

Oedipus Rex Summary

When Thebes is struck by a plague, the people ask King Oedipus to deliver them from its horrors. Creon, the brother of Jocasta, Oedipus's queen, returns from the oracle of Apollo and discloses that the plague is punishment for the murder of King Laius, Oedipus's immediate predecessor, to whom Jocasta was married. Creon further discloses that the citizens of Thebes need to discover and punish the murderer before the plague can be lifted. The people mourn their dead, and Oedipus advises them, in their own interest, to search out and apprehend the murderer of Laius.

Asked to help find the murderer, Teiresias, the ancient, blind seer of Thebes, tells Oedipus that it would be better for all if he does not tell what he knows. He says that coming events will reveal themselves. Oedipus rages at the seer's reluctance to tell the secret until he goads the old man to reveal that Oedipus is the one responsible for Thebes's afflictions because he is the murderer, and that he is living in intimacy with his nearest kin. Oedipus accuses the old man of being in league with Creon, whom he suspects of plotting against his throne, but Teiresias answers that Oedipus will be ashamed and horrified when he learns the truth about his true parentage. Oedipus defies the seer, saying he will welcome the truth as long as it frees his kingdom from the plague. Oedipus threatens Creon with death, but Jocasta and the people advise him against doing violence on the strength of rumor or momentary passion. Oedipus yields, but he banishes Creon.

Jocasta, grieved by the enmity between her brother and Oedipus, tells her husband that an oracle informed King Laius that he would be killed by his own child, the offspring of Laius and Jocasta. Jocasta assures Oedipus that this could not happen because the child was abandoned on a deserted mountainside soon after birth. When Oedipus hears further that Laius was killed by robbers at the meeting place of three roads and that the three roads met in Phocis, he is deeply disturbed and begins to suspect that he is, after all, the murderer. He hesitates to reveal his suspicion, but he becomes more and more convinced of his own guilt.

Oedipus tells Jocasta that he believed himself to be the son of Polybus of Corinth and Merope until a drunken man on one occasion announced that the young Oedipus was not really Polybus's son. Disturbed, Oedipus consulted the oracle of Apollo, who told him he would sire children by his own mother and that he would kill his own father. After he left Corinth, at a meeting place of three roads, Oedipus was offended by a man in a chariot. He killed the man and all of his servants but one. From there he went on to Thebes, where he became the new king by answering the riddle of the Sphinx. The riddle asked what went on all fours before noon, on two legs at noon, and on three legs after noon. Oedipus answered, correctly, that human beings walk on all fours as an infant, on two legs in their prime, and with the aid of a stick in their old age. With the kingship, he also won the hand of Jocasta, King Laius's queen.

Oedipus summons the servant who reported King Laius's death, but he awaits his arrival fearfully. Jocasta assures her husband that the entire matter is of no great consequence, that surely the prophecies of the oracles will not come true.

A messenger from Corinth announces that King Polybus is dead and that Oedipus is his successor. Polybus died of natural causes, so Oedipus and Jocasta are relieved for the time being. Oedipus tells the messenger he will not go to Corinth for fear of siring children by his mother, Merope.

The messenger goes on to reveal that Oedipus is not the son of Polybus and Merope but a foundling whom the messenger, at that time a shepherd, took to Polybus. The messenger relates how he received the baby from another shepherd, who was a servant of the house of King Laius. At that point Jocasta realizes the dreadful truth. She does not wish to see the old servant who was summoned, but Oedipus desires clarity regardless of the cost. He again calls for the servant. When the servant appears, the messenger recognizes him as the herdsman from whom he received the child years earlier. The old servant confesses that King Laius ordered him to destroy the boy but that out of pity he gave the infant to the Corinthian to raise as his foster son.

Oedipus, now all but mad from the realization of what he did, enters the palace and discovers that Jocasta hanged herself by her hair. He removes her golden brooches and with them puts out his eyes so that he will not be able to see the results of the horrible prophecy. Then, blind and bloody and miserable, he displays himself to the Thebans and announces himself as the murderer of their king and the defiler of his own mother's bed. He curses the herdsman who saved him from death years before.

Creon, returning, orders the attendants to lead Oedipus back into the palace. Oedipus asks Creon to have him conducted out of Thebes where no man will ever see him again. He also asks Creon to give Jocasta a proper burial and to see that the sons and daughters of the unnatural marriage should be cared for and not be allowed to live poor and unmarried because of the shame attached to their parentage. Creon leads the wretched Oedipus away to his exile of blindness and torment.