

# Oedipus The King Robert Fagles



PENGUIN CLASSICS



SOPHOCLES

THE THREE THEBAN PLAYS

ANTIGONE, OEDIPUS THE KING,  
OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

TRANSLATED BY ROBERT FAGLES

**Oedipus the King Robert Fagles** is a modern translation of one of the most significant works of ancient Greek literature, "Oedipus Rex," originally penned by the playwright Sophocles. Robert Fagles, an acclaimed translator and professor of comparative literature at Princeton University, is known for his ability to render ancient texts into contemporary English while maintaining the poetic essence and dramatic intensity of the originals. Fagles' translation of "Oedipus the King" invites modern audiences to engage with the timeless themes of fate, free will, and the search for truth that

permeate this tragic narrative.

## Background of Oedipus the King

"Oedipus the King" is part of a trilogy of plays by Sophocles, which also includes "Antigone" and "Oedipus at Colonus." The play is set in Thebes and tells the story of Oedipus, the king who unknowingly kills his father and marries his mother, fulfilling a prophecy that he desperately tries to avoid. This narrative is steeped in themes of fate, identity, and the human condition, making it a cornerstone of Western literary tradition.

## The Storyline

The plot unfolds as follows:

1. The Theban Plague: The play begins with Thebes suffering from a devastating plague, prompting Oedipus to send his brother-in-law, Creon, to consult the Oracle of Delphi for guidance.
2. The Prophecy Revealed: Creon returns with the revelation that the plague is a punishment for the murder of the previous king, Laius, and that the killer is within the city.
3. The Search for Truth: Oedipus vows to find Laius's murderer and curses him, unaware that he himself is the culprit.
4. The Unraveling of Identity: As Oedipus investigates, he uncovers the truth about his origins, leading to his tragic realization that he has fulfilled the prophecy.
5. The Consequence of Knowledge: Overcome by horror and guilt, Oedipus blinds himself and is exiled from Thebes, symbolizing the tragic consequences of seeking knowledge.

## Thematic Exploration

Fagles' translation deftly captures the complex themes woven throughout the play:

- Fate vs. Free Will: The tension between destiny and personal choice is central to the narrative. Oedipus attempts to escape his fate, but his actions only serve to fulfill the prophecy.
- The Nature of Truth: The quest for truth is a double-edged sword. While Oedipus seeks to uncover the murderer to save his city, the truth ultimately leads to his downfall.
- Blindness and Sight: The motif of blindness represents both literal and metaphorical ignorance. Oedipus's physical blindness at the end symbolizes his newfound understanding of his reality.

# Robert Fagles' Translation Techniques

Fagles is celebrated for his unique approach to translation, which blends fidelity to the source text with accessibility for contemporary readers. His translation of "Oedipus the King" showcases several key techniques:

## 1. Poetic Language

Fagles employs a poetic style that captures the lyrical quality of Sophocles' original text. He uses:

- Imagery: Vivid descriptions that evoke emotions and settings.
- Rhythm: A careful attention to the cadence of the lines, creating a musicality that resonates with the audience.

## 2. Clarity and Accessibility

By using contemporary language, Fagles makes the complex themes and dialogues understandable for modern readers without sacrificing the integrity of the original. This accessibility is crucial for engaging new audiences with ancient texts.

## 3. Emotional Depth

Fagles captures the emotional intensity of the characters, particularly Oedipus, allowing readers to feel the weight of his tragic journey. His translation emphasizes the psychological dimensions of the characters, making their struggles relatable.

## The Impact of Fagles' Translation

Since its publication, Robert Fagles' "Oedipus the King" has had a significant impact on both academic and popular readings of the play. Here are some of the ways it has influenced audiences:

### 1. Academic Engagement

- Educational Use: Fagles' translation is widely used in literature and drama courses, providing students with a clear and engaging text to study.
- Scholarly Analysis: The translation has inspired numerous academic papers

and critiques, contributing to ongoing discussions about themes, character development, and the relevance of the play in contemporary society.

## **2. Popular Adaptations**

Fagles' work has also influenced modern adaptations of the play:

- Theater Productions: Many contemporary theater companies have turned to Fagles' translation for their productions, appreciating its clarity and emotional resonance.
- Film and Media: Elements of Fagles' interpretation can be seen in various film adaptations and modern retellings of the Oedipus myth.

## **Comparative Analysis with Other Translations**

Fagles' translation is often compared with other notable translations of "Oedipus the King." Each translator brings a unique perspective, and understanding these differences can enhance the reading experience.

### **1. Robert Fitzgerald**

Fitzgerald's translation is known for its poetic elegance and fidelity to the original Greek. His rich, complex language contrasts with Fagles' more straightforward approach.

### **2. David Cohen**

Cohen's translation offers a modern vernacular that prioritizes accessibility, similar to Fagles. However, some critics argue that it lacks the poetic depth found in Fagles' work.

### **3. Anne Carson**

Carson's translation is noted for its innovative style and interpretation, often diverging from traditional forms. Her unique perspective offers a fresh take but may not resonate with all readers seeking a classical interpretation.

# Conclusion

Robert Fagles' translation of "Oedipus the King" stands as a significant contribution to the study and appreciation of this timeless tragedy. Through his skillful use of poetic language, clarity, and emotional depth, Fagles invites readers to explore the profound themes that define the human experience. The play's exploration of fate, truth, and identity continues to resonate with modern audiences, proving that the ancient narrative remains relevant in contemporary discussions of morality and self-discovery.

In embracing Fagles' translation, readers are not only engaging with a pivotal piece of literature but also embarking on a journey through the complexities of existence that Sophocles so masterfully portrayed.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **What are the main themes explored in Robert Fagles' translation of Oedipus the King?**

The main themes include fate versus free will, the nature of truth and knowledge, and the consequences of pride and hubris. Fagles' translation emphasizes the tragic inevitability of Oedipus' fate and the complex interplay between human agency and destiny.

### **How does Robert Fagles' translation of Oedipus the King differ from other translations?**

Fagles' translation is known for its accessibility and poetic language, making the text more relatable to modern audiences. He balances fidelity to the original Greek with a contemporary style, capturing the emotional intensity of the characters.

### **What impact does Fagles' translation of Oedipus the King have on its interpretation?**

Fagles' translation encourages readers to engage deeply with the text, highlighting the psychological complexity of Oedipus and the moral dilemmas faced by the characters. It brings a fresh perspective that can lead to new interpretations of the classic story.

### **Why is Fagles' Oedipus the King considered relevant in today's context?**

The themes of Oedipus the King, such as the search for truth and the consequences of one's actions, resonate with contemporary issues like personal accountability and societal challenges. Fagles' translation makes

these timeless themes accessible to modern readers.

## What elements of dramatic irony are present in Fagles' Oedipus the King?

Dramatic irony is prevalent as Oedipus seeks to uncover the truth about his identity while the audience is already aware of his tragic fate. Fagles' translation effectively highlights this irony, enhancing the emotional impact of Oedipus' journey toward self-discovery.

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