

# OEDIPUS THE KING

Sophocles

**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.

**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.

## Themes

**Insight** 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.

**Death** 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.

## 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.

## MAIN CHARACTERS

OEDIPUS (Conscientious)

**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, inculcate 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

**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.

**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.

**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.

**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.

**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?

TEIRESIAS (extravert)

**Overview** Greek mythography abounds in references to Teiresias, a renowned seer, augurer, sisionary, and mystic. Among the many tales about Teiresias is the story of his extermination of two copulating serpents, for which the gods punished him. He was turned into a woman for seven years, married and gave birth, then reverted to male form for withholding, later, from trampling two copulating serpents. No wonder, we may say, that Teiresias was known for 'acquaintance with all sides of human experience,' including the experience that the truth will come to be whether we act on it or not.

**Character** Teiresias is polysexual, and more widely liminal, a figure that emerges at the boundaries between earth and sky, humans and the gods, and the erotic and the chaste. Hence the mysterious presence Teiresias brings with him; the only figure, for instance, who met Odysseus at the very entrance to the Underworld in the *Odyssey*. He is typically mysterious in *Oedipus*, where he seems to be more interior to Oedipus than Oedipus is to himself. Teiresias comes over as a figure who knows the will of the gods—through vision, through auguries, through intimations from the god Apollo-- but will not tell it, because it is useless to declare what will take place anyway.

**Parallels** Ancient Judaic tradition relied heavily on prophetic testimony—cf. esp. Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel—for their actions inside history; and were in this closely followed by practices of the Greco-Roman tradition, which took for granted the importance of visions, oracular pronouncements from holy sites like Delphi, and the interventions of deities like Athena, who prompt their favorites, like Odysseus, to make or move within history. Prophetic historicizing, via the prophet T.B. Joshua, is widely consulted among religious communities not only in Nigeria, but throughout Africa, from which heads of state travel regularly to be freed---like Oedipus?—from the demons clambering for expression in them.

### Illustrative moments

**Trigger** Dramatically speaking, Sophocles needs to provide a trigger to Oedipus' hot temper—the initial sign that he might have a significant 'character flaw.' (Creon's report back from the oracle was informative, but not provocative, to Oedipus.) Teiresias provides this trigger, for he at once awakens Oedipus' aggressive search-spirit. When Oedipus attempts to detain Teiresias, he gets the following provocative reply: 'Let me go home; prevent me not, t'were best that thou should'st bear thy burden as I mine.' By withdrawing from the quest, with the implication that he alone knows the full truth, Teiresias galls Oedipus.

**Analyst** Teiresias gets at Oedipus, by knowing (or seeming to know) what Oedipus wants to find out, and to know it effortlessly, by natural gift. Sophocles is a master at making the provocations from Teiresias into spurs for plot development—as well as into goading bits of repartee like the following: 'Thou blamest my mood and seest not thine own, wherewith thou art mated.' Sharply seizing the context, in which Oedipus convinces himself he is seeing clearly, Teiresias accuses Oedipus of simple reflection of the seer's own thoughts and feelings. The crumbling foundations of Oedipus' brash self-confidence are beginning to litter the ground the ruler walks on.

**Accuser** Teiresias grows closer and closer to accusation, as the plot unfolds to reveal one inculpatory detail after another. (Each development seeming to justify Oedipus' innocence turns out, unexpectedly, to play into a theory which includes his guilt.) At a certain stage in these revelations, Teiresias feels justified in leveling a direct charge: 'I say thou livest with thy nearest kin,' he hurls at Oedipus, who cannot have realized—or could he on some level? —that in taking over the kingdom where he currently rules he took as his own the ruling queen, who was his mother. As this information hardens, Jocasta feels it coming, and hangs herself.

**Philosopher** Teiresias is mysterious both because he is a liminal figure—existing on all of life’s defining borders—and because he adopts an ambiguous attitude toward the truth. On the one hand, because he is a seer, he feels confident he knows the future. On the other hand he knows that the future must unfold at its own pace. He continually (and insultingly) rejects Oedipus’ gestures toward dialogue, by saying that Oedipus is headstrong, and wrongly supposes that he can bull his way through to an explanation of the city’s problems. Take it easy and wait for destiny, is Teiresias’ message, but it is unpalatable to Oedipus, who has a plague to cure, and a profound sense of personal unease.

### **Discussion questions**

Teiresias makes only one extended appearance in Sophocles’ play. From the dramaturgic view point why does Teiresias’ appearance come when and where it does?

Is Teiresias hostile to Oedipus, or an ultimately benign ally, who wants to save the ruler from useless suffering?

How does Teiresias’ liminal personality—openness to all experience—play out in the development of the plot of *Oedipus*?