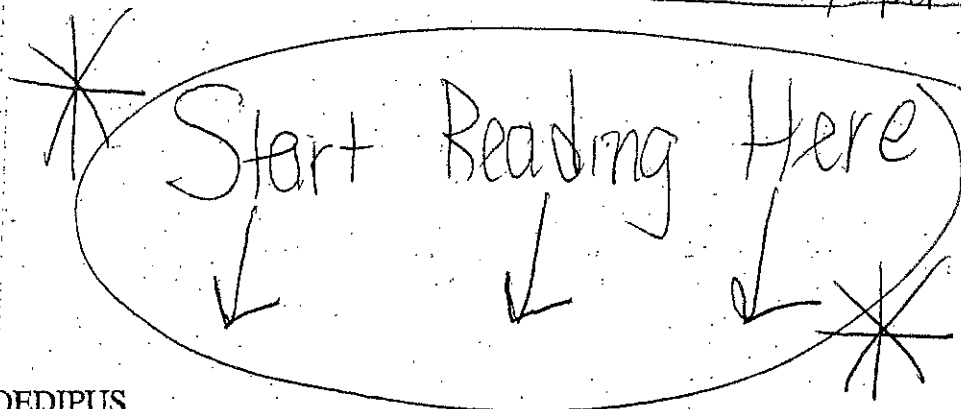


grims there. The sons of the seven champions, although they succeeded where their fathers failed, were always called the Epigoni, "the After-Born," as if they had come into the world too late, after all great deeds had been done. But when Thebes fell, the Greek ships had not yet sailed to the Trojan land; and the son of Tydeus, Diomedes, was to be famed as one of the most glorious of the warriors who fought before the walls of Troy.

☺ This is the very end. I'm saving paper!



OEDIPUS

I have taken this story entirely from Sophocles' play of that name except for the riddle of the Sphinx which Sophocles merely alludes to. It is given by many writers, always in substantially the same form.

King Laius of Thebes was the third in descent from Cadmus. He married a distant cousin, Jocasta. With their reign Apollo's oracle at Delphi began to play a leading part in the family's fortunes.

Apollo was the God of Truth. Whatever the priestess at Delphi said would happen infallibly came to pass. To attempt to act in such a way that the prophecy would be made void was as futile as to set oneself against the decrees of fate. Nevertheless, when the oracle warned Laius that he would die at the hands of his son he determined that this should not be. When the child was born he bound its feet together and had it exposed on a lonely mountain where it must soon die. He felt no more fear; he was sure that on this point he could foretell the future better than the god. His folly was not brought home to him. He was killed, indeed, but he thought

the man who attacked him was a stranger. He never knew that in his death he had proved Apollo's truth.

When he died he was away from home and many years had passed since the baby had been left on the mountain. It was reported that a band of robbers had slain him together with his attendants, all except one, who brought the news home. The matter was not carefully investigated because Thebes was in sore straits at the time. The country around was beset by a frightful monster, the Sphinx, a creature shaped like a winged lion, but with the breast and face of a woman. She lay in wait for the wayfarers along the roads to the city and whomever she seized she put a riddle to, telling him if he could answer it, she would let him go. No one could, and the horrible creature devoured man after man until the city was in a state of siege. The seven great gates which were the Thebans' pride remained closed, and famine drew near to the citizens.

So matters stood when there came into the stricken country a stranger, a man of great courage and great intelligence, whose name was Oedipus. He had left his home, Corinth, where he was held to be the son of the King, Polybus, and the reason for his self-exile was another Delphic oracle. Apollo had declared that he was fated to kill his father. He, too, like Laius, thought to make it impossible for the oracle to come true; he resolved never to see Polybus again. In his lonely wanderings he came into the country around Thebes and he heard what was happening there. He was a homeless, friendless man to whom life meant little and he determined to seek the Sphinx out and try to solve the riddle. "What creature," the Sphinx asked him, "goes on four feet in the morning, on two at noonday, on three in the evening?" "Man," answered Oedipus. "In childhood he creeps on hands and feet; in manhood he walks erect; in old age he helps himself with a staff." It was the right answer. The Sphinx, inexplicably, but most fortunately, killed herself; the Thebans were saved. Oedipus gained all and more than he had left. The grateful citizens made him their King and he married the dead King's wife, Jocasta. For many years they lived happily. It seemed that in this case Apollo's words had been proved to be false.

But when their two sons had grown to manhood Thebes was visited by a terrible plague. A blight fell upon everything. Not only were men dying throughout the country, the flocks and herds and the fruits of the field were blasted as well. Those who were spared death by disease faced death



Oedipus and the Sphinx

himself as the father of the whole state; the people in it were his children; the misery of each one was his too. He dispatched Jocasta's brother Creon to Delphi to implore the god's help.

Creon returned with good news. Apollo had declared that the plague would be stayed upon one condition: whoever had murdered King Laius must be punished. Oedipus was enormously relieved. Surely the men or the man could be found even after all these years, and they would know well how to punish him. He proclaimed to the people gathered to hear the message Creon brought back:—

... Let no one of this land
Give shelter to him. Bar him from your homes,
As one defiled, companioned by pollution.
And solemnly I pray, may he who killed
Wear out his life in evil, being evil.

Oedipus took the matter in hand with energy. He sent for Teiresias, the old blind prophet, the most revered of Thebans. Had he any means of finding out, he asked him, who the guilty were? To his amazement and indignation the seer at first refused to answer. "For the love of God," Oedipus implored him. "If you have knowledge—" "Fools," Teiresias said. "Fools all of you. I will not answer." But when Oedipus went so far as to accuse him of keeping silence because he had himself taken part in the murder, the prophet in his turn was angered and words he had meant never to speak fell heavily from his lips: "You are yourself the murderer you seek." To Oedipus the old man's mind was wandering; what he said was sheer madness. He ordered him out of his sight and never again to appear before him.

Jocasta too treated the assertion with scorn. "Neither prophets nor oracles have any knowledge," she said. She told her husband how the priestess at Delphi had prophesied that Laius should die at the hand of his son and how he and she together had seen to it that this should not happen by having the child killed. "And Laius was murdered by robbers, where three roads meet on the way to Delphi," she concluded triumphantly. Oedipus gave her a strange look. "When did this happen?" he asked slowly. "Just before you came to Thebes," she said.

"How many were with him?" Oedipus asked. "They were five in all," Jocasta spoke quickly, "all killed but one." "I must

see that man," he told her. "Send for him." "I will," she said. "At once. But I have a right to know what is in your mind." "You shall know all that I know," he answered. "I went to Delphi just before I came here because a man had flung it in my face that I was not the son of Polybus. I went to ask the god. He did not answer me, but he told me horrible things—that I should kill my father, marry my mother, and have children men would shudder to look upon. I never went back to Corinth. On my way from Delphi, at a place where three roads met, I came upon a man with four attendants. He tried to force me from the path; he struck me with his stick. Angered I fell upon them and I killed them. Could it be the leader was Laius?" "The one man left alive brought back a tale of robbers," Jocasta said. "Laius was killed by robbers, not by his son—the poor innocent who died upon the mountain."

As they talked a further proof seemed given them that Apollo could speak falsely. A messenger came from Corinth to announce to Oedipus the death of Polybus. "O oracle of the god," Jocasta cried, "where are you now? The man died, but not by his son's hand." The messenger smiled wisely. "Did the fear of killing your father drive you from Corinth?" he asked. "Ah, King, you were in error. You never had reason to fear—for you were not the son of Polybus. He brought you up as though you were his, but he took you from my hands." "Where did you get me?" Oedipus asked. "Who were my father and mother?" "I know nothing of them," the messenger said. "A wandering shepherd gave you to me, a servant of Laius."

Jocasta turned white; a look of horror was on her face. "Why waste a thought upon what such a fellow says?" she cried. "Nothing he says can matter." She spoke hurriedly, yet fiercely. Oedipus could not understand her. "My birth does not matter?" he asked. "For God's sake, go no further," she said. "My misery is enough." She broke away and rushed into the palace.

At that moment an old man entered. He and the messenger eyed each other curiously. "The very man, O King," the messenger cried. "The shepherd who gave you to me." "And you," Oedipus asked the other, "do you know him as he knows you?" The old man did not answer, but the messenger insisted. "You must remember. You gave me once a little child you had found—and the King here is that child." "Curse you," the other muttered. "Hold your tongue." "What!" Oedipus said angrily. "You would conspire with

him to hide from me what I desire to know? There are ways, be sure, to make you speak."

The old man wailed, "Oh, do not hurt me. I did give him the child, but do not ask more, master, for the love of God." "If I have to order you a second time to tell me where you got him, you are lost," Oedipus said. "Ask your lady," the old man cried. "She can tell you best." "She gave him to you?" asked Oedipus. "Oh, yes, oh, yes," the other groaned. "I was to kill the child. There was a prophecy—" "A prophecy!" Oedipus repeated. "That he should kill his father?" "Yes," the old man whispered.

A cry of agony came from the King. At last he understood. "All true! Now shall my light be changed to darkness. I am accursed." He had murdered his father, he had married his father's wife, his own mother. There was no help for him, for her, for their children. All were accursed.

Within the palace Oedipus wildly sought for his wife that was his mother. He found her in her chamber. She was dead. When the truth broke upon her she had killed herself. Standing beside her he too turned his hand against himself, but not to end his life. He changed his light to darkness. He put out his eyes. The black world of blindness was a refuge; better to be there than to see with strange shamed eyes the old world that had been so bright.

ANTIGONE

I have taken this story from the Antigone and the Oedipus at Colonus, two of Sophocles' plays, with the exception of the death of Menoeceus, which is told in a play of Euripides, The Suppliants.

After Jocasta's death and all the evils that came with it, Oedipus lived on in Thebes while his children were growing up. He had two sons, Polyneices and Eteocles, and two daughters, Antigone and Ismene. They were very unfortunate young people, but they were far from being monsters all would shudder to look at, as the oracle had told Oedipus. The two lads were well liked by the Thebans and the two girls were as good daughters as a man could have.

Oedipus of course resigned the throne. Polyneices, the elder son, did the same. The Thebans felt that this was wise because of the terrible position of the family, and they accepted Creon, Jocasta's brother, as the regent. For many years they treated Oedipus with kindness, but at last they de-

cided to expel him from the city. What induced them to do this is not known, but Creon urged it and Oedipus' sons consented to it. The only friends Oedipus had were his daughters. Through all his misfortunes they were faithful to him. When he was driven out of the city Antigone went with him to guide him in his blindness and care for him, and Ismene stayed in Thebes to look out for his interests and keep him informed of whatever happened that touched him.

After he had gone his two sons asserted their right to the throne, and each tried to be made king. Eteocles succeeded although he was the younger, and he expelled his brother from Thebes. Polyneices took refuge in Argos and did all he could to arouse enmity against Thebes. His intention was to collect an army to march against the city.

In the course of their desolate wanderings Oedipus and Antigone came to Colonus, a lovely spot near Athens, where the one-time Erinyes, the Furies, now the Benignant Goddesses, had a place sacred to them and therefore a refuge for suppliants. The blind old man and his daughter felt safe there, and there Oedipus died. Most unhappy in much of his life, he was happy at the end. The oracle which once had spoken terrible words to him comforted him when he was dying. Apollo promised that he, the disgraced, the homeless wanderer, would bring to the place where his grave should be a mysterious blessing from the gods. Theseus, the King of Athens, received him with all honor, and the old man died rejoicing that he was no longer hateful to men, but welcomed as a benefactor to the land that harbored him.

Ismene, who had come to tell her father the good news of this oracle, was with her sister when he died and afterward they were both sent safely home by Theseus. They arrived to find one brother marching against their city, resolved to capture it, and the other determined to defend it to the end. Polyneices, the one who attacked it, had the better right to it, but the younger, Eteocles, was fighting for Thebes, to save her from capture. It was impossible for the two sisters to take sides against either brother.

Polyneices had been joined by six chieftains, one of them the King of Argos, Adrastus, and another Adrastus' brother-in-law, Amphiaraus. This last joined the enterprise most unwillingly because he was a prophet and he knew that none of the seven would come back alive except Adrastus. However, he was under oath to let his wife Eriphyle decide whenever there was a dispute between him and her brother. He had sworn this once when he and Adrastus had quarreled and

Eriphyle had reconciled them. Polyneices won her over to his side by bribing her with the wonderful necklace that had been the wedding gift of his ancestress Harmonia, and she made her husband go to the war.

There were seven champions to attack the seven gates of Thebes, and seven others within as bold to defend them. Eteocles defended the gate which Polyneices attacked, and Antigone and Ismene within the palace waited to hear which had killed the other. But before any decisive combat had taken place, a youth in Thebes not yet grown to manhood had died for his country and in his death had shown himself the noblest of all. This was Creon's younger son, Menoeceus.

Teiresias, the prophet who had brought so many distressful prophecies to the royal family, came to bring still another. He told Creon that Thebes would be saved only if Menoeceus was killed. The father utterly refused to bring this about. He would be willing to die himself, he said—"But not even for my own city will I slay my son." He bade the boy, who was present when Teiresias spoke, "Up, my child, and fly with all speed from the land before the city learns." "Where, Father?" asked the lad. "What city seek—what friend?" "Far, far away," the father answered. "I will find means—I will find gold." "Go get it then," said Menoeceus, but when Creon had hurried away he spoke other words:—

My father—he would rob our town of hope,
Make me a coward. Ah well—he is old
And so to be forgiven. But I am young.
If I betray Thebes there is no forgiveness.
How can he think I will not save the city
And for her sake go forth to meet my death?
What would my life be if I fled away
When I can free my country?

He went to join the battle and, all unskilled in warfare, he was killed at once.

Neither the besiegers nor the besieged could gain any real advantage and finally both sides agreed to let the matter be decided by a combat between the brothers. If Eteocles was the victor, the Argive Army would withdraw; if Eteocles was conquered, Polyneices should be king. Neither was victor; they killed each other, Eteocles dying looked upon his brother and wept; he had no strength to speak. Polyneices could murmur a few words: "My brother, my enemy, but

loved, always loved. Bury me in my homeland—to have so much at least of my city.”

The combat had decided nothing and the battle was renewed. But Menoeceus had not died in vain; in the end the Thebans prevailed and of the seven champions all were killed except Adrastus only. He fled with the broken Army to Athens. In Thebes, Creon was in control and he proclaimed that none of those who had fought against the city should be given burial. Eteocles should be honored with every rite that the noblest received at death, but Polyneices should be left for beasts and birds to tear and devour. This was to carry vengeance beyond the ordinance of the gods, beyond the law of right; it was to punish the dead. The souls of the unburied might not pass the river that encircles the kingdom of death, but must wander in desolation, with no abiding-place, no rest ever for their weariness. To bury the dead was a most sacred duty, not only to bury one's own, but any stranger one might come upon. But this duty, Creon's proclamation said, was changed in the cause of Polyneices to a crime. He who buried him would be put to death.

Antigone and Ismene heard with horror what Creon had decided. To Ismene, shocking as it was, overwhelming her with anguish for the pitiful dead body and the lonely, homeless soul, it seemed, nevertheless, that nothing could be done except to acquiesce. She and Antigone were utterly alone. All Thebes was exulting that the man who had brought war upon them should be thus terribly punished. “We are women,” she told her sister. “We must obey. We have no strength to defy the State.” “Choose your own part,” Antigone said. “I go to bury the brother I love.” “You are not strong enough,” Ismene cried. “Why, then when my strength fails,” Antigone answered, “I will give up.” She left her sister; Ismene dared not follow her.

Some hours later, Creon in the palace was startled by a shout, “Against your orders Polyneices has been buried.” He hurried out to be confronted with the guards he had set on the dead body and with Antigone. “This girl buried him,” they cried. “We saw her. A thick dust-storm gave her her chance. When it cleared, the body had been buried and the girl was making an offering to the dead.” “You knew my edict?” Creon asked. “Yes,” Antigone replied. “And you transgressed the law?” “Your law, but not the law of Justice who dwells with the gods,” Antigone said. “The unwritten laws of heaven are not of today nor yesterday, but from all time.”

Ismene weeping came from the palace to stand with her

sister. “I helped do it,” she said. But Antigone would not have that. “She had no share in it,” she told Creon. And she bade her sister say no more. “Your choice was to live,” she said, “mine to die.”

As she was led away to death, she spoke to the bystanders:—

... Behold me, what I suffer
Because I have upheld that which is high.

Ismene disappears. There is no story, no poem, about her. The House of Oedipus, the last of the royal family of Thebes, was known no more.

THE SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

Two great writers told this story. It is the subject of one of Aeschylus' plays and one of Euripides'. I have chosen Euripides' version which, as so often with him, reflects remarkably our own point of view. Aeschylus tells the tale splendidly, but in his hands it is a stirring martial poem. Euripides' play, The Suppliants, shows his modern mind better than any of his other plays.

Polyneices had been given burial at the price of his sister's life; his soul was free to be ferried across the river and find a home among the dead. But five of the chieftains who had marched with him to Thebes lay unburied, and according to Creon's decree would be left so forever.

Adrastus, the only one alive of the seven who had started the war, came to Theseus, King of Athens, to beseech him to induce the Thebans to allow the bodies to be buried. With him were the mothers and the sons of the dead men. “All we seek,” he told Theseus, “is burial for our dead. We come to you for help, because Athens of all cities is compassionate.”

“I will not be your ally,” Theseus answered. “You led your people against Thebes. The war was of your doing, not hers.”

But Aethra, Theseus' mother, to whom those other sorrowing mothers had first turned, was bold to interrupt the two Kings. “My son,” she said, “may I speak for your honor and for Athens?”

“Yes, speak,” he answered and listened intently while she told him what was in her mind.

“You are bound to defend all who are wronged,” she said. “These men of violence who refuse the dead their right of

burial, you are bound to compel them to obey the law. It is sacred through all Greece. What holds our states together and all states everywhere, except this, that each one honors the great laws of right?"

"Mother," Theseus cried, "these are true words. Yet of myself I cannot decide the matter. For I have made this land a free state with an equal vote for all. If the citizens consent, then I will go to Thebes."

The poor women waited, Aethra with them, while he went to summon the assembly which would decide the misery or happiness of their dead children. They prayed: "O city of Athena, help us, so that the laws of justice shall not be defiled and through all lands the helpless and oppressed shall be delivered." When Theseus returned he brought good news. The assembly had voted to tell the Thebans that Athens wished to be a good neighbor, but that she could not stand by and see a great wrong done. "Yield to our request," they would ask Thebes. "We want only what is right. But if you will not, then you choose war, for we must fight to defend those who are defenseless."

Before he finished speaking a herald entered. He asked "Who is the master here, the lord of Athens? I bring a message to him from the master of Thebes."

"You seek one who does not exist," Theseus answered. "There is no master here. Athens is free. Her people rule."

"That is well for Thebes," the herald cried. "Our city is not governed by a mob which twists this way and that, but by one man. How can the ignorant crowd wisely direct a nation's course?"

"We in Athens," Theseus said, "write our own laws and then are ruled by them. We hold there is no worse enemy to a state than he who keeps the law in his own hands. This great advantage then is ours, that our land rejoices in all her sons who are strong and powerful by reason of their wisdom and just dealing. But to a tyrant such are hateful. He kills them, fearing they will shake his power."

"Go back to Thebes and tell her we know how much better peace is for men than war. Fools rush on war to make a weaker country their slave. We would not harm your state. We seek the dead only, to return to earth the body, of which no man is the owner, but only for a brief moment the guest. Dust must return to dust again."

Creon would not listen to Theseus' plea, and the Athenians marched against Thebes. They conquered. The panic-stricken people in the town thought only that they would be

killed or enslaved and their city ruined. But although the way lay clear to the victorious Athenian Army, Theseus held them back. "We came not to destroy the town," he said, "but only to reclaim the dead." "And our King," said the messenger who brought the news to the anxiously waiting people of Athens, "Theseus himself, made ready for the grave those five poor bodies, washed them and covered them and set them on a bier."

Some measure of comfort came to the sorrowful mothers as their sons were laid upon the funeral pyre with all reverence and honor. Adrastus spoke the last words for each: "Capaneus lies here, a mighty man of wealth, yet humble as a poor man always and a true friend to all. He knew no guile; upon his lips were kind words only. Eteocles is next, poor in everything save honor. There he was rich indeed. When men would give him gold he would not take it. He would not be a slave to wealth. Beside him Hippomedon lies. He was a man who suffered hardship gladly, a hunter and a soldier. From boyhood he disdained an easy life. Atalanta's son is next, Parthenopaeus, of many a man, of many a woman loved, and one who never did a wrong to any man. His joy was in his country's good, his grief when it went ill with her. The last is Tydeus, a silent man. He could best reason with his sword and shield. His soul was lofty; deeds, not words, revealed how high it soared."

As the pyre was kindled, on a rocky height above it a woman appeared. It was Evadne, the wife of Capaneus. She cried,

I have found the light of your pyre, your tomb.
I will end there the grief and the anguish of life.
Oh, sweet death to die with the dear dead I love.

She leaped down to the blazing pyre and went with her husband to the world below.

Peace came to the mothers, with the knowledge that at last their children's spirits were at rest. Not so to the young sons of the dead men. They vowed as they watched the pyre burn that when they were grown they would take vengeance upon Thebes. "Our fathers sleep in the tomb, but the wrong done to them can never sleep," they said. Ten years later they marched to Thebes. They were victorious; the conquered Thebans fled and their city was leveled to the ground. Teiresias the prophet perished during the flight. All that was left of the old Thebes was Harmonia's necklace, which was taken to Delphi and for hundreds of years shown to the pil-