

Oedipus the King

Sophocles

Translated by Robert Fagles



GUIDE FOR READING

FOCUS A terrible plague has struck the city of Thebes. Plants, animals, and people are dying in great numbers. The priests of the city seek help from Oedipus, their king. As you read, look for details that help you form impressions of Oedipus as a leader.

Time and Scene: *The royal house of Thebes. Double doors dominate the façade; a stone altar stands at the center of the stage.*

Many years have passed since Oedipus solved the riddle of the Sphinx and ascended the throne of Thebes, and now a plague has struck the city. A procession of priests enters; suppliants, broken and despondent, they carry branches wound in wool and lay them on the altar.

The doors open. Guards assemble. Oedipus comes forward, majestic but for a telltale limp, and slowly views the condition of his people.

Oedipus. Oh my children, the new blood of ancient Thebes,
why are you here? Huddling at my altar,
praying before me, your branches wound in wool.
Our city reeks with the smoke of burning incense,
rings with cries for the Healer and wailing for the dead.
5 I thought it wrong, my children, to hear the truth
from others, messengers. Here I am myself—
you all know me, the world knows my fame:
I am Oedipus.

(helping a Priest to his feet)

3 branches wound in wool: tokens placed on altars by people seeking favors from the gods.

5 the Healer: the god Apollo, who could both cause and cure plagues.

WORDS TO KNOW



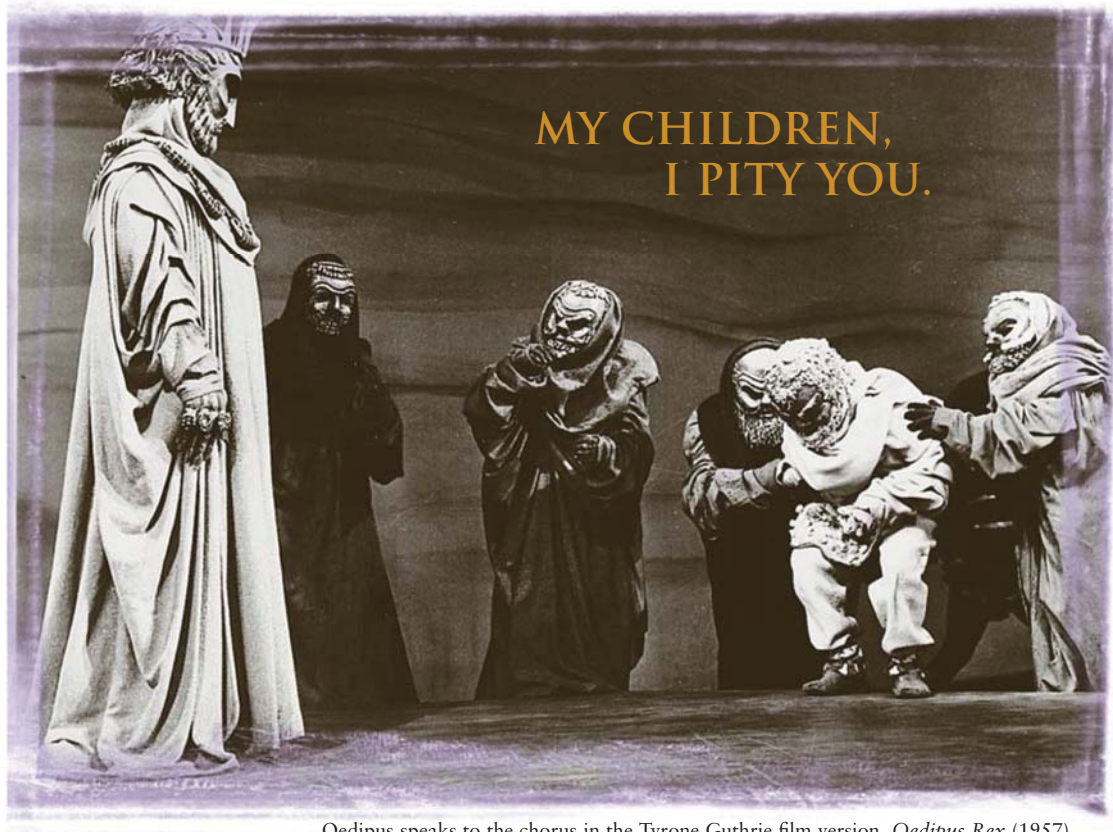
So now again,
50 Oedipus, king, we bend to you, your power—
we implore you, all of us on our knees:
find us strength, rescue! Perhaps you've heard
the voice of a god or something from other men,
Oedipus . . . what do you know?
55 The man of experience—you see it every day—
his plans will work in a crisis, his first of all.

Act now—we beg you, best of men, raise up our city!
Act, defend yourself, your former glory!
Your country calls you savior now
60 for your zeal, your action years ago.
Never let us remember of your reign:
you helped us stand, only to fall once more.
Oh raise up our city, set us on our feet.
The omens were good that day you brought us joy—
65 be the same man today!
Rule our land, you know you have the power,
but rule a land of the living, not a wasteland.
Ship and towered city are nothing, stripped of men
alive within it, living all as one.

Oedipus. My children,
70 I pity you. I see—how could I fail to see
what longings bring you here? Well I know
you are sick to death, all of you,
but sick as you are, not one is sick as I.
Your pain strikes each of you alone, each
75 in the confines of himself, no other. But my spirit
grieves for the city, for myself and all of you.
I wasn't asleep, dreaming. You haven't wakened me—
I have wept through the nights, you must know that,
groping, laboring over many paths of thought.
80 After a painful search I found one cure:
I acted at once. I sent Creon,
my wife's own brother, to Delphi—
Apollo the Prophet's oracle—to learn
what I might do or say to save our city.

85 Today's the day. When I count the days gone by
it torments me . . . what is he doing?
Strange, he's late, he's gone too long.

82 Delphi (děl'fī'): the site of a temple where prophecies were delivered by a priestess of Apollo.



Oedipus speaks to the chorus in the Tyrone Guthrie film version, *Oedipus Rex* (1957).

But once he returns, then, then I'll be a traitor
if I do not do all the god makes clear.

- 90 **Priest.** Timely words. The men over there
are signaling—Creon's just arriving.

PAUSE & REFLECT What are your impressions of
Oedipus as a leader?

FOCUS Creon is returning from Delphi with news from
the god Apollo. Read to find out about the cause of the
plague in Thebes.

Oedipus (*sighting Creon, then turning to the altar*).
Lord Apollo,
let him come with a lucky word of rescue,
shining like his eyes!

- 95 **Priest.** Welcome news, I think—he's crowned, look,
and the laurel wreath is bright with berries.

95 laurel wreath: a crown of
leaves worn by those seeking the
help of the oracle at Delphi.



Oedipus. We'll soon see. He's close enough to hear—
(*Enter Creon from the side; his face is shaded with a wreath.*)

Creon, prince, my kinsman, what do you bring us?
What message from the god?

Creon. Good news.

I tell you even the hardest things to bear,
100 if they should turn out well, all would be well.

Oedipus. Of course, but what were the god's *words*? There's
no hope
and nothing to fear in what you've said so far.

Creon. If you want my report in the presence of these
people . . .

(*pointing to the priests while drawing Oedipus toward the palace*)

I'm ready now, or we might go inside.

Oedipus. Speak out,
105 speak to us all. I grieve for these, my people,
far more than I fear for my own life.

Creon. Very well,

I will tell you what I heard from the god.
Apollo commands us—he was quite clear—
“Drive the corruption from the land,
110 don't harbor it any longer, past all cure,
don't nurse it in your soil—root it out!”

Oedipus. How can we cleanse ourselves—what rites?
What's the source of the trouble?

Creon. Banish the man, or pay back blood with blood.
115 Murder sets the plague-storm on the city.

Oedipus. Whose murder?
Whose fate does Apollo bring to light?

Creon. Our leader,
my lord, was once a man named Laius,
before you came and put us straight on course.

117 **Laius** (lā'ēs): the king of Thebes before Oedipus.

Oedipus. I know—
or so I've heard. I never saw the man myself.

120 **Creon.** Well, he was killed, and Apollo commands us now—
he could not be more clear,
“Pay the killers back—whoever is responsible.”



Oedipus. Where on earth are they? Where to find it now,
the trail of the ancient guilt so hard to trace?

125 **Creon.** “Here in Thebes,” he said.
Whatever is sought for can be caught, you know,
whatever is neglected slips away.

Oedipus. But where,
in the palace, the fields or foreign soil,
where did Laius meet his bloody death?

130 **Creon.** He went to consult an oracle, Apollo said,
and he set out and never came home again.

Oedipus. No messenger, no fellow-traveler saw what
happened?
Someone to cross-examine?

Creon. No,
they were all killed but one. He escaped,
135 terrified, he could tell us nothing clearly,
nothing of what he saw—just one thing.

Oedipus. What’s that?
One thing could hold the key to it all,
a small beginning give us grounds for hope.

140 **Creon.** He said thieves attacked them—a whole band,
not single-handed, cut King Laius down.

Oedipus. A thief,
so daring, so wild, he’d kill a king? Impossible,
unless conspirators paid him off in Thebes.

Creon. We suspected as much. But with Laius dead
no leader appeared to help us in our troubles.

145 **Oedipus.** Trouble? Your *king* was murdered—royal blood!
What stopped you from tracking down the killer
then and there?

Creon. The singing, riddling Sphinx.
She . . . persuaded us to let the mystery go
and concentrate on what lay at our feet.

Oedipus. No,
150 I’ll start again—I’ll bring it all to light myself!
Apollo is right, and so are you, Creon,
to turn our attention back to the murdered man.
Now you have *me* to fight for you, you’ll see:
I am the land’s avenger by all rights,
155 and Apollo’s champion too.

154 avenger: one who punishes wrongdoing.



But not to assist some distant kinsman, no,
for my own sake I'll rid us of this corruption.
Whoever killed the king may decide to kill me too,
with the same violent hand—by avenging Laius
160 I defend myself.

(to the priests)

Quickly, my children.
Up from the steps, take up your branches now.
(to the guards)

One of you summon the city here before us,
tell them I'll do everything. God help us,
we will see our triumph—or our fall.
(Oedipus and Creon enter the palace, followed by the guards.)

165 **Priest.** Rise, my sons. The kindness we came for
Oedipus volunteers himself.
Apollo has sent his word, his oracle—
Come down, Apollo, save us, stop the plague.
(The priests rise, remove their branches and exit to the side.)

PAUSE & REFLECT What is the cause of the plague in Thebes?

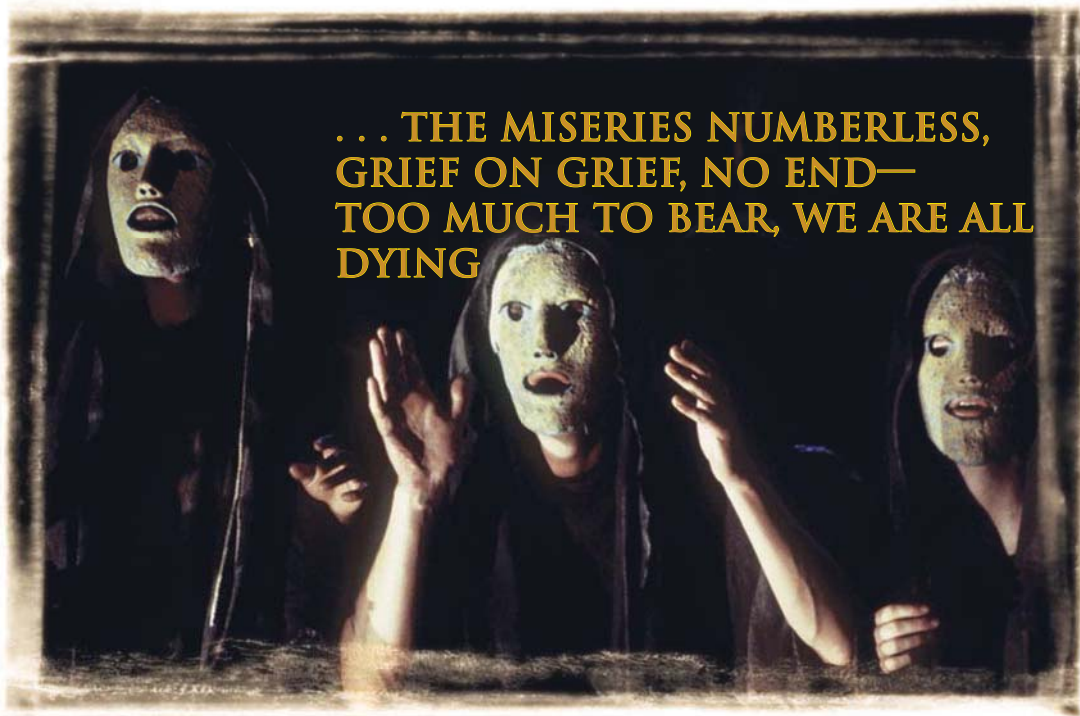
FOCUS The chorus enters and chants a plea to the gods, describing the people's sufferings. As you read, look for details that help you visualize the sufferings of the people of Thebes.

(Enter a Chorus, the citizens of Thebes, who have not heard the news that Creon brings. They march around the altar, chanting.)

Chorus. Zeus!
Great welcome voice of Zeus, what do you bring?
170 What word from the gold vaults of Delphi
comes to brilliant Thebes? Racked with terror—
terror shakes my heart
and I cry your wild cries, Apollo, Healer of Delos
I worship you in dread . . . what now, what is your price?
175 some new sacrifice? some ancient rite from the past
come round again each spring?—

157 corruption: pollution; contamination.

173 Delos (dē'lōs'): the island where Apollo was born.



Masked members of the chorus, from a stage production of *Oedipus the King*, directed by Peter Hall (1996).

what will you bring to birth?
Tell me, child of golden Hope
warm voice that never dies!

180 You are the first I call, daughter of Zeus
deathless Athena—I call your sister Artemis,
heart of the market place enthroned in glory,
guardian of our earth—
I call Apollo, Archer astride the thunderheads of heaven—
185 O triple shield against death, shine before me now!
If ever, once in the past, you stopped some ruin
launched against our walls
you hurled the flame of pain
far, far from Thebes—you gods
190 come now, come down once more!

180–244 In this chant the chorus prays to various gods—Athena, Artemis, Apollo, Zeus, and Dionysus—for help and protection.

No, no
the miseries numberless, grief on grief, no end—
too much to bear, we are all dying
O my people . . .
Thebes like a great army dying



195 and there is no sword of thought to save us, no
and the fruits of our famous earth, they will not ripen
no and the women cannot scream their pangs to birth—
screams for the Healer, children dead in the womb
and life on life goes down

200 you can watch them go
like seabirds winging west, outracing the day's fire
down the horizon, irresistibly
streaking on to the shores of Evening

Death
so many deaths, numberless deaths on deaths, no end—
205 Thebes is dying, look, her children
stripped of pity . . .
generations strewn on the ground
unburied, unwept, the dead spreading death
and the young wives and gray-haired mothers with them
210 cling to the altars, trailing in from all over the city—
Thebes, city of death, one long cortege
and the suffering rises

211 cortege (kôr-tězh'): funeral procession.

wails for mercy rise
and the wild hymn for the Healer blazes out
215 clashing with our sobs our cries of mourning—
O golden daughter of god, send rescue
radiant as the kindness in your eyes!
Drive him back!—the fever, the god of death
that raging god of war
220 not armored in bronze, not shielded now, he burns me,
battle cries in the onslaught burning on—
O rout him from our borders!

216 golden daughter of god: Athena.

Sail him, blast him out to the Sea-queen's chamber
the black Atlantic gulfs
225 or the northern harbor, death to all
where the Thracian surf comes crashing.
Now what the night spares he comes by day and kills—
the god of death.

223 Sea-queen's chamber: the ocean depths—home of Amphitrite, wife of the sea god Poseidon.

226 Thracian (thrā'shən) **surf:** the rough waters of the western Black Sea.

O lord of the stormcloud,
you who twirl the lightning, Zeus, Father,
230 thunder Death to nothing!

Apollo, lord of the light, I beg you—
whip your longbow's golden cord
showering arrows on our enemies—shafts of power



champions strong before us rushing on!

235 Artemis, Huntress,
torches flaring over the eastern ridges—
ride Death down in pain!

God of the headdress gleaming gold, I cry to you—
your name and ours are one, Dionysus—
240 come with your face aflame with wine
your raving women's cries
your army on the march! Come with the lightning
come with torches blazing, eyes ablaze with glory!
Burn that god of death that all gods hate!

239 your name and ours are one, Dionysus (dī'ə-nī'sēs): Dionysus, god of wine, was born of a Theban woman.

PAUSE & REFLECT What details helped you visualize Thebes as a city of death?

FOCUS Oedipus will now speak to his people. Read to find out what he intends to do to the killer or killers of Laius.

(Oedipus enters from the palace to address the Chorus, as if addressing the entire city of Thebes.)

245 **Oedipus.** You pray to the gods? Let me grant your prayers.
Come, listen to me—do what the plague demands:
you'll find relief and lift your head from the depths.

I will speak out now as a stranger to the story,
a stranger to the crime. If I'd been present then,
250 there would have been no mystery, no long hunt
without a clue in hand. So now, counted
a native Theban years after the murder,
to all of Thebes I make this proclamation:
if any one of you knows who murdered Laius,
255 the son of Labdacus, I order him to reveal
the whole truth to me. Nothing to fear,
even if he must denounce himself,
let him speak up
and so escape the brunt of the charge—
260 he will suffer no unbearable punishment,
nothing worse than exile, totally unharmed.

255 Labdacus (lăb'də-kəs).

(Oedipus pauses, waiting for a reply.)

WORDS TO KNOW