

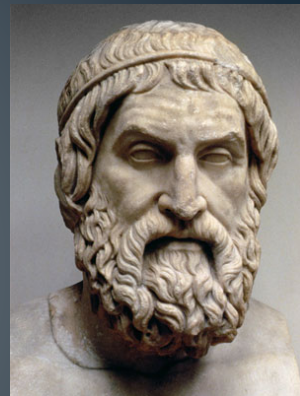
*Greek Drama & Sophocles'*  
*Oedipus Rex*



## About the Author...

**SOPHOCLES** (c. 496-406 B.C.)

- His tragedies probe the depth of human **suffering** and **despair**.
- He lived a long, comfortable, and happy life despite the **misery** he displayed in his works.
- He grew up in a well-to-do family in Athens, enjoyed a carefree childhood and education, and eventually became a distinguished public official as well as an outstanding **dramatist**.



## Sophocles and the Theatre

- He first achieved recognition in the theatre at the age of 28, when he defeated Aeschylus—another great Greek playwright—in an annual dramatic competition.
- He went on to with 24 first prizes over the next six decades—the best record of any Greek playwright.
- He produced 123 plays, of which only seven survive today.



## The Dionysia

- The Dionysia, an annual festival in honor of the god Dionysus, was a four-day extravaganza held in March or April.
- At the open-air Theater of Dionysus, some fifteen-thousand spectators witnessed a variety of plays, both tragic and comic.
- Tragedies were told in 3 parts.
- The dramatic festival was so important to civic life that magistrates selected the playwrights for each annual competition, and wealthy citizens with political ambitions subsidized the production fees; judges ranked the competing playwrights and awarded prizes for the winners.



## The Theater of Dionysus

- The theater of Dionysus was carved out of a stone hillside and resembled a semicircle with steeply rising tiers of seats.
- The performances began at dawn and lasted the entire day. The light of the sun illuminated performances and audiences alike, uniting them uniquely into the drama.



## The Parts of the Greek Theater



## Parts of the Greek Theatre

- Orchestra (literally, "dancing space")
  - The orchestra was normally circular.
  - It was a level space where the chorus would dance, sing, and interact with the actors who were on the stage near the skene.
  - In the center of the orchestra there was often a thymele, or altar.

## Parts of the Greek Theatre

- Theatron (literally, "viewing place")
  - The theatron is where the spectators sat.
  - The theatron was usually part of hillside overlooking the orchestra, and often wrapped around a large portion of the orchestra.



## Parts of the Greek Theatre

- Skene (literally, "tent")
  - The skene was the building directly behind the stage.
  - The skene was directly in back of the stage, and was usually decorated as a palace, temple, or other building, depending on the needs of the play.
  - It had at least one set of doors, and actors could make entrances and exits through them.
  - There was also access to the roof of the skene from behind, so that actors playing gods and other characters could appear on the roof, if needed.

## Parts of the Greek Theatre

- Parados/Paradoi (literally, "passageways")
  - The paradoi are the paths by which the chorus and some actors (such as those representing messengers or people returning from abroad) made their entrances and exits.
  - The audience also used them to enter and exit the theater before and after the performance.

## Performers in Greek Theatre

- All roles, like the familiar Shakespearean plays, were performed by men.
- These men wore masks, and many played 2 or more roles throughout the drama.
  - These masks were often decorated to suggest character types familiar with the audience (i.e. a king, a messenger, a nurse, etc.).
  - By switching masks, one actor could play a number of roles—both male and female—in a single play.



## Performers in Greek Theatre

- Participating in Greek drama was considered to be a citizen's civic duty; they were expected to volunteer to perform in the chorus.
- Experienced performers, especially citizens trained in oratory, elevated to the status of actor. The Greek actor, who might also be a governmental official or influential businessman, was highly regarded in Greek society.



## Tragedy and the Tragic Hero

- Oedipus is considered one of the world's greatest tragedies.
  - **tragedy- a serious drama featuring a noble, dignified main character—often a member of royalty—who strives to achieve something and is ultimately defeated.**
    - The **defeat** of the hero may appear to be brought about by forces beyond his or her control, and the outcome, or fate, seems almost predetermined.
      - The word *tragedy* is derived from the Greek words *tragos* (“goat”) and *ode* (“song”). *Tragedy* may have originally referred to a type of song or pantomime performed in goat costumes at the religious festivals of Dionysus.
- The main character's downfall is usually brought about by his or her own character flaw or weakness—the **tragic flaw**.
  - In spite of defeat and even death, however, the tragic hero is ennobled by his or her newly gained **self-knowledge** and **wisdom**.

## Aristotle's Take on Tragedy and the Tragic Hero

- The Greek philosopher **Aristotle** (384-322B.C.) pays special attention to tragedy in his formal essay entitled, ***The Poetics***.
  - He explains that drama should be tightly unified based on a single **action** and featuring a single **protagonist** (main character). Tragedies generally deal with characters who are neither exceptionally **good** or **evil**.
  - In his analysis of tragedy in *The Poetics*, Aristotle cites Sophocles' play, ***Oedipus Rex***, several times as a supreme example of tragic drama.



## Terms to Know from Aristotle's *The Poetics*

- *ANAGNORISIS*
  - the recognition by the tragic hero of some truth about his or her identity
- *CATHARSIS*
  - when members of an audience witness a character's deep suffering and thus exhibit emotions of pity and fear and leading them to a new sense of self-awareness and renewal
- *HAMARTIA*
  - a character's weakness; often translated as "tragic flaw"
- *HUBRIS*
  - the excessive pride or arrogance brought on by the character's "tragic flaw"
- *PERIPETEIA*
  - the reversal of the situation in the plot of a tragedy

## Oedipus Rex

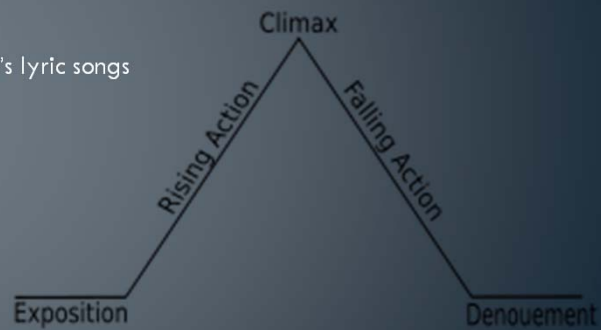
- One of Sophocles' three "Theban plays"—three tragedies about King Oedipus of Thebes and his family.
- Sophocles **did not** write these three plays to be performed at a single festival, as was a common practice in his day.
- Instead, he composed them over a 36-year period—actually beginning with the tragedy *Antigone*, the third and last part of the story, which was first performed in 442B.C.





## The Structure *Oedipus Rex*

- Prologue
  - Opening scene
- Parodos
  - The first of the Chorus's lyric songs
- Dialogue
- Choral Odes
- Exodos
  - Concluding scene



## The Structure *Oedipus Rex*

- The play contains a tight dramatic framework.
  - All of the action takes place in a single location.
  - All of the action involves a small number of characters interacting with the central character, Oedipus (who remains on stage for nearly the entire play).
  - The Chorus, which serves simply as a nameless onlooker and commentator in other Greek tragedies, is turned by Sophocles into a collective "actor" within the drama itself.

## Types of Irony

- Dramatic Irony
  - A situation in which the readers or audience knows information that the characters in a play or story do not know.
- Verbal Irony
  - A figure of speech; when one intends to be understood as meaning something that contrasts with the literal or usual meaning of what he says.
- Situational Irony
  - A relationship of contrast between what an audience is led to expect during a particular situation within the unfolding of a story's plot and a situation that ends up actually resulting later on.

Oedipus' name also contains a pun on the Greek verb "I know" (*oida*). Oedipus' knowledge is an important motif in *Oedipus Rex*!

## Themes *Oedipus Rex*

- The themes, or underlying messages, of *Oedipus Rex* are crucial to the play's long-lasting appeals. Audiences for generations have recognized and been affected by the issues that lead to Oedipus' downfall.
  - The quest for identity
  - The nature of innocence and guilt
  - The nature of moral responsibility
  - Human will versus fate
  - The abuse of power

