

Oedipus

(‘swollen foot’) A king of Thebes; the son of Laius and his wife Jocasta (Epicaste in Homer).

The Homeric version of his story differs from the later tradition used by Sophocles in his three Theban plays, *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*, by Aeschylus in *Seven against Thebes*, and by Euripides in his *Phoenician Women* and other plays that are now lost.

King Laius, while a refugee at the court of Pelops at Pisa, abducted his host's son Chrysippus; from this deed many believed the curse of the house of Laius to have sprung. On his return to Thebes, Laius married Jocasta, the daughter of Menoeceus, one of the ‘Sown Men’. But shortly afterwards an oracle warned him that any son Jocasta bore him would kill him. When, therefore, his wife bore him a son, he took the infant, pierced his feet with a spike (perhaps to hasten his death, or after his death to prevent his ghost from walking), and abandoned him on Mount Cithaeron. However the Theban shepherd charged with this task disobeyed his orders, and instead handed the baby to a Corinthian shepherd, who took him to his king, Polybus; and he, a childless man, decided to adopt the child, calling him Oedipus.

When Oedipus had grown up, he was taunted one day at a banquet with being not Polybus' own son, but a bastard. He therefore went to Delphi to enquire the truth and was there informed that he was destined to kill his father and marry his mother; and the horrified priests drove him away from Delphi. Still believing that King Polybus and Queen Merope were his parents, he resolved never to return to Corinth, and made his way back to Boeotia. At a crossroads he met a stranger—King Laius, though he did not know it—riding in a carriage; and its driver ordered Oedipus to make way in the narrow road. Oedipus refused and the driver pressed forward, running a wheel over Oedipus' foot. Furthermore the rider in the carriage, in passing, struck him a blow with his staff; and Oedipus, enraged, killed the rider and all the rest of the party, except one servant who ran away.

Continuing his journey, Oedipus came to Thebes, where he found the people in great distress. King Laius, it appeared, had recently been killed on the way to Delphi, to which he had been going to consult the oracle about the Sphinx, a dangerous monster that was plaguing Thebes. For she had been eating its citizens whenever they could not answer its riddle: ‘What creature walks on four legs in the morning, on two at noon, and on three at evening, and is weakest when it walks on most?’ She had already devoured many people, including, it was said, Haemon, son of the regent Creon (though in other versions of the story he was younger, and survived to be betrothed to Antigone; or it could be supposed that Creon had two sons of the same name). Now that Laius was dead, Creon offered the throne, together with the hand of his sister, Laius' widow Jocasta, to any man who would rid Thebes of the pest. This Oedipus did, by replying correctly that the answer to the riddle was Man, who walks on all fours as a baby and leans on a stick in old age. In this way he brought the oracle to completion for, having already unintentionally killed his father Laius, he now married his mother Jocasta.

In Homer's version of the story, Jocasta, who had married her son in ignorance, was quickly made aware of her sin and hanged herself, whereas Oedipus himself, in spite of his grief at his two unwitting crimes, continued to rule Thebes for many years. The geographical writer Pausanias concludes from this that another woman, whom he calls Eurygania daughter of Hyperphas, bore him his sons; of his daughters Homer knows nothing. He also knows nothing of his exile and says that he died in battle.

The version adopted by Sophocles is quite different. Oedipus and Jocasta, aided by Jocasta's brother Creon, ruled over Thebes happily for several years, having two sons, Polynices and Eteocles, and two daughters, Antigone and Ismene. Then Thebes was struck by plague once again, and the whole country became barren, so that all births ceased. Creon went to Delphi to enquire what should be done, and brought back the command to drive out the murderers of Laius. The prophet Tiresias backed up the oracle and angered Oedipus by declaring that he was the guilty man. At that same time King Polybus of Corinth died, and the Corinthians, believing Oedipus to be his heir, sent him a message asking him to become their king. He told the messenger that he could not, as he was afraid to go near his mother Merope, Polybus' wife. The messenger—the Corinthian shepherd who had long ago handed over the infant Oedipus to Polybus—denied that Oedipus was Merope's son. Oedipus, following up information received from him, arranged that the Theban shepherd, who had received him from Laius, should be found and, in spite of the man's warnings, elicited from him the dreadful truth about himself. Jocasta hanged herself, and Oedipus blinded himself with her brooch. Creon took over the regency, and banished Oedipus as the Delphic Oracle had commanded.

How long a time elapsed before he went into exile was variously reported. One tradition maintained that Oedipus spent many years in Thebes while his children grew to manhood and Jocasta's brother Creon acted as regent. During this period it was said he quarrelled violently with Eteocles and Polynices, solemnly cursing them because they served him a meal on Laius' royal plate which he considered cursed; and on another occasion, when they gave him the second-best portion of meat, he regarded it as unfit for a king, and prayed that they might kill each other. Finally Creon was believed to have cast him out—perhaps at the time when Eteocles became king of Thebes—and Oedipus wandered away from the city, accompanied by his elder daughter Antigone, who was betrothed to Creon's son Haemon. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, however, Sophocles makes Oedipus accuse Polynices of having driven him out of Thebes.

The curses Oedipus had pronounced against his sons took effect shortly afterwards, for both of them claimed the throne at Thebes, and an agreement to take turns year by year collapsed when Eteocles, after his year of office, refused to surrender the throne. In consequence King Adrastus of Argos, who was the father of Polynices' wife, brought an army to Thebes to restore his son-in-law and attacked the city at all its seven gates. Before this attack, however, Polynices went to Colonus, near Athens, where Oedipus had found a refuge, and begged for his blessing—since an oracle had forecast success to the side Oedipus supported: but received a curse instead. Because of the same oracle Creon, who supported Eteocles, tried to kidnap Oedipus from Colonus, desiring to bury his body at Thebes; for this, it was prophesied, would save the city. But he was driven off by Theseus' Athenian troops. In his gratitude, Oedipus assured Theseus that the presence of his body would guarantee Athens' safety against any future attack from Thebes. Then he died at Colonus, leaving his blessing upon Attica, the land that had given him his last refuge. Only Theseus knew the site of his tomb. Another tradition, consistent with the Homeric story of Oedipus, states that the Thebans, after celebrating magnificent funeral games for their king, buried him outside their city at Ceus, but a plague afflicted the place, whereupon his bones were secretly moved by night to Eteonus. The Eteonians, unhappy about the matter, consulted the Delphic Oracle; but it bade them leave the tomb alone, for Oedipus was now a guest of Demeter, in whose grove he lay.

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