

Hera's Monologue

Who is the antagonist in Oedipus Rex? I suggested that the only character within the play who might fit the bill is the old blind prophet, Tiresias. But another answer could be that it is the gods for whom he is the spokesman. Here's an improvisation on the idea that Jove himself is the enemy of the unfortunate young man, condemned quite arbitrarily to commit the crimes for which he is unreasonably punished. This is Jove's wife, Hera, speaking.

He's up to no good. I can always tell. He's been down in the cave, listening in on those ridiculous sessions that the Oracle, that silly old gypsy, holds for the poor pathetic mortals that come to her with their problems. She and my husband have been cooking up some new scheme to inflict punishment on somebody or other.

Why does Jove do it? For a god who is supposed to be looked up to by all of the rest of us here on Mount Olympus, he's really a very petty individual. I'm not talking about all his absurd infidelities, though they are enough of a humiliation. It's the indignity of his behaviour that is so hard to put up with. Dressing himself up as a bull or a swan or something to go chasing after some girl that he's taken a fancy to! He's just as bad as any of the mortals—maybe worse!

I think they've been seeing somebody from Thebes, so I guess it must be something to do with the Cadmus family and that unfortunate young man with the limp. What my husband has against him I really don't know. None of it is the poor boy's fault. The whole sad story is something that my husband cooked up years and years ago before Oedipus was even born.

The father was called Laius, as I remember. I didn't care for him much. He'd married a wife much younger than himself, a pretty little creature whom he treated rather badly. When she was pregnant, Laius came to our Oracle for some reason or another, wanting to know about the future of the child. Jove must have been in a filthy mood that day—probably we'd been having a row—so, out of pure malice, no other reason, he told the Oracle to prophesy to Laius that, if it was a manchild, it would kill its own father and seduce its own mother! That sort of thing arouses my husband. He says things like that as “an experiment”—just to see what people will do about it. I suppose he wants to show the mortals who's the boss and keep them from getting too uppity. He's always on about that—what he calls “hubris” in the lower classes who think they can handle things all on their own without any help from us.

One is never very sure how much the people who come to consult the Oracle really believe all the nonsense that is handed out to them. Generally, the priestess takes the precaution of using language that is vague, or ambiguous, or even just meaningless, so that if it doesn't work out nobody can be called to account. But when my husband takes it into his head to be specific, then the fat is in the fire.

Laius was thrown into a panic. He went scurrying back to Thebes and when the baby turned out to be a boy, he decided to get rid of it. We've got very strict rules about killing babies—at least male ones. The other goddesses and I are still campaigning to make them even stricter although, men being what they are, I get the feeling it will take another couple of thousand years. With the girls the way they get round it is by taking the poor little creatures out on to some desolate hillside, tying their feet together and abandoning them.

That's what they did to Jocasta's baby. It's not clear if, at the time, they told the mother that she'd had a son. They just gave the infant to some shepherd, told him to take it out on to Mount Cithaeron, and dispose of it. That was about the time that I got to know of the whole senseless and unnecessary affair. I never argue with my husband—it just makes him more stubborn. But I felt I had to do something. As it happens, I knew of another couple, some people in Corinth who had been trying to get a child. So I managed to see that, as the baby was taken out on to Cithaeron, there was another shepherd there who realised that he could get the poor little thing adopted.

I kept an eye on it. Merope and Polybus, they were the couple at Corinth, they wanted my advice whether or not to tell the boy that he was adopted. I told them not to bother. What you don't know can't hurt you is what I always say.

But my husband found out. He was livid. He has this thing about prophecies. He insists that when he says something is going to happen then happen it must—even if he has to go to quite lunatic lengths to make it happen. He blamed me for having spoiled the whole business and swore that, however long it took, he'd see that it turned out the way that he had said it would. And it did take quite a time. My husband, as I have said, can be extraordinarily stubborn when he gets the idea that he has been thwarted. He waited for years—until Oedipus (that's what they called him because his foot was lame from the place where they'd cut the tendon at the ankle when he was an infant)—he waited until Oedipus was fully grown before he prompted some drunk to insult the youth, telling him that he was illegitimate. The poor boy didn't know what to believe. He didn't confront Merope—instead he came to the oracle. Which is, I suppose, what my husband wanted. The priestess didn't even answer the boy's question about his father and mother. She just repeated what Jove had told her to say—that he was under a curse and would kill his father and marry his own mother.

Oedipus was so shocked that he didn't even go back to Corinth. He ran away.

So my husband is delighted. He sat down with a map to work out how he could arrange to get Laius and the boy into a quarrel, and found some crossroads at which he set up the whole silly incident, Laius with three or four servants on his way here from Thebes, Oedipus coming the other way, all on his own. My husband engineered the whole episode, that's clear. Oedipus seems to have gone quite berserk. On his own, he slaughtered all of the servants but one, who ran away. Then he killed the old man, Laius. Nasty, the whole thing.

I suppose I have tended to take young Oedipus' side because I felt he had been treated so unfairly, but it has to be admitted that he has a violent streak. And everything he did, everywhere he went, my husband seemed to have laid a trap for him. The Sphinx, for example. She was simply a monster and one was quite proud of the way that Oedipus stood up to her. That riddle—it was smart of him to guess the answer to that, and good riddance to the creature. But my husband took immediate advantage of that too. The townsfolk of Thebes were naturally grateful to the young man and carried him back to the town to introduce him to Jocasta, so my husband had little difficulty contriving the other half of his stupid prophesy. He thought it a great joke, I dare say. Frankly, I find it hard to see why my husband had to go to all the bother. What is he trying to prove?

What's more, I don't think it's finished yet. You would think Jove would be satisfied that he's manipulated it all so that it has worked out in the way that he promised. But no, that's not enough. Jove has still been persecuting the town, sending them a plague and refusing to accept their sacrifices and so on. So now Oedipus has sent to ask the Oracle what he should do. He didn't come himself—he sent one of the family, Jocasta's brother. Typically, that also seems to have annoyed my husband so that he's sent back a message telling Oedipus that he's got to find the man who killed Laius. Jove finds that entertaining, I dare say.

As for myself, I've washed my hands of the whole business. I tried to help, but what good did it do? My husband, Jove—he's been the source of the trouble since the beginning. He goes on about how we gods have to teach mortals to show a proper humility and a respect for religion, that sort of thing. But any mortal with an ounce of intelligence is going to see that if the gods go on the way my husband has been doing then we don't deserve to be respected. But I suppose my husband can't see that.