

Discussion Questions, Oedipus Rex

1. The most widely accepted view of Oedipus is that he is guilty of overweening pride, and hence, he has to suffer. The primary basis for this view comes in lines 963 – 978, which read in the Fagles translation: “Pride breeds the tyrant/violent pride, gorging, crammed to bursting/with all that is overripe and rich with ruin--/clawing up to the heights, headlong pride/crashes down the abyss—sheer doom!/No footing helps , all foothold lost and gone./But the healthy strife that makes the city strong--/I pray that god will never end that wrestling:/god my champion, I will never let you go./But is any man comes striding, high and mighty in all he says and does,/no fear of justice, no reverence/for the temples of the gods--/let a rough doom tear him down,/repay his pride, breakneck, ruinous pride!” Is pride the primary failing of Oedipus? Why or why not? Does Oedipus have any other failings?
2. Laius and Jocasta were warned by Apollo that their son would kill his father and marry his mother, yet they did not kill the baby when they had a chance. Are they guilty of defying the gods, and did they bring their doom upon themselves as a result? Was their doom merited?
3. *Oedipus Rex* is often seen as a play which is deterministic in outlook. Does Oedipus have choices, or is he locked into his fate? What supporting evidence can you give for either position?
4. The play makes use of the words “sight,” “see,” and “eyes” constantly. In addition, there is an interplay between Tiresias, the blind seer who “sees,” and Oedipus, the sighted man who is “blind.” Is this technique effective to set up one of the major themes of the play – the ability or inability to see what is before us, or our past?
5. Freud noted that the tale of Oedipus was rooted in the desire of the son for his mother, and the hatred of his father for possessing his mother. He later recanted part of this theory as it applied to the play, but held that it was still a valid psychological insight. Is this the primary force behind the play? Did Oedipus know that his wife was his mother, or that he killed his father?
6. Early in the play, we learn that Apollo commands that the corruption (killer of Laius) be driven from the land, and that the person responsible for the killing is still in Thebes (lines 107-121). This decree sets the play in motion. Oedipus decides to find the killer and to ban him from Thebes. Throughout the play, Oedipus is given a number of opportunities to abandon the search for the killer, but he continues to press the search. Why does Oedipus continue the search? Does his continuance argue that he has free will (as Knox suggests)?
7. One of the themes in the play is the tension between the gods and man. Early on, Oedipus says that the chorus is “huddling at my altar, praying before me.” Later, when Jocasta first learns of

the testimony of Tiresias, she dismisses it, saying that Tiresias also foretold that she would marry her son, and that her son would kill his father, which she claims to be impossible. She says that Apollo could not bring the event to pass. Have Oedipus and Jocasta gone too far in acting like gods?

8. Toward the middle of the play, Oedipus accuses Creon of concocting a plot to kill him and take the throne. Creon makes a plausible argument that he has no desire to rule in Oedipus' place. Here is an argument that follows after Creon's plea (lines 700-705): "Creon: What if you're wholly wrong? /Oedipus: No matter—I must rule/Creon: Not if you rule unjustly." What do these lines mean? Can a king rule unjustly? Should Oedipus back down? Why doesn't he?