

"I saw the mother of Oedipus, Epikastè
whose great unwitting deed it was
to marry her own son. He took that prize
from a slain father; presently the gods
brought all to light that made the famous story ... "

Homer: ODYSSEY, Book XI (tr Fitzgerald)

OEDIPUS TYRANNOS // Sophokles // 425 BC

OEDIPUS TYRANNOS or OEDIPUS REX is part of a trilogy that was written and produced separately: the third play was produced first (ANTIGONE, 442 BC); the first play was produced second (OEDIPUS TYRANNOS, 425 BC - did not win the first prize); and the second play was written third (OEDIPUS AT COLONOS, written 406 BC, produced 401 BC).

Some key terms for Greek tragedy:

anagnorisis - sudden recognition
peripeteia - reversal of fortune
nemesis - inevitable punishment
in medias res - in the middle of things

ananke - necessity, order even gods cannot alter
pharmakos - scapegoat takes suffering or sins
catharsis - purging or cleansing
molpê - dance and song, sacred to ritual exorcism

"We all know, since the work of Sir James Frazer, how the whole religion of the Mediterranean world centred on what we call agriculture: the ancients regarded it as the action of divine powers blessing or cursing man through his land and flocks... The purpose of the drama was -- it is generally agreed -- originally magical... It is well to remember that dramatic performances were introduced into Rome *inter alia caelestis irae placamina* in order to cure a pestilence. This occurred actually during the lifetime of Aristotle. But Aristotle himself has forgotten as completely as we have that tragedy was ever a magical rite: he treats it simply as an artistic performance, and judges it, not for any concrete effect it may have on the public health, but simply on aesthetic grounds... Put briefly, it seems that historically the tragic hero is derived both from the Life Spirit -- call him Dionysus or what you will -- who comes to save the community with the fruits of the New Year, and from the polluted Old Year, the *Pharmakos* or Scapegoat, who is cast out to die or to wander in the wilderness, bearing with him the sins of the community... Oedipus is the saviour of Thebes, the being whose advent delivered Thebes from death; Oedipus is also the abomination, the polluter of Thebes, the thing which must be cast out, if Thebes is to live and be clean."

Gilbert Murray: THE CLASSICAL TRADITION IN POETRY, Vintage, 1957

Laius and Jocasta, king and queen of Thebes, were told by an oracle they would have a son who would kill his father and marry his mother; when Oedipus ("club-foot") was born, he was put out on a hill to perish; a shepherd found him, named him Oedipus from swollen feet and gave him to the king and queen of Corinth, Polybus and Merope, whom Oedipus believed to be his real parents. Coming to manhood, Oedipus was told by another oracle the same prophecy, that he would kill his father and marry his mother, so he fled Corinth to avoid its fulfillment. On the way to Thebes, Oedipus he met an older man, argued with him, and slew him on the open road. Approaching Thebes he met the Sphinx (a monster with face of a woman, tail and claws of lion, wings of a bird). Sphinx asked Oedipus a riddle: "What is it goes first on four feet, then on two feet, then on three?" Oedipus answered "Man", whereupon Sphinx extincted itself. The grateful Thebans made Oedipus their new king in absence of Laius, and let Oedipus marry Jocasta. They had four children: Antigone, Polynices, Eteocles, and Ismene.

