

Name: _____ Block: _____

Date: _____

Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*

The Myth of Oedipus

When King Laius of Thebes learned from an oracle that he was destined to be killed by his own son, who would then marry his mother Jocasta, he decided that his newborn son could not be allowed to live. He ordered a servant to pierce the child's ankles and bind them with leather cords, and then leave him to die on a lonely mountain.

A passing shepherd found the infant and took him to Polybus, the king of Corinth. The queen, who had never had children of her own, was delighted that the gods had sent them a son. They named the boy Oedipus (swollen foot), and they loved him so much that they never told him he was adopted.

Many years later ...

Oedipus was at a carnival. An oracle proclaimed that he would kill his own father and marry his mother, so he decided to leave Corinth rather than bring harm to the parents he loved so much.

As he wandered, he came to a crossroads, where a haughty man in a chariot ordered him off the road and threatened him with a whip. Oedipus, who was after all a prince, was not accustomed to being spoken to like that, and he answered the man with equal arrogance. When the man tried to strike him, Oedipus pulled him from his chariot and killed him. The man's servant escaped, but Oedipus did not pursue him.

Eventually Oedipus came to the gates of Thebes. Guarding the gates was a terrible monster with the body of a lion and the head and torso of a woman. She allowed no one to enter or leave the city without answering the riddle that she posed. If the traveler could not answer correctly, she would kill and devour him. As no one had yet come up with the right answer, the sphinx was well-fed, and the city of Thebes was effectively cut off from all trade and all contact with the world outside the city walls.

When Oedipus reached the gates of the city, the creature posed her riddle: What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening? Oedipus solved the riddle, answering that man crawls on all fours in infancy, walks upright on two legs in adulthood, and uses a cane as a third leg in old age. The sphinx was so frustrated that Oedipus had answered her riddle that she threw herself from the city walls, and died there on the road in front of the city that she had terrorized for so long.

The Thebans were immensely grateful to Oedipus for having rid them of the monstrous sphinx. Their king, Laius, had been gone for over a year, and by now they had figured out that he was never coming back. In fact, they assumed he had been murdered by robbers during his travels, and that the sphinx's sudden appearance at their gates was actually a sign that their king had died. So closely bound was a king to his land, that Laius's unavenged murder had brought a curse down upon Thebes--and the sphinx was a manifestation of that curse.

In their gratitude the Thebans made Oedipus their new king, and gave him their widowed queen as his wife. For many years the two were happy together, and for awhile Thebes prospered as well. But the curse that had first manifested in the form of the sphinx had not been lifted, for the king's death had still not been avenged, and the city soon fell victim to a terrible plague.

This is where we begin our tale...