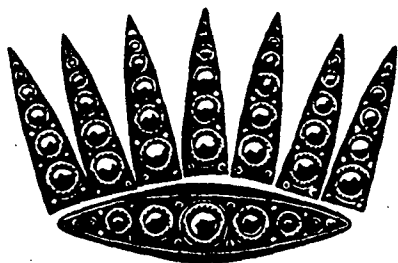




SOPHOCLES  
THE THREE  
THEBAN PLAYS

ANTIGONE · OEDIPUS THE KING  
OEDIPUS AT COLONUS



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NOTES BY  
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PENGUIN BOOKS

# OEDIPUS THE KING

## CHARACTERS

OEDIPUS  
*king of Thebes*

A PRIEST  
*of Zeus*

CREON  
*brother of Jocasta*

A CHORUS  
*of Theban citizens and their LEADER*

TIRESIAS  
*a blind prophet*

JOCASTA  
*the queen, wife of Oedipus*

A MESSENGER  
*from Corinth*

A SHEPHERD

A MESSENGER  
*from inside the palace*

ANTIGONE, ISMENE  
*daughters of Oedipus and Jocasta*

*Guards and attendants*

*Priests of Thebes*

TIME AND SCENE: *The royal house of Thebes. Double doors dominate the façade; a stone altar stands at the center of the stage.*

*Many years have passed since OEDIPUS solved the riddle of the Sphinx and ascended the throne of Thebes, and now a plague has struck the city. A procession of priests enters; suppliants, broken and despondent, they carry branches wound in wool and lay them on the altar.*

*The doors open. Guards assemble. OEDIPUS comes forward, majestic but for a telltale limp, and slowly views the condition of his people.*

OEDIPUS:

Oh my children, the new blood of ancient Thebes,  
why are you here? Huddling at my altar,  
praying before me, your branches wound in wool.  
Our city reeks with the smoke of burning incense,  
rings with cries for the Healer and wailing for the dead. 5  
I thought it wrong, my children, to hear the truth  
from others, messengers. Here I am myself—  
you all know me, the world knows my fame:  
I am Oedipus.

*Helping a Priest to his feet.*

Speak up, old man. Your years,  
your dignity—you should speak for the others. 10  
Why here and kneeling, what preys upon you so?  
Some sudden fear? some strong desire?  
You can trust me. I am ready to help,  
I'll do anything. I would be blind to misery  
not to pity my people kneeling at my feet. 15

PRIEST:

Oh Oedipus, king of the land, our greatest power!  
 You see us before you now, men of all ages  
 clinging to your altars. Here are boys,  
 still too weak to fly from the nest,  
 and here the old, bowed down with the years, 20  
 the holy ones—a priest of Zeus myself—and here  
 the picked, unmarried men, the young hope of Thebes.  
 And all the rest, your great family gathers now,  
 branches wreathed, massing in the squares, 25  
 kneeling before the two temples of queen Athena  
 or the river-shrine where the embers glow and die  
 and Apollo sees the future in the ashes.

Our city—

look around you, see with your own eyes—  
 our ship pitches wildly, cannot lift her head  
 from the depths, the red waves of death . . . 30  
 Thebes is dying. A blight on the fresh crops  
 and the rich pastures, cattle sicken and die,  
 and the women die in labor, children stillborn,  
 and the plague, the fiery god of fever hurls down  
 on the city, his lightning slashing through us— 35  
 raging plague in all its vengeance, devastating  
 the house of Cadmus! And black Death luxuriates  
 in the raw, wailing miseries of Thebes.

Now we pray to you. You cannot equal the gods,  
 your children know that, bending at your altar. 40  
 But we do rate you first of men,  
 both in the common crises of our lives  
 and face-to-face encounters with the gods.  
 You freed us from the Sphinx, you came to Thebes  
 and cut us loose from the bloody tribute we had paid 45  
 that harsh, brutal singer. We taught you nothing,  
 no skill, no extra knowledge, still you triumphed.  
 A god was with you, so they say, and we believe it—  
 you lifted up our lives.

So now again,

Oedipus, king, we bend to you, your power— 50  
 we implore you, all of us on our knees:  
 find us strength, rescue! Perhaps you've heard  
 the voice of a god or something from other men,  
 Oedipus . . . what do you know?  
 The man of experience—you see it every day— 55  
 his plans will work in a crisis, his first of all.

Act now—we beg you, best of men, raise up our city!  
 Act, defend yourself, your former glory!  
 Your country calls you savior now 60  
 for your zeal, your action years ago.  
 Never let us remember of your reign:  
 you helped us stand, only to fall once more.  
 Oh raise up our city, set us on our feet.  
 The omens were good that day you brought us joy—  
 be the same man today! 65  
 Rule our land, you know you have the power,  
 but rule a land of the living, not a wasteland.  
 Ship and towered city are nothing, stripped of men  
 alive within it, living all as one.

OEDIPUS:

My children,  
I pity you. I see—how could I fail to see 70  
what longings bring you here? Well I know  
you are sick to death, all of you,  
but sick as you are, not one is sick as I.  
Your pain strikes each of you alone, each  
in the confines of himself, no other. But my spirit 75  
grieves for the city, for myself and all of you.  
I wasn't asleep, dreaming. You haven't wakened me—  
I have wept through the nights, you must know that,  
groping, laboring over many paths of thought.  
After a painful search I found one cure: 80  
I acted at once. I sent Creon,  
my wife's own brother, to Delphi—  
Apollo the Prophet's oracle—to learn  
what I might do or say to save our city.

Today's the day. When I count the days gone by 85  
it torments me . . . what is he doing?  
Strange, he's late, he's gone too long.  
But once he returns, then, then I'll be a traitor  
if I do not do all the god makes clear.

PRIEST:

Timely words. The men over there 90  
are signaling—Creon's just arriving.

OEDIPUS:

*Sighting CREON, then turning  
to the altar.*

Lord Apollo,

let him come with a lucky word of rescue,  
shining like his eyes!

PRIEST:

Welcome news, I think—he's crowned, look,  
and the laurel wreath is bright with berries. 95

OEDIPUS:

We'll soon see. He's close enough to hear—

*Enter CREON from the side; his face  
is shaded with a wreath.*

Creon, prince, my kinsman, what do you bring us?  
What message from the god?

CREON:

Good news.

I tell you even the hardest things to bear,  
if they should turn out well, all would be well. 100

OEDIPUS:

Of course, but what were the god's words? There's no hope  
and nothing to fear in what you've said so far.

CREON:

If you want my report in the presence of these people . . .

*Pointing to the priests while drawing  
OEDIPUS toward the palace.*

I'm ready now, or we might go inside.

OEDIPUS:

Speak out,

speaking to us all. I grieve for these, my people,  
far more than I fear for my own life. 105

CREON:

Very well,

I will tell you what I heard from the god.  
 Apollo commands us—he was quite clear—  
 “Drive the corruption from the land,  
 don’t harbor it any longer, past all cure, 110  
 don’t nurse it in your soil—root it out!”

OEDIPUS:

How can we cleanse ourselves—what rites?  
 What’s the source of the trouble?

CREON:

Banish the man, or pay back blood with blood.  
 Murder sets the plague-storm on the city.

OEDIPUS:

Whose murder? 115

Whose fate does Apollo bring to light?

CREON:

Our leader,

my lord, was once a man named Laius,  
 before you came and put us straight on course.

OEDIPUS:

I know—

or so I’ve heard. I never saw the man myself.

CREON:

Well, he was killed, and Apollo commands us now— 120  
 he could not be more clear,  
 “Pay the killers back—whoever is responsible.”

OEDIPUS:

Where on earth are they? Where to find it now,  
 the trail of the ancient guilt so hard to trace?

CREON:

“Here in Thebes,” he said. 125  
 Whatever is sought for can be caught, you know,  
 whatever is neglected slips away.

OEDIPUS:

But where,

in the palace, the fields or foreign soil,  
 where did Laius meet his bloody death?

CREON:

He went to consult an oracle, Apollo said, 130  
 and he set out and never came home again.

OEDIPUS:

No messenger, no fellow-traveler saw what happened?  
 Someone to cross-examine?

CREON:

No,

they were all killed but one. He escaped,  
 terrified, he could tell us nothing clearly, 135  
 nothing of what he saw—just one thing.

OEDIPUS:

What’s that?

One thing could hold the key to it all,  
 a small beginning give us grounds for hope.



CREON:

He said thieves attacked them—a whole band,  
not single-handed, cut King Laius down.

OEDIPUS:

A thief, 140

so daring, so wild, he'd kill a king? Impossible,  
unless conspirators paid him off in Thebes.

CREON:

We suspected as much. But with Laius dead  
no leader appeared to help us in our troubles.

OEDIPUS:

Trouble? Your *king* was murdered—royal blood! 145  
What stopped you from tracking down the killer  
then and there?

CREON:

The singing, riddling Sphinx.

She . . . persuaded us to let the mystery go  
and concentrate on what lay at our feet.



OEDIPUS:

No,

I'll start again—I'll bring it all to light myself! 150  
Apollo is right, and so are you, Creon,  
to turn our attention back to the murdered man.  
Now you have *me* to fight for you, you'll see:  
I am the land's avenger by all rights,  
and Apollo's champion too. 155  
But not to assist some distant kinsman, no,  
for my own sake I'll rid us of this corruption.  
Whoever killed the king may decide to kill me too,  
with the same violent hand—by avenging Laius  
I defend myself.

*To the priests.*

Quickly, my children: 160  
Up from the steps, take up your branches now.

*To the guards.*

One of you summon the city here before us,  
tell them I'll do everything. God help us,  
we will see our triumph—or our fall.

*OEDIPUS and CREON enter the palace,  
followed by the guards.*

PRIEST:

Rise, my sons. The kindness we came for 165  
Oedipus volunteers himself.  
Apollo has sent his word, his oracle—  
Come down, Apollo, save us, stop the plague.

*The priests rise, remove their  
branches and exit to the side.*

*Enter a CHORUS, the citizens of Thebes, who have not heard the news that CREON brings. They march around the altar, chanting.*

CHORUS:

Zeus!

Great welcome voice of Zeus, what do you bring?  
What word from the gold vaults of Delphi  
comes to brilliant Thebes? Racked with terror— 170

terror shakes my heart

and I cry your wild cries, Apollo, Healer of Delos  
I worship you in dread . . . what now, what is your price?  
some new sacrifice? some ancient rite from the past 175  
come round again each spring?—

what will you bring to birth?

Tell me, child of golden Hope  
warm voice that never dies!

You are the first I call, daughter of Zeus 180  
deathless Athena—I call your sister Artemis,  
heart of the market place enthroned in glory,  
guardian of our earth—

I call Apollo, Archer astride the thunderheads of heaven—  
O triple shield against death, shine before me now! 185

If ever, once in the past, you stopped some ruin  
launched against our walls

you hurled the flame of pain

far, far from Thebes—you gods  
come now, come down once more!

No, no 190  
the miseries numberless, grief on grief, no end—  
too much to bear, we are all dying  
O my people . . .

Thebes like a great army dying 195  
and there is no sword of thought to save us, no  
and the fruits of our famous earth, they will not ripen  
no and the women cannot scream their pangs to birth—  
screams for the Healer, children dead in the womb  
and life on life goes down

you can watch them go 200  
like seabirds winging west, outracing the day's fire  
down the horizon, irresistibly  
streaking on to the shores of Evening

Death  
so many deaths, numberless deaths on deaths, no end—  
Thebes is dying, look, her children 205  
stripped of pity . . .

generations strewn on the ground  
unburied, unwept, the dead spreading death  
and the young wives and gray-haired mothers with them  
cling to the altars, trailing in from all over the city— 210  
Thebes, city of death, one long cortege  
and the suffering rises

wails for mercy rise  
and the wild hymn for the Healer blazes out  
clashing with our sobs our cries of mourning— 215  
O golden daughter of god, send rescue  
radiant as the kindness in your eyes!

Drive him back!—the fever, the god of death  
   that raging god of war  
 not armored in bronze, not shielded now, he burns me,       220  
 battle cries in the onslaught burning on—

O rout him from our borders!  
 Sail him, blast him out to the Sea-queen's chamber  
   the black Atlantic gulfs  
           or the northern harbor, death to all                       225  
 where the Thracian surf comes crashing.

Now what the night spares he comes by day and kills—  
 the god of death.

                          O lord of the stormcloud,  
 you who twirl the lightning, Zeus, Father,  
 thunder Death to nothing!                                       230

Apollo, lord of the light, I beg you—  
           whip your longbow's golden cord  
 showering arrows on our enemies—shafts of power  
 champions strong before us rushing on!

Artemis, Huntress,   235  
 torches flaring over the eastern ridges—  
   ride Death down in pain!

God of the headdress gleaming gold, I cry to you—  
 your name and ours are one, Dionysus—  
           come with your face aflame with wine                       240  
   your raving women's cries  
           your army on the march! Come with the lightning  
 come with torches blazing, eyes ablaze with glory!  
 Burn that god of death that all gods hate!

*OEDIPUS enters from the palace to  
 address the CHORUS, as if addressing  
 the entire city of Thebes.*

OEDIPUS:  
 You pray to the gods? Let me grant your prayers.           245  
 Come, listen to me—do what the plague demands:  
 you'll find relief and lift your head from the depths.

I will speak out now as a stranger to the story,  
 a stranger to the crime. If I'd been present then,  
 there would have been no mystery, no long hunt           250  
 without a clue in hand. So now, counted  
 a native Theban years after the murder,  
 to all of Thebes I make this proclamation:  
 if any one of you knows who murdered Laius,  
 the son of Labdacus, I order him to reveal               255  
 the whole truth to me. Nothing to fear,  
 even if he must denounce himself,  
 let him speak up  
 and so escape the brunt of the charge—  
 he will suffer no unbearable punishment,               260  
 nothing worse than exile, totally unharmed.

*OEDIPUS pauses, waiting for a reply.*

  Next,  
 if anyone knows the murderer is a stranger,  
 a man from alien soil, come, speak up.  
 I will give him a handsome reward, and lay up  
 gratitude in my heart for him besides.                       265

*Silence again, no reply.*

But if you keep silent, if anyone panicking,  
 trying to shield himself or friend or kin,  
 rejects my offer, then hear what I will do.  
 I order you, every citizen of the state  
 where I hold throne and power: banish this man— 270  
 whoever he may be—never shelter him, never  
 speak a word to him, never make him partner  
 to your prayers, your victims burned to the gods.  
 Never let the holy water touch his hands.  
 Drive him out, each of you, from every home. 275  
*He* is the plague, the heart of our corruption,  
 as Apollo's oracle has just revealed to me.  
 So I honor my obligations:  
 I fight for the god and for the murdered man.

Now my curse on the murderer. Whoever he is,  
 a lone man unknown in his crime 280  
 or one among many, let that man drag out  
 his life in agony, step by painful step—  
 I curse myself as well . . . if by any chance  
 he proves to be an intimate of our house, 285  
 here at my hearth, with my full knowledge,  
 may the curse I just called down on him strike me!

These are your orders: perform them to the last.  
 I command you, for my sake, for Apollo's, for this country  
 blasted root and branch by the angry heavens. 290  
 Even if god had never urged you on to act,  
 how could you leave the crime uncleansed so long?  
 A man so noble—your king, brought down in blood—  
 you should have searched. But I am the king now,  
 I hold the throne that he held then, possess his bed 295  
 and a wife who shares our seed . . . why, our seed  
 might be the same, children born of the same mother  
 if his hope of offspring had not met disaster—  
 but fate swooped at his head and cut him short. 300  
 So I will fight for him as if he were my father,  
 stop at nothing, search the world  
 to lay my hands on the man who shed his blood,  
 the son of Labdacus descended of Polydorus,  
 Cadmus of old and Agenor, founder of the line: 305  
 their power and mine are one.

Oh dear gods,  
 my curse on those who disobey these orders!  
 Let no crops grow out of the earth for them—  
 shrivel their women, kill their sons,  
 burn them to nothing in this plague 310  
 that hits us now, or something even worse.  
 But you, loyal men of Thebes who approve my actions,  
 may our champion, Justice, may all the gods  
 be with us, fight beside us to the end!

LEADER:

In the grip of your curse, my king, I swear  
I'm not the murderer, I cannot point him out. 315  
As for the search, Apollo pressed it on us—  
he should name the killer.

OEDIPUS:

Quite right,  
but to force the gods to act against their will—  
no man has the power.

LEADER:

Then if I might mention 320  
the next best thing . . .

OEDIPUS:

The third best too—  
don't hold back, say it.

LEADER:

I still believe . . .  
Lord Tiresias sees with the eyes of Lord Apollo.  
Anyone searching for the truth, my king,  
might learn it from the prophet, clear as day. 325

OEDIPUS:

I've not been slow with that. On Creon's cue  
I sent the escorts, twice, within the hour.  
I'm surprised he isn't here.

LEADER:

We need him—  
without him we have nothing but old, useless rumors.

OEDIPUS:

Which rumors? I'll search out every word. 330

LEADER:

Laius was killed, they say, by certain travelers.

OEDIPUS:

I know—but no one can find the murderer.

LEADER:

If the man has a trace of fear in him  
he won't stay silent long,  
not with your curses ringing in his ears. 335

OEDIPUS:

He didn't flinch at murder,  
he'll never flinch at words.

*Enter TIRESIAS, the blind prophet, led  
by a boy with escorts in attendance.  
He remains at a distance.*

LEADER:

Here is the one who will convict him, look,  
they bring him on at last, the seer, the man of god.  
The truth lives inside him, him alone.

OEDIPUS:

O Tiresias, 340

master of all the mysteries of our life,  
all you teach and all you dare not tell,  
signs in the heavens, signs that walk the earth!  
Blind as you are, you can feel all the more  
what sickness haunts our city. You, my lord, 345  
are the one shield, the one savior we can find.

We asked Apollo—perhaps the messengers  
haven't told you—he sent his answer back:  
"Relief from the plague can only come one way.  
Uncover the murderers of Laius, 350  
put them to death or drive them into exile."  
So I beg you, grudge us nothing now, no voice,  
no message plucked from the birds, the embers  
or the other mantic ways within your grasp.  
Rescue yourself, your city, rescue me— 355  
rescue everything infected by the dead.  
We are in your hands. For a man to help others  
with all his gifts and native strength:  
that is the noblest work.

TIRESIAS:

How terrible—to see the truth 360  
when the truth is only pain to him who sees!  
I knew it well, but I put it from my mind,  
else I never would have come.

OEDIPUS:

What's this? Why so grim, so dire?

TIRESIAS:

Just send me home. You bear your burdens,  
I'll bear mine. It's better that way, 365  
please believe me.

OEDIPUS:

Strange response . . . unlawful,  
unfriendly too to the state that bred and reared you—  
you withhold the word of god.

TIRESIAS:

I fail to see  
that your own words are so well-timed.  
I'd rather not have the same thing said of me . . . 370

OEDIPUS:

For the love of god, don't turn away,  
not if you know something. We beg you,  
all of us on our knees.

TIRESIAS:

None of you knows—  
and I will never reveal my dreadful secrets,  
not to say your own. 375

OEDIPUS:

What? You know and you won't tell?  
You're bent on betraying us, destroying Thebes?

TIRESIAS:

I'd rather not cause pain for you or me.  
So why this . . . useless interrogation?  
You'll get nothing from me.

OEDIPUS:

Nothing! You, 380  
 you scum of the earth, you'd enrage a heart of stone!  
 You won't talk? Nothing moves you?  
 Out with it, once and for all!

TIRESIAS:

You criticize my temper . . . unaware  
 of the one *you* live with, you revile me. 385

OEDIPUS:

Who could restrain his anger hearing you?  
 What outrage—you spurn the city!

TIRESIAS:

What will come will come.  
 Even if I shroud it all in silence.

OEDIPUS:

What will come? You're bound to *tell* me that. 390

TIRESIAS:

I will say no more. Do as you like, build your anger  
 to whatever pitch you please, rage your worst—

OEDIPUS:

Oh I'll let loose, I have such fury in me—  
 now I see it all. You helped hatch the plot,  
 you did the work, yes, short of killing him 395  
 with your own hands—and given eyes I'd say  
 you did the killing single-handed!

TIRESIAS:

Is that so!  
 I charge you, then, submit to that decree  
 you just laid down: from this day onward  
 speak to no one, not these citizens, not myself. 400  
*You* are the curse, the corruption of the land!

OEDIPUS:

You, shameless—  
 aren't you appalled to start up such a story?  
 You think you can get away with this?

TIRESIAS:

I have already.  
 The truth with all its power lives inside me. 405

OEDIPUS:

Who primed you for this? Not your prophet's trade.

TIRESIAS:

You did, you forced me, twisted it out of me.

OEDIPUS:

What? Say it again—I'll understand it better.

TIRESIAS:

Didn't you understand, just now?  
 Or are you tempting me to talk? 410

OEDIPUS:

No, I can't say I grasped your meaning.  
Out with it, again!

TIRESIAS:

I say you are the murderer you hunt.

OEDIPUS:

That obscenity, twice—by god, you'll pay.

TIRESIAS:

Shall I say more, so you can really rage? 415

OEDIPUS:

Much as you want. Your words are nothing—  
futile.

TIRESIAS:

You cannot imagine . . . I tell you,  
you and your loved ones live together in infamy,  
you cannot see how far you've gone in guilt.

OEDIPUS:

You think you can keep this up and never suffer? 420

TIRESIAS:

Indeed, if the truth has any power.

OEDIPUS:

It does  
but not for you, old man. You've lost your power,  
stone-blind, stone-deaf—senses, eyes blind as stone!

TIRESIAS:

I pity you, flinging at me the very insults  
each man here will fling at you so soon.

OEDIPUS:

Blind, 425  
lost in the night, endless night that nursed you!  
You can't hurt me or anyone else who sees the light—  
you can never touch me.

TIRESIAS:

True, it is not your fate  
to fall at my hands. Apollo is quite enough,  
and he will take some pains to work this out. 430

OEDIPUS:

Creon! Is this conspiracy his or yours?

TIRESIAS:

Creon is not your downfall, no, you are your own.



OEDIPUS:

wealth and empire, skill outstripping skill  
 in the heady rivalries of life,  
 what envy lurks inside you! Just for this,  
 the crown the city gave me—I never sought it,  
 they laid it in my hands—for this alone, Creon,  
 the soul of trust, my loyal friend from the start  
 steals against me . . . so hungry to overthrow me  
 he sets this wizard on me, this scheming quack,  
 this fortune-teller peddling lies, eyes peeled  
 for his own profit—seer blind in his craft!

O power—

435

Come here, you pious fraud. Tell me,  
 when did you ever prove yourself a prophet?  
 When the Sphinx, that chanting Fury kept her deathwatch here,  
 why silent then, not a word to set our people free?  
 There was a riddle, not for some passer-by to solve—  
 it cried out for a prophet. Where were you?  
 Did you rise to the crisis? Not a word,  
 you and your birds, your gods—nothing.  
 No, but I came by, Oedipus the ignorant,  
 I stopped the Sphinx! With no help from the birds,  
 the flight of my own intelligence hit the mark.

450

And this is the man you'd try to overthrow?  
 You think you'll stand by Creon when he's king?  
 You and the great mastermind—  
 you'll pay in tears, I promise you, for this,  
 this witch-hunt. If you didn't look so senile  
 the lash would teach you what your scheming means!

455

LEADER:

I would suggest his words were spoken in anger,  
 Oedipus . . . yours too, and it isn't what we need.  
 The best solution to the oracle, the riddle  
 posed by god—we should look for that.

460

TIRESIAS:

You are the king no doubt, but in one respect,  
 at least, I am your equal: the right to reply.  
 I claim that privilege too.  
 I am not your slave. I serve Apollo.  
 I don't need Creon to speak for me in public.

465

So,

you mock my blindness? Let me tell you this.  
 You with your precious eyes,  
 you're blind to the corruption of your life,  
 to the house you live in, those you live with—  
 who *are* your parents? Do you know? All unknowing  
 you are the scourge of your own flesh and blood,  
 the dead below the earth and the living here above,  
 and the double lash of your mother and your father's curse  
 will whip you from this land one day, their footfall  
 treading you down in terror, darkness shrouding  
 your eyes that now can see the light!

470

475

Soon, soon  
 you'll scream aloud—what haven won't reverberate?  
 What rock of Cithaeron won't scream back in echo?  
 That day you learn the truth about your marriage,  
 the wedding-march that sang you into your halls,  
 the lusty voyage home to the fatal harbor!  
 And a crowd of other horrors you'd never dream  
 will level you with yourself and all your children.

480

485

There. Now smear us with insults—Creon, myself  
 and every word I've said. No man will ever  
 be rooted from the earth as brutally as you.

OEDIPUS:

Enough! Such filth from him? Insufferable—  
 what, still alive? Get out—  
 faster, back where you came from—vanish!

490

TIRESIAS:

I would never have come if you hadn't called me here.

OEDIPUS:

If I thought you would blurt out such absurdities,  
you'd have died waiting before I'd had you summoned. 495

TIRESIAS:

Absurd, am I! To you, not to your parents:  
the ones who bore you found me sane enough.

OEDIPUS:

Parents—who? Wait . . . who is my father?

TIRESIAS:

This day will bring your birth and your destruction.

OEDIPUS:

Riddles—all you can say are riddles, murk and darkness. 500

TIRESIAS:

Ah, but aren't you the best man alive at solving riddles?

OEDIPUS:

Mock me for that, go on, and you'll reveal my greatness.

TIRESIAS:

Your great good fortune, true, it was your ruin.

OEDIPUS:

Not if I saved the city—what do I care?

TIRESIAS:

Well then, I'll be going.

*To his attendant.*

Take me home, boy. 505

OEDIPUS:

Yes, take him away. You're a nuisance here.  
Out of the way, the irritation's gone.

*Turning his back on TIRESIAS,  
moving toward the palace.*

TIRESIAS:

I will go,  
once I have said what I came here to say.  
I will never shrink from the anger in your eyes—  
you can't destroy me. Listen to me closely: 510  
the man you've sought so long, proclaiming,  
cursing up and down, the murderer of Laius—  
he is here. A stranger,  
you may think, who lives among you,  
he soon will be revealed a native Theban 515  
but he will take no joy in the revelation.  
Blind who now has eyes, beggar who now is rich,  
he will grope his way toward a foreign soil,  
a stick tapping before him step by step.

*OEDIPUS enters the palace.*

Revealed at last, brother and father both 520  
to the children he embraces, to his mother  
son and husband both—he sowed the loins  
his father sowed, he spilled his father's blood!

Go in and reflect on that, solve that.

And if you find I've lied 525  
from this day onward call the prophet blind.

*TIRESIAS and the boy exit to the side.*

CHORUS:

Who—

who is the man the voice of god denounces  
resounding out of the rocky gorge of Delphi?

The horror too dark to tell,  
whose ruthless bloody hands have done the work? 530

His time has come to fly  
to outrace the stallions of the storm  
his feet a streak of speed—

Cased in armor, Apollo son of the Father  
lunges on him, lightning-bolts afire! 535  
And the grim unerring Furies  
closing for the kill.

Look,

the word of god has just come blazing  
flashing off Parnassus' snowy heights!

That man who left no trace— 540  
after him, hunt him down with all our strength!

Now under bristling timber  
up through rocks and caves he stalks  
like the wild mountain bull—  
cut off from men, each step an agony, frenzied, racing blind 545

but he cannot outrace the dread voices of Delphi  
ringing out of the heart of Earth,  
the dark wings beating around him shrieking doom  
the doom that never dies, the terror—

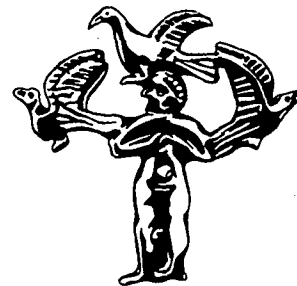
The skilled prophet scans the birds and shatters me with terror!  
I can't accept him, can't deny him, don't know what to say,  
I'm lost, and the wings of dark foreboding beating—  
I cannot see what's come, what's still to come . . .  
and what could breed a blood feud between  
Laius' house and the son of Polybus? 555

I know of nothing, not in the past and not now,  
no charge to bring against our king, no cause  
to attack his fame that rings throughout Thebes—  
not without proof—not for the ghost of Laius,  
not to avenge a murder gone without a trace. 560

Zeus and Apollo know, they know, the great masters  
of all the dark and depth of human life.

But whether a mere man can know the truth,  
whether a seer can fathom more than I—  
there is no test, no certain proof 565  
though matching skill for skill

a man can outstrip a rival. No, not till I see  
these charges proved will I side with his accusers.  
We saw him then, when the she-hawk swept against him,  
saw with our own eyes his skill, his brilliant triumph— 570  
there was the test—he was the joy of Thebes!  
Never will I convict my king, never in my heart.



*Enter CREON from the side.*

CREON:

My fellow-citizens, I hear King Oedipus  
levels terrible charges at me. I had to come.  
I resent it deeply. If, in the present crisis,  
he thinks he suffers any abuse from me, 575  
anything I've done or said that offers him  
the slightest injury, why, I've no desire  
to linger out this life, my reputation in ruins.  
The damage I'd face from such an accusation 580  
is nothing simple. No, there's nothing worse:  
branded a traitor in the city, a traitor  
to all of you and my good friends.

LEADER:

True,  
but a slur might have been forced out of him,  
by anger perhaps, not any firm conviction. 585

CREON:

The charge was made in public, wasn't it?  
I put the prophet up to spreading lies?

LEADER:

Such things were said . . .  
I don't know with what intent, if any.

CREON:

Was his glance steady, his mind right 590  
when the charge was brought against me?

LEADER:

I really couldn't say. I never look  
to judge the ones in power.

*The doors open. OEDIPUS enters.*

Wait,

here's Oedipus now.

OEDIPUS:

You—here? You have the gall  
to show your face before the palace gates? 595  
You, plotting to kill me, kill the king—  
I see it all, the marauding thief himself  
scheming to steal my crown and power!

Tell me,

in god's name, what did you take me for,  
coward or fool, when you spun out your plot? 600  
Your treachery—you think I'd never detect it  
creeping against me in the dark? Or sensing it,  
not defend myself? Aren't you the fool,  
you and your high adventure. Lacking numbers,  
powerful friends, out for the big game of empire— 605  
you need riches, armies to bring that quarry down!

CREON:

Are you quite finished? It's your turn to listen  
for just as long as you've . . . instructed me.  
Hear me out, then judge me on the facts.

OEDIPUS:

You've a wicked way with words, Creon, 610  
but I'll be slow to learn—from you.  
I find you a menace, a great burden to me.

CREON:

Just one thing, hear me out in this.

OEDIPUS:

Just one thing,  
don't tell *me* you're not the enemy, the traitor.

CREON:

Look, if you think crude, mindless stubbornness  
such a gift, you've lost your sense of balance. 615

OEDIPUS:

If you think you can abuse a kinsman,  
then escape the penalty, you're insane.

CREON:

Fair enough, I grant you. But this injury  
you say I've done you, what is it? 620

OEDIPUS:

Did you induce me, yes or no,  
to send for that sanctimonious prophet?

CREON:

I did. And I'd do the same again.

OEDIPUS:

All right then, tell me, how long is it now  
since Laius . . .

CREON:

Laius—what did *he* do?

OEDIPUS:

Vanished,  
swept from sight, murdered in his tracks. 625

CREON:

The count of the years would run you far back . . .

OEDIPUS:

And that far back, was the prophet at his trade?

CREON:

Skilled as he is today, and just as honored.

OEDIPUS:

Did he ever refer to me then, at that time?

CREON:

No, 630  
never, at least, when I was in his presence.

OEDIPUS:

But you did investigate the murder, didn't you?

CREON:

We did our best, of course, discovered nothing.

OEDIPUS:

But the great seer never accused me then—why not?

CREON:

I don't know. And when I don't, *I* keep quiet. 635

OEDIPUS:

You do know this, you'd tell it too—  
if you had a shred of decency.

CREON:

What?  
If I know, I won't hold back.

OEDIPUS:

Simply this:  
if the two of you had never put heads together,  
we would never have heard about *my* killing Laius. 640

CREON:

If that's what he says . . . well, you know best.  
But now I have a right to learn from you  
as you just learned from me.

OEDIPUS:

Learn your fill,  
you never will convict me of the murder.

CREON:

Tell me, you're married to my sister, aren't you? 645

OEDIPUS:

A genuine discovery—there's no denying that.

CREON:

And you rule the land with her, with equal power?

OEDIPUS:

She receives from me whatever she desires.

CREON:

And I am the third, all of us are equals?

OEDIPUS:

Yes, and it's there you show your stripes—  
you betray a kinsman. 650

CREON:

Not at all.  
Not if you see things calmly, rationally,  
as I do. Look at it this way first:  
who in his right mind would rather rule  
and live in anxiety than sleep in peace? 655  
Particularly if he enjoys the same authority.  
Not I, I'm not the man to yearn for kingship,  
not with a king's power in my hands. Who would?  
No one with any sense of self-control.  
Now, as it is, you offer me all I need, 660  
not a fear in the world. But if I wore the crown . . .  
there'd be many painful duties to perform,  
hardly to my taste.

How could kingship  
please me more than influence, power  
without a qualm? I'm not that deluded yet, 665  
to reach for anything but privilege outright,  
profit free and clear.  
Now all men sing my praises, all salute me,  
now all who request your favors curry mine.  
I am their best hope: success rests in me. 670  
Why give up that, I ask you, and borrow trouble?  
A man of sense, someone who sees things clearly  
would never resort to treason.  
No, I have no lust for conspiracy in me,  
nor could I ever suffer one who does. 675

Do you want proof? Go to Delphi yourself,  
examine the oracle and see if I've reported  
the message word-for-word. This too:  
if you detect that I and the clairvoyant  
have plotted anything in common, arrest me, 680  
execute me. Not on the strength of one vote,  
two in this case, mine as well as yours.  
But don't convict me on sheer unverified surmise.

How wrong it is to take the good for bad,  
 purely at random, or take the bad for good. 685  
 But reject a friend, a kinsman? I would as soon  
 tear out the life within us, priceless life itself.  
 You'll learn this well, without fail, in time.  
 Time alone can bring the just man to light—  
 the criminal you can spot in one short day. 690

LEADER:

Good advice,  
 my lord, for anyone who wants to avoid disaster.  
 Those who jump to conclusions may go wrong.

OEDIPUS:

When my enemy moves against me quickly,  
 plots in secret, I move quickly too, I must,  
 I plot and pay him back. Relax my guard a moment, 695  
 waiting his next move—he wins his objective,  
 I lose mine.

CREON:

What do you want?  
 You want me banished?

OEDIPUS:

No, I want you dead.

CREON:

Just to show how ugly a grudge can . . .

OEDIPUS:

So,  
 still stubborn? you don't think I'm serious? 700

CREON:

I think you're insane.

OEDIPUS:

Quite sane—in my behalf.

CREON:

Not just as much in mine?

OEDIPUS:

You—my mortal enemy?

CREON:

What if you're wholly wrong?

OEDIPUS:

No matter—I must rule.

CREON:

Not if you rule unjustly.

OEDIPUS:

Hear him, Thebes, my city!

CREON:

My city too, not yours alone! 705

LEADER:

Please, my lords.

*Enter JOCASTA from the palace.*

Look, Jocasta's coming,  
 and just in time too. With her help  
 you must put this fighting of yours to rest.

JOCASTA:

Have you no sense? Poor misguided men,  
such shouting—why this public outburst? 710  
Aren't you ashamed, with the land so sick,  
to stir up private quarrels?

*To OEDIPUS.*

Into the palace now. And Creon, you go home.  
Why make such a furor over nothing?

CREON:

My sister, it's dreadful . . . Oedipus, your husband, 715  
he's bent on a choice of punishments for me,  
banishment from the fatherland or death.

OEDIPUS:

Precisely. I caught him in the act, Jocasta,  
plotting, about to stab me in the back.

CREON:

Never—curse me, let me die and be damned 720  
if I've done you any wrong you charge me with.

JOCASTA:

Oh god, believe it, Oedipus,  
honor the solemn oath he swears to heaven.  
Do it for me, for the sake of all your people.

*The CHORUS begins to chant.*

CHORUS:

Believe it, be sensible 725  
give way, my king, I beg you!

OEDIPUS:

What do you want from me, concessions?

CHORUS:

Respect him—he's been no fool in the past  
and now he's strong with the oath he swears to god.

OEDIPUS:

You know what you're asking?

CHORUS:

I do.

OEDIPUS:

Then out with it!

CHORUS:

The man's your friend, your kin, he's under oath—  
don't cast him out, disgraced  
branded with guilt on the strength of hearsay only.

OEDIPUS:

Know full well, if that is what you want 735  
you want me dead or banished from the land.



CHORUS:

Never—

no, by the blazing Sun, first god of the heavens!  
 Stripped of the gods, stripped of loved ones,  
 let me die by inches if that ever crossed my mind.  
 But the heart inside me sickens, dies as the land dies  
 and now on top of the old griefs you pile this, 740  
 your fury—both of you!

OEDIPUS:

Then let him go,

even if it does lead to my ruin, my death  
 or my disgrace, driven from Thebes for life.  
 It's you, not him I pity—your words move me.  
 He, wherever he goes, my hate goes with him. 745

CREON:

Look at you, sullen in yielding, brutal in your rage—  
 you will go too far. It's perfect justice:  
 natures like yours are hardest on themselves.

OEDIPUS:

Then leave me alone—get out!

CREON:

I'm going.

You're wrong, so wrong. These men know I'm right. 750

*Exit to the side. The CHORUS turns  
 to JOCASTA.*

CHORUS:

Why do you hesitate, my lady  
 why not help him in?

JOCASTA:

Tell me what's happened first.

CHORUS:

Loose, ignorant talk started dark suspicions  
 and a sense of injustice cut deeply too. 755

JOCASTA:

On both sides?

CHORUS:

Oh yes.

JOCASTA:

What did they say?

CHORUS:

Enough, please, enough! The land's so racked already  
 or so it seems to me . . .  
 End the trouble here, just where they left it.

OEDIPUS:

You see what comes of your good intentions now? 760  
 And all because you tried to blunt my anger.

CHORUS:

My king,

I've said it once, I'll say it time and again—  
 I'd be insane, you know it,  
 senseless, ever to turn my back on you.  
 You who set our beloved land—storm-tossed, shattered—  
 straight on course. Now again, good helmsman,  
 steer us through the storm!

*The CHORUS draws away, leaving  
OEDIPUS and JOCASTA side by side.*

JOCASTA:

For the love of god,  
Oedipus, tell me too, what is it?  
Why this rage? You're so unbending.

OEDIPUS:

I will tell you. I respect you, Jocasta,  
much more than these men here . . . 770

*Glancing at the CHORUS.*

Creon's to blame, Creon schemes against me.

JOCASTA:

Tell me clearly, how did the quarrel start?

OEDIPUS:

He says *I* murdered Laius—I am guilty.

JOCASTA:

How does he know? Some secret knowledge  
or simple hearsay? 775

OEDIPUS:

Oh, he sent his prophet in  
to do his dirty work. You know Creon,  
Creon keeps his own lips clean.

JOCASTA:

A prophet?  
Well then, free yourself of every charge!  
Listen to me and learn some peace of mind: 780  
no skill in the world,  
nothing human can penetrate the future.  
Here is proof, quick and to the point.

An oracle came to Laius one fine day  
(I won't say from Apollo himself 785  
but his underlings his priests) and it declared  
that doom would strike him down at the hands of a son,  
our son, to be born of our own flesh and blood. But Laius,  
so the report goes at least, was killed by strangers,  
thieves, at a place where three roads meet . . . my son— 790  
he wasn't three days old and the boy's father  
fastened his ankles, had a henchman fling him away  
on a barren, trackless mountain.

There, you see?  
Apollo brought neither thing to pass. My baby  
no more murdered his father than Laius suffered— 795  
his wildest fear—death at his own son's hands.  
That's how the seers and all their revelations  
mapped out the future. Brush them from your mind.  
Whatever the god needs and seeks  
he'll bring to light himself, with ease. 800

OEDIPUS:

Strange,  
hearing you just now . . . my mind wandered,  
my thoughts racing back and forth.

JOCASTA:

What do you mean? Why so anxious, startled?

OEDIPUS:

I thought I heard you say that Laius  
was cut down at a place where three roads meet. 805

JOCASTA:

That was the story. It hasn't died out yet.

OEDIPUS:

Where did this thing happen? Be precise.

JOCASTA:

A place called Phocis, where two branching roads,  
one from Daulia, one from Delphi,  
come together—a crossroads. 810

OEDIPUS:

When? How long ago?

JOCASTA:

The heralds no sooner reported Laius dead  
than you appeared and they hailed you king of Thebes.

OEDIPUS:

My god, my god—what have you planned to do to me?

JOCASTA:

What, Oedipus? What haunts you so?

OEDIPUS:

Not yet. 815

Laius—how did he look? Describe him.  
Had he reached his prime?

JOCASTA:

He was swarthy,  
and the gray had just begun to streak his temples,  
and his build . . . wasn't far from yours.

OEDIPUS:

Oh no no,  
I think I've just called down a dreadful curse  
upon myself—I simply didn't know! 820

JOCASTA:

What are you saying? I shudder to look at you.

OEDIPUS:

I have a terrible fear the blind seer can see.  
I'll know in a moment. One thing more—

JOCASTA:

Anything,  
afraid as I am—ask, I'll answer, all I can. 825

OEDIPUS:

Did he go with a light or heavy escort,  
several men-at-arms, like a lord, a king?

JOCASTA:

There were five in the party, a herald among them,  
and a single wagon carrying Laius.

OEDIPUS:

Ai—  
now I can see it all, clear as day. 830  
Who told you all this at the time, Jocasta?

JOCASTA:

A servant who reached home, the lone survivor.

OEDIPUS:

So, could he still be in the palace—even now?

JOCASTA:

No indeed. Soon as he returned from the scene  
and saw you on the throne with Laius dead and gone, 835  
he knelt and clutched my hand, pleading with me  
to send him into the hinterlands, to pasture,  
far as possible, out of sight of Thebes.  
I sent him away. Slave though he was,  
he'd earned that favor—and much more. 840

OEDIPUS:

Can we bring him back, quickly?

JOCASTA:

Easily. Why do you want him so?

OEDIPUS:

I am afraid,  
Jocasta, I have said too much already.  
That man—I've got to see him.

JOCASTA:

Then he'll come.  
But even I have a right, I'd like to think, 845  
to know what's torturing you, my lord.

OEDIPUS:

And so you shall—I can hold nothing back from you,  
now I've reached this pitch of dark foreboding.  
Who means more to me than you? Tell me,  
whom would I turn toward but you 850  
as I go through all this?

My father was Polybus, king of Corinth.  
My mother, a Dorian, Merope. And I was held  
the prince of the realm among the people there,  
till something struck me out of nowhere, 855  
something strange . . . worth remarking perhaps,  
hardly worth the anxiety I gave it.  
Some man at a banquet who had drunk too much  
shouted out—he was far gone, mind you—  
that I am not my father's son. Fighting words! 860  
I barely restrained myself that day  
but early the next I went to mother and father,  
questioned them closely, and they were enraged  
at the accusation and the fool who let it fly.  
So as for my parents I was satisfied, 865  
but still this thing kept gnawing at me,  
the slander spread—I had to make my move.

And so,  
unknown to mother and father I set out for Delphi,  
and the god Apollo spurned me, sent me away  
denied the facts I came for, 870  
but first he flashed before my eyes a future  
great with pain, terror, disaster—I can hear him cry,  
“You are fated to couple with your mother, you will bring  
a breed of children into the light no man can bear to see—  
you will kill your father, the one who gave you life!” 875  
I heard all that and ran. I abandoned Corinth,  
from that day on I gauged its landfall only  
by the stars, running, always running  
toward some place where I would never see  
the shame of all those oracles come true. 880  
And as I fled I reached that very spot  
where the great king, you say, met his death.

Now, Jocasta, I will tell you all.  
 Making my way toward this triple crossroad  
 I began to see a herald, then a brace of colts 885  
 drawing a wagon, and mounted on the bench . . . a man,  
 just as you've described him, coming face-to-face,  
 and the one in the lead and the old man himself  
 were about to thrust me off the road—brute force—  
 and the one shouldering me aside, the driver, 890  
 I strike him in anger!—and the old man, watching me  
 coming up along his wheels—he brings down  
 his prod, two prongs straight at my head!  
 I paid him back with interest!  
 Short work, by god—with one blow of the staff 895  
 in this right hand I knock him out of his high seat,  
 roll him out of the wagon, sprawling headlong—  
 I killed them all—every mother's son!

Oh, but if there is any blood-tie  
 between Laius and this stranger . . . 900  
 what man alive more miserable than I?  
 More hated by the gods? *I* am the man  
 no alien, no citizen welcomes to his house,  
 law forbids it—not a word to me in public,  
 driven out of every hearth and home. 905  
 And all these curses I—no one but I  
 brought down these piling curses on myself!  
 And you, his wife, I've touched your body with these,  
 the hands that killed your husband cover you with blood.

Wasn't I born for torment? Look me in the eyes! 910  
 I am abomination—heart and soul!  
 I must be exiled, and even in exile  
 never see my parents, never set foot  
 on native ground again. Else I am doomed  
 to couple with my mother and cut my father down . . . 915  
 Polybus who reared me, gave me life.

But why, why?  
 Wouldn't a man of judgment say—and wouldn't he be right—  
 some savage power has brought this down upon my head?

Oh no, not that, you pure and awesome gods,  
 never let me see that day! Let me slip 920  
 from the world of men, vanish without a trace  
 before I see myself stained with such corruption,  
 stained to the heart.

LEADER:

My lord, you fill our hearts with fear.  
 But at least until you question the witness, 925  
 do take hope.

OEDIPUS:

Exactly. He is my last hope—  
 I am waiting for the shepherd. He is crucial.

JOCASTA:

And once he appears, what then? Why so urgent?

OEDIPUS:

I will tell you. If it turns out that his story  
 matches yours, I've escaped the worst. 930

JOCASTA:

What did I say? What struck you so?

OEDIPUS:

You said *thieves*—  
 he told you a whole band of them murdered Laius.  
 So, if he still holds to the same number,  
 I cannot be the killer. One can't equal many.  
 But if he refers to one man, one alone, 935  
 clearly the scales come down on me:  
 I am guilty.

JOCASTA:

Impossible. Trust me,  
 I told you precisely what he said,  
 and he can't retract it now;  
 the whole city heard it, not just I. 940  
 And even if he should vary his first report  
 by one man more or less, still, my lord,  
 he could never make the murder of Laius  
 truly fit the prophecy. Apollo was explicit:  
 my son was doomed to kill my husband . . . my son, 945  
 poor defenseless thing, he never had a chance  
 to kill his father. They destroyed him first.

So much for prophecy. It's neither here nor there.  
 From this day on, I wouldn't look right or left.

OEDIPUS:

True, true. Still, that shepherd, 950  
 someone fetch him—now!

JOCASTA:

I'll send at once. But do let's go inside.  
 I'd never displease you, least of all in this.

OEDIPUS and JOCASTA enter the  
 palace.

CHORUS:

Destiny guide me always  
 Destiny find me filled with reverence 955  
 pure in word and deed.  
 Great laws tower above us, reared on high  
 born for the brilliant vault of heaven—  
 Olympian Sky their only father,  
 nothing mortal, no man gave them birth, 960  
 their memory deathless, never lost in sleep:  
 within them lives a mighty god, the god does not  
 grow old.

Pride breeds the tyrant  
 violent pride, gorging, crammed to bursting  
 with all that is overripe and rich with ruin— 965  
 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: 970  
 god, my champion, I will never let you go.



But if 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— 975

let a rough doom tear him down,  
 repay his pride, breakneck, ruinous pride!  
 If he cannot reap his profits fairly  
 cannot restrain himself from outrage—  
 mad, laying hands on the holy things untouchable! 980

Can such a man, so desperate, still boast  
 he can save his life from the flashing bolts of god?  
 If all such violence goes with honor now  
 why join the sacred dance?

Never again will I go reverent to Delphi,  
 the inviolate heart of Earth 985  
 or Apollo's ancient oracle at Abae  
 or Olympia of the fires—

unless these prophecies all come true  
 for all mankind to point toward in wonder. 990

King of kings, if you deserve your titles  
 Zeus, remember, never forget!

You and your deathless, everlasting reign.

They are dying, the old oracles sent to Laius,  
 now our masters strike them off the rolls. 995

Nowhere Apollo's golden glory now—  
 the gods, the gods go down.

*Enter JOCASTA from the palace,  
 carrying a suppliant's branch wound  
 in wool.*

JOCASTA:  
 Lords of the realm, it occurred to me,  
 just now, to visit the temples of the gods,  
 so I have my branch in hand and incense too. 1000

Oedipus is beside himself. Racked with anguish,  
 no longer a man of sense, he won't admit  
 the latest prophecies are hollow as the old—  
 he's at the mercy of every passing voice  
 if the voice tells of terror. 1005  
 I urge him gently, nothing seems to help,  
 so I turn to you, Apollo, you are nearest.

*Placing her branch on the altar,  
 while an old herdsman enters from  
 the side, not the one just summoned  
 by the King but an unexpected  
 MESSENGER from Corinth.*

I come with prayers and offerings . . . I beg you,  
 cleanse us, set us free of defilement!  
 Look at us, passengers in the grip of fear,  
 watching the pilot of the vessel go to pieces. 1010

MESSENGER:

*Approaching JOCASTA and  
 the CHORUS.*

Strangers, please, I wonder if you could lead us  
 to the palace of the king . . . I think it's Oedipus.  
 Better, the man himself—you know where he is?

LEADER:

This is his palace, stranger. He's inside.  
 But here is his queen, his wife and mother  
 of his children. 1015

MESSENGER:

Blessings on you, noble queen,  
queen of Oedipus crowned with all your family—  
blessings on you always!

JOCASTA:

And the same to you, stranger, you deserve it . . . 1020  
such a greeting. But what have you come for?  
Have you brought us news?

MESSENGER:

Wonderful news—  
for the house, my lady, for your husband too.

JOCASTA:

Really, what? Who sent you?

MESSENGER:

Corinth. 1025  
I'll give you the message in a moment.  
You'll be glad of it—how could you help it?—  
though it costs a little sorrow in the bargain.

JOCASTA:

What can it be, with such a double edge?

MESSENGER:

The people there, they want to make your Oedipus  
king of Corinth, so they're saying now. 1030

JOCASTA:

Why? Isn't old Polybus still in power?

MESSENGER:

No more. Death has got him in the tomb.

JOCASTA:

What are you saying? Polybus, dead?—dead?

MESSENGER:

If not,  
if I'm not telling the truth, strike me dead too.

JOCASTA:

To a servant.  
Quickly, go to your master, tell him this! 1035

You prophecies of the gods, where are you now?  
This is the man that Oedipus feared for years,  
he fled him, not to kill him—and now he's dead,  
quite by chance, a normal, natural death,  
not murdered by his son. 1040

OEDIPUS:

Emerging from the palace.  
Dearest,  
what now? Why call me from the palace?

JOCASTA:

Bringing the MESSENGER closer.  
Listen to *him*, see for yourself what all  
those awful prophecies of god have come to.

OEDIPUS:

And who is he? What can he have for me?

JOCASTA:

He's from Corinth, he's come to tell you  
your father is no more—Polybus—he's dead! 1045



OEDIPUS:

*Wheeling on the MESSENGER.*

What? Let me have it from your lips.

MESSENGER:

Well,

if that's what you want first, then here it is:  
make no mistake, Polybus is dead and gone.

OEDIPUS:

How—murder? sickness?—what? what killed him? 1050

MESSENGER:

A light tip of the scales can put old bones to rest.

OEDIPUS:

Sickness then—poor man, it wore him down.

MESSENGER:

That,

and the long count of years he'd measured out.

OEDIPUS:

So!

Jocasta, why, why look to the Prophet's hearth,  
the fires of the future? Why scan the birds 1055  
that scream above our heads? They winged me onto the murder of my father, did they? That was my doom?  
Well look, he's dead and buried, hidden under the earth,  
and here I am in Thebes, I never put hand to sword—  
unless some longing for me wasted him away, 1060  
then in a sense you'd say I caused his death.But now, all those prophecies I feared—Polybus  
packs them off to sleep with him in hell!  
They're nothing, worthless.

JOCASTA:

There.

Didn't I tell you from the start? 1065

OEDIPUS:

So you did. I was lost in fear.

JOCASTA:

No more, sweep it from your mind forever.

OEDIPUS:

But my mother's bed, surely I must fear—

JOCASTA:

Fear?

What should a man fear? It's all chance,  
chance rules our lives. Not a man on earth 1070  
can see a day ahead, groping through the dark.Better to live at random, best we can.  
And as for this marriage with your mother—  
have no fear. Many a man before you,  
in his dreams, has shared his mother's bed. 1075Take such things for shadows, nothing at all—  
Live, Oedipus,  
as if there's no tomorrow!

OEDIPUS:

Brave words,

and you'd persuade me if mother weren't alive.  
But mother lives, so for all your reassurances 1080  
I live in fear, I must.

JOCASTA:

But your father's death,  
that, at least, is a great blessing, joy to the eyes!

OEDIPUS:

Great, I know . . . but I fear *her*—she's still alive.

MESSENGER:

Wait, who is this woman, makes you so afraid?

OEDIPUS:

Merope, old man. The wife of Polybus. 1085

MESSENGER:

The queen? What's there to fear in her?

OEDIPUS:

A dreadful prophecy, stranger, sent by the gods.

MESSENGER:

Tell me, could you? Unless it's forbidden  
other ears to hear.

OEDIPUS:

Not at all.

1090 Apollo told me once—it is my fate—  
I must make love with my own mother,  
shed my father's blood with my own hands.  
So for years I've given Corinth a wide berth,  
and it's been my good fortune too. But still,  
to see one's parents and look into their eyes  
is the greatest joy I know.

MESSENGER:

You're afraid of that?

That kept you out of Corinth?

OEDIPUS:

My *father*, old man—  
so I wouldn't kill my father.

MESSENGER:

So that's it.

Well then, seeing I came with such good will, my king,  
why don't I rid you of that old worry now? 1100

OEDIPUS:

What a rich reward you'd have for that!

MESSENGER:

What do you think I came for, majesty?  
So you'd come home and I'd be better off.

OEDIPUS:

Never, I will never go near my parents.

MESSENGER:

My boy, it's clear, you don't know what you're doing. 1105

OEDIPUS:

What do you mean, old man? For god's sake, explain.

MESSENGER:

If you ran from *them*, always dodging home . . .

OEDIPUS:

Always, terrified Apollo's oracle might come true—

MESSENGER:

And you'd be covered with guilt, from both your parents.

OEDIPUS:  
That's right, old man, that fear is always with me. 1110

MESSENGER:  
Don't you know? You've really nothing to fear.

OEDIPUS:  
But why? If I'm their son—Merope, Polybus?

MESSENGER:  
Polybus was nothing to you, that's why, not in blood.

OEDIPUS:  
What are you saying—Polybus was not my father?

MESSENGER:  
No more than I am. He and I are equals. 1115

OEDIPUS:  
My father—  
how can my father equal nothing? You're nothing to me!

MESSENGER:  
Neither was he, no more your father than I am.

OEDIPUS:  
Then why did he call me his son?

MESSENGER:  
You were a gift,  
years ago—know for a fact he took you  
from my hands.

OEDIPUS:  
No, from another's hands? 1120  
Then how could he love me so? He loved me, deeply . . .

MESSENGER:  
True, and his early years without a child  
made him love you all the more.

OEDIPUS:  
And you, did you . . .  
buy me? find me by accident?

MESSENGER:  
I stumbled on you,  
down the woody flanks of Mount Cithaeron.

OEDIPUS:  
So close, 1125  
what were you doing here, just passing through?

MESSENGER:  
Watching over my flocks, grazing them on the slopes.

OEDIPUS:  
A herdsman, were you? A vagabond, scraping for wages?

MESSENGER:  
Your savior too, my son, in your worst hour.

OEDIPUS:  
Oh—  
when you picked me up, was I in pain? What exactly? 1130

MESSENGER:

Your ankles . . . they tell the story. Look at them.

OEDIPUS:

Why remind me of that, that old affliction?

MESSENGER:

Your ankles were pinned together. I set you free.

OEDIPUS:

That dreadful mark—I've had it from the cradle.

MESSENGER:

And you got your name from that misfortune too,  
the name's still with you.

1135

OEDIPUS:

Dear god, who did it?—  
mother? father? Tell me.

MESSENGER:

I don't know.  
The one who gave you to me, he'd know more.

OEDIPUS:

What? You took me from someone else?  
You didn't find me yourself?

MESSENGER:

No sir,  
another shepherd passed you on to me.

1140

OEDIPUS:

Who? Do you know? Describe him.

MESSENGER:

He called himself a servant of . . .  
if I remember rightly—Laius.

*JOCASTA turns sharply.*

OEDIPUS:

The king of the land who ruled here long ago?

1145

MESSENGER:

That's the one. That herdsman was *his* man.

OEDIPUS:

Is he still alive? Can I see him?

MESSENGER:

They'd know best, the people of these parts.

*OEDIPUS and the MESSENGER turn to  
the CHORUS.*

OEDIPUS:

Does anyone know that herdsman,  
the one he mentioned? Anyone seen him  
in the fields, here in the city? Out with it!  
The time has come to reveal this once for all.

1150

LEADER:

I think he's the very shepherd you wanted to see,  
a moment ago. But the queen, Jocasta,  
she's the one to say.

OEDIPUS:

Jocasta, 1155  
 you remember the man we just sent for?  
 Is *that* the one he means?

JOCASTA:

That man . . .  
 why ask? Old shepherd, talk, empty nonsense,  
 don't give it another thought, don't even think—

OEDIPUS:

What—give up now, with a clue like this? 1160  
 Fail to solve the mystery of my birth?  
 Not for all the world!

JOCASTA:

Stop—in the name of god,  
 if you love your own life, call off this search!  
 My suffering is enough.

OEDIPUS:

Courage! 1165  
 Even if my mother turns out to be a slave,  
 and I a slave, three generations back,  
*you* would not seem common.

JOCASTA:

Oh no,  
 listen to me, I beg you, don't do this.

OEDIPUS:

Listen to you? No more. I must know it all,  
 must see the truth at last.

JOCASTA:

No, please— 1170  
 for your sake—I want the best for you!

OEDIPUS:

Your best is more than I can bear.

JOCASTA:

You're doomed—  
 may you never fathom who you are!

OEDIPUS:

*To a servant.*  
 Hurry, fetch me the herdsman, now!  
 Leave her to glory in her royal birth. 1175

JOCASTA:

Aieeeee—  
 man of agony—  
 that is the only name I have for you,  
 that, no other—ever, ever, ever!

*Flinging through the palace doors. A  
 long, tense silence follows.*

LEADER:

Where's she gone, Oedipus?  
 Rushing off, such wild grief . . . 1180  
 I'm afraid that from this silence  
 something monstrous may come bursting forth.

OEDIPUS:

Let it burst! Whatever will, whatever must!  
 I must know my birth, no matter how common  
 it may be—I must see my origins face-to-face. 1185  
 She perhaps, she with her woman's pride  
 may well be mortified by my birth,  
 but I, I count myself the son of Chance,  
 the great goddess, giver of all good things—  
 I'll never see myself disgraced. She is my mother! 1190  
 And the moons have marked me out, my blood-brothers,  
 one moon on the wane, the next moon great with power.  
 That is my blood, my nature—I will never betray it,  
 never fail to search and learn my birth!

CHORUS:

Yes—if I am a true prophet 1195  
 if I can grasp the truth,  
 by the boundless skies of Olympus,  
 at the full moon of tomorrow, Mount Cithaeron  
 you will know how Oedipus glories in you—  
 you, his birthplace, nurse, his mountain-mother! 1200  
 And we will sing you, dancing out your praise—  
 you lift our monarch's heart!  
 Apollo, Apollo, god of the wild cry  
 may our dancing please you!  
 Oedipus—  
 son, dear child, who bore you? 1205  
 Who of the nymphs who seem to live forever  
 mated with Pan, the mountain-striding Father?  
 Who was your mother? who, some bride of Apollo  
 the god who loves the pastures spreading toward the sun?  
 Or was it Hermes, king of the lightning ridges? 1210  
 Or Dionysus, lord of frenzy, lord of the barren peaks—  
 did he seize you in his hands, dearest of all his lucky finds?—  
 found by the nymphs, their warm eyes dancing, gift  
 to the lord who loves them dancing out his joy!

*OEDIPUS strains to see a figure  
 coming from the distance. Attended  
 by palace guards, an old SHEPHERD  
 enters slowly, reluctant to approach  
 the king.*

OEDIPUS:

I never met the man, my friends . . . still, 1215  
 if I had to guess, I'd say that's the shepherd,  
 the very one we've looked for all along.  
 Brothers in old age, two of a kind,  
 he and our guest here. At any rate  
 the ones who bring him in are my own men, 1220  
 I recognize them.

*Turning to the LEADER.*

But you know more than I,  
 you should, you've seen the man before.

LEADER:

I know him, definitely. One of Laius' men,  
 a trusty shepherd, if there ever was one.

OEDIPUS:

You, I ask you first, stranger, 1225  
 you from Corinth—is this the one you mean?

MESSENGER:

You're looking at him. He's your man.

OEDIPUS:

*To the SHEPHERD.*

You, old man, come over here—  
 look at me. Answer all my questions.  
 Did you ever serve King Laius?

SHEPHERD:

So I did . . . 1230

a slave, not bought on the block though,  
born and reared in the palace.

OEDIPUS:

Your duties, your kind of work?

SHEPHERD:

Herding the flocks, the better part of my life.

OEDIPUS:

Where, mostly? Where did you do your grazing? 1235

SHEPHERD:

Well,

Cithaeron sometimes, or the foothills round about.

OEDIPUS:

This man—you know him? ever see him there?

SHEPHERD:

*Confused, glancing from the  
MESSENGER to the King.*

Doing what?—what man do you mean?

OEDIPUS:

*Pointing to the MESSENGER.*

This one here—ever have dealings with him?

SHEPHERD:

Not so I could say, but give me a chance, 1240  
my memory's bad . . .

MESSENGER:

No wonder he doesn't know me, master.  
But let me refresh his memory for him.  
I'm sure he recalls old times we had  
on the slopes of Mount Cithaeron; 1245  
he and I, grazing our flocks, he with two  
and I with one—we both struck up together,  
three whole seasons, six months at a stretch  
from spring to the rising of Arcturus in the fall,  
then with winter coming on I'd drive my herds 1250  
to my own pens, and back he'd go with his  
to Laius' folds.

*To the SHEPHERD.*

Now that's how it was,  
wasn't it—yes or no?

SHEPHERD:

Yes, I suppose . . .

it's all so long ago.

MESSENGER:

Come, tell me,  
you gave me a child back then, a boy, remember? 1255  
A little fellow to rear, my very own.

SHEPHERD:

What? Why rake up that again?

MESSENGER:

Look, here he is, my fine old friend—  
the same man who was just a baby then.

SHEPHERD:

Damn you, shut your mouth—quiet!

1260

OEDIPUS:

Don't lash out at him, old man—  
you need lashing more than he does.

SHEPHERD:

Why,

master, majesty—what have I done wrong?

OEDIPUS:

You won't answer his question about the boy.

SHEPHERD:

He's talking nonsense, wasting his breath.

1265

OEDIPUS:

So, you won't talk willingly—  
then you'll talk with pain.

*The guards seize the SHEPHERD.*

SHEPHERD:

No, dear god, don't torture an old man!

OEDIPUS:

Twist his arms back, quickly!

SHEPHERD:

God help us, why?—

what more do you need to know?

1270

OEDIPUS:

Did you give him that child? He's asking.

SHEPHERD:

I did . . . I wish to god I'd died that day.

OEDIPUS:

You've got your wish if you don't tell the truth.

SHEPHERD:

The more I tell, the worse the death I'll die.

OEDIPUS:

Our friend here wants to stretch things out, does he?

1275

*Motioning to his men for torture.*

SHEPHERD:

No, no, I gave it to him—I just said so.

OEDIPUS:

Where did you get it? Your house? Someone else's?



SHEPHERD:

It wasn't mine, no, I got it from . . . someone.

OEDIPUS:

Which one of them?

*Looking at the citizens.*

Whose house?

SHEPHERD:

No—

god's sake, master, no more questions!

1280

OEDIPUS:

You're a dead man if I have to ask again.

SHEPHERD:

Then—the child came from the house . . .  
of Laius.

OEDIPUS:

A slave? or born of his own blood?

SHEPHERD:

Oh no,

I'm right at the edge, the horrible truth—I've got to say it!

OEDIPUS:

And I'm at the edge of hearing horrors, yes, but I must hear!

SHEPHERD:

All right! His son, they said it was—his son!  
But the one inside, your wife,  
she'd tell it best.

OEDIPUS:

My wife—  
she gave it to you?

1290

SHEPHERD:

Yes, yes, my king.

OEDIPUS:

Why, what for?

SHEPHERD:

To kill it.

OEDIPUS:

Her own child,  
how could she?

1295

SHEPHERD:

She was afraid—  
frightening prophecies.

OEDIPUS:

What?

SHEPHERD:

They said—  
he'd kill his parents.

OEDIPUS:

But you gave him to this old man—why? 1300

SHEPHERD:

I pitied the little baby, master,  
hoped he'd take him off to his own country,  
far away, but he saved him for this, this fate.  
If you are the man he says you are, believe me,  
you were born for pain. 1305

OEDIPUS:

O god—  
all come true, all burst to light!  
O light—now let me look my last on you!  
I stand revealed at last—  
cursed in my birth, cursed in marriage,  
cursed in the lives I cut down with these hands! 1310

*Rushing through the doors with a  
great cry. The Corinthian  
MESSENGER, the SHEPHERD and  
attendants exit slowly to the side.*

CHORUS:

O the generations of men  
the dying generations—adding the total  
of all your lives I find they come to nothing . . .  
does there exist, is there a man on earth  
who seizes more joy than just a dream, a vision? 1315  
And the vision no sooner dawns than dies  
blazing into oblivion.

You are my great example, you, your life  
your destiny, Oedipus, man of misery—  
I count no man blest.

You outranged all men! 1320  
Bending your bow to the breaking-point  
you captured priceless glory, O dear god,  
and the Sphinx came crashing down,  
the virgin, claws hooked  
like a bird of omen singing, shrieking death— 1325  
like a fortress reared in the face of death  
you rose and saved our land.

From that day on we called you king  
we crowned you with honors, Oedipus, towering over all—  
mighty king of the seven gates of Thebes. 1330

But now to hear your story—is there a man more agonized?  
More wed to pain and frenzy? Not a man on earth,  
the joy of your life ground down to nothing

○ Oedipus, name for the ages—

one and the same wide harbor served you

son and father both

1335

son and father came to rest in the same bridal chamber.

How, how could the furrows your father plowed

bear you, your agony, harrowing on

in silence ○ so long?

But now for all your power

1340

Time, all-seeing Time has dragged you to the light,

judged your marriage monstrous from the start—

the son and the father tangling, both one—

○ child of Laius, would to god

I'd never seen you, never never!

1345

Now I weep like a man who wails the dead

and the dirge comes pouring forth with all my heart!

I tell you the truth, you gave me life

my breath leapt up in you

and now you bring down night upon my eyes.

1350



*Enter a MESSENGER from the palace.*

MESSENGER:

Men of Thebes, always first in honor,  
what horrors you will hear, what you will see,  
what a heavy weight of sorrow you will shoulder . . .

if you are true to your birth, if you still have  
some feeling for the royal house of Thebes.

1355

I tell you neither the waters of the Danube  
nor the Nile can wash this palace clean.

Such things it hides, it soon will bring to light—

terrible things, and none done blindly now,

all done with a will. The pains

1360

we inflict upon ourselves hurt most of all.

LEADER:

God knows we have pains enough already.

What can you add to them?

MESSENGER:

The queen is dead.

LEADER:

Poor lady—how?

MESSENGER:

By her own hand. But you are spared the worst, 1365  
 you never had to watch . . . I saw it all,  
 and with all the memory that's in me  
 you will learn what that poor woman suffered.

Once she'd broken in through the gates,  
 dashing past us, frantic, whipped to fury, 1370  
 ripping her hair out with both hands—  
 straight to her rooms she rushed, flinging herself  
 across the bridal-bed, doors slamming behind her—  
 once inside, she wailed for Laius, dead so long,  
 remembering how she bore his child long ago, 1375  
 the life that rose up to destroy him, leaving  
 its mother to mother living creatures  
 with the very son she'd borne.

Oh how she wept, mourning the marriage-bed  
 where she let loose that double brood—monsters— 1380  
 husband by her husband, children by her child.

And then—

but how she died is more than I can say. Suddenly  
 Oedipus burst in, screaming, he stunned us so  
 we couldn't watch her agony to the end,  
 our eyes were fixed on him. Circling 1385  
 like a maddened beast, stalking, here, there,  
 crying out to us—

Give him a sword! His wife,  
 no wife, his mother, where can he find the mother earth  
 that cropped two crops at once, himself and all his children?  
 He was raging—one of the dark powers pointing the way, 1390  
 none of us mortals crowding around him, no,  
 with a great shattering cry—someone, something leading him on—  
 he hurled at the twin doors and bending the bolts back  
 out of their sockets, crashed through the chamber.

And there we saw the woman hanging by the neck, 1395  
 cradled high in a woven noose, spinning,  
 swinging back and forth. And when he saw her,  
 giving a low, wrenching sob that broke our hearts,  
 slipping the halter from her throat, he eased her down,  
 in a slow embrace he laid her down, poor thing . . . 1400  
 then, what came next, what horror we beheld!

He rips off her brooches, the long gold pins  
 holding her robes—and lifting them high,  
 looking straight up into the points,  
 he digs them down the sockets of his eyes, crying, "You, 1405  
 you'll see no more the pain I suffered, all the pain I caused!  
 Too long you looked on the ones you never should have seen,  
 blind to the ones you longed to see, to know! Blind  
 from this hour on! Blind in the darkness—blind!"  
 His voice like a dirge, rising, over and over 1410  
 raising the pins, raking them down his eyes.  
 And at each stroke blood spurts from the roots,  
 splashing his beard, a swirl of it, nerves and clots—  
 black hail of blood pulsing, gushing down.

These are the griefs that burst upon them both, 1415  
 coupling man and woman. The joy they had so lately,  
 the fortune of their old ancestral house  
 was deep joy indeed. Now, in this one day,  
 wailing, madness and doom, death, disgrace,  
 all the griefs in the world that you can name, 1420  
 all are theirs forever.

LEADER:

Oh poor man, the misery—  
has he any rest from pain now?

*A voice within, in torment.*

MESSENGER:

He's shouting,  
"Loose the bolts, someone, show me to all of Thebes!  
My father's murderer, my mother's—"  
No, I can't repeat it, it's unholy. 1425  
Now he'll tear himself from his native earth,  
not linger, curse the house with his own curse.  
But he needs strength, and a guide to lead him on.  
This is sickness more than he can bear.

*The palace doors open.*

Look,  
he'll show you himself. The great doors are opening— 1430  
you are about to see a sight, a horror  
even his mortal enemy would pity.

*Enter OEDIPUS, blinded, led by a  
boy. He stands at the palace steps, as  
if surveying his people once again.*



CHORUS:

O the terror—  
the suffering, for all the world to see,  
the worst terror that ever met my eyes.  
What madness swept over you? What god, 1435  
what dark power leapt beyond all bounds,  
beyond belief, to crush your wretched life?—  
godforsaken, cursed by the gods!  
I pity you but I can't bear to look. 1440  
I've much to ask, so much to learn,  
so much fascinates my eyes,  
but you . . . I shudder at the sight.

OEDIPUS:

Oh, Ohh—  
the agony! I am agony—  
where am I going? where on earth?  
where does all this agony hurl me? 1445  
where's my voice?—  
winging, swept away on a dark tide—  
My destiny, my dark power, what a leap you made!

CHORUS:

To the depths of terror, too dark to hear, to see.

OEDIPUS:

Dark, horror of darkness 1450  
*my* darkness, drowning, swirling around me  
 crashing wave on wave—unspeakable, irresistible  
 headwind, fatal harbor! Oh again,  
 the misery, all at once, over and over  
 the stabbing daggers, stab of memory 1455  
 raking me insane.

CHORUS:

No wonder you suffer  
 twice over, the pain of your wounds,  
 the lasting grief of pain.

OEDIPUS:

Dear friend, still here?  
 Standing by me, still with a care for me,  
 the blind man? Such compassion, 1460  
 loyal to the last. Oh it's you,  
 I know you're here, dark as it is  
 I'd know you anywhere, your voice—  
 it's yours, clearly yours.

CHORUS:

Dreadful, what you've done . . .  
 how could you bear it, gouging out your eyes? 1465  
 What superhuman power drove you on?

OEDIPUS:

Apollo, friends, Apollo—  
 he ordained my agonies—these, my pains on pains!  
 But the hand that struck my eyes was mine,  
 mine alone—no one else— 1470  
 I did it all myself!  
 What good were eyes to me?  
 Nothing I could see could bring me joy.

CHORUS:

No, no, exactly as you say.

OEDIPUS:

What can I ever see?  
 What love, what call of the heart 1475  
 can touch my ears with joy? Nothing, friends.  
 Take me away, far, far from Thebes,  
 quickly, cast me away, my friends—  
 this great murderous ruin, this man cursed to heaven,  
 the man the deathless gods hate most of all! 1480

CHORUS:

Pitiful, you suffer so, you understand so much . . .  
 I wish you had never known.

OEDIPUS:

Die, die—

whoever he was that day in the wilds  
 who cut my ankles free of the ruthless pins,  
 he pulled me clear of death, he saved my life  
 for this, this kindness—

1485

Curse him, kill him!

If I'd died then, I'd never have dragged myself,  
 my loved ones through such hell.

CHORUS:

Oh if only . . . would to god.

OEDIPUS:

I'd never have come to this,  
 my father's murderer—never been branded  
 mother's husband, all men see me now! Now,  
 loathed by the gods, son of the mother I defiled  
 coupling in my father's bed, spawning lives in the loins  
 that spawned my wretched life. What grief can crown this grief?  
 It's mine alone, my destiny—I am Oedipus!

CHORUS:

How can I say you've chosen for the best?  
 Better to die than be alive and blind.

OEDIPUS:

What I did was best—don't lecture me,  
 no more advice. I, with *my* eyes,  
 how could I look my father in the eyes  
 when I go down to death? Or mother, so abused . . .  
 I have done such things to the two of them,  
 crimes too huge for hanging.

1500

Worse yet,

the sight of my children, born as they were born,  
 how could I long to look into their eyes?

1505

No, not with these eyes of mine, never.  
 Not this city either, her high towers,  
 the sacred glittering images of her gods—  
 I am misery! I, her best son, reared  
 as no other son of Thebes was ever reared,  
 I've stripped myself, I gave the command myself.  
 All men must cast away the great blasphemer,  
 the curse now brought to light by the gods,  
 the son of Laius—I, my father's son!

1510

1515

Now I've exposed my guilt, horrendous guilt,  
 could I train a level glance on you, my countrymen?  
 Impossible! No, if I could just block off my ears,  
 the springs of hearing, I would stop at nothing—  
 I'd wall up my loathsome body like a prison,  
 blind to the sound of life, not just the sight.  
 Oblivion—what a blessing . . .  
 for the mind to dwell a world away from pain.

1520

O Cithaeron, why did you give me shelter?  
 Why didn't you take me, crush my life out on the spot?  
 I'd never have revealed my birth to all mankind.

1525

O Polybus, Corinth, the old house of my fathers,  
 so I believed—what a handsome prince you raised—  
 under the skin, what sickness to the core.  
 Look at me! Born of outrage, outrage to the core.

1530

O triple roads—it all comes back, the secret,  
dark ravine, and the oaks closing in  
where the three roads join . . .

You drank my father's blood, my own blood  
spilled by my own hands—you still remember me? 1535  
What things you saw me do? Then I came here  
and did them all once more!

Marriages! O marriage,  
you gave me birth, and once you brought me into the world  
you brought my sperm rising back, springing to light .  
fathers, brothers, sons—one murderous breed— 1540  
brides, wives, mothers. The blackest things  
a man can do, I have done them all!

No more—  
it's wrong to name what's wrong to do. Quickly,  
for the love of god, hide me somewhere,  
kill me, hurl me into the sea 1545  
where you can never look on me again.

*Beckoning to the CHORUS as they  
shrink away.*

Closer,

it's all right. Touch the man of grief.  
Do. Don't be afraid. My troubles are mine  
and I am the only man alive who can sustain them.

*Enter CREON from the palace,  
attended by palace guards.*

LEADER:  
Put your requests to Creon. Here he is,  
just when we need him. He'll have a plan, he'll act. 1550  
Now that he's the sole defense of the country  
in your place.

OEDIPUS:  
Oh no, what can I say to him?  
How can I ever hope to win his trust?  
I wronged him so, just now, in every way. 1555  
You must see that—I was so wrong, so wrong.

CREON:  
I haven't come to mock you, Oedipus,  
or to criticize your former failings.

*Turning to the guards.*

You there,  
have you lost all respect for human feelings?  
At least revere the Sun, the holy fire 1560  
that keeps us all alive. Never expose a thing  
of guilt and holy dread so great it appalls  
the earth, the rain from heaven, the light of day!  
Get him into the halls—quickly as you can.  
Piety demands no less. Kindred alone 1565  
should see a kinsman's shame. This is obscene.

OEDIPUS:  
Please, in god's name . . . you wipe my fears away,  
coming so generously to me, the worst of men.  
Do one thing more, for your sake, not mine.

CREON:  
What do you want? Why so insistent? 1570

OEDIPUS:  
Drive me out of the land at once, far from sight,  
where I can never hear a human voice.

CREON:  
I'd have done that already, I promise you.  
First I wanted the god to clarify my duties.



OEDIPUS:

The god? His command was clear, every word:  
death for the father-killer, the curse—  
he said destroy me!

1575

CREON:

So he did. Still, in such a crisis  
it's better to ask precisely what to do.

OEDIPUS:

So miserable—  
you would consult the god about a man like me?

1580

CREON:

By all means. And this time, I assume,  
even you will obey the god's decrees.

OEDIPUS:

I will,  
I will. And you, I command you—I beg you . . .  
the woman inside, bury her as you see fit.  
It's the only decent thing,  
to give your own the last rites. As for me,  
never condemn the city of my fathers  
to house my body, not while I'm alive, no,  
let me live on the mountains, on Cithaeron,  
my favorite haunt, I have made it famous.  
Mother and father marked out that rock  
to be my everlasting tomb—buried alive.  
Let me die there, where they tried to kill me.

1585

1590

Oh but this I know: no sickness can destroy me,  
nothing can. I would never have been saved  
from death—I have been saved  
for something great and terrible, something strange.  
Well let my destiny come and take me on its way!

1595

About my children, Creon, the boys at least,  
don't burden yourself. They're men,  
wherever they go, they'll find the means to live.  
But my two daughters, my poor helpless girls,  
clustering at our table, never without me  
hovering near them . . . whatever I touched,  
they always had their share. Take care of them,  
I beg you. Wait, better—permit me, would you?  
Just to touch them with my hands and take  
our fill of tears. Please . . . my king.  
Grant it, with all your noble heart.  
If I could hold them, just once, I'd think  
I had them with me, like the early days  
when I could see their eyes.

1600

1605

1610

*ANTIGONE and ISMENE, two small  
children, are led in from the palace  
by a nurse.*

What's that?

O god! Do I really hear you sobbing?—  
my two children. Creon, you've pitied me?  
Sent me my darling girls, my own flesh and blood!  
Am I right?

1615

CREON:

Yes, it's my doing.  
I know the joy they gave you all these years,  
the joy you must feel now.

OEDIPUS:

Bless you, Creon!  
May god watch over you for this kindness,  
better than he ever guarded me.

Here, come quickly—

Children, where are you? 1620

*Groping for ANTIGONE and ISMENE,  
who approach their father cautiously,  
then embrace him.*

Come to these hands of mine,  
your brother's hands, your own father's hands  
that served his once bright eyes so well—  
that made them blind. Seeing nothing, children,  
knowing nothing, I became your father, 1625  
I fathered you in the soil that gave me life.

How I weep for you—I cannot see you now . . .  
just thinking of all your days to come, the bitterness,  
the life that rough mankind will thrust upon you. 1630  
Where are the public gatherings you can join,  
the banquets of the clans? Home you'll come,  
in tears, cut off from the sight of it all,  
the brilliant rites unfinished.

And when you reach perfection, ripe for marriage,  
who will he be, my dear ones? Risking all 1635  
to shoulder the curse that weighs down my parents,  
yes and you too—that wounds us all together.  
What more misery could you want?

Your father killed his father, sowed his mother,  
one, one and the selfsame womb sprang you— 1640  
he cropped the very roots of his existence.

Such disgrace, and you must bear it all!  
Who will marry you then? Not a man on earth.  
Your doom is clear: you'll wither away to nothing,  
single, without a child.

*Turning to CREON.*

Oh Creon, 1645  
you are the only father they have now . . .  
we who brought them into the world  
are gone, both gone at a stroke—  
Don't let them go begging, abandoned,  
women without men. Your own flesh and blood! 1650  
Never bring them down to the level of my pains.  
Pity them. Look at them, so young, so vulnerable,  
shorn of everything—you're their only hope.  
Promise me, noble Creon, touch my hand!

*Reaching toward CREON, who  
draws back.*

You, little ones, if you were old enough 1655  
to understand, there is much I'd tell you.  
Now, as it is, I'd have you say a prayer.  
Pray for life, my children,  
live where you are free to grow and season.  
Pray god you find a better life than mine, 1660  
the father who begot you.

CREON:

Enough.

You've wept enough. Into the palace now.

OEDIPUS:

I must, but I find it very hard.

CREON:

Time is the great healer, you will see.

OEDIPUS:

I am going—you know on what condition? 1665

CREON:

Tell me. I'm listening.

OEDIPUS:

Drive me out of Thebes, in exile.

CREON:

Not I. Only the gods can give you that.

OEDIPUS:

Surely the gods hate me so much—

CREON:

You'll get your wish at once.

OEDIPUS:

You consent?

1670

CREON:

I try to say what I mean; it's my habit.

OEDIPUS:

Then take me away. It's time.

CREON:

Come along, let go of the children.

OEDIPUS:

No—

don't take them away from me, not now! No no no!

*Clutching his daughters as the guards  
wrench them loose and take them  
through the palace doors.*

CREON:

Still the king, the master of all things?

No more: here your power ends.

None of your power follows you through life.

1675

*Exit OEDIPUS and CREON to the  
palace. The CHORUS comes forward  
to address the audience directly.*

CHORUS:

People of Thebes, my countrymen, look on Oedipus.

He solved the famous riddle with his brilliance,

he rose to power, a man beyond all power.

Who could behold his greatness without envy?

Now what a black sea of terror has overwhelmed him.

Now as we keep our watch and wait the final day,

count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last.

1680

*Exit in procession.*

