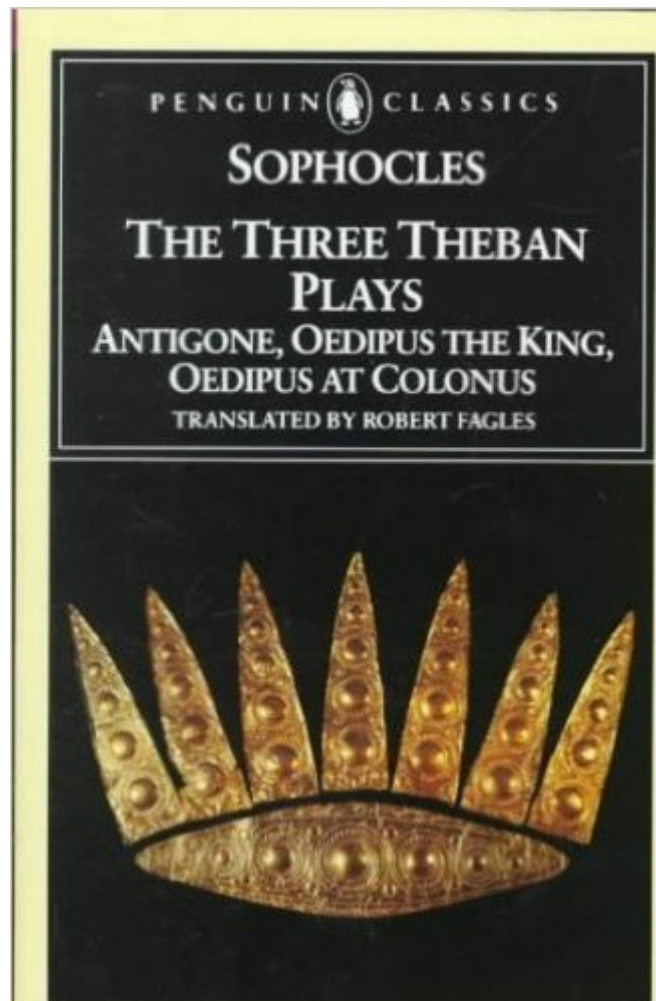


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The Three Theban Plays: Antigone; Oedipus The King; Oedipus At Colonus



Synopsis

The heroic Greek dramas that have moved theatergoers and readers since the fifth century B.C. Towering over the rest of Greek tragedy, the three plays that tell the story of the fated Theban royal family—*Antigone*, *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus*—are among the most enduring and timeless dramas ever written. Robert Fagles's authoritative and acclaimed translation conveys all of Sophocles's lucidity and power: the cut and thrust of his dialogue, his ironic edge, the surge and majesty of his choruses and, above all, the agonies and triumphs of his characters. This Penguin Classics edition features an introduction and notes by the renowned classicist Bernard Knox. 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.

Book Information

Paperback: 430 pages

Publisher: Penguin Classics; 1st edition (January 3, 2000)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0140444254

ISBN-13: 978-0140444254

Product Dimensions: 5 x 0.7 x 7.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars See all reviews (94 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #1,357 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #1 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Dramas & Plays > Ancient & Classical #1 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Dramas & Plays > Tragedy #33 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy

Customer Reviews

Researching translations is never an easy task, and in this case, where you'll have to search on for the title and the translator to find what you want, it's particularly difficult. Here's what I've found by comparing several editions:

1. David Grene translation: Seems to be accurate, yet not unwieldy as such. My pick. Language is used precisely, but not to the point where it's barely in English.
2. Fitts/Fitzgerald translation: Excellent as well, though a little less smooth than the Grene one.

Certainly not a bad pick.³ Fagles translation: Beautiful. Not accurate. If you are looking for the smoothest English version, there's no doubt that this is it. That said, because he is looser with the translation, some ideas might be lost. For instance, in *Antigone*, in the beginning, *Antigone* discusses how law compels her to bury her brother despite Creon's edict. In Fagles, the "law" concept is lost in "military honors" when discussing the burial of Eteocles. This whole notion of obeying positive law or natural law is very important, but you wouldn't know it from Fagles. In Grene, for example, it is translated to "lawful rites."⁴ Gibbons and Segal: Looks great, but right now the book has only *Antigone* (and not the rest of the trilogy) and costs almost 3x as much. I'll pass. But, from a cursory review, I'm impressed with their work.⁵ MacDonald: This edition received some good write-ups, but I wasn't able to do a direct passage-to-passage comparison.⁶ Woodruff: NO, NO, NO. Just NO. It's so colloquial it makes me gag. Very accessible, but the modernization of the language is just so extreme as to make it almost laughable. You don't get any sense of the power of language in the play.

There's not much to say about these plays that hasn't been said over the last 2,500 years except, read them. More than once. More than twice. As to the Fagles translation, as with most of his translations it is very smooth, almost lyrical, quite appealing. But he takes more liberties than I really like a translator to take. You are not reading as close as possible a rendition of what Sophocles actually wrote; rather, Fagles is somewhere between translation and retelling. For the average reader this may be fine, but don't think you're getting pure Sophocles, or as pure as is possible with a translation. If all you want is an enjoyable read that is reasonably close to what Sophocles wrote, Fagles is fine. For more scholarly accuracy, try the translations by Greene, Fitzgerald, or Wyckoff. For a very good set of alternate translations which have as much fluidity as Fagles and a bit more faithfulness to the original, try the Fitts/Fitzgerald translations. One benefit to the Fagles translation is the introductions by Knox, which are excellent (nearly as good as his superb introduction to Fagles' *Odyssey*). One detriment, for me, is that the volume presents the plays in the order they were written, not in the order of the (relatively) unified story which they present. (It's sort of like reading Shakespeare's *Henry VI* plays before his *Henry IV* and *V* plays; that's the order he wrote them in, but the *Henry V* and *VI* plays make more sense if you've read the *Henry IV* plays first.

I try to reread Sophocles every few years, both because I enjoy him and because I find him a moral tonic. Since I can only haltingly stumble through his Greek, I always read translations, and I read a different translation each time. When one reads a translated literary work, one is reading a piece of

literature that, in a manner of speaking, is "co-authored." Translation isn't, can't, and oughtn't to be a mechanically isomorphic transliteration of the original text. Translators--good ones, anyway--are artists in their own right. The choices they make in deciding how best to render the original text reflects not only their own creative sensitivity, but also their cultural context. Different translators, because of the variability of their temperaments, talents, and times, focus on different inflections. (In this regard, they're not unlike stage directors, who also "co-author" the plays they present.) So one never reads Sophocles, unless one reads the original Greek. One always reads Fagles' Sophocles, or Fitzgerald's Sophocles, or X's Sophocles. I think Fagles and Sophocles make a marvelous collaboration. In fact, I like this translation better than any other I've read over the past half-century (and I've liked some others very much). Fagles has the soul of a poet (his volume of poems, I, Vincent, is very good indeed), and his rendering of "Antigone" and "Oedipus the King" are especially fine. Like all translators, he has a spin that mirrors the fears and hopes of his own time. In Fagles' case, it's what the existentialists would call nausea or anxiety over the absurd contingency of existence. For example, Oedipus the King [1442], after learning of his unhappy fate:...the agony! I am agony--where am I going? where on earth?

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