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Cambridge Translations from Greek Drama

Sophocles

Antigone

A new translation and
commentary by David Franklin
and John Harrison

Introduction to the Greek Theatre
by P.E. Easterling

Series Editors: John Harrison and Judith Affleck



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Preface

The aim of the series is to enable students to approach Classical plays with confidence and understanding; to discover the play within the text.

The translations are new. Many recent versions of Greek tragedy have been produced by poets and playwrights who do not work from the original Greek. The translators of this series aim to bring readers, actors and directors as close as possible to the playwrights' actual words and intentions: to create translations which are faithful to the original in content and tone; and which are speakable, with all the immediacy of modern English.

The notes are designed for students of Classical Civilisation and Drama, and indeed anyone who is interested in theatre. They address points which present difficulty to the reader of today: chiefly relating to the Greeks' religious and moral attitudes, their social and political life, and mythology.

Our hope is that students should discover the play for themselves. The conventions of the Classical theatre are discussed, but there is no thought of recommending 'authentic' performances. Different groups will find different ways of responding to each play. The best way of bringing alive an ancient play, as any other, is to explore the text practically, to stimulate thought about ways of staging the plays today. Stage directions in the text are minimal, and the notes are not prescriptive; rather, they contain questions and exercises which explore the dramatic qualities of the text. Bullet points introduce suggestions for discussion and analysis; open bullet points focus on more practical exercises.

If the series encourages students to attempt a staged production, so much the better. But the primary aim is understanding and enjoyment.

This translation of *Antigone* is based on the Greek text edited by Hugh Lloyd-Jones and N.G. Wilson for Oxford University Press.

John Harrison
Judith Affleck

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Background to the story of Antigone

(*The names of characters who appear in this play are printed in bold.*)

Antigone, like many Greek tragedies, is set in Thebes. The early history of Thebes was the subject of a cycle of epic poems, which provided material for many plays, of which, in addition to *Antigone*, Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*, Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Oedipus at Colonus* and Euripides' *Phoenissae* survive. The dramatists freely adapted the legends, and the version of the story below comes mainly from *Oedipus Tyrannus*, which was written later than *Antigone*.

The city, according to legend, was founded by Cadmus, who came from Phoenicia. He was told by an oracle to found a city in a place to which he was led by a cow. Where the cow lay down, he killed a dragon and sowed its teeth, which sprang up from the ground as armed soldiers, who became the Theban nobles. After a successful reign Cadmus left for western Greece with his wife Harmonia.

An early king was Labdacus, who died when his son Laius was a child. While still a minor, Laius kidnapped Chryseippus, son of Pelops, king of Elis. Pelops pronounced on him a curse, which was to blight the next two generations of the family, the descendants of Labdacus.

When Laius became king and married Jocasta, he was warned that his son would kill him. So he pierced the baby's ankles, tied the feet together and abandoned him on Mount Cithaeron, the common grazing ground of Thebes and neighbouring Corinth. There a Corinthian shepherd found the baby and took him to his king, Polybus, and Queen Merope, who named him Oedipus (Swollen Foot) and brought him up as their own son. But, when an adult, Oedipus, hearing rumours that he was not the king's legitimate son, went to the oracle at Delphi to find out who his parents were. The oracle simply told him that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Oedipus, deciding that the best way to avoid this destiny was not to return to Corinth, travelled towards Thebes. At a crossroads he became involved in a quarrel with some other travellers and in the ensuing fight killed the occupant of a carriage, not knowing it was his own father Laius. Arriving in Thebes he found the city in turmoil, its king missing and the city plagued by the Sphinx, a winged creature with a woman's face and a lion's body.

Creon, the regent and brother of Jocasta, offered the kingdom and his sister's hand in marriage to the man who could solve the Sphinx's riddle and so save the state. Oedipus solved the riddle, and unwittingly married his own mother, by whom he became father of two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, and two daughters, **Antigone** and **Ismene**.

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Years later, Thebes was afflicted by a plague. In answer to Oedipus' enquiry, the oracle at Delphi declared that the land was polluted by the murderer of Laius; only by his removal could the plague be lifted. Oedipus, cursing the unknown murderer and pronouncing him an exile, set in train an enquiry. At each stage it became clearer that he himself was the source of pollution: that he had killed his own father and married his mother. Oedipus put out his own eyes as punishment, Jocasta hanged herself and Creon again became regent.

Oedipus' two sons, approaching adulthood, quarrelled as to which should be king; finally they agreed that they should rule in alternate years, starting with Eteocles. Polyneices went to Argos, where King Adrastus gave him in marriage his daughter Argeia, and, when it became clear that Eteocles did not intend to relinquish the throne, undertook to restore Polyneices to power in Thebes. Adrastus gathered an army, led by seven champions, who fought at the seven gates of Thebes against seven chosen Theban warriors. Eteocles and Polyneices fought one another at the Hypsistai gate and killed one another. The Argives were routed.

Creon, as the nearest surviving kinsman, now became king and decreed that Eteocles should be buried with all honour, but that the corpse of Polyneices should be left to rot on the plain. At this point in the story the action of the play begins.

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Map of Ancient Greece

