

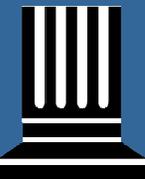
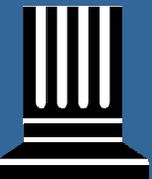


Sophocles

Oedipus the King



- 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!



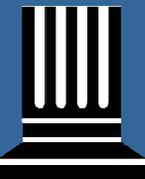
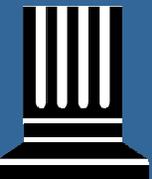


Sophocles

Oedipus the King



- 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)



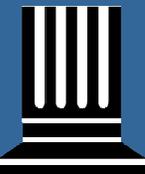
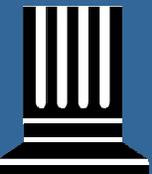


Sophocles

Oedipus the King



- 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.”



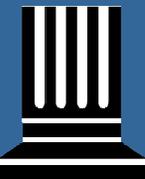
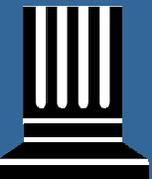


Sophocles

Oedipus the King



- 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!



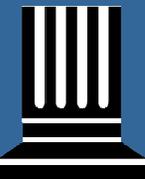
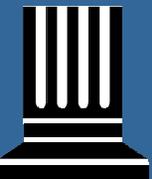


Sophocles

Oedipus the King



- 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



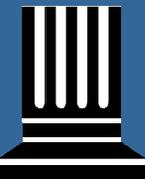
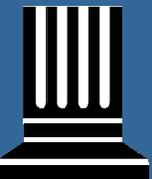


Sophocles

Oedipus the King



- 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

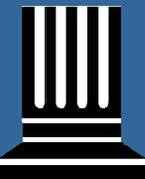
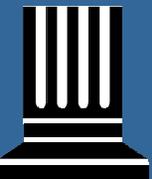


- at the highest pitch of his agon with Teiresias, Oedipus says:

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!



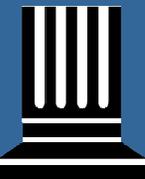


Sophocles

Oedipus the King



- 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”?





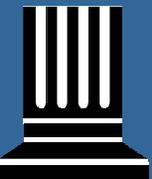
Sophocles

Oedipus the King



- 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!



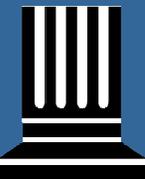
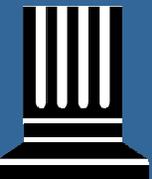


Sophocles

Oedipus the King



- 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!



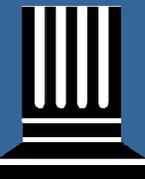
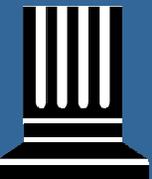


Sophocles

Oedipus the King



- 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).





Sophocles

Oedipus the King



- the Corinthian Messenger's first lines are notable in Greek:

Ar'an par'humon, o xenoι, mathoim' hopou,
Could from you, o strangers, I learn where

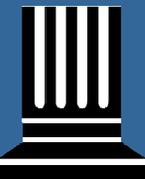
ta tou tyrannou domat'estin Oidipou?

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**”



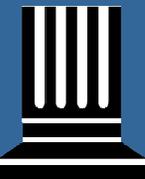
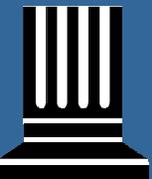


Sophocles

Oedipus the King



- 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?





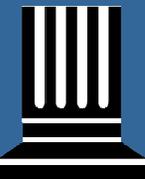
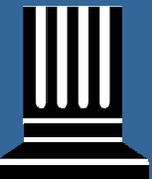
Sophocles

Oedipus the King



- 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”



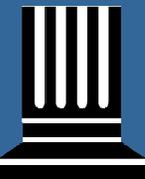
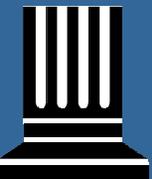


Sophocles

Oedipus the King



- 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



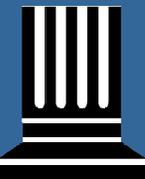
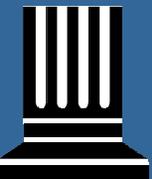


Sophocles

Oedipus the King



- 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:

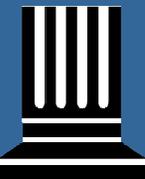
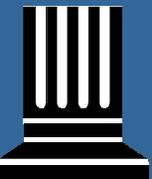
Q: Then she gave it to you? / H: Yes, my lord!

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!



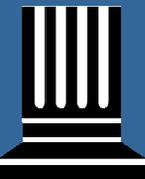
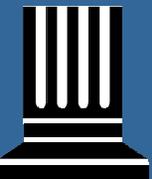


Sophocles

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



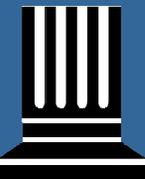
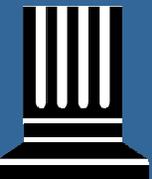


Sophocles

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



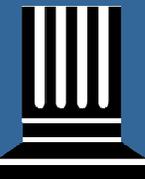
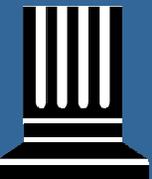


Sophocles

Oedipus the King



- 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!





Sophocles

Oedipus the King



- 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!

