The Myth of Oedipus

## “He will kill his father and marry his mother…”

King Laios and Queen Jocasta of Thebes learned from and oracle that their newborn son would kill his father and marry his mother. Horrified by this prediction, they gave their baby to a shepherd with orders to leave the infant to die on a lonely mountainside with his ankles pinned together. The shepherd, however, took pity on the baby. Instead of abandoning him, he gave him to a Corinthian shepherd, who in turn gave the baby to the childless king and queen of Corinth. They named him Oedipus, which means “swollen foot”, or “club foot” and raised him as their son.

When Oedipus was a young man, he learned of the oracle’s prophecy. Believing the king and queen of Corinth to be his real parents, he ran away from home in horror. In the course of his lonely wandering, he encounters an arrogant old man who tried to run him off the road with his chariot. Because honor was at stake, the two men fought and Oedipus killed the stranger. Thinking no more the incident, such occurrences were probably common on the roads in those days, Oedipus continued on his journey to the city of Thebes.

## Meeting the Monster Sphinx

In those days, the Thebans were very afraid of a winged monster with the body of a lion and the face of a young woman. Its name was *The Sphinx* and it lay on a rock, from which it confronted every passer-by with an enigma. Those who could not resolve the enigma were killed.

This happened just when the news about the king's death was spread. The brother of Queen Jocasta, Creon*,* became head of the government. His son fell prey to the Sphinx. So, Creon suffered heavily. He declared that the person who could free the city from the monster would be the next king and might marry his sister Jocasta. As that declaration was proclaimed, Oedipus arrived at Thebes.

Immediately, he went to the Sphinx and asked for the enigma. It was: "Which creature walks in the morning with four feet, in the afternoon with two, and in the evening with three feet? But the more feet it uses, the less are its power and speed."

"The human being." replied Oedipus, "In the morning of his life he creeps on hands and feet. When he reaches the afternoon of life as a man, he walks proudly with raised head. As an old man, in life's evening, a supporting stick is his third leg." The Sphinx lept into the sea.

## A Hero’s Welcome

When Oedipus arrived in Thebes, the city where (unknown to him) he had been born, the people welcomed him as their savior. Since Laios had been killed recently, the Thebans offered Oedipus their throne and the widowed queen, Jocasta, as his bride. So Oedipus became king of Thebes and had two sons, Polyneices, and Eteocles and two daughters, Ismene and Anitgone.

## A Horrible Discovery

During a long time, Oedipus reigned over Thebes as a righteous and beloved king for a long time.

Then, suddenly, a plague broke out. Oedipus sent Creon to the Oracle of Delphi to ask the cause of the divine punishment. He brought back the answer that the wrath of the gods was upon the people, because the murderer of Laios had not been punished and exiled.

While searching for the villain who had killed Laios, Oedipus learns that he was not born in Corinth and that he was the son of Laios and Jocasta. He had fulfilled the prophecy without even knowing it. When he and his mother/wife discovered the truth, she killed herself and he gouged out his eyes to punish himself for having been blind to the truth.

After these disasters, Creon becomes King and exiles Oedipus. Oedipus leaves Antigone and Ismene in Creon’s care.