• the play begins with a priest leading a procession of mourners lamenting those who have died in a plague

• Sophocles is probably injecting “current events” into the Oedipus story

• he is also using this silent parade to pose a riddle for the audience: What are those plague-mourners doing out there?

• he wants to get the audience’s attention!
• the first scenes of the play are loaded with **irony** (double meaning):
  
  – The Priest: "... let us never speak about your reign as of a time when first our feet were set secure on high, but later fell to ruin" (49-50).
  
  – Oedipus: "... yet there is not one of you, sick though you are, that is as sick as I myself." (60-61)
  
  – Oedipus: "O holy Lord Apollo, grant that his news too may be bright for us and bring us safety." (80-81)
• sometimes the irony is so thick it’s hard not to laugh:
  – Oedipus: “If with my knowledge (the murderer) lives at my hearth I pray that I myself may feel my curse” (249-50)
  – Oedipus: “I fight in (Laius’) defense as for my father” (264-5)

• George Bernard Shaw once called the Sophoclean irony “a stupidity too dense to be credible as such.”
• but perhaps the greatest—and best!—irony in the play is left unstated as such
• Oedipus showed that he’s very clever when he saw that the answer to the Sphinx’ riddle (“What walks on four legs . . .?”) was himself (“Man”)
• but he fails to see that the answer to the second riddle (“Who killed Laius?”) is the same: it’s he himself again!
• the **Teiresias** scene is a famous *agon*
• Sophocles demonstrates brilliantly how a person as sharp-minded as Oedipus can hear the truth but not see it
• scared of the king’s temper, the blind prophet Teiresias is reluctant to point to him as the murderer of Laius
• when begging does not work, Oedipus threatens to beat the truth out of him
so when Teiresias finally tells Oedipus the truth about himself, it looks like the prophet is just insulting Oedipus back

and when he adds that Oedipus is sleeping with his own mother, it looks like just some sort of street-slang retort

the theme seems to be the same as that in the Book of Job: human intelligence is limited and cannot be trusted
Sophocles

*Oedipus the King*

- at the highest pitch of his agon with Teiresias, Oedipus says:
  
  *tuphlos ta t’ota ton te noun ta t’ommat’ ei.*

  Blind in ears and mind and eyes are you

- Oedipus is literally spitting with rage

- or ToTally sTuTTering in an inTemperaTe TanTrum

- Sophocles’ Greek is magnificent!
• finally, Teiresias at line 408 calls Oedipus a “tyrant” (tyrannos)
• remember that this is a technical term for a “non-dynastic usurper”
• it is true that Oedipus is a usurper
• but is he “non-dynastic”? 
• in the center of the play, Oedipus and Jocasta have two poignant scenes
• in the first, she comes outside the palace and intercedes between Oedipus and Creon who are quarreling loudly:
  For shame! Why have you raised this foolish squabbling brawl? . . . Go in, you, Oedipus, and you, too, Creon, into the house! . . .
• she acts like a mother to Oedipus!
• in another irony-laden moment, Jocasta tells Oedipus not to worry about oracles because they aren’t always right
• for instance, she and her first husband Laius had once been sent an oracle that their child would kill his father
• but the child was exposed and has not been seen since
• of course, she’s looking at that child!
• in her next scene with Oedipus, Jocasta realizes the truth about her relationship with her husband/son

• the scene begins with a Messenger from Corinth coming to report Polybus’ death

• as Aristotle points out in *Poetics*:
  – In *Oedipus*, for example, the messenger who came to cheer Oedipus and relieve him of his fear about his mother did the very opposite by revealing to him who he was . . . (trans. T.S. Dorsch).
the Corinthian Messenger’s first lines are notable in Greek:

Ar’an par’humon, o xenoi, *mathoim’ hopou*,
Could from you, o strangers, *I learn where*

*ta tou tyrannou domat’estin Oidipou?*
The tyrant’s palace is, Oedipus’?

*malista d’auton eipat’ ei *katisth’ hopou.*
First this tell me if *you know where.*

as if *Oedi-pus* meant “*know-where*”
• on one level, the Messenger’s silly punning shows his joy at the good news he is reporting
• it also shows Sophocles’ joy in the Greek language
• but it hints at dark things as well
• does Oedipus “know where” he is or “know where” he is sleeping?
in this scene Jocasta makes her famous “Freudian” observation of male sexuality:

As to your mother’s marriage bed—don’t fear it. Before this, in dreams too, as well as oracles, many a man has lain with his mother.

A.E. Housman called the Oedipus complex “an ugly phrase . . . unfortunate and misleading”
Jocasta’s silence at the end of this scene is one of the most powerful moments in all of Greek tragedy.

As she begins to realize the full truth, she says nothing.

She is in shock and horror and her silence is a scream of pain!

But even though she doesn’t speak, the audience in the theatre watches her...
• at the end of scene she runs off warning Oedipus not to pursue any further the riddle of his birth

• the exit is well motivated but it’s also necessary in another way

• Sophocles needs the actor playing Jocasta for the next scene in which he will portray the old herdsman who gave away Oedipus as a baby
Sophocles

*Oedipus the King*

- at the climax of the tragedy, Oedipus learns the full truth from the Herdsman
- Sophocles breaks up the stichomythia in an uncustomary fashion:
  
  Q: Then she gave it to you?  
  H: Yes, my lord!

  Q: To do what with it?  
  H: To destroy it, sir.

  Q: A cruel mother!  
  H: She feared an oracle!

  Q: What oracle?  
  H: It would kill its parents!

- the truth renders Oedipus breathless!
Sophocles

Oedipus the King

• the play ends in gore and lamentation
• note that the plot is composed of what are traditionally comic elements, e.g.
  – a native-born son returning home
  – the defeat of a horrible monster (the Sphinx)
  – a lost child reunited with his parents
• Sophocles has twisted a comedy into the darkest and most frightful comedy imaginable
Sophocles

Oedipus the King

• if not entirely positive, the character of
  Oedipus comes off as sympathetic
• what did he do wrong, except be born?
• but traditionally Oedipus is a villain
• in other tragedies, Sophocles has
  reversed the audience’s expectation of
  character type
  – Electra: loyal sister → vengeful daughter
  – Deianeira: jealous wife → accidental killer
• Sophocles makes Oedipus sympathetic by displacing the moment when he realizes the truth to later in the myth
• thus, Oedipus is innocent of his crime
• but is this feasible?
• what have Oedipus and Jocasta been talking about for twenty years?
• it doesn’t make sense!
all in all, *Oedipus the King* is a bold but failed experiment in converting Oedipus into a nice guy

the story is simply not set up to see Oedipus as a hero of any sort

and perhaps that is why this was one of the few plays which did not win a first-place award at the Dionysia for Athens’ “golden boy” Sophocles!