

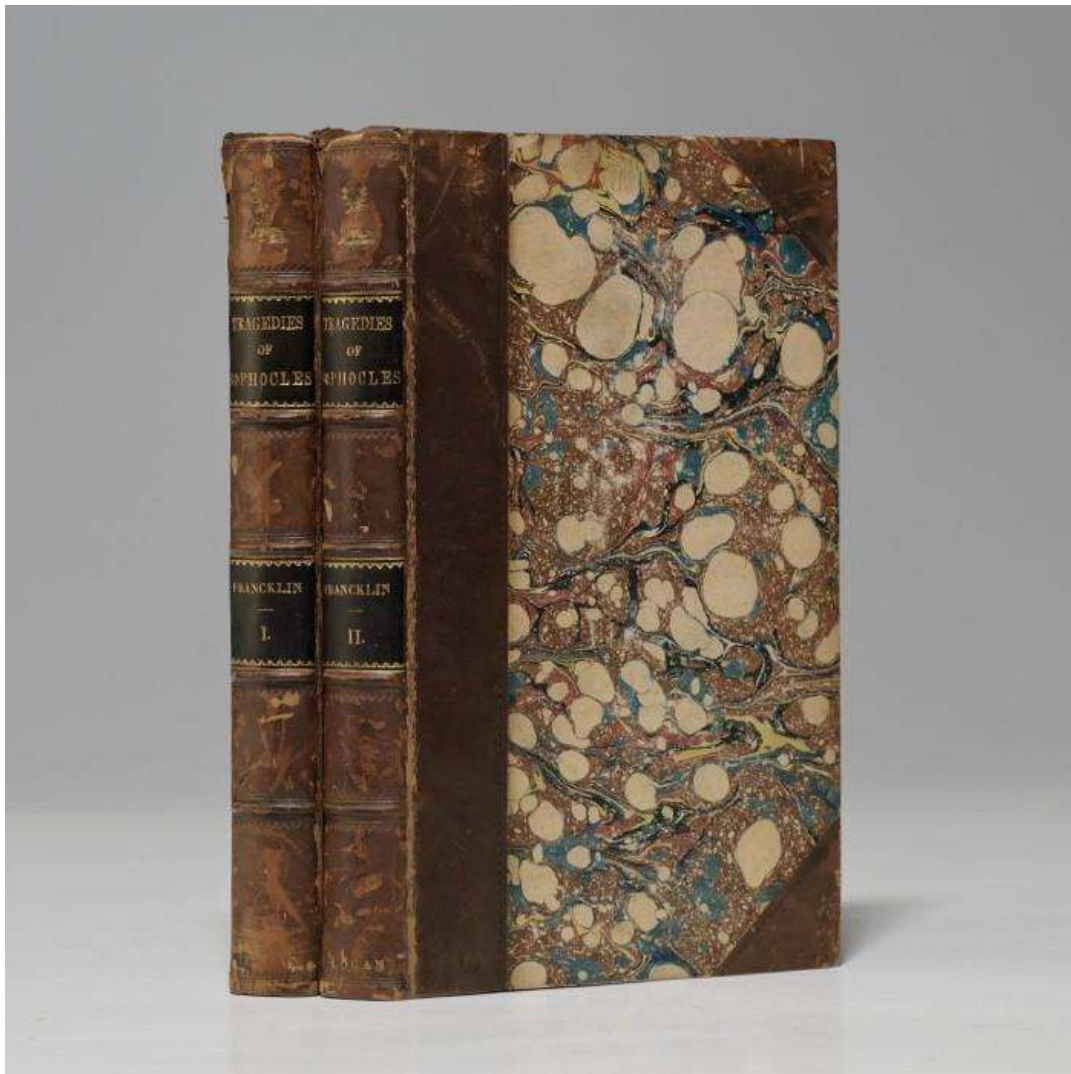
"The Tragedies of Sophocles" (translated 1759) by Thomas Francklin: A Canonical Book

Curated by Stephen A Batman

Sunday, March 16, 2025

Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition

Translated from the Greek... by Thomas Francklin, John Dickinson's copy, The Tragedies of Sophocle, 1766



John Dickinson

THE
TRAGEDIES
OF
SOPHOCLES,

TRANSLATED FROM THE
GREEK;
(With a DISSERTATION ON ANTIENT TRAGEDY.)

By the Rev. THOMAS FRANCKLIN, M. A.
^{LATE}
GREEK PROFESSOR in the University of
CAMBRIDGE.

A NEW EDITION, carefully revised and corrected.

VOL. I.

Nulla Sophocleo veniet jactura cothurno.



LONDON:
Printed for T. DAVIES, in RUSSEL-STREET,
COVENT-GARDEN, 1766.

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VOL. II.



E. Gemma in Museo Florentino.

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“THE PENMAN OF THE REVOLUTION”: JOHN DICKINSON'S COPY OF THE WORKS OF SOPHOCLES

Early edition of Francklin's esteemed translation of the collected plays of Sophocles—the copy of founding father John Dickinson, known as "the penman of the Revolution," author of *Letters from a Farmer*, *Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking up Arms*, and other important revolutionary works, with his ownership signature ("John Dickinson's") on the title page of each volume. "John Dickinson has been aptly termed the 'Penman of the Revolution.' In the literature of that struggle, his position is as preeminent as Washington in war, Franklin in diplomacy" (Leicester Ford, *Political Writings* VI:ix). He was "a leader of the Revolutionary movement from its inception—author of the Declaration of the Stamp Act Congress and of the Farmer's Letters, drafter if not sole author of both the Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking up Arms and of the Articles of Confederation" (Bailyn, *Pamphlets*, 660).

In September 1767, as news of Britain's punitive Townshend Acts reached the colonies, "Dickinson took up his pen to defend American liberty. In 12 letters signed 'A Farmer' he made a bold step in clarifying and strengthening the colonists' claims" (Kaestle, *Public Reaction*, 323). Dickinson ranks, above all, as "a radical in the vital sense in which the Revolution itself was radical" (Bailyn, 662). Thomas Francklin's translation, first published in 1759 and "long considered the best in the English language" (DNB), was only the second in English and the first verse translation.

"The translation is remarkably close and precise, yet sufficiently free to give it the air of an original... [Francklin has] preserved that elegance and simplicity, for which the Grecian is so deservedly admired" (Brueggemann, 103). Includes Francklin's "A Dissertation on Antient Tragedy." With engraved frontispiece plan of a Greek theatre, and vignette title pages. Francklin's first verse translation was preceded by George Adams' prose translation of 1729. Bookplates of Dickinson's grandson, John Dickinson Logan.

(DICKINSON, John) SOPHOCLES. (FRANCKLIN, Thomas, translator). *The Tragedies...* Translated from the Greek... by Thomas Francklin. London: T. Davies, 1766. Two volumes. Octavo, 19th-century three-quarter brown calf, raised bands, black Morocco spine labels, marbled boards, endpapers, and edges.

Text generally clean, some mild rubbing to extremities of bindings. An attractive copy, most desirable from the library of and signed by founding father John Dickinson.

Introduction

"The Tragedies of Sophocles" translated by Thomas Francklin, published in 1758-1759. The work combines two volumes into one and was published in London by R. Francklin¹. This translation represents an important cultural milestone in making the ancient Greek tragedies of Sophocles accessible to English-speaking audiences during the Enlightenment period.

The translation emerged during a time of growing intellectual curiosity about classical works in 18th century Britain. Thomas Francklin, a fellow of Trinity College and Greek professor at the University of Cambridge, undertook this significant translation project to bring Sophocles' timeless tragedies to an English readership. The political climate of the mid-18th century saw Britain expanding its empire and cultivating a self-image as the inheritor of classical traditions. This translation served both scholarly purposes and reflected the cultural aspirations of educated British society to connect with the philosophical and dramatic achievements of ancient Athens.

The economic context included a growing market for classical works among the educated elite, with publishers like R. Francklin (likely a relation of the translator) capitalizing on this intellectual appetite. The translation appeared during a period when Britain was establishing itself as a major European power, between the War of Austrian Succession and the Seven Years' War, reflecting the nation's growing confidence in its cultural and intellectual standing.

The Author

Sophocles (c. 496 – c. 406 BCE) was one of the three great tragedians of ancient Athens, alongside Aeschylus and Euripides. Born to a wealthy manufacturing family in Colonus, near Athens, Sophocles lived during the golden age of Athenian democracy and culture. Unlike some of his contemporaries, Sophocles largely avoided direct political involvement, though he was twice elected as a general alongside the Athenian ruler Pericles around 441/40 BCE. Historical accounts suggest he declined invitations to visit royal courts, unlike his fellow tragedians Aeschylus and Euripides¹.

Known for his good temperament and respected character, Sophocles demonstrated his reverence for his fellow artists when, just months before his own death, he had his chorus and actors perform in mourning attire to honor the recently deceased Euripides¹. Of his prolific output—he is believed to have written over 120 plays—only seven complete tragedies have survived to the modern era. These include *Ajax*, *Electra*, *Philoctetes*, *Women of Trachis*, and his most famous works, the Oedipal Trilogy consisting of *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*¹.

As for Thomas Francklin, the translator, he was a distinguished academic at Cambridge University, serving as both a fellow of Trinity College and a professor of Greek. His translation work represents a significant scholarly achievement of the 18th century, making these classical works accessible to English readers while maintaining their dramatic power and philosophical depth.

Why this is a Canonical Book

"The Tragedies of Sophocles" in Francklin's translation deserves canonical status for several compelling reasons. First, it represents a vital cultural bridge between ancient Greek thought and Anglo-American intellectual traditions. This translation helped establish Sophocles' works as

foundational texts in Western education and political thought, influencing generations of American thinkers, politicians, and cultural figures.

The evidence of this book's importance can be seen in its presence in the library of George Wythe, one of America's founding fathers and a legal mentor to Thomas Jefferson. The work was listed in Jefferson's inventory of Wythe's library as "Francklin's Sophocles. 2.v. in 1. 4to." and was among the books Jefferson kept in his personal collection¹. This direct connection to America's founding generation demonstrates how Sophocles' explorations of justice, governance, and moral duty were considered essential reading for those shaping the new republic.

Sophocles' tragedies, particularly works like "Antigone," explore tensions between individual conscience and state authority that remain central to American political discourse. The playwright's examination of the limits of power, the nature of justice, and the consequences of hubris provides a philosophical foundation for American concepts of checks and balances and limited government. His works challenge readers to consider the moral dimensions of governance and citizenship—themes that resonate deeply with American political culture⁵.

Furthermore, Sophocles' plays address universal themes of fate, free will, morality, and the nature of power that continue to inform American cultural and political self-understanding⁵. The ethical dilemmas presented in these tragedies offer a framework for examining contemporary American challenges, from questions of civil disobedience to the proper relationship between religious conviction and civic duty.

This translation specifically has historical significance as it influenced the intellectual development of America's founding generation and has continued to shape how these classical works are understood in the Anglo-American tradition. Its canonical status is confirmed by its preservation in institutions like the Wolf Law Library and its continued study as a foundational text in American liberal education.

Five Timeless Quotes

1. "The man who thinks that he alone has wisdom or eloquence or other virtue, such men, when opened up, are found to be empty." (From "Antigone")

This quote speaks directly to the American wariness of concentrated power and the importance of humility in leadership. In our current political climate, where polarization and certainty often override nuance and collaboration, Sophocles reminds us that those most confident in their exclusive wisdom are often the most dangerously misguided. This sentiment aligns with the American constitutional system's built-in skepticism toward unchecked authority and emphasizes the value of diverse perspectives in governance⁵.

2. "Not to be born is, past all prizing, best; but when a man hath seen the light, this is next best by far, that with all speed he should go thither, whence he hath come." (From "Oedipus at Colonus")

This stark reflection on human suffering carries particular relevance in our age of mental health crises and existential questioning. While seemingly pessimistic, this quote invites contemporary Americans to confront difficult truths about human experience and to develop greater compassion for those struggling with despair. It challenges our culture's often superficial positivity and encourages deeper engagement with life's fundamental challenges.

3. "The greatest griefs are those we cause ourselves." (From "Oedipus the King")

In an era where personal responsibility is often downplayed in favor of external factors, this quote reminds Americans of the power and consequences of individual choice. It speaks to the self-inflicted nature of many societal problems, from political dysfunction to environmental degradation, while affirming our capacity to address these issues through better choices and self-awareness⁵.

4. "Nobody likes the man who brings bad news." (From "Antigone")

This observation remains profoundly relevant in our information ecosystem, where uncomfortable truths are often rejected in favor of comforting narratives. The quote challenges Americans to consider how we receive challenging information and whether we punish truth-tellers when their messages contradict our preferences or beliefs. In an era of "fake news" accusations and partisan information bubbles, Sophocles reminds us of our ancient tendency to blame messengers.

5. "It is not right if I am wrong. But if I am young, and right, what does my age matter?" (From "Antigone")

This powerful assertion of moral courage regardless of status speaks directly to American traditions of civil disobedience and youth activism. From the civil rights movement to contemporary climate activism, young Americans have often led moral challenges to established authority. Sophocles' words affirm that ethical truth is not determined by age or position but by alignment with deeper principles of justice⁷.

Five Major Ideas

1. The Tension Between Individual Conscience and State Authority

Sophocles explores this fundamental tension most explicitly in "Antigone," where the protagonist defies King Creon's edict against burying her brother Polynices. This conflict between personal moral conviction and governmental decree resonates deeply with American

political traditions. The play presents compelling arguments on both sides—Creon's concern for civic order and Antigone's appeal to divine law and family duty⁷. This nuanced treatment invites readers to consider the proper limits of state power and the circumstances under which civil disobedience might be justified. In American history, from the Revolution to civil rights movements, this tension has repeatedly emerged as citizens navigate competing obligations to conscience and country.

2. The Consequences of Hubris and the Limits of Human Knowledge

Throughout his tragedies, particularly in "Oedipus the King," Sophocles examines the devastating consequences of human pride and overconfidence. Oedipus's tragic fall comes not despite his intelligence but because of his excessive faith in his own understanding. This warning against hubris speaks directly to American political culture, with its constitutional checks and balances designed specifically to prevent the concentration of power that often accompanies overconfidence⁵. Sophocles reminds modern readers that even the most capable leaders remain fallible and that governance systems must account for human limitations rather than deny them.

3. The Role of Fate and Free Will in Human Affairs

Sophocles presents a complex view of human agency, portraying characters who make meaningful choices while operating within constraints they cannot fully control or understand. This nuanced perspective offers valuable insight for Americans navigating questions of personal responsibility and structural determinism. Rather than presenting a simplistic either/or proposition, Sophocles suggests that human dignity lies in how we respond to circumstances not entirely of our making—a message that resonates with American ideals of resilience and self-determination while acknowledging systemic realities.

4. The Importance of Proper Burial and Honoring the Dead

Across several tragedies, Sophocles emphasizes the sacred obligation to properly honor the deceased, most notably in "Antigone" and "Ajax." This theme speaks to fundamental human values that transcend particular religious traditions, addressing our need to maintain dignity even in death. For contemporary Americans, this raises important questions about how we treat the remains of the marginalized, how we memorialize national tragedies, and how we balance public health considerations with meaningful funeral practices during crises like the recent pandemic.

5. The Nature of True Justice and Its Relationship to Divine Order

Sophocles repeatedly examines what constitutes justice beyond mere human law. His tragedies suggest that true justice must align with deeper moral principles that transcend temporary political arrangements. This conception influenced American notions of natural law and inalienable rights that exist prior to and independent of governmental recognition³. Sophocles challenges readers to consider whether justice is merely what powerful actors declare it to be or

whether it must conform to more enduring standards—a question that remains central to American legal and political debates.

Three Major Controversies

1. Democratic Critique and Aristocratic Values

One significant controversy surrounding Sophocles' works involves their political implications. Some scholars interpret his tragedies, particularly "Oedipus at Colonus," as subtly critical of democratic institutions and supportive of aristocratic leadership. As one analysis suggests, the play implies Athens "should not put its faith in democratic institutions [...], but it must be led by a noble aristocrat like Theseus, blessed by the help of a beneficent hero like Oedipus"³. This reading has generated debate about whether Sophocles' works ultimately support or undermine democratic values—a question with obvious relevance to American political discourse. Critics from both progressive and conservative perspectives have appropriated Sophocles to support their preferred governance models, demonstrating the enduring political ambiguity of these texts.

2. Moral Ambiguity and Ethical Relativism

Sophocles' presentation of complex ethical dilemmas without clear-cut resolutions has provoked controversy among those seeking more definitive moral guidance. His portrayal of characters like Electra, who pursues justice through morally questionable means, raises uncomfortable questions about whether righteous ends justify troubling means. Some interpreters see a "black view of the moral tone" in plays like "Electra," where characters appear "degraded by immoral behaviour"³. This moral complexity has made Sophocles both compelling and controversial for American readers accustomed to clearer ethical distinctions. Religious conservatives have sometimes criticized the plays for their moral ambiguity, while others value precisely this nuanced treatment of ethical questions.

3. Gender Roles and Female Agency

The portrayal of female characters in Sophocles' tragedies has generated significant controversy, particularly in contemporary American discussions. Characters like Antigone, Electra, and Tecmessa display remarkable courage and moral agency, yet operate within severely constrained social circumstances. Feminist interpretations have both celebrated these characters' strength and criticized the limitations placed upon them. The question of whether Sophocles was reinforcing or subtly challenging gender norms of his time remains contentious. This controversy reflects broader American debates about gender roles, with traditional and progressive readers finding different messages in these ancient texts. The plays' complex treatment of gender continues to provoke diverse and sometimes conflicting interpretations.

In Closing

Civic-minded Americans should read "The Tragedies of Sophocles" because these works provide an unparalleled foundation for understanding and addressing the fundamental tensions that continue to animate our democratic experiment. By engaging with Sophocles' exploration of individual conscience versus state authority, Americans gain historical perspective on contemporary debates about civil disobedience, religious liberty, and the proper limits of governmental power.

These tragedies offer more than abstract philosophical speculation—they dramatize the human consequences of political decisions and moral choices. At a time when American civic discourse often lacks nuance and historical depth, Sophocles presents complex ethical dilemmas that resist simplistic partisan framing. His works remind us that the questions we face about justice, leadership, and community responsibility have challenged human societies for millennia.

Moreover, Sophocles' plays were explicitly created to "compel audiences" and create "dialogue about politics and civic duty"[7](#). This original civic purpose aligns perfectly with the needs of contemporary American democracy, which requires citizens capable of thoughtful engagement with difficult questions. By wrestling with these texts, Americans participate in a tradition of civic reflection that stretches from ancient Athens to the present day.

The presence of this translation in the libraries of America's founders, including Thomas Jefferson, demonstrates its historical importance to American political thought[1](#). By reading what our constitutional framers read, contemporary citizens gain insight into the intellectual foundations of our governance systems and the classical values that informed them.

Finally, in an era of increasing polarization and democratic fragility, Sophocles offers a sobering reminder of the consequences of hubris, the limitations of human knowledge, and the enduring need for moral courage. These lessons remain as vital to American civic health today as they were to Athenian democracy 2,500 years ago. For all these reasons, "The Tragedies of Sophocles" deserves a place not just on scholars' shelves but in the active reading life of every citizen committed to thoughtful participation in American democracy.

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