

Classic Poetry Series

Sophocles

- 36 poems -

Publication Date:

2012

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

Sophocles

Sophocles (c. 497/6 BC- winter 407/6 BC) was the second of the three ancient Greek tragedians whose work has survived. His first plays were written later than those of Aeschylus and earlier than those of Euripides. According to the Suda, a 10th century encyclopedia, Sophocles wrote 123 plays during the course of his life, but only seven have survived in a complete form: Ajax, Antigone, Trachinian Women, Oedipus the King, Electra, Philoctetes and Oedipus at Colonus. For almost 50 years, Sophocles was the most-awarded playwright in the dramatic competitions of the city-state of Athens that took place during the religious festivals of the Lenaea and the Dionysia. Sophocles competed in around 30 competitions; he won perhaps 24 and never received lower than second place; in comparison, Aeschylus won 14 competitions and was defeated by Sophocles at times, while Euripides won only 4 competitions.

The most famous of Sophocles' tragedies are those concerning Oedipus and Antigone: these are often known as the Theban plays, although each play was actually a part of different tetralogy, the other members of which are now lost. Sophocles influenced the development of the drama, most importantly by adding a third actor and thereby reducing the importance of the chorus in the presentation of the plot. He also developed his characters to a greater extent than earlier playwrights such as Aeschylus

A Fair Eubœan Shore

There stretcheth by the sea
A fair Eubœan shore, and o'er it creeps
The vine of Bacchus, each day's growth complete.
In morning brightness all the land is green
With tendrils fair and spreading. Noontide comes,
And then the unripe cluster forms apace:
The day declines, and purple grow the grapes;
At eve the whole bright vintage is brought in,
And the mixed wine poured out.

Sophocles

A Sailor's Life

A weary life is that the sailors lead,
To whom no gift from Heaven or Fortune sent
Could offer worthy recompense. Poor souls,
Adventuring traffic far on slender chance,
They save, or gain, or lose all utterly.

Sophocles

Agamemnon's Vengeance

If wisdom fail me not,
As seer misled by doubtful auguries,
And wanting counsel wise,
She comes, true augur with foreshadowing tread,
Vengeance, with hands that bear
The might of righteousness:
She comes, my child, full soon, in hot pursuit:
And through my veins there springs a courage new,
Hearing but now these dreams
That come with favouring gale;
For he, thy father, King of all Hellenes,
Will not forget for aye,
Nor will that hatchet with its double edge,
Wrought out in bronze of old,
Which laid him low in death
With vilest contumely.

And She shall also come,
Dread form, with many a foot, and many a hand,
Erinnyes shod with brass,
Who lieth still in ambush terrible:
For there has come to those
For whom it was not right,
The hot embrace of marriage steeped in blood,
Of evil omen, bed and bride alike;
But, above all, this thought
Fills heart and soul, that ne'er
The boding sign will come unblamed to those
Who did the deed, or shared;
Lo! men can find no prophecies in dreams,
Nor yet in words divine,
Unless it gain its goal,
This vision of the night.

Sophocles

Almighty Love

Not mortal men alone does Love assail,
No, nor yet women, but it leaves its stamp
Upon the souls of Gods, and passes on
To mighty ocean. Zeus omnipotent
Is powerless to avert it, and submits
And yields full willingly.

Sophocles

An Awful Purity

O that 'twere mine to keep
An awful purity,
In words and deeds whose laws on high are set
Through heaven's clear æther spread,
Whose birth Olympos boasts,
Their one, their only sire,
Whom man's frail flesh begat not,
Nor in forgetfulness
Shall lull to sleep of death;
In them our God is great,
In them He grows not old for evermore.

Sophocles

Antigone in Her Tomb

O tomb, my bridal chamber, vaulted home.
Guarded right well for ever, where I go
To join mine own, of whom the greatest part
Among the dead doth Persephassa hold;
And I, of all the last and saddest, wend
My way below, life's little span unfilled,
And yet I go, and feed myself with hopes
That I shall meet them, by my father loved,
Dear to my mother, well-beloved of thee,
Thou darling brother: I, with these my hands,
Washed each dear corpse, arrayed you, poured libations,
In rites of burial; and in care for thee,
Thy body, Polneices, honouring,
I gain this recompense. And yet in sight
Of all that rightly judge the deed was good;
I had not done it had I come to be
A mother with her children-had not dared,
Though 'twere a husband dead that mouldered there,
Against my country's will to bear this toil.
And am I asked what law constrained me thus?
I answer, had I lost a husband dear,
I might have had another; other sons
By other spouse, if one were lost to me;
But when my father and my mother sleep
In Hades, then no brother more can come.
And therefore, giving thee the foremost place,
I seemed in Creon's eyes, O brother dear,
To sin in boldest daring. Therefore now
He leads me, having taken me by force,
Cut off from marriage bed and marriage song,
Untasting wife's true joy, or maiden's bliss,
With infant at her breast, but all forlorn,
Bereaved of friends, in utter misery,
Alive, I tread the chambers of the dead.
What law of Heaven have I transgressed against?
What use for me, ill-starred one, still to look
To any God for succour, or to call
On any friend for aid? For holiest deed
I bear this charge of rank unholiness.
If acts like these the Gods on high approve,
We, taught by pain, shall own that we have sinned;
But if these sin, I pray they suffer not
Worse evils than the wrongs they do to me.

Sophocles

Ares the Destroyer

Ares the destroyer drive away!
Who now, though hushed the din
Of brazen shield and spear,
With fiercest battle-cry
Wars on me mightily.
Bid him go back in flight,
Retreat from this our land,
Or to the ocean bed,
Where Amphitrite sleeps,
Or to that haven of the homeless sea
Which sweeps the Thracian shore.
If waning night spares aught,
That doth the day assail:
Do thou, then, Sire almighty,
Wielding the lightning's strength,
Blast him with thy dread fiery thunderbolts.

Sophocles

Avenger of the Dead

See ye, where Ares, breathing slaughter still,
Speeds on his onward way,
Slaughter that none may check;
E'en at this very hour, beneath the roof,
They go who track all evil deeds of guile,
The hands whom none escape;
And lo! my soul's dream doth not tarry long
Floating in wild suspense;

For now beneath the roof-tree he has passed,
The avenger of the dead,
Treading with subtle feet,
E'en to his father's high ancestral halls,
And in his hands bears slaughter newly edged;
And Hermes, Maia's son,
Hiding their counsel, leads them to the goal,
Leads on, and tarries not.

Sophocles

Battle of Two Brothers

O light of yon bright sun,
Fairest of all that ever shone on Thebes,
Thebes with her seven high gates,
Thou didst appear that day,
Eye of the golden dawn,
O'er Dirké's streams advancing,
Driving with quickened curb,
In haste of headlong flight,
The warrior who, in panoply of proof,
From Argos came, with shield of glittering white;
Whom Polyneikes brought,
Roused by the strife of tongues
Against our fatherland,
As eagle shrieking shrill,
He hovered o'er our land,
With snow-white wing bedecked,
Begirt with myriad arms,
And flowing horsehair crests.

He stood above our towers,
Encircling, with his spears all blood-bestained,
The portals of our gates;
He went, before he filled
His jaw with blood of men,
Ere the pine-fed Hephæstos
Had seized our crown of towers.
So loud the battle din
That Ares loves was raised around his rear,
A conflict hard e'en for his dragon foe.
For breath of haughty speech
Zeus hateth evermore;
And seeing them advance,
With mighty rushing stream,
And clang of golden arms,
With brandished fire he hurls
One who rushed eagerly
From topmost battlement
To shout out, 'Victory!'

Crashing to earth he fell,
Down-smitten, with his torch,
Who came, with madman's haste,
Drunken, with frenzied soul,
And swept o'er us with blasts,
The whirlwind blasts of hate.
Thus on one side they fare,
And Ares great, like war-horse in his strength,
Smiting now here, now there,
Brought each his several fate.
For seven chief warriors at the seven gates met,
Equals with equals matched,
To Zeus, the Lord of War,

Left tribute, arms of bronze;
All but the hateful ones,
Who, from one father and one mother sprung,
Stood wielding, hand to hand,
Their two victorious spears,
And had their doom of death as common lot.

But now, since Victory,
Of mightiest name, hath come
To Thebes, of chariots proud,
Joying and giving joy,
After these wars just past,
Learn ye forgetfulness,
And all night long, with dance and voice of hymns,
Let us go round in state
To all the shrines of Gods,
While Bacchus, making Thebes resound with dance,
Begins the strain of joy;
But, lo! our country's king,
Creon, Menoekus' son,
New ruler, by new change,
And providence of God,
Comes to us, steering on some new device;
For, lo! he hath convened,
By herald's loud command,
This council of the elders of our land.

Sophocles

Chorus from Ajax

Fair Salamis, the billow's roar
Wanders around thee yet;
And sailors gaze upon thy shore
Firm in the Ocean set.
Thy son is in a foreign clime
Where Ida feeds her countless flocks,
Far from thy dear remembered rocks,
Worn by the waste of time-
Comfortless, nameless, hopeless-save
In the dark prospect of the yawning grave.
And Ajax, in his deep distress
Allied to our disgrace,
Hath cherished in his loneliness
The bosom friend's embrace.
Frenzy hath seized thy dearest son,
Who from thy shores in glory came
The first in valor and in fame;
The deeds that he hath done
Seem hostile all to hostile eyes;
The sons of Atreus see them and despise.

Woe to the mother, in her close of day,
Woe to her desolate heart, and temples gray,
When she shall hear
Her loved one's story whispered in her ear!
'Woe, woe!' will be the cry-
No quiet murmur like the tremulous wail
Of the lone bird, the querulous nightingale-
But shrieks that fly
Piercing, and wild, and loud, shall mourn the tale;
And she will beat her breast, and rend her hair,
Scattering the silver locks that Time hath left her there.

Oh! when the pride of Græcia's noblest race
Wanders, as now, in darkness and disgrace,
When Reason's day
Sets rayless-joyless-quenched in cold decay,
Better to die, and sleep
The never-waking sleep, than linger on,
And dare to live, when the soul's life is gone:
But thou shalt weep,
Thou wretched father, for thy dearest son,
Thy best beloved, by inward Furies torn,
The deepest, bitterest curse thine ancient house hath borne!

Sophocles

Disease of Love

A pleasant ill is this disease of love,
And 'twere not ill to sketch its likeness thus:
When sharp cold spreads through all the æther clear,
And children seize a crystal icicle,
At first they firmly hold their new-found joy;
But in the end the melting mass nor cares
To slip away, nor is it good to keep:
So those that love, the self-same strong desire
Now leads to action, now to idleness.

Sophocles

Electra's Song

O holy light of day,
And air with earth commensurate,
Many the wailing songs,
Many the echoing blow,
On bosom stained with blood
Thou heardest, when the night
Of murky darkness ceased;
And how, in all my vigils of the night
I wail my hapless sire,
It knows, the loathed bed of hated house;
My sire, whom Ares fierce and murderous,
On alien shore received not as a guest,
But she, my mother, and her paramour,
Ægisthos, with the blood-stained hatchet, smote
As those that timber fell
Smite down with lofty oak.
And thou, my father, hast no pity gained
From any one but me,
Though thou a death hast died
So grievous and so foul to look upon.

But I at least will ne'er
Refrain mine eyes from weeping, while I live,
Nor yet my voice from wail;
Not while I see this day,
And yon bright twinkling stars;
But, like a nightingale
Of its young brood bereaved,
Before the gates I speak them forth to all.
O house of Hades and Persephone,
O Hermes of the abyss, and thou, dread Curse,
And ye, Erinnyes, daughters of the Gods,
Ye dreaded Ones who look
On all who perish, slain unrighteously,
On all whose bed is stealthily defiled,
Come ye, and help, avenge my father's death;
Send me my brother here,
For I alone must fail,
Sorrow's great burden in the balance cast.

Sophocles

God's Counsel

I know that God is ever such as this,
Darkly disclosing counsels to the wise;
But to the simple, speaking fewest words,
Plain teacher found.

Sophocles

Grief

Blessed are those whose life no woe doth taste!
For unto those whose house
The Gods have shaken, nothing fails of curse
Or woe, that creeps to generations far.
E'en thus a wave, (when spreads,
With blasts from Thracian coasts,
The darkness of the deep,)
Up from the sea's abyss
Hither and thither rolls the black sand on,
And every jutting peak,
Swept by the storm-wind's strength,
Lashed by the fierce wild waves,
Re-echoes with the far-resounding roar.

Sophocles

Ill-fated Oedipus

Ah, race of mortal men,
How as a thing of nought
I count ye, though ye live;
For who is there of men
That more of blessing knows,
Than just a little while
To seem to prosper well,
And, having seemed, to fall?
With thee as pattern given,
Thy destiny, e'en thine,
Ill-fated Oedipus,
I count nought human blest.

For he, with wondrous skill,
Taking his aim, did hit
Success, in all things blest;
And did, O Zeus! destroy
The Virgin with claws bent,
And sayings wild and dark;
And against many deaths
A tower and strong defense
Did for my country rise:
And so thou king art named,
With highest glory crowned,
Ruling in mighty Thebes.

And now, who lives than thou more miserable?
Who equals thee in wild woes manifold,
In shifting turns of life?
Ah, noble one, our Oedipus!
For whom the same wide harbour
Sufficed for sire and son,
In marriage rites to enter:
Ah how, ah, wretched one,
How could thy father's bed
Receive thee, and so long,
Even till now, be dumb?

Time, who sees all things, he hath found thee out,
Against thy will, and long ago condemned
The wedlock none may wed,
Begetter and begotten.
Ah, child of Laios! would
I ne'er had seen thy face!
I mourn with wailing lips,
Mourn sore exceedingly.
'Tis simplest truth to say,
By thee from death I rose,
By thee in death I sleep.

Sophocles

Kyprian Queen

Not Kyprian only, children, is she called,
Who rules o'er Kypros, but bears many names.
Hades is she, and Might imperishable,
And raving Madness, and untamed Desire,
And bitter Lamentation. All is hers,
Or earnest, or in calm, or passionate;
For still where'er is life she winds within
The inmost heart. Where finds this Goddess not
Her easy prey? She masters all the tribe
Of fish that swim the waters, she prevails
O'er all four-footed beasts that walk the earth.
Her wing directs the course of wandering birds,
Mighty o'er beasts, and men, and Gods above.
What God in wrestling throws she not thrice o'er?
Yea, if 'twere lawful to speak all the truth,
She sways the breast of Zeus. All weaponless,
Without or spear or sword, the Kyprian queen
Cuts short the schemes of mortals or of Gods.

Sophocles

Long Life Not To Be Desired

WHO, loving life, hath sought
To outrun the appointed span,
Shall be arraigned before my thought
For an infatuate man.
Since the added years entail
Much that is bitter; -- joy
Flies out of ken, desire doth fail,
The wished-for moments cloy.
But when the troublous life,
Be it less or more, is past,
With power to end the strife
Comes rescuing Death at last.
Lo! the dark bridegroom waits! No festal choir
Shall grace his destined hour, no dance, no lyre!

Far best were ne'er to be;
But, once he hath seen the day,
Next best by far for each to flee
As swiftly as each may,
Yonder from whence he came;
For let but Youth be there
With her light fooleries, who shall name
The unnumbered brood of Care?
No trial spared, no fall!
Feuds, battles, murders, rage,
Envy, and last of all,
Despised, dim, friendless age!
Ay, there all evils, crowded in one room.
Each at his worst of ill, augments of gloom.

Such lot is mine, and round this man of woe,
As some gray headland of a northward shore
Bears buffets of all wintry winds that blow,
Fresh storms of Fate are bursting evermore
In thunderous billows, borne
Some from the waning light,
Some through mid-noon, some from the rising morn,
Some from the stars of Night.

Sophocles

Man

Many the forms of life,
Wondrous and strange to see,
But nought than man appears
More wondrous and more strange.
He, with the wintry gales,
O'er the white foaming sea,
'Mid wild waves surging round,
Wendeth his way across:
Earth, of all Gods, from ancient days to first,
Unworn and undecayed.
He, with his ploughs that travel o'er and o'er,
Furrowing with horse and mule,
Wears ever year by year.

The thoughtless tribe of birds,
The beasts that roam the fields,
The brood in sea-depths born,
He takes them all in nets
Knotted in snaring mesh.
Man, wonderful in skill.
And by his subtle arts
He holds in sway the beasts
That roam the fields, or tread the mountain's height;
And brings the binding yoke
Upon the neck of horse with shaggy mane,
Or bull on the mountain crest,
Untameable in strength.

And speech, and thought as swift as wind,
And tempered mood for higher life of states,
These he has learnt, and how to flee
Or the clear cold of frost unkind,
Or darts of storm and shower,
Man all-providing. Unprovided, he
Meeteth no chance the coming days may bring;
Only from Hades, still
He fails to escape,
Though skill of art may teach him how to flee
From depths of fell disease incurable.

So, gifted with a wondrous might,
Above all fancy's dreams, with skill to plan,
Now unto evil, now to good,
He turns. While holding fast the laws,
His country's sacred rights,
That rest upon the oath of Gods on high,
High in the State: an outlaw from the State,
When loving, in his pride,
The thing that is not good;
Ne'er may he share my hearth, nor yet my thoughts,
Who worketh deeds of evil like to this.

Sophocles

Old Age and Youth

What man is he that yearneth
For length unmeasured of days?
Folly mine eye discerneth
Encompassing all his ways.
For years over-running the measure
Small change thee in evil wise:
Grief draweth nigh thee; and pleasure,
Behold it is hid from thine eyes.
This to their wage have they
Which overlive their day.
And He that looseth from labor
Doth one with other befriend,
Whom bride nor bridesmen attend,
Song, nor sound of the tabor,
Death, that maketh an end.

Thy portion esteem I highest,
Who was not even begot;
Thine next, being born who diest
And straightway again art not.
With follies light as the feather
Doth Youth to man befall;
Then evils gather together,
There wants not one of them all-
Wrath, envy, discord, strife,
The sword that seeketh life.
And sealing the sum of trouble
Doth tottering Age draw nigh,
Whom friends and kinsfolk fly,
Age, upon whom redouble
All sorrows under the sky.

This man, as me, even so,
Have the evil days overtaken;
And like as a cape sea-shaken
With tempest at earth's last verges
And shock of all winds that blow,
His head the seas of woe,
The thunders of awful surges
Ruining overflow;
Blown from the fall of eve,
Blown from the dayspring forth,
Blown from the noon in heaven,
Blown from night and the North.

Sophocles

Parting Words

Come, then, I leave this isle,
And speak my parting words:
Farewell, O roof, long time
My one true guard and friend;
And ye, O nymphs that sport
In waters or in fields;
Strong roar of waves that break
On jutting promontory,
Where oft my head was wet,
(Though hid in far recess,)
With blasts of stormy South;
And oft the mount that bears
The name of Hermes gave
Its hollow, loud lament,
Echoing my stormy woe;
And now, ye streams and fount,
Lykian, where haunt the wolves,
We leave you, leave you now,
Who ne'er had dreamt of this.
Farewell, O Lemnos, girt by waters round,
With fair breeze send me on
Right well, that none may blame,
Where Fate, the mighty, leads,
Counsel of friends, and God,
Who worketh this in might invincible.

Sophocles

Power Of Love (From

O LOVE, thou art victor in fight: thou mak'st all things afraid;
Thou couchest thee softly at night on the cheeks of a maid;
Thou passest the bounds of the sea, and the folds of the fields;
To thee the immortal, to thee the ephemeral yields;
Thou maddenest them that possess thee; thou turnest astray
The souls of the just, to oppress them, out of the way;
Thou hast kindled amongst us pride, and the quarrel of kin;
Thou art lord, by the eyes of a bride, and the love-light therein;
Thou sittest assessor with Right; her kingdom is thine,
Who sports with invincible might, Aphrodite divine.

Sophocles

Praise Of Colonus (From

STRANGER, thou art standing now
On Colonus' sparry brow;
All the haunts of Attic ground,
Where the matchless coursers bound,
Boast not, through their realms of bliss,
Other spot as fair as this.
Frequent down this greenwood dale,
Mourns the warbling nightingale,
Nestling 'mid the thickest screen
Of the ivy's darksome green;
Or where, each empurpled shoot
Drooping with its myriad fruit,
Curled in many a mazy twine,
Blooms the never-trodden vine,
By the god's protecting power
Safe from sun and storm and shower.
Bacchus here, the summer long,
Revels with the goddess throng,
Nymphs who erst, on Nyssa's wild,
Reared to man the rosy child.

Here Narcissus, day by day,
Buds, in clustering beauty gay,
Sipping aye, at morn and even,
All the nectar dews of heaven,
Wont amid your locks to shine,
Ceres fair, and Proserpine.
Here the golden Crocus gleams,
Murmur here unfailing streams,
Sleep the bubbling fountains never,
Feeding pure Cephissus river,
Whose prolific waters daily
Bid the pastures blossom gayly,
With the showers of spring-tide blending,
On the lap of earth descending.
Here the Nine, to notes of pleasure,
Love to tread their choral measure,
Venus, o'er those flowerets gliding,
Oft her rein of gold is guiding.

Now a brighter boast than all
Shall my grateful song recall;
Yon proud shrub, that will not smile,
Pelops, on thy Doric isle,
Nor on Asiatic soil,
But unsown, unsought by toil,
Self-engendered, year by year,
Springs to life a native here.
Tree the trembling foeman shuns,
Garland for Athena's sons,
May the olive long be ours,
None may break its sacred bowers,

None its boughs of silvery gray
Young or old may bear away:
Morian Jove, with look of love,
Ever guards it from above,
Blue-eyed Pallas watch unsleeping
O'er her favorite tree is keeping.

Swell the song of praise again;
Other boons demand my strain,
Other blessings we inherit,
Granted by the mighty Spirit;
On the sea and on the shore,
Ours the bridle and the oar.
Son of Saturn old! whose sway
Stormy winds and waves obey,
Thine be honor's well-earned meed,
Tamer of the champing steed:
First he wore on Attic plain
Bit of steel and curbing rein.
Oft too o'er the waters blue,
Athens, strain thy laboring crew;
Practiced hands the bark are plying,
Oars are bending, spray is flying,
Sunny waves beneath them glancing,
Sportive Nereids round them dancing,
With their hundred feet in motion,
Twinkling 'mid the foam of ocean.

Sophocles

Prayer For Deliverance From The Pestilence (From

Lord of the Pythian treasure,
What meaneth the word thou hast spoken?
The strange and wondrous word,
Which Thebes has heard,
Oh! it hath shaken our hearts to a faltering measure!
A token, O Paian, a token!
What is thy boon to us?
Shall it come soon to us,
Shall it be long e'er the circle bend
Full round to the fatal end?
Answer us, daughter of Hope,
Voice born Immortal of golden Hope!

First therefore thou be entreated,
Divine unapproachable maiden [2],
And Artemis with thee, our aid to be,
In the mid mart of our city majestic seated,
And Phoebus the archer death-laden!
By your affinity
Helpfullest trinity,
Help us. And as in the time gone by
Ye have bowed to our plaintive cry,
Bowed to our misery sore:
So come to us now as ye came before.
Ah me! it is a world, a world of woe,
Plague upon the height and plague below!
And they mow us with murderous glaive,
And never a shield to save!
Never a fruit of the earth comes to the birth,
And in vain, in vain
Is the cry and the labor of mothers, and all for a fruitless pain.
Away, away,
Ghost upon ghost they are wafted away:
One with another they die,
Swifter than flame do they fly
From life, from light, from day.

Ah me! it is a world, a world of dead,
Feverous and foul, with corpses spread:
And they lie as they lie, unbefriended.
Where are the mothers, and where are the wives?
They are fled, fled for their lives,
To the alters to pray,
There to lie, to sigh,
And to pray, and to pray unattended,
With choir and cry
Lamentation and litany blended.
And only, O Maiden, by thee may our marred estate be mended.

The fiend of plague, whose swordless hand
Burns like battle through the land,
With wild tempestuous wailing all about him,--

O cross his track and turn him back
O meet him, thou, and rout him!
Let him sink again
Deep in the deepest main!
Let him mingle in horrible motion
With the wildest ocean!
(For still what 'scapes the cruel night,
Cruel day destroys it quite.)
But oh! with thunder-stroke
Let our enemy and thine be broke,--
O Zeus! --
Father! -- let him know thy wrath, thy wrath divine!

O God of light, from lightsome bow
Cast abroad thy fiery snow,
Like morsels cast thine arrowy, fiery snow!
And thou, O mountain maiden pure,
His sister, stand our champion sure,
Stand and strow
Arrows, as fire, below!
Thou too -- thou art Theban -- O Bacchus,
Thou -- art thou not Theban? -- O Bacchus,
In rosy bloom, elate and strong,
Lead thy madding train along,
Until thy fiery chase
Hunt the demon from the place
Afar, afar!
O follow, follow him far, afar!

Sophocles

Prosperity and Fate

We should not speak of one that prospers well
As happy, till his life have run its course,
And reached its goal. An evil spirit's gift
In shortest time has oft laid low the state
Of one full rich in great prosperity,
When the change comes, and so the Gods appoint.

Sophocles

Prosperity of the Godless

Strange is it that the godless, who have sprung
From evil-doers, should fare prosperously,
While good men, born of noble stock, should be
By adverse fortune vexed. It was ill done
For the Gods thus to order lives of men.
What ought to be is this, that godly souls
Should from the Gods gain some clear recompense,
And the unjust pay some clear penalty;
So none would prosper who are base of soul.

Sophocles

Return of the Hero

Soon will the clear-voiced flute return to you
With no unfitting strain,
But like a lyre with hymn
And song the Gods approve;
For, lo! the hero whom Zeus owns as son,
Of fair Alcmena born, hastes home to us,
With trophies of high worth.

Him we, (for twelve long months,
Still waiting, knowing nought of all that passed,)
Counted as wanderer far upon the sea;
And she, his dear-loved wife,
Weeping with many tears,
Full sadly wore her saddened heart away,
But Ares, roused to rage,
Hath freed us from our dark and troublous days.

Ah may he come, yea, come!
Let not his ship of many oars lie to,
Before this city welcomes his approach;
Leaving the island hearth,
Where he his victim slays,
Thence may he come, yea, come with strong desire,
Tempered by suasive spell,
Of that rich unguent, as the Monster spake.

Sophocles

Song of Philoctetes

O cave of hollow rock,
Now hot, now icy cold,
And I was doomed, ah me!
To leave thee never more;
But e'en in death thou still wilt be to me
My one true helping friend.
O woe, woe, woe!
O home most full of grief,
My grief, me miserable!
What now shall come to me
As day succeeds to day?
Whence shall I, in my woe,
Find hope of food to live?
Ah, now the swift-winged birds
Will soar in loftiest flight,
High through the whistling wind;
For I am powerless.

O miserable me!
O Utraged with foulest wrong,
Who for the years to come
In woe, no helper near,
Shall henceforth, dwelling here, consume away,
(Ah me! ah me!)
Gaining no food for life
From those my swift-winged darts,
With firm hands grasping them;
But unsuspected words
Of guileful mind deceived;
Would I might see the man
Whose heart devised these things,
Bearing these pains of mine
As long as I have borne!

Ah, woe is me! he sits,
Where the shore is white with waves,
And laughs within himself,
And tosses in his hands
What fed my wretched life,
By none else borne till now.
O bow, of me beloved,
Torn from my loving grasp,
Surely, if thou can'st feel,
Thou lookest piteously
On me, the bosom friend of Heracles,
Who never more shall bend thee as of old;
But now thou changest hands,
Art wielded by a man of many wiles,
And seest foul deceits,
A man thou needs must loathe and execrate,
Ten thousand plots from shameful deeds upspringing,
Such as none else contrived.

O all ye wingèd game,
And tribes of bright-eyed deer,
Who on these high lawns fed,
No more from this my home
Will ye allure me forth.
I wield not in my hands
The strength I had of old
(Ah me!) from those my darts;
Full carelessly this place
Is barred against you now,
No longer fearful; come ye, now 'tis well
That ye in turn should glut your ravenous maw
With this my spotted flesh.
Soon I shall end my life; for whence can I
Find means withal to live?
Who thus can feed upon the empty winds,
Gaining no more what earth brings forth to men,
The giver of their life?

Sophocles

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Sophocles

The Chariot Race (From

They took their stand where the appointed judges
Had cast their lots and ranged the rival cars.
Rang out the brazen trump! Away they bound,
Cheer the hot steeds and shake the slackened reins;
As with a body the large space is filled
With the huge clangor of the rattling cars.
High whirl aloft the dust-clouds; blent together,
Each presses each and the lash rings; and loud
Snort the wild steeds, and from their fiery breath,
Along their manes and down the circling wheels
Scatter the flaking foam. Orestes still--
Ays, as he swept around the perilous pillar
Last in the course, wheeled in the rushing axle;
The left rein curbed,--that on the dexter hand
Flung loose.-- So on erect the chariots rolled!
Sudden the Ænian's fierce and headlong steeds
Broke from the bit -- and, as the seventh time now
The course was circled, on the Libyan car
Dashed their wild fronts: then order changed to ruin:
Car crashed on car; the wide Crissæan plain
Was sea-like strewed with wrecks; the Athenian saw,
Slackened his speed, and wheeling round the marge,
Unscathed and skillful, in the midmost space,
Left the wild tumult of that tossing storm.
Behind, Orestes, hitherto the last,
Had yet kept back his coursers for the close;
Now one sole rival left -- on, on he flew,
And the sharp sound of the impelling scourge
Rang in the keen ears of the flying steeds.
He nears, he reaches -- they are side by side --
Now one -- the other -- by a length the victor.
The courses all are past -- the wheels erect --
All safe -- when, as the hurrying coursers round
The fatal pillar dashed, the wretched boy
Slackened the left rein: on the column's edge
Crashed the frail axle: headlong from the car
Caught and all meshed within the reins, he fell;
And masterless the mad steeds raged along!
Loud from that mighty multitude arose
A shriek -- a shout! But yesterday such deeds,
To-day such doom! Now whirled upon the earth,
Now his limbs dashed aloft, they dragged him -- those
Wild horses -- till all gory from the wheels
Released; -- and no man, not his nearest friends,
Could in that mangled corpse have traced Orestes.
They laid the body on the funeral-pyre;
And while we speak, the Phocian strangers bear,
In a small, brazen, melancholy urn,
That handful of cold ashes to which all
The grandeur of the Beautiful hath shrunk.

Sophocles

The Life of Woman

I by myself am nought; yea, oftentimes
So look I upon all our womenkind,
That we are nothing. Young, we lead a life
Of all most joyous, in our father's house,
For want of knowledge is our kindly nurse;
But when we come to marriageable years,
Then are we pushed and bartered for away
From household gods and from our parents dear
Some unto alien husbands, some to men
Of stronger race, and some to homes full strange,
Or full of turmoil: and when one night bind us,
We needs must bear, and think of it as right.

Sophocles

The Vine of Bacchus

There stretcheth by the sea
A fair Euboean shore, and o'er it creeps
The vine of Bacchus, each day's growth complete.
In morning brightness all the land is green
With tendrils fair and spreading. Noontide comes,
And then the unripe cluster forms apace:
The day declines, and purple grow the grapes;
At eve the whole bright vintage is brought in,
And the mixed wine poured out.

Sophocles

The Wheel of God

In many a turning of the wheel of God
My fate revolves and changes all its mood;
E'en as the moon's face never keepeth still
For but two nights in one position fixed,
But from its hiding-place first comes as new,
With brightening face, and thenceforth waxeth full;
And when it gains its noblest phase of all,
Wanes off again, and comes to nothingness.

Sophocles

Undying Love

O Love, in every battle victor owned;
Now on a maiden's soft and blooming cheek,
In secret ambush hid;
Now o'er the broad sea wandering at will,
And now in shepherd's folds;
Of all the Undying Ones none 'scape from thee,
Nor yet of mortal men
Whose lives are measured as a fleeting day;
And who has thee is frenzied in his soul.

Sophocles

Wealth

Riches gain friends, gain honours-further still,
Gain highest sovereignty for those who sit
In low estate. The rich have no men foes;
And if they have, these still conceal their hate.
A wondrous power has wealth to wind its way
Or on plain ground, or heights that none may tread,
Where one that's poor, although 'twere close at hand
Would fail to gain the thing his heart desires.
The form unsightly and of no esteem
It makes both wise of speech and fair to see:
It only has the power of joy or grief,
It only knows the art of hiding ill.

Sophocles

Wisdom

Man's highest blessedness,
In wisdom chiefly stands;
And in the things that touch upon the Gods,
'Tis best in word or deed
To shun unholy pride;
Great words of boasting bring great punishments,
And so to grey-haired age
Teach wisdom at the last.

Sophocles

Wives

No greater evil can a man endure
Than a bad wife, nor find a greater good
Than one both good and wise; and each man speaks
As judging by the experience of his life.

Sophocles