

## Greek Tragedy

A general interest in literature and history are the only requirements for this course, which will take place over three two-hour sessions:

1. The course will start by looking at the development of early drama, with an introduction to Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. We shall consider Aristotle's analysis of tragedy and several stories from Greek tragedy. This session will include a synopsis of *Prometheus Bound* and some more in-depth reading of extracts (in English).
2. The second session will begin with an examination of the historical context in which Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides were writing (5th century BCE) followed by some exploration of passages from *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone* in English, as well as from Euripides' *Hippolytus*. We shall also look at the role of women in Greek society as reflected in Greek tragedy.
3. The third session will include an exploration of Euripides' *Medea* and *Bacchae*, with particular reference to the concept of the tragic hero. We shall also look at the role of the foreigner in Athenian society as reflected in their drama. We shall finish with a discussion of the legacy of Greek tragedy and its influence on European dramatists like Racine, Marlowe and Shakespeare, etc.

### Week 2: the historical context, "hubris" and Sophocles

#### Time line (all dates BCE – Before Common Era)

490 BCE	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
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**

In his 4<sup>th</sup> 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 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.

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. 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). *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone* are two of three plays by Sophocles that deal with the Oedipus myth.

## **Oedipus Rex (summary)**

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.

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.

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.

Creon arrives to face Oedipus's accusations. The King demands that Creon be executed; however, the chorus 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.

The mention of this crossroads causes Oedipus to pause and ask for more details. He asks Jocasta what Laius looked like, and Oedipus suddenly becomes worried that Tiresias's accusations were true. For he had himself killed someone at a crossroads before arriving in Thebes.) Oedipus then sends for the one surviving witness of the attack to be brought to the palace from the fields where he now works as a shepherd.

Jocasta, confused, asks Oedipus what the matter is, and he tells her. Many years ago, at a banquet in Corinth, a man drunkenly accused Oedipus of not being his father's son. Oedipus went to Delphi and asked the oracle about his parentage. He was given a prophecy that he would one day murder his father and sleep with his mother. To avoid any possibility of his fulfilling this prophecy, Oedipus decides to leave Corinth and never return. While traveling he came to the very crossroads where Laius was killed and encountered a carriage which attempted to drive him off the road. An

argument ensued and Oedipus killed the travellers, including a man who matches Jocasta's description of Laius. Oedipus has hope, however, because the story is that Laius was murdered by several robbers. If the shepherd confirms that Laius was attacked by many men, then Oedipus is in the clear.

A man arrives from Corinth with the message that Oedipus's father has died. Oedipus, to the surprise of the messenger, is thrilled by this news, for it proves one half of the prophecy false: now he can never kill his father. However, he still fears that he may somehow commit incest with his mother. The messenger, eager to ease Oedipus's mind, tells him not to worry, because Merope was not in fact his real mother. It emerges that this messenger was formerly a shepherd on Mount Cithaeron, and that he was given a baby, which the childless Polybus then adopted. The baby, he says, was given to him by another shepherd from the Laius household, who had been told to get rid of the child.

Oedipus asks the chorus if anyone knows who this man was, or where he might be now. They respond that he is the "same shepherd" who was witness to the murder of Laius, and whom Oedipus has already summoned. Jocasta, who has by now realized the truth, desperately pleads with Oedipus to stop asking questions, but he refuses, and Jocasta runs into the palace. When the shepherd arrives Oedipus questions him, but the messenger begs to be allowed to leave without answering further. However, Oedipus presses him, finally threatening him with torture or execution. It emerges that the child he gave away was Laius's own son, and that Jocasta had given the baby to the shepherd to be exposed secretly upon the mountainside. This was done in fear of the prophecy that Jocasta said had never come true: that the child would kill his father (and marry his mother).

Everything is at last revealed, and Oedipus curses himself and fate before leaving the stage. The chorus laments how even a great man can be felled by fate and, following this, a servant comes out of the palace to speak of what has happened inside: when Jocasta entered the house, she ran to the palace bedroom and hanged herself there. Shortly afterwards, he says, Oedipus entered in a fury and found Jocasta's body. With a cry, Oedipus took her down and removed the long gold pins that held her dress together. He has plunged the pins into his own eyes in despair.

A blind Oedipus now comes on stage from the palace and begs to be exiled as soon as possible. On an empty stage the chorus repeats the common Greek maxim, that no man should be considered fortunate until he is dead.

### **Antigone (summary)**

Antigone's father, Oedipus, was the King of Thebes. He unknowingly murdered his father and married his own mother, Queen Jocasta. With his wife/mother, Oedipus had two daughter/sisters and two brother/sons.

After Oedipus died, his two sons battled for control of the kingdom. Eteocles fought to defend Thebes. Polynices and his men attacked the city, aided by troops from Argos. Both brothers died. Creon (Antigone's uncle) became the official ruler of Thebes.

Creon has buried Eteocles's body with honour. But because the other brother is perceived as a traitor, Polynices's body has been left to rot. Creon has made it illegal to bury Polynices. At the play's beginning, Antigone decides to defy Creon's law. Her sister Ismene warns her that Creon will punish anyone who defies the law of the city. Antigone believes that the law of the gods supersedes a king's decree: she will not obey an unjust law.

She leaves the stage to give her brother a proper funeral by sprinkling dust over his body. She is caught in the act, however, by Creon's guards, who bring her to Creon to tell him. Creon is furious and sentences Antigone to death.

Ismene asks to be executed along with her sister. But Antigone does not want her by her side. She insists that she alone buried the brother, so she alone will receive punishment.

Antigone is betrothed to Haemon, the son of Creon. Haemon tries to convince his father that mercy and patience are called for. But the more they argue, the more Creon's anger and intransigence grow. Haemon leaves.

At this point, the people of Thebes, represented by the Chorus, are uncertain as to who is right or wrong. Creon orders that Antigone be sealed into a stone chamber with some food and drink. This way, he will not actually kill her.

Antigone, who is by now questioning her own wisdom in this matter, is escorted to her prison, where she will be walled in.

The blind prophet Teiresias then enters, bringing the message that Creon is making a terrible mistake. Creon becomes furious and accuses the old man of

treason. Creon remains stubborn, even when Teiresias predicts dire events for him. Teiresias leaves.

It is only at this point that Creon, finally scared, rethinks his decision. He dashes off to release Antigone. He is too late.

A messenger enters to reveal what has occurred offstage. Creon was too late to save Antigone who had already hanged herself. Haemon grieving beside her body attacked his father with a sword, and then stabbed himself and has now died.

Creon's wife, Eurydice, hears of her son's death and leaves the stage. The message comes that she too has killed herself.

When Creon returns to Thebes, the Chorus tells Creon what has happened. They explain that "There is no escape from the doom we must endure." Creon realizes that his stubbornness and arrogance have led to his family's ruin. He has lost everything.

The Chorus ends the play by offering a final message: "The mighty words of the proud are paid in full with mighty blows of fate."

### **Women in Athenian Society**

Antigone has been a popular play from its first production in around 440 BCE until the present day. It is regularly at the Edinburgh Festival and Fringe, and has been rewritten in many languages. Jean Anouilh's famous version in French was written in the last century. It is often used as an example of a young woman's fighting spirit, though it is unlikely that Athenian citizens of the fifth century saw it this way. Rather they might have considered Antigone's daring and wilful opposition to Creon as further evidence that he had made a terrible mistake: her actions are proof of his folly rather than of her own liberation.

Still, it is interesting to analyse Sophocles's treatment of women in his plays, and even more beguiling to examine Euripides's depiction of women. Euripides was considered more elegant but less revolutionary than the slightly older Sophocles. In all three plays by Euripides that we shall consider (*Hippolytus*, *Medea* and *the Bacchae*) the women play a powerful and deadly role, though they are often seen as slaves to lust and jealousy rather than creatures of intelligence and reason.