

# **Oedipus the King Book Notes**

## **Oedipus the King by Sophocles**

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## Author/Context

Sophocles was born in the year 496 B.C. at Kolonos, a northern suburb of Athens. At the age of sixteen, he was chosen to lead the dance at the celebrations for the Athenian victory over the Persian navy. At twenty-eight, he won the prize of the tragedy competition, with his first entry. He then established a public career at Athens, where he was well distinguished. He was elected to serve a term as State Treasurer, and later served a term as the Special State Commissioner. He obtained one of these positions in a time of major crisis, which suggests that he was well known, and well liked in the Greek democracy. He was also nominated to compete at the annual Festival of Dionysos on approximately thirty occasions, and won the first prize eighteen times. He died at the age of ninety, in the year 406 B.C.

All these achievements go to show that "the conservative view of Sophocles as loftily detached, concerned with 'timeless' or 'universal' themes is mistaken; all seven surviving dramas engage with issues central to contemporary Athenian political, social and religious life" (Ewans). These achievements suggest Sophocles was not writing at a distance from controversy, but rather that he was close to it.

It is thought that *Oedipus the King* was written between 430 B.C. and 420 B.C. The plague that is spoken about in the book is similar to the plague that hit Athens at this time. The book has no villains, and all the characters are good men and women who are trying their best to help the city, Thebes, escape from the plague. Each of them acts naturally and truthfully, but because of their lack of integration of knowledge, their stories, and the book, become a tragedy. Although the traps can be foreseen, the reader can do nothing to change them, just as Oedipus can do nothing to change his fate. As one critic says, "Few dramas ever written expose so pitilessly the isolation, and the limitations, of human existence" (Ewans).

### Bibliography

Ewans, Michael, Graham Ley, and Gregory McCart. *Oedipus The King*. The Everyman Library: 1999.

# Plot Summary

Oedipus, the ruler of Thebes, approaches a group of unhappy citizens, represented by a priest, and asks them what is wrong. They answer that the city is dying and that they are sick and poor. Oedipus sympathizes and tells them that, as their ruler, he is also troubled by the sickness of the city, and has already taken steps to see that something be done about it. The first step he has taken was to send Creon to Apollo's shrine to see what the god recommends they do. As Creon appears, he tells them that the god, Apollo, said that there is bad blood in Thebes, and that until this blood is expelled Thebes will be a sick city.

This bad blood is the blood of the person who killed Laios. When Oedipus asks why the case was not investigated, as he had not come to Thebes at that point, the people answer that they were too busy trying to solve the Sphinx's riddle. Oedipus says that no matter what the cost is, he will get to the bottom of it, both because it harms Thebes, and because Laios was noble and loyal. The elders say that they do not have any knowledge of the murder, and suggest that Oedipus call Tiresias, a blind prophet, to help and advise him. Oedipus says that he has already done this, and Tiresias arrives promptly. Although reluctant to speak, Oedipus forces Tiresias to reveal what he knows. Tiresias says that Oedipus is Thebes' pollution and that he killed his father and sleeps with his mother, and that this is the truth. Oedipus accuses Tiresias of lying on Creon's behalf so that Creon can kill Oedipus and take over the position of ruler of Thebes.

Creon enters and says that Oedipus is not making any sense-of course he did not collaborate with Tiresias, because he also owns a third of Thebes but chooses not to rule it, leaving Thebes to Oedipus, which shows that he is not interested in ruling at all. Jocasta enters and stops the two men from arguing. When Creon leaves, she asks Oedipus what happened and he explains the whole story to her. She tells him not to believe the words of the oracle, as an oracle once predicted that her son would kill his father and share her bed, and this has never happened. She bore a son with Laios, but Laios had the feet of the child bound and had the child tossed in the wilderness.

Although this story is supposed to calm Oedipus down, it only worries him more. He asks about the place and time of Laios' death and for a description of Laios. Every answer adds to Oedipus' worry. Jocasta informs him that there was one survivor who was with Laios when he was attacked, so Oedipus calls for him. Jocasta also says that Laios had been killed by a group of people.

While waiting for the survivor, Oedipus tells Jocasta his life story, that a man had called him a bastard son, so he went to an oracle to inquire about it as no one would speak to him about it. The oracle, Delphi, told him that he was to kill his father and sleep with his mother. As a result, he left his hometown so that he would protect himself and his parents from this terrible prediction. On his journey to another town, he came to a three-pronged fork in the road, where a group of men attacked him. Oedipus killed all of them except for one.



At this time, a Corinthian enters and asks Oedipus to come back to Corinth and rule since his father has died. Afraid of his fate, Oedipus refuses, as he does not want to harm his mother. However, when Oedipus explains to the Corinthian his fate, the Corinthian says that Merope and Polybus were not Oedipus' real parents and that he had given Oedipus to them as a gift. When he asks where he was found, Oedipus is told that a herdsman had given him to the Corinthian in Mount Kithairon where he used to be a shepherd, and that his feet were tied together. When the survivor from Laios' killing enters, the Corinthian identifies him as the man who had given him Oedipus, and the herdsman admits that Jocasta had given him the baby to get rid of it, and that he had thought the Corinthian would take him far away, never to be seen again.

As a result of discovering all of the horrible prophecies have been fulfilled, Jocasta hangs herself. Oedipus discovers her body and takes her brooches off her dress and pierces his eyes until they bleed and he blinds himself. Then, he asks to be exiled from Thebes, which Creon grants, and he leaves to return to his starting place, Mount Kithairon. His daughters, Antigone and Ismene, are left in the hands of Creon, who proves to be a true friend of Oedipus.



# Major Characters

**Oedipus Rex:** The ruler of Thebes, Oedipus was destined to sleep with his mother and kill his father. Knowing this fate, his parents abandoned him, and he was raised by a different family. However, Oedipus had no knowledge of this, and after hearing of his fate he left his parents in order not to hurt them. After many years, he discovers that he has done exactly what his fate had predicted, as he has found and married his mother by chance, and killed his father on the road without knowing who he was.

**Creon:** Oedipus' brother-in-law, and Jocasta's brother. Oedipus accuses Creon of attempting to kill him and take his title. Creon also supported Tiresias, who predicted Oedipus' fate, so Oedipus resents him even more. What Oedipus imagines to be Creon's murderous intentions, however, are discounted when it's revealed that Creon owns a third of Thebes but chooses not to rule (so he's not power-hungry). Creon turns out to be a true friend, as he agrees to take care of Oedipus' daughters when Oedipus goes into exile.

**Jocasta:** Oedipus' wife and mother. Jocasta was also Creon's sister, and was previously married to Laios. Although she wants Thebes to get better, she does not want Oedipus to pursue the path he has taken in finding out why Thebes is sick, as she is scared that what the oracles predicted when Oedipus was born is true. Jocasta, up to this point, does not believe in the oracles, since she thought that her son had died and could not live to do what the oracles had proclaimed he would do.

## Minor Characters

**The priest of Zeus:** The priest that represents the people when they come to Oedipus to complain of the disasters that are befalling them and the city.

**Gods:** Many gods, such as Zeus and Ares, are offered prayers for many different reasons. When the people have problems, they turn to the gods for advice.

**Apollo:** The Sun god and Healer god. The people of Thebes ask Apollo for advice when they want to save Thebes. Since Apollo saved Thebes once before, the people believe he can do it again. It is Apollo's shrine that Jocasta goes to when she prays for the gods to help Oedipus cure Thebes.

**Laios:** Oedipus' father and Jocasta's first husband. It was his fate to be killed by his son, and therefore he tried to get rid of his newborn boy. However, his fate befell him when Oedipus (who never knew his true parents) got into a fight with Laios' party at a crossroads, and killed him.

**Delphi:** An oracle that predicts Oedipus will kill his father and sleep with his mother.



**The elders:** They represent the voice of Thebes, and give advice to Oedipus. They are very holy and pray to the gods all the time. They are disappointed with the sorry state of Thebes.

**Ares:** The Slaughter god of War. The elders pray to him to help stop Thebes from burning and being destroyed.

**Tiresias:** The blind prophet who predicts fate and can see the future. He is called on by Oedipus for advice, but when he reveals Oedipus' fate, the king gets angry, accuses him of conspiring with Creon to kill him and take his place as king, and tells him to leave.

**Polybus:** Oedipus' surrogate father in Corinth, and the ruler of Corinth. Oedipus left Corinth because he was destined to kill his father, whom he thought was Polybus. When Polybus died of natural causes, the people of Corinth came to Oedipus and asked him to rule.

**Zeus:** The elders call upon the god, Zeus, to give help to Thebes and Oedipus.

**Corinthian:** The man who brings news of Polybus' death and who asks Oedipus to rule Corinth. He also informs Oedipus that Merope and Polybus are not his real parents, and that he himself gave them the baby Oedipus, whom he'd received from a herdsman.

**Merope:** Oedipus' surrogate mother in Corinth, and current ruler of Corinth. Oedipus left Corinth because he was destined to sleep with his mother, who he thought was Melope.

**Herdsmen/Shepherd:** Oedipus was given to the herdsman by Jocasta, who tried to get rid of her ill-fated child. This herdsman once grazed sheep in Mount Kithairon with the Corinthian, and had given him to Jocasta's child. Also, he was the only survivor of the fight between Oedipus and Laios.

**Dionysos:** A god who roams the hilltops and who the elders hope is Oedipus' father when they learn that he was found on a hill.

**Labdakos:** The ruling family of Thebes, consisting of Creon, Laios and Jocasta. Oedipus married Jocasta after Laios died, and therefore ruled as king of Thebes, since Creon didn't want to rule.

**Antigone:** One of Oedipus' daughters, who Oedipus asks Creon to take care of.

**Ismene:** One of Oedipus' daughters, who Oedipus asks Creon to take care of.

## Objects/Places

**Thebes:** The city in which all events take place. Thebes is deteriorating, with infertile soil, and women who are giving birth only to stillborns. As a result, its ruler, Oedipus, wants to find out what is wrong and has sent his brother-in-law, Creon, to an oracle. This oracle says that there is someone living in Thebes who is of bad blood.

**Sphinx's riddle:** Thebes was cursed by this riddle, which Oedipus solved when he first came to Thebes. As a result, he was considered the savior of the city, and people expect him to save Thebes again from its current troubles.

**Shrine:** Every time someone has a problem, they go to the appropriate god's shrine to pray. The common belief is that the gods will solve problems or show people the road to a solution.

**Corinth:** The city where Oedipus grew up. He left Corinth because he was scared of his fate--that he would kill his father and share a bed with his mother. He left thinking that Polybus and Melope were his true parents.

**Fate:** Running from fate drives everyone's actions. Oedipus tried to avoid his fate by leaving Corinth, so he wouldn't kill his father and wed his mother. Jocasta discarded her son because of his cursed fate. However, Oedipus ends up running directly into his and his family's inescapable fate.

**Oracles:** Fate is predicted by the oracles, and the elders believe that it is a sin not to believe them. Jocasta, however, does not believe in the oracles when they predict that her son will kill his father and have sex with her, because she thinks her son is dead. In trying to convince Oedipus that the oracles do not know what they are talking about, she brings out the truth--that Oedipus is her son and that the oracles have predicted their fate correctly.

**Isthmia:** Corinth is a part of this land. The Corinthian comes to Thebes to tell Oedipus that his father has died, and that the people of Isthmia want him to become their new ruler.

**Mount Kithairon:** The mountain where Oedipus was given to the Corinthian, when a herdsman from Thebes was ordered to get rid of the child. This is also the place Oedipus chooses for his new home when he is exiled from Thebes.



# Quotes

Quote 1: "among the foremost men in daily matters and in dealings with the gods." Line 34

Quote 2: "ungodly pollution" Line 353

Quote 3: "a resident stranger as it seems, but soon to be revealed as a native Theban." Line 451

Quote 4: "blind, though now he sees - and poor, though now he's rich - he'll use a stick to guide his steps into another land." Line 454

Quote 5: "he'll be revealed a brother and a father to his children in his house, husband and son to her who gave him birth; wife-sharer and the killer of his father." Line 457

Quote 6: "[it is] not right to think good men, without a reason, bad or bad men good." Line 609

Quote 7: "Time alone can make it clear a man is just while you can know a traitor in a day." Line 613

Quote 8: "Laios had the feet of this child bound and pinned. Someone tossed it in a mountain wilderness. So there. Apollo didn't cause this boy to be his father's killer. Laios didn't bear the terror he feared from his son. That's what the words of prophecy defined." Line 717

Quote 9: "send him to the fields, the sheep pastures, so far he couldn't even lay eyes on Thebes." Line 761

Quote 10: "if a man's contemptuous, and goes along with acts and speaks without respect for what is right and doesn't revere statues of gods, then let a sorry fate destroy him - for this perverse pride - since he unjustly reaps rewards, does not respect what's godly." Line 883

Quote 11: "He unpinned and tore away the golden brooches from the robes which she was dressed in, raised them up and struck at his own eyeballs, yelling something like, 'You'll not look on the disgraceful things I've done or have had done to me. In darkness now you'll look on those I ought not to have seen, and not know those I yearned to know,'" Line 1268

Quote 12: Oedipus' cloud of darkness is "inescapable, unspeakable, unstoppable, driven by cruel winds." Line 1314

Quote 13: "to live where time allows, and have a better life than the man who fathered you." Line 1514

Quote 14: "[Oedipus] knew the famous riddles. He was a mighty king, he was the envy of everyone who say how lucky he'd been. Now he's struck a wave of terrible ruin. While you're alive, you must keep looking to your final day, and don't be happy till you pass life's boundary without suffering grief." Line 1524

## Topic Tracking: Exile

Exile 1: Oedipus promises not to harm the man that comes forward, or is known to have killed Laios. He is not interested in taking this man's life, only that he no longer live in Thebes, so that the city can get better. He therefore promises only to exile Laios' killer.

Exile 2: Tiresias foresees, and tells everyone, that Oedipus will be driven out of Thebes in terror by the curses of his parents. Not only will he be exiled, he will be exiled blind, poor, and weak, and will have to use a stock to guide himself to another land.

Exile 3: After he accuses Creon of seeking his death and conspiring with Tiresias to dethrone him, the elders ask Oedipus to calm down and believe Creon, for they do not believe that Creon is a fool, and they believe his oath because nobody should cast off a friend as unworthy or doubt their word. Oedipus says that when they seek support for Creon, they seek his death or exile from Thebes. This statement brings grief to the elders because they support and believe Oedipus.

Exile 4: After her son is born, Jocasta has him exiled, as his fate was for him to kill his father and sleep with his mother.

Exile 5: When the servant who had witnessed the killing returned to Thebes, he asked to be exiled and asked Jocasta to "send him to the fields, the sheep pastures, so far he couldn't even lay eyes on Thebes."

Exile 6: When asked about his fate, Apollo told Oedipus that there were terrible things in store for him. Among these was the news that he was to mate with his own mother and kill his father. As a result, Oedipus decided to leave Corinth and live elsewhere, so that he would not see these oracles fulfilled.

Exile 7: After all that has happened, Jocasta kills herself, and Oedipus blinds himself and asks to be exiled from Thebes so that he will not be seen by anyone. This fulfils Tiresias' prophesy.

## Topic Tracking : Fate

Fate 1: Oedipus knows that Thebes has a fate, and sends Creon to Apollo to find out what this fate is and how to make Thebes healthy again.

Fate 2: Unwillingly, Tiresias reveals Oedipus' fate--that he is to kill his own father and sleep with his own mother. Oedipus refuses to believe this fate, calls Tiresias a liar, and orders him to leave.

Fate 3: Jocasta tells the story of how her son was supposed to kill his father and sleep with his mother, but, she says, this never happened. Therefore, she claims that Oedipus should not believe in fate.

Fate 4: When a drunk person called him a bastard son and people refused to speak about it, Oedipus went to the Delphi to find out what they meant, and to ask what his fate and destiny was. However, the Delphi said that he had terrible things in store for him, such as killing his father and sleeping with his mother, and sent him away.

Fate 5: Oedipus left Corinth in order to escape his terrible fate.

Fate 6: Oedipus thinks that while traveling, he killed his father without knowing it, as was his fate.

Fate 7: A Corinthian brings news that Oedipus' father, Polybus, has died a natural death. Thus, Oedipus says that his fate is impossible unless his father died because he missed him too much.

Fate 8: Oedipus refuses to return to rule Corinth, as he is scared that he will mate with his mother, as his fate predicts.

Fate 9: The Corinthian informs Oedipus that his fate does not lie in Corinth, because Merope and Polybus are not his real parents--he was given to them as a gift after being found in Mount Kithairon with his feet bound

Fate 10: The herdsman who gave Oedipus to the Corinthian verifies that he was Jocasta's child, forcing Oedipus to realize that he has not escaped his fate, and did indeed kill his father and sleep with his mother.

## Topic Tracking: Sight

Sight 1: Oedipus calls for Tiresias, a blind oracle, to foresee the future of Thebes.

Sight 2: Although Tiresias is blind, he claims that he can see the truth and what is important better than can Oedipus. Therefore, Oedipus' sight is useless.

Sight 3: Tiresias foresees that although Oedipus is now strong and can physically see, he will soon be weak and blind.

Sight 4: After seeing Jocasta dead, Oedipus realizes that he doesn't want to see what he's done, or any other evil in the world. He realizes that he should have seen things that he did not see and that he did not want to see, and that he was blind to everything around him.

Sight 5: Oedipus takes Jocasta's broaches off her dead body and pierces his eyes, blinding himself. Now, he can no longer physically see, as the oracle had predicted.

Sight 6: When the elders ask Oedipus why he blinded himself, he answers that there is nothing sweet for him to see, and that he wishes he had never lived. The elders also wish that he had never lived and that they had never known him, and say that it is better for him to not live than to live blind.

Sight 7: Oedipus curses the road that forked in three, and asks the elders to hide him out of sight of the gods, or to kill him or throw him into the sea so that nobody can see him and he will not be ashamed of who he is.

# Scene 1

At an altar, outside his palace, Oedipus finds a delegation of citizens and a priest of Zeus. He approaches them in order to hear what they have to say, as he cares about them and does not want to send a messenger. He introduces himself as Oedipus, the king, and tells them that he wants to help in any way possible--and to find out why they are there. He asks the priest to speak (the priest's age makes him an obvious choice to represent the crowd).

The priest of Zeus has little strength, like the rest of the people gathered, who are all unmarried youth. He tells Oedipus the city is drowning and almost dead--the soil is infertile, the cattle pastures are burnt, and babies are all stillborn. The city, Thebes, is plagued, homes are empty, and people are in pain. The priest tells Oedipus that he knows nobody is equal to the gods, but that the children and people with him find Oedipus to be "among the foremost men in daily matters and in dealings with the gods" Line 34 and are therefore turning to him for help. They think he is great because he came to Thebes and loosened the city from the cruel Sphinx's riddle, which could only be done with a god's aid. Thus, people consider him a savior. The priest begs Oedipus for help, and asks him to set the city straight, to not let it fall. Since Oedipus has saved the city once before, the priest says that he can do it again, and he adds that even with towers, ships and other accomplishments, a city remains nothing without her people.

To this, Oedipus replies that he knows all about their sorrow, and knows that they are sick; and although they are sick, their pain is individual, whereas his pain 'bemoans' the city--he has thought much about the city's illness and cried much about it. He had come up with one possible cure, which he has acted on already. He sent his brother-in-law, Creon, to the prophetic shrine of Apollo to find out what must be done to save the city.

Topic Tracking: Fate 1

Oedipus says that Creon has been gone longer than expected, but that when he comes, Oedipus will do all that the god has revealed. The priest deems this appropriate, and Creon arrives within minutes.

Oedipus asks Creon what the god said. Creon is reluctant to speak in front of the crowd, but Oedipus urges him to do so, as he realizes that the people are suffering as much as he is. Creon says that the Sun-god, Apollo, stated that they must rid their land of the pollution that is festering there. He says that this must be done through banishment, as it is someone's blood that pollutes the city. Prior to Oedipus' rule, their leader, Laios, was killed by a band of robbers on his way to visit Delphi's oracle. Although one person lived to tell the tale, the case was not investigated because everybody was too busy with the Sphinx's riddle. Oedipus claims that he will make every effort to find this killer and punish him. The priest realizes that he, and the delegation, have accomplished what they came for, and leave.

# Chorus 1

The elders of Thebes ominously chant a prayer to the gods. This is aimed at Thebes' recovery. They call upon many gods, mainly Apollo, whom they beg to save Thebes from death. Apollo saved Thebes once when it was deteriorating from the riddle, and they ask him to save it again. They speak of the many sicknesses of the city, such as infertile soil and stillborn children. Countless deaths destroy the city, as children and young wives live in sorrow. They also pray to Ares, the Slaughter-god of War, to save them from this burning plague.

## Scene 2

Oedipus appreciates the prayers of the elders, but asks them to also take his advice and listen to him, as he will provide relief from this disaster. He feels bound to this matter, and as he has earned his civic rights, he proclaims to all Thebans that he will reward the person who knows the man who killed Laios, and will not harm that man, but only exile him from the city.

Topic Tracking: Exile 1

However, should they keep silent, he commands that nobody associate themselves with that man. Oedipus continues to say that even if this matter was not god-inspired, he could not let it go, as Laios was noble, royal and murdered. He promises to avenge him the same way he would avenge his father, as he has married Laios' wife and has the same office as Laios had. He feels as if it was only Laios' body that was replaced. Therefore, he will do anything to find the assassin. He prays to the gods that the people who do not comply with his commands suffer worse than they already have in this plague, and that the gods bless those who do comply.

The elders say that they did not kill Laios nor know anyone who did, and that Oedipus cannot force the gods to do something they do not want to do, and therefore he can only learn the truth if the gods want him to. Furthermore, they suggest that Oedipus seek the advice of Tiresias, a blind prophet, which Oedipus says he has done. In fact, he is surprised that Tiresias has not shown up yet.

Topic Tracking: Sight 1

Oedipus also says that he will reexamine every rumor and story. As Oedipus is speaking, Tiresias enters and Oedipus turns his attention to explaining the situation to the blind man, in case he doesn't already know it. After doing this, he asks Tiresias to help him, and to help Thebes. Initially, Tiresias refuses to testify and regrets coming to the meeting. He says that by revealing what he knows, he will expose everyone else's anguish, but Oedipus argues that this means that he is betraying Thebes, and says that if Tiresias were not blind, he would not hesitate to say that he was the criminal. In response to this, Tiresias says that Oedipus is Thebes' "ungodly pollution" Line 353, and that Oedipus is Laios' murderer, and that that is the truth, even though he did speak against his will. In response to this, Oedipus becomes angry and says that Tiresias will regret ever saying that and that Tiresias is plotting with Creon to help Creon take over his throne. However, he urges Tiresias to continue, and as a result Tiresias states that Oedipus' love for his wife is shameful and thus Oedipus does not see his misery, and does not realize that his misery, and Thebes' misery, are because of him. He continues and criticizes Oedipus, for although Tiresias himself is blind, he believes that he can see the truth whereas Oedipus is blind with respect to where he lives and the people he lives with.

Topic Tracking: Sight 2



Also, Tiresias asks Oedipus whether he knows his own parents or not, and then continues to say that Oedipus will be driven out of Thebes in terror by the curses of his parents and that this has nothing to do with Creon or any plots.

Topic Tracking: Exile 2

Despite Oedipus' anger, Tiresias has no regrets, as he believes that there is strength in the truth and that everyone will see the light at the end. Oedipus orders Tiresias to leave, and Tiresias does so gladly, as he did not want to be there to begin with. Before leaving, however, he does say that this day will beget Oedipus' birth and destruction and that the man they are all looking for is in Thebes, "a resident stranger as it seems, but soon to be revealed as a native Theban." Line 451 He also prophesizes that this man will leave "blind, though now he sees - and poor, though now he's rich - he'll use a stick to guide his steps into another land," Line 454 and that "he'll be revealed a brother and a father to his children in his house, husband and son to her who gave him birth; wife-sharer and the killer of his father." Line 457 Tiresias prophesizes that Oedipus will be revealed to be the killer of his own father and lover of his own mother.

Topic Tracking: Sight 3

Topic Tracking: Fate 2

## Chorus 2

The elders believe in Oedipus and refuse to acknowledge that he has committed any crimes. Because of his past of proven wisdom, faithfulness and saving of Thebes, they think of him as a great person and will not stand against him. Furthermore, they had never been aware of a feud between Oedipus and Creon, and therefore they find no reason to test the king's dedication to finding the criminal. Although they do not doubt the knowledge and wisdom of the gods, they do question the extent of Tiresias' insight and wisdom.

## Scene 3

Creon asks the elders what was said about him, for he is concerned about the rumors that have started spreading. He knows of no feud between himself and Oedipus and it upsets him that the prophet was said to have lied on his behalf. He claims that he has never caused any harm to Oedipus that he knows of, and asks why this accusation was directed at him. As Oedipus enters, he asks Creon how he could come there and accuses him of trying to steal the crown and of murdering Laios. He also accuses Creon of influencing him to call Tiresias down there and to ask for his opinion, which he believes Creon plotted with Tiresias and was the reason Tiresias called him Laios' killer.

Furthermore, he questions why Tiresias didn't come forward at the time of the murder and says that he refuses to be convicted of murder. Creon points out that he has an equal third (the other two thirds belonging to Oedipus and Oedipus' wife) in governing Thebes, and yet he lets Oedipus rule entirely while he enjoys his life and all the pleasures of royalty. Therefore, he says, there is no reason for him to kill Oedipus to take the throne and he does not want to rule. Oedipus is free to judge him, Creon says, but not without some proof, as it is "not right to think good men, without a reason, bad or bad men good." Line 609

Creon believes that it takes time to judge for: "time alone can make it clear a man is just while you can know a traitor in a day." Line 613 While the elders agree to this and say that hasty advice is impure, Oedipus says that if someone plots quickly, he must respond quickly or he will have missed his chance and the other person will have gotten what they wanted. Furthermore, he calls Creon a traitor and says he wants him dead.

Jocasta stops the two men from arguing, reminding them that the city is sick, and that it is wrong of them to put their concerns before the city's concerns. Creon, her brother, swears on his death that he has done nothing of what Oedipus has charged him of. At the same time, the elders agree, asking Oedipus to calm down and believe Creon, for they do not believe he is a fool. They believe Creon's oath and think nobody should cast off a friend as unworthy or doubt their word. Oedipus says that when they seek this, they seek his death or exile from Thebes. This statement brings grief to the elders, as they support and believe Oedipus.

### Topic Tracking: Exile 3

As Creon leaves, Oedipus' wife, Jocasta, asks her husband to explain to her why he is so angry. Oedipus says that Creon is plotting against him and having the prophet say that he killed Laios. In response to this, Jocasta tells Oedipus how there is no truth in what any prophet says as an oracle once predicted that Laios would be killed by his, and her, son (As they were previously married). However, three days after their son was born:

*"Laios had the feet of this child bound and pinned. Someone tossed it in a mountain wilderness. So there. Apollo didn't cause this boy to be his father's killer. Laios didn't*

*bear the terror he feared from his son. That's what the words of prophecy defined."* Line 717

Topic Tracking: Fate 3

Topic Tracking: Exile 4

Although this story was supposed to help Oedipus calm down, it has the opposite effect and Oedipus becomes extremely worried. Oedipus proceeds to ask Jocasta many questions about the place and time of Laios' death, as well as demanding an accurate description of Laios, all of which Jocasta provides. Frantic now, Oedipus summons for the man who had escaped the attack and had brought the news to Thebes. However, the man is not easily to be found because after he came back and found that Oedipus had taken Laios' place, he pleaded with Jocasta to "send him to the fields, the sheep pastures, so far he couldn't even lay eyes on Thebes." Line 761 Because he was such an excellent servant and had won great favor, Jocasta did so. However, Jocasta says that he can be fetched and so he will be searched for.

Topic Tracking: Exile 5

Meanwhile, Oedipus tells Jocasta why the information he just obtained is worrisome. Oedipus' father was Polybus of Corinth, and one day at a banquet someone was overly intoxicated and called Oedipus a bastard son to his face. When he asked his parents about it, they avoided answering the question; but because the rumors had spread he was extremely curious and went to the Delphi to inquire about it. However, the Healer-god Apollo sent him off, without respecting what he had come for, and instead told him that his fate had terrible things in store for him.

Topic Tracking: Fate 4

Among these terrible things was the revelation that he was to have sex with his own mother and kill his father. As a result, Oedipus decided to leave Corinth and retreat elsewhere, so that he would not see these oracles fulfilled.

Topic Tracking: Fate 5

Topic Tracking: Exile 6

However, when he came near a road that forked in three directions, the people Jocasta had described came in a colt-drawn carriage and tried to get him off the road and shoved him. Oedipus got angry and attacked one man. Another man saw this and attacked Oedipus and cracked his skull. As a result, Oedipus killed all of them except for one.

Topic Tracking: Fate 6

He now finishes telling the story and feels guilty about killing the men and thinks that he is an evil person. In order to console him, the elders and Jocasta say that this may not have been Laios, as the servant said that they had been attacked by a group of men, and Oedipus had nobody with him.

## Chorus 3

The elders talk about their dismay at human pride and irreverence, particularly in regard to doubters of the oracles. Furthermore, they believe that:

*"if a man's contemptuous, and goes along with acts and speaks without respect for what is right and doesn't revere statues of gods, then let a sorry fate destroy him - for this perverse pride - since he unjustly reaps rewards, does not respect what's godly."*  
Line 883

The elders then call the gods, especially Zeus, to pay attention to this matter, and not let it slip by. Should they not give it much attention, it will show that there is no apparent honor for the god, Apollo, and that worship is dead and gone.

## Scene 4

Jocasta goes to the shrine of Apollo, with holy offerings, to pray for Oedipus and to ask the gods to rid Thebes of its pollution. Also, she asks for Oedipus to be less worried and agitated because it scares her, and all Thebans, when their leader is panic-stricken.

As she is doing this, a Corinthian enters and asks where he can find the Oedipus' palace. The elders answer that he is already there, and kind greetings are exchanged. The Corinthian then proceeds to tell Jocasta of the news he bears - that Polybus died a natural death, and the people of Isthmia want to make Oedipus ruler. Jocasta sends for Oedipus and instructs the Corinthian to inform him of the news. After this, Oedipus replies that unless his father died because he missed him too much, the oracles were incorrect. Jocasta agrees.

Topic Tracking: Fate 7

Now, Oedipus faces the fear of sharing his mother's bed, and refuses to return to Corinth as long as she lives.

Topic Tracking: Fate 8

When the Corinthian hears this, he asks him why he fears he will have sex with his mother, and Oedipus tells him what the prophet said. To this, the Corinthian says that Oedipus' fears are unfounded, as Polybus did not father him, nor did Merope give birth to him. The Corinthian then informs Oedipus that he was a gift to his parents, as they had no children; and that he was found in the bush in Mount Kithairon's valleys with his ankles tied together, and that he was given to this Corinthian by a different shepherd, who was one of Laios' herdsmen.

Topic Tracking: Fate 9

Oedipus immediately summons for this herdsman, whom people say is the same servant he has already summoned for. Jocasta now steps in and begs Oedipus not to pursue this; however he has come so close to finding out who he is that he is not ready to let it go. After calling him an 'unlucky man', and begging him not to pursue this matter, Jocasta says to Oedipus that he is a 'poor, poor man'. Although the elders recognize Jocasta's grief, Oedipus thinks that she is upset because she is about to learn that he comes from no distinguished breed. Oedipus insists he wants to learn about his kin.

## Chorus 4

The elders are excited about this new information and sing a happy song of Mount Kithairon. They speculate on the origins of Oedipus' true parents, thinking that it may be some god, such as god Dionysos, who roams the hilltops. The elders also dance the holy dance.

## Scene 5

As the herdsman approaches, one of the elders says that he definitely recognizes him as a faithful shepherd. The herdsman, when asked, says that he was not raised a herdsman, but in the household. When asked where he reared sheep, he names several places, among which is Mount Kithairon. However, he becomes extremely reluctant to answer any more questions after they ask him if he knows the Corinthian. Despite this, when the Corinthian reminds him that they had herded sheep together for six months every year for three years, he admits to remembering. After much threatening, since he is reluctant to speak freely, he admits to giving the Corinthian a child, as he thought the Corinthian would take the child far away. Furthermore, he says that Jocasta had given him this child to get rid of in order to evade a dreadful oracle. Throughout all this, he begs Oedipus to stop asking questions, as he is sure that the answers are not what Oedipus wants to hear.

Topic Tracking: Fate 10



## Chorus 5

The elders now pity the mortals who appear to be happy, but are not. They speak of Oedipus accomplishing much in his life, such as solving the Sphinx's riddle, becoming ruler of Thebes, and being named king; and yet he is the person most afflicted with agonies and ruin. They are also surprised that his secret was silent for so long. They all feel sorry for him and cry for him, because he produced children with his mother. They also speak of the unfairness of human life, and of the cruelty of fate.

# Finale

The servant speaks to the elders and tells them that the Labdakos household is filled with even more terror than they could imagine. The elders are surprised and ask the servant to tell them what has happened. The servant says that Jocasta is dead. She ran into the house, after leaving Oedipus, and straight into their bedroom where she slammed the door and called out for Laios, as he implanted the seed that had caused all this anguish. Then, she killed herself. At the same time, Oedipus rushed in, shouting and demanding a sword, and demanding his wife. He heard the scream from the bedroom and went in. There, he found Jocasta hanging from a noose. After screaming and moaning, he loosened her and placed her body on the ground.

*"He unpinned and tore away the golden brooches from the robes which she was dressed in, raised them up and struck at his own eyeballs, yelling something like, 'You'll not look on the disgraceful things I've done or have had done to me. In darkness now you'll look on those I ought not to have seen, and not know those I yearned to know,'"*  
Line 1268

Topic Tracking: Sight 4

Topic Tracking: Sight 5

Although their years of happiness were truly happy, this all ends today, a day of death and anguish. Oedipus now wants everyone in Thebes to see him, a man who killed his father and wed his mother, and he wants to leave Thebes forever, but has nobody to guide him. As he approaches, the elders pity him, and cannot believe what he has done to himself. They ask him what demon has taken over his body, and he answers that it is just a cloud of darkness that isolates him, a cloud that is "inescapable, unspeakable, unstoppable, driven by cruel winds." Line 1314 When the elders ask him why he blinded himself, he answers that there is nothing sweet for him to see, and that he wishes he had never lived. The elders also wish that he had never lived and that they had never known him, and say that it is better for him to not live than to live blind.

Topic Tracking: Sight 6

Furthermore, they all agree that the man who saved him should be punished. However, Oedipus tells the elders that he does not want their advice anymore, and asks them not to preach at him. He speaks of all his sins, such as killing his father and marrying his mother, and questions how the sight of his children could have ever pleased him. He now finds the city and its towers to be wretched, as is everything else to be seen. He claims that if there were a way he could make himself deaf, he would, as there is also nothing pleasant for him to hear. He curses the road that forked in three, and asks the elders to hide him out of sight of the gods, or to kill him or throw him in the sea.

Topic Tracking: Sight 7



Oedipus realizes how weak he is and tells the elders not to be afraid. At this point, Creon enters and the elders ask him to advise Oedipus.

Oedipus asks how a man so wronged by him could come to help him, but Creon simply says that he is not there to gloat, and takes Oedipus inside so that he does not shame the human race any longer, and because only family should hear about a family's troubles. Also, he claims that the earth, light and holy rain cannot stand the sight of him, and that being such a polluted man, he shouldn't be outside. Then, he asks what Oedipus wants of him, to which Oedipus answers that he wants to be cast out of Thebes.

#### Topic Tracking: Exile 7

Creon says that he first needs to consult with the god. At this point, Oedipus asks that Jocasta be buried in the palace and that he be left to die in Mount Kithairon, as was supposed to happen many years ago. As for his two boys, he says that they are grown men and can take care of themselves, but his two girls, Antigone and Ismene, cannot, and he asks that Creon take care of them. He then reaches out to touch and hold them, as Creon has pitied him and called them in advance. Oedipus takes this gesture very well, and he says that Creon is a very worthy man. He then speaks to his daughters, pitying them and telling them that they will be shunned from society everywhere. After that, Creon promises to look after them as if they were his own daughters, and Oedipus says a short prayer for his daughters: "to live where time allows, and have a better life than the man who fathered you." Line 1514

Oedipus reiterates his wish to be sent away, and Creon says that it depends on what the gods want. In response, Oedipus says that he hates the gods, but Creon agrees that he will send him away. As his daughters are leaving, Oedipus orders that they stay, and Creon must remind him that he no longer has any authority. After watching all this, the elders address the people of Thebes, telling them to look at Oedipus who:

*"knew the famous riddles. He was a mighty king, he was the envy of everyone who say how lucky he'd been. Now he's struck a wave of terrible ruin. While you're alive, you must keep looking to your final day, and don't be happy till you pass life's boundary without suffering grief."* Line 1524