

Derek Mahon

OEDIPUS

A version of Sophocles'
King Oedipus
and
Oedipus at Colonus



Gallery Books

Introduction

The Sphinx of Greek mythology, as distinct from the Egyptian one, was a monster with the head and breasts of a woman, the body of a lion, the wings of a bird, and a human voice. 'She' sat at the edge of Thebes, posing a riddle and killing those unable to find the answer. Consulted about the problem, the Delphic Oracle replied that the Sphinx would kill herself if anyone solved the riddle, which ran: 'What goes on four legs at dawn, on two at noon, and on three at dusk?' The answer seems obvious now (the human frame); but its dramatic point lies in its intimate application to Oedipus himself as child, as vigorous man and stick-dependent sage. He's not alone in this, of course, and even his unconscious incest makes him one with mankind. 'Many a man has dreamt of similar things,' Jocasta says, anticipating Freud: 'His destiny moves us because it might have been ours; our dreams convince us that this is so.' Considerations of this kind enlarge the myth's significance and remind us that Sophocles' Theban plays aren't only about Oedipus but about Thebes, the human community. The city is stricken by an unidentified plague. Everyone suffers directly or indirectly; and Oedipus, the cause of this, will also bring redemption. Destroyer and saviour both, through his own suffering he will rescue Thebes; a new life can begin.

Sophocles' Theban plays are three in number, but *Antigone* stands apart. Though set later, it was written much earlier than *King Oedipus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*; Oedipus is dead and the focus has changed. All three have proved an inexhaustible source of inspiration, none more so than *Antigone*; Seamus Heaney's *The Burial at Thebes* is the latest in a distinguished line. The others ask to be seen as a single play united by the arc of Oedipus' fate. The story has proved amazingly tenacious and generative. There is Seneca. The famous complex shadows Hamlet and Gertrude; it is somewhere there in Webster and Racine; there are striking similarities with *King Lear*. Yeats, Stravinsky, Cocteau and Pasolini each had a go. The Yeats versions, more Yeats than Sophocles, are famously idiosyncratic, though memorable for some great lines and magnificent choral odes. The Stravinsky opera is highly regarded, and the Pasolini

film is a masterpiece, one of the high points of Italian cinema. Disguised, the 'poor forked creature' appears in Beckett too.

The present version bears no comparison with any of these, but it tries out some experiments. These involve, as once with Yeats, substantial textual elisions. Things move more quickly than hitherto, particularly at Colonus, Sophocles' birthplace and site of Oedipus' death. Ismene, always a dim figure compared with her younger sister, receives more prominence and a more positive role. At the same time there is nothing here, or almost nothing, without some source in the original plays — or, since I know no Greek, in the various literal translations from which I've worked. The few exceptions are, I hope, in the right spirit.

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Characters

OEDIPUS
JOCASTA
CREON
TIRESIAS
ISMENE
ANTIGONE
THESEUS
PRIESTS
GARDENER
COURIERS
SHEPHERDS
SERVANTS
SOLDIERS
CHORUSES
CITIZENS
CHILDREN

ACT ONE

King Oedipus

A spring morning before the palace at Thebes. Steps and altars. A subdued crowd of PRIESTS and CITIZENS sits silently downstage. Enter OEDIPUS from the palace.

OEDIPUS

Thebans, your flowers and incense, what do they mean,
your quiet demonstration and obvious pain?
I, Oedipus your king, am here to listen
in person to the cause of your agitation.
Your anxious silence buzzes in my ears.
Speak up now, tell me of your hopes and fears;
whatever I can do for you will be done.

PRIEST

Oedipus, all our citizens old and young
have come here to deliver a petition
with suppliant branches at your royal palace;
we sit on pavements and in the market-place
to ask for some initiative, some decision.
You yourself have seen our desolation,
the death-tide that engulfs us one and all:
death in the fruit, death in the fruitful soil,
death in the fields and meadows, death in the womb
and a ferocious plague blighting the home,
wasting the city to which we all belong
founded by Cadmus in his generation.
We turn to you, Oedipus, the best of men,
remembering that, a stranger to this town,
you freed us from the malevolence of the Sphinx

with your own resolution and initiative.
Act for us now again that we may live
and prosper; exorcize the curse that sinks
our health and our economy in despair.
Your ingenuity saved us once before.
Use your unique resourcefulness once more;
rule, not a desert, but the Thebes we love.

OEDIPUS

I share your grief, believe me; I'm quite aware
of your great suffering and anxiety.
All suffer, but no-one suffers more than I.
Each has his personal sorrow, his own grief,
but I suffer too for everyone gathered here,
my responsibility being the communal life.
I've wandered sleeplessly from room to room
heart-broken, baffled by the general doom;
my eyes open, all night I've lain awake
looking for answers in the lightless dark;
and there *might* be a solution. A faint spark
of hope sustains me, for my kinsman Creon
set off three days ago to ask the opinion
of the Delphic Oracle; he should be back soon.
Whatever the gods demand will be quickly done.

PRIEST

I think I see him at the Northern Gate
and waving to us as he comes into sight.

OEDIPUS

Perhaps everything is going to be all right.

Enter CREON.

. . . Brother-in-law, what word from the Oracle?

CREON

Our troubles may be over, by some miracle.

OEDIPUS

What did she say? What hope did she hold out?

CREON

Should I speak openly or for your ears alone?

OEDIPUS

Speak openly; the answer concerns everyone.

CREON

The Sibyl says there is some vicious thing
sprung from our Theban soil, which is destroying
the earth and must be banished from our sight.

OEDIPUS

What vicious thing? What purification rite?

CREON

The exile of a man from our sick city;
a killing is the source of our adversity.

OEDIPUS

Someone was killed? Who are we talking about?

CREON

Our previous king was obviously the victim.

OEDIPUS

King Laius? I see; I never set eyes on him.

CREON

He was murdered; and clearly the Oracle intends
we find the one who did it and make amends.

OEDIPUS

Where do we look? What on earth do we do?
The crime took place so many years ago.

CREON

Start here; the Sibyl says the fault lies here.

OEDIPUS

But he didn't die in Thebes; he died elsewhere.

CREON

He left Thebes on a pilgrimage; since when
no-one ever saw him alive again.

OEDIPUS

What, no companion, no-one to breathe a word,
to give us some report of what occurred?

CREON

They were all killed except for a single man
with the vaguest recollection of what went on.

OEDIPUS

What did he say? Did he leave us the slightest clue?

CREON

He merely reported that a bunch of thieves
ambushed the royal party and took their lives.

OEDIPUS

An outrage, and so hazardous. No mere
thieves would have tried such a risky game.
They were put up to it by somebody here.

CREON

So it was thought; but in the violent time
thereafter, the whole question was set aside.

OEDIPUS

What violence could be worse than regicide?

CREON

The murderous, riddling Sphinx consumed our days,
presenting us with more immediate difficulties.

OEDIPUS

I begin to glimpse a solution to our plight;
we'll start now and bring everything to light.
Not only have we a duty to the late king
but to ourselves. Until we expose this thing
suspicion hangs like a shadow over everyone;
besides, whoever the killer is, he might
rise up again and try to usurp the throne.
Thebans, take up your branches and disperse;
no stone will be left unturned, nothing undone
to save our city from this unnatural curse.

CHORUS

(A series of individual voices)

Thebes, the bright city, has heard
the grave voice of the Oracle
in her secret limestone cave
whirling with bat and bird.
What prophecy does she give?
We hope for a miracle
but may yet receive
some more ominous word.

Athene, daughter of Zeus,
Phoebus, lord of the sun,
visit us with your grace;
lend us your strength again
as often you did before.
Eradicate this curse;
banish the plague and pain
so we may thrive once more.

Death squats in our houses
and our infected fields;
silence of children's voices,
bird silence in the hills.
Life-loving Dionysus,
Artemis with your bow,