

OEDIPUS REX

by Sophocles

Before we do anything else, let's clear up the pronunciation of O-E-D-I-P-U-S. No literary name is more commonly mispronounced than this one. Americans, in particular, seem to reverse the first two letters, making oe sound like eo in leopard and jeopardy: an "eh" sound

The correct pronunciation is a long e, as in Phoenix, foetus, and Phoebe. The ancient Greek state of Boeotia is pronounced bee-OH-shee-ah, the god of wine is Oenus, and Oedipus is pronounced EE-deh-pus.

The name means something like "swollen foot" or "swollen leg." In the play, it refers to an old wound Oedipus bears. In history, it might have a more surprising meaning - which we'll get to after we talk about the play itself. We'll also look further into the Riddle of the Sphinx.

The Philosopher Aristotle wrote some notes about the drama for his lectures on theatre and poetry. He cited "Oedipus Rex" as a perfect tragedy, meeting all the elements he considered necessary to elicit from the audience a true catharsis; a kind of cleansing of the soul, an uplifted feeling one may experience when seeing what happens when a great soul undertakes a daunting task and sees it through to the end.

Yet, when "Oedipus Rex" was first performed as part of a trilogy - a series of three plays presented in competition - the judges gave it second prize, not first. (Literary scholars would really like to read the plays that beat it out.) But few others would argue with Aristotle. From earliest times, "Oedipus Rex" has been regarded as one of the greatest tragedies ever written. The plot is engrossing, artfully developed; the characters are fully drawn and believable; and the problem at its center - Is Oedipus guilty or not? - has given us something to debate ever since.

Let's go through the play, scene by scene. There is a prologue, which sets the scene and states the problem, five scenes, and an exodos, or ending. Between each scene, a chorus speaks lines, commenting on the action they have just witnessed or voicing their inner thoughts.

PROLOGUE

The drama begins with the people of Thebes entering, led by a priest. The city is suffering famine and plague and all are desperate to discover its cause. In Greek thought, there was no dividing line between natural and moral law. If the gods were punishing the city, there must be some reason for it; someone was guilty of some offense.

Oedipus enters and asks why they have come to see him. The priest answers, telling of the great travail they have endured. They have come to see Oedipus as the one man most likely to be able to solve the problem. After all, he solved the riddle of the sphinx and freed them from its oppression, for which they made him their king. Surely now he can help them once more.

Oedipus tells them he has anticipated their visit and has already sent his brother-in-law, Creon, to Delphi to seek the Oracle's advice. Creon returns as they are talking and delivers the Oracle's message. The former king, Laios, was murdered. The plague will not be lifted until that murderer is discovered and punished. Oedipus questions Creon, learning that Laios was killed while on a pilgrimage. One of his servants escaped and said that the king and his attendants were set upon by a band of highwaymen. Oedipus promises to find and punish the guilty party.

PARADOS

After the stage empties, the chorus makes its entrance for the parados, the first of six choral interludes. They describe the city's suffering and implore the gods to send them deliverance.

SCENE I

Oedipus re-enters, answering the chorus, assuring them that he will solve the problem. He issues several decrees: if anyone knows anything about the crime, he is to report to the king; no one in the city may offer the guilty party shelter or aid. He further prays that the gods will consume the murderer in wretchedness.

Oedipus says he is taking the murdered king's part, as if he were his son, since Laios left no children. He reminds them that he not only occupies Laios' throne, but that he has married the former king's wife and sired four children with her.

The leader of the chorus (choragos) suggests that he might consult the blind prophet Teiresias who has lived in Thebes since Laios' time. Once again, Oedipus has anticipated the suggestion and has summoned Teiresias who then enters, led by a boy.

Oedipus questions Teiresias who refuses to answer. Their exchange grows heated and Teiresias blurts out that Oedipus himself is the guilty man. Oedipus, knowing that he is innocent, becomes enraged and shouts that Teiresias must be part of a conspiracy against the former king and now against him. Further, he suggests that Creon must be in on the plot, since he urged Oedipus to listen to Teiresias. Teiresias prepares to leave, and departs with these words:

The damned man, the murderer of Laios,
That man is in Thebes. To your mind he is foreign-born,
But it will soon be shown that he is a Theban... a blind man
Who has his eyes now; a penniless man, who is rich now;
And he will go tapping the strange earth with his staff.
To the children with whom he lives now he will be
Brother and father - the very same; to her
Who bore him, son and husband - the very same.
Who came to his father's bed, wet with his father's blood.

(NOTE: all quotes from the Fitts-Fitzgerald translation)

CHORAL ODE I

The chorus is appalled by what it has heard. It can't make sense of the wild words from both king and prophet, but its faith in Oedipus is unshaken: he is the man who saved them from the sphinx.

SCENE II

Creon enters, having heard that he has been accused of being complicit in the murder of Laios and is plotting the overthrow the king. He questions the chorus: Did Oedipus really say such things? Then Oedipus enters and repeats his accusations. Creon defends himself, arguing that he has no possible motive for wanting to depose Oedipus. At this point, Jocaste, Oedipus' wife and Creon's sister, enters to try to calm the two men down. Creon leaves and choragos asks the queen to take the king inside as well. Instead she asks him why he is so angry and he tells her that Teiresias has accused him of being the murderer. To allay his fears and to prove that prophets are not to be believed, she tells him of a prophecy sent to Laios after their only son was born:

That his doom would be at the hands of his own son -
His son, born of his flesh and of mine.

Now, you remember the story: Laios was killed
By marauding strangers where three highways meet;
But his child had not been three days in this world
Before the king had pierced the baby's ankles
And left him to die on a lonely mountainside.

The mention of a place where three highways meet disturbs Oedipus. He asks Jocaste for further details and begins to believe that Teiresias may be right after all. He tells Jocaste of his past: that he is the son of King Polybos and Queen Merope of Corinth. One day, a drunken man told him that he was not his father's son. His parents angrily denied the story, but Oedipus went to Delphi to be reassured.

The god dismissed my question without reply;
He spoke of other things. Some were clear

Full of wretchedness, dreadful, unbearable;
As, that I should lie with my own mother, breed
Children from whom all men would turn their eyes;
And that I should be my father's murderer.

At this, Oedipus fled, vowing never to return to Corinth. As he traveled, he came to a place where three highways converged. An old man in a chariot came toward him, accompanied by retainers. One of them tried to force Oedipus off the road. Oedipus hit the man and the charioteer struck at him with his goad. Furious, Oedipus attacked and killed them all. If the man Oedipus slew that day proved to be Laios, then Oedipus himself is the man whom he cursed, the cause of the plague, and must be driven from Thebes. Yet he cannot go back to Corinth for fear of fulfilling the oracle.

His last remaining chance is to talk to the shepherd who was with Laios when he was killed. If he maintains that the crime was committed by a group of highwaymen, then the man Oedipus killed was not Laios. Jocaste says she will send for the man at once and they enter the palace.

CHORAL ODE II

The chorus is shaken by what it has heard. It is also distressed by the manner in which Jocaste dismisses the pronouncements of the oracle. They remind themselves to be "reverent in the ways of right" and call on Zeus to witness that "reverence for the gods has died away."

SCENE III

Jocaste returns with offerings for Apollo to whom she prays for deliverance. As she prays, a messenger enters, inquiring where he might find the king. Directed to Jocaste, he tells her that he is from Corinth with news of the death of King Polybos and an invitation to Oedipus to return and take the throne.

Jocaste joyfully sends for Oedipus. She tells him that he can now be freed of the fear of murdering his father. But Oedipus still worries that he may somehow marry his mother. The messenger tells him that his fears are groundless because he is not Polybos' natural son. Polybos and Merope had him as a gift from his hands. Years ago, the messenger was a shepherd on the slopes of Mount Kithairon. He was given a baby boy, its ankles pierced and bound, by a shepherd from Thebes. Choragos tells Oedipus that the Theban shepherd is the very man sent for by Jocaste.

At this point, Jocaste sees clearly the terrible truth and begs Oedipus to go no further in his inquiries. But he will not be deterred; he wants to know once and for all who he really is. He jokes that his wife's agitation is due to the fear that he might prove to be the child of a commoner. Jocaste rushes into the palace.

ODE III

The chorus speculates on Mount Kithairon and Oedipus's birth.

SCENE IV

The Theban shepherd is brought in and is forced to tell what he knows: that Oedipus is the son of Laios and Jocaste and that he was given the baby to be abandoned on Mount Kithairon but, in pity, gave the child to the man from Corinth. Now Oedipus has learned the full story of his birth and his crimes. He runs into the palace.

ODE IV

The chorus, in sorrow, mulls the terrible history of the man who saved them from the sphinx, but who now has been brought low by fate.

EXODOS

A second messenger enters from the palace to tell the chorus what he has witnessed. (It is a convention of Greek tragedy that scenes of violence occur offstage and are described by a tragic messenger.) He tells how Oedipus ranged through the palace calling upon the gods; how he found his wife/mother dead, a suicide by hanging. He takes the brooches from her gown and stabs them into his eyes, so that he might never again see his family or the scene of his crimes.

The palace door opens and Oedipus enters, blood streaming from his empty eye sockets. In a dialogue with choragos, he laments his fate. Creon, who has now assumed leadership of Thebes comes in and tries to get him to move out of public sight. Oedipus asks to be driven into the exile he deserves, but requests a final favor: that he be allowed to see his daughters one last time. Creon brings in Antigone and Ismene who take a tearful farewell of their father. He laments their fate, knowing that nothing but disgrace and agony await them. His children are taken away and he is led into exile.

Choragos closes the play:

Men of Thebes: look upon Oedipus:
This is the king who solved the famous riddle,
And towered up, most powerful of men.
No mortal eyes but looked on him with envy
Yet in the end, ruin swept over him.

Let every man in mankind's frailty
Consider his last day. And let none

Presume on his good fortune until he find
Life, at his death, a memory without pain.

About the Play

There are probably more questions in the text of Oedipus Rex than in any other Greek tragedy. All of them serve the resolution of two main questions: "Who killed King Laios?" and, later, "Who is Oedipus?"

Everyone attending the first performance of the play knew the story. What interested that audience was how the plot unfolded: how Oedipus used his formidable intellect to bring about his own ruin. It was not the plot alone which transfixed them, but also Sophocles' magnificent poetry - which is largely lost to us in translation.

The tragedy tells us of a deep thinker whose intelligence meant little when pitted against the will of the gods. It is a disturbing story. The gods foretell that this particular person will commit the greatest crimes - patricide and incest. He spends his whole life trying to avoid this fate, only to find that his efforts meant nothing. It reminds us of the inscription at Delphi: "Know thyself" - in other words, remember that you're merely human, not divine. Or, to put in modern parlance: "Your arms are too short to wrestle with God."

It was Oedipus' cleverness that gained him authority in Thebes. He answered the Riddle of the Sphinx and, in doing so, delivered the town from its annual tribute of human sacrifices to the half-woman, half-lion. She stopped all travelers and asked the same question: "What goes upon four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening?"

Those unable to answer were killed and devoured. Oedipus gave the correct answer: "Man: who crawls on all fours in the morning of his life, walks erect in the noon of manhood, and totters on a cane in the twilight of his existence." Defeated, the sphinx threw herself off a cliff and was destroyed. The Thebans welcomed their savior, making him king in place of the recently-murdered Laios and gave Oedipus Laios' queen, Jocaste.

This play is a prime example of just how profoundly Sophocles changed the nature of Greek tragedy. In the earlier plays of the great tragedian, Aeschylus, there is a kind of formality about the two principal actors, who changed masks to play different parts. They often don't interact in a natural way. Sophocles not only added a third actor, making a variety of interactions between the actors possible, he also created roles for recognizable human beings. His is a theatre of character.

This emphasis on character changed theatre forever. Prior to Sophocles, the divine background of the story was most important: the plays taught ethical and moral lessons. With Sophocles' plays, attention shifts to the human foreground, where it remains to this day. The divine aspect of Sophocles' tragedies remains (after all, theatre arose in religious ritual), but his audience became emotionally involved in the fate of human beings they knew and understood.

It is possible to spend a lifetime on various aspects of Oedipus Rex. It is a harrowing tale of human will struggling against forces it cannot control or understand. It gives us a lot to think and talk about. The overarching question remains: "Was Oedipus guilty?" Dissecting this question can lead to a variety of interesting topics; e.g. the contrast between modern thinking and the ethics of ancient Greece, free will versus "fate," the nature of the divine, and so on. What do you think?

A historical footnote: Is Greece's Theban king, Oedipus ("swollen foot"), linked to Egypt's Theban king, the swollen-thighed Anhkaton, the heretic pharaoh who believed in one god? Several people have linked Anhkaton not only to Oedipus, but also tied his radical monotheism to Moses.

And finally, you might ask yourself why what happens to an imaginary person on stage often moves us more deeply than what happens to real human beings. What is tragedy? How and why does it produce its powerful effect?