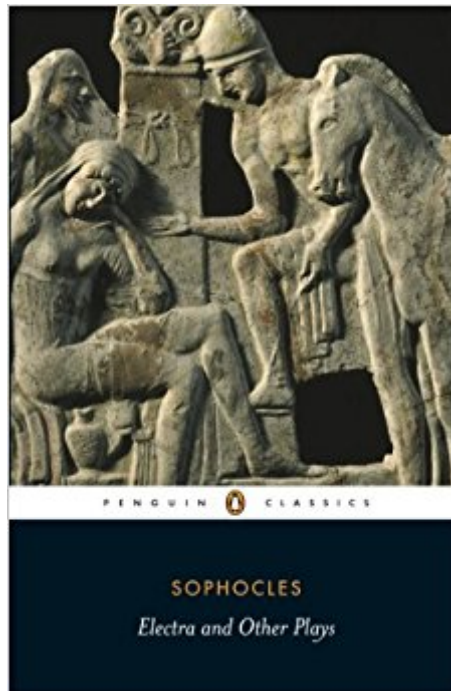




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# Electra And Other Plays (Penguin Classics)



## Synopsis

Four seminal tragedies by the master Greek dramatist, in sparkling new translations. Of the more than one hundred plays Sophocles wrote over the course of his long life, only seven survive. This volume collects four of them, all newly translated. *Electra* portrays the grief of a young woman for her father, Agamemnon, who has been killed by her mother's lover. *Ajax* depicts the enigma of power and weakness vis-à-vis the fall of the great hero. *Women of Trachis* dramatizes the tragic love and error of Heracles's deserted wife, Deianeira; *Philoctetes* examines the conflict between physical force and moral strength. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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## Customer Reviews

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 Searches, 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. David Raeburn is a lecturer in classics at Oxford University. He has translated Sophocles and directed numerous school and university productions of Greek tragedies.

Great product. Very satisfied.

This version of Sophocles plays Electra, Ajax, Philoctetes and Women of Trachis is one of the best I've found. I was basically looking for an acting version, and Waitings verse is both telling, beautiful and flowing. It tells the story without plodding or stumbling. Very good. By the way, the cover says Penguin Classic.

In the USA there's a social category of people known as "airheads" for whom anything that happened before the year 2000 is "like, major antiquity, guy". What can we say, then, about plays that were written over 2,400 years ago? For most of my life, the mention of Greek plays was on a par with cod liver oil. Probably good for me, but best avoided if possible. I admit, it was the airhead-lite approach. Recently, I finally buckled down and decided it was now or never. I'm not sorry I did. The four plays by Sophocles in this collection deal with Iliad spinoffs---events connected to that ancient epic with some of the Trojan War characters already known to the Greeks of the author's time---with legends of the gods (Hercules or Heracles, as they write it) or with both at once. Each play uses a chorus to reflect inner thinking or thinking by "other people", whoever they may be. The translation in this volume brings a modicum of modern English to the plays, rendering them very understandable. Purists might not appreciate that, but I, for one, found myself better able to follow the deeper meanings of the plays because I didn't have to wade through archaic English. (Remember how we struggled through Shakespeare?) AJAX, ELECTRA, WOMEN OF TRACHIS, and PHILOCTETES jolted me out of my neo-airhead tendencies and amazed me by their modernity. Their form may be ancient, stilted to modern eyes, and lacking much action, but the themes reveal human nature as if these plays all were written yesterday. The same dilemmas pose themselves,

the same contrasts in human character---the straight and the crooked, the mean and the noble, the forgiving and the vengeful. Actions well meant turn out to have disastrous consequences. Greed and jealousy run rampant. AJAX, the earliest work here, is a little less dramatic than the other three, but does deal with "temporary insanity". I don't have the silver tongue and deconstruction abilities of a literary expert, but if these plays don't knock your socks off---just because of their relevance to 2003 if for no other reason---then I don't know what will. Don't wait 40 years. Delicious cod liver oil, no lie.

I found this to be much more satisfying than Aeschylus's Libation Bearers. Focusing on Electra offers a much more nuanced examination of bitterness and what it means to be exiled from those one loves. It also ties up some of the loose ends about the murder that Libation Bearers sort of glosses over. Euripides gives a real sense of the grave magnitude of these crimes. The speech where Electra condemns her mother is one of the most powerful statements of personal anger I've ever read.

Sophocles shows dramatically his vision on man and religion in these four plays (Ajax, Electra, Women of Trachis, Philoctetes). The tragedies are also a 'human' documentary on ancient Greece and its population. The overall theme is 'war': In 'Ajax', the warriors are fighting among themselves; Electra and Orestes in 'Electra' revenge the sacrifice of his daughter by Agamemnon to win a war; in 'Women of Trachis', Heracles conquered a new concubine in a war, and in 'Philoctetes' the Greeks need a bow to win a war. The consequences of this relentless fighting are death, destruction and enslavement: 'battle and lust of blood move onward step by step to the inevitable end'. 'Where is now the spear of victory?' 'War never picks the worst men for victories, but always the best.' 'sad sight, the poor unhappy exiles, homeless, fatherless, waifs in a strange land, daughters of free-born families now condemned to slavery.' For Sophocles, man is a ballgame for the gods. 'The future is hidden'. 'The gods delight to turn away all deep-dyed villains from the door of death and hale in all good men.' But Sophocles' vision on religion is extremely ambivalent. He sees around him 'the malevolence of the unforgiving gods'. 'God is an awful hand of death, new shapes of woe, uncontrolled sufferings.' Eros is destruction: 'her beauty has been her ruin; she has brought her country down to slavery and destruction.' So, 'why then praise we gods, when we find them evil?' And ultimately, who is responsible? 'Say that it was the will of heaven; but your hand did it.' Is it not 'Everyman for himself': in Ajax, Teucer forces a human burial for his half-brother. Of the four tragedies, the 'Women of Trachis' are more a long meditation, 'Philoctetes' ends with a *deus ex*

machina, 'Ajax' is the most lively, but 'Electra' shines through the intensity of the head-on confrontations. These formidable texts, written some 2500 years ago, are a must read for all those interested in highlights of world literature.

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