Plays of Sophocles: Oedipus the King; Oedipus at Colonus; Antigone

Sophocles

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The Oedipus Trilogy

by Sophocles

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OEDIPUS THE KING

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ARGUMENT

To Laius, King of Thebes, an oracle foretold that the child born to him by his queen Jocasta would slay his father and wed his mother. So when in time a son was born the infant's feet were riveted together and he was left to die on Mount Cithaeron. But a shepherd found the babe and tended him, and delivered him to another shepherd who took him to his master, the King of Corinth. Polybus being childless adopted the boy, who grew up believing that he was indeed the

King’s son. Afterwards doubting his parentage he inquired of the Delphic god and heard himself the word declared before to Laius. Wherefore he fled from what he deemed his father’s house and in his flight he encountered and unwillingly slew his father Laius. Arriving at Thebes he answered the riddle of the Sphinx and the grateful Thebans made their deliverer king. So he reigned in the room of Laius, and espoused the widowed queen. Children were born to them and Thebes prospered under his rule, but again a grievous plague fell upon the city. Again the oracle was consulted and it bade them purge themselves of blood-guiltiness. Oedipus denounces the crime of which he is unaware, and undertakes to track out the criminal. Step by step it is brought home to him that he is the man. The closing scene reveals Jocasta slain by her own hand and Oedipus blinded by his own act and praying for death or exile.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Oedipus.
The Priest of Zeus.
Creon.
Chorus of Theban Elders.
Teiresias.
Jocasta.
Messenger.
Herd of Laius.
Second Messenger.

Scene: Thebes. Before the Palace of Oedipus.

OEDIPUS THE KING

Suppliants of all ages are seated round the altar at the palace doors, at their head a PRIEST OF ZEUS. To them enter OEDIPUS.

OEDIPUS.

My children, latest born to Cadmus old,
Why sit ye here as suppliants, in your hands
Branches of olive filleted with wool?
What means this reek of incense everywhere,
And everywhere laments and litanies?
Children, it were not meet that I should learn
From others, and am hither come, myself,
I Oedipus, your world-renowned king.
Ho! aged sire, whose venerable locks
Proclaim thee spokesman of this company,
Explain your mood and purport. Is it dread
Of ill that moves you or a boon ye crave?
My zeal in your behalf ye cannot doubt;
Ruthless indeed were I and obdurate
If such petitioners as you I spurned.

PRIEST.

Yea, Oedipus, my sovereign lord and king,
Thou seest how both extremes of age besiege
Thy palace altars—fledglings hardly winged,
and greybeards bowed with years; priests, as am I
of Zeus, and these the flower of our youth.
Meanwhile, the common folk, with wreathed boughs

Crowd our two market-places, or before
Both shrines of Pallas congregate, or where
Ismenus gives his oracles by fire.
For, as thou seest thyself, our ship of State,
Sore buffeted, can no more lift her head,
Foundered beneath a weltering surge of blood.
A blight is on our harvest in the ear,
A blight upon the grazing flocks and herds,
A blight on wives in travail; and withal
Armed with his blazing torch the God of Plague
Hath swooped upon our city emptying
The house of Cadmus, and the murky realm
Of Pluto is full fed with groans and tears.

Therefore, O King, here at thy hearth we sit,
I and these children; not as deeming thee
A new divinity, but the first of men;
First in the common accidents of life,
And first in visitations of the Gods.
Art thou not he who coming to the town
of Cadmus freed us from the tax we paid
To the fell songstress? Nor hadst thou received
Prompting from us or been by others schooled;
No, by a god inspired (so all men deem,
And testify) didst thou renew our life.
And now, O Oedipus, our peerless king,
All we thy votaries beseech thee, find
Some succor, whether by a voice from heaven
Whispered, or haply known by human wit.

Tried counselors, methinks, are aptest found1
To furnish for the future pregnant rede.
Upraise, O chief of men, upraise our State!
Look to thy laurels! for thy zeal of yore
Our country’s savior thou art justly hailed:
O never may we thus record thy reign:—
“He raised us up only to cast us down.”
Uplift us, build our city on a rock.
Thy happy star ascendant brought us luck,
O let it not decline! If thou wouldst rule
This land, as now thou reignest, better sure
To rule a peopled than a desert realm.
Nor battlements nor galleys aught avail,
If men to man and guards to guard them tail.

OEDIPUS.

Ah! my poor children, known, ah, known too well,
The quest that brings you hither and your need.
Ye sicken all, well wot I, yet my pain,
How great soever yours, outtops it all.
Your sorrow touches each man severally,
Him and none other, but I grieve at once
Both for the general and myself and you.
Therefore ye rouse no sluggard from day-dreams.
Many, my children, are the tears I’ve wept,
And threaded many a maze of weary thought.
Thus pondering one clue of hope I caught,
And tracked it up; I have sent Menoeceus’ son,

Creon, my consort's brother, to inquire
Of Pythian Phoebus at his Delphic shrine,
How I might save the State by act or word.
And now I reckon up the tale of days
Since he set forth, and marvel how he fares.
'Tis strange, this endless tarrying, passing strange.
But when he comes, then I were base indeed,
If I perform not all the god declares.

PRIEST.
Thy words are well timed; even as thou speakest
That shouting tells me Creon is at hand.

OEDIPUS.
O King Apollo! may his joyous looks
Be presage of the joyous news he brings!

PRIEST.
As I surmise, 'tis welcome; else his head
Had scarce been crowned with berry-laden bays.

OEDIPUS.
We soon shall know; he's now in earshot range.
[Enter CREON]
My royal cousin, say, Menoeceus' child,
What message hast thou brought us from the god?

CREON.
Good news, for e'en intolerable ills,
Finding right issue, tend to naught but good.

OEDIPUS.
How runs the oracle? thus far thy words
Give me no ground for confidence or fear.

CREON.
If thou wouldst hear my message publicly,
I'll tell thee straight, or with thee pass within.

OEDIPUS.
Speak before all; the burden that I bear
Is more for these my subjects than myself.

CREON.
Let me report then all the god declared.
King Phoebus bids us straitly extirpate
A fell pollution that infests the land,
And no more harbor an inveterate sore.

OEDIPUS. What expiation means he? What's amiss?

CREON.
Banishment, or the shedding blood for blood.
This stain of blood makes shipwreck of our state.

OEDIPUS. Whom can he mean, the miscreant thus denounced?

CREON.
Before thou didst assume the helm of State,
The sovereign of this land was Laius.

OEDIPUS. I heard as much, but never saw the man.

CREON.

He fell; and now the god's command is plain:
Punish his takers-off, whoe'er they be.

OEDIPUS.
Where are they? Where in the wide world to find
The far, faint traces of a bygone crime?

CREON.
In this land, said the god; "who seeks shall find;
Who sits with folded hands or sleeps is blind."

OEDIPUS.
Was he within his palace, or afield,
Or traveling, when Laius met his fate?

CREON.
Abroad; he started, so he told us, bound
For Delphi, but he never thence returned.

OEDIPUS.
Came there no news, no fellow-traveler
To give some clue that might be followed up?

CREON.
But one escape, who flying for dear life,
Could tell of all he saw but one thing sure.

OEDIPUS.
And what was that? One clue might lead us far,
With but a spark of hope to guide our quest.

CREON.
Robbers, he told us, not one bandit but

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