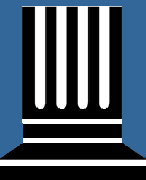
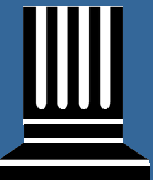




Sophocles



- Sophocles' Life and Work
- The Oedipus Myth
- The Plot of *Oedipus the King*
- Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*



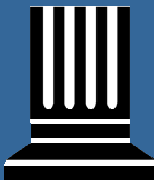


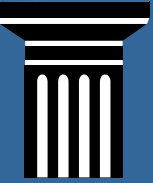
Sophocles

Life and Work



- born ca. 495 BCE and died 406 BCE
- thus, Sophocles witnessed the glories of the Classical Age:
 - the Persian Wars
 - the construction of the Parthenon
 - the birth of Greek philosophy
 - but also the Peloponnesian War
 - however not the siege of Athens in 404 BCE which ended the Peloponnesian War



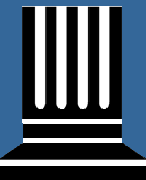
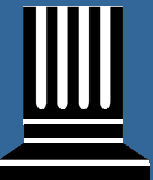


Sophocles

Life and Work



- **Sophocles** was born into a wealthy family and never had to work for a living
- he dedicated his entire life to public service and writing plays
- as a youth, he led the procession celebrating the Greek victory in the Second Persian War (479 BCE)



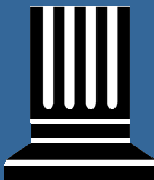


Sophocles

Life and Work



- Sophocles was elected to high office in Athens several times
- late in life, he was heralded a “hero” named **Dexion** (“the Receiver”) for having sheltered the sacred snake of Aesclepius, the god of healing
- to be declared a “hero” was the highest honor a person could receive in ancient Athens



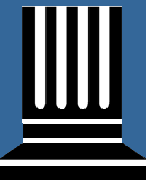


Sophocles

Life and Work



- early in his playwriting career, Sophocles won first place at the Dionysia, along the way defeating the veteran Aeschylus
- Sophocles then went on to win a record number of first places in playwriting
- he was clearly the most beloved and respected playwright in the generation following Aeschylus



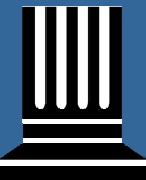


Sophocles

Life and Work



- the philosopher Aristotle tells us that Sophocles introduced the **third speaking actor** to the Greek stage
- but it is more likely Aeschylus did, probably in *The Oresteia*
- however, Aristotle may not be completely wrong on this count if we interpret his terminology in a different way



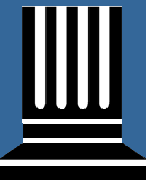


Sophocles

Life and Work



- ancient sources tell us that in the early part of his career Sophocles stopped performing as an actor in his own dramas
- because he had a weak voice and could not be heard in the Theatre of Dionysus
- if so, he would have introduced a third *hypocrites* to the Greek stage, not a third speaking actor



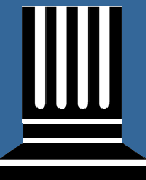
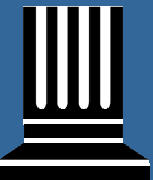


Sophocles

Life and Work



- more important, by ceasing to perform in his own tragedies, Sophocles became the first playwright in the modern sense of the word
- i.e. a person who writes but does not necessarily act in his own dramas
- that means he was the first playwright we know of who sat in the theatre and watched his plays unfold on stage



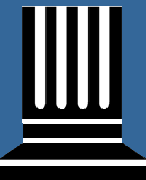
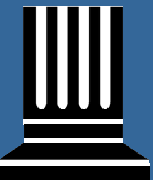


Sophocles

Life and Work



- Sophocles' perspective from the *theatron* is evident in his work
- he clearly focused on creating complex stage action, especially scenes in which three characters hear the same news but each react differently
- e.g. the Corinthian Messenger scene in *Oedipus the King*



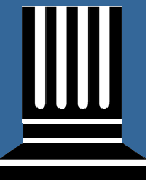


Sophocles

Life and Work



- **Sophoclean verse** marks a dramatic shift from Aeschylus' style of poetry
- Sophocles focuses on producing what appears on the surface to be simple language but which on reflection contains underlying layers of meaning
- especially words which carry two or more connotations in the context of the play



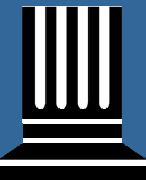
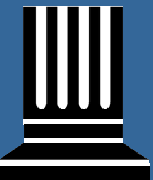


Sophocles

The Oedipus Myth



- there is no myth better suited for this type of poetic language than that of Oedipus, the King of Thebes
- it is a myth rife with double meaning, e.g. characters who have multiple relationships with each other
- thus, in *Oedipus the King* Sophocles has an ideal vehicle for exploring the nuances of psychology and linguistics



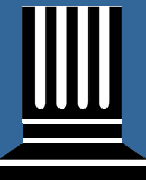


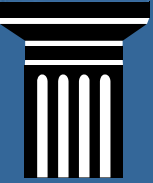
Sophocles

The Oedipus Myth



- the core of the myth of **Oedipus** is the story of a man who kills his father and marries his mother
- Oedipus was born in **Thebes** (NW of Athens)
- hoping for good news about their child's future, his parents **Laius** and **Jocasta** sought the advice of Apollo's oracle at **Delphi**



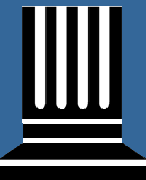


Sophocles

The Oedipus Myth



- instead of receiving glad tidings, Laius and Jocasta were told their unborn son would one day marry his mother and kill his father
- n.b. the order of the oracle's prediction (first marry mother, then kill father) suggests a crime worse than Oedipus'
- that he will murder his father to gain his mother's hand in marriage—not true!



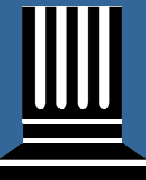


Sophocles

The Oedipus Myth



- besides that unnecessarily sadistic twist, note also that, if the oracle had not predicted Oedipus would do these things, none of it would have happened
- it is a “self-fulfilling” prophecy!
- thus, the Oedipus myth seems originally designed to ask whether or not people should even ask about fate: “Are humans meant to know the future?”



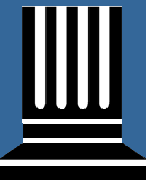


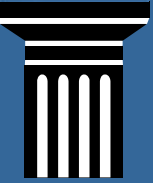
Sophocles

The Oedipus Myth



- there seems to be another underlying question inherent in the myth: “Why do the gods perpetrate such horrors on humanity?”
- that is, “When there are divinities in heaven who can protect us from evil, why do injustice and arbitrary cruelty exist in the world?”
- cf. the Book of Job



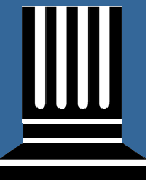


Sophocles

The Oedipus Myth



- in shock at the oracle, Laius and Jocasta “expose” their accursed child on Mount Cithaeron (between Thebes and Corinth)
- that way, there is no blood-guilt on their hands but the baby is not likely to live
- however, a Corinthian shepherd saves Oedipus and gives him to **Polybus and Merope**, the childless King and Queen of Corinth who raise him as their own



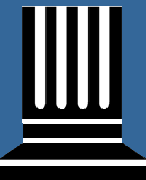
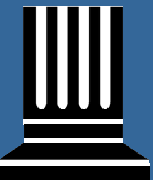


Sophocles

The Oedipus Myth



- when he grows up, Oedipus hears from a stranger that he is not the legitimate son of his Corinthian “parents”
- he storms off to Delphi to learn the truth from the oracle
- but instead it tells him that he will marry his mother and kill his father
- in an effort to avoid this fate, he refuses to live in Corinth any longer



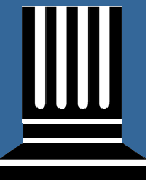


Sophocles

The Oedipus Myth



- now wandering homeless, he comes to a place where three roads meet and encounters a rude old man in a wagon
- they fight over who has the right-of way
- in the primordial act of road rage, Oedipus kills the obstructive geezer and chases off his attendants
- he then proceeds on his way, and ends up at the gates of Thebes!



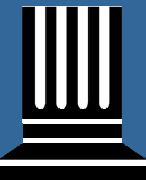
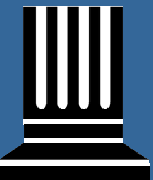


Sophocles

The Oedipus Myth



- as he approaches the city, Oedipus runs into the **Sphinx**, a horrible monster which will let no one in or out of the city
- Oedipus solves its riddle: “What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon and three in the evening?”
- the answer is “Man,” because as babies, we crawl; as adults, we walk upright; and as old people, we use canes



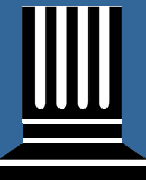


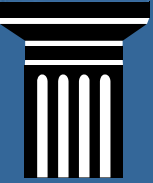
Sophocles

The Oedipus Myth



- in grief, the Sphinx throws itself off a cliff and disappears never to be seen again
- for having liberated the city, Oedipus is made the king of Thebes
- the throne happens to be vacant because the elderly former king had recently left town and has not been heard from since



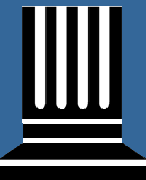


Sophocles

The Oedipus Myth



- to seal the deal, Oedipus takes as his wife, the queen Jocasta who is somewhat older than he is but brings royal power to their union
- that goes some distance toward compensating for a few sags and wrinkles
- thus, Oedipus becomes the King of Thebes and the husband of Jocasta



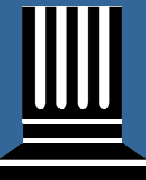


Sophocles

The Oedipus Myth



- at some point, the truth comes to light
- Jocasta kills herself in humiliation at what she has done, unwittingly or not
- blinded and cursed, Oedipus is cast out of Thebes (a second time!)
- so goes the legend, according to Sophocles, though this is not the only version of the myth circulating in antiquity



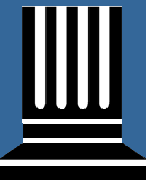


Sophocles

The Oedipus Myth



- earlier versions of the Oedipus myth hint at other interpretations
- for instance, Aeschylus staged a play called *Oedipus* (now lost) in the generation before Sophocles
- to judge from its remains, Aeschylus portrayed Oedipus as a rather unsavory, power-hungry character who thrived despite the gods' repeated warnings





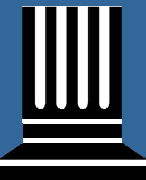
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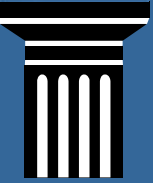
The Oedipus Myth



- Homer also alludes to the Oedipus myth in *The Odyssey* (Book 11.271-80)
- recalling his voyage to the underworld, Odysseus tells the Phaeacians:

I saw the mother of Oidipous, Epicaste, whose great unwitting deed it was to marry her own son. He took that prize from a slain father; presently the gods brought all to light that made the famous story.





Sophocles

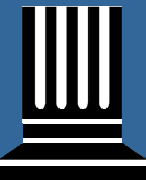
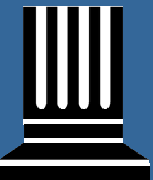
The Oedipus Myth



- recalling his voyage to the underworld, Odysseus tells the Phaeacians:

But by their fearsome wills he kept his throne
in dearest Thebes, all through his evil days,
while she descended to the place of Death,
god of the locked and iron door. Steep down
from a high rafter, throttled in her noose,
she swung, carried away by pain, and left him
endless agony from a mother's Furies.

(trans. Robert Fitzgerald)





Sophocles

The Oedipus Myth

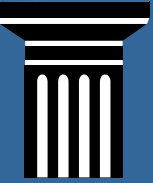


- so according to Homer, Oedipus lived out his “evil days” in Thebes, even after the revelation of his great crime!
- cf. *Iliad* 23.678-80:

Euryalus

alone stood up to face him, well-built son of Lord Mekisteus Talaionides, who in the old days came to Thebes when Oidipous had found his grave.



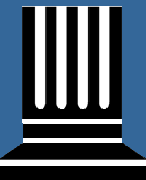
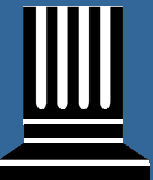


Sophocles

The Oedipus Myth



- thus, at least in some respects, the epic tradition directly contradicts the story as Sophocles tells it,
- this shows the variability and flexibility of Greek myth
- moreover, it also suggests that, before Sophocles dramatized the myth, Oedipus was typically seen as a dark and nefarious character



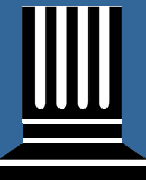


Sophocles

The Oedipus Myth



- so Sophocles' audience came into the theatre expecting to see the performance of a myth about a man who killed his father and married his mother
- they could also expect to see traditional characters like **Creon** (Jocasta's brother)
- but *how* the story unfolded—and where it all ended up—was clearly open to interpretation



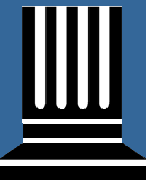


Sophocles



The Plot of *Oedipus the King*

- the **plot** of *Oedipus the King* is often called the “first great detective story”
- this is true to the extent that Sophocles does something all great mysteries do: he jumbles up the **exposition** (the background of the story) so that it comes out in bits and pieces
- and not in the order in which the events happened!





Sophocles

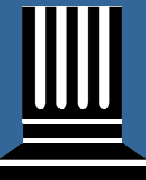


The Plot of *Oedipus the King*

The Chronology of the Oedipus Myth

1. The First Oracle: The Oracle at Delphi predicts that Oedipus will grow up to marry his mother and kill his father
2. Exposure: Oedipus as a baby is left to die on Mount Cithaeron
3. Rescue (a) and Adoption (b): Shepherds save the baby and give him to Polybus and Merope

Time Passes: Oedipus grows up in Corinth





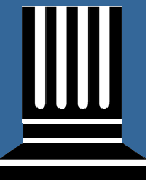
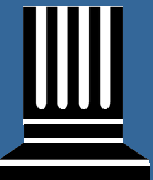
Sophocles



The Plot of *Oedipus the King*

The Chronology of the Oedipus Myth

4. The Stranger: Oedipus learns from a mysterious stranger that he is not Polybus and Merope's natural child
5. Second Oracle: The Oracle predicts that Oedipus will marry his mother and kill his father
6. Flight From Corinth: Determined to avoid this fate, Oedipus flees Corinth and sets out wandering





Sophocles

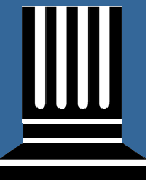


The Plot of *Oedipus the King*

The Chronology of the Oedipus Myth

7. Murder: Oedipus encounters a rude old man (Laius) in traffic and murders him
8. Sphinx: As he approaches Thebes, Oedipus confronts the Sphinx (“Strangler”), but Oedipus defeats it by solving its riddle. He is made King of Thebes and marries Jocasta

Time Passes: Oedipus rules Thebes; he and Jocasta have four children





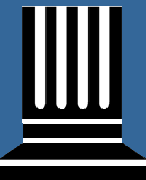
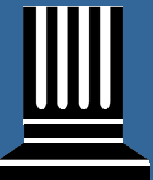
Sophocles



The Plot of *Oedipus the King*

The Chronology of the Oedipus Myth

9. Plague: Apollo sends a plague on Thebes because the city has unwittingly been harboring the murderer of Laius for many years
10. The Revelation of the Truth: When Oedipus is shown to be that murderer and to have married his mother and had children by her, Jocasta commits suicide and Oedipus blinds himself and goes into exile from Thebes





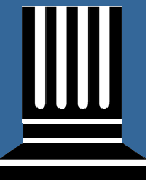
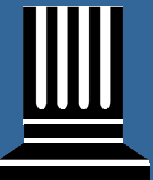
Sophocles

The Plot of *Oedipus the King*



- the play itself encompasses only a brief time (9-10)
- 1-8 have already happened
- here is the order in which the plot elements occur in the play

1. FIRST ORACLE
2. EXPOSURE
- 3a. RESCUE
- 3b. ADOPTION
- time passes ——
4. STRANGER
5. SECOND ORACLE
6. FLEES CORINTH
7. LAIUS' MURDER
8. SPHINX
- time passes ——
9. PLAGUE
10. FULL TRUTH





Sophocles

The Plot of *Oedipus the King*



- this is the final order:
9-8-1-2-4-5-6-7-3b-3a-10
- thus, the audience shares the characters' confusion
- but the audience sits cool and remote above the action
- like the gods!

9. PLAGUE
8. SPHINX
1. FIRST ORACLE
2. EXPOSURE
4. STRANGER
5. SECOND ORACLE
6. FLEES CORINTH
7. LAIUS' MURDER
- 3b. ADOPTION
- 3a. RESCUE
10. FULL TRUTH

