

THE OEDIPUS PLAYS

Sophocles

Summary

PROLOGUE

(FROM ODYSSEYWARE: Oedipus the King begins like all classic Greek dramas, with a Prologue. This short expository section gives us the backstory we need to understand the events of the play. Here, Oedipus arrives at the city of Thebes to find a Sphinx, a mysterious, mythical creature, has taken up a position right outside the gates to the city. The Sphinx is asking everyone who tries to enter the city a riddle. If you can answer the riddle, the Sphinx lets you go. If you cannot answer the riddle, the Sphinx eats you on the spot. No one seems to know the answer. So what is the riddle? What goes on four feet in the morning, two feet at noon, and three feet in the evening? Oedipus is able to correctly guess the answer: man. See, man is a baby in the "morning" of his life, and he crawls on four feet. As an adult, in the "noon" of his life, a man walks on two feet. But when he is old, in the "evening" of his life, he walks with a cane, and thus, metaphorically, on three feet. Well, the Sphinx is so upset that he has been able to answer her riddle, that she kills herself; thus, Oedipus relieves the city of one of its plagues. You can probably imagine that the Thebans (the citizens of Thebes) were pretty delighted to welcome Oedipus into their city. They have received the news that their own King Laius has been killed, and so, given the obvious intelligence of this latest arrival, they decide to make him their new king. As the play opens, we also find out that the city of Thebes is suffering from a plague. The livestock is dying, and the women are infertile. Oedipus is confronted with this story of woe by a priest who begs Oedipus to free the city from its plague. Oedipus sends his brother-in-law, Creon, to the oracle at Delphi for information. Creon turns up with the answer, and says that the city will not be free until the murderer of Laius is found and driven out of the city. Only then will the plague end. Thus, the prologue is complete, and the scene has been set for the stage of the story.)

Oedipus steps out of the royal palace of Thebes and is greeted by a procession of priests, who are in turn surrounded by the impoverished and sorrowful citizens of Thebes. The citizens carry branches wrapped in wool, which they offer to the gods as gifts. Thebes has been struck by a plague, the citizens are dying, and no one knows how to put an end to it. Oedipus asks a priest why the citizens have gathered around the palace. The priest responds that the city is dying and asks the king to save Thebes. Oedipus replies that he sees and understands the terrible fate of Thebes, and that no one is more sorrowful than he. He has sent Creon, his brother-in-law and fellow ruler, to the Delphic oracle to find out how to stop the plague. Just then, Creon arrives, and Oedipus asks what the oracle has said. Creon asks Oedipus if he wants to hear the news in private, but Oedipus insists that all the citizens hear. Creon then tells what he has learned from the god Apollo, who spoke through the oracle: the murderer of Laius, who ruled Thebes before Oedipus, is in Thebes. He must be driven out in order for the plague to end.

Creon goes on to tell the story of Laius's murder. On their way to consult an oracle, Laius and all but one of his fellow travelers were killed by thieves. Oedipus asks why the Thebans made no attempt to find the murderers, and Creon reminds him that Thebes was then more concerned with the curse of the Sphinx. Hearing this, Oedipus resolves to solve the mystery of Laius's murder.

PARADOS (the first choral passage in an ancient Greek drama recited or sung as the chorus enters the orchestra)

The Chorus enters, calling on the gods Apollo, Athena, and Artemis to save Thebes. Apparently, it has not heard Creon's news about Laius's murderer. It bemoans the state of Thebes, and finally invokes Dionysus, whose mother was a Theban. Oedipus returns and tells the Chorus that he will end the plague himself. He asks if anyone knows who killed Laius, promising that the informant will be rewarded and the murderer will receive no harsher punishment than exile. No one responds, and Oedipus furiously curses Laius's murderer and anyone who is protecting him. Oedipus curses himself, proclaiming that should he discover the murderer to be a member of his own family, that person should be struck by the same exile and harsh treatment that he has just wished on the murderer. Oedipus castigates the citizens of Thebes for letting the murderer go unknown so long. The Leader of the Chorus suggests that Oedipus call for Tiresias, a great prophet, and Oedipus responds that he has already done so.

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The First Episode

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A boy leads in the blind prophet Tiresias. Oedipus begs him to reveal who Laius's murderer is, but Tiresias answers only that he knows the truth but wishes he did not. Puzzled at first, then angry, Oedipus insists that Tiresias tell Thebes what he knows. Provoked by the anger and insults of Oedipus, Tiresias begins to hint at his knowledge. Finally, when Oedipus furiously accuses Tiresias of the murder, Tiresias tells Oedipus that Oedipus himself is the curse. Oedipus dares Tiresias to say it again, and so Tiresias calls Oedipus the murderer. The king criticizes Tiresias's powers wildly and insults his blindness, but Tiresias only responds that the insults will eventually be turned on Oedipus by all of Thebes. Driven into a fury by the accusation, Oedipus proceeds to concoct a story that Creon and Tiresias are conspiring to overthrow him.

The leader of the Chorus asks Oedipus to calm down, but Tiresias only taunts Oedipus further, saying that the king does not even know who his parents are. This statement both infuriates and intrigues Oedipus, who asks for the truth of his parentage. Tiresias answers only in riddles, saying that the murderer of Laius will turn out to be both brother and father to his children, both son and husband to his mother.

The First Stasimon

The characters exit and the Chorus takes the stage, confused and unsure whom to believe. They resolve that they will not believe any of these accusations against Oedipus unless they are shown proof.

The Second Episode

Creon enters, soon followed by Oedipus. Oedipus accuses Creon of trying to overthrow him, since it was he who recommended that Tiresias come. Creon asks Oedipus to be rational, but Oedipus says that he wants Creon murdered. Both Creon and the leader of the Chorus try to get Oedipus to understand that he's concocting fantasies, but Oedipus is resolute in his conclusions and his fury.

Summary

Oedipus's wife, Jocasta, enters and convinces Oedipus that he should neither kill nor exile Creon, though the reluctant king remains convinced that Creon is guilty. Creon leaves, and the Chorus reassures Oedipus that it will always be loyal to him. Oedipus explains to Jocasta how Tiresias condemned him, and Jocasta responds that all prophets are false. As proof, she offers the fact that the Delphic oracle told Laius he would be murdered by his son, while actually his son was cast out of Thebes as a baby and Laius was murdered by a band of thieves. Her narrative of his murder, however, sounds familiar to Oedipus, and he asks to hear more.

Jocasta tells him that Laius was killed at a three-way crossroads, just before Oedipus arrived in Thebes. Oedipus, stunned, tells his wife that he may be the one who murdered Laius. He tells Jocasta that, long ago, when he was the prince of Corinth, he heard at a banquet that he was not really the son of the king and queen, and so went to the oracle of Delphi, which did not answer him but did tell him he would murder his father and sleep with his mother. Hearing this, Oedipus fled from home, never to return. It was then, on the journey that would take him to Thebes, that Oedipus was confronted and harassed by a group of travelers, whom he killed in self-defense, at the very crossroads where Laius was killed.

Hoping that he will not be identified as Laius's murderer, Oedipus sends for the shepherd who was the only man to survive the attack. Oedipus and Jocasta leave the stage, and the Chorus enters, announcing that the world is ruled by destiny and denouncing prideful men who would defy the gods. At the same time, the Chorus worries that if all the prophecies and oracles are wrong—if a proud man can, in fact, triumph—then the gods may not rule the world after all. Jocasta enters from the palace to offer a branch wrapped in wool to Apollo.

The Third Episode

A messenger enters, looking for Oedipus. He tells Jocasta that he has come from Corinth to tell Oedipus that his father, Polybus, is dead, and that Corinth wants Oedipus to come and rule there. Jocasta rejoices, convinced that since Polybus is dead from natural causes, the prophecy that Oedipus will murder his father is false. Oedipus arrives, hears the messenger's news, and rejoices with Jocasta; king and queen concur that prophecies are worthless and the world is ruled by chance. However, Oedipus still fears the part of the prophecy that said he would sleep with his mother. The messenger says he can rid himself of that worry, because Polybus and his wife, Merope, are not really Oedipus's natural parents.

The messenger explains that he used to be a shepherd years ago. One day, he found a baby on Mount Cithaeron, near Thebes. The baby had its ankles pinned together, and the former shepherd set them free. That baby was Oedipus, who still walks with a limp because of the injury to his ankles so long ago. When Oedipus inquires who left him in the woods on the mountain, the messenger replies that another shepherd, Laius's servant, gave him baby Oedipus. At this, Jocasta turns sharply, seeming to sense some horrible revelation on the horizon.

Oedipus wants to find this shepherd, so he can find out who his natural parents are. Jocasta begs him to abandon his search immediately, but Oedipus is insistent. After screaming and pleading some more to no avail, Jocasta finally flees back into the palace. Oedipus dismisses her concerns as snobbish fears that he may be born of poor parents, and Oedipus and the Chorus rejoice at the possibility that they may soon know who his parents truly are.

The Fourth Episode

The other shepherd, who turns out to be the same shepherd who witnessed Laius's murder, comes onto the stage. The messenger identifies him as the man who gave him the young Oedipus. Oedipus interrogates the new arrival, asking who gave him the baby, but the shepherd refuses to talk. Finally, after Oedipus threatens him with torture, the shepherd answers that the baby came from the house of Laius. Questioned further, he answers that it was Laius's child, and that Jocasta gave it to him to destroy because of a prophecy that the child would kill his parents. But instead, the shepherd gave him to the other shepherd, so that he might be raised as a prince in Corinth. Realizing who he is and who his parents are, Oedipus screams that he sees the truth, and flees back into the palace. The shepherd and the messenger slowly exit the stage.

The Fourth Stasimon

The Chorus enters and cries that even Oedipus, greatest of men, was brought low by destiny, for he unknowingly murdered his father and married his mother.

The Fifth Episode

The messenger enters again to tell the Chorus what has happened in the palace. Jocasta is dead, by suicide. She locked herself in her bedroom, crying for Laius and weeping for her monstrous fate. Oedipus came to the door in a fury, asking for a sword and

cursing Jocasta. He finally hurled himself at the bedroom door and burst through it, where he saw Jocasta hanging from a noose. Seeing this, Oedipus sobbed and embraced Jocasta. He then took the gold pins that held her robes and, with them, stabbed out his eyes. He kept raking the pins down his eyes, crying that he could not bear to see the world now that he had learned the truth.

Just as the messenger finishes the story, Oedipus emerges from the palace. With blood streaming from his blind eyes, he fumes and rants at his fate, and at the infinite darkness that embraces him. He claims that though Apollo ordained his destiny, it was he alone who pierced his own eyes. He asks that he be banished from Thebes. The Chorus shrinks away from Oedipus as he curses his birth, his marriage, his life, and in turn all births, marriages, and lives.

The Sixth Episode

Creon enters, and the Chorus expresses hope that he can restore order. 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 the gods. Oedipus embraces the hope of exile, since he believes that, for some reason, the gods want to keep him alive. He says that his two sons are men and can take care of themselves, but asks that Creon take care of his girls, whom he would like to see one final time.

The girls, Antigone and Ismene, come forth, crying. Oedipus embraces them and says he weeps for them, since they will be excluded from society, and no man will want to marry the offspring of an incestuous marriage. He turns to Creon and asks him to promise that he will take care of them. He reaches out to Creon, but Creon will not touch his hand. Oedipus asks his daughters to pray that they may have a better life than his. Creon then puts an end to the farewell, saying that Oedipus has wept shamefully long enough. Creon orders the guards to take Antigone and Ismene away from Oedipus, and tells Oedipus that his power has ended.

The Exodus

Everyone exits, and the Chorus comes onstage once more. Oedipus, greatest of men, has fallen, they say, and so all life is miserable, and only death can bring peace.