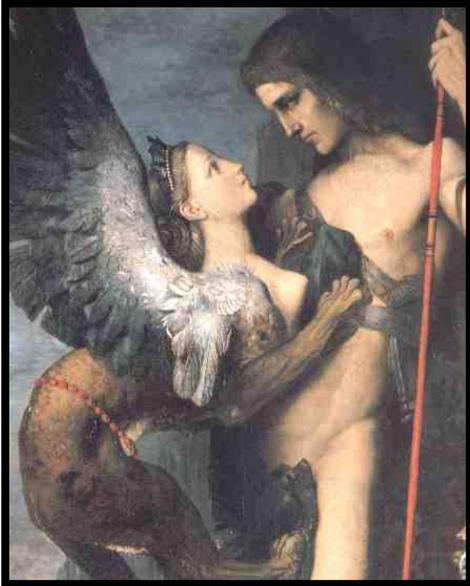


THE LAMENTABLE TALE OF OEDIPUS



Once upon a time in the city-state of Thebes, there was an old king named Laius. He had always wanted a son, and when his wife came to him with the happy news that this was finally going to happen, he went to consult an oracle in the countryside. Much to his dismay, the oracle gave him a grim prophecy concerning his son. “Your soon-to-be son will murder his father and marry his mother,” she said. This news was appalling—even to ancient Greeks—and so when the son was born, King Laius took the child and secretly ordered some passing shepherds to take him into the wilderness and leave him to die. But these shepherds were kind men, and once they were in the wild, they realized that they could not kill an innocent newborn. Instead they decided to disobey Laius and take the baby with them through the wilderness to the city-state of Corinth, the neighbor of Thebes.

When they reached the walls of the city, they heard news that the King of Corinth’s young son had just died. They requested an audience with the King and said, “We found this baby in the woods. Would you take him as a replacement for your lost son?”

The King of Corinth agreed and took the baby as his own—naming him Oedipus. As a prince of Corinth, Oedipus grew up from a small boy into a young man—thinking that his true father was the Corinthian King.

When he came of age, he went to see an oracle to tell him of his future, as every Greek boy was to. What he heard was the same message his father had heard, “You will murder your father and marry your mother.” Horrified at this, Oedipus decided to run away from Corinth. He could not risk accidentally harming who he believed to be his mother and father. He set out on the dusty road that ran between Corinth and Thebes.

For several months, a terrible beast had been plaguing the travelers on this road. It was the Sphinx—a creature with the head of a woman, the body of a lion, the wings of an eagle, and the tail of a snake. This fearsome creature liked to toy with its victims before it killed them. It would ask a riddle, and if the person could not find the answer, the beast would devour him. This had become such a problem that Laius—Oedipus’ real father—had decided to go abroad and seek help from the other kings in Greece. He disguised himself as an old traveling man—the highway was full of bandits who would love to take the spoils of a king. Laius set out upon the same road as Oedipus.

Meanwhile, Oedipus—in his flight—had encountered the Sphinx. The creature began by asking its riddle. “What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening?” it asked. Oedipus thought for a moment. He was a wise young boy. “Man,” he said. “When we are young, we crawl on four legs. When we are in our prime, we walk on two. When we get old, we walk with a cane.” The Sphinx screamed, and in its anger at having its riddle ruined, threw itself from a nearby cliff—meeting its death at the bottom. Oedipus was free to continue his journey. Soon he encountered a group of men on the road—their leader an old irritable man. The old man cursed Oedipus and told him to get out of the road. He even raised his stick to strike the boy—but Oedipus

dodged and pushed the man from his horse. The man landed heavily on his head, and the young prince ran away in fright. He did not know it, but the elderly man died, and unwittingly he had fulfilled the first part of the prophecy.

Frightened and fearful—Oedipus reached the city of Thebes. Part of the king's party had returned and was wailing that Laius had been killed by a robber. The city was in mourning and without a king. Since he was a stranger and suspicious, Oedipus was brought before the distraught queen and questioned. The boy said that he knew nothing about the king's death—which was true—he did not know the old man had been the king. But he told them Thebes no longer had to worry about the Sphinx, because he had killed it. The people were overjoyed. So, overjoyed, in fact, that they made him their new king and gave him the slightly older queen as his bride.

Many years passed—Oedipus and Jocasta had two sons and two daughters and were very happy. Then Thebes fell under a famine. Famine was always a sign of the gods' anger, so the King and Queen sent for an oracle. The oracle told them that the crops would not grow until Laius' murderer was found and punished for his crime. Oedipus sent out men to every corner of the city-state searching for the robber who had killed the old king, but he could not be found. They had one last hope. They called upon Tiresias—the famous blind prophet of Thebes—to ask him to solve the riddle.

When Tiresias appeared and they asked him their question, he only laughed. "Fools—all of you fools. Do you not know that *you* are the king's murderer and that you have married your mother?" Oedipus was at first outraged at the old blind holy man. How dare he say such things! He was raised in Corinth! But a group of old shepherds happened to be paying homage to their monarch, and they overheard the King's yelling.

"It is true!" they said. "It was we who took a baby from Thebes to the King of Corinth to be raised as his own."

Oedipus could not believe it. In spite of all his efforts, the prophecy had come true. Jocasta ran from the throne room in tears. Oedipus followed her—but when he reached her chambers, she was dead—dangling at the end of a rope. Taking her brooch from her lifeless body, Oedipus cried out, "I no longer wish to see such a cruel world!" And he poked out his eyes with the pin and disappeared—blood flowing from his wounds and screaming like a madman. The rest of his life, he wandered the earth as a blind beggar—accompanied by his two kind daughters. He died in the desert—a pawn to the will of the gods.

Read and answer the following questions.

- 1. When the reader knows information that the characters in the story do not, this is called Dramatic Irony. For example, in movies the viewer sometimes knows that a killer is in the dark bedroom, but the actress in the movie does not. This creates tension and makes the film more enjoyable. How is Dramatic Irony used in the story of Oedipus? How does it make the story more interesting or suspenseful?**
- 2. Oedipus is a Tragic Hero, and all Tragic Heroes have a Tragic Flaw. What is Oedipus' Tragic Flaw? Why does he fall into the trap set for him by fate? What characteristic or personal philosophy leads him down this road to destruction? Hint: Think about Oedipus' reaction to the Oracle's information. What does he try to do?**