



Greek Tragedy (Penguin Classics)

By Aeschylus, Euripides, Sophocles

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Aeschylus was born of a noble family near Athens in 525 BC. He took part in the Persian Wars and his epitaph, said to have been written by himself, represents him as fighting at Marathon. At some time in his life he appears to have been prosecuted for divulging the Eleusinian mysteries, but he apparently proved himself innocent. Aeschylus wrote more than seventy plays, of which seven have survived: **The Suppliants, The Persians, Seven Against Thebes, Prometheus Bound, Agamemnon, The Choephoroi, and The Eumenides**. (All are translated for Penguin Classics.) He visited Syracuse more than once at the invitation of Hieron I and he died at Gela in Sicily in 456 BC. Aeschylus was recognized as a classic writer soon after his death, and special privileges were decreed for his plays.

Euripides, the youngest of the three great Athenian playwrights, was born around 485 BC of a family of good standing. He first competed in the dramatic festivals in 455 BC, coming only third; his record of success in the tragic competitions is lower than that of either Aeschylus or Sophocles. There is a tradition that he was unpopular, even a recluse; we are told that he composed poetry in a cave by the sea, near Salamis. What is clear from contemporary evidence, however, is that audiences were fascinated by his innovative and often disturbing dramas. His work was controversial already in his lifetime, and he himself was regarded as a 'clever' poet, associated with philosophers and other intellectuals. Towards the end of his life he went to live at the court of Archelaus, king of Macedon. It was during his time there that he wrote what many consider his greatest work, the **Bacchae**. When news of his death reached Athens in early 406 BC, Sophocles appeared publicly in mourning for him. Euripides is thought to have written about ninety-two plays, of which seventeen tragedies and one satyr-play are known to survive; the other play which is attributed to him, the **Rhesus**, may in fact be by a later hand.

Sophocles was born at Colonus, just outside Athens, in 496 BC, and lived ninety years. His long life spanned the rise and decline of the Athenian Empire; he was a friend of Pericles, and though not an active politician he held several public offices, both military and civil. The leader of a literary circle and friend of Herodotus, he was interested in poetic theory as well as practice, and he wrote a prose treatise **On the Chorus**. He seems to have been content to spend all his life at Athens, and is said to have refused several invitations to royal courts.

Sophocles first won a prize for tragic drama in 468, defeating the veteran Aeschylus. He wrote over a hundred plays for the Athenian theater, and is said to have come first in twenty-four contests. Only seven of his tragedies are now extant, these being **Ajax, Antigone, Oedipus the King, Women of Trachis, Electra, Philoctetes**, and the posthumous **Oedipus at Colonus**. A substantial part of **The Searchers**, a satyr play, was recovered from papyri in Egypt in modern times. Fragments of other plays remain, showing that he drew on a wide range of themes; he also introduced the innovation of a third actor in his tragedies. He died in 406 BC.

E.F. Watling was educated at Christ's Hospital and University College, Oxford. His translations of Greek and Roman plays for the Penguin Classics include the seven plays of Sophocles, nine plays of Plautus, and a selection of the tragedies of Seneca.

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