

# Section 8 – Greek Mythology

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## Oedipus

Oedipus, whose name means ‘swollen foot’ was the son of King Laius and Queen Jocasta of Thebes. Because of a prophecy that his son would kill him and marry Jocasta, Laius fastened the baby boy’s feet together with a pin and left him on a mountainside to die.

The baby was found by shepherds and taken to Corinth, where he was adopted by King Polybus and Queen Merope, who raised him as their son. When he was grown, Oedipus learned of the prophecy that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Aghast and believing Polybus and Merope to be his natural parents, Oedipus fled the city, hoping to thwart the prophecy.

Oedipus decided to go to Thebes, which he did not know was his original home. On the way, he met an older man on a chariot, who refused to give way on the road. A fight ensued, and the older man was killed. Oedipus did not realise this at the time, but he had killed Laius.

On arriving in Thebes, Oedipus learned that the king had died, but still did not associate this with his own adventure. Thebes was under threat by a monster that guarded its entrance, the Sphinx. This beast asked a riddle of those who wished to pass, and Oedipus answered correctly; the monster fell from its perch and died. This heroic act won for Oedipus the crown of Thebes and also the hand of Jocasta in marriage; thus the prophecy that Laius had tried to prevent was fulfilled. The couple had two sons and two daughters.

Because of Laius’ assassination, the gods made Thebes victim of a plague. Oedipus decided to identify the murderer and put him to death, in order to end the people’s suffering. Eventually, he discovered that he himself was guilty. Jocasta realised that she had married her son and hanged herself. Oedipus took two pins from her dress and blinded himself with them. The people of Thebes, horrified, drove Oedipus into exile, accompanied by his daughters Antigone and Ismene. After many years of wandering they arrived in Athens, where Oedipus was given refuge in a grove of trees called Colonus. Civil war had broken out in Thebes between Jocasta’s brother, Creon, who had seized the throne and Oedipus’s son, Polyneices. The people called for Oedipus’ return to restore peace; but too late. He died in Colonus, where his grave was thought to bring luck to Athens.

In Thebes, Creon killed Polyneices but refused to allow his burial. Antigone, who had returned, disobeyed and secretly buried her brother, for which Creon executed her.<sup>1</sup>

Although this story has been represented as an allegory of a boychild's sexual desire for his mother, especially by Freud, this is at best a biased reading. In fact, the Ancient Greeks were not at all coy about sex; their mythology is full of it, their plays brimmed with sexual innuendo and ribald language, and their comedic theatre contained such elements as male actors with fake phalloi hanging out of short tunics.

In fact, the tale is about obedience. Firstly this is to the will of the gods. Prophecies in Greece and elsewhere were held to reveal the intentions of the gods, so any attempt to prevent one from being fulfilled was an act of defiance, of blasphemy. Secondly, it is about obedience to the father, and serves to promote the idea of filial loyalty. It warns of the punishment for patricide – exile, loss of throne, blindness and death. In this era, it was common for sons of kings to rise against their fathers to claim the throne, and Greek mythology repeats this theme again and again. The story supports social conservatism, issuing dire warnings about what might happen if the existing order were challenged.

Women are once again revealed as property. Oedipus, by outwitting the Sphinx, wins both the city and the hand of Jocasta. She was an object, a highly desirable, fertile and sexual trophy which was simply handed over to Oedipus as a reward. She had no choice in this.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a very much abbreviated version of one of the greatest of tragic tales.