

*Oedipus the King*¹

*Before commencing with evaluation of the reading, it should be noted that *Oedipus* does not have any separation into chapters or sections. As a result, I have divided the text into five sections, which are consistent with some degree of plot shift.

I. The “Blight”

At the outset, a “blight” has fallen on the city of Thebes. This event is best described beginning at line 25 by a priest in conversation with Oedipus, “A blight is on the fruitful plants of the earth, a blight is on the cattle in the fields, a blight is on our women that no children are born to them; a God that carries fire, a deadly pestilence, is on our town, strikes us and spares us not, and the house of Cadmus is emptied of its people while black Death grows rich in groaning and lamentation” (25-30). In front of Oedipus’ palace, the priest along with a group of children have assembled, to seek help. Oedipus is aware of blight and mentions his “spirit groans for the city and myself and you at once” (64). Oedipus argues that he has not been roused like a man asleep, but rather as mournful and shedding many tears and even going on long wanderings in deep thought. The only reasonable actions he can think of is to seek counsel from the God Apollo to find out by what act or word he can save the city. As a result, Oedipus sends his wife’s brother Creon to Apollo’s Pythian temple to find out.

Initially, when Creon returns, his face is bright and there is considerable hope that the news he brings is bright as well, especially since his head is crowned with sprigs of fruitful laurel. Creon tries to reveal the information he has learned in secret to Oedipus, but at the insistence of Oedipus, reveals the news publicly. According to Creon, “King Pheobus in plain words commanded us to drive out a pollution from our land, pollution grown ingrained within the land; drive it out, said the God, not cherish it, till its past cure” (95-98). Oedipus questions, “What is the rite of purification?”, to which Creon continues, “By banishing a man, or expiation of blood by blood, since it is murder guilt which holds our city in this destroying storm” (101-105). Creon reveals the before Oedipus, the King of Thebes was Laius and it is Laius’s murders that must be punished.² The whereabouts of these suspects is unknown, but the clue is in this land. Laius had set out on a journey but never returned, but to further vex the issue, there were no messengers or the only witness fled. Creon mentions that only one fact was known about the death, that “this man said the robbers they encountered were many and the hand that did the murder were many; it was no man’s single power” (120). Oedipus inquires as to why more investigation was not done, especially since their king was murdered. To wit, Creon answers that Thebes was plagued by a riddling Sphinx, which caused them to neglect

¹ Grene, David. 1988. *Oedipus the King*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

² Presumably, multiple assailants are involved.

mysterious crimes and seek resolution to an immediate problem in close proximity.³ Concluding the dialogue from this section, Oedipus rants that whoever murdered the king should “dispatch me with his murderous hand, so helping the dead king I help myself” (139-141). Accordingly, the children and priest are dismissed.

Oedipus engages in a rather lengthy discussion with a Chorus (of Old Men of Thebes) followed by the introduction of Teiresias (an Old Blind Prophet). The Chorus further develops the detail of the adverse situation in Thebes. Specifically [Strophe], “There are no growing children in this famous land; there are no women bearing the pangs of childbirth” (179). In response [Antistrophe], “Those children that are born lie dead on the naked earth unpitied, spreading contagion of death; and grey haired mothers and wives everywhere stand at the altar’s edge, suppliant, moaning...” (182). Oedipus is called upon in a subsequent antistrophe to do something about the present situation. Essentially, Oedipus demands that those who listen to his words will find strength and lightening of burdens. He has not previously sought after the murder of Laius because he has only recently become king and would be searching without a clue. He then directs his dialogue to anyone who may have knowledge of the murder. “I proclaim to all men of Thebes who so among you knows the murder by whose hand Laius...died...I command him to tell everything to me...though he fears himself to take the blame on his own head; for bitter punishment he shall have none, but leave this land unharmed” (230). Or if someone else knows the murder, even if a foreigner, the truth should be revealed because he would be paid and have the appreciation from Thebes. “But if you shall keep silence...to shield a guilty friend...I shall...forbid that man...[from] my land...and to ban him from his home since he is our pollution, as the oracle of Pytho’s God proclaimed him now to me” (245). In conclusion, Oedipus invokes a curse upon the murder—whether one man or many—this his life be consumed in misery to miserable doom. “If with my knowledge he lives at my hearth I pray that I myself may feel my curse...Since I am now the holder of his office, and have his bed and wife that once was his, and had his line not been unfortunate we would have common children...because of all these things, I fight in the defense as for my father and I shall try all means to take [care of] the murderer of Laius” (260). Needless to say, this lengthy dialogue offers a significant degree of foreshadowing of what will develop as *Oedipus* continues. The Chorus injects Oedipus by mentioning they do not know who the murder of Laius, but that the Lord Teiresias sees what is most seen by the Lord Apollo, especially since in him alone truth is native.

II. The “Truth” is Blind.

³ Although not directly disclosed in *Oedipus the King*, the Sphinx lived outside the boundary of Thebes and demanded the passerby’s answer a riddle. If the riddle was not answered correctly, which it was not under Oedipus came along, the person was eaten. At some point in Oedipus’ past, he encountered the Sphinx and correctly answered her riddle. Out of anger, the Sphinx committed suicide. In appreciation from Thebes, Oedipus became King.

In what opens as a suspected sarcastic dialogue, Oedipus compliments Teiresias as being versed in everything (things which are teachable and things not to be spoken, things of the heavens and the earth), yet even without eyes is able to comprehend the present blight. As Oedipus continues the dialogue, Teiresias is identified as the only man who can rescue the city. Fearing the consequences of revealing his wisdom, Teiresias attempts to withdraw from the conversation and would much rather allows the fates to dictate the coming future instead of seeking advice from the gods to end the blight. Frustration begins to mount as the old prophet wishes to not reveal any wisdom, to wit Oedipus' mood changes from presumably sarcastic to immediately angry. Citing the prophet, "You would blame my temper, but you do not see your own the lives within you..." and continues to not reveal anything about what he knows regarding Oedipus (337). Oedipus continues arguing by saying that he has no intention of holding back any words.

Teiresias continues in the prolonged dialogue by mentioning that he knows Oedipus is the land's pollution and he will prove it. Oedipus snarls back by trying to discredit the profession of being a prophet by saying, "And who has taught you truth? Not your profession surely!". Initially, Teiresias accuses Oedipus of being the murder of the king, to which Oedipus retracts with "Not twice you shall say calumnies like this and stay unpunished" (365). Continuing with the discredit, Oedipus cites that he alone solved the riddle of the sphinx and did so without any knowledge from any God. In this case, it was a prophet's task to resolve the riddle, especially since a prophet should gain knowledge from any God. Specifically, he said he knew nothing, but alone stopped the sphinx. Teiresias retracts with, "You have your eyes, but see not where you are in sin, nor where you live, nor whom you live with...Unknowing you are an enemy to kith and kin in death...a striking curse shall drive you out of this land, with darkness in your eyes" (420). Also, there remain such things that Oedipus is ignorant of including the secret of his marriage to his mother along with a multitude of evils that will affect this children. Oedipus then demands that the prophet leave at once, especially since his riddles needlessly darken everything. Humorously, Oedipus proclaimed just before that in riddle answering he is strongest. In the conclusion to this portion, Teiresias predicts that it will not be much longer before Oedipus shall have no joy in the discovery of the king's murder and as a result shall go on a journey to a foreign country tapping his way before him with a stick. "He shall be proved both father and brother both to his own children in his house; to her that gave him birth, a son and husband both; a fellow sower in this father's bed with that same father he murdered" (460). As he walks away, Teiresias comments for Oedipus to consider those things and if it's wrong, then he reckons to have no skill in prophecy.

III. The "Blame"

Creon confronts Oedipus regarding the deadly rumors that have circulated about him, especially that he is a traitor to his city and friends. In response, Oedipus proclaims that how dare Creon come to his house, especially that he was proved manifestly the murder of the king. Creon

inquires as to what offense is he guilty of? Oedipus mostly ignores the question, but continues attempting to discredit the prophet by questioning his reputation now and in the past. To wit, Creon replies that Teiresias was as honored in the past as he is honored now. Creon attempts to prove his loyalty to Oedipus by citing that he has been loyal and would not join in any plot to overthrow his friend. He challenges Oedipus to go to the oracle at Pytho and inquire for himself for the cause of the blight and if its anything different than his report, he will agree to die. Continuing, “Do not charge me on obscure opinion without some proof to back it” (608). The chorus interrupts attempting to persuade Oedipus of Creon’s honesty and wisdom.

Jocasta interrupts the argument between Oedipus and Creon and immediately demands that the men go inside and no air their private squabbling, while the county is sick. Once the trio goes inside, Creon argues that Oedipus (your husband) thinks he has the right to do terrible wrongs, to either kill or banish me. Oedipus confirms this and mentions death is necessary for a traitor. Jocasta along with the chorus defend Creon because of his loyalty and that he should not be banished based on an obscure conjecture. Creon leaves the scene, but there remains hostility between the two men.

As Jocasta inquires about the origin of the quarrel, Oedipus mentions that Teiresias and Creon explicate that he is murder of Laius. Jocasta initiates a lengthy dialogue explaining a previous prophecy that affected Laius, [the oracle] “...Told him that it was fate that he should die a victim at the hands of his own son, a son to be born to Laius and me” (715). Several days after the son was born, Laius pierced the ankles of his son and cast him on a pathless hillside to die. As a result, at least as Jocasta thinks, “Apollo failed to fulfill his oracle to the son that he should kill his father, and to Laius also proved false in that the thing he feared, death at his son’s hands, never came to pass” (725). Oedipus remains uneasy and hints that he could run mad. Oedipus inquires from Jocasta about Laius being killed at a crossroads. Jocasta then describes the location and Oedipus becomes (what can be imagined as) eerily nauseous, or perhaps guilty. Both Oedipus and Jocasta become frightened and more questions are asked. The king was traveling with a small party of five, all of which were killed except for a single man. When the servant returned to Thebes, he came to Jocasta and begged to be sent to the fields to spend time as a shepherd. This person is described as an honest man and was worthy of far more than what he asked for.

Oedipus begins a lengthy monologue revealing to Jocasta everything he knows: At a dinner, when he was a younger man, he was informed by a drunken man that he was a bastard child. He later learned from Phoebus that he was fated to live with mother and doomed to be the murderer of his father. But when he learned of this fate, Oedipus fled and used the stars as an indicator of how far away he was from his home. On his journey, he came to a crossroads, which is the location that is suspected as where the king died. At this location, he saw a carriage with a man in it led by an old man. The old man attempted to forcibly move Oedipus from the road and in retaliation (and anger) the old man was attacked. In response, Laius struck Oedipus in the head with a “two pointed goad”.

In return, Oedipus struck Laius with a stick and the force was so great that it threw him from the carriage and killed the king. Jocasta continues to cast doubt that this murderer was Oedipus, the old shepherd is sent for. Oedipus continues to question Jocasta about the story that the old shepherd said before he was sent away, specifically he asked if the story involved a single robber or robbers. If the story is *one robber* then Oedipus surely believes he is guilty of murder.

At the beginning of the next scene, Jocasta is described as going outside of the temple carrying garlands (presumably, in result of some celebration) and awaits a messenger from Corinth. The messenger brings news informing Jocasta that Oedipus' father, Polybus has died and that they want Oedipus to be their new king. When Oedipus enters the scene, the messenger explains that Polybus died of old age. Immediately, Jocasta and Oedipus become jubilant, not at the death of Polybus, but that the presumed oracle is now proven untrue. According to Oedipus, "...the oracles, as they stand...[are] dead and worthless" (973). The death of Polybus only eliminates one-half of the oracle, which is expressed by Oedipus in his concern of fear of his mother's bed. To this, Jocasta argues, "As to your mother's marriage bed,—don't fear it. Before this, in dreams too, as well as oracles, many a man has lain with his own mother. But he to whom such things are nothing bears his life most easily" (985). After learning about the oracle, the messenger tries to persuade Oedipus to return to Corinth. But Oedipus responds that he will never go near his parents due to the constant terrors of murder and incest. The messenger continues by commenting that Polybus was not the actual father of Oedipus, but rather cared for him after he was rescued him from a thicket. The messenger describes pulling the infant [Oedipus] from the thicket and loosed the tendons of the infant's feet which had been pierced and fettered. However, as the scene continues, it is discovered that the shepherd rescued Oedipus from the thicket was not this messenger, but rather the old shepherd that was aforementioned. Oedipus questions Jocasta as to the whereabouts of the old shepherd (or herdsman), to which she contends, "I beg you—do not hunt this out—I beg you, if you have care for your own life" (1062). The old shepherd is sent for.

IV. Realization

Oedipus, the messenger, and the old shepherd engage in conversation. Oedipus questions the old shepherd if he is from Corinth and if he were ever a servant of King Laius. The old shepherd replies yes and that he was reared in the King's house and not as a slave he bought. Most of this time was spent among the flocks. The messenger questions the old shepherd as to the locations he has been and questions if he remembers the child he plucked from the thicket. When the messenger reveals that Oedipus is the grown-up child that was removed from the wilderness, the old shepherd snaps to the messenger; "Death take you! Won't you hold your tongue?" (1150). The old shepherd continues to be resistant to speak, to combat the resistance, Oedipus demands his servants to twist the man's hands behind his back to urge him to speak. The old shepherd explains that Jocasta gave the infant to him to do away with because of fear from evil oracles. Specifically, the fear that he

should kill his parents. The herdsman mentions that he thought sending the child off to another country would thwart the oracle, but it appears as though it did not and that Oedipus was bred to misery. Oedipus cries, "Let me look upon the light of the sun no more after today! I who first saw the light bred of a match accursed, and accursed in my living with them I lived with, cursed in my killing" (1185).

V. The Outcome

The messenger reveals that the queen (Jocasta) has met an unlucky end. She has fallen victim to what the messenger calls a "double bond", that is to say, "she brought forth husband by her husband, children by her own child, an infamous double bond" (1250). In response to this news, Oedipus has become hysterical and find his wife (and indeed, his mother also) hanging with a twist rope around her neck. When her body was cut down, Oedipus pulled the brooches from her robe, lifted them high and "dashed them into his own eyeballs, shrieking out such things as: they will never see the crime I have committed or had done upon me!" (1272).⁴ From his eyes, blood pours, so much so that his beard is stained. At this point, the chorus of old men responds to Oedipus that he is bound to a place where men's ears cannot hear nor eyes can see his suffering. Oedipus questions, "What can I see to love? What greeting can touch my ears with joy? Take me away my friends, the greatly miserable, the most accursed, whom God too hates above all men on earth!" (1345). Oedipus curses the man who stole him away from death and that had he died as an infant, he would not now be so burdensome to his friends, nor would have come "*...to kill my father and marry my mother infamously*" (1360). The chorus sarcastically adds that Oedipus' current remedy cannot be described as good and would be better dead than blind and living.

Creon enters the scene as requests that servants take Oedipus into the temple so that public cannot see the shame, especially "our Lord the Sun", which gives all life. Oedipus demands that he be sent from Thebes to where he cannot hear a human voice. Creon replies that he would have already done this, but wanted to first hear the wishes of the God what his action should be. The burial of Jocasta is arranged and Oedipus decides to be cast into Cithaeron (what he calls "my mountain"), the place where he should have died as an infant. Oedipus believes that his sons will be able to fend for themselves, but asks Creon to care for his two daughters Antigone and Ismene. In his final dialogue, Oedipus warns his daughters that they will face insults and bitterness because of who this father was. Eloquently explained, "What curse is not there? "Your father killed his father and sowed the seed where he had sprung himself and begot you out of the womb that held him" (1500). Also, he asks that Creon not allow them to wander like beggars, poor, and husbandless. Although Creon does not explicitly say he will take care of the daughters, he does presumably turn Oedipus to the wilderness. In conclusion, the chorus describes Oedipus as a man who knew famous riddles and

⁴ Brooches: the gold chased brooches fastening Jocasta's robe.

was a man most masterful, one that was envied by many, but now see the breakers of misfortune swallow him! (1526).