Topic Page: Oedipus

Definition: Oedipus from Collins English Dictionary

1 Greek myth the son of Laius and Jocasta, the king and queen of Thebes, who killed his father, being unaware of his identity, and unwittingly married his mother, by whom he had four children. When the truth was revealed, he put out his eyes and Jocasta killed herself.

Summary Article: Oedipus from Dictionary of Classical Mythology

The son of LAIUS, king of Thebes, and JOCASTA (Epicasta in Homer), and the hero of one of the best-known of all legends. From Greek tragedy we know him as the man who unwittingly killed his father, then married his mother and had four children by her; when the incest was discovered she committed suicide; he blinded himself, then wandered through the world as a polluted exile until his death. But originally Oedipus’ story was very different. In Homer and the Epic Cycle he killed his father and married his mother – these are the immutable basics of his story – and his mother, when the truth was discovered soon after their marriage, committed suicide. But as far as we can tell from scattered epic references to the myth, Oedipus ruled on at Thebes, married again and had his four children by a second wife, EURYGANEIA. He died in battle while still active and in power, and was given splendid funeral games as the mark of respect due to a great hero. So originally there were no children born of incest, no self-inflicted blindness, no exile. This is all very different from the legend in Sophocles’ seminal tragedy Oedipus the King (Oedipus Tyrannus, often known by its Latin title of Oedipus Rex), which gives the canonical version of Oedipus’ story. This is certainly one of the most celebrated plays of all time: it was cited by Aristotle in his Poetics as a model of dramatic craftsmanship, and it overshadows all other treatments.

Image from: Oedipus and the Sphinx in National Gallery Collection

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Laius, king of Thebes, was married to Jocasta, but when he consulted the DELPHIC ORACLE about their continued childlessness, the Oracle told him that if he had a son, that son would kill him. For a time he kept away from his wife’s bed, until one night, inflamed with wine, he ignored the oracle’s warning. When in due course Jocasta bore him a son, Laius pinned the baby’s ankles together and gave him to a herdsman, with instructions that he be cast out to die on Mount Cithaeron (Fig. 123). The herdsman took pity on the helpless infant and gave him to a second herdsman, also pasturing his flocks on the mountain. This man took the baby back to his home city of Corinth. Here the infant was adopted by the childless king and queen, Polybus and Merope. They called him Oedipus (“Swollen Foot”) because of the wounds in his ankles.

Oedipus grew up fully believing that these were his true parents, but one day, when he was by now a young man, a drunkard taunted him with not being his father’s child. Polybus and Merope reassured him, but doubts still gnawed at his mind, so he questioned the Oracle at Delphi in the hope of learning the truth. Instead of giving an answer to his query, the Oracle told him that he was destined to kill his father and have sex with his mother, producing a brood of children intolerable to the sight of man. Oedipus at once determined never for the rest of his life to go back to Corinth, and he set off in a quite different direction, travelling towards Thebes. Near Daulis, at a narrow place where three roads met, a man in a chariot tried to force him off the road, striking at him with a goad. Oedipus struck back in anger and killed the man, then killed most of his attendants too — all but one servant who managed to escape with
his life. The man in the chariot was Oedipus’ real father, Laius. Neither father nor son had recognised the other.

Oedipus went on to Thebes, where he found the terrible SPHINX preying on the city, devouring anyone who failed to answer her riddle correctly. The ruler, CREON (2), had ordained that anyone who could solve the riddle and get rid of the monster would be rewarded with the rule of the kingdom and the hand of the queen, Jocasta, recently widowed. Oedipus gave the right answer (Fig. 156), at which the Sphinx hurled herself to her death. He was greeted as a hero, became king, and married his real mother — again with neither recognising the other. They had two sons, Eteocles and POLYNEICES, and two daughters, ANTIGONE (1) and ISMENE. Years later a terrible plague descended on Thebes.

This is the point at which Oedipus the King opens. Oedipus is determined to cure his afflicted city, so when he learns from the Delphic Oracle that the plague will end only when the man who murdered Laius has himself been killed or banished, he undertakes at once to discover the murderer. He puts a solemn curse on the unknown killer; he questions Creon; he questions TEIRESIAS — a scene rich in irony, where the prophet, although physically blind, is aware of the facts, while Oedipus, although his eyes can see, is mentally blind to the truth. He is also too angry to listen to what Teiresias has to tell him, convinced that the seer and Creon are in league together and plotting to depose him.

Jocasta tries to reassure Oedipus, but when he learns from her that Laius was killed at a place near Daulis where three roads meet, he remembers his chance encounter with the unknown traveller and is shocked to realise that he himself may well have been the murderer of the king. To find out the truth, he sends for the one servant of Laius who survived the massacre and has since lived far out in the Theban countryside.

But there is worse knowledge to come. An old messenger arrives from Corinth to announce that Polybus is dead from old age, at first reassuring news, because it seems to mean that, despite what the oracle predicted for him, Oedipus did not after all kill his father. But the messenger also happens to be the very man who long ago carried the baby Oedipus to Corinth, so when Oedipus expresses the fear that he may still have sex with his mother, the old man reassures him that Polybus and Merope were not his real parents, but had merely adopted him. He himself, he says, was given the baby, with its pitiful, pierced ankles, by another herdsman on Mount Cithaeron — one of Laius’ men. Now the hunt for Laius’ killer is forgotten as Oedipus seeks to find out his real parentage. Jocasta has by now realised the truth and she desperately implores Oedipus not to pursue the matter any further. He dismisses her pleas, believing her merely afraid that he will prove to be lowborn. She goes indoors, where in the depths of her shame she will hang herself.

Another old man arrives, the single eyewitness of Laius’ murder. He proves to be none other than the herdsman who carried the baby Oedipus from the Theban palace to his intended death, and out of pity saved him. Oedipus wrings the full truth from him, at the last minute guessing that what he is about to hear will be the worst possible knowledge. “I am on the brink of terrible words,” cries the herdsman.

“And I of terrible hearing,” replies Oedipus, “yet I must hear” (1169–70). This is what makes him one of the great heroes: not the physical might to battle monsters, like Heracles, but his qualities of mind and will — the intelligence to answer the Sphinx’ riddle in the first place, and now the unswerving resolve to discover the truth, and the courage to face whatever it might be.

So at last he learns that he himself is the unknown killer for whom he has been searching and, worse even than this, that Apollo’s appalling oracle has come true. Distraught, he goes indoors, where he finds
Jocasta dead by her own hand. He tears out the long golden pins from her robe and in his anguish gouges out his eyes, the eyes which could see, but had nevertheless been blind to the truth. At the end of the play, a blinded but unbroken man, he is ready to go into exile, leaving Thebes forever, in obedience to the commands of Apollo.

The sequel to these events is recorded in Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus at Colonus*, written at about the age of 90 just before his death in 406–405 BC. Here Oedipus at last reaches the end of his long sufferings, when in a mysterious and moving death he is taken from earth by the gods. He has wandered as a blind outcast for many years, guided by his faithful daughter Antigone. Now, weary of life, he reaches the sacred precinct of the Eumenides at Colonus in Attica, which he knows from an oracle of Apollo is the place where he will die.

King THESEUS of Athens gives him sanctuary, supporting him against Creon and his own son Polynoeices, both of whom try in vain to make him return to Thebes for their own selfish motives. In return Oedipus prophesies that the place of his death will forever bring blessings from the gods on Attica. (For Oedipus’ curses on his sons, and the consequent troubles suffered by his family and his city, see POLYNOEICES.) At the end of the play Oedipus’ end is announced by peals of thunder. No longer needing guidance, the old blind man walks confidently into the depths of the sacred grove and there the voice of a god rings out: “Oedipus, Oedipus, why do we linger. Long indeed have you been made to wait” (1627–8). At a spot known only to Theseus, Oedipus mysteriously disappears from human sight. He has at last found the death he longed for.

There are of course many other accounts of Oedipus’ story by other authors, often with minor variations. In 467 BC Aeschylus produced a tetralogy on the legend, the three tragedies *Laius*, *Oedipus* and *Seven against Thebes*, and the satyr play *Sphinx*. Only the third tragedy is extant, dramatising the effects of Oedipus’ curse on his sons, which results in the tragic and ultimately fatal conflict of the two brothers over the rule of Thebes. Fragments of the other plays remain and we know, for instance, that the oracle to Laius said that for his city's sake he must never have children, but that one night, overcome by lust, he fathered his doom-laden son. The scholia record a version in which the baby Oedipus was put in a chest and cast out to sea. The chest floated to Sicyon, and there the baby was found and adopted by Polybus and his wife Periboea. In Euripides’ *Oedipus*, now lost, Oedipus was blinded, not by his own hand, but by the servants of Laius. And in his *Phoenician Women* (where Oedipus did blind himself), Jocasta did not kill herself when she learnt about her incestuous marriage, but she tended Oedipus in his blindness, and is alive in the play to try and make peace between Eteocles and Polyneices, who are fighting over the rule of Thebes. Here she dies only after her sons have killed each other, when in her grief she commits suicide over their corpses. Yet interesting as these variants are, it was Sophocles’ version that became the definitive account of Oedipus’ story and had by far the greatest influence on later works.

Seneca based his own *Oedipus* on that of Sophocles; as did Corneille his *Oedipe* (1659), though he adds some mythological irrelevancies, as does Voltaire in his *Oedipe* of 1718. Stravinsky based his opera-oratorio *Oedipus Rex* (1927, libretto by Cocteau) on Sophocles’ play. Cocteau, in his *Infernal Machine* (1934), sees the story of Oedipus as an example of a cosmic joke, “one of the most perfect machines constructed by the infernal gods for the mathematical annihilation of a mortal”, and his Oedipus is brutally crushed by a hostile external world. Freud's interpretation of the myth is renowned: his “Oedipus complex” is a boy's attraction to his mother and repressed hostility towards his father, who is seen by the child as a rival for his mother’s love, all of which causes psychological problems later.
in life. Modern reworkings of the Oedipus legend which are influenced by Freudian theory, such as Pasolini’s film *Oedipus Rex* (1967), can be strikingly effective. Oedipus remains an eternal symbol of the innate blindness of the human condition.


For Euripides’ lost *Oedipus*, see


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