

GREEK TRAGEDY SOPHOCLES AND THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

WEEK 2

21 FEBRUARY 2020

TIMELINE

Time line (all dates BCE – Before Common Era)

490 First major Persian invasion of Greece and Battle of Marathon

480/479 Second major Persian Invasion; Thermopylae and Salamis

479/478 Formation of Delian League: the Athenians and their Allies

TIMELINE

Time line (all dates BCE – Before Common Era)

450 Transfer of treasury from Delos to Athens and subsequent building programme in Athens

450 -432 Gradual development of the Athenian Empire (age of Pericles)

440 Attempted withdrawal of Samos from the Athenian alliance (Antigone)

431-404 The Peloponnesian War leading to the fall of Athenian Democracy

ARISTOTLE

Aristotle

In his 4th century (BCE) work *The Poetics*, Aristotle described the archetypal Greek Tragedy. Many academics believe that his analysis of the tragic effect relates most to the works of Sophocles: a tragic hero is a man of great power and status who loses everything throughout the course of the play, mostly through his own intransigence and arrogance (hubris), and his failing to recognise the truth of his situation. The idea of the hero having a tragic flaw (“**hamartia**”) has been an influence on subsequent tragic drama.

ARISTOTLE

Aristotle particularly refers to **anagnorisis**. This is where one or more characters in a play is brought to a gradual realisation that they have got things badly wrong. This realisation is usually associated with pain, suffering and death and comes too late to prevent catastrophe.

SOPHOCLES

Sophocles makes great use of the messenger in his gradual revelations. Hence the phrase: “Don’t shoot the messenger”. Terrible acts of violence are not shown on stage: they would be considered obscene (literally, *ob scaena* – off stage) and the messenger is the usual tool by which information about violent acts is relayed – often in lurid detail. The results of any carnage could be displayed on stage – but no live action.

SOPHOCLES

Far from being static (like Prometheus), Sophocles's plays rely on a number of exits and entrances of characters who attempt to make the "hero" see sense. There is much conflict through dialogue, but the Chorus still has a lot to say. Sophocles uses his second actor in a far more modern way than Aeschylus.

The two plays by Sophocles that we shall look at are bound closely together by common themes (pollution by violent death; human blindness – both figurative and real; cultural taboos).

SOPHOCLES' OEDIPUS REX

Oedipus, King of Thebes, sends his brother-in-law, Creon, to ask advice of the oracle at Delphi, concerning a plague, which is ravaging Thebes. Creon returns to report that the plague is the result of religious pollution, since the murderer of their former king, Laius, has never been caught. Oedipus vows to find the murderer and curses him vehemently for causing the plague.

SOPHOCLES' OEDIPUS REX

Oedipus summons the blind prophet Tiresias for help. When Tiresias arrives he claims to know the answers to Oedipus's questions, but refuses to speak, instead telling him to abandon his search. Oedipus is enraged by Tiresias' refusal, and accuses him of complicity in Laius' murder. Outraged, Tiresias tells the king that Oedipus himself is the murderer ("You yourself are the criminal you seek"). Oedipus cannot see how this could be and immediately concludes that the prophet must have been paid off by Creon in an attempt to undermine him.

SOPHOCLES'
OEDIPUS REX

Oedipus mocks Tiresias' lack of sight, and Tiresias in turn tells Oedipus that he himself is blind. Eventually Tiresias leaves, muttering darkly that when the murderer is discovered he shall be found to be a native citizen of Thebes, brother and father to his own children, and son and husband to his own mother.

SOPHOCLES' OEDIPUS REX

Creon arrives to face Oedipus's accusations. The King demands that Creon be executed; the chorus, however, persuades him to let Creon live. Jocasta, wife of first Laius and then Oedipus, enters and attempts to comfort Oedipus, telling him he should take no notice of prophets. As proof, she recounts an incident in which she and Laius received an oracle which (she says) never came true. The prophecy stated that Laius would be killed by his own son; however, Jocasta reassures Oedipus by her statement that Laius was killed by bandits at a crossroads on the way to Delphi.