

Study Guide prepared by
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Barter Dramaturge

Oedipus Rex

By Sophocles

Adapted by John Hardy

Especially for grades 7-12

Touring in Spring 2009

Virginia SOLs

English – 7.5, 8.5, 9.1, 9.5, 10.6, 11.6, 12.3, 12.6

History and Social Science – WHI.5

Theatre Arts – M.8, M.9, M.12, M.13, M.14, TI.8, TI.10, TI.11, TI.13, TII.9, TII.12, TII.13, TII.14, TII.15, TII.16, TIII.12

Tennessee TCAPS

Language Arts – 7.1.12, 7.1.13, 8.1.12, 8.1.13

English I – 2.2, 2.3, 3.1, 3.2

English II – 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 3.1, 3.2

English III – 2.01, 2.02, 2.08, 2.10, 2.11, 2.12, 4.05, 4.07

Theatre 6th-8th Grade – 6.0, 7.0, 8.0 **Theatre 9th-12th** – 5.0, 6.0, 7.0, 8.0

North Carolina SCOS

Theatre Arts – 7.7.01, 7.7.03, 7.7.05, 8.7.01, 8.7.04, 8.7.06,

Theatre Arts I – 5.03, 6.01, 7.02, 8.01 **Theatre Arts II** – 5.01, 5.03, 6.03, 8.03

Theatre Arts III – 1.06, 5.02, 7.02, 8.01 **Theatre Arts IV** – 5.01

English Language Arts – 7.5.02, 8.5.02

English I – 5.01, 5.03 **English II** – 3.04, 4.05, 5.01

English III – 5.01, 5.03 **English IV** – 5.03 **AP English** – 5.01

Social Studies – 2.02

Setting

The palace of King Oedipus in the ancient Greek city of Thebes

Characters

Oedipus – the King of Thebes

The Sphinx – a figure in Greek mythology comprised of a lion's body and a human head

Jocasta – wife to Oedipus

Creon – Jocasta's brother

Teiresias – a blind seer

Messenger – a messenger from Corinth

Shepherd – an ancient sheep herder who had served Laius, the former King of Thebes

Attendant – Jocasta's servant

Citizens of Thebes

Priest

Chorus

Synopsis

Twelve years before the action of the play begins, Oedipus solves the riddle of the Sphinx and saves the kingdom of Thebes from destruction. In gratitude, the people of Thebes make him King. Oedipus takes as his queen Jocasta, wife of Laius, the former king who had shortly before been murdered.

Now another deadly pestilence is threatening Thebes and the people ask Oedipus to rescue them once again. Creon, Jocasta's brother, returns from Apollo's oracle and announces that all will be well once Laius' murderer is found and cast out from the city. In an effort to discover the murderer, Oedipus sends for the blind seer, Teiresias. Under protest, Teiresias names Oedipus the killer. Outraged, Oedipus denies the allegation and accuses Creon of using Teiresias to try to gain the throne. Jocasta appears just in time to prevent a fight between Creon and Oedipus. She assures Oedipus that seers are not infallible. In proof, she cites the old prophecy that she and Laius would have a son who would kill his father and have children with his mother. She prevented its fulfillment, she confesses, by giving their infant son to a Shepherd with orders to abandon the baby in the mountains. As for Laius, he had been killed by robbers years later at the junction of three roads on the route to Delphi. This information makes Oedipus uneasy. He recalls having killed a man fitting Laius' description at this very spot, when he was fleeing his home in Corinth to avoid fulfillment of a similar prophecy. Just then, an aged messenger arrives from Corinth to inform Oedipus that his father, King Polybus, is dead and that the people of Corinth expect Oedipus to return there and take his rightful place as king. On account of the old prophecy Oedipus refuses to return to Corinth until his mother is also dead. The messenger assures Oedipus that he is not the blood son of King Polybus and his queen, but is instead a foundling from the house of Laius who had been abandoned in the mountains as an infant. When this statement is confirmed by the Shepherd, Oedipus and Jocasta realize that they are indeed son and mother as well as husband and wife – the ancient prophecy has been fulfilled in each dreadful detail. Horrified, Jocasta hangs herself and Oedipus stabs out his eyes. Oedipus then exiles himself, the punishment he had promised for the murderer of Laius.



Playwright Information

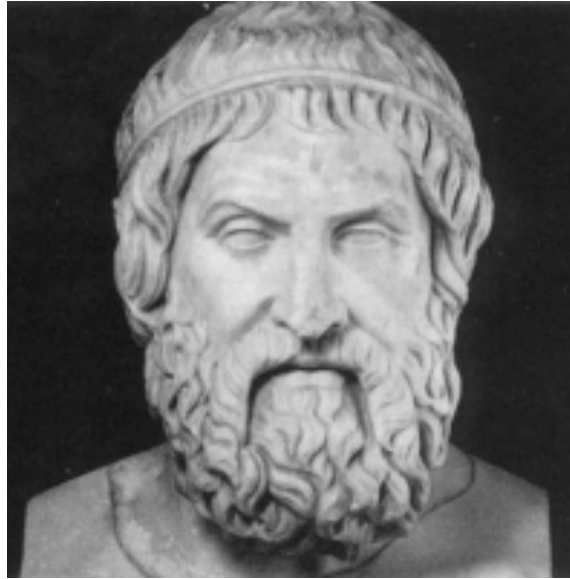
Sophocles (495-405 B.C) was one of the great playwrights of the golden age of Greek Drama. The son of a wealthy merchant, he was able to study all of the arts. In 468 B.C. he competed in the City Dionysia--a festival held every year at the Theatre of Dionysus in which new plays were presented.

Sophocles took first prize, defeating none other than Aeschylus himself. More than 120 plays were to follow. He would go on to win eighteen first prizes.

One of the great innovators of the theatre, Sophocles was the first to add a third actor. Prior to this, the Greek theatre consisted of a Chorus and two Actors. One actor played

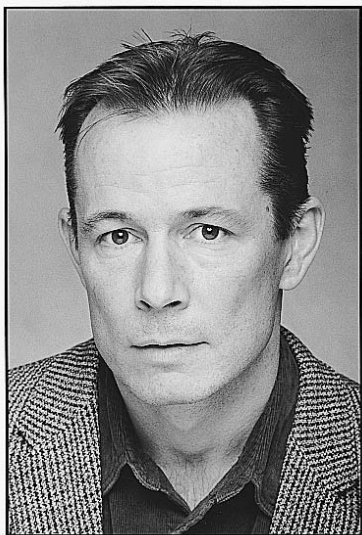
the lead and the second actor played all the other roles. Sophocles also abolished the trilogy form in which Aeschylus, for example, had used three tragedies to tell a single story. Sophocles chose to make each tragedy a complete entity unto itself.

Of Sophocles' more than 120 plays, only seven have survived in their entirety, including *Antigone*, *The Women of Trachis*, and *Electra*. However, *Oedipus the King* is generally considered his greatest work. In this story, Oedipus unwittingly kills his father and marries his mother in an attempt to avoid the very prophecy he fulfills. A masterful work of plot and suspense, *Oedipus the King* is often heralded as a "perfectly structured" play. Sophocles passed away shortly after the production of *Oedipus at Colonus* in 405 B.C.



Adapter/Director Information

John Hardy was born in Big Spring, Texas in 1957 – a place of open prairie and cactus. He grew up in Newark, New Jersey and lived most of his life in and around New York



City. As a young man, John played sports and read books. He moved to east Tennessee at the age of twenty and attended East Tennessee State University, where he first came in contact with theatre. He has lived and worked all over the country with a variety of theatres and has been writing plays for over twenty years. John has been associated with the Barter Theatre since 1991 where he continues to write, act and direct plays. John has a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Alabama and a Doctorate from Texas Tech University.

What Teachers and Students Can Expect

Every effort has been made to make certain the production is engaging, understandable and entertaining. This can be difficult to accomplish when you are working with a play that is 2400 years old, was originally written in a now extinct language (ancient Greek) and comes from a country deep in the continent of Europe, which is, obviously, far from the USA.

Anyone can take a famous title and end up with a production that is “entertaining” for students and teachers by changing it to the degree that it no longer resembles the original play. But it is an achievement to entertain and engage all the while retaining the qualities that made this play significant in the history of literature.

The ancient Greek playwrights, Sophocles included, set the standard for dramatic work of universal appeal and timelessness (A standard that informed William Shakespeare and most of the great classic dramatists). This is what they did: create a work of drama that resonates with, informs, and entertains a *contemporary* audience. That is to say: an audience contemporary to their times.

Long story made short: This is what we are trying to do: Create a production of *Oedipus the King* that resonates with, informs, and entertains a contemporary audience; which is exactly what Sophocles was trying to do.

Cast Size and Doubling of Actors

****“Doubling” means one actor playing more than one role in a production**

In this production of *Oedipus the King* we will be using six actors; the actor playing Oedipus will play that role only; the other five actors will play two or three roles each.

Doubling (and tripling) of actors can be a problem if the distinction between characters played is not made clear. One way of defining one character from another, when played by the same actor, is: costume; the costume helps to distinguish the character for the audience. In this production, the audience will be able to see the actors actually changing costumes from one character to another and this will help to clarify, for the audience, when an actor switches from one character to another.

An interesting note: Before Sophocles, the Greek theatre used:

- A chorus of ten – fifteen
- One actor playing the lead
- One other actor playing all the other roles

Sophocles introduced a third actor. So you had:

- A chorus of ten – fifteen
- One actor playing the lead
- Two actors playing all the other roles

*(All of the actors were men; women did not act on the Greek stage.)

Cast Size and Doubling of Actors (cont.)

Using fewer actors than characters, which requires actors to play more than one role, is an aspect of this production that we share with the productions of Sophocles time. An advantage of this technique is that it seems to focus the audience on the main character. Another advantage: it demonstrates the unique ability of theatre to create a world, onstage that is quite different from the literal world that we live in daily and most often see re-created in film and television. Only theatre has the ability to do this (create an onstage world that is different from the literal reality that is required by film and television).

The Visual Aspects of the Production: Sets and Properties (Props)

As in the time of Sophocles, sets and props for this production will be minimal. This further helps to focus the audience on the human aspects of the play. The job of a set, for any play, is this: create a physical/visual world which best allows the events of the play to take place within.

A good set is one that accomplishes this. A good set is not necessarily one that dazzles the audience with spectacle but rather creates a visual and physical world that allows the audience to participate in the most important aspect of the play: the journey of the main character(s).

The Historical Significance of *Oedipus the King*

Western culture (which means: northern hemisphere excluding Asia) began in ancient Greece, and particularly, ancient Athens, where this play was first performed. Almost everything we do, watch, appreciate, participate in, as a society, had its foundation in the Athenian world. To participate, now, in 2009, as an audience, in a performance of *Oedipus the King*, is to participate in the deepest part of our heritage as a culture.

Art, sculpture, architecture, poetry, prose, psychology, city management, engineering, education, democracy itself; all of these were either founded in Athens or further perfected in Athens.

Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

Sight and Blindness

References to eyesight and vision, both literal and metaphorical, are frequently used in *Oedipus the King*. Quite often the image of clear vision is used as a metaphor for knowledge and insight. In fact, this metaphor is so much a part of the Greek way of thinking that it is almost not a metaphor at all, just as in modern English: to say “I see the truth” or “I see the way things are” is a perfectly ordinary use of language. However, the references to eyesight and insight in this play forms a meaningful pattern in combination with the references to literal and metaphorical blindness. Oedipus is famed for his clear-sightedness and quick comprehension, but he discovers that he has been blind to the truth for many years, and then he blinds himself so as not to have to look on his own children/siblings. Teiresias is blind, yet he sees farther than others. Overall, the play seems to say that human beings can demonstrate remarkable powers of intellectual penetration and insight, and that they have a great capacity for knowledge, but that even the smartest human being is liable to error.



The Limits of Free Will

Prophecy is a central part of *Oedipus the King*. The play begins with Creon's return from the oracle at Delphi, where he has learned that the plague will be lifted if Thebes banishes the man who killed Laius. Teiresias prophesies the capture of one who is both father and brother to his own children. Oedipus tells Jocasta of a prophecy he heard as a youth, that he would kill his father and sleep with his mother, and Jocasta tells Oedipus of a similar prophecy given to Laius, that her son would grow up to kill his father. Oedipus and Jocasta debate the extent to which prophecies should be trusted at all, and when all of the prophecies come true, it appears that one of Sophocles' aims is to justify the powers of the gods and prophets, which had recently come under attack in fifth-century B.C. Athens.



Sophocles' audience would, of course, have known the story of Oedipus, which only increases the sense of complete inevitability about how the play would end. It is difficult to say how justly one can accuse Oedipus of being "blind" or foolish when he seems to have no choice about fulfilling the prophecy: he is sent away from Thebes as a baby and by a remarkable coincidence saved and raised as a prince in Corinth. Hearing that he is fated to kill his father, he flees Corinth and, by a still more remarkable coincidence, ends up back in Thebes, now king and husband in his actual father's place. Oedipus seems only to desire to flee his fate, but his fate continually catches up with him. Many people have tried to argue that Oedipus brings about his catastrophe because of a "tragic flaw," but nobody has managed to create a consensus about what Oedipus's flaw actually is. Perhaps his story is meant to show that error and disaster can happen to anyone, that human beings are relatively powerless before fate or the gods, and that a cautious humility is the best attitude toward life.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

Oedipus's Swollen Foot

In *Oedipus the King*, the Corinthian messenger tells Oedipus that his name, which means “thick foot”, was derived from the fact that when the infant Oedipus was found in the mountains, his ankles were pinned together with a bolt, resulting in a swollen foot. Jocasta explains that Laius abandoned him in this state on a barren mountain shortly after he was born. The injury leaves Oedipus with a vivid scar for the rest of his life. Oedipus's injury symbolizes the way in which fate has marked him and set him apart. It also symbolizes the way his movements have been confined and constrained since birth, by Apollo's prophecy to Laius.



The Three-way Crossroads

In *Oedipus the King*, Jocasta says that Laius was slain at a place where three roads meet. This crossroads is referred to a number of times during the play, and it symbolizes the crucial moment, long before the events of the play, when Oedipus began to fulfill the dreadful prophecy that he would murder his father and marry his mother. A crossroads is a place where a choice has to be made, so crossroads usually symbolize moments where decisions will have important consequences but where different choices are still possible. In *Oedipus the King*, the crossroads is part of the distant past, dimly remembered, and Oedipus was not aware at the time that he was making a fateful decision. In this play, the crossroads symbolizes fate and the awesome power of prophecy rather than freedom and choice.

Question and Activities for Guided Study and Discussion



1. How would you describe the character of Oedipus? What sort of a person is he? Consider how Oedipus sees himself (as seen for example in the play's opening speech and his later dialogues with Creon and Teiresias). What character traits are dominant in his personality? Make a list of them. Now pick a few of today's current world leaders. Make a list of their dominant character traits. How does this list compare with the one you made for Oedipus? What character traits do they have in common? How do they differ? Discuss how time and place might affect their differences.

2. Oedipus's kingdom, Thebes, is located in ancient Greece. Study a map of ancient Greece. Locate the cities of Thebes, Delphi, Athens, Daulia, Phocis and Corinth.

Compare a map of ancient Greece with a map of Greece today. Are these ancient cities still there? The infant Oedipus was abandoned on Mount Cithaeron. Locate Mount Cithaeron on the map of ancient Greece. How far is it from Thebes? From Corinth? Oedipus killed King Laius at a crossroads in Phocis. The roads led to Daulia and Delphi. Are there roads there today? How has Greece changed in 2500 years? Research pictures of what Oedipus might see today if he went back to Corinth and Athens. Make a collage of these pictures entitled "Oedipus Today."



3. Consider that many of the events in the traditional story of Oedipus (killing his father, solving the riddle of the Sphinx, marrying his mother, etc.) have already occurred when the play opens. Why? Why does Sophocles concentrate on the life of Oedipus after his becoming king of Thebes?

4. What did Oedipus hope to gain by sending his wife's brother, Creon, to pray to the oracle at Delphi?



4. Why does Teiresias initially refrain from divulging the truth to Oedipus and assembled others? What is Oedipus's response to Teiresias's refusal, and then later, to his accusations? Teiresias replies that he is beholden to no one but Apollo—the “higher authority” that the Greeks thought was God. This allows him to speak the painful truth to Oedipus. What caused Teiresias to change his mind and speak the truth?

5. Oedipus calls himself an “abomination” for killing his father and marrying his mother. If he was aware of neither, why does he call himself evil? Is a man responsible for the evil of his actions if he is truly unaware that they are evil? If Oedipus were to be put on trial today what would be his crime? Breaking the class into various members of the Court, put Oedipus on trial. Twelve students will act as jury members, one student will be the Prosecutor and one student will be the Defender. The other students will take on the other roles in the play and be called as witnesses in the trial. What would be a suitable punishment for his crime?

6. Barter's production of this play is a *touring* production, which means minimal sets, costumes and props. How different might it be if it was performed in a theatre? What sort of set/costume/props do you think the ancient Greeks had at their disposal? Pick a scene from *Oedipus* and design what you think would be the perfect set for that scene. Start with drawings, then make a three-dimensional model. Be sure to keep in mind the function of the set in the story-telling process and the actors ability to move safely on it.

7. What do you make of the various situations at the end of the play (the suicide of Jocasta, Oedipus's self-blinding and exile, his prediction of a miserable life for his own children)? Why are the outcomes so tragic and extreme? If this play were set in your hometown today how might the outcomes differ? What other alternatives might the characters choose? Were these alternatives considered a choice by the ancient Greeks? Why or why not? Discuss how important time and place are in story-telling. If you could set this story in any time or place, what would it be? Working in small groups, pick a scene from the play and set it in your school, present day. Use the language common to you and your friends as dialogue. Present your scene to the class. How effective was the setting, place and language to the story and themes of *Oedipus*? Is this play still relevant today?



8. Imagine that you are Oedipus and keep a journal. Be sure your entries include the following: the day you left Corinth, the day you killed King Laius at the crossroads, the day you solved the riddle of the Sphinx, your marriage to Jocasta, and the day you spoke with Teiresias. If you were the Shepherd, what significant events in regards to this play might you put in your journal? Keep a journal and include as many details as possible. If Jocasta had left a suicide note, what might she have written? Who would be the recipient? Oedipus? Her children? Creon? The citizens of Thebes? How might Creon's journal entry read the night he became King of Thebes?

9. The climax of a play is defined as the point of highest dramatic tension or a major turning point in the action. Where is the climax in this play?

10. Why did the lone surviving slave of Laius's party plead with Jocasta to leave Thebes when he saw Oedipus on the throne?

11. Consider that Jocasta abandoned her child Oedipus to death. Is this action justified? If Jocasta were to do the same thing today, what would be the consequences? How do Jocasta's actions compare to the actions of Moses' mother in the biblical story of Exodus? What other stories deal with a character abandoned as an infant? What examples of child-murder are in the news today? How does the law today deal with these situations?

12. What basis is there for Oedipus's fears that his daughters will not easily find spouses?



14. The ancient Greeks were a *polytheistic* people – they believed in more than one god. Some of the gods mentioned in this play include Apollo, Athena, Zeus, Artemis, Bacchus and Hermes. Make a chart of the Greek gods. Be sure to show how they are related to each other and what role they played in nature. Why is Apollo so important in this play?

13. Imagine you are asked to cast a film version of *Oedipus Rex*. Knowing what you do about the characters, who would you cast to play Oedipus? Jocasta? Creon? Teiresias? The Shepherd? Find pictures of the actors you think would serve the story best and make a presentation to the class as to why they are best to play the various parts.

14. There are several places in this story where the fate of Oedipus could have been avoided “if only” certain things had/had not happened. What are some of these instances? Is Oedipus an innocent victim of an unjust fate or does he bear some responsibility in the outcome of his life? Is his fate the result of unavoidable necessity or does he contribute to it through his own choices? Could he have changed the fate described in the prophecies? How?

Vocabulary

pestilence
extinction
petition
renowned
The Sphinx
remedy
oracle
banish
riddle
tribute

seer
prophecy
fate
charlatan
heresy
depose
atrocious
irrational
treachery
conspire

petty
squabble
exile
suspicion
tyrant
arrogance
vanity
nymph

Suggested Further Reading

Other plays by Sophocles include: *Antigone*, *The Women of Trachis*, *Electra* and *Oedipus at Colonus*.

<http://www.online-literature.com/sophocles>

This lists links to good information and discussions regarding Sophocles and his works