

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Sophocles

LOSS

PREFACE. There remain seven plays of Sophocles, and of those only one, *Oedipus at Colonus*, concludes on a note of hope. (*Philoctetes* is penetrated by occasional rays of hope, or outlook—especially at the end. And to be sure the darkness in the plays without hope is not as bleak as Shakespeare's 'as flies to wanton boys are we to the gods.')

A *steady state of loss* might do, as a catch phrase for the human condition Sophocles finds us in. The Greeks of the classical moment simply boasted no aspirations for *salvation*, the way out of the life-condition that was, for example, later to speak through the Abrahamic religious insights. A condition of loss morphed, in the best tragedies remaining to us—the *Oresteia*, *Prometheus*, *Oedipus the King*, *Philoctetes*, *Medea*, *Alcestis*, *Phaedra*—into a depiction of the inescapable submission mandatory to living the good life. That submission was a strongly centered collaboration with the best you can get.

OEDIPIUS COLONUS. It is a long ride from the bulldoggish and irritable presence of Oedipus, at the outset of *Oedipus the King*, to the withdrawn and resigned Oedipus of the last play of the Theban trilogy. He has been through a tremendous experience of self-discovery and guilt—at the beginning of which experience he was a stridently confident leader of men. He is aware, as he enters finally into the deme of Colonus, and listens to the disputes between Creon and Theseus, for the possession of his once polluted but now sanctified body, that he himself has now passed far beyond the desperate quests that had driven him through the period of self-search, into this corner of land where he is to give up his body. He is at peace with the loss that pervades his world, and aspires for nothing more than to be able to offer his burial place to the benefit of Athens.

ANTIGONE. As a youngster, fighting ardently for the honor of her brother, and expecting nothing more than to guarantee him a significant burial setting, Antigone makes no extravagant claims on the meaning of life, or on her personal chances for a transcending exit out of the life condition. She realizes she is embedded in loss, and that she will lose all if she persists. But that honor point she is willing to claim is worth everything to her. Only her loss is her gain.

PHILOKTETES. Philoctetes is at peace with pain and endurance, when he receives his visit from Neoptolemus and Odysseus. He doesn't suspect the trick Odysseus is playing, to wheedle the bow away from him, and he is unable to read the dreadful guilt that Neoptolemus is experiencing, as he mans up to being able to deceive Philoctetes. The Philoctetes we know, accepting the world of loss and learning to live with it, is at the end carried away by Heracles, who returns him to the battlefield, and props him up once again as a fighting hero. Philoctetes, like Oedipus, must in the end be 'rescued,' the world he lives being in itself no match for the transcendent, but a simple given.

WOMEN OF TRACHIS. Deianira and Heracles live through a world which has never opened them a way out or up. Deianira's jealousy, upon learning that Heracles has brought another woman home with him, crushes her into a longing for revenge, which in itself can never satisfy her sense of loss. She tricks herself into thinking she is administering a love charm to Heracles, through a love arrow, but she is instead administering a toxic poison which kills the half-man half-god she longs for. Loss would be bad enough, given this turn of events, but as it happens Deianira walks into a world in which torture simply builds on itself, and we know that no hole will ever open in the sky.