

Oedipus the King

by Sophocles

Oedipus the King is a classic Greek tragedy written by Sophocles. Sophocles was an ancient Greek tragedian contemporary to Aeschylus and Euripides. He wrote more than 120 plays but only seven have survived in a complete form: Ajax, Antigone, Women of Trachis, Oedipus Rex, Electra, Philoctetes and Oedipus at Colonus. For almost 50 years, Sophocles was the most celebrated playwright in the dramatic competitions of the city-state of Athens, which took place during the religious festivals of the Lenaea and the Dionysia. The most famous tragedies of Sophocles feature Oedipus and Antigone: they are generally known as the Theban plays. These plays concern the fate of Thebes during and after the reign of King Oedipus. They have often been published under a single cover, but Sophocles wrote them for separate festival competitions, many years apart.

Oedipus Rex or Oedipus, the King is a Greek tragedy that tells the story of King Oedipus of Thebes, who is doomed to a dreadful fate that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Shortly after Oedipus' birth, his father King Laius of Thebes, learned from an oracle that he, Laius, was doomed to perish by the hand of his own son, and so ordered his wife Jocasta to kill the infant. However, neither she nor her servant could bring themselves to kill him and he was abandoned to elements. There he was found and brought up by a shepherd before being taken in and raised in the court of the childless king Polybus of Corinth as if he were his own son.

Stung by rumours that he was not the biological son of the king, Oedipus consulted an oracle which foretold that he would marry his own mother and kill his own father. Desperate to avoid this foretold fate, and believing Polybus and Merope to be his true parents, Oedipus left Corinth.

On the road to Thebes, he met Laius, his real

Father, and, unaware of each other's true identities, they quarrelled and Oedipus' pride led him to murder Laius, fulfilling part of the Oracle's prophecy.

When the Sphinx started tormenting Thebes, Creon proclaimed that anybody who could solve her riddle could have his crown and the hand of his sister, Jocasta. The Sphinx was being with the head of a woman, the body of a lioness, the wings of an eagle and the tail of a serpent. She guarded the entrance to the city of Thebes and would pose a riddle to travellers who aimed to enter. If they could not answer it, she would devour them. The riddle is "what goes on four in the morning, on two in the afternoon and three at night?"

When Oedipus travelled to Thebes, the Sphinx posed the riddle to him. He said that the answer is a human being, because a human being walks on all fours in early life, on two legs as an adult and with a walking stick in old age. It would seem that the Sphinx regarded the value of her life as bound up with having a riddle that no mortal could solve, for she killed herself because of his success.

His reward for freeing the Kingdom of Thebes from the Sphinx's curse was the hand of Queen Jocasta (actually his biological mother) and the crown of the city of Thebes. The prophecy was thus fulfilled, although none of the main characters were aware of it at this point. Priest of Apollo asks King Oedipus of Thebes to help end the plague that is ravaging the city. In response, Oedipus reveals that he has already sent his brother-in-law, Creon to consult with the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi on the matter. Creon returns with the message that in order for the plague to end, the murderer of Laius, the previous King of Thebes, must be brought to Justice. According to the oracle, the murderer still resides within the city.

Later Oedipus demands that Creon must be executed, convinced that he is conspiring against him, and only the intervention of the chorus persuade him to let Creon live. Oedipus wife, Jocasta

tells him, he should take no notice of prophets and oracles anyway because, many years ago, she and Laius received an oracle which never came true.

When a messenger from Corinth arrives with the news of the death of King Polybus, Oedipus shocks everyone with his apparent happiness at the news as he sees this as proof that he can never kill his father, although he still fears that he may somehow commit incest with his mother. This messenger, eager to ease Oedipus' mind tells him not to worry because Queen Merope of Corinth was not in fact his real mother anyway. The messenger turns out to be the very shepherd who had looked after an abandoned child, which he later took to Corinth and gave up to King Polybus for adoption. He is also the very same shepherd who witnessed the murder of Laius.

By now Jocasta is beginning to realize the truth and desperately begs Oedipus to stop asking questions. But Oedipus presses the shepherd, threatening him with torture or execution, until it finally emerges that the child he gave away was Laius' own son, and that Jocasta had given the baby to the shepherd to secretly be exposed upon the mountainside, in fear of the prophecy that Jocasta said had never come true: that the child would kill its father. Oedipus survived and unknowingly killed his father before marrying Jocasta and becoming King.

With all now revealed, Oedipus curses himself and his tragic destiny and stumbles off, as the chorus laments how even a great man can be felled by fate. A servant enters and explains that Jocasta, when she had begun to suspect the truth, had run to the palace bedroom and hanged herself there.

Oedipus enters, deliriously calling for a sword so that he might kill himself and raging through

the house until he comes upon Jocasta's body. In final despair, Oedipus takes two long gold pins from her dress and plunges them in to his own eyes.

With blood streaming from his blind eyes, he asks that he be banished from Thebes. Oedipus begs to be exiled as soon as possible. He says that his two sons are men and can take care of themselves, but asks that Creon take care of his girls, Antigone and Ismene, whom he would like to see one final time. Creon forgives Oedipus for his past accusations of treason and asks that Oedipus be sent inside so that the public display of shame might stop.

Creon agrees to exile Oedipus from the city, but tells him that he will only do so if every detail is approved by gods. Oedipus embraces the hope of exile, since he believes that for some reason, the gods want to keep him alive. The play ends as the chorus wails: 'Count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last.'

