

CHAPTER 16 THE TRAGIC HOUSE OF LAIUS: SOPHOCLES' OEDIPUS

MAIN POINTS

1. Sophocles lived through the classical age of Greece, witnessing the development of democracy, the political rise of Athens, and achievements of philosophers, artists, writers, and mathematicians.
2. The Peloponnesian War shattered many illusions, but even prior to the beginning of the war (431 B.C.), the rapid cultural changes caused people to reexamine their traditional perspectives on the world order.
3. Sophocles's tragedies reflect this transitional time of reevaluation of the role of the gods, coinciding with cultural progress.
4. Sophocles participated in public life, held various offices, and wrote more than one hundred twenty-five plays, of which seven have survived.
5. Three of these plays are about Oedipus, but they not a trilogy. The first, *Antigone*, is the last in the narrative sequence, dealing with Oedipus's daughter Antigone's martyrdom.
6. *Oedipus Rex*, probably written between 429 and 425 B.C., speaks to a plague-weary Athens about the plague in Thebes.
7. Sigmund Freud argued that *Oedipus Rex* is relevant because every male child unconsciously desires to kill his father and marry his mother; the repression of these urges gives rise to the Oedipus complex.
8. Sophocles anticipates Freudian themes: Jocasta believes that appalling urges are common and are revealed in dreams, and that these urges must be repressed. Oedipus's own endeavor to find the truth can be compared with the psychoanalytic process.
9. Two forms of failure of knowledge produce illness: the people's indifference to the murderer of their king and Oedipus's ignorance of his own identity. His discovery of the truth has cathartic effects.

NOTE: It may be relevant to ask whether Oedipus himself suffered from an Oedipus complex; in Freud's scenario, the young male child of the nuclear family is attracted to his mother and is jealous of his father monopolizing her; unconsciously he wants to get his father out of the way but worries about his father's punishment, a fear translated into the fear of castration. Oedipus, having been told by the Oracle at Delphi that he will kill his father and marry his mother, refuses to go home to Corinth for as long as they are alive, because he doesn't want to risk placing himself or them in such a situation; the man he ends up killing is a stranger to him, and so is the woman he marries. It is debatable how well the actual story of Oedipus reflects what Freud refers to as the Oedipus complex.

10. Apollo is the one calling attention to the conditions through his oracle; so is Apollo decreeing the fate of Oedipus, or is he merely foreseeing it? Does Oedipus have freedom of the will, or is his life predetermined?
11. Apollo, as controller of fate, announces that the city of Thebes will suffer from the plague until the king's murderer has been exiled.
12. The series of coincidences also points to fate controlling human experience. But the oracle becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; the mere fact of its revelation prompts Oedipus to leave home and go out to seek his fortune in the first place, thus setting in motion the whole chain of tragic events.
13. Tiresias also validates the oracle's authority. Being blind, he has the gift of inner sight, undistracted by surface appearances or gender restrictions. Tiresias was blinded by Hera

- for seeing her too intimately. Oedipus also tries to pierce the veil that separates the human and the divine and to see the mysteries of the gods—and of “fate”—for himself.
14. The myths about Oedipus’s family refer to a curse, but Sophocles never alludes to that.
 15. The sin that angers Apollo is not Oedipus’s murder and incest but the lack of civic duty displayed by the citizens of Thebes. Of course, patricide and incest were not to be acted out or even openly acknowledged as thoughts. Contrast with that the divine penchant for conspiring with mothers to kill/castrate/dethrone fathers (Cronus, Zeus) and marrying, if not mothers, at least sisters.
 16. Thebes had a reputation for evil and was an enemy of Athens, having sided with the Persians and having fought the Athenians during the Peloponnesian War. The Theban people are punished by the plague.
 17. Oedipus’s own punishment, blinding himself, exceeds the exile demanded by Apollo.
 18. Both the act of Laius exposing his child and the act of Oedipus leaving Corinth are intended to preempt the will of the gods, but instead they help bring it about.
 19. Father and son make similar behavioral choices, determined by pride and anger; when Oedipus is angry, his reason does not prevail; he may have inherited from his father not curses but personality traits.
 20. Riddles are essential to the story; Oedipus’s intelligence in solving the Sphinx’s riddle makes his marriage to Jocasta possible.
 21. The riddle of the Sphinx: what creature walks on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs in the evening? A human being.
 22. Oedipus solves the riddle but fails to see its significance: only for a short time in midlife are humans in relative control of their lives.
 23. Human beings are riddles to themselves and not in control of their psyches, where shadow selves are hiding. Oedipus is blind to the feminine component of his psyche. His “heroic” approach to experience, pursuing his quest for truth to the bitter end, causes typically destructive consequences to women and families.
 24. Oedipus Rex raises metaphysical questions, such as Why do terrible things happen to good people? Do humans have a destiny—or a choice?
 25. In the end, Oedipus accepts that there is no answer and that human logic cannot explain the intentions of the gods.
 26. He furthermore takes responsibility for his actions, even though he acted out of ignorance, and this leaves him free. When Oedipus accepts his role as a scapegoat, the plague is lifted from Thebes.
 27. By putting his eyes out, Oedipus becomes a parallel to Tiresias with his inner sight, the awareness of truth. Oedipus thus reenacts Tiresias’s role as the seer.
 28. Oedipus goes through a personal journey to an inner hell and returns; he is both hero and victim, freed by his own experience.
 29. In Sophocles’s last play, written twenty-five years later, Oedipus is on the road to Colonus, where tradition claims he was buried; Oedipus at Colonus has slightly different details than Oedipus Rex.
 30. Oedipus’s sons have taken over the government from Creon; despite their quarrel, they want their father back in Thebes because, according to the oracle, the city that earns Oedipus’s goodwill will prosper after he is dead.
 31. Sophocles’ Athenian audience would relate well to the praise of Athens at the expense of Thebes.

32. Similarities between the two plays include Oedipus still carrying the burden of his sins as well as his continued anger. But in Oedipus Rex, he took responsibility for his acts, whereas in Oedipus at Colonus, he insists on his innocence and victimization by the gods.
33. No longer self-sufficient, he has learned patience and suffers loneliness.
34. In Oedipus at Colonus, opposites are reconciled in a series of paradoxes; Oedipus becomes an avenger himself, and, blinded, he sees the truth of the mystery and is reconciled with the gods.
35. In Oedipus Rex, Oedipus rejects the feminine principle; in the last play, he embraces this principle by entering the sacred grove of the Furies (the Eumenides), who accept him.

NOTE: According to the mythologist Robert Graves, there may have been a historical King Oedipus; he may not have killed his father and married his mother, but he may have been the consort of a priestess-queen. Graves speculates that this event may have marked the transition between Goddess worship and patriarchal rule; Oedipus may have been one of a series of consort-kings, temporary sacrificial husbands (often referred to as sons) of the priestess-queen representing the Great Goddess but refusing to be sacrificed as tradition demanded, thus establishing a patriarchal kingdom and causing the downfall of the priestess-rule.

36. Oedipus finally experiences death and transfiguration, becoming deified; like the Furies, he has become one of the Kindly Ones.
37. The earliest of Sophocles' plays is the last in the narrative sequence; the action of Antigone takes place after Oedipus and his two sons are dead and Creon is again in power.
38. Antigone is the most overtly political of Sophoclean dramas. Creon, in precarious power over Thebes, pushes beyond limits in his attempt to stabilize his control.
39. Polynices, who attacked Athens, is left unburied, an act of impiety. Antigone, as so often the case with a female character, represents a completely different set of priorities. Their conflict can be interpreted in several different ways.
40. Although Antigone fulfills the traditional role of the woman in Greece—to lament over the dead—she simultaneously becomes the “hero.”
41. Creon is the first to interpret the conflict in gender terms. Antigone is seen as a threat to his masculine identity because she exceeds her own gender boundaries.
42. Haimon is the nexus between public and private, between masculine and feminine.
43. Tiresias reveals the falseness of Creon's position: the gods are angry at the failure to complete burial rites, and disaster will result.
44. Antigone is arrested and buried alive in a cave; when Creon relents at the advice of Tiresias and opens the cave, she has hanged herself, and her fiancé, Creon's son, takes his own life. So does Creon's wife, his mother.
45. Like the usual hero, Antigone journeys to the Underworld. Unlike most heroes, she is unable to return. She willingly becomes the “Bride of Death.”

KEY NAMES OF MYTHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS MENTIONED:

Oedipus, king of Thebes

Jocasta, his wife and birth mother

Laius, former king of Thebes, Jocasta's husband, Oedipus's father

Antigone, their daughter

Ismene, their daughter

Eteocles, their son

Polynices, their son

Creon, Jocasta's brother

Polybus of Corinth, Oedipus's foster father

Dorian Merope, his foster mother

Apollo

Tiresias, the blind seer

Theseus, Greek hero, ruler of Athens

KEY NAMES ASSOCIATED WITH THE TELLING/CRITICISM OF MYTHS:

Sophocles (c. 495–406 B.C.)

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939)