

GREEK TRAGEDY

A SUMMARY OF THE OEDIPUS TRILOGY

BY SOPHOCLES

One day, a king and queen of a powerful Greek city-state visit the oracle of Delphi to hear prophecies about their city. What they hear, however, is rather disturbing. The oracle tells the king and queen that their baby son will one day kill his father. Upset by this terrible news, the royal couple tries to prevent this tragic destiny.

The king pierces his son's feet and gives him to a shepherd with instructions to leave the baby in the mountains to die. But pitying the child, the shepherd gives him to a herdsman, who takes the baby far away to the city of Corinth. There, the herdsman presents the child to his own king and queen, Polybus and Merope of Corinth, because they are childless. Without knowing the baby's true identity, King Polybus and Queen Merope of Corinth adopt the child and name him Oedipus ("swollen-foot").

Oedipus grows up as a prince in Corinth, but hears troubling stories that his father, King Polybus of Corinth, is not his real father. When Oedipus travels to Delphi to consult the oracle about this, Oedipus hears a prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother. Horrified, he determines to avoid his terrible destiny by never returning home to Corinth. Instead, he decides to go to the far-away city of Thebes, where there will be no danger of fulfilling the prophecy.

Near Thebes, Oedipus reaches a crossroads and encounters an old man in a chariot with several servants. Oedipus gets in the way of the chariot and the old man insults and hits Oedipus. Oedipus becomes very angry at the old man's insult and kills the man and his servants.

Outside Thebes, Oedipus discovers that the monstrous Sphinx has been terrorizing the countryside. Oedipus also learns that King Laius (LAY-us) of Thebes had recently been killed, apparently by a band of robbers. Leaderless and afraid of the Sphinx, the people call out for help. Oedipus volunteers to try to defeat the mighty Sphinx.

The Sphinx challenges Oedipus with a riddle: "What goes on four feet at dawn, two feet at noon, and three feet at evening?" Oedipus thinks for a while and eventually responds with the right answer, "A man". A baby crawls on all-fours, a child and adult each walk on two legs, and an old person uses a cane (three legs). Answering the riddle correctly, Oedipus is able to kill the Sphinx, saving the people of Thebes.

The Theban people proclaim him a hero; and because their king, King Laius, has been killed, they offer the crown to Oedipus as their new king. As was the usual custom, Oedipus marries the widowed queen of Thebes, Queen Jocasta (joe-COST-ah), and they have four children.

Years later, a plague descends upon the city of Thebes. The citizens of Thebes beg their king, Oedipus, to find a way to lift the plague that threatens to destroy the city. Oedipus decides to send his brother-in-law, Creon (CREE-on), to the oracle to learn what to do.

On his return, Creon announces that the oracle instructs them to find the murderer of King Laius, the king who ruled Thebes before Oedipus. The discovery and punishment of the murderer will end the plague. At once, Oedipus sets out to solve the murder to once again save the people of Thebes.



King Oedipus summons a blind prophet named Tiresias (ty-REE-see-us) and asks Tiresias if he can use his skills of prophecy to identify the man who murdered King Laius. At first, the prophet refuses to speak. Oedipus, who senses that Tiresias knows more than he wants to admit, threatens to punish the prophet unless he tells Oedipus what he knows. Finally, the prophet Tiresias points his finger at Oedipus and cries out, **“It is you! You are the murderer!”** Oedipus mocks and rejects the prophet angrily, ordering him to leave. Before Tiresias leaves, however, he hints that the marriage of Oedipus and Jocasta is “unnatural”. The prophet also foretells a future for Oedipus of blindness, infamy, and wandering.

Oedipus attempts to gain advice from his wife Jocasta, the queen. She encourages him to ignore the prophecies, explaining that a prophet once told her that Laius, her former husband, would die at the hands of their son. According to Jocasta, the prophecy did not come true because her son was dead. She and her former husband Laius had abandoned their baby so the prophecy could never come true. Furthermore, Laius himself was killed by a band of robbers at a crossroads outside the city. Therefore, Oedipus should relax.

Oedipus becomes distressed by Jocasta’s remarks because just before he came to Thebes, he killed an old man with servants at a crossroads. Oedipus is determined to learn the truth. Remember that, as a young man, Oedipus learned from an oracle that he was fated to kill his father and marry his mother. Fear of the prophecy drove him from his home in Corinth and brought him to Thebes. Again, Queen Jocasta advises him not to worry about the prophecies.

Oedipus finds out from a messenger that Polybus, king of Corinth, the father who raised Oedipus, has died of old age. Jocasta rejoices—surely this is proof that the prophecy Oedipus heard from the oracle is worthless. Oedipus cannot kill his father if he’s already dead. Jocasta also attempts to calm Oedipus’ fears of fulfilling the other part of the prophecy, marrying his mother. Marrying Queen Merope of Corinth would be impossible since Corinth is so far away from Thebes.

Unfortunately for Oedipus, Jocasta’s reassurance is short lived. A messenger tells Oedipus that he heard from people in Corinth that Polybus and Merope were not Oedipus’ real parents. Oedipus had earlier heard rumors that Polybus was not his real father, but Oedipus had always dismissed those rumors. The messenger tells Oedipus that many years ago, a shepherd was given a baby by a mother and father from Thebes. The shepherd then gave the abandoned baby to the messenger so that a suitable home could be found. The messenger gave the baby to King Polybus and Queen Merope of Corinth so that the baby would have a prosperous life.

Now Oedipus is really confused. If Polybus and Merope were not his real parents, then who could his parents be? Who were the parents from Thebes who abandoned the baby that the shepherd found? Oedipus becomes determined to track down the shepherd and learn the truth of his birth. Jocasta, who is now beginning to put the pieces of the puzzle together, becomes terrified. She does not want to know any more details of Oedipus’ birth. Jocasta begs him to stop, and then runs off to the palace, wild with grief.

Confident that the worst he could hear is that his true parents were peasants, not royalty, Oedipus eagerly awaits the shepherd. At first the shepherd refuses to speak, but King Oedipus threatens the shepherd with death if he doesn’t tell Oedipus what he knows. Finally, the shepherd tells Oedipus what he knows—Oedipus was the abandoned baby he found. Oedipus is actually the son of King Laius and Queen Jocasta of Thebes.



Realizing that he had killed his father Laius at the crossroads and married his mother Jocasta, Oedipus is consumed by grief. He rushes into the palace and finds that his wife (and mother), Queen Jocasta, had killed herself. Tortured and frenzied, Oedipus takes the pins from her gown and gouges out his own eyes, so that he can no longer look upon the misery he has caused.

Now blinded and disgraced, Oedipus begs his brother-in-law Creon to kill him. Instead, Oedipus quietly submits to Creon’s leadership, and spends the rest of his days as a blind, depressed, disgraced man.