

# Oedipus The King Translated By Robert Fagles

*Oedipus Rex (the King)*  
Sophocles  
Translated by Robert Fagles

**PROLOGUE** - Prologue comes from the Greek term prologos, which means "before word," is an opening of a story that establishes the setting, and gives background details. Generally speaking, the main function of a prologue tells some earlier story, and connects it to the main story. (Lines 1-168)

**FOCUS** - A terrible plague has struck the city of Thebes. Plants, animals, and people are dying in great numbers. The priests of the city seek help from Oedipus, their king. As you read, look for details that help you form impressions of Oedipus as a leader.

**NOTES BY LINE NUMBER:**

**3 branches wound on wool:** tokens placed on altars by people seeking favors from the gods

**5 the Healer:** the god Apollo, who could cause and cure plagues

**26 river-shrine:** a shrine of Apollo in Thebes, where priests foretold the future by interpreting the way offerings to the gods burned

**31 blight:** a disease that withers plants

**37 Cadmus:** the founder of Thebes; **luxuriates:** takes pleasure

**45 bloody tribute:** the human lives taken by the Sphinx

**82 Delphi:** the site of a temple where prophecies were delivered by a priestess of Apollo

**95 laurel wreath:** a crown of leaves worn by those seeking the help of the oracle at Delphi

**117 Laius:** the king of Thebes before Oedipus

**154 avenger:** one who punishes wrongdoing

**157 corruption:** pollution; contamination

**PAUSE & REFLECT:** What is the cause of the plague in Thebes?

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**Oedipus the King Translated by Robert Fagles** is a remarkable rendition of Sophocles' classic tragedy, a work that explores profound themes of fate, free will, and the human condition. Robert Fagles, an eminent translator known for his ability to capture the lyrical qualities of ancient texts while making them accessible to contemporary readers, brings a fresh perspective to this timeless story. His translation not only stays true to the original Greek play but also resonates with modern audiences, making it an essential read for anyone interested in literature, psychology, or philosophy.

# Introduction to Oedipus the King

Oedipus the King, or Oedipus Rex, is one of the most significant works of Western literature, written by Sophocles around 429 BCE. It is the first play in a trilogy that includes Oedipus at Colonus and Antigone, though it is often performed independently. The tragedy follows the life of Oedipus, the King of Thebes, who is determined to rid his city of a devastating plague. Unbeknownst to him, his quest for truth will lead to his ultimate downfall.

## Plot Summary

The story begins with Oedipus addressing the citizens of Thebes, expressing his concern over a plague that has beset the city. He sends his brother-in-law, Creon, to the Oracle of Delphi to seek guidance. Creon returns with the news that the plague will end when the murderer of the former king, Laius, is found and punished.

As Oedipus vows to find the killer, he consults the blind prophet Teiresias, who reveals a shocking truth: Oedipus himself is the murderer he seeks. Oedipus, in disbelief and anger, accuses Teiresias of conspiracy. The tension escalates when Oedipus learns more about his past, including the prophecy that he would kill his father and marry his mother.

As the play unfolds, Oedipus's investigation leads him to uncover the harrowing reality of his origins. He discovers that he is indeed the son of Laius and Jocasta, and that he has unwittingly fulfilled the prophecy. The tragic irony is that in trying to avoid his fate, Oedipus has brought it upon himself.

In a heart-wrenching climax, Jocasta, overwhelmed by the revelations, takes her own life, and Oedipus blinds himself in despair. The play ends with Oedipus exiled from Thebes, a tragic hero brought low by his own actions and the inexorable workings of fate.

## Fagles' Translation: A Closer Look

Robert Fagles' translation of Oedipus the King stands out for several reasons. His approach blends fidelity to the original text with a poetic sensibility that captures the emotional intensity of the drama. Here are some key features of Fagles' translation:

## Accessibility

Fagles' translation is particularly noted for its accessibility. He uses contemporary language while maintaining the play's rhythmic and emotional depth. This makes it suitable for both seasoned readers of Greek tragedy and those encountering it for the first time.

## **Preservation of Themes**

One of the most striking aspects of Fagles' translation is his ability to preserve the central themes of fate, identity, and blindness. He emphasizes the tragic irony of Oedipus's situation—his quest for knowledge ultimately leads to his ruin. Fagles captures the essence of Sophocles' exploration of human suffering and the limits of human understanding.

## **Characterization**

Fagles' portrayal of Oedipus and other characters is nuanced. Oedipus is depicted not just as a tragic hero but as a complex individual driven by a strong sense of duty and a desire for truth. This depth adds to the reader's understanding of his motivations and the tragic consequences of his actions.

## **Thematic Exploration**

Oedipus the King delves into several profound themes, many of which resonate deeply with audiences across cultures and eras. Fagles' translation allows these themes to emerge vividly, offering insight into the human experience.

### **Fate vs. Free Will**

The tension between fate and free will is perhaps the most significant theme in Oedipus the King. The prophecy that Oedipus would kill his father and marry his mother creates a deterministic framework within which the characters operate. Despite Oedipus's attempts to escape his fate, his actions—motivated by free will—ironically lead him to fulfill the prophecy.

- The following points illustrate this theme:

1. Oedipus's efforts to avoid the prophecy only serve to bring it to fruition.
2. The role of the gods and oracles in shaping the characters' destinies raises questions about divine intervention and human agency.
3. The play suggests that the quest for knowledge can lead to self-destruction.

### **Blindness and Sight**

Another prominent theme is the contrast between blindness and sight—both literal and metaphorical. Oedipus, who begins with physical sight but is blind to the truth of his identity, ultimately blinds himself upon realizing his tragic fate. In contrast, Teiresias, the blind prophet, possesses insight into the truth that Oedipus cannot see.

- Key aspects of this theme include:

1. The irony of Oedipus's situation; he is blind to the reality of his life despite his physical sight.
2. The notion that true knowledge often comes with suffering, as Oedipus learns too late.
3. The idea that wisdom and insight can come from unexpected sources, as seen in Teiresias's character.

## **The Nature of Suffering**

Sophocles explores the nature of suffering through Oedipus's tragic journey. The play raises questions about the human condition, the inevitability of suffering, and the search for meaning in pain.

- Important points regarding suffering include:

1. Oedipus's journey from power and confidence to despair highlights the unpredictability of life.
2. The collective suffering of Thebes due to the plague serves as a backdrop to Oedipus's personal tragedy, emphasizing the interconnectedness of human experiences.
3. The play invites reflection on the resilience of the human spirit in the face of insurmountable odds.

## **Conclusion**

Robert Fagles' translation of Oedipus the King breathes new life into Sophocles' classic tragedy, making it relevant for contemporary readers while preserving the richness of the original text. Through his accessible language and keen insights into character and theme, Fagles allows the timeless struggles of Oedipus and the moral dilemmas he faces to resonate with audiences today.

This translation not only serves as a gateway into the world of Greek tragedy but also offers profound reflections on fate, free will, and the human condition. Oedipus the King remains a vital work that continues to provoke thought and evoke emotion, confirming its place as a cornerstone of Western literature. Whether read for its literary merits, historical context, or philosophical inquiries, Fagles' translation invites readers to engage with the complexities of human existence, making it a must-read for anyone seeking to understand the depth of the human experience.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

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

Fagles' translation highlights themes such as fate vs. free will, the search for truth, and the nature of blindness—both literal and metaphorical. The tension between human agency and predetermined destiny is a central focus.

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

Fagles' translation is noted for its poetic quality and accessibility, maintaining the original's dramatic intensity while employing contemporary language that resonates with modern audiences. His approach balances fidelity to the source text with a sense of immediacy.

## **What is the significance of the chorus in Fagles' version of 'Oedipus the King'?**

In Fagles' translation, the chorus serves as a moral and emotional compass, reflecting the societal values and fears of the time. They comment on the action, provide insights into the characters' motivations, and enhance the play's thematic depth.

## **How does Fagles capture the tragic elements of Oedipus' character in his translation?**

Fagles captures Oedipus' tragic nature by emphasizing his hubris and relentless pursuit of truth. His translation illustrates Oedipus as a complex character whose strengths and flaws lead to his ultimate downfall, evoking both pity and fear in the audience.

## **What impact does Fagles' translation have on the understanding of Greek tragedy?**

Fagles' translation makes Greek tragedy more accessible and relatable to contemporary readers. His vivid language and attention to emotional nuance help convey the timeless nature of the human experience portrayed in the play, fostering a deeper appreciation for the genre.

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