

## **Sophocles' Oedipus Tyrannus**

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Oedipus Tyrannus is a cold-case mystery in which the detective discovers that he himself is the murderer. Laius, the hereditary king of the city of Thebes, was killed on a road from Thebes to Delphi about twenty years before the play's action begins. At the time, Thebes launched no investigation to track down Laius's killer(s) and only rumors remained. As the play opens, a plague on fertility has descended on the city. Humans and animals are sick and sterile, any offspring still-born, fields moribund.

Years before in Corinth, King Polybus and Queen Merope brought up as their own child and heir a baby boy, found with his feet maimed by an iron spike driven through his ankles. They called the foundling Oidi-pous (Οἰδίπους), "swollen-foot." As he approached manhood, a raving drunk at a fancy party told Oedipus he was not truly his parents' son. His parents vehemently denied this allegation, excoriating the teller of such tales. But doubt niggled at the back of Oedipus's mind, driving him at last to consult the Pythian oracle at Delphi. There, the priestess told Oedipus he was destined to sleep with his mother and kill his father.

To avoid fulfilling this prediction, Oedipus fled on foot, staff in hand, no longer a prince but a "child of fortune." As he bolted, he came to a divide in the road, where three roads met. A greying man in a chariot with four attendants approached. One attendant shoved Oedipus aside, but Oedipus shoved back. Then, as the carriage passed, the older man struck Oedipus on the head with his prod. In a fit of road rage, Oedipus knocked the man from the carriage with his staff and then killed the entire entourage, all, that is, but one, as it turned out.

Nearing Thebes, he encountered the Sphinx, a lion-like monster. Her wont was to kill and eat all travelers to and from the city who failed to answer her riddle: "What goes on four feet in the morning, two feet in the afternoon, and three feet at night?" Oedipus immediately answered "man." Humans crawl on four as infants, then walk on two feet,

and finally in old age walk with a staff on three. Her screams reverberating, the Sphinx threw herself from a cliff and perished.

Oedipus enters Thebes as its savior. Its citizens crown Oedipus *Tyrannos*<sup>1</sup>, and he marries Queen Jocaste. They engender two boys, Polynices and Eteocles, and two girls, Antigone and Ismene. Oedipus becomes a great king, renowned throughout the land.

As the play opens, Oedipus emerges from the castle alone. Before the castle altars, suppliants of all ages have come to pray. He addresses them: "O children, latest generation of ancient Cadmus<sup>2</sup> . . ."

Of myriad approaches to this play, I suggest we first try to understand the Sphinx's riddle. Enigmatically, Oedipus doesn't fit it.

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<sup>1</sup> Tyrannos (τύραννος) suggests a non-hereditary monarch by contrast to basileus (βασιλεύς), a hereditary king. The plays title, Oedipus Tyrannos, is therefore deeply ironic because Oedipus turns out to be the hereditary king. At the time the play was performed in Athens, "tyrant" meant tyrant.

<sup>2</sup> Cadmus, a Phoenician, founded Thebes, notably giving the alphabet to the Greeks. He founded Thebes by killing a dragon, a child of Ares, whose teeth, ploughed into the soil, grew warriors called Spartoi (not, except in literary puns, related to Spartans). After mostly murdering each other, the five warriors left standing fathered the noble families of Thebes. Where did the women come from? Where are they in the play?