



Drama

OEDIPUS *the* KING

— BY SOPHOCLES —

Translated by Robert Fagles

PREVIEW For many years Oedipus has ruled Thebes in peace. Suddenly, the city again is faced with a crisis. Can Oedipus save the city for the second time?

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.

FOCUS

The priest describes how the people are suffering. Find out how Oedipus responds to his pleas for help.

MARK IT UP As you read, underline details that help you form an impression of Oedipus as a leader. An example is highlighted on this page.

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. 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)

Speak up, old man. Your years, your dignity—you should speak for the others. Why here and kneeling, what preys upon you so? Some sudden fear? some strong desire? You can trust me. I am ready to help, I'll do anything. I would be blind to misery not to pity my people kneeling at my feet.

Priest. Oh Oedipus, king of the land, our greatest power! You see us before you now, men of all ages clinging to your altars. Here are boys, still too weak to fly from the nest, and here the old, bowed down with the years, the holy ones—a priest of Zeus myself—and here the picked, unmarried men, the young hope of Thebes.

WORDS TO KNOW

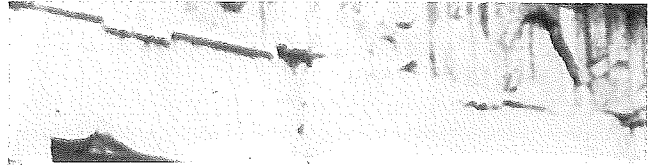
despondent (dī-spōn'dənt) *adj.* sad; depressed

GUIDE FOR READING

Use this guide for help with unfamiliar words and difficult passages.

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.



As the play begins . . .

- Oedipus listens to one of the priests from Thebes as he describes the horrible suffering and asks Oedipus for help.
- Oedipus sets out to save his people.

More About . . .

GREEK RELIGIOUS RITUALS The priests lay **(branches wound in wool)** on the altar as an offering to the god Apollo. They want to make Apollo happy so that he will remove the plague from the people.



This story is told in the form of a play. Pay close attention to the stage directions in *italic*, or slanted, type. They describe the setting, give background information, and tell how the characters move on the stage.

Cast of Characters

Oedipus (ĕd'ĕ-pĕs), king of Thebes

Priests of Thebes

Creon (krĕ'ŏn'), Oedipus' brother-in-law, brother of Queen Jocasta

Chorus, the people of Thebes

Tiresias (ti-rĕ'sĕ-ĕs), a blind prophet

Leader, a wise citizen of Thebes

Guards and attendants

And all the rest, your great family gathers now,
branches wreathed, massing in the squares,
25 kneeling before the two temples of queen Athena
or the river-shrine where the embers glow and die
and Apollo sees the future in the ashes.

Our city—
look around you, see with your own eyes—
our ship pitches wildly, cannot lift her head
30 from the depths, the red waves of death . . .
Thebes is dying. A blight on the fresh crops
and the rich pastures, cattle sicken and die,
and the women die in labor, children stillborn,
and the plague, the fiery god of fever hurls down
35 on the city, his lightning slashing through us—
raging plague in all its vengeance, devastating
the house of Cadmus! And black Death luxuriates
in the raw, wailing miseries of Thebes.

Now we pray to you. You cannot equal the gods,
40 your children know that, bending at your altar.
But we do rate you first of men,
both in the common crises of our lives
and face-to-face encounters with the gods.
You freed us from the Sphinx, you came to Thebes
45 and cut us loose from the bloody tribute we had paid
that harsh, brutal singer. We taught you nothing,
no skill, no extra knowledge, still you triumphed.
A god was with you, so they say, and we believe it—
you lifted up our lives.

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.

GUIDE FOR READING

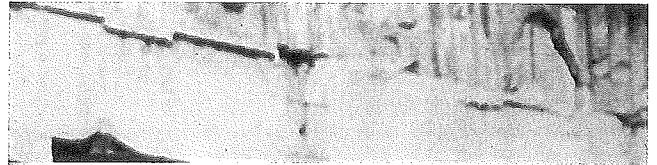
26 river-shrine: a shrine of Apollo in Thebes, where priests foretold the future by interpreting the way offerings to the god burned.

31 blight: a disease that withers plants.

37 Cadmus (kăd'məs): the founder of Thebes;
luxuriates (lŭg-zhŏor'ē-āts'): takes pleasure.

44 Sphinx (sfɪŋks): a monster that terrorized Thebes by devouring citizens who could not answer its riddle. Oedipus solved the riddle and became king.

45 bloody tribute: the human lives taken by the Sphinx.



the boxed text on page 76. What is happening in Thebes? Circle three sentences below. (Clarify)

Earthquakes are shaking the city.

Crops are dying.

Lightning is striking.

Cattle are getting sick.

Women and children are dying.



Reading Check

Why do the suppliants call Oedipus "first of men"?

MARK IT UP > KEEP TRACK

Remember to use these marks to keep track of your reading:

* This is important.

? I have a question about this.

! This is a surprise.

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

GUIDE FOR READING

60 your action years ago: Oedipus solved the riddle of the Sphinx years ago.

82 Delphi (dəl'fī'): the site of a temple where prophecies were made; the oracle at Delphi was dedicated to the god Apollo.



In this play, you will find references to things that were well known in ancient Greece but may be unfamiliar to you. Check the sidenotes found in the *Guide for Reading* for explanations.



Reader Success Strategy

Oedipus says that he understands the pain that the people are feeling. Rewrite his speech in your own words.



the boxed text on page 78. What action has Oedipus taken to try to stop the plague in Thebes? (Clarify)

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

Pause & Reflect

FOCUS

Creon returns from Delphi with news from the god Apollo. Read to find out what has caused the plague in Thebes and what the people must do to end it.

Oedipus (*sighting Creon, then turning to the altar*).

Lord Apollo,

let him come with a lucky word of rescue,
shining like his eyes!

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

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*)

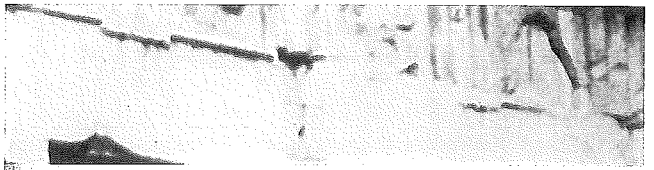
I’m ready now, or we might go inside.

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—

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

97 **kinsman:** close relative.



Pause & Reflect

Review the details you underlined. Then put a *T* next to each phrase below that is true about Oedipus. Put an *F* next to each phrase that is not true of him.
(Draw Conclusions)

- ___ cares about his people
- ___ listens to his people
- ___ dislikes his people
- ___ thinks he is doing what he can to help
- ___ is unfair

As the play continues . . .

- Creon explains why Apollo is angry.
- Oedipus is eager to fulfill Apollo's command.

More About . . .

THE ORACLE OF DELPHI The oracle at the Temple of Apollo at Delphi was believed to speak for Apollo and communicate the god's words.



The stage directions help you see what is happening as the characters speak. In line 103, Creon is trying to speak privately to Oedipus.

110 “Drive the corruption from the land,
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.

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.

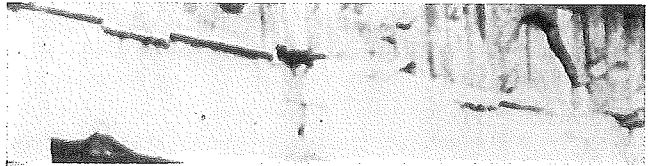
Oedipus. What’s that?

GUIDE FOR READING

109 **corruption:** pollution; contamination.

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

123–124 **Where . . . trace?:** Oedipus wonders how they will be able to find Laius' murderer after so many years have passed since the murder.



the boxed text on page 82. What do we know that Oedipus does not? Check one. (Analyze)

- Laius was once king of Thebes.
- Laius was murdered.
- Oedipus killed Laius many years before.

What Does It Mean?

To *cross-examine* someone means "to question someone closely."

One thing could hold the key to it all,
a small beginning give us grounds for hope.

Creon. He said thieves attacked them—a whole band,
140 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.

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.)*

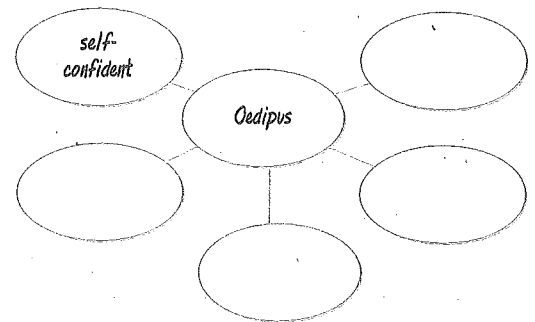
143 **conspirators:** people taking part in a secret plan to do something unlawful.

154 **avenger:** one who punishes wrongdoing.



★ **Reader Success Strategy**

Think about what you have learned about Oedipus. Fill in the following web with words that describe him.



✓ **Reading Check**

Why wasn't the murderer of Laius ever pursued and caught?



REREAD the first boxed passage on page 84. Do you think Oedipus is really "Apollo's champion"? Why or why not? (Make Judgments)



READ ALOUD the second boxed passage on page 84. Whom does Oedipus unknowingly refer to when he says "Whoever killed the king . . ."? (Analyze)

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

FOCUS

The Chorus represents the people of Thebes. It enters and chants a plea to the gods, describing the suffering of Thebes.

MARK IT UP > As you read, circle words and phrases that tell you about this suffering.

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

Chorus.

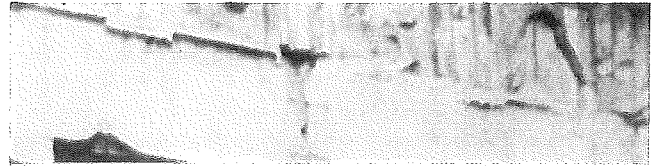
Zeus!

170 Great welcome voice of Zeus, what do you bring?
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?—
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!

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

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



Pause & Reflect

What is the cause of the plague in Thebes, and what must the people do to end it?
(Cause and Effect)

The cause:

The cure:

As the play continues . . .

- The citizens of Thebes, unaware of Creon's news, have gathered to ask the gods Zeus and Apollo for help.

More About . . .

THE GREEK CHORUS The Chorus consisted of at least twelve men who would sing or chant their lines in unison. Here, the Chorus represents all of the citizens of Thebes. They express the hopes and fears of ordinary citizens and make judgments about the characters.

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

195 Thebes like a great army dying
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

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!

Sail him, blast him out to the Sea-queen's chamber
the black Atlantic gulfs
225 or the northern harbor, death to all

GUIDE FOR READING

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

216 **golden daughter of god**: Athena.

222 **rout**: defeat and drive away.

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



Reading Check

"The Healer" refers to Apollo. What needs to be healed in Thebes?

READ ALOUD



the boxed text on page 88.
What picture does this image create in your mind? (Visualize)

What Does It Mean?

Generations strewn on the ground means that the corpses of babies, children, and adults of all ages are on the ground.



Reader Success Strategy

The Chorus is pleading with the gods to save Thebes. Rewrite their words in the form of a letter to the gods.

where the Thracian surf comes crashing.
Now what the night spares he comes by day and kills—
the god of death.

230 O lord of the stormcloud,
you who twirl the lightning, Zeus, Father,
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!

240 God of the headdress gleaming gold, I cry to you—
your name and ours are one, Dionysus—
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!

Pause & Reflect

FOCUS

Now Oedipus speaks to his people. Read to find out what he plans to do to Laius' murderer.

(*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.

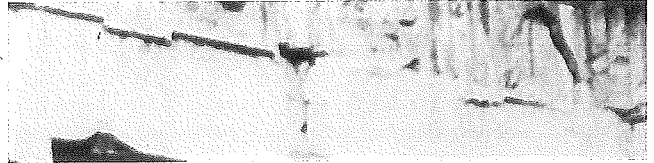
250 I will speak out now as a stranger to the story,
a stranger to the crime. If I'd been present then,
there would have been no mystery, no long hunt
without a clue in hand. So now, counted
a native Theban years after the murder,
to all of Thebes I make this proclamation:

GUIDE FOR READING

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

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

253 **proclamation**: an official announcement.



Pause & Reflect

1. Review the words and phrases you circled. What details helped you visualize Thebes as a city of death? (Visualize)

2. What does the Chorus ask the gods and goddesses to do? Check three phrases below. (Clarify)

- drive back the plague
- find the killer of Laius
- send rescue to Thebes
- defeat the Sphinx
- come down to help

As the play continues . . .

- Oedipus asks the citizens of Thebes to give information about the murderer of King Laius.
- Oedipus tells them that the murder must be avenged in order for the plague to end.
- Oedipus places a curse on the murderer.

255 if any one of you knows who murdered Laius,
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.

(Oedipus *pauses, waiting for a reply.*)

Next,

if anyone knows the murderer is a stranger,
a man from alien soil, come, speak up.
I will give him a handsome reward, and lay up
265 gratitude in my heart for him besides.

(*silence again, no reply*)

But if you keep silent, if anyone panicking,
trying to shield himself or friend or kin,
rejects my offer, then hear what I will do.
I order you, every citizen of the state
270 where I hold throne and power: banish this man—
whoever he may be—never shelter him, never
speak a word to him, never make him partner
to your prayers, your victims burned to the gods.
Never let the holy water touch his hands.
275 Drive him out, each of you, from every home.
He is the plague, the heart of our corruption,
as Apollo's oracle has just revealed to me.
So I honor my obligations:
I fight for the god and for the murdered man.

280 Now my curse on the murderer. Whoever he is,
a lone man unknown in his crime
or one among many, let that man drag out
his life in agony, step by painful step—

I curse myself as well . . . if by any chance
285 he proves to be an intimate of our house,

WORDS TO KNOW

denounce (dī-nouns') v. to condemn publicly

GUIDE FOR READING

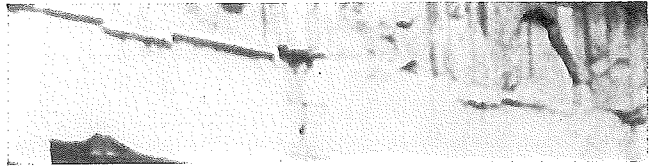
255 **Labdacus** (lăb'də-kəs).

261 **exile**: the punishment of being banished from one's own country.

263 **alien**: foreign.

274 **holy water**: water used for purification after a sacrifice to the gods.

285 **intimate**: friend.



Reading Check

What is the punishment for the murderer?

READ ALOUD



the boxed passage on page 92.
What does Oedipus not realize
as he curses the murderer?
(Infer)

here at my hearth, with my full knowledge,
may the curse I just called down on him strike me!

These are your orders: perform them to the last.
I command you, for my sake, for Apollo's, for this country
290 blasted root and branch by the angry heavens.

Even if god had never urged you on to act,
how could you leave the crime uncleansed so long?
A man so noble—your king, brought down in blood—
you should have searched. But I am the king now,

295 I hold the throne that he held then, possess his bed
and a wife who shares our seed . . . why, our seed
might be the same, children born of the same mother
might have created blood-bonds between us
if his hope of offspring had not met disaster—
300 but fate swooped at his head and cut him short.

So I will fight for him as if he were my father,
stop at nothing, search the world
to lay my hands on the man who shed his blood,
the son of Labdacus descended of Polydorus,
305 Cadmus of old and Agenor, founder of the line:
their power and mine are one.

Oh dear gods,
my curse on those who disobey these orders!
Let no crops grow out of the earth for them—
shrivel their women, kill their sons,
310 burn them to nothing in this plague
that hits us now, or something even worse.
But you, loyal men of Thebes who approve my actions,
may our champion, Justice, may all the gods
be with us, fight beside us to the end!

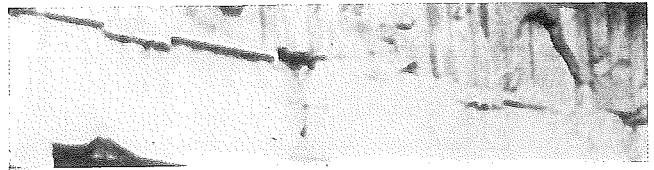
315 **Leader.** In the grip of your curse, my king, I swear
I'm not the murderer, I cannot point him out.
As for the search, Apollo pressed it on us—
he should name the killer.

Oedipus. Quite right,
but to force the gods to act against their will—
320 no man has the power.

GUIDE FOR READING

304 **Polydorus** (pŏl'ə-dŏr'əs).

305 **Agenor** (ə-jē'nŏr'): Cadmus' father.



What Does It Mean?

Blasted root and branch means "torn completely apart by the plague."



the boxed text on page 94.
Then circle the correct answer that completes the sentence

below. (Clarify)

Oedipus says that his own children and any children born to Laius would have shared the same _____.

- A. mother
- B. father
- C. aunt



the shaded text on page 94.
What is ironic about this line?
Check one sentence below.

(Analyze)

- Oedipus can't fight anymore.
- Laius is already dead.
- Laius is Oedipus' father.



Reading Check

What curse does Oedipus put on those who disobey his orders?

Leader. Then if I might mention
the next best thing . . .

Oedipus. The third best too—
don't hold back, say it.

Leader. I still believe . . .
Lord Tiresias sees with the eyes of Lord Apollo.
Anyone searching for the truth, my king,
325 might learn it from the prophet, clear as day.

Oedipus. I've not been slow with that. On Creon's cue
I sent the escorts, twice, within the hour.
I'm surprised he isn't here.

Leader. We need him—
without him we have nothing but old, useless rumors.

330 **Oedipus.** Which rumors? I'll search out every word.

Leader. Laius was killed, they say, by certain travelers.

Oedipus. I know—but no one can find the murderer.

Leader. If the man has a trace of fear in him
he won't stay silent long,
335 not with your curses ringing in his ears.

Oedipus. He didn't flinch at murder,
he'll never flinch at words.

Pause & Reflect

FOCUS

The prophet Tiresias and Oedipus quarrel. In anger, Tiresias reveals the identity of Laius' murderer. Read to find out whom Tiresias names.

(Enter Tiresias, the blind prophet, led by a boy with escorts in attendance. He remains at a distance.)

Leader. Here is the one who will convict him, look,
they bring him on at last, the seer, the man of god.
340 The truth lives inside him, him alone.

Oedipus. O Tiresias,
master of all the mysteries of our life,
all you teach and all you dare not tell,
signs in the heavens, signs that walk the earth!

GUIDE FOR READING

323–324 I still believe . . . Apollo: Lord Tiresias is a prophet who can find out what the god Apollo thinks.

339 seer: a prophet; someone who has the power to foretell the future and know what other people do not know.



Reader Success Strategy

Working in pairs, read this conversation between Oedipus and the leader of the people aloud.



Reading Check

Who will the people of Thebes call upon now for help with the problem? What do they think they will learn?

What Does It Mean?

When Oedipus says “He didn’t flinch at murder, he’ll never flinch at words,” he means that someone who would commit murder would not worry about a curse.

Pause & Reflect

Keep in mind that the original audience who watched this play knew the Oedipus legend. How might they have felt hearing Oedipus curse the murderer of Laius?
(Draw Conclusions)

As the play continues . . .

- Tiresias says that the secret of the murder is too dreadful to tell.
- Oedipus becomes so enraged that he accuses Tiresias of the murder.
- Tiresias blurts out the name of the murderer.

Blind as you are, you can feel all the more
345 what sickness haunts our city. You, my lord,
are the one shield, the one savior we can find.

We asked Apollo—perhaps the messengers
haven't told you—he sent his answer back:
"Relief from the plague can only come one way."
350 Uncover the murderers of Laius,
put them to death or drive them into exile."
So I beg you, grudge us nothing now, no voice,
no message plucked from the birds, the embers
or the other mantic ways within your grasp.
355 Rescue yourself, your city, rescue me—
rescue everything infected by the dead.
We are in your hands. For a man to help others
with all his gifts and native strength:
that is the noblest work.

Tiresias. How terrible—to see the truth
360 when the truth is only pain to him who sees!
I knew it well, but I put it from my mind,
else I never would have come.

Oedipus. What's this? Why so grim, so dire?

Tiresias. Just send me home. You bear your burdens,
365 I'll bear mine. It's better that way,
please believe me.

Oedipus. Strange response . . . unlawful,
unfriendly too to the state that bred and reared you—
you withhold the word of god.

Tiresias. I fail to see
that your own words are so well-timed.
370 I'd rather not have the same thing said of me . . .

Oedipus. For the love of god, don't turn away,
not if you know something. We beg you,
all of us on our knees.

Tiresias. None of you knows—
and I will never reveal my dreadful secrets,
375 not to say your own.

GUIDE FOR READING

352–354 So I beg you . . . within your grasp:

Oedipus is asking Tiresias to tell everything he knows regardless of how he knows the information—from birds, glowing coals, or any other unusual sources a prophet has.

354 mantic: prophetic.



the boxed text on page 98 with a partner. Why do you think Tiresias doesn't want to tell Oedipus the truth? (Draw Conclusions)

What Does It Mean?

In the highlighted sentence, Tiresias is talking about the "truth" of the murderer of Laius. He does not want to tell what he knows.



Reader Success Strategy

During this conversation, Oedipus has to persuade Tiresias to tell a truth he would rather keep secret. Go over the dialogue between Tiresias and Oedipus carefully. Then fill in this chart.

Why Oedipus Wants to Know the Truth	Why Tiresias Does Not Want to Tell the Truth



Reading Check

Why does Oedipus accuse Tiresias of acting unlawfully?

Oedipus. What? You know and you won't tell?
You're bent on betraying us, destroying Thebes?

Tiresias. I'd rather not cause pain for you or me.
So why this . . . useless interrogation?

380 You'll get nothing from me.

Oedipus. Nothing! You,
you scum of the earth, you'd enrage a heart of stone!
You won't talk? Nothing moves you?
Out with it, once and for all!

Tiresias. You criticize my temper . . . unaware
385 of the one you live with, you revile me.

Oedipus. Who could restrain his anger hearing you?
What outrage—you spurn the city!

Tiresias. What will come will come.
Even if I shroud it all in silence.

390 **Oedipus.** What will come? You're bound to *tell* me that.

Tiresias. I will say no more. Do as you like, build your
anger
to whatever pitch you please, rage your worst—

Oedipus. Oh I'll let loose, I have such fury in me—
now I see it all. You helped hatch the plot,
395 you did the work, yes, short of killing him
with your own hands—and given eyes I'd say
you did the killing single-handed!

Tiresias. Is that so!
I charge you, then, submit to that decree
you just laid down: from this day onward
400 speak to no one, not these citizens, not myself.
You are the curse, the corruption of the land!

Oedipus. You, shameless—
aren't you appalled to start up such a story?
You think you can get away with this?

WORDS TO KNOW

revile (rĭ-vil') v. to abuse verbally; criticize harshly

appall (ə-pôl') v. to horrify

GUIDE FOR READING

379 interrogation (ĭn-tĕr'ĕ-gā'shĕn):
questioning.

387 spurn: reject.



**Reader Success
Strategy**

With a partner, read the dialogue on this page aloud. Be sure to communicate the characters' anger.

What Does It Mean?

When Tiresias says "You are the curse," he is accusing Oedipus of murdering Laius.

Tiresias. I have already.
405 The truth with all its power lives inside me.

Oedipus. Who primed you for this? Not your prophet's trade.

Tiresias. You did, you forced me, twisted it out of me.

Oedipus. What? Say it again—I'll understand it better.

Tiresias. Didn't you understand, just now?

410 Or are you tempting me to talk?

Oedipus. No, I can't say I grasped your meaning.
Out with it, again!

Tiresias. I say you are the murderer you hunt.

Oedipus. That obscenity, twice—by god, you'll pay.

415 **Tiresias.** Shall I say more, so you can really rage?

Oedipus. Much as you want. Your words are nothing—
futile.

Tiresias. You cannot imagine . . . I tell you,
you and your loved ones live together in infamy,
you cannot see how far you've gone in guilt.

420 **Oedipus.** You think you can keep this up and never suffer?

Tiresias. Indeed, if the truth has any power.

<p>Oedipus. It does but not for you, old man. You've lost your power, stone-blind, stone-deaf—senses, eyes blind as stone!</p>

<p>425 Tiresias. I pity you, flinging at me the very insults each man here will fling at you so soon.</p>
--

Oedipus. Blind,
lost in the night, endless night that nursed you!
You can't hurt me or anyone else who sees the light—
you can never touch me.

Tiresias. True, it is not your fate
to fall at my hands. Apollo is quite enough,
430 and he will take some pains to work this out.

Oedipus. Creon! Is this conspiracy his or yours?

WORDS TO KNOW
futile (fyoot'1) *adj.* useless

GUIDE FOR READING

406 **primed**: prepared; coached with information.

414 **obscenity**: disgusting statement.

418 **infamy** (ɪnˈfə-mē): disgrace.



Reading Check

Why does Oedipus have such a hard time understanding Tiresias' accusation?



the boxed text on page 102. Based on what Tiresias says, what do you predict will happen to Oedipus? (Predict)

I predict

because

Tiresias. Creon is not your downfall, no, you are your own.

Oedipus.

O power—

wealth and empire, skill outstripping skill
in the heady rivalries of life,
435 what envy lurks inside you! Just for this,
the crown the city gave me—I never sought it,
they laid it in my hands—for this alone, Creon,
the soul of trust, my loyal friend from the start
steals against me . . . so hungry to overthrow me
440 he sets this wizard on me, this scheming quack,
this fortune-teller peddling lies, eyes peeled
for his own profit—seer blind in his craft!

Come here, you pious fraud. Tell me,
when did you ever prove yourself a prophet?
445 When the Sphinx, that chanting **(Fury)** kept her death-
watch here,
why silent then, not a word to set our people free?
There was a riddle, not for some passer-by to solve—
it cried out for a prophet. Where were you?
Did you rise to the crisis? Not a word,
450 you and your birds, your gods—nothing.
No, but I came by, Oedipus the ignorant,
I stopped the Sphinx! With no help from the birds,
the flight of my own intelligence hit the mark.

And this is the man you'd try to overthrow?
455 You think you'll stand by Creon when he's king?
You and the great mastermind—
you'll pay in tears, I promise you, for this,
this witch-hunt. If you didn't look so senile
the lash would teach you what your scheming means!

460 **Leader.** I would suggest his words were spoken in anger,
Oedipus . . . yours too, and it isn't what we need.
The best solution to the oracle, the riddle
posed by god—we should look for that.

Tiresias. You are the king no doubt, but in one respect,
465 at least, I am your equal: the right to reply.

GUIDE FOR READING

434 **heady:** violent; passionate.

440 **scheming quack:** a tricky person who pretends to have knowledge or skill.

443 **pious fraud:** one who pretends to be holy and moral.



REREAD



the boxed text on page 104.
What does Oedipus suspect
Creon and Tiresias of? Circle
one phrase below. (Clarify)

- stealing his money
- casting a spell on him
- being fortune tellers
- plotting to steal the throne

More About . . .

THE FURIES The Furies were hideous goddesses who were responsible for avenging murders within families. Here, Oedipus compares the Sphinx to one of the Furies.



Reading Check

How does Oedipus challenge Tiresias' authority as a prophet and seer?

I claim that privilege too.
I am not your slave. I serve Apollo.
I don't need Creon to speak for me in public.

So,
you mock my blindness? Let me tell you this.
470 You with your precious eyes,
you're blind to the corruption of your life,
to the house you live in, those you live with—
who *are* your parents? Do you know? All unknowing
you are the scourge of your own flesh and blood,
475 the dead below the earth and the living here above,
and the double lash of your mother and your father's
curse
will whip you from this land one day, their footfall
treading you down in terror, darkness shrouding
your eyes that now can see the light!

Soon, soon
480 you'll scream aloud—what haven won't reverberate?
What rock of Cithaeron won't scream back in echo?
That day you learn the truth about your marriage,
the wedding-march that sang you into your halls,
the lusty voyage home to the fatal harbor!
485 And a crowd of other horrors you'd never dream
will level you with yourself and all your children.

There. Now smear us with insults—Creon, myself
and every word I've said. No man will ever
be rooted from the earth as brutally as you.

490 **Oedipus.** Enough! Such filth from him? Insufferable—
what, still alive? Get out—
faster, back where you came from—vanish!

Tiresias. I would never have come if you hadn't called me
here.

Oedipus. If I thought you would blurt out such absurdities,
495 you'd have died waiting before I'd had you summoned.

Tiresias. Absurd, am I! To you, not to your parents:

WORDS TO KNOW

reverberate (rĭ-vŭr'bĕ-rāt') v. to reflect a noise; resound

GUIDE FOR READING

474 **scourge:** cause of suffering.

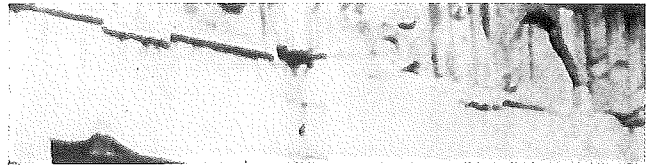
478 **shrouding:** covering or hiding.

479–484 **Soon, soon . . . fatal harbor:** Terrible things will happen on the day you learn that you married your mother.

480 **haven:** place of safety.

481 **Cithaeron** (sĭ-thĭr'ən): a mountain about 12 miles south of Thebes.

490 **insufferable:** unbearable.



REREAD



the boxed text on page 106.

What does Tiresias know about Oedipus that Oedipus does not?

Check two sentences below.

- Oedipus is the son of a beggar.
- Oedipus killed the king of Thebes.
- Oedipus married his own mother.

What Does It Mean?

Rooted from the earth means “torn away from your homeland.”

the ones who bore you found me sane enough.

Oedipus. Parents—who? Wait . . . who is my father?

Tiresias. This day will bring your birth and your destruction.

500 **Oedipus.** Riddles—all you can say are riddles, murk and
darkness.

Tiresias. Ah, but aren't you the best man alive at solving
riddles?

Oedipus. Mock me for that, go on, and you'll reveal my
greatness.

Tiresias. Your great good fortune, true, it was your ruin.

Oedipus. Not if I saved the city—what do I care?

505 **Tiresias.** Well then, I'll be going.

(to his attendant)

Take me home, boy.

Oedipus. Yes, take him away. You're a nuisance here.

Out of the way, the irritation's gone.

(turning his back on Tiresias, moving toward the palace)

Tiresias. I will go,

once I have said what I came here to say.

I will never shrink from the anger in your eyes—
510 you can't destroy me. Listen to me closely:

the man you've sought so long, proclaiming,
cursing up and down, the murderer of Laius—
he is here. A stranger,

515 you may think, who lives among you,
he soon will be revealed a native Theban
but he will take no joy in the revelation.

Blind who now has eyes, beggar who now is rich,
he will grope his way toward a foreign soil,
a stick tapping before him step by step.

(Oedipus enters the palace.)

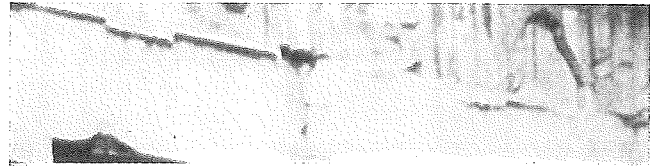
520 Revealed at last, brother and father both
to the children he embraces, to his mother
son and husband both—he sowed the loins
his father sowed, he spilled his father's blood!

GUIDE FOR READING

500 murk and darkness: words used to show confusion.

513–516 A stranger . . . revelation: Oedipus thinks he was born to the king and queen of Corinth, but in truth he was born in Thebes. Tiresias tells Oedipus that learning this truth will bring him grief.

520–523 Revealed . . . father's blood: Oedipus killed his father and married his mother, so he is both son and husband to his wife. He is both brother and father to his children.



READ ALoud

the boxed text on page 108. What does Tiresias mean when he tells Oedipus, "Your great good fortune . . . was your ruin"? Complete the chart below. (Draw Conclusions)

<i>Oedipus' fortune was . . .</i>	<i>It was his ruin because . . .</i>

What Does It Mean?

A *nuisance* is a troublemaker. Oedipus says that once the troublemaker is gone, the trouble, or irritation, he is causing will be gone, too.



Reader Success Strategy

Write a headline that sums up Tiresias' accusations.

Go in and reflect on that, solve that.
525 And if you find I've lied
from this day onward call the prophet blind.
(Tiresias and the boy exit to the side.)

Pause & Reflect

FOCUS

The Chorus describes the fate that Laius' murderer faces. It then expresses disbelief that Oedipus might be guilty.

MARK IT UP > Circle details that show how the Chorus views Oedipus at this point in the play.

Chorus. Who—
who is the man the voice of god denounces
resounding out of the rocky gorge of Delphi?
The horror too dark to tell,
530 whose ruthless bloody hands have done the work?
His time has come to fly
to outrace the stallions of the storm
his feet a streak of speed—
Cased in armor, Apollo son of the Father
535 lunges on him, lightning-bolts afire!
And the grim unerring Furies
closing for the kill.
Look,
the word of god has just come blazing
flashing off Parnassus' snowy heights!
540 That man who left no trace—
after him, hunt him down with all our strength!
Now under bristling timber
up through rocks and caves he stalks
like the wild mountain bull—
545 cut off from men, each step an agony, frenzied, racing
blind
but he cannot outrace the dread voices of Delphi
ringing out of the heart of Earth,
the dark wings beating around him shrieking doom
the doom that never dies, the terror—
550 The skilled prophet scans the birds and shatters me with
terror!

GUIDE FOR READING

530 **ruthless:** without feeling.

536 **unerring:** not turning aside; relentless;
Furies: terrifying goddesses who pursue and
punish criminals.

539 **Parnassus'** (pär-näs'əs) **snowy heights:**
the peaks of the mountain that towers over
Delphi.



Pause & Reflect

What character flaws does Oedipus show in his encounter with Tiresias? Check three words below. (Evaluate)

- dishonesty
- pride
- rage
- distrust
- cowardliness

As the play ends . . .

- The members of the Chorus cannot accept the accusations against Oedipus.

★ Reader Success Strategy

Look for the main ideas as you read this section. Then write a brief outline of the main ideas.

1. The people imagine the murderer as an outcast on the run.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

I can't accept him, can't deny him, don't know what to
say,

I'm lost, and the wings of dark foreboding beating—

I cannot see what's come, what's still to come . . .

and what could breed a blood feud between

555 Laius' house and the son of Polybus?

I know of nothing, not in the past and not now,

no charge to bring against our king, no cause

to attack his fame that rings throughout Thebes—

not without proof—not for the ghost of Laius,

560 not to avenge a murder gone without a trace.

Zeus and Apollo know, they know, the great masters

of all the dark and depth of human life.

But whether a mere man can know the truth,

whether a seer can fathom more than I—

565 there is no test, no certain proof

though matching skill for skill

a man can outstrip a rival. No, not till I see

these charges proved will I side with his accusers.

We saw him then, when the she-hawk swept against him,

570 saw with our own eyes his skill, his brilliant triumph—

there was the test—he was the joy of Thebes!

Never will I convict my king, never in my heart.

Pause & Reflect

WORDS TO KNOW

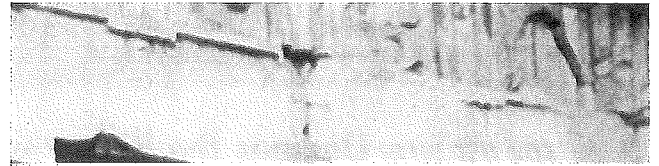
foreboding (fôr-bô'dīng) *n.* a sense of evil or danger to come

GUIDE FOR READING

555 the son of Polybus (pŏl'ē-bəs): Oedipus, who believes himself to be the son of Polybus, king of Corinth.

564 fathom: understand.

569 she-hawk: the Sphinx.



Pause & Reflect

1. Review the details you circled. How does the Chorus feel about Oedipus at this point in the play? (Summarize)
2. How might you feel if a leader you believed in were accused of a terrible crime? (Connect)



Oedipus is a tragic hero. He reminds us that though humans have qualities that make them great, they also have flaws that can lead to their ruin. Go back through the text. Put a plus sign (+) next to words or actions that show Oedipus' great qualities. Put a minus sign (-) next to words or actions that show his flaws. Compare your marks with a classmate's. (Evaluate)

Active Reading SkillBuilder

Strategies for Reading Greek Drama

Visualizing is the process through which readers form mental pictures as they read. Good readers use the details supplied by writers to picture characters, settings, and events in their minds. Read pages 74–112 of *Oedipus the King* and use Sophocles' descriptive details to visualize the play's setting, the characters, and the events. Then record your impressions on the chart below.

Impressions		
Setting	Characters	Events
<i>page 74: I picture the royal house of Thebes as a huge stone palace with many columns.</i>	<i>page 74: I picture Oedipus as a tall and powerful man. The priests look thin, tired, and huddled together miserably.</i>	<i>page 75: The people are begging Oedipus for help. I imagine them reaching up to him with hope in their eyes.</i>