

King Oedipus (Oedipus Rex) by Sophocles

At the beginning of this tightly plotted masterpiece, a priest explains how famine and plague has effected the town of Thebes, the setting of the story, and the surrounding lands. The current King of Thebes, Oedipus exits his palace (after he solves a clever riddle of the Sphinx) and sees the citizens of Thebes assembled near an altar asking for the cause of the current plague that have fallen upon them. Oedipus presents himself as an ideal king who can identify with problems just like the citizens do. The priest tells Oedipus the people request relief from the plague because Oedipus and previously solved a past plague. In the past, Oedipus saved the city from a cursed Sphinx and now promises action will be taken. Oedipus has sent Creon, his wife Jocasta's brother, to consult the oracle and should be back shortly.

Later, Creon enters the town and explains the plague's cause which was given to him by the oracle, or prophet. The murderer of former king, Laius, has gone unpunished, so the town is cursed. Creon says this killer must be killed or banished to lift the curse. Oedipus promises to take care of this matter personally. He asks Creon about details of the killing but Creon doesn't reveal much. It was robbers who killed the king, but the town was preoccupied with the Sphinx at the time to have a detailed investigation into the king's death. Oedipus reinforces his promise by saying he'll honor Laius's memory and also states "the killer...might think to turn his hand against me; thus, serving Laius, I serve myself."

A group of elders appear chanting prayers and songs to rid Thebes of this cursed plague. "In Thebes, City of Light, from the Pythian House of Gold [Delphi] the gracious voice of heaven is heard..." The next line of the song "With fear my heart is riven, fear of what shall be told. O Healer of Delos [Apollo]...What wilt thou do?" show how the elders are fearful of what dark secrets from the past will be uncovered. Oedipus gathers the people for a speech and they are ready to hear Oedipus' plan.

Oedipus demands that the murderer of King Laius reveal himself and anyone with information steps tells him. He vows to fight for Laius as he would for his father and promises punishment for anyone who helps the murderer. The elders ask Oedipus to consult with the prophet Tiresias, but Oedipus says he's already sent for him. Tiresias received his gift of prophecy by one god, but it is changed by another so no one believes his prophecy according to Greek mythology. Tiresias, an elderly blind man, enters with a servant and is warmly greeted by Oedipus as an omnipotent prophet. Tiresias claims that he knows nothing about the murderer. Oedipus tells Tiresias to not remain silent and then angrily accuses Tiresias of being involved in the murder. Tiresias names Oedipus as the murderer mostly because of Oedipus' accusations towards him. Obviously, this statement angers Oedipus and he accuses Tiresias of plotting an alliance with Creon to take the throne. Oedipus labels Tiresias a false prophet and boasts how he could solve the riddle of the Sphinx while Tiresias probably couldn't. Oedipus makes fun of Tiresias' blindness and tells him he has avoided punishment only because he is so old. Tiresias repeats his statement and tells Oedipus to call him blind when he can prove him wrong. Oedipus has Tiresias taken away.

The elders question the identity of the murderer and state that he will certainly receive justice. They think Oedipus is innocent and saying "Never...will I consent. To think him other than good." Creon denies to Oedipus his intention to overthrow him and

says Oedipus' accusation is completely false. Creon also questions Oedipus' sanity because he made such an outrageous accusation. But the angry Oedipus won't listen to Creon and threatens to have him executed. Oedipus' wife, Jocasta, tries to mediate as Creon swears his innocence. Oedipus gives in after Jocasta's pleading, but says he will never trust Creon again. Creon leaves as Oedipus tells Jocasta about Tiresias' accusation. She tells him of a prophecy that Laius would be slain by her son, but was actually killed by bandits outside Thebes where three roads meet. Oedipus doesn't realize that this prophecy is the same prophecy has also been told to him. She continues to say a very young child was left there and perished. She reminds Oedipus that prophecies don't always come true. This story bothers Oedipus as he remembers that he killed someone at a place just like the one Jocasta described. He asked her for descriptions of Laius, his servants, and when he was killed. She answers that one of the servants is still alive and returned to Thebes as Oedipus was ruling as king. This servant asked permission to retire to the countryside as a shepherd.

Based on Oedipus' worried reaction, Jocasta asks him what's wrong. Oedipus tells how he was born in Corinth and raised as a prince. One day he was told that he was not really his father's son and went to Delphi where the oracle told him he was meant to kill his father and marry his mother. He didn't want to hurt his parents and fled from Corinth and met an elderly man with several servants at a crossroads near Thebes. They fought and attacked Oedipus who became very angry and killed the man and his servants in self-defense. Oedipus then continued on to Thebes.

Oedipus fears the man he killed was Laius and refers to himself as the foulest of mortals, self-exiled from his home because of the prophecy that he would kill his parents, but still doesn't think that Laius was his father. Oedipus realizes he may be subject to the penalties he himself swore to carry out on the murderer when found. Oedipus, now very shaken, hopes to learn the truth from the last surviving servant of the party, the shepherd Jocasta described to him. Jocasta assures Oedipus that he is not the murderer because a report stated a band of men killed the king who was alone at the time. She tells Oedipus not to believe the oracle and prophecies as Oedipus sends the messenger who reported the Laius' murder to find the shepherd.

Meanwhile, a chorus sings a song proclaiming that people who are humble and holy have ideal lives and if people are greedy and too proud, the gods will punish them. The choral leader proclaims that the baby was Laius' and Jocasta's son. Again Oedipus' anger yields a bad result, but he finally learns the truth as the prophecy is fulfilled in the climax of this story. Oedipus runs into the palace screaming about the murder he has committed against his father and the sinful act of marrying his mother, Jocasta.

Singers chant a song about the sorrows of life and the tragic fate Oedipus has suffered. An attendant tells the elders of the tragic events and how Jocasta panicked through the castle and locked herself in her room. Soon after, an angry Oedipus, with sword in hand, knocks down Jocasta's door to discover that she had hung herself. Oedipus, calmer now, takes her body down and puts it on the floor. He proceeds to take gold brooches from her dress and uses them to pierce his eyes. Oedipus shouts that he will no longer have to look upon his shame. People are shocked and saddened when they see a now blind Oedipus stumble out of the castle in intense pain. He cries out that he wishes he would have died while he was a child and reviews the events that led him to his tragedies.

At this time, Creon, the new king, enters. Oedipus fears the worst from him because of the hurtful accusations he made toward Creon, but Creon instead tries to help and console Oedipus. Creon says he will give Jocasta a proper burial, but will not banish Oedipus from Thebes until he receives word from the oracle.

Creon summons Oedipus' younger daughters, Antigone and Ismene who are saddened by the past events. They support and comfort Oedipus as he tells them how he fears these tragedies will stain their lives and that the world will reject them because of him. He has Creon promise to take care of the girls then Oedipus reiterates his request to be banished. Oedipus again comforts his daughter and goes into the palace telling Creon to never separate them. Creon tells Oedipus "Command no more. Obey. Your rule is ended." Oedipus goes out of the castle while a chorus sings a tragic song.

Oedipus is guilty even though he saw himself as godlike and did not even believe the god's own prophecy until it was too late. Oedipus' true fault was his presumptuous sense of himself and didn't ever analyze his true origin and learn from it. Oedipus was responsible for King Laius' murder and for the resulting plague upon the town of Thebes, and so this tragedy filled with irony ends.