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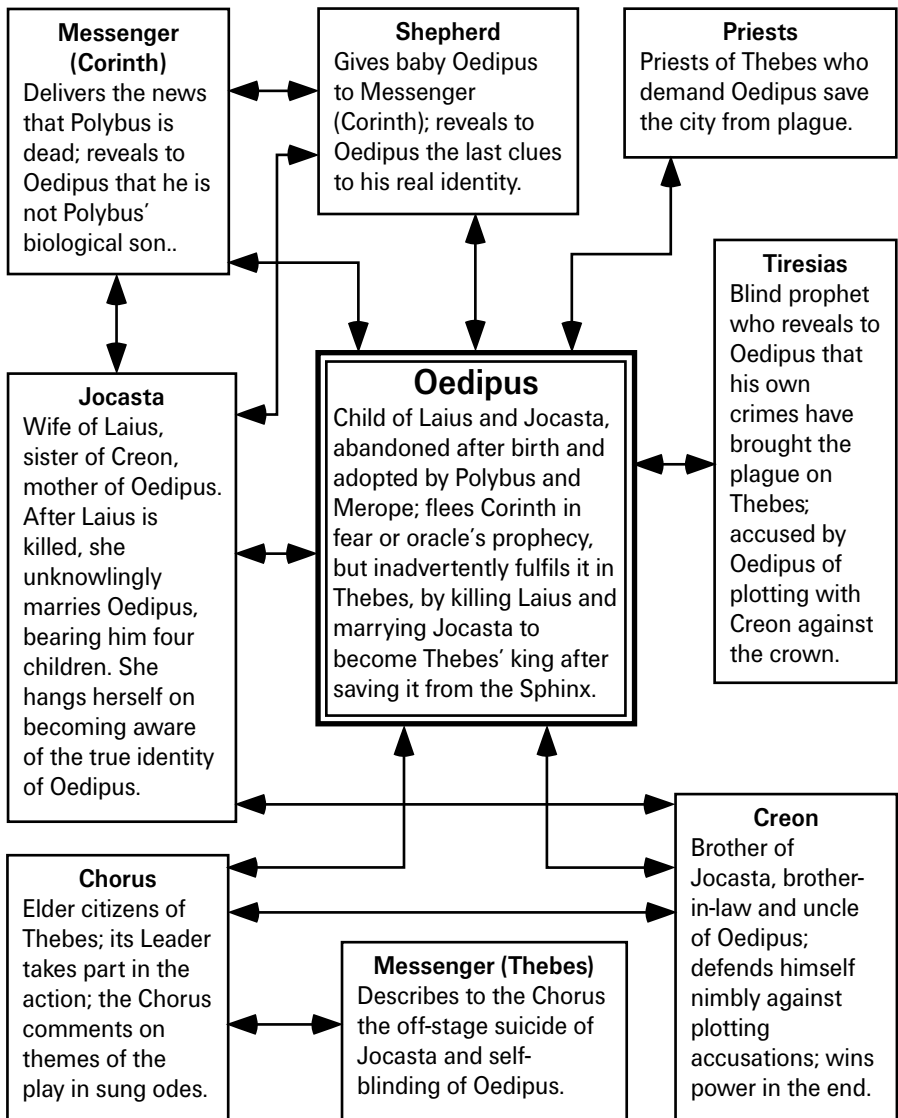
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CHARACTER MAP



Other Important Characters

Polybus & Merope: King & Queen of Corinth; adopted and raised Oedipus.

Laius: King of Thebes, husband of Jocasta, father of Oedipus.

INTRODUCTION

Oedipus the King tells the story of the ruler of Thebes who, believing that he was a stranger to that city, discovers on one terrible day that he is the lost son of the previous king, Laius, and his wife Jocasta. The tragedy which is revealed is the cause of the play's fame: many years before, Oedipus had, unknowingly, killed Laius and, having taken Laius' wife for his own, committed incest with his mother. The prelude to these events, however, began many years earlier, when Laius and Jocasta received a prophecy that a son born to them would one day kill Laius. When a son was born, they gave the newborn child to a servant to be killed. But the boy was saved and given to Polybus, the king of Corinth, who raised him as his own and gave him the name Oedipus. When he had grown to adulthood, Oedipus received his own warning from the oracle of Apollo: he would kill his father and mate with his mother. Fleeing Corinth that day, he unknowingly began a series of events that would return him to his homeland in Thebes and bring about the horrific fulfilment of both prophecies. The action of the play occurs many years after these events, on the fateful day when the truth behind them comes to light.

Oedipus the King is the best known of the tragedies of fifth-century BCE (Before the Christian Era) Athens, the locus, both in time and space, of the flowering of Greek drama, one of the world's great bodies of literature. It was written by Sophocles (496-406 BCE), a member of the famous trio of great tragedians along with Aeschylus (525c.-456 BCE) and Euripides (484-407 BCE). Living until the age of 90, and a prolific writer until the end, Sophocles was the author of well over 100 plays, seven of which have survived. He was a leading citizen of Athens who performed his civic duties in very high offices on a number of occasions. Like all of the Athenian tragedies, *Oedipus the King* was written for the Great Dionysia, the annual three-day celebration of the god Dionysos that was also a great expression of civic pride. Not surprisingly, there is a strong political element in the play, as there is in all of Sophocles' plays. But it is much less what Sophocles has to say about politics, than about the calamities of the human condition, that brings readers back to *Oedipus the King* nearly 2500 years after its first performance. It is the story of a great but flawed man, doomed to perform the most heinous crimes - despite doing everything in his power to prevent it.

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

The fifth century BCE is thought of as the 'Golden Age of Athens'. It is the age of Pericles and Socrates, of a flourishing of philosophy, the arts and the sciences in a democracy emerging as the most influential of the many Greek city-states. While it may have looked to Athenians that its glory would never end, it did, and soon - the long Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE) resulting in total defeat at the hands of Sparta and its allies. Though Athens did regain democratic rule in later centuries, it never again returned to the level of cultural achievement that marks the fifth century.

Dionysos – God of Crops and Wine

Every spring, Athenians celebrated the powerful deity Dionysos, god of crops and wine. It was an important aspect of the yearly cycle, for Dionysos needed to be appeased in order to ensure a good harvest in the autumn. This does not seem to have been an overly burdensome duty; the celebrations of Dionysos were marked by excessive drinking and sexual promiscuity.

Dionysos was also identified with the principles of ecstasy and the kind of inspiration that results from the ecstatic condition. In this capacity he sat diametrically opposed to Apollo, the model of logic, reason and propriety. Dionysos is the most complex and the most human of all the Olympian gods - he was the only god to have one mortal parent, his mother, Semele, a princess of Thebes. Dionysos also had a terrible side; as he induced ecstasy and joy in his followers, he could also induce the kind of madness that led to the most brutal violence. The Maenads, followers of Dionysos, would troop off to the wilds to give themselves entirely over to such madness, tearing to pieces any animal in their path - an orthodox way to make sacrifices to their god.¹ Moreover, Dionysos was the only god who could die. As the vines were pruned back every year in winter, the god would die, to be resurrected in spring with their regrowth.



It is easy to see why Dionysos was held in such esteem by the Greeks; he represented both the heights of their own emotional range, as well as the worst of their frailties. For

¹ Euripides' play, usually called *The Bacchae* (after Bacchus, the Latin name for Dionysos), tells the story of how king Pentheus of Thebes was torn apart by Maenads, including his mother and sister, who did not recognise him in their madness.

our purposes, Dionysos is most important as patron of ecstatic inspiration, for in this role he is the god of poetry.

The Great Dionysia

The Festival

Around 534 BCE, the Dionysiac revels were formalised into a festival called the Great Dionysia, remembered now primarily for being the occasion for the annual contest of plays among Athens' leading playwrights. There was more to it than that, however; its three days of pageantry, song, dance and drama were also a celebration of Athens itself. All citizens were required to attend, but one suspects that it was less a civic duty than an expression of civic identity. It must not be forgotten how important this last aspect was to Athenian culture. Classicist, Daniel Mendelsohn, says:

The religious and civic ceremonials that framed the performances — the opening libations to *Dêmokratia*, democracy personified, the parade of war orphans (and of allied tribute), the reading of the names of patriotic citizens, the sacrifices on behalf of the city, even the visible presence of fifteen thousand other citizens in the theater of Dionysos - underscored, in a fashion impossible to reproduce in today's theater, the sense that plays being performed had much larger social, civic, ritual, and political resonances.²

We may have no way of reproducing the sense of 'larger social, civic, ritual, and political resonances' in contemporary performances, but we have a responsibility to understand that the great artistic outpouring called Greek drama was not created in a vacuum. Our aesthetic appreciation must recognise the charged social environment in which these plays came to be. They were, at least partially, expressions of what it meant to be an Athenian.

Use of the Dithyramb



The origin of Greek tragedy can be traced to a lyrical ode (a stylised poem intended to praise) called the dithyramb, which is reputed to have been invented by Arion of Lesbos in the seventh or sixth century.

² Daniel Mendelsohn, 'When Not in Greece', *The New York Review of Books*, 28 March 2002 (XLIX, No. 5), p.35.

Dithyrambs to Dionysos were set to music and sung by a Chorus of 50 men in the early Dionysias; the men also danced. One should picture a highly ritualised spectacle having very little to do with what we now think of as drama. Legend has it that somewhere in the sixth century a poet called Thespis became the first true actor when he began engaging the Chorus in a kind of dialogue (actors to this day like to invoke the title *thespian*) - I envision a kind of give-and-take affair still within keeping of the spirit of the dithyramb. Aeschylus is usually attributed with increasing the number of actors to two and reducing the size of the Chorus to 12. This change is often declared the beginning of true drama - the greatly expanded interactive possibilities between two different actors, and the Chorus bestowing a flexibility able to broach more complex subjects, like those of tragedy. Whether Aeschylus is wholly responsible will never be known, but the fact remains that within the space of perhaps two hundred years, the dithyramb had evolved into the multi-faceted art form we know as Greek tragedy.

The Competition

As I have stated, Greek drama (tragedy and comedy) reached its height in the fifth century. Very early on, the Great Dionysia became a competition in which the top tragedians of Athens would each submit four plays for consideration. Three of these plays would be tragedies, and one would be what was called a *satyr* play (it is the origin of the word *satire*). This latter was an interesting concept, apparently a very crude burlesque (or parody) on the same themes that the playwright treated with such gravity in his tragedies. Only tragedians were allowed to submit *satyr* plays.

Comedies, which were allowed into the competitions a few decades after the tragedy competitions first started, were a staple but kept quite separate - playwrights either wrote tragedies (and *satyr* plays) or comedies; there was no crossover. Aristophanes is the most famous of the Athenian playwrights of comedy. Sophocles apparently won the most competitions in tragedy, more than twenty in total, and it is generally believed that he was never ranked lower than second.

GENRE, STRUCTURE & STYLE

Greek Tragedy

What was Greek tragedy? Well, statistically speaking, we cannot really know. It is estimated that the fifth century alone produced perhaps a thousand plays. Only 32 survive in their complete form, all of them by the three great playwrights (seven each by Aeschylus and Sophocles, and the rest by Euripides). It is difficult to come to definitive conclusions based on only three per cent of the total output, but we have had to patch together what we can from this material. Sophocles defeated Aeschylus to win his first Dionysia in 468 BCE. Somewhere around that time 'tragedy' was expanded to include three actors plus the Chorus. Sophocles is usually attributed with this advancement (along with expanding the Chorus to 15), but it is impossible to say conclusively. Regardless, the form was given even more flexibility. There was a healthy rivalry, as was Sophocles' later rivalry with Euripides. With them our conception of tragedy (ancient and beyond) was formed.

Features of Greek Tragedy

There are many features of Greek tragedy to consider. The first has to do with audience expectations. Tragedians took their subjects from a diverse array of stories and personages already present in their rich mythology. The legends surrounding the heroes of the Trojan wars - Achilles, Odysseus, Ajax, Agamemnon and so on - were extremely popular, as were those of more fantastic figures, such as Heracles and Jason. Tragedy, as a form, was expected to use only such 'larger-than-life' figures; it was through their stories, their successes and their failures, their glorious attributes as well as their frailties, that audiences could receive most clearly whatever lesson about fate or the gods or the human condition the playwright was trying to communicate. (This last point comes to us through Aristotle, who, in his *Poetics*, written about a hundred years after Sophocles, insisted that tragedy convey a lesson).



Key Features of Greek Tragedy

- *The audience knew the stories so what happened was not the main focus*
- *Highly stylised, artificial drama — not realistic*
- *Larger-than-life characters*

- *A Chorus expresses the will of the Gods or reflect on a dramatic theme*
 - *Distinctive structure (see p.12).*
-

Rather than a mystery, *Oedipus the King* is something like a morbid sideshow; its action follows the horrific and slow unveiling to a man of his deep entanglement in a hideous web that fate has spun just for him. The audience did not come to learn what happens to Oedipus; they came to learn something about life. The Oedipus legend provided a vehicle for that learning.

Greek drama, whether tragedy or comedy, was *artificial* in the original meaning of the term, employing high artifice in order to make its point. It is crucial to understand this about the genre. Our theatre, that is, modern theatre, strives for 'realism', which aims to represent the characters and action consistently with the 'real' world.³

In high tragedy, complex abstraction and extreme emotion are conveyed by means of high stylization: the deeply poetic texts, the rich allusive vocabulary of myth, the ritualistic singing and dancing that resonates with shared religious experience and social values - the very artificiality...that enhances rather than diminishes grand themes and emotions (ibid., p.36).

Larger-than-Life Characters

There were three actors playing multiple parts. Only men were allowed to perform. Moreover, the actors delivered all their speeches through highly stylised masks. The dialogue between actors would have been delivered in very unnatural tones. All of the lines of the Chorus were sung, to the accompaniment of ritualised dancing by the same performers. Even scenes between actors might be sung. Overall, the impression was anything but naturalistic, a term that would have had no meaning for the Greeks.

It is wrong to conclude that such conventions only existed because Greek drama was somehow primitive to our own. Our general requirement that drama be about 'real people' - 'it wasn't *real*' is surely the most common

³ Film is even more rigidly naturalistic; the most 'far out' sci-fi thriller can be, and usually is, naturalistic in that it strives to fool its audiences, through acting and special effects, into *believing* in the world it presents. It aims to make the sci-fi world credible.

criticism made these days, by professional critic and average playgoer alike - would not have meant anything to the Greeks. Their plays were not about 'real' people; they were about exceptional people, great heroes and great villains, unbelievably generous, horribly cruel - always larger than life. These heroes did not speak in the halting, pedestrian way of even the most eloquent of 'real' people; they spoke in an exalted, stylised way; they spoke metaphorically, poetically; they sang; they responded, by gestures, in ways that no 'real' person ever could, even under the most trying of circumstances. Like it or not, these are the characteristics of Greek drama. Naturalistic productions of Greek plays tend to fail, because the elevated language is completely inappropriate for 'real' people, and of course the situations seem absurd. While reading *Oedipus the King* you should keep in mind just how 'artificial' the original production would have been.

The Chorus

The Chorus is the most conspicuous aspect of Greek drama. As the form moved away from the dithyrambic tribute and towards drama, the role of the Chorus obviously decreased, but it did not fade into insignificance by any means. Before the introduction of dialogue, the Chorus' role was to express the ideas of the playwright as they intersected with the purpose of the dithyramb — to praise the gods and explain their will. This remained their essential function, though now it was set against the actors' dialogue occurring in between the sung choral odes, called *stasimon*.



Where the dialogue was active, discursive, even combative, the choral odes were reflective, passive.

A Clash of Opposites

The dialogue expressed the opinions of fallible characters arguing from extreme positions; the overall message emerges from the clashes between the characters and the Chorus, and deals with opposing viewpoints and philosophies. The audience gained insight by watching and judging the interaction of the opposing sides. The *stasimon* were singular expressions, either of the will and ways of the gods or of a dramatic theme.

This combination worked brilliantly, and it is arguably the most distinctive feature of the Greek tragedy. Hence, it is not so much that the Chorus