

OEDIPUS THE KING

Sophocles, ca. 496-406 BC

The play won second prize in the festival of Dionysus, Athens, Greece, ca. 429 BC.

Like stories and poetry, drama originates from preliterate folk traditions, such as song, dance and religious ceremonies. Body painting (make-up), masks and other devices also have ancient antecedents. According to Aristotle, Greek tragedy originated from the *dithyramb*, a choral hymn to the god of wine, Dionysus. The legend is that in 534 BC, the lead singer at the Festival of Dionysus, a man named Thespis, added an actor to the chorus and carried on a dialogue, creating the possibility for dramatic action. The great playwright Aeschylus (525-456 BC) added a second actor, and his younger rival, Sophocles, a third. Sophocles triumphed over Aeschylus at the festival in 468 BC. Sophocles won first prize over twenty times and never finished lower than second. The dramatic Festival of Dionysus in Athens compared in prestige with the athletic games at Olympia, another city in ancient Greece. The plays were staged in an amphitheater, like those in Lakewood or Chastain Park in Atlanta, which have excellent natural acoustics (no electricity — so the plays were performed in the afternoon). Nine speaking characters are listed, but no more than three appear on stage at one time. So each actor, wearing masks, could play multiple characters. Sophocles makes good use of this feature of ancient drama with the horrific, gory mask Oedipus wears at the end. Sophocles was also a wealthy man, a general considered a hero long after his death, and a priest.

Translation by F. Storr, B.A.
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Originally published by Harvard University Press, 1912
The text has been edited and revised, with notes by Ted Wadley.

ARGUMENT (by the translator, Storr, not by Sophocles)

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 creveted 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 Polybus' son. Afterwards doubting his parentage he inquired of the Delphic god and heard himself the prophecy declared before to Laius. Therefore 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 savior king. So he reigned in the city of Laius, and married the **widowed queen**. Children were born to them and Thebes prospered under his rule, until again a grievous plague fell upon the city. Again the oracle was consulted and it bade them purge themselves of blood-guilt. Oedipus denounces the crime of which he is unaware, and undertakes to track down 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.

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