Introduction

Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* is probably the most famous tragedy ever written. It is known by a variety of titles (the most common being *Oedipus Rex*), including *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Sophocles first produced the play in Athens around 430 B.C. at the Great Dionysia, a religious and cultural festival held in honor of the god Dionysus, where it won second prize. In the play Oedipus, King of Thebes, upon hearing that his city is being ravaged by fire and plague, sends his brother-in-law Creon to find a remedy from the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi. When Creon returns Oedipus begins investigating the death of his predecessor, Laius, and discovers through various means that he himself was the one who had unknowingly killed Laius and then married his own mother, Jocasta. Jocasta commits suicide, Oedipus blinds himself, takes leave of his children, and is led away. Aristotle praises the play in his *Poetics* for having an exemplary, well-constructed plot, one which is capable of inspiring fear and pity not only in its audience but especially in those who have merely heard of the story. Following Aristotle's appraisal, many prominent authors including Voltaire, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud reacted at length to the play's themes of incest and patricide. In the twentieth century, the most influential of these thinkers, Freud, showed that Oedipus's fate is that of every man; the "Oedipus Complex" is the definitive parent-child relationship. Throughout history, writers have drawn upon the myth of Oedipus, and dramatists, composers, and poets, including Pierre Corneille, Fredrich von Schiller, Heinrich von Kleist, William Butler Yeats, Ezra Pound, Igor Stravinsky, and Jean Cocteau, have both written on, translated, and staged the tragedy; contemporary filmmakers such as Pier Paolo Pasolini and Woody Allen have directed self-consciously autobiographical versions of *Oedipus Rex*.

Oedipus Rex Summary

Prologue

*Oedipus Rex* begins outside King Oedipus's palace, where despondent beggars and a priest have gathered and brought branches and wreaths of olive leaves. Oedipus enters and asks the people of Thebes why they pray and lament, since apparently they have come together to petition him with an unknown request. The Priest speaks on their behalf, and Oedipus assures them that he will help them. The Priest reports that Thebes has been beset with horrible calamities—famine, fires, and plague have all caused widespread suffering and death among their families and animals, and their crops have all been destroyed. He beseeches Oedipus, whom he praises for having solved the riddle of the Sphinx (an action which justified his succession to King Laius, as Jocasta's husband and as king) to cure the city of its woes. Oedipus expresses his profound sympathy and announces that he... »

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