

MJC ENGLISH, SEM II

Sophocles: The Oedipus

Summary Oedipus: 01-337

Oedipus steps out of the royal palace of Thebes and is greeted by a procession of priests, who are in turn surrounded by the impoverished and sorrowful citizens of Thebes. The citizens carry branches wrapped in wool, which they offer to the gods as gifts. Thebes has been struck by a plague, the citizens are dying, and no one knows how to put an end to it. Oedipus asks a priest why the citizens have gathered around the palace. The priest responds that the city is dying and asks the king to save Thebes. Oedipus replies that he sees and understands the terrible fate of Thebes, and that no one is more sorrowful than he. He has sent Creon, his brother-in-law and fellow ruler, to the Delphic oracle to find out how to stop the plague. Just then, Creon arrives, and Oedipus asks what the oracle has said. Creon asks Oedipus if he wants to hear the news in private, but Oedipus insists that all the citizens hear. Creon then tells what he has learned from the god Apollo, who spoke through the oracle: the murderer of Laius, who ruled Thebes before Oedipus, is in Thebes. He must be driven out in order for the plague to end.

Creon goes on to tell the story of Laius's murder. On their way to consult an oracle, Laius and all but one of his fellow travelers were killed by thieves. Oedipus asks why the Thebans made no attempt to find the murderers, and Creon reminds him that Thebes was then more concerned with the curse of the Sphinx. Hearing this, Oedipus resolves to solve the mystery of Laius's murder.

The Chorus enters, calling on the gods Apollo, Athena, and Artemis to save Thebes. Apparently, it has not heard Creon's news about Laius's murderer. It bemoans the state of Thebes, and finally invokes Dionysus, whose mother was a Theban. Oedipus returns and tells the Chorus that he will end the plague himself. He asks if anyone knows who killed Laius, promising that the informant will be rewarded and the murderer will receive no harsher punishment than exile. No one responds, and Oedipus furiously curses Laius's murderer and anyone who is protecting him. Oedipus curses himself, proclaiming that should he discover the murderer to be a member of his own family, that person should be struck by the same exile and harsh treatment that he has just wished on the murderer. Oedipus castigates the

citizens of Thebes for letting the murderer go unknown so long. The Leader of the Chorus suggests that Oedipus call for Tiresias, a great prophet, and Oedipus responds that he has already done so.

Analysis

Oedipus is notable for his compassion, his sense of justice, his swiftness of thought and action, and his candor. At this early stage in the play, Oedipus represents all that an Athenian audience—or indeed any audience—could desire in a citizen or a leader. In his first speech, which he delivers to an old priest whose suffering he seeks to alleviate, he continually voices his concern for the health and well-being of his people. He insists upon allowing all his people to hear what the oracle has said, despite Creon's suggestion that Oedipus hear the news in private. When Creon retells the story of Laius's murder, Oedipus is shocked and dismayed that the investigation of the murder of a king was so swiftly dropped (145–147). Oedipus quickly hatches plans to deal with both his people's suffering and Laius's unsolved murder, and he has even anticipated the Chorus's suggestions that he send someone to the oracle and call forth Tiresias. Finally, Oedipus is vehement in his promises of dire punishment for Laius's murderer, even if the murderer turns out to be someone close to Oedipus himself.

Sophocles' audience knew the ancient story of Oedipus well, and would therefore interpret the greatness Oedipus exudes in the first scene as a tragic harbinger of his fall. Sophocles seizes every opportunity to exploit this dramatic irony. Oedipus frequently alludes to sight and blindness, creating many moments of dramatic irony, since the audience knows that it is Oedipus's metaphorical blindness to the relationship between his past and his present situation that brings about his ruin. For example, when the old priest tells Oedipus that the people of Thebes are dying of the plague, Oedipus says that he could not fail to *see* this (68–72). Oedipus eagerly attempts to uncover the truth, acting decisively and scrupulously refusing to shield himself from the truth. Although we are able to see him as a mere puppet of fate, at some points, the irony is so magnified that it seems almost as if Oedipus brings catastrophe upon himself willingly. One such instance of this irony is when Oedipus proclaims proudly—but, for the audience, painfully—that he possesses the bed of the former king, and that marriage might have even created “blood-bonds” between him and Laius had Laius not been murdered (294–300).

