The Theban Sagas and heroes: Sophocles' Theban Plays.

- **I.** difficult to define - the Fourth Age of Heroes - demigods, men of greater (mythic) strength and ability - different from our current age.

- **II.** Thebes and its heroes: Cadmus, Herakles, the story of 7 against Thebes and its Theban gates.

- **III.** How is Antigone heroic?

- **IV.** How is Oedipus heroic in Oedipus the King?
  - A. these plays are about the aftermath of heroism and the worship that attends heroes. Antigone is heroic in that she follows both the dictates of the gods and her own heart. But she does not prosper by her piety (tragedy)

- **V.** How is plague connected to the stories of both Antigone and Oedipus
  - A. see Thucydides, HPW, Book 2 following the speech of Pericles.

- **VI.** Tragedy:
  - i. the relationship between song and acting - the chorus . . . speaks for a collective understanding of events (sometimes a misunderstanding)
  - B. Tragedy associated with the Athenian Dionysia.

- **VII.** Collective force of tragedy and drama: not about the individual, but about the collective consequences of individual action.
  - A. The Polis - the Greek City State
  - B. Pericles' Funeral oration. . . www.mtholyoke.edu—pericles.htm
  - C. The ideals of the state and the individual. How do the Greek tragedies show the Oedipus R. show the breakdown of some of these ideals via the filter of mythology?

- **VIII.** War - casts a long shadow over the Theban myths and tragedies.
  - A. Notes: Knox's intros from Sophocles.

- **IX.** OEDIPUS the KING
  - A. Structural reading: Oed. is both physician and sickness. He 'cures' the first plague only to bring about another.
  - B. gods that answer prayers: the peripeteia - reversal, or back and forth.
  - C. Fate and freewill: these are not quite the terms the Greeks would have used, but, as Knox's introduction points out, to the extent that Oedipus has a choice, he gets to choose the manner in which he fulfills the prophecy of Apollo.
  - D. Structural reading: What about the Sphinx?

  - i. Associated with Egypt. . . Or perhaps with Ethiopia, sent by Hera for the "crimes of Laius".
  - ii. "singing and riddling" - the mixture of oidos (song, prophecy, madness) and rationality (riddles are puzzles of logic, that often require irrational, creative thinking to solve.
  - iii. The Sphinx is both/neither man/woman, man/animal, Egyptian/Greek, outside the city gates, but determinant of its fate.
  - iv. Oed. by means of reason rather than strength conquers the monster at the city gates. But the very quality that raises him to its kingship, also proves his undoing: he very rationally figures out his own identity, fate, and crime - no god or prophet has to show him. Oedipus is rational man undone by his own reason, and apparently helpless before the pre-rational power of song, prophecy, and divine fate.
  - v. The plague -from Thuc. Hist. of Pel. War

  - i. These symptoms were followed by sneezing and hoarseness, after which the pain soon reached the chest, and produced a hard cough. When it fixed in the stomach, it upset it; and discharges of
bile of every kind named by physicians ensued, accompanied by very great distress. [4] In most cases also an ineffectual retching followed, producing violent spasms, which in some cases ceased soon after, in others much later.

- ii. For the disorder first settled in the head, ran its course from thence through the whole of the body, and even where it did not prove mortal, it still left its mark on the extremities; [8] for it settled in the privy parts, the fingers and the toes, and many escaped with the loss of these, some too with that of their eyes. Others again were seized with an entire loss of memory on their first recovery, and did not know either themselves or their friends.

- iii. Yet it was with those who had recovered from the disease that the sick and the dying found most compassion. These knew what it was from experience, and had now no fear for themselves; for the same man was never attacked twice--never at least fatally. And such persons not only received the congratulations of others, but themselves also, in the elation of the moment, half entertained the vain hope that they were for the future safe from any disease whatsoever.

- iv. The bodies of dying men lay one upon another, and half-dead creatures reeled about the streets and gathered round all the fountains in their longing for water. [3] The sacred places also in which they had quartered themselves were full of corpses of persons that had died there, just as they were; for as the disaster passed all bounds, men, not knowing what was to become of them, became utterly careless of everything, whether sacred or profane. [4] All the burial rites before in use were entirely upset, and they buried the bodies as best they could. Many from want of the proper appliances, through so many of their friends having died already, had recourse to the most shameless sepultures: sometimes getting the start of those who had raised a pile, they threw their own dead body upon the stranger's pyre and ignited it; sometimes they tossed the corpse which they were carrying on the top of another that was burning, and so went off.

• □ E. Man and the Gods:
  • □ a. The gods do not appear in Sophocles' play, unlike many other plays of this period
  • □ i. emphasis on mortal agency; divine will still rules. . .? Even when we think we are doing the right thing, we may be in violation of divine will. Even when we think we are doing our best to avoid offending the gods, and avoiding divine fate, we fulfill divine will.
The Theban Sagas and heroes: Sophocles' Theban Plays.

- □ ii. the gods are there but silent (except for the oracles and prophets: people make a choice to believe them or not, at their peril. . .)
- □ ii. man is equal to nothing before the power of the gods. Is this a pious message?
- □ iii. Jocasta believes that our lives our ruled by “chance” - odd that a woman who has seen her city laid low by a monster would believe that.

□ F. TABOOS: define, basically "sacer" - set apart, prohibited

- □ i. Jonathan Haidt, Univ of VA Psychologist
  - □ a. Haidt identified five foundational moral impulses. As succinctly defined by Northwestern University's McAdams, they are:
    - Harm/care. It is wrong to hurt people; it is good to relieve suffering.
    - Fairness/reciprocity. Justice and fairness are good; people have certain rights that need to be upheld in social interactions.
    - In-group loyalty. People should be true to their group and be wary of threats from the outside. Allegiance, loyalty and patriotism are virtues; betrayal is bad.
    - Authority/respect. People should respect social hierarchy; social order is necessary for human life.
    - Purity/sanctity. The body and certain aspects of life are sacred. Cleanliness and health, as well as their derivatives of chastity and piety, are all good. Pollution, contamination and the associated character traits of lust and greed are all bad.
  - □ b. www.alternet.org—conservatives_live_in_a_different_moral_universe_.--.
  - □ ii. gods or fates create situations where the ordinary taboos that structure civilization (the family, the polis) are pushed beyond their limits.
    - □ a. patricide/fratricide/child-murder
    - □ b. incest and other sexual taboos
    - □ c. gender norms (cf. Antigone, especially; Creon's speech betraying his own insecurity as a ruler).
    - □ d. the treatment of the dead (taboo against not burying the dead).
  - □ iii. Obscene: ob scenus - that which may not be seen
  - □ iv. The violence of the greek tragedy generally takes place off stage. . . But is described in detail. . . and we see its results.
  - □ v. Public/private: Creon tries to get Oed. to discuss the situation in private, away from the citizens. Oed. insists on doing everything in public.
  - □ a. Oedipus on p. 232: O god - all come true, all burst to light. . .

□ X. ANTIGONE

- □ A. Gender norms, heroism, tyrant, the laws of gods and words of men
  - □ i. Creon's speech on female subordination
  - □ ii. the tyrant: "emergency decree" (first page)
  - □ iii. to Ismene: “do as you like, dishonor the laws the gods hold in honor” (63) Ismene: "defy the city? I have no strength for that"
  - □ iv. Creon calls Haeron "you woman's slave" for taking A's part.
  - □ v. Creon gives in to the will of the gods, or to that of his own family (Haemon) but too late. . .
- □ B. The claims of the polis over the family
### The Theban Sagas and heroes: Sophocles' Theban Plays

- **A. Creon:** "whoever places a friend over the good of his own country, he is nothing. . . Zeus is my witness" (67).

- **ii.** "Exactly when did you last see the gods celebrating traitors? Inconceivable!" (73)

- **C. Taboos over burial: this is how we tell human from non-human.**
  - i. the body becomes carrion for animals.
  - ii. cf. the elaborate rites of funeral and mourning in Pericles' speech.
  - iii. Plague: sent to Thebes in punishment? Mass death, many unburied, without funeral rites

- **NB**

- **D. Taboo: fratricide that compounds Oedipus' sins - as though the curse is transmitted genetically somehow. . .
  - i. Song of the chorus: those blood brothers. . . clashed and won the common prize of Death" (66). Chorus gives communal judgment.

- **E. Antigone's heroism**
  - i. "Never share my dying. . . " (87). chooses certain death for dong what the gods and her loyalty to her father demand.
  - ii. Antigone argues with the Chorus 102-104: she stands alone against her city.

- **F. Fate**
  - i. Antigone repeats the fate of her own mother. . . just as Oedipus repeats the fate of his own father, in a way. . .
  - ii. Creon: I've murdered my son, against my will (127)

- **XI. Oedipus at Colonus**
  - **A.** Polyneices turns against his own city (conflict with his brother after the exile of Oedipus). Oedipus seeks sanctuary at Colonus (outside Athens), and curses his own sons and his former city. Oedipus, now humbled before the gods, becomes a harbinger and prophet of the gods himself, and vows that his burial site, will become a "hero's tomb" - a holy (sacer) site. Athens will win victory against Thebes if they give him sanctuary.
  - **B.** Redefining "hero" yet again: the outcast becomes the hero of Thebes becomes an outcast, becomes the hero of Colonus
  - i. heroes are protectors (the gods cannot be counted on in this regard)
  - C. Why does Oedipus seek sanctuary on holy (sacer) ground?
  - i. The setting is 'sacer'/taboo; Oedipus himself has become 'homo sacer' - the man who is both holy/defiled/outcast/set apart
  - ii. His curse upon his sons: does this eventually damn Antigone also? Does Oed's curse upon Poly. deepen Antigone's heroism? She defies not only Creon, but her own dead father's will. . .

- **D.** Commonalities between Oedipus and Theseus?
  - i. Theseus has many myths attached to him as a hero of Attica (region of Athens): his exile and return, the Six labors on his way back to Athens, his defeat of the Minotaur at Crete, return to Athens with Ariadne, his 'accidental' killing of his father Aegeus: the black flag was the signal that Theseus had failed against the Minotaur.
  - ii. Exile: born to Aegeus and Aethra ('accidental'). Did not know his true father. Returned to Athens to claim his paternity.
  - iii. Labors of Theseus - heroism of the old Heraclean school.
    - a. joins Heracles against the Amazons.
  - iv. Fate: accidental killing of his father.
  - v. Incest: wife Phaedra wanted his son Hippolytus. A nurse finds out and tells H., Phaedra hangs herself in shame, but leaves a note blaming H.
The Theban Sagas and heroes: Sophocles' Theban Plays.

- E. Oed. at Colonus is a kind of settling of scores.
- i. for Oed., his children, Thebes, and with the gods.