



ENRICHED  
CLASSIC

# OEDIPUS THE KING

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SOPHOCLES

Includes detailed explanatory notes,  
an overview of key themes, and more





*The background is the front wall of a building, with a double door in the center. Steps lead down from the door to stage level. In front of the steps, in the center, a square stone altar.*

*[Enter from the side, a procession of priests and citizens. They carry olive branches which have tufts of wool tied on them. They lay these branches on the altar, then sit on the ground in front of it.*

*The door opens. Enter Oedipus.<sup>1</sup>]*

OEDIPUS

My sons! Newest generation of this ancient city of Thebes!<sup>2</sup> Why are you here? Why are you seated there at the altar, with these branches of supplication?

The city is filled with the smoke of burning incense, with hymns to the healing god, with laments for the dead. I did not think it right, my children, to hear



reports of this from others. Here I am, myself, world-famous Oedipus.

You, old man, speak up—you are the man to speak for the others. In what mood are you sitting there—in fear or resignation? You may count on me; I am ready to do anything to help. I would be insensitive to pain, if I felt no pity for my people seated here.

PRIEST

Oedipus, ruler of Thebes, you see us here at your altar, men of all ages—some not yet strong enough to fly far from the nest, others heavy with age, priests, of Zeus<sup>3</sup> in my case, and these are picked men from the city's youth. The rest of the Thebans, carrying boughs like us, are sitting in the market place, at the two temples of Athena,<sup>4</sup> and at the prophetic fire of Apollo near the river Ismenus.<sup>5</sup>

You can see for yourself—the city is like a ship rolling dangerously; it has lost the power to right itself and raise its head up out of the waves of death. Thebes is dying. There is a blight on the crops of the land, on the ranging herds of cattle, on the stillborn labor of our women. The fever-god swoops down on us, hateful plague, he hounds the city and empties the houses of Thebes. The black god of death<sup>6</sup> is made rich with wailing and funeral laments.

It is not because we regard you as equal to the gods that we sit here in supplication, these children and I; in our judgment you are first of men, both in the normal crises of human life and in relations with the gods.

You came to us once and liberated our city, you freed us from the tribute which we paid that cruel singer, the Sphinx.<sup>7</sup> You did this with no extra knowledge you got



from us, you had no training for the task, but, so it is said and we believe, it was with divine support that you restored our city to life. And now, Oedipus, power to whom all men turn, we beg you, all of us here, in supplication—find some relief for us! Perhaps you have heard some divine voice, or have knowledge from some human source. You are a man of experience, the kind whose plans result in effective action. Noblest of men, we beg you, save this city. You must take thought for your reputation. Thebes now calls you its savior because of the energy you displayed once before. Let us not remember your reign as a time when we stood upright only to fall again. Set us firmly on our feet. You brought us good fortune then, with favorable signs from heaven—be now the equal of the man you were. You are king; if you are to rule Thebes, you must have an inhabited city, not a desert waste. A walled city or a ship abandoned, without men living together inside it, is nothing at all.

## OEDIPUS

My children, I am filled with pity. I knew what you were longing for when you came here. I know only too well that you are all sick—but sick though you may be, there is not one of you as sick as I. *Your* pain torments each one of you, alone, by himself—by my spirit within me mourns for the city, and myself, and all of you. You see then, I was no dreamer you awoke from sleep. I have wept many tears, as you must know, and in my ceaseless reflection I have followed many paths of thought. My search has found one way to treat our disease—and I have acted already. I have sent Creon,<sup>8</sup> my brother-in-law, to the prophetic oracle of Apollo,<sup>9</sup>



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ISBN-13: 978-1-4165-0033-9

ISBN-10: 1-4165-0033-2

\$5.95 U.S.

\$6.99 Can.



PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.