

King Oedipus, by Sophocles

Any analysis of *Oedipus the King* must focus on two things: Oedipus' character and the complex plot. Other minor characters can be more briefly analysed and usually the same evidence/quotes used to examine the themes and the character of Oedipus himself can apply.

Central Themes
<p>Fate vs Free Will/Prophecy: Centre to the plot are two prophecies and the people who try to avoid their fates. In Ancient Greece, prophecies were a significant part of life and society; and yet, they understood how tricky these things could be. Just as books or movies like <i>Harry Potter</i> or <i>The Matrix</i> show, prophecies can be defined by the actions of those they are about – the protagonist of these stories, like many Ancient Greeks, might have legitimately asked “Would the prophecy have happened if I hadn't heard it?”</p>
<p>Wisdom and knowledge: “Know Thyself” was written above the oracle's temple at Delphi. To understand a prophecy, the Greeks believed you needed to have greater insight into who you are. Oedipus showed a lack of wisdom when he heard the prophecy about his killing his father and marrying his parents – a wise man would not try and avoid fate. He now shows less wisdom has he acquires more knowledge about what has happened in the past. Just because he knows more does not mean he understands more or is wiser for it.</p>
<p>Blindness – Figurative vs Literal: Oedipus' lack of wisdom is highlighted by the central theme or motif of blindness. The ironically blind seer Tiresias <i>sees</i> more, has more <i>insight</i>, and is <i>wiser</i>; Oedipus, the determined detective, drives for truth, acquires what information he can, but can never <i>see</i> the truth clearly, never has <i>insight</i>, remains knowing but <i>unwise</i>. Not until the end, when the truth hits him all too hard and he decides to punish himself with ironically and tragically: blinding himself with his mother/wife's broaches – the clothes of the woman whose true relationship to himself he could not (or perhaps would not) see.</p>
<p>Determination – Oedipus the Detective: Oedipus asks many questions in his search for the truth. He does not leave any stone unturned. He is even driven to angry extremes in his search for truth – threatening his kin, blind seers, and old shepherds/slaves in his quest.</p>
<p>Power – Oedipus the Tyrant/Ruler: Ultimately the title of the play is <i>King Oedipus</i>. Sophocles play is exploring the nature of ruling through Oedipus and the plot. What happens when a king seeks the one causing his city suffering, only to find he is the unknown culprit? Oedipus' temper and determined nature, and his pride in his own abilities, drives him to the brink of killing his bother-in-law, to declaring a proven seer of the God Apollo a liar, and (in the backstory) to murder his own (unknown) father.</p>
<p>Hubris: The absolute centre of all of these themes is Hubris – the Ancient Greeks favourite trait in their tragic Heroes and Heroines. Oedipus has pride in himself, his skills and intelligent as a ruler and detective, his ability to defy Apollo and fate (though he does show some fear of it). It was his pride that led him to believe he was above the will of the gods and destiny; it was his pride and hot-temper that led him to kill Laius at the crossroads; it was his pride that leads him now to bring curses down on an unknown culprit, to accuse a blind seer and his trusted brother-in-law and friend of treachery, and to continue blindly down to path in search of a truth that he ought to never learn.</p>

Episodes of <i>King Oedipus</i>		
Section:	Lines	Stasimons and Dialogues
Prologue	Lines 1-151	Oedipus and Priest; Oedipus and Creon coming from Delphi
Parados	Lines 151-216	Chorus sing of the suffering of Thebes and pray to the Gods for relieve especially Apollo.
Episode 1	Lines 216-514	Oedipus and Chorus; Oedipus and Tiresias
Episode 2	Lines 512-875	Chorus Stasimon asking who the guilty man is and how could it be Oedipus as Tiresias had proclaimed. Oedipus accusing Creon; Jocasta tells Oedipus of 3 Roads and the death of her baby despite of the prophecy.
Episode 3	Lines 875-1085	Chorus Stasimon on destiny and the dangers of tyranny and ignoring the gods' will. Jocasta, Messenger, and Oedipus.
Episode 4	Lines 1102-1189	Chorus Stasimon on how the riddle of Oedipus' birth will reveal "tomorrow's moon"; Oedipus questions shepherd
Episode 5	Lines 1189-1530	Chorus Stasimon on the fall of Oedipus; attendant/messenger reveals the death of Jocasta and blinding of Oedipus; Oedipus comes on stage, humble before Chorus and Creon; Creon proclaims that they will wait for Apollo's command before sentencing Oedipus to exile. Oedipus embraces his daughters and is led indoors

Central Characters

Character: Oedipus



Background (as we know it from the start of the play):

- From the cursed line of **Cadmus**, founder of Thebes.
- Defeater of the **Sphinx** and **new** king of Thebes after the **mysterious death of Laius**.
- Noble son of **Polybus** the king of Corinth.

Characteristics/traits (Adjectives):

Proud/Hubristic, Clever/intelligent, **foolish/naïve/blind**, **hot-tempered**, authoritative, good ruler, slightly paranoid, **determined**, honest, confident,

Summary of Oedipus' Most Important Actions in Plot:

- Sends **Creon** to the oracle. Asks all the proceedings to be spoken **openly before the elders of Thebes**.
- Proclaims a curse on the murderer of Laius and all who protect.
- Sends **Creon** for Tiresias on **Creon's** advice.
- **Threatens Tiresias**, refutes Creon's accusations and accuses Tiresias and Creon of conspiracy.
- **Threatens Creon**, tries to proclaim him guilty without trial or proof.
- He is calmed by Jocasta and the Chorus.
- Questions Jocasta on the story of the 3 roads, Laius death, and reveals his

Key Quotes: (Your translation may differ)

Some quotes are more importance than others; you must decide which to prioritise – these lists are not exhaustive and will not guarantee a full answer.

"You freed us from the Sphinx, you came to Thebes 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."

– Priest, Prologue, to Oedipus about his clever success with the Sphinx.

"Best of men..."

– Priest, Prologue, to Oedipus.

"Speak out, speak to us all."

– Oedipus, Prologue, to Creon asking the prophecy to be public.

"No, I'll start again – I'll bring it all to light myself."

– Oedipus, Prologue, vowing to reveal the truth.

"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... he is a plague..."

– Oedipus, Episode 1, unknowingly/ironically cursing himself.

"I curse myself as well... If by any chance he proves to be an intimate of our house, here at my hearth, with my full knowledge, may the curse I just called down on him strike me!"

– Oedipus, Episode 1, unknowingly/ironically curing himself again.

"On Creon's cure I sent the escorts, twice, within the hour."

– Oedipus, Episode 1, connecting Creon to Tiresias.

"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!"

– Oedipus, Episode 1, insulting Tiresias and showing his anger.

"Shall I say more, so you can really rage?"

– Tiresias, Episode 1, to Oedipus emphasising Oedipus' anger.

"You cannot see how far you've gone in guilt."

– Tiresias, Episode 1, highlighting Oedipus' blindness.

"You've lost your power, stone-blind, stone-deaf – senses, eyes blind as stone!"

– Oedipus, Episode 1, to Tiresias showing his anger.

reasons for leaving Corinth. Sends for the Shepherd of Laius.

- Hears the messenger from Corinth but does not make the connection between himself and Laius and Jocasta's stories.
- Intensely questions the Shepherd and discovers the truth.
- **Blinds** himself.
- Returns to stage to beg for pity and exile; begs Creon to grant him exile; **Creon proclaims he shall remain till the will of the god Apollo is known.**

"Blind, lost in the night, endless night that nursed you! You can't hurt me or anyone else who sees the light..."
– Oedipus, Episode 1, insulting Tiresias' blindness but ironically showing his own.

"[Creon] so hungry to overthrow me 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."

– Oedipus, Episode 1, insulting Tiresias; connecting Tiresias to Creon without evidence; ironically highlighting his own ignorance.

"Oedipus the ignorant..."

– Oedipus, Episode 1, to Tiresias, talking sarcastically but also ironically/unknowingly referring to his own ignorance.

"I would suggest his words were spoken in anger, Oedipus ... yours too, and it isn't what we need."

– Chorus, Episode 1, to Oedipus showing the anger of both Oedipus and Tiresias.

"True, but a slur might have been forced out of him, by anger perhaps, not any firm conviction."

– Chorus, Episode 2, talking to Creon of Oedipus' temper.

"You, plotting to kill me, kill the king – I see it all, the marauding thief himself scheming to steal my crown and power!"

– Oedipus, Episode 2, accusing Creon without prove.

"Oedipus: No matter – I must rule.

Creon: not if you rule unjustly."

– Oedipus and Creon, Episode 2, discussing what it means to rule.

"Look at you, sullen in yielding, brutal in your rage – you will go too far. It's perfect justice: natures like yours are hardest on themselves."

– Creon, Episode 2, to Oedipus.

"Loose, ignorant talk started dark suspicions and a sense of injustice cut deeply too."

– Chorus, Episode 2, on the ignorance of Oedipus.

"Strange, hearing you just now... my mind wandered, my thoughts racing back and forth."

– Oedipus, Episode 2, to Jocasta.

"I have a terrible fear the blind seer can see"

– Oedipus, Episode 2, to Jocasta upon hearing more details of Laius murder at 3 roads; showing some insight.

"Ai – now I can see it all, clear as day."

– Oedipus, Episode 2, to Jocasta beginning to see some of the truth

"I am afraid, Jocasta, I have said too much already. That man – I've got to see him."

– Oedipus, Episode 2, to Jocasta showing more restraint.

"the one in the lead and the old man himself were about to thrust me off the road – brute force – and the one shouldering me aside, the driver, I strike him in anger!"
– Oedipus, Episode 2, reflecting on the incident at the crossroad, showing his anger.

"But now, all the prophecies I feared – Polybus packs them off to sleep with him in hell! They're nothing, worthless."
– Oedipus, Episode 3, doubting prophecy.

"A dreadful prophecy, stranger, sent by the gods."
– Oedipus, Episode 3, to messenger still fearing the prophecy.

"I must know it all, must see the truth at last."
– Oedipus, Episode 3, to Jocasta showing his determination for the truth.

"So, you won't talk willingly – then you'll talk with pain."
– Oedipus, Episode 4, to Shepherd.

"Twist his arms back, quickly!"
– Oedipus, Episode 4, showing his wrath.

"You're a dead man if I have to ask again."
– Oedipus, Episode 4, showing his anger.

"O god – all come true, all burst to light! O light – now let me look my last on you! I stand revealed at last –"
– Oedipus, Episode 4, on the pain of knowing the truth and seeing the light – asking for blindness and ignorance.

"You you'll see no more the pain I suffered, all the pain I caused! Too long you looked on the ones you never should have seen, blind to the ones you longed to see, to know! Blind from this our on! Blind I darkness – blind!"
– Messenger palace, Episode 5, relaying Oedipus' speech upon blinding himself – ironically Oedipus blinds himself now that he can see the truth.

"Apollo, friends, Apollo – he ordained my agonies – these, my pains on pains!"
– Oedipus, Episode 5, showing he recognises it was his neglect of Apollo that led to his pain.

"I, with *my* eyes, how could I look my father in the eyes when I go down to death?"
– Oedipus, Episode 5, on his blindness.

"I wronged him [Creon] so, just now, in every way. You must see that – I was wrong, so wrong."
– Oedipus, Episode 5, showing his regret in his prior abuses of power.

"Oh but this I know... I would never have been saved from death – I have been saved for something great and terrible, something strange. Well, let my destiny come and take me on its way!"
– Oedipus, Episode 5, now accepting his destiny.

"People of Thebes, my countrymen, look on Oedipus. He solved the famous riddle with his brilliance, he rose to power, a man beyond all power. Who could behold his

greatness without envy? Now what a black sea of terror has overwhelmed him. Now as we keep our watch and wait the final day, count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last.”

– Chorus Exodus

Opinion/Synopsis of Character:

Oedipus’ character is central to the plot of the play. All the themes of the play are tied to his character and his interaction with the other characters. Therefore, your opinion of his character is vital to answering most questions that may arise on a paper.

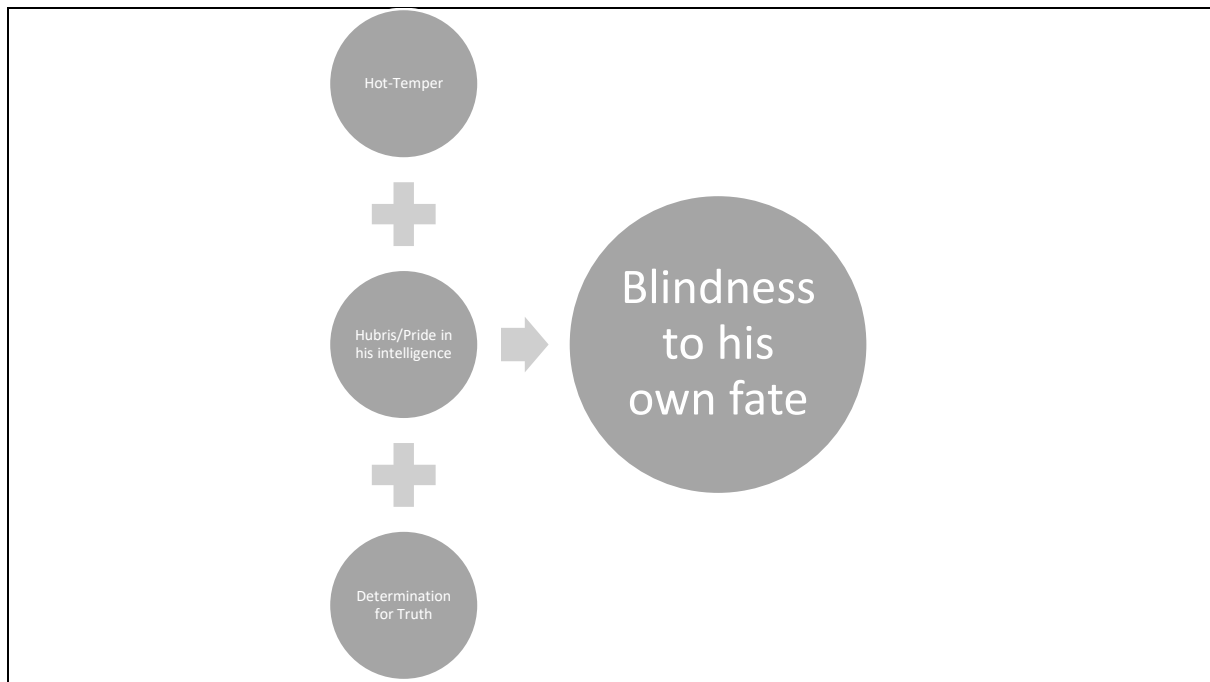
Oedipus is **clever and proud**, he tries to avoid his fate because he lacks **the insight into his own faults**, believing he can defy the will of the gods. His pride leads him to think himself more capable and worthier than other men, making him **determined** to be a good ruler and to discover the one at fault for the plague. However, this pride and his own **lack of wisdom** means that when the truth confronts him through Tiresias, Creon, Jocasta and the Messenger from Corinth, **he denies the truth and presses on blindly searching for his version of the truth**. His blind determination and pride in his own abilities also lead him to make aggressive outbursts against Creon, Tiresias and the shepherd; portraying him as a knowing and yet **unjust ruler – a Tyrant**.

He only accepts his own faults when he has exhausted all other possibilities and intensely questioned the shepherd – witness to his birth and his murdering of Laius.

By the end of the play, we see Oedipus character as completely reversed: **he is humble and humbled, blinded and yet can see the truth more clearly**. Even so, he tries to give a command at the end of the play, but Creon reminds him that he has no more power now.

Oedipus is at fault for believing himself capable of avoiding his own fate – as willed by the god Apollo – and above the reproach of his subjects. However, when he truly discovers his own fate and the truth, he has clearer insight and accepts his own guilt and insists on suffering the punishment as he had proclaimed for the murderer at the start of play. He even shows some insight into the future of his children’s lives, prophesising their own unhappy ends. For this we can commend him.

A Diagram helping you to visualise **what causes Oedipus’ blindness to the truth**:



Character: Tiresias



Overview of Character

Tiresias resists revealing the truth to Oedipus, saying it will not change the outcome of events – and this is true since it is not through Oedipus’ encounter with Creon or Tiresias that the truth will be revealed. However, he allows himself to be goaded by Oedipus into accusing Oedipus and revealing the truth. He reflects some of Oedipus’ temper, and yet he has the insight to know that any action he takes or words he says will **not** change his fate or anyone else’s.

Tiresias encounter with Oedipus explores the themes of wisdom, anger, power, and fate.

Key Quotes

“Blind as you are, you can feel all the more...”
 – Oedipus, Episode 1, to Tiresias highlighting Tiresias’ literal blindness but also insight.

“**How terrible – to see the truth when the truth is only pain to him who sees!**”
 – Tiresias, Episode 1, talking about the pain of wisdom or insight/knowledge of the truth.

“You criticize my temper... unaware of the one *you* live with, you revile me.”
 – Tiresias, Episode 1, showing Tiresias’ subversive attitude to Oedipus.

“What will come will come. Even if I shroud it all in silence.”
 – Tiresias, Episode 1, showing his stoicism (acceptance of fate) and wisdom.

“The truth with all its power lives inside me.”
 – Tiresias, Episode 1, talking to Oedipus.

“**I say you are the murderer you hunt**”
 – Tiresias, Episode 1, accusing Oedipus.

“True, it is not your fate to fall at my hands. Apollo is quite enough, and he will take some pains to work this out.”
 – Tiresias, Episode 1, showing faith in Apollo and fate.

“I would suggest his words were spoken in anger, Oedipus...”
 – Chorus, Episode 1, to Oedipus showing the anger of both Oedipus and Tiresias.

Adjectives

Wise, blind literally but insightful figuratively, hot-tempered, arrogant, subversive, stoic (accepting of fate), pious (accepting of the will of the gods).

“So, you mock my blindness? Let me tell you this. You with your precious eyes, you’re blind to the corruption of your life, to the house you live in, those you live with -”
– Tiresias, Episode 1, to Oedipus.

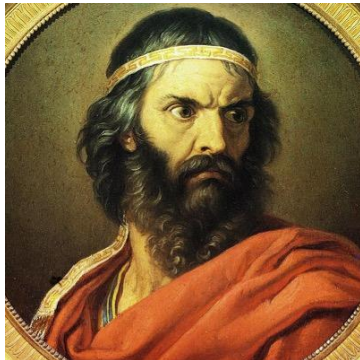
“The double lash of your mother and your father’s curse will whip you from this land one day, their footfall treading you down in terror, **darkness shrouding your eyes that now can see the light!**”
– Tiresias, Episode 1, to Oedipus showing insight into the future.

“This day will bring your birth and your destruction.”
– Tiresias, Episode 1, to Oedipus prophesising Oedipus fate.

“Blind who now has eyes, beggar who now is rich, he will grope his way towards a foreign soil...”
– Tiresias, Episode 1, to Oedipus prophesising Oedipus fate.

“And if you find I’ve lied from this day onward call the prophet blind.”
– Tiresias, Episode 1, to Oedipus prophesising Oedipus fate.

Character: Creon



Key Quotes

“I don’t know. And when I don’t, I keep quiet.”
– Creon, Episode 2, showing his humility and wisdom.

“How could kingship please me more than influence, power without a qualm?”
– Creon, Episode 2, to Oedipus on ruling/power.

“Time alone can bring the just man to light –”
– Creon, Episode 2, to Oedipus.

“Good advice my lord, for anyone who wants to avoid disaster. Those who jump to conclusions may go wrong.”
– Chorus, Episode 2, praising Creon’s words.

“Oedipus: No matter – I must rule.

Creon: Not if you rule unjustly.”
– Oedipus and Creon, Episode 2, discussing what it means to rule.

“First I wanted the god to clarify my duties.”
– Creon, Episode 5, showing his trust in the gods’ will.

“And this time, I assume, even you will obey the god’s decrees.”
– Creon, Episode 5, to Oedipus about obeying the prophecies of Apollo.

“Still the king, the master of all things? No more: here your power ends. None of your power follows you through life.”
– Creon, Episode 5, on the end of Oedipus’ reign.

Overview of Character

Creon represents a more tamed and considerate ruler than Oedipus; he is a man he respects the will of the gods and does not hunger for power. His encounter with Oedipus highlights what it means to rule justly.

Adjectives

Just, wise, loyal, honest, pious

Character: Jocasta



Overview of Character

Jocasta shares Oedipus' fault in defying the will of gods; however, she differs in one significant way: she does not fear prophecies, Oedipus does. She respects that all things are fated by Apollo and will be as they will be, but she denies to prophetic insight of Apollo's priests and oracles. This insult to the gods is not a slight one and is an impiety against the god Apollo. She is punished; punishment is to have fate and insight into the truth revealed to her. It is what could be called an **ironic punishment**.

Her interactions with Oedipus explore the idea of fate, free will, and prophecy.

Adjectives:

Loving, Caring, foolish, naïve, proud, impious

Key Quotes

"A prophet? Well then, free yourself of every charge!... Nothing human can penetrate the future."

– Jocasta, Episode 2, to Oedipus.

"Whatever the god needs and seeks he'll bring to light himself, with ease."

– Jocasta, Episode 2, to Oedipus.

"So much for prophecy. It's neither here nor there."

– Jocasta, Episode 2, to Oedipus.

"You prophecies of the gods, where are you now?"

– Jocasta, Episode 3, after messenger from Corinth brings news of Polybus' death.

"Listen to *him*, see for yourself what all those awful prophecies of god have come to."

– Jocasta, Episode 3, to Oedipus.

"It's all chance, chance rules our lives."

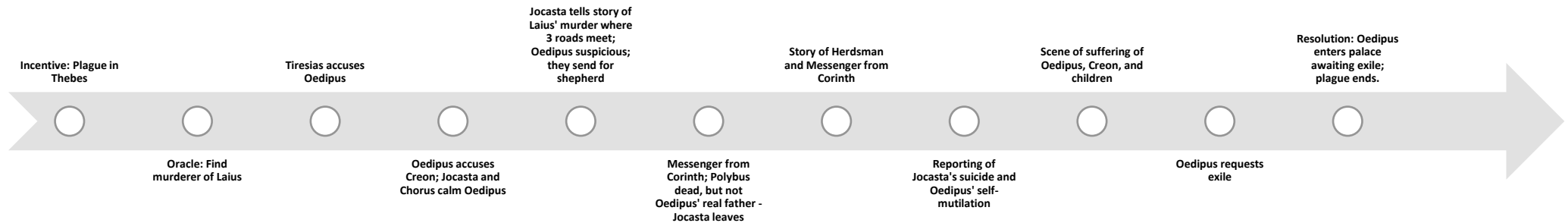
– Jocasta, Episode 3, to Oedipus.

Character: Chorus of Theban Elders	Key Quotes
<p>Role in Play</p> <p>The role of the Chorus in <i>King Oedipus</i> is primarily to highlight certain themes throughout – particularly through their stasimon. They also give insight – through the chorus leader – into the emotions of key characters, and how we should react to their actions.</p>	<p>“Apollo, Healer of Delos... Apollo, archer astride the thunderheads of heaven... Apollo, lord of light, I beg you –”</p> <p>– Chorus, Parados, three times praying to Apollo lord of healing and prophecy.</p> <p>“The skilled prophet scans the birds and shatters me with terror! 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...”</p> <p>– Chorus, Episode 2, Stasimon on prophecy and tyrants.</p> <p>“No, not till I see these charges proved will I side with his accusers.</p> <p>– Chorus, Episode 2, in Stasimon holding their judgement.</p> <p>“Those who jump to conclusions may go wrong.”</p> <p>– Chorus, Episode 2, on the dangers of making conclusions without proof.</p> <p>“Destiny guide me always, destiny find me with reverence pure in word and deed.”</p> <p>– Chorus, Episode 3, Stasimon on destiny and tyranny.</p> <p>“Pride breeds the Tyrant.”</p> <p>– Chorus, Episode 3. Stasimon about destiny and abuse of power, and dangers of ignoring prophecy.</p> <p>“If I am a true prophet, if I can grasp the truth, by the boundless skies of Olympus, at the full moon of tomorrow, Mount Cithaeron you will know hoe Oedipus glories in you –“</p> <p>– Chorus, Episode 4, on Oedipus’ birth.</p> <p>“You are my great example, you, your life, your destiny, Oedipus, man of misery – I count no man blest.”</p> <p>– Chorus, Episode 5, on fall of Oedipus.</p> <p>“O child of Laius, would to god I’d never seen you, never never!”</p> <p>– Chorus, Episode 5, on fall of Oedipus.</p> <p>“I tell you truth, you gave me life my breath leapt in you and now you bring down night upon my eyes.”</p> <p>– Chorus, Episode 5, on Oedipus fall connected to light and dark, insight and blindness.</p> <p>“People of Thebes, my countrymen, look on Oedipus. He solved the famous riddle with his brilliance, he rose to power, a man beyond all power. Who could behold his greatness without envy? Now what a black sea of terror has overwhelmed him. Now as we keep our watch and wait the final day, count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last.”</p> <p>– Chorus Exodus</p>

Plotting the Plot

The most difficult aspect to analysing Sophocles is unravelling his plots. In Oedipus the King there are two: the main plot and the Backstory. The former progresses normally – into the future – the other is in the past and is revealed in reverse.

The Main Plot (in the Present):



The Subplot/Backstory as it's revealed (in the Past):

