

# OEDIPUS

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Oedipus

(Sophocles; *Oedipus the King*)

**Conscientious**

**Overview** Oedipus, ruler of the Greek city of Thebes, enters the play of his name deeply involved in a dooming prediction that he was to murder his father and marry his mother. As a result of this murder, furthermore, his city was to be overcome by a plague, in which it is currently being destroyed. Oedipus, a headstrong but responsible leader, proclaims to the people that he is going to get to the root of the plague, and though he does not say so, we suspect he suspects that his own doom may be connected with the plague. The play involves a series of episodes increasingly pointing the finger at Oedipus, and finally clinched by the memories of an old shepherd who recalls having rescued an infant, whom he called 'Oedipus,' and who had been exposed on the mountains to die. These pieces of evidence gradually congeal, as the play advances remorselessly, and by the end Oedipus, clearly guilty for all to see, blinds himself and is led off stage to the horror of the chorus.

**Character** Oedipus is a powerful king, deeply concerned with the plague that is destroying his city-state, Thebes, and determined to get to the bottom of the crisis, even if, though he doesn't yet realize this, the resolution involves recognition of his own guilt. He is determined, action oriented, and remorseless in searching both his own history and others' memories, on the track of the truth. To these traits we must add his honesty. Oedipus has every incentive, after the truth of the mystery begins to clear up, to turn his back on the mystery quest, which is bit by bit turning in his direction. It has, for instance, been predicted that he would kill his father, and he has in his background a brutal occasion, on which he, still a young man, confronted a dignified elder at a crossroads, and, demanding right of way for his own chariot, killed the gentleman. Could this have been my father? Oedipus has to wonder. Despite efforts to disprove the possibility, that the man was his father, Oedipus only substantiates unexpected turns which do, in fact, inculpate him. His guilt becomes clearer with every step he takes to exonerate himself.

**Parallels** The younger Seneca, in 55 A. D. Rome, produced his version of Sophocles' *Oedipus*, a far bloodier and more violent replica. Not too surprisingly, though, it was not until Freud formulated a particular relevance, of the Oedipus narrative, that modern thought began to embrace the special urgency of the play. (In his *Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) Freud suggested the importance of an Oedipus complex, a dark behavioral pattern in us, which has spawned much discussion, notably—in recent times—the *Anti-Oedipus* of Deleuze and Guattari (1972). Two novels are to note, for their hard-hitting updatings of the Oedipus theme: Garcia Marquez' *Edipo alcalde* (1996), and David Guterson's *Ed King* (2011). And a remarkable film, Philip Saville's version of Sophocles' play, showing the murder of Laius (in a flashback) and Oedipus and Jocasta making love in bed.

## Illustrative moments

**1 Compassionate** Oedipus appears on center stage, at the beginning of the play, and addresses an elderly priest who has come to speak of the suffering of the Theban people, whose livelihood and individual health are being destroyed by the plague. After the elder has expressed the pain of the people, Oedipus passionately empathizes with the man's sentiments, assuring him that he, Oedipus, is suffering more greatly even than the people, for he must endure his own terrible sorrow as well as that of the people. Father to his state, Oedipus deals with the citizens compassionately, and explains that he has sent his brother-in-law, Creon, to ask the Delphic Oracle how the plague can be lifted. The priest is relieved, doubly because, when Creon returns a few lines later, Oedipus insists on debriefing the minister of state directly before the people, so they will know the whole truth as rapidly as he does.

**2 Suspicious** Oedipus reveals that as a young man in Corinth, he had heard rumors that he was not the biological son of Polybus and Merope, with whom he has been living, as though they were his parents. When he asks the king and queen about the truth of his lineage, they insist that they are Oedipus' parents, But Oedipus is not convinced; he is suspicious. He goes to the Delphic Oracle for

further information, but finds his question ignored; he is simply told that he will marry his mother and murder his father. Oedipus then leaves Corinth, where he is living with Polybus and Merope, feeling sure that if he leaves the couple he will be in no danger of fulfilling the prediction of the oracle. It does not occur to him that his parents are not the present ruling couple of Corinth, but individuals he has known earlier.

**3 Ingenious** Oedipus proceeded toward Thebes, where he felt he would be free of the dangers of murder and mother-marriage which were predicted by the Oracle. Thebes, however, was at that time rendered inaccessible by the Sphinx, who would let no one pass unless they were able to solve the riddle of the Sphinx. (No one had been able to.) Oedipus had to face the riddle, en route to Thebes, and was the first to solve it. Who walks on all fours in the morning, on two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening? The answer, *man*, depended on realizing, as Oedipus did, that in the morning of life the baby human crawls, at noon the mature man stands upright, and at night the old man with his cane walks on three legs. The Sphinx immediately opens the route to Thebes, conceding herself defeated, and in fact, according to the prevailing legend, throws herself off to death from a high parapet. Her power is taken from her by Oedipus' ingenuity.

**4 Stubborn** At the court in Thebes, the blind prophet Teiresias is a particularly galling adversary of the confident Oedipus. Oedipus asks Teiresias to interpret the mystery prediction of the oracle, that Oedipus will murder his father and marry his mother. Teiresias refuses to elaborate, whereupon Oedipus accuses Teiresias of being involved in the murder of Laius. When Teiresias goes to the King, saying that Oedipus himself is the murderer, Oedipus concludes that Teiresias and Creon—Oedipus' brother in law—are in cahoots to take the throne away from Oedipus. Oedipus' refusal to find out what Teiresias knows, and his persistence in his own theory of how his present involvement has developed, are evidence of Oedipus' unwillingness to follow the track of evidence, when it begins to turn against him. Oedipus is both stubborn and unscientific in his commitment to follow the track of evidence.

**5 Guilty** At the end of the play the glowingly evident truth is revealed—that the Oracle with its terrible prediction was correct. Oedipus brings down curses on himself, and on the fate that has doomed him, while a messenger comes in from off stage to declare what has happened. It happens as he speaks. Jocasta runs to the palace bedroom and hangs herself; then Oedipus surges onto the stage, and begs his servants for a sword, so that he can cut out his mother's womb—the womb that bore him, her lover, as her child. Surging into the bedroom, Oedipus finds Jocasta hanged. He seizes the brooches from her arms, and gouges out his eyes, before emerging from the Palace. Thus he takes straight out on himself the character faults that have long prevented him from seeing the truth, long before it took its revenge on his family and the state.

### Discussion questions

When Oedipus sets out on his quest to find the person guilty of murdering Laius, has he any suspicion that he himself is the criminal? Does Freud's notion of an 'oedipal complex' offer any case for suspecting that Oedipus might, at some level of consciousness, harbor a sense of his own guilt?

Has Oedipus any 'tragic flaw' which might justify the harsh fate that is descending upon him? What do you think of the view that Oedipus is too impetuous, and that such a fault led to his quickness to murder his father?

The self-blinding of Oedipus coincides with his first insights into the truth and details of his guilt. Is Sophocles stressing the irony that insight and blindness are tightly interrelated? What would be the larger meaning of that irony?

