

# OEDIPUS THE KING

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Oedipus the King by Sophocles

## Story

Oedipus the King is the story of a dynamic city-state ruler, who is faced with a major problem. A plague is ravishing his land; he has just sent his brother in law, Creon, to find out what can be done about this problem. Creon brings back the answer, that religious pollution is the cause of the plague, because the murderer of the previous ruler has never been caught. Oedipus renews all his efforts to catch this malefactor.

At this point the blind prophet, Teiresias, comes on stage, but, being questioned about the plague, finally responds that Oedipus himself is the cause of it, and that he had better stop his search. After a long and bitter quarrel Teiresias leaves, having told Oedipus that the murderer will turn out to be a native citizen of Thebes, both father and brother to his own children, and son and husband to his mother. The beans have been spilled, but Oedipus is in no mood for calculating the obvious odds, that he himself is guilty. He plunges ahead.

When Creon enters, Oedipus accuses him of the crime, and insists that he should be executed. Jocasta, Oedipus' wife, soon intercedes, pointing out that prophets' insights are frequently faulty, but telling a story, about the way Oedipus' father was killed, that startlingly confirms the prediction that Teiresias has been handing out. The audience, and we, groan with the painful realization that perhaps Oedipus may be guilty, but he himself still has an active defence system. He has one more protective supposition, to support him.

Oedipus is reassured when Jocasta recalls a detail, from the death of her husband, which seemingly excludes Oedipus from guilt. Laius (Oedipus' father) was said to have been killed by bandits at a crossroads, on his way to the oracle at Delphi. Oedipus then recounts a tale to Jocasta, a tale ending, as did hers, with seemingly incriminating evidence. Oedipus' tale places him, himself, near that crossroads where Laius was killed, and identifies a moment of wrath, when Oedipus' carriage was being driven off the road, and Oedipus responded by killing the driver of the other vehicle. But hadn't Jocasta's account insisted that *several* men had been in on the killing of Laius?

Once again, the seeming exoneration of Oedipus takes a vicious turn, for a messenger enters from Corinth, with the news that Oedipus' father has died. Assuming that this news exonerates him of guilt in the slaying of his father, Oedipus is shortly to receive news which casts in a fresh light the prophecy of Teiresias. He is to learn that at his birth he was exposed on the mountains, to hide the fact of his true mother and father, and that both Laius and Jocasta are his true parents. Neither his 'alleged mother' nor his 'alleged father' is truly his progenitor, and nothing blocks the theory that he killed his father and married his mother.

Recognizing his appalling guilt, Oedipus calls down the curses of fate on himself, before leaving the stage. Jocasta runs to her room, where she hangs herself, while Oedipus snatches up a sword and carves out both of his eyes, rendering himself as blind as Teiresias.

## Characters

**Oedipus** is the ruler of Thebes, intelligent, dynamic, and yet headstrong—to the point of what the ancient Greeks called *hybris*, arrogance. He is the last person to accept the evidence mounting against him, but he has the courage to take full responsibility, when he has finally accepted the facts.

**Teiresias**, the blind prophet of Thebes, knows all in advance, but realizes that, although he himself can state the truth to Oedipus, Oedipus can only accept the truth in stages.

**Jocasta** is the from the start anxious wife (and mother) of Oedipus. Each piece of information she adds, in an effort to reassure her son, only implicates Oedipus and her further.

### **Themes**

**Insight versus blindness.** The ancient Greeks were sensitive to the contrast between the wisdom of the blind and the blindness of the sighted. Teiresias is the poster child for this paradox, but so is Oedipus, who though ultimately a lover of truth cannot see it until it slaps him in the face.

**Count no man happy til you see him dead.** This maxim, widely repeated in classical Hellenic times, is the reflection of the chorus onto the events of the present drama. Oedipus has no capacity to cool it, even when both Teiresias and his wife urge him to, and therefore plunges headfirst into his misery.