

Oedipus Rex (or Oedipus the King or Oedipus Tyrannos)

Background

Oedipus Rex is a Greek tragedy, written by Sophocles and first performed in 428 BC. The play was the second of Sophocles' three Theban plays to be produced, but comes first in the internal chronology of the plays, followed by *Oedipus at Colonus* and then *Antigone*. Date and circumstances of production are unknown. It is known, however, that Sophocles suffered defeat in the contests with this play, although it is generally regarded as his masterpiece. Aristotle, consider it the greatest tragedy ever written.

Synopsis

Some twelve years before the action of the play begins, Oedipus has been made King of Thebes in gratitude for his freeing the people from the pestilence brought on them by the presence of the riddling Sphinx. Since Laius, the former king, had shortly before been killed, Oedipus has been further honored by the hand of Queen Jocasta.

Now another deadly pestilence is raging and the people have come to ask Oedipus to rescue them as before. The King has anticipated their need, however. Creon, Jocasta's brother, returns at the very moment from Apollo's oracle with the announcement that all will be well if Laius' murderer be found and cast from the city.

In an effort to discover the murderer, Oedipus sends for the blind seer, Tiresias. Under protest the prophet names Oedipus himself as the criminal. Oedipus, outraged at the accusation, denounces it as a plot of Creon to gain the throne. Jocasta appears just in time to avoid a battle between the two men. Seers, she assures Oedipus, are not infallible. In proof, she cites the old prophecy that her son should kill his father and have children by his mother. She prevented its fulfillment, she confesses, by abandoning their infant son in the mountains. As for Laius, he had been killed by robbers years later at the junction of three roads on the route to Delphi.

This information makes Oedipus uneasy. He recalls having killed a man answering Laius' description at this very spot when he was fleeing from his home in Corinth to avoid fulfillment of a similar prophecy. An aged messenger arrives from Corinth, at this point, to announce the death of King Polybus, supposed father of Oedipus, and the election of Oedipus as king in his stead. On account of the old prophecy Oedipus refuses to return to Corinth until his mother, too, is dead. To calm his fears the messenger assures him that he is not the blood son of Polybus and Merope, but a foundling from the house of Laius deserted in the mountains. This statement is confirmed by the old shepherd whom Jocasta had charged with the task of exposing her babe. Thus the ancient prophecy has been fulfilled in each dreadful detail. Jocasta in her horror hangs herself and Oedipus stabs out his eyes. Then he imposes on himself the penalty of exile which he had promised for the murderer of Laius.