

**OEDIPUS,
KING OF THEBES**

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Oedipus, King of Thebes by Sophocles & Gilbert Murray

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SOPHOCLES & GILBERT MURRAY

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BY

SOPHOCLES

TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH RHYMING VERSE
WITH EXPLANATORY NOTES BY

GILBERT MURRAY

LL.D., D.LITT., F.B.A.

REGIUS PROFESSOR OF GREEK IN THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD
FORMERLY PROFESSOR OF GREEK IN THE UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

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PREFACE

IF I have turned aside from Euripides for a moment and attempted a translation of the great stage masterpiece of Sophocles, my excuse must be the fascination of this play, which has thrown its spell on me as on many other translators. Yet I may plead also that as a rule every diligent student of these great works can add something to the discoveries of his predecessors, and I think I have been able to bring out a few new points in the old and much-studied *Oedipus*, chiefly points connected with the dramatic technique and the religious atmosphere.

Mythologists tell us that Oedipus was originally a daemon haunting Mount Kithairon, and Jocasta a form of that Earth-Mother who, as Aeschylus puts it, "bringeth all things to being, and when she hath reared them receiveth again their seed into her body" (*Choephoroi*, 127; cf. Crusius, *Beiträge z. Gr. Myth.*, 21). That stage of the story lies very far behind the consciousness of Sophocles. But there does cling about both his hero and his heroine a great deal of very primitive atmosphere. There are traces in Oedipus of the pre-hellenic Medicine King, the *Basileus* who is also a *Theos*, and can make rain or blue sky, pestilence or fertility. This explains many things in the Priest's first speech, in the attitude of the Chorus, and in Oedipus' own language after

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the discovery. It partly explains the hostility of Apollo, who is not a mere motiveless Destroyer but a true Olympian crushing his Earth-born rival. And in the same way the peculiar royalty of Jocasta, which makes Oedipus at times seem not the King but the Consort of the Queen, brings her near to that class of consecrated queens described in Dr. Frazer's *Lectures on the Kingship*, who are "honoured as no woman now living on the earth."

The story itself, and the whole spirit in which Sophocles has treated it, belong not to the fifth century but to that terrible and romantic past from which the fifth century poets usually drew their material. The atmosphere of brooding dread, the pollution, the curses; the "insane and beastlike cruelty," as an ancient Greek commentator calls it, of piercing the exposed child's feet in order to ensure its death and yet avoid having actually murdered it (*Schol. Eur. Phœn.*, 26); the whole treatment of the parricide and incest, not as moral offences capable of being rationally judged or even excused as unintentional, but as monstrous and inhuman pollutions, the last limit of imaginable horror: all these things take us back to dark regions of pre-classical and even pre-homeric belief. We have no right to suppose that Sophocles thought of the involuntary parricide and metrogamy as the people in his play do. Indeed, considering the general tone of his contemporaries and friends, we may safely assume that he did not. But at any rate he has allowed no breath of later enlightenment to disturb the primaeval gloom of his atmosphere.

Does this in any way make the tragedy insincere?

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I think not. We know that people did feel and think about "pollution" in the way which Sophocles represents; and if they so felt, then the tragedy was there.

I think these considerations explain the remarkable absence from this play of any criticism of life or any definite moral judgment. I know that some commentators have found in it a "humble and unquestioning piety," but I cannot help suspecting that what they saw was only a reflection from their own pious and unquestioning minds. Man is indeed shown as a "plaything of Gods," but of Gods strangely and incomprehensibly malignant, whose ways there is no attempt to explain or justify. The original story, indeed, may have had one of its roots in a Theban "moral tale." Aelian (*Varia Historia*, 2, 7) tells us that the exposure of a child was forbidden by Theban Law. The state of feeling which produced this law, against the immensely strong conception of the *patria potestas*, may also have produced a folklore story telling how a boy once was exposed, in a peculiarly cruel way, by his wicked parents, and how Heaven preserved him to take upon both of them a vengeance which showed that the unnatural father had no longer a father's sanctity nor the unnatural mother a mother's. But, as far as Sophocles is concerned, if anything in the nature of a criticism of life has been admitted into the play at all, it seems to be only a flash or two of that profound and pessimistic arraignment of the ruling powers which in other plays also opens at times like a sudden abyss across the smooth surface of his art.