

OEDIPUS REX

by Sophocles



UNABRIDGED WITH GLOSSARY AND NOTES

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S o p h o c l e s



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NOTES

Oedipus Rex, without argument one of the greatest plays ever written in any language, is also one of the most complex. Scholars have spent millennia debating Sophocles' intentions and how he achieved such a powerful effect. At the root of the play's popularity lies its humanity: All human beings search for themselves during life, and we all want to know who we really are. Through science, religion, and art, we try to discover who we are as a species—what it means to be human. This is precisely the search undertaken by Oedipus, and his quest to understand himself and its horrifying consequences resonates deeply inside all of us. The play communicates to us even though we are separated from it by time and language.

In preparing this translation from the Greek, I have used the Oxford text of Lloyd-Jones and Wilson. I have also availed myself of the excellent commentaries by Jebb and Kammerbeek. The manuscripts for *Oedipus Rex*, although generally coherent, do contain several gaps and troublesome passages. In some cases, I have used an alternate reading to that of Lloyd-Jones and Wilson; in these instances, I generally follow the manuscript reading over the emendation and have rarely deviated without the authority of one of the commentators.

J. E. Thomas, Translator
Providence, R.I.

READING POINTERS

Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

As you read *Oedipus Rex*, be aware of the following:

1. the role of dramatic irony in the play (The audience knows information, specifically about Oedipus' past, that the characters on stage do not.)
2. the emergence of the following themes, concepts, and questions:
 - sin and retribution
 - divine justice: Do people deserve what happens to them, and do the gods allow it?
 - What characteristics make a good ruler?
 - The search for one's own identity is universal.
 - Complete control of one's own fate is not possible.
 - In life, suffering is inevitable, but wisdom can be gained through it.
 - There exists a need to search for truth.
 - What is the value of human intellect?
3. the conventions of Greek drama:
 - the use of masks with wigs attached
 - the Chorus, which would sing in verse and dance
 - multiple roles played by the same actor



DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Dramatis Personae

OEDIPUS, king of Thebes

the PRIEST of Zeus

CREON, Oedipus' brother-in-law

CHORUS of the old men of Thebes

TIRESIAS, blind prophet

JOCASTA, wife of Oedipus, sister of Creon, widow of Laius, the former king

MESSENGER from Corinth

SHEPHERD of Laius, the former king (in the manuscripts called the Servant)

SERVANT, from inside the house (in the manuscripts the Second Messenger or Messenger from the House)



OEDIPUS REX

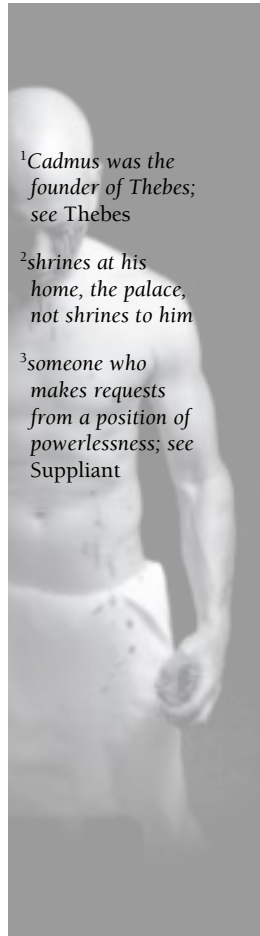
[Scene: outside, in front of the palace of Oedipus. There is also a shrine to Apollo at which are seated many suppliants. Oedipus enters the stage from the palace.]

- OEDIPUS: My children, new-sprung race of old Cadmus,¹
why do you sit at my shrines,² wearing garlands
of the suppliants' olive?³ All around
the city is filled with the smell of incense,
5 all around filled with the sound of hymns and groans.
These things I did not think it right to learn
from messengers, and so I have come here myself,
who am called Oedipus and known to all.
But you, old man, tell me, since it is fitting
10 for you to speak on their behalf, why you
sit out here, afraid of something or wanting it?
So I would be willing to help you
in any way, for he would be hardhearted
who did not pity such an assembly.
- 15 PRIEST: Oedipus, you who rule my land, you see
how many of us sit here at your altars;
some do not yet have the strength to fly far;

¹Cadmus was the founder of Thebes; see Thebes

²shrines at his home, the palace, not shrines to him

³someone who makes requests from a position of powerlessness; see Suppliant



⁴He points to the different groups as he speaks; see Stage directions

⁵The marketplace (or agora) was the center of city life for the Greeks.

⁶the goddess of wisdom; see Gods and goddesses

⁷Ismenus is a river named after a character in Greek mythology who was, by some accounts, a river god.

⁸i.e., The children are stillborn.

⁹In some contexts, this refers to Sirius, the dog star, which ushers in the feverish times of August, but here it simply refers to the plague as a god.

¹⁰an allusion to Ploutos, or Wealth, another name for Hades

¹¹The priest here refers to the intersections between ordinary mortal life and divine intervention; see Religion

¹²the Sphinx; see Sphinx

others are heavy with age. I am the priest
of Zeus, and these⁴ were chosen from the young men.
20 There is another group wreathed as suppliants
sitting in the marketplace⁵ and another
at the double-gated temple of Athena⁶
and at the smoke-filled oracle of Ismenus.⁷
25 For the city, as you yourself can see,
is badly shaken already and from the waves
can no longer lift her head above this
bloody tossing; there is death in the fruitful buds
from the earth and in the pasturing herds,
and even in the childless births of women.⁸
30 Falling upon us, the fire-bringing god,⁹
most hateful disease, drives the city,
and by him the house of Cadmus is drained,
and dark Hades grows rich¹⁰ with groans and wails.
Now, I do not hold you equal to the gods,
35 nor do these children who sit at your hearth,
but we judge you the first of men both
in the ordinary chances of life
and in the contingencies of the divine.¹¹
It was you who came and released Cadmus' town
40 from the tribute we paid to the cruel songstress,¹²
and these things you did knowing nothing from us,
nor instructed at all, but with help from god
you spoke and knew how to set our lives straight.
And now, Oedipus, greatest in the eyes of all,
45 we who are here as your suppliants beseech you
to find some defense for us, as you may have heard
the voice of one of the gods or have learned
something from a man—for I think that the ideas
of experienced men most often succeed.
50 Come, o best of mortals, and save our city;
come, but be careful, since now this land
calls you her savior for your former zeal,
and let us never recall of your reign
that we first stood straight, but stumbled later.
55 Rather, then, restore this city to safety.

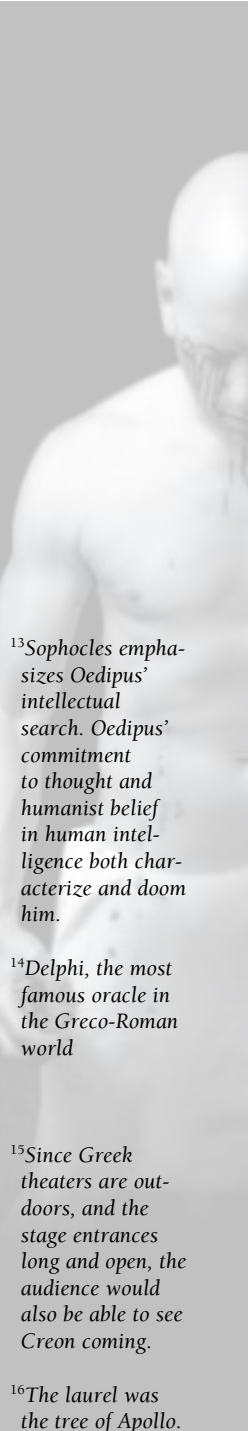
For at that time you gave us great fortune,
 be now equal to what you were then.
 Since, if indeed you would rule this land,
 just as you do now, it is far better
 60 to rule over men than a wasteland;
 nothing matters, neither tower nor ship,
 if it is empty of men to dwell within it.

OEDIPUS: My poor children, what you desire is
 known and not unknown to me, for I see well
 65 that everyone is sick, and being sick,
 still, not one of you is as sick as I am.
 For your pain comes upon the individual,
 one by one, to each man alone and no other,
 but my soul groans for the city, for me and you
 70 together. Hence, you do not wake me from sleep,
 but know that I have been weeping much
 and wandering many roads of the mind.¹³
 And that which my inquiry found our only cure
 I have done, for I have sent Creon,
 75 son of Menoeceus, my own brother-in-law,
 to Apollo's home at Pytho,¹⁴ so that he may
 learn what I should do or say to save this city.
 And already enough time has passed that
 I wonder what he is doing, for he has stayed
 80 beyond the proper time. But whenever he comes,
 I would surely be an evil man not to do
 whatever the god reveals.

PRIEST: Wonderful news! Both what you have said,
 and what these have just pointed out to me:
 85 Creon is approaching!¹⁵

OEDIPUS: Lord Apollo, if only he might come with
 redeeming fortune as bright as shine his eyes!

90 PRIEST: It seems he brings good news, for otherwise
 he would not come crowned with berry-laden laurel.¹⁶



¹³Sophocles emphasizes Oedipus' intellectual search. Oedipus' commitment to thought and humanist belief in human intelligence both characterize and doom him.

¹⁴Delphi, the most famous oracle in the Greco-Roman world

¹⁵Since Greek theaters are outdoors, and the stage entrances long and open, the audience would also be able to see Creon coming.

¹⁶The laurel was the tree of Apollo.

Glossary

Chorus – Since Greek tragedy grew out of the performances of lyric poetry sung by large Choruses, it is only natural that the Chorus should remain a large part of Greek tragedy. Every play’s Chorus (usually fourteen men) took on an identity appropriate to the play. For example, in *Oedipus Rex*, they are old men of Thebes; in Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*, they are the dread goddesses, the Furies.

The word *chorus* in Greek means “dance,” and the Chorus’ main function was to sing and dance lyric odes in between dramatic episodes. These odes comment on the action of the preceding episode. The Chorus could also, however, act as a character; one Chorus member would be designated leader and speak lines of dialogue, interacting with the other characters on stage. They react as their characters should—in *Oedipus Rex*, the Chorus, while concerned about Oedipus’ personal problems, care first and foremost about the fate of the city and finding a cure for the plague.

Cithaeron – the mountain in southern Boeotia (the region in which Thebes is located) where Oedipus was to have been exposed as an infant; Cithaeron’s position on the border of Theban territory allowed Laius’ herdsman to encounter someone who worked for Polybus of Corinth.

Daimones – In addition to major gods and goddesses like Zeus and Apollo, the Greeks believed in divine forces, not quite gods, who could influence human life and events. They acted somewhat like guardian angels, but could also be malicious. The word “demons” comes directly from the Greek word *daimones*.

Gods and goddesses – Greek religion was polytheistic; the Greeks worshipped many gods. The most powerful god was Zeus, the sky god, who was thought to have taken power when he overthrew his father Cronus. After Zeus came the other Olympian deities, including Zeus’ queen Hera, his brother Poseidon, and his children Athena, Ares, Artemis, and Apollo. There were also other gods, older deities from the reign of Cronus who remained powerful and were often irrational. Among these are the Furies, dreadful goddesses who hunt down and drive mad humans who kill blood-relatives.

The most important god for *Oedipus Rex* is Apollo, whose oracle at Delphi gives the important prophecies to Oedipus and Creon (Laius was traveling to this oracle when he was killed). Apollo’s knowledge is absolute—if Apollo says something will happen, it will happen. His prophecies in this play, however,

Vocabulary

- antistrophe** – the part of a choral ode or kommos following the strophe; metrically identical to the strophe
- aulos** – a wind instrument which accompanied the Chorus
- catharsis** – a ritual purification of pollution; used by Aristotle for the purging of strong emotions achieved while watching tragedy
- demigod** – the child of a god and a mortal or nymph
- epic** – a long poem about legendary figures and their heroic deeds
- episode** – the part of a Greek drama that takes place between the odes; spoken rather than sung
- epode** – the part of a choral ode that follows the strophe and antistrophe
- hamartia** – a flaw or mistake; in Greek tragedy, one that leads to the tragic hero's downfall
- kommos** – a lyric song sung by dramatic characters and the Chorus together, usually at a point of heightened emotion
- lyric** – poetry meant to be sung
- meter** – the rhythmic division of lines in poetry
- miasma** – pollution (see glossary)
- ode** – a sung piece between episodes consisting of matched lyric stanzas; also called a *stasimon*
- orchestra** – the round circle in front of the stage where the Chorus danced
- Paeon** – a ritual hymn of thanks given to Apollo for a cure from sickness or injury, as well as another name for Apollo in his capacity as healer
- parodos** – the first entrance of the Chorus
- peripeteia** – the reversal of fortune
- prologue** – the part of the tragedy before the Chorus' entrance
- stasimon** – the Greek term for ode; takes place between dramatic episodes, allowing the Chorus to reflect on the action and dialogue that has preceded
- strophe** – the first part of a choral ode or kommos
- tragedy** – a type of dramatic genre, loftier and more serious than comedy, often with a sad ending