Sophokles, *Oedipus Tyrannos*
also known as: *Oedipus Rex, Oedipus the King*

Background on Sophokles and *Oedipus Tyrannos:*
The story of Oedipus is one of the most well-known and shockingly horrific legends of ancient Greece. The curse begins with Oedipus’ father, Laius, who was instructed by the god Apollo not to have children, because his son would kill him and marry the mother. After a night of heavy drinking, however, Laius fathered Oedipus on his wife, Jokasta. When he was born, thinking that they might avoid the curse, Laius and Jokasta lashed his feet together, pierced the baby’s ankles with a pin, and bid a servant kill the infant. Instead, the servant exposed the child in the woods of central Greece, where a shepherd found the baby and brought him to the city of Corinth.

Oedipus was subsequently raised by king Polybus of Corinth. When he reached early manhood, whispers of his servile origins spurred Oedipus to consult the Delphic oracle. The oracle repeated the curse originally given to Laius, that Oedipus would kill his father and marry his mother. In an attempt to avoid this fate, Oedipus fled Corinth. As he made his way northward, he encountered a man of regal bearing at a place where three roads met, just outside of Thebes. After a disagreement, Oedipus killed the man and continued on his way.

Upon arriving at the city of Thebes, Oedipus found the area ravaged by an evil, riddling Sphinx. The Sphinx had sent plague and misery among the citizens and refused to leave until someone was able to answer her riddle: what goes on four feet at morning, two feet at noon, and three feet at dusk? Oedipus succeeded where all others had failed when he deduced the correct answer: man. As part of his reward for ridding the city of the Sphinx, Oedipus marries the widowed queen of the city, begets four children by her, and rules as king of Thebes.

The dramatic tension of the *Oedipus Tyrannos* is centered on Oedipus’ discovery of his true identity and the nature of his crimes. The play opens amidst a new plague, brought on by the pollution of the unsolved murder of Laius. Oedipus’ attempt to quell this new pestilence is what eventually leads to his self-discovery.

*Oedipus Tyrannos* was first performed in 429 and won second place at the City Dionysia. Sophokles himself was an Athenian, born a few years prior to the Persian Wars. He wrote nearly 125 plays in his lifetime, only 7 of which completely survive. Sophokles built on the use of the third actor, as first introduced by Aeschylos, and takes full advantage of having a larger cast. He is also credited with inventing *skenographia*, or painted scene decoration that would have been hung or mounted to the walls of the ephemeral skene.

Study questions and issues for discussion:

1. Oedipus can be translated as “swollen-footed” but also contains roots for the Greek words “to know” and “two-footed.” How does Sophokles play with these different meanings behind the name of the protagonist? Make note of remarks about knowing and not knowing with reference to Oedipus.

2. There is frequent allusion and direct reference to sight and blindness, vision both latent and manifest, throughout the play. Who sees and who is blind? How does sight relate to knowledge? What are the ramifications of sight and blindness?
3. What is the role of fate in the play? How does fate underscore, compel, and contradict the actions of the characters? Consider also Oedipus’ own relationship with divinity. How does he react to Teiresias and to the oracle of Apollo?

4. What is Oedipus’ hybris? Rather than thinking of hybris as “pride” in this instance, think of it in terms of the opposite of *sophrosyne*, or moderation. Why must Oedipus suffer?

5. The *Oedipus Tyrannos* is principally a play about personal responsibility and personal action. Oedipus himself demands action and leads the investigation that eventually results in his own disgrace. What sort of man is Oedipus? How do his actions define his character?

6. At the end of the play, why does Oedipus blind himself? Why does he not follow Jokasta’s example and kill himself? Does this confirm or contradict what we know of him to this point?