

How many riddles did Oedipus solve?

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Abstract. This paper proposes that before the opening of Sophocles' play *Oedipus the King*, the "hero" had to solve a lot of riddles.

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No birds go near the Sphinx

To find out how she thinks—

They say her eagle wings

Must be aching things.

In Sophocles' play *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus boasts about his famous riddle-solving feat. To the blind seer Tiresias, he says:

Her riddle was not something the first man to stroll along could solve – a prophet was required. And there the people saw your knowledge was no use – nothing from birds or picked up from the gods. But then I came, Oedipus, who knew nothing. Yet I finished her off, using my wits rather than relying on birds. (2004: 471-478)

He does not just boast here. He criticizes. He soon criticizes the blind man for speaking in riddles, to which Tiresias responds:

Well, in solving riddles, are you not the best there is? (2004: 532-533)

From this intense discussion, I imagine that it was not easy for Oedipus after he solved the Sphinx's riddle.

To begin with, he was given a desk near some postgraduate researchers. People would come along to his desk and ask him how he got here. He would say, “I solved the riddle of the Sphinx.” “What riddle of the Sphinx?” some of them would reply, “Never heard of it.”

Others would ask him how he solved it. When he explained his method, they would say, “Do you solve riddles like that? Don’t you solve them by listening to birds and picking up messages from the gods? That is what Tiresias does.” Yet others would say, “Anyone can get lucky once. Can you solve the following riddle...?” Oedipus ends up solving a lot of other riddles. That is what grounds his reputation that in solving riddles he is the best there is, not a one-off success.¹ But these experiences leave him with a disposition to boast and promote his methods of riddle-solving, because various Theban intellectuals are likely to deny his achievements.

One of the few people who was respectful to him during that difficult time was Jocasta.

Reference

Sophocles (translated by I. Johnston). 2004. *Oedipus the King*. Accessed from:

<http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/sophocles/oedipustheking.htm>

¹ A background story involving solving other riddles strikes me as the best way of making sense of Tiresias’s response, even if it is mocking. But in this case one has to take into account other methods.