

# Oedipus Rex



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SOPHOCLES

Considered one of the three greatest playwrights of classical Greek theater, Sophocles was a friend of Pericles and Herodotus, and a respected citizen who held political and military offices in fifth-century B.C.E. Athens. He won fame by defeating the playwright Aeschylus for a prize in tragic drama at Athens in 468 B.C.E. Only seven of his complete plays have survived to reach the modern era, but he wrote more than 100 and won first prize in 24 contests. Best known are his three Theban plays, [Antigone](#), *Oedipus Rex*, and [Oedipus at Colonus](#). Sophocles's other complete surviving works are [Electra](#), [Philoctetes](#), and *Trachinian Women*. He is credited with changing Greek drama by adding a third actor, reducing the role of the chorus, and paying greater attention to character development.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The story of Oedipus and the tragedies that befell his family were nothing new to Sophocles's audience. Greek authors routinely drew their basic material from a cycle of four epic poems, known as the *Theban Cycle*, that was already ancient in the fifth century B.C.E. and is now lost to history. The *Theban Cycle* was as familiar to Athenians as the [The Iliad](#) and [The Odyssey](#), so everyone in the audience would have known what was going to happen to Oedipus. Sophocles used this common story but made Oedipus a contemporary character, a man of action and persistence who represented many of the ideals of Athenian leadership. It is Oedipus's desire to find out the truth—a quality that, again, would have been admired by Sophocles's audience—that leads to his destruction.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Of Sophocles's surviving dramatic works, [Antigone](#), *Oedipus Rex*, and [Oedipus at Colonus](#) treat different episodes of the same legend, using many of the same characters. Sophocles's writing career overlapped with that of Aeschylus and Euripedes, the other great tragic playwrights of fifth-century Athens. Among Aeschylus's best-known tragedies are *Seven Against Thebes*, [Agamemnon](#), [The Libation Bearers](#), and [The Fumenides](#). Euripedes's most influential works include [Medea](#), [Electra](#), and [The Bacchae](#). A 20th-century theatrical retelling of the Oedipus myth is Jean Cocteau's *The Infernal Machine*.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Oedipus Rex* (or *Oedipus the King*)

- **When Written:** circa 429 B.C.E.
- **Where Written:** Athens, Greece
- **When Published:** circa 429 B.C.E.
- **Literary Period:** Classical
- **Genre:** Tragic drama
- **Setting:** The royal house of Thebes
- **Climax:** When Oedipus gouges out his eyes
- **Antagonist:** Tiresias; Creon

### EXTRA CREDIT

**The Oedipus Complex:** Sigmund Freud used the Oedipus story as an important example in his theory of the unconscious. He believed that "It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father." He referred to these two urges as the "Oedipus complex."



## PLOT SUMMARY

At the start of the play, the city of Thebes is suffering terribly. Citizens are dying from plague, crops fail, women are dying in childbirth and their babies are stillborn. A group of priests comes to the royal palace to ask for help from Oedipus, their king who once saved them from the tyranny of the terrible Sphinx. Oedipus has already sent his brother-in-law, Creon, to the oracle of the god Apollo to find out what can be done. (A little background: before Oedipus arrived in Thebes, the previous king, Laius, was murdered under mysterious circumstances and the murderer was never found. When Oedipus arrived in Thebes and saved the city, he was made king and married the widowed queen, Jocasta, sister of Creon.) Now Creon returns with the oracle's news: for the plague to be lifted from the city, the murderer of Laius must be discovered and punished. The oracle claims that the murderer is still living in Thebes.

Oedipus curses the unknown murderer and swears he will find and punish him. He orders the people of Thebes, under punishment of exile, to give any information they have about the death of Laius. Oedipus sends for Tiresias, the blind prophet, to help with the investigation. Tiresias comes, but refuses to tell Oedipus what he has seen in his prophetic visions. Oedipus accuses Tiresias of playing a part in Laius's death. Tiresias grows angry and says that Oedipus is the cause of the plague—he is the murderer of Laius. As the argument escalates, Oedipus accuses Tiresias of plotting with Creon to overthrow him, while Tiresias hints at other terrible things that Oedipus has done.

Convinced that Creon is plotting to overthrow him, Oedipus declares his intention to banish or execute his brother-in-law. Jocasta and the chorus believe Creon is innocent and beg Oedipus to let Creon go. He relents, reluctantly, still convinced of Creon's guilt. Jocasta tells Oedipus not to put any stock in what prophets and seers say. As an example, she tells him the prophecy she once received—that Laius, her first husband, would be killed by their own son. And yet, Laius was killed by strangers, and her own infant son was left to die in the mountains. But her description of where Laius was killed—a **triple-crossroad**—worries Oedipus. It's the same place where Oedipus once fought with several people and killed them, one of whom fit the description of Laius. He asks that the surviving eyewitness to Laius's murder be brought to him. He tells Jocasta that oracles have played a big part in his life as well—he received a prophecy that he would kill his father and sleep with his mother, which is why he left Corinth, the city he was raised in, and never returned.

An old messenger arrives from Corinth with the news that Oedipus's father, King Polybus, has died of old age. This encourages Oedipus. It seems his prophecy might not come true, but he remains worried because his mother is still alive. The messenger tells him not to worry—the king and queen of Corinth were not his real parents. The messenger himself brought Oedipus as a baby to the royal family as a gift after a shepherd found the boy in the mountains and gave him to the messenger. The shepherd was the same man Oedipus has already sent for—the eyewitness to Laius's murder. Jocasta begs Oedipus to abandon his search for his origins, but Oedipus insists he must know the story of his birth. Jocasta cries out in agony and leaves the stage. The shepherd arrives but doesn't want to tell what he knows. Only under threat of death does he reveal that he disobeyed the order to kill the infant son of Laius and Jocasta, and instead gave that baby to the messenger. That baby was Oedipus, who in fact killed his father Laius and married his mother. Oedipus realizes that he has fulfilled his awful prophecy. Queen Jocasta kills herself and Oedipus, in a fit of grief, gouges out his own eyes. Blind and grief-stricken, Oedipus bemoans his fate. Creon, after consulting an oracle, grants Oedipus's request and banishes him from Thebes.

to discover the truth about the murder of Laius, he falsely accuses Creon and Tiresias of treachery, and even forces the reluctant shepherd to tell his story, which publicly reveals Oedipus to be the murderer and husband of his own mother. The same leadership skills that have brought him fame and success—decisive action, a desire to solve mysteries using his intellect—drive him to his own destruction.

**Creon** – Brother of Jocasta. Whereas Oedipus is the charismatic leader who speaks openly in front of his people, Creon is more political and perhaps more scheming. Creon is offended and alarmed when Oedipus accuses him of treason, but he speaks calmly and tries to show the error of the accusation by appealing to Oedipus's sense of reason. At the end of the play, however, he is more than willing to step into the power vacuum after Oedipus's terrible fate has been revealed. Even then, however, he cautiously makes sure to follow the dictates of the gods, rather than trying to resist fate as Oedipus has done.

**Tiresias** – The blind prophet or seer. He knows that the terrible prophecy of Oedipus has already come true, but doesn't want to say what he knows. Only when Oedipus accuses him of treachery does Tiresias suggest that Oedipus himself is guilty of the murder of King Laius. He leaves Oedipus with a riddle that implies, plainly enough for the audience to understand, that Oedipus has killed his father and married his mother.

**Jocasta** – Wife of Oedipus. Also, mother of Oedipus. When the play begins, she no longer believes in the prophecies of seers. She tries to convince Oedipus not to worry about what Tiresias says. As more evidence points toward the probability that Oedipus has in fact fulfilled a terrible prophecy, she begs him not to dig any further into his past. He will not be persuaded. Realizing that her son killed her first husband, that she is now married to her son, and that Oedipus is about to bring all of this to light, Jocasta takes her own life.

**The Chorus** – In this play, the chorus represents the elder citizens of Thebes, reacting to the events of the play. The chorus speaks as one voice, or sometimes through the voice of its leader. It praises, damns, cowers in fear, asks or offers advice, and generally helps the audience interpret the play.

**A Messenger** – The messenger from Corinth informs Oedipus that King Polybus and Queen Merope of Corinth were not his actual parents. The messenger himself gave Oedipus as a baby to the Corinthian king and queen. He got the baby from a Theban shepherd whom he met in the woods. Oedipus's ankles were pinned together at the time—in Greek, the name "Oedipus" means "swollen ankles."

**A Shepherd** – The former servant of King Laius who took pity on the baby Oedipus and spared his life. The shepherd was also an eyewitness to the death of King Laius. When Oedipus commands the shepherd to tell him what he knows about Oedipus's origins, the shepherd refuses, and only relents under



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Oedipus** – Long before the play begins, Oedipus became king of Thebes by solving the riddle of the Sphinx. His sharp mind and quickness to action have made him an admired and successful leader. When the priests come to petition him after a plague strikes the city, he has already set into motion two plans to deal with the city's crisis. Throughout the play, he makes decisions boldly and quickly, if not always wisely. In his attempts

punishment of death.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**A Priest** – He comes to the royal house to tell Oedipus of the city's suffering and to ask Oedipus to save Thebes once more.

**Antigone** – Daughter of Oedipus and half-sister of Oedipus. Still a small child in *Oedipus Rex*, Antigone appears at the end to bid farewell to her father. She is the main character of Sophocles's [Antigone](#).

**Ismene** – Daughter of Oedipus and half-sister of Oedipus. Like Antigone, Ismene is a small child and appears only at the end of the play when her father says goodbye to her.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### FATE VS. FREE WILL

The ancient Greeks believed that their gods could see the future, and that certain people could access this information. Prophets or seers, like blind

Tiresias, saw visions of things to come. Oracles, priests who resided at the temples of gods—such as the oracle to Apollo at Delphi—were also believed to be able to interpret the gods' visions and give prophecies to people who sought to know the future. During the fifth century B.C.E., however, when Sophocles was writing his plays, intellectuals within Athenian society had begun to question the legitimacy of the oracles and of the traditional gods. Some of this tension is plain to see in *Oedipus Rex*, which hinges on two prophecies. The first is the prophecy received by King Laius of Thebes that he would have a son by Queen Jocasta who would grow up to kill his own father. The second is the prophecy that Oedipus received that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Laius, Jocasta, and Oedipus all work to prevent the prophecies from coming to pass, but their efforts to thwart the prophecies are what actually bring the prophecies to completion.

This raises a question at the heart of the play: does Oedipus have any choice in the matter? He ends up killing his father and marrying his mother without knowing it—in fact, when he is trying to *avoid* doing these very things. Does he have free will—the ability to choose his own path—or is everything in life predetermined? Jocasta argues that the oracles are a sham because she thinks the prediction that her son would kill her husband never came to pass. When she finds out otherwise, she kills herself. In *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus has fulfilled his terrible

prophecy long ago, but without knowing it. He has *already* fallen into his fate. One could argue that he *does* have free will, however, in his decision to pursue the facts about his past, despite many suggestions that he let it go. In this argument, Oedipus's destruction comes not from his deeds themselves but from his persistent efforts to learn the truth, through which he reveals the true nature of those terrible deeds. Oedipus himself makes a different argument at the end of the play, when he says that his terrible deeds were fated, but that it was he alone who chose to blind himself. Here, Oedipus is arguing that while it is impossible to avoid one's fate, how you respond to your fate is a matter of free will.



### GUILT AND SHAME

The play begins with a declaration from the oracle at Delphi: Thebes is suffering because the person guilty of the murder of King Laius has not been brought to justice. Oedipus sets himself the task of discovering the guilty party—so guilt, in the legal sense, is central to *Oedipus Rex*. Yet ultimately it is not legal guilt but the emotion of guilt, of remorse for having done something terrible, that drives the play.

After all, one can argue that neither Oedipus nor Jocasta are guilty in a legal sense. They committed their acts unknowingly. Yet their overwhelming feelings of guilt and shame for violating two of the basic rules of civilized humanity—the taboos against incest and killing one's parents—are enough to make Jocasta commit suicide and to make Oedipus blind himself violently.



### SIGHT VS. BLINDNESS

When Oedipus publicly declares his intention to solve the mystery of King Laius's murder, he says, "I'll start again—I'll bring it all to light myself."

Oedipus's vision and intelligence have made him a great king of Thebes—he solved the riddle of the Sphinx and revitalized the city. But he is blind to the truth about his own life. It takes the blind prophet, Tiresias, to point out his ignorance and to plant the first seeds of doubt in Oedipus's mind. When Oedipus mocks Tiresias's blindness, Tiresias predicts that Oedipus himself will soon be blind. And indeed, when Oedipus learns the full story—that he has killed his father and married his mother—he gouges out his eyes. He learns the nature of fate and the power of the gods, but at a great cost. And though he is blinded, he has learned to see something he could not see before.



### FINDING OUT THE TRUTH

The terrible deeds that are Oedipus's undoing actually took place long before the play begins. King Laius has been dead for many years, Oedipus has ruled for some time, and his marriage to Jocasta has

produced four children. They might have all remained happy in their ignorance had the plague not come to Thebes and the oracle not commanded that the murderer of Laius be found. Good king that he is, Oedipus swears he will find the murderer. Every step of the way, people are reluctant to speak and try to tell him that it would be better if the past were left alone. Creon suggests that they discuss the oracle behind closed doors, not in front of everyone, but Oedipus wants to show that he is open to the truth and keeps no secrets from his people. Tiresias refuses to say what he knows, and only speaks when he has been insulted and accused of treachery. Jocasta begs Oedipus to cease his investigations. The old shepherd gives Oedipus the final pieces of the puzzle only when threatened with death. In his desire to seek out the truth and save his people from the plague, Oedipus becomes his own prosecutor, and then his own judge and punisher.



### ACTION VS. REFLECTION

In his quest for truth, Oedipus is a man of constant action. When the priests come to ask for his help, he has already dispatched Creon to the oracle to find out what the gods suggest. When the chorus suggests that he consult Tiresias, Oedipus has already sent for him. Oedipus decides quickly and acts quickly—traits his audience would have seen as admirable and in the best tradition of Athenian leadership. But Oedipus's tendency to decide and act quickly also leads him down a path to his own destruction. He becomes convinced that Tiresias and Creon are plotting to overthrow him, though he has no evidence to prove it.

At several stages where he might have paused to reflect on the outcome of his actions—where he might have sifted through the evidence before him and decided not to pursue the question further, or not in such a public way—he forges onward, even threatening to torture the reluctant shepherd to make him speak. And it is the shepherd's words that irrefutably condemn Oedipus. Even here, his will to act doesn't end. Discovering Jocasta, his wife and mother, dead, Oedipus quickly takes his punishment into his own hands and gauges out his eyes.



### SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### TRIPLE CROSSROAD

Oedipus killed King Laius at a place "where three roads meet," or a triple crossroad. Typically, crossroads symbolize a choice to be made. Yet because the murder of Laius occurred in the distant past, Oedipus's choice has already been made, and so the triple crossroads becomes a

symbol not of choice but of fate.



### SWOLLEN ANKLES

As an adult, Oedipus still limps from a childhood injury to his ankles. This limp, and his very name—which means "swollen ankle," and which was given to him because of a childhood ankle injury—are clues to his own identity that Oedipus fails to notice. As such, Oedipus's ankles become symbols of his fate. His ankles, literally, are the marks of that fate.



### QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *The Three Theban Plays* published in 1982.

#### Lines 1-340 Quotes

☞ Here I am myself—  
you all know me, the world knows my fame:  
I am Oedipus.

**Related Characters:** Oedipus (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 7-9

#### Explanation and Analysis

In the play's opening lines, Oedipus introduces himself with this flourishing pronouncement. He accentuates how all those he speaks to would already know of him.

Oedipus's language is a somewhat jesting take on a traditional character introduction. First he declines to give his name, saying just "I am myself," which stresses the singularity and importance of his identity. Then, saying "you all know me," he establishes that this "myself" needs no introduction for the priests in his attendance. When he qualifies this point saying, "the world knows my fame," he expands his notoriety beyond just the immediate group to refer to a more universal renown. Only at the end of the passage does he finally speak his name, implying that it is relatively less important than the social identity constructed through his prestige. Sophocles immediately establishes the fact that Oedipus is already a celebrated hero: this tragedy will tell not of his epic ascent but rather of his tragic fall. These lines also have a second layer of significance directed toward the audience: at Sophocles' time, Greek citizens would have been well acquainted with

Oedipus's story, so when Oedipus says "you all know me," he is referring to both characters in the play and real viewers outside of it. Though modern readers or theater-goers come to the story of Oedipus primarily through Sophocles' work, the myth was already an important part of Greek culture and mythology by the time Sophocles was writing. This fact is important to keep in mind when analyzing how Sophocles designs the dramatic action: the actual conclusion of Oedipus's story would already be known for a Greek audience, and thus the merit of the play came from how it could best treat the tension leading up to that realization.

☞ If ever, once in the past, you stopped some ruin  
launched against our walls  
you hurled the flame of pain  
far, far from Thebes—you gods,  
come now, come down once more!

**Related Characters:** The Chorus (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 186-189

### Explanation and Analysis

The chorus enters suddenly into the play's action. They beg the Gods to come to aid the city as they have before.

A chorus's role is essential in every Greek tragedy: they function as an analog for the audience within the play—a general public that watches the events unfolding and helps articulate their significance to the actual audience. Here, the chorus has a specific identity: members of the city of Thebes who specifically wish for their city to be saved. As a result, they are not entirely omniscient—they haven't yet heard Creon's news from the oracle, in this case—but will gain information as it is explained to the public of Thebes.

Even as the priests ask Oedipus, a mortal man, for help, the chorus members turn their pleas to higher powers, directly imploring the gods to "come now, come down" to their aid. This language showcases the Greek belief that the gods intervened directly in human affairs and could take on corporeal bodies to do so. Intriguingly, the chorus's plea makes references to past interventions with the lines "if ever, once in the past" and "once more!" These references imply that the gods have directly changed the fate of Thebes before—and that those past events signify that they have a continued obligation to do so. Thus the chorus's

speech points to the intimate relationship between divine and mortal realms, which in turn means an intimate relationship between fate (the will of the gods) and free will (the will of humans).

☞ Thebes, city of death, one long cortege  
and the suffering rises  
wails for mercy rise  
and the wild hymn for the Healer blazes out  
clashing with our sobs our cries of mourning—  
O golden daughter of god, send rescue  
radiant as the kindness in your eyes!

**Related Characters:** The Chorus (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 211-217

### Explanation and Analysis

The chorus continues to lament the current decrepit state of Thebes. They narrow their earlier general call for help from the gods to one toward a specific deity (seemingly Artemis, a daughter of Zeus, although she is only one of a litany of gods and goddesses called upon by the Chorus).

Sophocles' language here is highly lyrical: that Thebes is deemed "city of death" shows how horrifically it has been affected by the plague, and the phrase "one long cortege" presents it as a single funeral procession for its demise. The next two lines put into parallel "suffering rises" and "wails for mercy rise," playing on the term "rise" to mean both increasing and lifting through the air toward the gods. The chorus then describes their own laments and the role they play in the cacophony of Thebes: a mix of "wails for mercy," "wild hymn," and "cries of mourning." Thus we have the combination of horror and entreaties for aid, being described by the very public performing the acts themselves. Before, the chorus's request for help was addressed to a general divine realm, but they ask here specifically for "the Healer." This speaks to the Greek belief that specific gods played particular roles on earth and in heaven—and that each was bestowed with a set of properties to be called upon when needed. The references to "kindness in your eyes" also bears noticing considering the importance of vision throughout the play. Indeed, the salvation of Thebes *will* come through "eyes"—yet its radiance will be the cruelty that gouges out Oedipus's eyes in order to absolve the city of its crime.

●● Now my curse on the murderer. Whoever he is,  
a lone man unknown in his crime  
or one among many, let that man drag out  
his life in agony, step by painful step—

**Related Characters:** Oedipus (speaker)

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 280-283

### Explanation and Analysis

Having learned that the plague is a punishment for the murder of Laius, Oedipus here condemns the killer. He spitefully demands that his life be drawn out in extended pain rather than lived freely or ended quickly.

For an audience familiar with the Oedipus story, these lines unwittingly predict the tragic hero's fate. Oedipus highlights how the actual identity of the murderer does not matter to him, whether he has committed many crimes before or whether this is his first. The phrase "unknown in his crime" implies that the murderer may not even be aware of what he has done, which is the precise situation in which Oedipus finds himself. That Oedipus's curse demands he "drag out his life in agony" speaks to a certain type of vengeful cruelty: the victim is not supposed to merely receive punishment or death, but rather experience a torturous decline (as Oedipus himself will).

This passage brings up a point of much contention in analyses of this play: does Oedipus bring his fate upon himself? Here, the protagonist seems to have cursed himself and demanded his own torturous death—which would make the play's plot his own fault. In this case, Oedipus is not just at the whims of destiny and the gods, but rather lives a tragic life due to human action and free will. The tension between these two poles—fate and human agency—remains a central problem to the play, and it begins already in this famous curse.

## Lines 341-708 Quotes

●● Just send me home. You bear your burdens,  
I'll bear mine. It's better that way,  
please believe me.

**Related Characters:** Tiresias (speaker), Oedipus

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 364-366

### Explanation and Analysis

Tiresias comes to Oedipus to offer counsel on the plague. But when asked to share his wisdom, Tiresias asks to be allowed to depart without any comment.

As with the earlier scene, Oedipus here seems to bring his fate upon himself. By pressing Tiresias to tell him about the murderer of Laius, Oedipus is actively pursuing his own demise. Sophocles thus presents a division between the information held by prophets like Tiresias and its assimilation into the populace: his foresight seems to only come true when it is at last vocalized to Oedipus—for at that point it will become self-fulfilling prophecy. The text also implicitly cautions against the hubris of pursuing knowledge beyond one's range of understanding, for Oedipus's tragic action is not so much the murder itself but rather his insistent wish to know the truth instead of just to "bear your burdens" in silence.

Furthermore, Tiresias seems capable of resisting this fate. He knows Oedipus's true identity, but actively resists telling him of it—he acts, not like an oracle who would simply freely convey information. Sophocles thus makes Tiresias a character halfway between the divine and mortal realms: he has access to content beyond normal humans, but he is still privy to the human emotions of pity and anger—which dictate whether he will reveal what he has foreseen.

●● Did you rise to the crisis? Not a word,  
you and your birds, your gods—nothing.  
No, but I came by, Oedipus the ignorant,  
I stopped the Sphinx! With no help from the birds,  
the flight of my own intelligence hit the mark.

**Related Characters:** Oedipus (speaker), Tiresias

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 449-453

### Explanation and Analysis

Tiresias and Oedipus begin to fight, each insulting the other about the way they have been negligent of Thebes. Here, Oedipus reprimands Tiresias for not having intervened when Thebes was previously crippled by the Sphinx.

Oedipus juxtaposes the roles of divine and human intervention. He aligns Tiresias with "your birds, your gods"—the first which stands for auguries (observing the actions of birds to predict the future), the second which explicitly links him to the divine. But Oedipus claims

“nothing” came from this spiritual realm, whereas it was “Oedipus the ignorant” who was successful. His ignorance is set in contrast with the “help from the birds”—the foresight permitted by reading divine signs—and Oedipus thus implies that his “own intelligence” has merit even if it is not derived from divine prophecy. He was able to solve the riddle of the Sphinx through his own mental acuity alone, without the aid of the gods.

Oedipus's statement is actually quite blasphemous, for it elevates his human intelligence above divine providence. Again, he displays himself to be deeply proud, assuming that his previous accomplishments have given him a status that cannot be challenged by others, even the gods. This fault speaks, itself, to the limits of Oedipus's “intelligence,” for while he may be shrewd and clever, he has no wisdom when dealing with others and thus cannot prevent his fate.

☞ No man will ever  
be rooted from the earth as brutally as you.

**Related Characters:** Tiresias (speaker), Oedipus

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 488-489

### Explanation and Analysis

Tiresias speaks these condemning lines as his argument with Oedipus escalates. He predicts that Oedipus will suffer a horrifying end to his life.

This language is actually remarkably similar to that used by Oedipus earlier in the play. Recall that Oedipus cursed the murderer of Laius to “drag out his life in agony, step by painful step,” which highlighted the way the killer would die slowly and in agony. That Tiresias evokes, similarly, the way Oedipus will die “brutally” reiterates how they are actually speaking about a single person: Oedipus is the murderer of Laius, whom he himself has cursed. Tiresias's pronouncement is thus less a new prophecy than a reiteration of what Oedipus himself has already brought into motion.

It is a typical technique of Sophocles to have characters make similar pronouncements about people or events that they believe to be different, but are actually the same. It creates a dramatic irony in which the audience knows that Oedipus had cursed himself, just as Tiresias curses him here—even when Oedipus is unaware of this equivalence. The technique also further blurs the lines between human

action and fate—for here Tiresias seems, as a divine figure, to bring about Oedipus's destiny. But he only does so after Oedipus's aggression has *forced* Tiresias to do so.

☞ Blind who now has eyes, beggar who now is rich,  
he will grope his way toward a foreign soil,  
a stick tapping before him step by step.

**Related Characters:** Tiresias (speaker), Oedipus

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 517-519

### Explanation and Analysis

After pronouncing that Oedipus will suffer a terrible end, Tiresias tells this riddle about the killer of Laius. He describes the pitiful way the killer's life will end.

As is characteristic in the play, the elements of the prophecy will be easily recognized by anyone who knows the Oedipus story. “Blind who now has eyes” refers to the way Oedipus will gouge out his own eyes once he learns of his crimes, while “beggar who now is rich” foretells how he will fall swiftly from king to vagrant. As before, Tiresias uses Oedipus's own language—“step by step”—from the king's earlier curse on the killer of Laius. Here, Tiresias uses the phrase more literally to refer to the way Oedipus will, once he is blinded, move slowly away from Thebes as an outcast.

That Tiresias has left Oedipus with a riddle recalls the hero's own triumph when he solved the riddle of the Sphinx. In a sense, Tiresias is offering a second test to Oedipus's character: perhaps if he were able to solve this relatively straightforward riddle, he could avoid his fate. That he cannot do so speaks to how extensively Oedipus has been blinded by his pride—to the point that he cannot perform the same task that garnered him acclaim in Thebes to begin with. Sophocles thus renders Oedipus's tragic downfall the result of not just any character flaw, but rather one that undermines his defining heroic characteristic: intelligence.

☞ But whether a mere man can know the truth,  
whether a seer can fathom more than I—  
there is no test, no certain proof  
though matching skill for skill  
a man can outstrip a rival. No, not till I see  
these charges proved will I side with his accusers...  
Never will I convict my king, never in my heart.

**Related Characters:** The Chorus (speaker), Oedipus

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 563-572

### Explanation and Analysis

After Tiresias and Oedipus have finished fighting, the chorus expresses their sympathy for the king. They acknowledge the power of oracles, but also refuse to accept Tiresias's judgement until it has been proved certain.

The chorus challenges Tiresias, as Oedipus did before, on whether he does indeed profess prophetic powers above those of humans. They wonder “whether a seer can fathom more than I,” thus expressing a deep-seated skepticism with oracles. Like Oedipus, they want the proof of “matching skill for skill”—an even playing field, such as when Oedipus proved his strength and intelligence against the Sphinx. Perhaps the chorus, composed as it is by residents of Thebes, has been influenced by Oedipus's more secular and humanist sensibilities, which prioritize human agency over the will of the gods. Indeed, they seem willing to defend Oedipus to great lengths when they say “Never will I convict my king, never in my heart.” That is to say, the chorus is willing to deny explicit evidence against Oedipus due to their strong attachment to him as a ruler.

This passage also marks the chorus as distinctly ignorant rather than omniscient. They play the role of an audience that is not already intimately aware of the story of Oedipus—and thus they allow viewers to compare their own knowledge against what a more ignorant viewer might assume. This strategy is part of what allows Sophocles to re-stage an old tale and maintain dramatic tension, for he can maintain the semblance of unfamiliarity in the perspective of the chorus.

### Lines 709-997 Quotes

☝ Look at you, sullen in yielding, brutal in your rage—you will go too far. It's perfect justice: natures like yours are hardest on themselves.

**Related Characters:** Creon (speaker), Oedipus

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 746-748

### Explanation and Analysis

Oedipus permits Creon to leave without punishment. But as

he departs, Creon shouts this condemnation of Oedipus.

His insult points again to the crippling pride in Oedipus's personality. That he is “sullen in yielding” speaks to how reluctant he is to accept the calming advice of Jocasta and the chorus, while “brutal in your rage” reiterates how terrifying he is if allowed to fully unleash his frustration. Creon points again to how Oedipus is unable to mediate his response to the given situation based on whether he should be angry or accepting. As a result, he “will go too far,” or overreach what is permitted by his royal position.

Beyond reiterating Oedipus's character flaws, Creon's language also stresses that Oedipus's fate is the result of his own faulty actions. Saying “it's perfect justice” implies that Oedipus's story is not the result of a pre-designed divine plot to unseat him, but rather is the natural and necessary result of his own arrogant behavior. Similarly, “natures like yours are hardest on themselves” places the burden of agency onto Oedipus's “nature.” By Creon's account, it is the tragic hero who brings fate on himself.

☝ You who set our beloved land—storm-tossed, shattered—straight on course. Now again, good helmsman, steer us through the storm!

**Related Characters:** The Chorus (speaker), Oedipus

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 765-767

### Explanation and Analysis

In the wake of Oedipus's fight with Creon, the chorus continues to defend their ruler. They repeatedly call upon him to save them from the current plague.

Sophocles underlines, once more, how fully the populace of Thebes has aligned themselves with Oedipus. Though they do diverge from his viewpoints at times—for instance urging a merciful treatment of Creon—their general view is entirely sympathetic to him. Here, the chorus again brings up the way Oedipus had previously saved their “beloved land,” this time making use of a sailing metaphor, in which the plague is a “storm” and their ruler a “good helmsman.” The image presents composure and good judgment as the necessary qualities to save Thebes—both of which Oedipus is, of course, lacking at this point. Yet the chorus seems unaware of this discrepancy. That they simply continue to implore Oedipus speaks to their own sort of blindness—for they, like their ruler, cannot tell that he acts unjustly and will

thus bring tragedy upon himself.

☞ Listen to me and learn some peace of mind:  
no skill in the world,  
nothing human can penetrate the future.

**Related Characters:** Jocasta (speaker), Oedipus

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 780-782

### Explanation and Analysis

Jocasta gives this consoling speech after Oedipus recounts his interaction with Tiresias. She claims that prophets have no real knowledge of events to come, and that Oedipus therefore should not be disturbed by what Tiresias has said.

These lines make a sharp division between the human and divine realms: Jocasta associates “skill” with “human,” both of which contrast with the providence of the “future.” Much like Oedipus praised his intelligence over the bird auguries of Tiresias, Jocasta claims that human skill can only affect the current state of affairs and cannot “penetrate” or enter any zone beyond that of the present. Though this appeal might strike some as disheartening, it would grant “peace of mind” to Oedipus and Jocasta by denying the significance of the prophecies they have heard thus far. That is to say, it would allow them to exist in their human realm without the anxiety that they should change their actions to respond to the unique “skill” of Tiresias.

It is important to clarify here that Jocasta is not denying the existence or providence of the gods. This is not an atheistic passage, but rather one that sharply delineates between divine and earthly realms. Her claim is that mediums such as Tiresias do not actually bridge the gap between the two realms, but rather exist fully in the human one—and thus have no unique access to the divine.

☞ Great laws tower above us, reared on high  
born for the brilliant vault of heaven—  
Olympian Sky their only father,  
nothing mortal, no man gave them birth,  
their memory deathless, never lost in sleep:  
within them lives a mighty god, the god does not  
grow old.

**Related Characters:** The Chorus (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 957-962

### Explanation and Analysis

Jocasta and Oedipus have just finished discussing the significance of the prophecies that each has received. When they depart, the chorus offers a chilling and complex speech about the state of the gods in Thebes.

Their first move is to aggrandize the gods and stress their omnipresence in human affairs. That “Great laws tower above us” indicates that a different and more powerful set of rules exist in the divine realm—ones that would supersede the relatively minute human regulations. Indeed, “no man gave them birth,” thus directly contrasting the power of Oedipus as a human king with the divine rulers who exist entirely independently of him. After a series of somewhat heretical exchanges between Jocasta and Oedipus, this passage firmly reinstates the importance of the gods for the chorus, and thus for Thebes society.

A particular emphasis is placed on how these rules and their creators are eternal and immune to decay. The chorus fixates on how they are “nothing mortal,” “deathless,” and “the god does not grow old”—which contrasts with the ephemeral nature of humans and their laws. Part of their entitlement thus comes from the way they are immune to the current state of Thebes and the eventual fate of Oedipus.

### Lines 998-1310 Quotes

☞ They are dying, the old oracles sent to Laius,  
now our masters strike them off the rolls.  
Nowhere Apollo's golden glory now—  
the gods, the gods go down.

**Related Characters:** The Chorus (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 994-997

### Explanation and Analysis

After first contending that the gods are everlasting and all-powerful, the chorus rapidly shifts positions here. They claim that given the current state of Thebes, the relative power of Oedipus, and the potential falseness of the prophecies, the gods may in fact be in decline.

To substantiate this point, the chorus directly inverts their

earlier descriptions: if before, the gods were deathless and immortal, here we learn the oracles “are dying.” This formulation is both literal and metaphoric, for it refers to their increasing lack of importance in Thebes society, due to the perspective of “our masters.” Indeed, this lack of adherence to old prophecies extends to more than just prophets such as Tiresias—for it even applies to “Apollo’s golden glory.” The gods themselves are deemed to be in decline: they “go down” in public interest and in perceived relevance.

The chorus implies that a massive societal shift has taken place in the way of Oedipus’s rise to power: a movement away from the providence of religion and instead toward a more secular orientation. By repeatedly praising human intelligence and disparaging prophecy, Oedipus has already shown this to be his personal belief system—and the chorus has affirmed the actions and ideas of their ruler. Thus Thebes seem to have arrived at a complex and pivotal decision: if the prophecies about Oedipus prove untrue, it would cause them to see the gods as “down,” and gravitate toward an increasingly secular society.

☞ Man of agony—  
that is the only name I have for you,  
that, no other—ever, ever, ever!

**Related Characters:** Jocasta (speaker), Oedipus

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 1176-1179

### Explanation and Analysis

Jocasta has just concluded that Oedipus is her son and she repeatedly implores him not to continue his investigation. When he refuses to do so, she screams this at him.

This passage plays on the way that Oedipus introduced himself at the play’s onset: recall that he selected not to use his name at first, but rather implied that all should know him based on his fame. Here, Jocasta similarly replaces his name, but instead with the epithet “man of agony,” thus foreshadowing how this will be Oedipus’s new legacy by the play’s end. Beyond condemning him to a life of misery, Jocasta’s language also subtly wipes away his identity. Replacing his specific name with this generic term denies the coherence between Oedipus’s current royal position and his actual identity. Jocasta implies that he will hold “no other” title or identity in the years to come, and that this

identification with agony will be permanent: “ever, ever, ever!” Thus Sophocles uses Jocasta’s moment of realization—called in Greek tragedy an *anagnorisis*—to demonstrate the pending end of Oedipus’s identity as it is currently defined.

☞ If you are the man he says you are, believe me  
you were born for pain.

**Related Characters:** A Shepherd (speaker), A Messenger, Oedipus

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 1304-1305

### Explanation and Analysis

When interrogated by Oedipus, the shepherd at first resists his attempts to procure information. Yet eventually the shepherd gives in, condemning Oedipus to his terrifying fate.

These lines articulate an important new position on the role of fate in Oedipus’s destiny. Whereas other characters or critics may believe the tragic action occurred due to a mixture of destiny and human folly, the shepherd clearly attributes what will occur solely to a pre-determined narrative. That Oedipus was “born for pain” implies that his life’s torment began precisely at the moment he came into the world: his later actions thus would only fulfill this pre-designed path, rather than carving a new one. This point builds on Jocasta’s claim that his name is “man of agony”—which makes his identity similarly equivalent to pain—and reiterates the power of the gods and fate to control each moment in human affairs. Thus Sophocles moves at this crucial moment in the tragedy to highlight the role of destiny over human action.

### Lines 1311-1680 Quotes

☞ "...is there a man more agonized?  
More wed to pain and frenzy? Not a man on earth,  
the joy of your life ground down to nothing  
O Oedipus, name for the ages—"

**Related Characters:** The Chorus (speaker), Oedipus

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 1331-1334

### Explanation and Analysis

Having now learned of Oedipus's history and fate, the chorus renounces their earlier adoration of him. They reflect on the way Oedipus has shown himself to be predestined to a doomed and painful life.

This passage is a striking turn in the perception of the chorus, which had previously refused to accept claims or prophecies that told of their king's fate. Here, they adopt the language of other accusers: he is "agonized" and "wed to pain and frenzy"—thus permanently associated with these horrific qualities. As before, he is singular and famous—but this is no longer due to heroism, and instead because of his tragic fate. That the chorus says, "O Oedipus, name for the ages" demonstrates that this fate will be recorded and maintained for eons to come: thus they already predict the writing of Sophocles' play and the other ways that this story will enter Greek cultural history (and Western culture in general). Even at this point, however, the chorus still displays a level of sympathy for their ruler. Instead of calling Oedipus "man of agony" in the disparaging tone of Jocasta, they choose "man more agonized," which forefronts the pain he must be enduring. They also make mention of the previous "joy of your life," and even maintain the use of his name, "Oedipus." This continued sympathy reiterates how the chorus functions as an analog to the audience—for it reacts with a similar emotional and caring mindset that an observer of the tragedy might have.

☝ My destiny, my dark power, what a leap you made!

**Related Characters:** Oedipus (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 1448

### Explanation and Analysis

At this point, Jocasta has committed suicide and Oedipus has blinded himself. In response, Oedipus bemoans his fate and how rapidly it has deteriorated.

That Oedipus refers to his "destiny" as a "dark power" implies that he locates both positive and negative qualities in fate. By this moment in the tragic action, he could very well see destiny as entirely antagonistic, yet the use of the term "power" implies that it has served as a source of potential in the past. Indeed, we know of his destiny's power

from the way he was able to save Thebes from the Sphinx—and yet it is also "dark," for it carries the terrifying opportunities that have caused the play's tragic action to unfold as it has.

Oedipus articulates that shift with the phrase "what a leap you made!" implying that a decisive change took place between the positive and negative sides of his "destiny." He continues, then, to question the poles of human agency versus divine fate—for while he may stress the role of "destiny," he also possesses it with the key pronoun "my," and implies with the "leap" image that even destiny itself may change course.

☝ Take me away, far, far from Thebes,  
quickly, cast me away, my friends—  
this great murderous ruin, this man cursed to heaven,  
the man the deathless gods hate most of all!

**Related Characters:** Oedipus (speaker)

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 1477-1480

### Explanation and Analysis

Oedipus continues to disparage his fate and to speak of madness and darkness. He then asks to be thrown out of Thebes.

In contrast to his earlier proud position as a king, Oedipus has descended to the lowliest role of beggar and outcast. He thus rejects the city he had saved and ruled and affirms that he was "cursed to heaven" or fated to this end. Oedipus further reaffirms the importance of the "deathless gods," which had previously been said to be in decline. Yet as with his blindness, Oedipus insists upon acting decisively and taking control of his fate: he speaks in commands to others and curses himself—as if to preempt the curses and judgments of others. In an odd way, then, he seems to be defending his own minute quantity of human agency up to the very end of the play.

One should note, however, that the passage recreates, in an odd way, the first moments of Oedipus's life—when as a baby he was cast away from the city. A circular narrative like this affirms how his destiny was set to begin with: both because it repeats a similar motif and because it shows how inescapable his destiny as an outcast must be. Though he may have been able to avoid it as a young baby, his fate eventually returned. Thus we see at the play's end a

complicated negotiation of fate and agency, in which the structure of the tragedy reaffirms the power of destiny even as the hero seeks to carve out a space for his own control.

Now as we keep our watch and wait the final day,  
count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last.

**Related Characters:** The Chorus (speaker), Oedipus

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 1683-1684

### Explanation and Analysis

After Creon has dealt with Oedipus's fate, they both depart the stage to leave only the chorus. The chorus ends the play with these lines that reaffirm the power of the gods to dictate each action of man.

Once more, the chorus functions as a way to explain the morals and meanings of the tragedy to the audience. Their

perspective has changed radically over the course of play—from full-heartedly supporting Oedipus, to questioning his position, and finally to condemning him to his fate. Here, they extrapolate from the specific example of Oedipus to offer a more broad-reaching comment on humanity. They take their king as proof that none can escape the control of the gods, and that their earlier skepticisms of divine control were unwise.

As a result, men can only “keep our watch and wait the final day,” implying that observation and submissiveness are the only possible responses to destiny. Oedipus's proud attempts to escape or challenge his fate are deemed foolhardy, and thus any active attempt to shift one's life will ultimately fail. The chorus's next line is far darker, however, for it says that no one will be “free of pain” until death. This seems to imply that being bound by destiny is by definition a type of pain—and that watching and waiting will similarly bring pains that can never be fully eluded. Sophocles's final lesson extracted from Oedipus is thus a cautionary and dark one: none can escape the providence of the gods, and therefore one must accept a life of pained predestination.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## LINES 1-340

The play begins in the royal house of Thebes. The stage directions state that Oedipus solved the riddle of the Sphinx many years earlier and has since ruled as king of Thebes. As the play begins, a procession of miserable-looking priests enters. Oedipus follows soon after, walking with a slight limp and attended by guards.

Oedipus asks the priests why they have come. He knows that the city is sick with plague. He tells them they can trust him to help in any way he can. In a moving speech, a priest tells Oedipus the city's woes: the crops are ruined, cattle are sick, women die in labor and children are stillborn, and people are perishing from the plague. The priest begs Oedipus to save Thebes, just as Oedipus once saved it from the Sphinx.

Oedipus says he knows of the trouble and has been trying to think of a solution. He has already sent Creon, his brother-in-law, to the oracle at Delphi to find out what the god Apollo advises. Just then, the priest notices that Creon is returning from this mission.

Creon tells Oedipus and the assembled priests the words of the god Apollo, according to the oracle. Before Oedipus became king, the previous king, Laius, was murdered, and his murderer was never discovered. According to the oracle, the killer lives in Thebes. He must be caught and punished in order to stop the plague.

Oedipus asks Creon about the circumstances of Laius's death. Creon says that Laius left the city to consult the oracle of Apollo and never returned. Only one eyewitness to the murder survived and returned to Thebes. This man claimed that a band of thieves killed the king. Oedipus asks why no one tried to find the murderers. Creon responds that, at the time, Thebes was under the Sphinx's curse. Oedipus then promises that he'll take on the task of finding the murderer.

The chorus, which has not heard the news from the oracle, enters and marches around an altar, chanting. The chorus catalogs the misfortunes of Thebes and calls on many gods by name to come to the city's aid.

*Oedipus limps because Laius and Jocasta (who he doesn't know are his parents) pinned his ankles together when he was an infant to thwart the prophecy that he would kill Laius (they failed). The limp marks Oedipus's fate, even though he does not know it yet.*



*The reference to the Sphinx reminds the audience that Oedipus is a genuine hero. Oedipus saved Thebes from the Sphinx by answering the Sphinx's riddle. In other words, he became a hero by figuring out the truth.*



*Oedipus is a vigorous and active leader. He has already anticipated the priests' request for help and has done what a good Greek ruler should do—seek advice from an oracle.*



*As when he faced the Sphinx, Oedipus is presented with a puzzle to solve: the identity of Laius's murderer. Shame was believed to have real-world consequences. The plague results from the shame of not punishing Thebe's former king's murderer.*



*Oedipus is a hero and a man of action. Had his king been murdered, nothing would have stopped him from finding the murderer, just as he is promising to let nothing stop him now. Creon is more pragmatic and less inclined to take action. Having just escaped the Sphinx, searching out Laius's murderer seemed impossible to Creon.*



*The chorus, which represents the elders of Thebes, appeals to the gods as the agents of fate and rulers of the world to save the city.*



Oedipus orders anyone who knows anything about Laius's murderer to speak, in exchange for light treatment and possibly a reward. But, Oedipus declares, if anyone has useful information and does not speak, the citizens of Thebes must banish this person. Oedipus curses the murderer—"Let that man drag out his life in agony, step by painful step." He adds that even if the murderer ends up being a member of his own family, he or she should receive the same harsh banishment and punishment.

Oedipus criticizes the people for not hunting more vigorously for Laius's killer. He says he will fight for Laius as if Laius were his own father. Oedipus curses anyone who defies his orders. The leader of the chorus suggests that Oedipus send for Tiresias, the blind seer. Oedipus announces that he has already done so. Soon, blind Tiresias arrives, led by a boy.

## LINES 341-708

Oedipus asks Tiresias, the prophet, to help Thebes end the plague by guiding him to the murderers of King Laius. But Tiresias does not want to tell Oedipus what he knows. He asks to be sent home and says he will not tell his secret. Oedipus insults Tiresias, but the prophet still refuses to speak.

Now angry, Oedipus accuses Tiresias of plotting to kill Laius. This upsets Tiresias, who tells Oedipus that Oedipus himself is the cause of the plague—Oedipus is the murderer of Laius. As the insults fly back and forth, Tiresias hints that Oedipus is guilty of further outrages.

Oedipus convinces himself that Creon has put Tiresias up to making these accusations in attempt to overthrow him. He mocks Tiresias's blindness and calls the man a false prophet. The leader of the chorus tries to calm the two men down. Tiresias warns Oedipus that Oedipus is the blind one—blind to the corrupt details of his own life.

As the men continue to argue, Tiresias prophesies that Oedipus will know who his parents are by the end of the day, and that this knowledge will destroy him. He leaves with a riddle: the killer of Laius is a native Theban whom many think is a foreigner; he will soon be blind; he is both brother and father to his children; he killed his own father. Both men exit.

*Oedipus acts quickly to find the killer. He thinks he knows what happened—thieves killed Laius—but is actually blind to the truth. Acting blindly, he curses himself. Greek audiences would have known the Oedipus story, and so in this scene Oedipus would seem to be describing his own fate, or even bringing this fate upon himself.*



*Another example of Oedipus's strong leadership. He's one step ahead of the suggestions his subjects make to him and has already sent for Tiresias. Yet in saying he would fight for Laius as if he were his own father, Oedipus further displays his own blindness to the truth.*



*The blind seer sees the truth, but tries to protect Oedipus by remaining silent. This puts him into conflict with Oedipus, who is merely trying to be a good leader and save his city.*



*Oedipus, thinking he understands more than he does, is too quick to judge Tiresias. Though Tiresias is a noted seer, Oedipus is too angry to listen to him.*



*Oedipus, a man of action, describes blindness as an inability to see. Tiresias, the seer, describes it as an inability to see the truth. In calling Tiresias a false prophet, Oedipus shows his willingness to fight against any prophecy he disagrees with.*



*The riddle is a reference to the riddle of the Sphinx. Solving that riddle gave Oedipus his fame. Solving this one will destroy him. In other words, Oedipus's own qualities doom him. This riddle is pretty obvious, but Oedipus is not ready or willing to solve it.*



The chorus enters, chanting about the murderer of Laius, pursued now by the gods and the words of a prophecy. The chorus concludes that it will not believe the serious charges brought against Oedipus without proof.

Creon enters, upset that he has been accused of treachery. Oedipus enters. He launches further accusations at Creon. Creon tries to defend himself against the charges. He claims he has no idea what Tiresias was going to say, and has no desire to be king. He suggests that Oedipus is being unreasonable and paranoid. Oedipus refuses to listen, and says he wants Creon dead. Jocasta—Oedipus's wife and Creon's sister—approaches.

## LINES 709-997

Jocasta tells Oedipus and Creon that it's shameful to have public arguments when the city is suffering. When she learns that Oedipus wants to have Creon banished or killed, Jocasta begs Oedipus to believe Creon. The chorus echoes her plea. Oedipus thinks that this means the Chorus also wants to see him overthrown. The chorus swears they don't.

Moved by the chorus's expression of loyalty, Oedipus allows Creon to go free, though he says that he still doesn't believe that Creon is innocent. Creon exits, declaring that Oedipus is both wrong and stubborn.

Jocasta asks how Oedipus's argument with Creon started. Oedipus tells her that Creon sent Tiresias to accuse Oedipus of Laius's death. Jocasta responds that Oedipus shouldn't worry about the seer's accusation because the revelations of prophets are meaningless.

Jocasta tells a story from her past: When Laius and Jocasta were still married, an oracle told Laius that he would be killed by his own son. In response, when Jocasta and Laius's son was three-days-old, his **ankles** were pinned together and one of Laius's servants left him to die on a mountain. Laius was not killed by his son, but instead by strangers, at a place where **three roads meet**. So, Jocasta concludes, seers don't know what they're talking about.

*The chorus helps the reader and the audience interpret the play. Here, the reader understands that the people of Thebes are still on Oedipus's side. He is still their champion.*



*Creon perhaps protests too much when he says he has no desire to be king (as his actions at the end of the play and in Antigone and Oedipus at Colonus will show). However, he is right that Oedipus is making strong accusations without evidence. Oedipus appears quite unreasonable, overcome by anger and the desire to take some decisive action.*



*Oedipus remains in a high state of agitation. He is defensive and still inclined to see a conspiracy. Some critics have argued that Oedipus is so quick to see conspiracies because he actually senses his own guilt, but is trying to hide from it.*



*Oedipus seems willing to listen to his subjects in this scene, though he doesn't take the advice of those who tell him not to pursue the story of his birth.*



*Jocasta declares outright that prophecy is a sham. She doesn't believe in the truth of oracles or prophecies, which, by extension, implies that she does not believe in the gods.*



*Jocasta once believed in oracles enough to sacrifice her infant son. But now that she's sure the prophecy didn't come true, she no longer believes in prophecies. But in explaining why she doesn't believe in prophecies, she provides the details that make Oedipus suspect the prophecy might be true. Like Oedipus, she dooms herself.*



Jocasta's story troubles Oedipus, so he asks Jocasta for more details about the murder of Laius. He grows even more concerned when she tells him that the murder took place just before Oedipus arrived in Thebes, and describes what Laius looked like and how many men accompanied him. Now truly worried, Oedipus asks Jocasta to send for the lone survivor of the murder of Laius and his men to come to Thebes and tell them what he saw that day.

Jocasta asks to know what's troubling Oedipus. Oedipus tells her his life story. His father Polybus and his mother Merope were king and queen of Corinth. One day, at a banquet, he heard gossip that the king and queen were not really his parents. To learn the truth he went to the oracle at Delphi, where he received a prophecy that he would sleep with his mother and kill his father.

Terrified, Oedipus never returned to Corinth in order to ensure that the prophecy would not come true. As he wandered, he one day reached the place where Jocasta says King Laius was killed. There he had an incident with a group of men who pushed him off the road and tried to kill him. He defended himself, and ended up killing them. Oedipus now fears one of the men he killed was Laius, and the curses that he himself showered upon the old king's murderer will now come down upon his own head.

The chorus tells Oedipus to remain hopeful until he questions the witness he has sent for. Oedipus takes heart—after all, the witness, a shepherd, had said that a group of thieves killed Laius, not just one man. Jocasta also tells him not to worry, because the murder of Laius does not fit the prophecy anyway. Apollo said that her son would kill her husband, and her son was left to die in the mountains. They exit.

The chorus, alone on stage, chants about the gods who rule the world from Olympus, striking down those who gain power by disregarding the gods' laws and protecting those men who faithfully serve the state. But then the Chorus goes on to say that if a sinner is not punished or if the prophecies and oracles of the gods turn out to be untrue, then there is no reason to worship or have faith in the Gods.

*While Oedipus was quick to accuse Creon, he is just as quick to abandon his conspiracy theory once new evidence arises. Now he's back in detective mode.*



*Oedipus reveals the second major prophecy of the Oedipus story. The first prophecy, given to Laius and Jocasta, mentions only that the son would kill the father. The prophecy given to Oedipus brings up the other shameful atrocity: incest.*



*When he realizes that he may have killed Laius, Oedipus worries that the punishment of exile that he promised for Laius's killer will fall on his own head. That would be bad enough—by his own decree, he would be banished. But because he still thinks he thwarted the prophecy by leaving Corinth, however, he doesn't realize that the gods will punish him as well.*



*Oedipus gets some reprieve from his fears and doubts. If he investigates no further, he can walk away believing that he isn't the murderer of Laius. Yet in believing that the prophecies have not come to pass he too is now dangerously close to denying the power of the gods.*



*The chorus suggests that the stakes are very high. At this moment the prophecies look unlikely, and if these prophecies don't come true, why should people believe any prophecies? If the words of the gods aren't true, doesn't that call into question the existence of the gods?*



## LINES 998-1310

Jocasta enters and makes an offering to Apollo to appease Oedipus's mind. Just then, a messenger—an old man—arrives from Corinth, with news that the people there want to make Oedipus their king. Polybus, king of Corinth—the man Oedipus believes to be his father—has died. Jocasta is overjoyed because she views Polybus's death as further proof that the prophecies are false.

Oedipus enters and learns the news. Relieved, he celebrates with Jocasta and agrees with her that the oracles and prophecies are "dead," and that chance alone rules the world.

Jocasta urges Oedipus to live without fear. Yet Oedipus admits that because his mother is still alive, part of the prophecy might still come true.

The messenger asks what Oedipus is afraid of. Oedipus tells him the prophecy—that he would kill his father and sleep with his mother—and says that this is why he has never returned to Corinth. The messenger tells Oedipus he never had anything to fear. Polybus and Merope weren't his real father and mother.

The messenger tells Oedipus that he (the messenger) came upon a baby on the side of Mount Cithaeron, near Thebes. He freed the baby's **ankles**, which were pinned together, and gave the baby to Polybus to raise as a gift. That baby grew up to be Oedipus, who still walks with a limp because of the injury to his ankles. When Oedipus asks for more details about who his parents were, the messenger says he doesn't know, but was given the baby by another shepherd who was a servant of Laius.

Jocasta reacts sharply to this last piece of news. Meanwhile, the chorus tells Oedipus that this other shepherd, Laius's old servant, is the same man as the eyewitness to the murder of Laius.

Jocasta now begs Oedipus to abandon his search for his origins. Oedipus thinks she's worried that he will discover he's the son of some slave or commoner, a fact that might shame her. She insists that isn't it, and continues to beg him not to question the shepherd. He won't listen to her. At last, she lets out a wrenching scream, calls Oedipus a "man of agony," and flees through the palace.

*The news from Corinth seems like further evidence to support Jocasta's claim that prophecies are meaningless. If King Polybus has died of natural causes, then Oedipus can't fulfill the prophecy and kill his own father.*



*The idea that chance, rather than the gods, rules the world is deeply blasphemous. It is significant that from this moment on, things come crashing down.*



*Even so, Oedipus is not completely able to deny either his guilt or his belief in fate.*



*By leaving Corinth, Oedipus thought he was thwarting the prophecy, but instead he was carrying it out. Here the messenger thinks he is helping Oedipus, but is in fact dooming him. Fate is unavoidable.*



*The detail about the pinned ankles links Oedipus to the baby who Jocasta and Laius tried to kill. Oedipus's swollen ankles are marks of his fate. Yet Oedipus, who solved the riddle of the Sphinx, still can't see it. His search for the truth has actually blinded him to the truth.*



*Jocasta has realized the awful truth: her current husband is in fact her son.*



*Though she knows the truth, Jocasta desperately wants to hide from it, hoping that by maintaining some bit of doubt they might escape their guilt and fate. But Oedipus is still blind, and refuses to stop. He relentlessly pursues the very truth that will destroy him.*



Oedipus declares that he must know the secret of his birth, no matter how common his origins. A shepherd approaches. The messenger confirms that it's the same man who gave him the baby. Oedipus and the messenger question the old shepherd. When they bring up the subject of the baby, the shepherd refuses to speak.

*This is a moment of great dramatic irony, when the audience knows the truth, and other characters know the truth, but the main character still does not. As many characters have before, the shepherd tries to stop the discovery of the truth.*



Only after Oedipus threatens to torture the shepherd does the shepherd admit that he gave the baby to the messenger. The shepherd then refuses to name the father and mother of the baby. Oedipus threatens to kill the shepherd if he does not speak. Finally, the shepherd gives in: the parents of the baby were Laius and Jocasta. The shepherd says he was told to kill the baby boy because of a prophecy that he would grow up to kill his father. But the shepherd took pity on the baby and gave it to the messenger.

*The shepherd is the last roadblock between Oedipus and disaster, and fittingly, he is the most reluctant to speak. In his blind need to know the truth, Oedipus forces his way past every obstacle. He truly dooms himself, even going so far as to threaten to kill the shepherd, to make him speak the very words which seal Oedipus's fate.*



Realizing who he is, and that the prophecies have come to pass, Oedipus lets out a terrible cry and rushes into the palace. The messenger and shepherd exit.

*Now Oedipus knows everything. His fate is revealed, his blindness lifted, and his guilt and shame descend upon him.*



## LINES 1311-1680

The chorus, left alone on stage, chants first of Oedipus's greatness among men, and then about how fate brought about his horrifying destruction. The chorus adds that though Oedipus saved Thebes (from the Sphinx), the city would have been better off had it never seen Oedipus.

*Though he committed them unwittingly, Oedipus's deeds are so shameful that even the Thebans whom he saved from the Sphinx find him repulsive and wish they were blind to him.*



A second messenger enters with news of events in the palace. Jocasta locked herself in her room to mourn Laius and her own fate. In hysterical grief, Oedipus ran through the palace searching for Jocasta with sword drawn, cursing her. He knocked down her door to find that she had hanged herself. Now weeping, Oedipus embraced Jocasta and lowered her to the floor. He took two golden brooches (pins) from her robes, and plunged them into his eyes until he was blind, screaming that he no longer wanted to see the world now that he knew the truth.

*Oedipus's deliberate self-mutilation remains one of the most shocking acts in theater. But, as typically happens in Greek drama, the violence takes place off stage and then is described on stage by someone who witnessed it. The truth, and the shame and guilt its discovery released, have killed Jocasta and blinded Oedipus.*



The chorus and the messenger are struck with grief and pity. Oedipus enters, but they can't bear to look at him. Blood pouring from his eyes, Oedipus speaks of his agony, of darkness, of insanity. He begs to be cast out of Thebes as a cursed man. He wishes he'd never been saved as a baby.

*Oedipus is still revolting because of his past deeds, but his act of blinding himself has immediately made him worthy of pity too. He's now a victim more than a villain.*



Oedipus gives a long and heart-rending speech about the terrible things he has done and that have happened to him, as ordained by Apollo. Yet he insists that it was his own hand that blinded himself, he claims, not the hand of fate. The chorus asks why he blinded himself instead of killing himself. Oedipus says he could not bear to look his father and mother in the eyes in Hades (hell), and, alive, he cannot look bear to look at the faces of his children or his countrymen. He asks the chorus to hide him, kill him, or hurl him into the sea.

Creon enters. The Chorus expresses hope that he will restore order to Thebes. Creon forgives Oedipus for his past actions, and orders that Oedipus be brought inside so that his shame may be dealt with privately. Oedipus begs Creon to banish him in order to save Thebes. Creon agrees to do it, but only after consulting an oracle to make sure that the gods support such an action. Oedipus notes that his sons are old enough to take care of themselves, but begs Creon to look after his daughters, Antigone and Ismene.

At Oedipus's request, Creon sends for Antigone and Ismene, who enter, crying. Oedipus hugs them. Weeping, he tells them that they will be shunned because of his terrible acts, and that as the products of an incestuous marriage they will be unable to find husbands. He tells them to pray for a life better than their father's.

Creon then puts an end to Oedipus's time with his daughters, and again refuses to grant Oedipus's wish for immediate banishment until the gods explicitly grant it. Oedipus then asks Creon to give him more time with his daughters, but Creon responds only by reminding Oedipus that he will no longer have any power for the rest of his life.

All exit except the Chorus, which laments that even the most powerful and skillful of men can be ruined by fate. The Chorus ends with these tragic words: "Now as we keep our watch and wait the final day, count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last."

*Although Tiresias predicted that Oedipus would end up blind, Oedipus emphasizes that it was his own choice to blind himself. He did not choose to kill his father or marry his mother. That, he says, was the will of the gods. But blinding himself was an act of his own free will, a response to the fate and shame that the gods have forced on him.*



*Just as Oedipus restored order by defeating the Sphinx, Creon restores order now. Creon has assumed the role of leader without missing a beat. Notice his different leadership style, though. Where Oedipus was a man of action and was willing to try to defy fate, Creon is much more cautious and makes sure he is doing the will of the gods before acting.*



*Oedipus is correct that his misfortune will continue into the next generation, as shown in Sophocles's play Antigone. Throughout Greek literature, shame and guilt are often passed down through families.*



*Creon's treatment of Oedipus at first seemed gracious. Now he begins to flex his political power, but Creon ends up wrong. In Oedipus at Colonus, the dying Oedipus has gained a new kind of power that Creon will try to take and control.*



*The chorus suggests that, just as Oedipus was unable to escape his destiny, all people, however great, are always subject to the whims of fate and the gods. Trying to escape fate brings more pain, which can only be stopped by death.*





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