

# Sophocles

(c. 496–c. 406 BCE)

One of the most popular and influential artists of his age, the ancient Greek dramatist Sophocles continues to be admired for his masterful use of language and his psychologically complex characters. His plays often engage with themes of self-discovery and of individual struggle against the workings of fate.

Born in Colonus, near Athens, Sophocles is said to have been educated, athletic, and artistically accomplished. Over his long public career, he served as a general, a spiritual leader, a treasurer, and a proboulos (an advisory committee member). In Sophocles' lifetime, theatre was not a professional pursuit but was undertaken by esteemed citizens, who competed in the Great Dionysia and Lenaia, spring festivals in which carefully rehearsed plays were presented in an outdoor amphitheatre for thousands of spectators. Weak-voiced Sophocles apparently refrained from performing in his own plays but wrote more winning entries than his contemporaries Aeschylus and Euripides combined, coming in first place at least eighteen times.

As was common in the tragedy of the period, Sophocles' plays depict familiar mythological characters, which were represented onstage by male actors wearing masks and elaborate costumes. His plays also follow the convention of the time in featuring a chorus (a group of performers who speak and move in unison) and a very limited number of individual characters. However, Sophocles expanded the cast of characters to three from the traditional two, an innovation that allowed him greater opportunities for the exploration of individual psychology. Of the 120 plays Sophocles wrote, seven remain intact, including *Ajax*, *Philoctetes*, *Trachinian Women*, and *Electra*. His most famous are the three "Theban Plays"—*Antigone*, *Oedipus the King*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*—which, though they were not conceived as a trilogy, are often grouped together because all three relate to the myth of King Oedipus.

*Oedipus the King* (c. 429 BCE) did not win first prize at the Great Dionysia, but it became one of Sophocles' most famous works. It is also his most influential; in Aristotle's *Poetics*, the philosopher commended the play's unity of plot and theme—an analysis that, thousands of years later, continues to influence western conceptions of tragedy, and of theatre itself.

# Oedipus the King<sup>1</sup>

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

OEDIPUS: King of Thebes

PRIEST: The High Priest of Thebes

CREON: Oedipus' Brother-in-Law

CHORUS OF THEBAN ELDERS

TEIRESIAS: An Old Blind Prophet

BOY: Attendant on Teiresias

JOCASTA: Wife of Oedipus, Sister of Creon

MESSENGER: An Old Man

SERVANT: An Old Shepherd

SECOND MESSENGER: A Servant of Oedipus

ANTIGONE: Daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta, a Child

ISMENE: Daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta, a Child

SERVANTS and ATTENDANTS on Oedipus and Jocasta

*[The action takes place in Thebes in front of the royal palace. The main doors are directly facing the audience. There are altars beside the doors. A crowd of citizens carrying branches decorated with laurel branches garlanded with wool<sup>2</sup> and led by the priest has gathered in front of the altars, with some people sitting on the altar steps. Oedipus enters through the palace doors.]*

OEDIPUS. My children, latest generation born from Cadmus,<sup>3</sup>

why are you sitting here with wreathed sticks

in supplication to me, while the city

fills with incense, chants, and cries of pain?

5 Children, it would not be appropriate for me

to learn of this from any other source,

so I have come in person—I, Oedipus,

whose fame all men acknowledge. But you there,

old man, tell me—you seem to be the one

10 who ought to speak for those assembled here. [10]

What feeling brings you to me—fear or desire?

1 *Oedipus the King* Translated by Ian Johnston, Vancouver Island University. The translator would like to acknowledge the invaluable help provided by Sir Richard Jebb's translation and commentary.

The line numbers in square brackets refer to the Greek text; the numbers without brackets refer to the English text.

2 *laurel ... wool* Such branches were carried by suppliants (those seeking help, usually from a god or a human authority figure).

3 *born from Cadmus* Cadmus was the legendary founder of Thebes. Hence, the citizens of Thebes were often called "children of Cadmus" or "Cadmeians."

You can be confident that I will help.  
 I shall assist you willingly in every way.  
 I would be a hard-hearted man indeed,  
 if I did not pity suppliants like these. 15

PRIEST. Oedipus, ruler of my native land,  
 you see how people here of every age  
 are crouching down around your altars,  
 some fledglings barely strong enough to fly  
 and others bent by age, with priests as well— 20  
 for I'm priest of Zeus—and these ones here,  
 the pick of all our youth. The other groups  
 sit in the market place with suppliant branches  
 or else in front of Pallas'<sup>1</sup> two shrines, [20]  
 or where Ismenus prophesies with fire.<sup>2</sup> 25  
 For our city, as you yourself can see,  
 is badly shaken—she cannot raise her head  
 above the depths of so much surging death.  
 Disease infects fruit blossoms in our land,  
 disease infects our herds of grazing cattle, 30  
 makes women in labour lose their children;  
 and deadly pestilence, that fiery god,  
 swoops down to blast the city, emptying  
 the House of Cadmus, and fills black Hades<sup>3</sup> [30]  
 with groans and howls. These children and myself 35  
 now sit here by your home, not because we think  
 you're equal to the gods. No. We judge you  
 the first of men in what happens in this life  
 and in our interactions with the gods.  
 For you came here, to our Cadmeian city, 40  
 and freed us from the tribute we were paying  
 to that cruel singer<sup>4</sup>—and yet you knew

1 *Pallas* Name of the goddess Pallas Athena. There were two shrines to her in Thebes.

2 *where Ismenus ... fire* Ismenus, a temple to Apollo Ismenios where burnt offerings were used as the basis for divination.

3 *Hades* the underworld.

4 *you came ... singer* The phrase "cruel singer" is a reference to the Sphinx, a winged monster with the body of a lion and the head and torso of a woman. After the death of king Laius, the Sphinx tyrannized Thebes by not letting anyone into or out of the city, unless the person could answer the following riddle: "What walks on four legs in the morning, on two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening?" Those who could not answer were killed and eaten. Oedipus saved the city by providing the answer: "a human being," with each time of day representing a phase of life—crawling, walking upright, and walking with a cane. The Sphinx then committed suicide.

no more than we did and had not been taught.

In their stories, the people testify

45 how, with gods' help, you gave us back our lives.

So now, Oedipus, our king, most powerful

[40]

in all men's eyes, we're here as suppliants,

all begging you to find some help for us,

either by listening to a heavenly voice

50 or learning from some other human being.

For, in my view, men of experience

provide advice that gives the best results.

So now, you best of men, raise up our state.

Act to consolidate your fame, for now,

55 thanks to your eagerness in earlier days,

the city celebrates you as its saviour.

Don't let our memory of your ruling here

[50]

declare that we were first set right again

and later fell. No. Restore our city,

60 so that it stands secure. In those times past

you brought us joy—and with good omens, too.

Be that same man today. If you're to rule

as you are doing now, it's better to be king

in a land of men than in a desert.

65 An empty ship or city wall is nothing

if no men share a life together there.

OEDIPUS. My poor children, I know why you have come—

I am not ignorant of what you yearn for.

For I understand that you are ill, and yet,

[60]

70 sick as you are, there is not one of you

whose illness equals mine. Your agony

comes to each one of you as his alone,

a special pain for him and no one else.

But here in my soul, I sorrow for myself,

75 and for the city, and for you—all together.

You are not rousing me from a deep sleep.

You must know I've been shedding many tears

and, in my wandering thoughts, exploring

many pathways. After a careful search

80 I grasped the only help that I could find

and acted on it. So I have sent away

my brother-in-law, son of Menoecus,

Creon, to Pythian Apollo's shrine,

[70]

to learn from him what I might do or say  
 to save our city. But when I count the days— 85  
 the time he's been away—now I worry  
 what he's doing. For he's been gone too long,  
 well past the time he should have taken.  
 But when he comes, I'll be a wicked man  
 if I do not act on all the god reveals. 90

PRIEST. What you have said is most appropriate,  
 for these men here have just informed me  
 that Creon is approaching.

OEDIPUS. Lord Apollo, 80  
 as he returns may fine shining fortune,  
 bright as his countenance, attend on him. 95

PRIEST. It seems the news he brings is good—if not,  
 he would not wear that wreath around his head,  
 a laurel thickly packed with berries.<sup>1</sup>

OEDIPUS. We'll know soon enough—he's within earshot.

[*Enter Creon. Oedipus calls to him as he approaches.*]

My royal kinsman, child of Menoeceus, 100  
 what message do you bring us from the god?

CREON. Good news, I tell you. If things work out well,  
 then these troubles, so difficult to bear,  
 will end up bringing us great benefits.

OEDIPUS. What is the oracle? So far your words 105  
 inspire in me no confidence or fear. 90]

CREON. If you wish to hear the news in public,  
 I'm prepared to speak. Or we could step inside.

OEDIPUS. Speak out to everyone. The grief I feel 110  
 for these citizens is even greater 110  
 than any pain I feel for my own life.

CREON. Then let me report what I heard from the god.  
 Lord Phoebus<sup>2</sup> clearly orders us to drive away  
 the polluting stain this land has harboured.

It will not be healed if we keep nursing it. 115

OEDIPUS. What sort of cleansing? And this disaster—  
 how did it happen?

1 *that wreath ... with berries* A suppliant to Apollo's shrine characteristically wore such a garland if he received favourable news.

2 *Phoebus* Name of Apollo, used especially in reference to his role as god of light and the sun.

- CREON. By banishment— [100]  
 or atone for murder by shedding blood again,  
 for blood brings on the storm which blasts our state.
- 120 OEDIPUS. Tell me, the one whose fate the god revealed—  
 what sort of man is he?
- CREON. Before you came, my lord,  
 to steer our ship of state, Laius ruled this land.
- OEDIPUS. I've heard that, but I never saw the man.
- CREON. Laius was killed. And now the god is clear:  
 125 those murderers, he tells us, must be punished,  
 whoever they may be.
- OEDIPUS. And where are they?  
 In what country? Where am I to find a trace  
 of this ancient crime? It will be hard to track.
- CREON. Here in Thebes, so said the god. What is sought  
 130 is found, but what is overlooked escapes. [110]
- OEDIPUS. When Laius fell in bloody death, where was he—  
 at home, or in his fields, or in another land?
- CREON. He was abroad, on his way to Delphi—  
 that's what he told us. He began the trip,  
 135 but did not return.
- OEDIPUS. Was there no messenger—  
 no companion who made the journey with him  
 and witnessed what took place—someone  
 who might provide some knowledge men could use?
- CREON. They all died—except for one who was afraid  
 140 and ran away. There was only one thing  
 he could inform us of with confidence  
 about the things he saw.
- OEDIPUS. What was that?  
 We might get somewhere if we had one fact— [120]  
 we could find many things, if we possessed  
 145 some slender hope to get us going.
- CREON. He told us it was robbers who attacked them—  
 not just a single man, a gang of them—  
 they came on with force and killed him.
- OEDIPUS. How would a thief have dared to do this,  
 150 unless he had financial help from Thebes?
- CREON. That's what we guessed. But after Laius died  
 we were in trouble, so no one sought revenge.
- OEDIPUS. When the ruling king had fallen in this way,

what bad trouble blocked your path, preventing you  
from looking into it? 155

CREON. It was the Sphinx— [130]  
she sang her cryptic song and so forced us  
to put aside something we found obscure  
to look into the problem we now faced.

OEDIPUS. Then I will start afresh and once again  
shed light on darkness. It is most fitting 160  
that Apollo demonstrates his care  
for the dead man, and worthy of you, too.  
And so you'll see how I will work with you,  
as is right, seeking vengeance for this land,  
as well as for the god. This polluting stain 165  
I will remove, not for some distant friends,  
but for myself. For whoever killed this man  
may soon enough desire to turn his hand [140]  
to punish me in the same way, as well.  
Thus, in avenging Laius, I serve myself. 170  
But now, my children, quickly as you can  
stand up from these altar steps and raise  
your suppliant branches. Someone must call  
the Theban people to assemble here.  
I'll do everything I can. With the god's help 175  
this will all come to light successfully,  
or else will prove our common ruin.

[*Oedipus and Creon go into the palace.*]

PRIEST. Let us get up, children. For this man  
has willingly declared just what we came for.  
And may Phoebus, who sent this oracle, 180  
come as our saviour and end our sickness. [150]

[*The priest and the citizens leave. Enter the chorus of Theban elders.*]

CHORUS. O sweet-speaking voice of Zeus,  
you have come to glorious Thebes from golden Pytho—  
but what is your intent?  
My fearful heart twists on the rack and shakes with fear. 185  
O Delian healer,<sup>1</sup> for whom we cry aloud  
in holy awe, what obligation

1 *Delian healer* Apollo, who was born on the island of Delos.

will you demand from me, a thing unknown  
 or now renewed with the revolving years?  
 190 Immortal voice, O child of golden Hope,  
 speak to me!

First I call on you, Athena the immortal,  
 daughter of Zeus, and on your sister, too, [160]  
 Artemis,<sup>1</sup> who guards our land and sits  
 195 on her glorious round throne in our market place,  
 and on Phoebus, who shoots from far away.  
 O you three guardians against death,  
 appear to me!  
 If before now you have ever driven off  
 200 a fiery plague to keep disaster  
 from the city and have banished it,  
 then come to us this time as well!

Alas, the pains I bear are numberless—  
 my people now all sick with plague,  
 205 our minds can find no weapons [170]  
 to help with our defence. Now the offspring  
 of our splendid earth no longer grow,  
 nor do our women crying out in labour  
 get their relief from a living new-born child.  
 210 As you can see—one by one they swoop away,  
 off to the shores of the evening god<sup>2</sup> like birds,  
 faster than fire which no one can resist.

Our city dies—we've lost count of all the dead.  
 Her sons lie in the dirt unpitied, unlamented. [180]  
 215 Corpses spread the pestilence, while youthful wives  
 and grey-haired mothers on the altar steps  
 wail everywhere and cry in supplication,  
 seeking to relieve their agonizing pain.  
 Their solemn chants ring out—  
 220 they mingle with the voices of lament.  
 O Zeus' golden daughter,  
 send your support and strength,  
 your lovely countenance!

1 *Artemis* Goddess associated with hunting, the wilderness, and childbirth.

2 *evening god* I.e., the god of death.

And that ravenous Ares,<sup>1</sup> god of killing, [190]  
 who now consumes me as he charges on 225  
 with no bronze shield but howling battle cries,  
     let him turn his back and quickly leave this land,  
 with a fair following wind to carry him  
 to the great chamber of Amphitrite<sup>2</sup>  
 or inhospitable waves of Thrace. 230  
 For if destruction does not come at night,  
 then day arrives to see it does its work.  
 O you who wield that mighty flash of fire, [200]  
 O father Zeus, with your lightning blast  
 let Ares be destroyed! 235

O Lycean lord,<sup>3</sup> how I wish those arrows  
 from the golden string of your bent bow  
 with their all-conquering force would wing out  
 to champion us against our enemy—  
 and I pray for those blazing fires of Artemis, 240  
 with which she races through the Lycian hills.<sup>4</sup>  
 I call the god who binds his hair with gold,  
 the one whose name our country shares,<sup>5</sup> [210]  
 the one to whom the Maenads<sup>6</sup> shout their cries,  
 Dionysus with his radiant face— 245  
 may he come to us with his flaming torchlight,  
 our ally against Ares,  
 a god dishonoured among gods.

[*Enter Oedipus from the palace.*]

OEDIPUS. You pray. But if you listen now to me,  
 you'll get your wish. Hear what I have to say 250  
 and treat your own disease—then you may hope  
 to find relief from your distress. I speak  
 as one who is a stranger to the story,

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- 1 *Ares* Ares, god of war and killing, was often disapproved of by the major Olympian deities.  
 2 *Amphitrite* Goddess of the sea, married to Poseidon.  
 3 *Lycean lord* Apollo; his epithet “Lykeios” means “wolfish.”  
 4 *Lycian hills* Mountainous regions on the southern coast of present-day Turkey; the Lycians were particularly devout worshippers of both Artemis and Apollo.  
 5 *the one ... shares* Dionysius was also called Bacchus, while Thebes was sometimes called Baccheia (“belonging to Bacchus”).  
 6 *Maenads* Followers of Dionysius.

a stranger to the crime. If I alone  
 255 were tracking down this act, I'd not get far [220]  
 without a single clue. But as things stand,  
 for it was after the event that I became  
 a citizen of Thebes, I now proclaim  
 the following to all of you Cadmeians:  
 260 Whoever among you knows the man it was  
 who murdered Laius, son of Labdacus,  
 I order him to reveal it all to me.  
 And if the killer is afraid, I tell him  
 to avoid the danger of the major charge  
 265 by speaking out against himself. If so,  
 he will be sent out from this land unhurt  
 and undergo no further punishment.  
 If someone knows the killer is a stranger, [230]  
 from some other state, let him not stay mute.  
 270 As well as a reward, he'll earn my thanks.  
 But if he remains quiet, if anyone,  
 through fear, hides himself or a friend of his  
 against my orders, here's what I shall do—  
 so listen to my words. For I decree  
 275 that no one in this land, in which I rule  
 as your own king, shall give that killer shelter  
 or talk to him, whoever he may be,  
 or act in concert with him during prayers,  
 or sacrifice, or sharing lustral water.<sup>1</sup> [240]  
 280 Ban him from your homes, every one of you,  
 for he is our pollution, as the Pythian god  
 in his oracle has just revealed to me.  
 In this I'm acting as an ally of the god  
 and also of dead Laius. And I pray  
 285 whoever the man is who did this crime,  
 one unknown person acting on his own  
 or with companions, the worst of agonies  
 will wear out his wretched life. I pray, too,  
 that, if he should become an honoured guest  
 290 in my own home and with my knowledge, [250]  
 I may suffer all those things I've just called down  
 upon the killers. And I urge you now

1 *lustral water* Water purified in a communal religious ritual.

to make sure all these orders take effect,  
 for my sake, for the sake of the god,  
 and for our barren, godless, ruined land. 295  
 For in this matter, even if a god  
 were not urging us, it would not be right  
 for you to simply leave things as they are,  
 and not to purify the murder of a man  
 who was so noble and who was your king. 300  
 You should have looked into it. But now I  
 possess the ruling power which Laius held  
 in earlier days. I have his bed and wife— [260]  
 she would have borne his children, if his hopes  
 to have a son had not been disappointed. 305  
 Children from a common mother might have linked  
 Laius and myself. But as it turned out,  
 Fate swooped down onto his head. So now  
 I'll fight on his behalf, as if this matter  
 concerned my own father, and I will strive 310  
 to do everything I can to find him,  
 the man who spilled his blood, and thus avenge  
 the son of Labdacus and Polydorus,  
 of Cadmus and Agenor from old times.<sup>1</sup>  
 As for those who do not follow what I urge, 315  
 I pray the gods send them no fertile land,  
 no, nor any children in their women's wombs— [270]  
 may they all perish in our present fate  
 or one more hateful still. To you others,  
 you Cadmeians who support my efforts, 320  
 may Justice, our ally, and all the gods  
 attend on us with kindness all our days.

CHORUS LEADER. My lord, since you extend your oath to me,  
 I will say this. I am not the murderer,  
 nor can I tell you who the killer is. 325  
 As for what you're seeking, it's for Apollo,  
 who launched this search, to state who did it.

OEDIPUS. That is well said. But no man has power [280]  
 to force the gods to speak against their will.

1 *the son ... old times* Agenor was the founder of the Theban royal family; his son Cadmus founded Thebes. Polydorus was the son of Cadmus, the father of Labdacus, and hence the grandfather of Laius.

330 CHORUS LEADER. May I then suggest what seems to me  
the next best course of action?

OEDIPUS. You may indeed,  
and if you see a third course, too, don't hesitate  
to let me know.

CHORUS LEADER. Our lord Teiresias,  
I know, can see into things, like lord Apollo.  
335 From him, my king, a man investigating this  
might well find out clear details of the crime.

OEDIPUS. I've taken care of that—it's not something  
I could overlook. At Creon's urging,  
I have dispatched two messengers to him  
340 and have been wondering for some time now  
why he has not come.

CHORUS LEADER. Apart from that,  
there are rumours—but inconclusive ones  
from a long time ago. [290]

OEDIPUS. What kind of rumours?  
I'm looking into every story.

CHORUS LEADER. It was said  
345 that Laius was killed by certain travellers.

OEDIPUS. Yes, I heard as much. But no one has seen  
the one who did it.

CHORUS LEADER. Well, if the killer  
has any fears, once he hears your curses on him,  
he will not hold back, for they are serious.

350 OEDIPUS. When a man has no fear of doing the act,  
he's not afraid of words.

CHORUS LEADER. No, not in the case  
where no one stands there to convict him.  
But at last Teiresias is being guided here,  
our god-like prophet, in whom truth resides  
355 more so than in all other men.

*[Enter Teiresias led by a small boy.]*

OEDIPUS. Teiresias,  
you who understand all things—what can be taught  
and what cannot be spoken of, what goes on  
in heaven and here on the earth—you know,  
although you cannot see, how sick our state is.  
360 And so we find in you alone, great seer,

[300]



400 You would move something made of stone to rage!  
Will you not speak out? Will your stubbornness  
never have an end?

TEIRESIAS. You blame my nature,  
but do not see the temper you possess.  
Instead of that, you're finding fault with me.

405 OEDIPUS. What man who listened to these words of yours  
would not be enraged—you insult the city! [340]

TEIRESIAS. Yet events will still unfold, for all my silence.

OEDIPUS. Since they will come, you must inform me.

TEIRESIAS. I will say nothing more. Fume on about it,  
410 if you wish, as fiercely as you can.

OEDIPUS. I will. In my anger I will not conceal  
just what I make of this. You should know  
I get the feeling you conspired in the act  
and played your part, as much as you could do,  
415 short of killing him with your own hands.  
If you could use your eyes, I would have said  
that you had done this work all by yourself.

TEIRESIAS. Is that so? Then I would ask you to stand by  
the very words which you yourself proclaimed  
420 and from now on not speak to these men or me.

For the accursed polluter of this land is you.

OEDIPUS. You dare to utter shameful words like this?  
Do you think you can get away with it?

TEIRESIAS. I am getting away with it. The truth  
425 within me makes me strong.

OEDIPUS. Who taught you this?  
It could not have been your craft.

TEIRESIAS. You did.  
I did not want to speak, but you incited me.

OEDIPUS. What do you mean? Repeat what you just said,  
so I can understand you more precisely.

430 TEIRESIAS. Did you not grasp my meaning earlier,  
or are you trying to test me with your question? [360]

OEDIPUS. I did not fully understand your words.  
Tell me again.

TEIRESIAS. I say that you yourself  
are the one you seek—the man who murdered Laius.

435 OEDIPUS. That's twice you've stated that disgraceful lie—  
and you'll regret it.

- TEIRESIAS.                    Shall I tell you more,  
    so you can grow even more enraged?
- OEDIPUS. As much as you desire. It will be useless.
- TEIRESIAS. I say that with your dearest family,  
    unknown to you, you are living in disgrace.                    440  
    You have no idea how bad things are.
- OEDIPUS. Do you really think you can just speak out,  
    say things like this, and still remain unpunished?
- TEIRESIAS. Yes, I can, if the truth has any strength.
- OEDIPUS. It does, but not for you. Truth is not in you—                    [370] 445  
    for your ears, your mind, your eyes are blind!
- TEIRESIAS. You are a wretched fool to use harsh words  
    which all men soon enough will use to curse you.
- OEDIPUS. You live in endless darkness of the night,  
    so you can never injure me or any man                    450  
    who can glimpse daylight.
- TEIRESIAS.                    It is not your fate  
    to fall because of me. Lord Apollo  
    will make that happen. He will be enough.
- OEDIPUS. Is this something Creon has devised,  
    or is it your invention?                    455
- TEIRESIAS.                    Creon is no threat.  
    You have made this trouble on your own.
- OEDIPUS. O wealth and ruling power, skill after skill                    [380]  
    surpassing all in life's rich rivalries,  
    how much envy you must carry with you,  
    if, for this kingly office—which the city                    460  
    gave me, for I did not seek it out—  
    Creon, my old trusted family friend,  
    has secretly conspired to overthrow me  
    and paid off a double-dealing quack like this,  
    a crafty bogus priest, who can only see                    465  
    his own advantage, who in his special art  
    is absolutely blind. Come on, tell me                    [390]  
    how you have ever given evidence  
    of your wise prophecy. When the Sphinx,  
    that singing bitch, was here, you said nothing                    470  
    to set the people free. Why not? 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—

475 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. That's the man  
 you want to overthrow, hoping, no doubt,  
 480 to stand up there with Creon, once he's king. [400]  
 But I think you and your conspirator  
 will regret trying to drive me from the state.  
 If you did not look so old, you'd learn  
 what punishment your arrogance deserves.

485 CHORUS LEADER. To us it sounds as if Teiresias  
 has spoken in anger, and, Oedipus,  
 you have done so, too. That isn't what we need.  
 Instead we should be looking into this:  
 How can we best act on the god's decree?

490 TEIRESIAS. You may be king, but I do have the right  
 to answer you—and I control that right,  
 for I am not your slave. I serve Apollo, [410]  
 and thus will never stand with Creon,  
 signed up as his man. So I say this to you,  
 495 since you have chosen to insult my blindness—  
 you have your eyesight, and you do not see  
 how miserable you are, or where you live,  
 or who it is who shares your household.  
 Do you know the family you come from?

500 Without your knowledge you have turned into  
 the enemy of your own relatives,  
 those in the world below and those up here,  
 and the fearful scourge of that two-edged curse  
 of father and mother will one day drive you  
 505 from this land in exile. Those eyes of yours,  
 which now can see so clearly, will be dark.  
 What harbour will not echo with your cries? [420]  
 Where on Cithaeron<sup>1</sup> will they not soon be heard,  
 once you have learned the truth about the wedding  
 510 by which you sailed into this royal house—  
 a lovely voyage, but the harbour's doomed?  
 You have no notion of the quantity  
 of other troubles which will render you

1 *Cithaeron* Sacred mountain outside Thebes.

- and your own children equals. So go on—  
 keep insulting Creon and my prophecies, 515  
 for of all living mortals nobody  
 will be destroyed more wretchedly than you.
- OEDIPUS. Must I tolerate this insolence from him?  
 Get out, and may the plague get rid of you! [430]  
 Off with you! Now! Turn your back and go! 520  
 And don't come back here to my home again.
- TEIRESIAS. I would not have come, but you summoned me.
- OEDIPUS. I did not know you'd speak so stupidly.  
 If I had, you would have waited a long time  
 before I called you here. 525
- TEIRESIAS. I was born like this.  
 You think I am a fool, but to your parents,  
 those who made you, I was wise enough.
- OEDIPUS. Wait! My parents? Who was my father?
- TEIRESIAS. This day will reveal that and destroy you.
- OEDIPUS. Everything you speak is all so cryptic— 530  
 like a riddle.
- TEIRESIAS. Well, in solving riddles, [440]  
 are you not the best there is?
- OEDIPUS. Mock my excellence,  
 but you will find out I am truly great.
- TEIRESIAS. That success of yours has been your ruin.
- OEDIPUS. I do not care, if I have saved the city. 535
- TEIRESIAS. I will go now. Boy, lead me away.
- OEDIPUS. Yes, let him guide you back. You're in the way.  
 If you stay, you will provoke me. Once you're gone,  
 you won't annoy me further.
- TEIRESIAS. I'm going.  
 But first I shall tell you why I came. 540  
 I do not fear the face of your displeasure—  
 there is no way you can destroy me. I tell you,  
 the man you have been seeking all this time,  
 while proclaiming threats and issuing orders [450]  
 about the one who murdered Laius— 545  
 that man is here. According to reports,  
 he is a stranger who lives here in Thebes.  
 But he will prove to be a native Theban.  
 From that change he will derive no pleasure.  
 He will be blind, although he now can see. 550

He will be poor, although he now is rich.  
 He will set off for a foreign country,  
 groping the ground before him with a stick.  
 And he will turn out to be the brother  
 555 of the children in his house—their father, too,  
 both at once, and the husband and the son  
 of the very woman who gave birth to him.  
 He sowed the same womb as his father  
 and murdered him. Go in and think on this. [460]  
 560 If you discover I have spoken falsely,  
 you can say I lack all skill in prophecy.

*[Exit Teiresias led off by the boy. Oedipus turns and goes back into the palace.]*

CHORUS. Speaking from the Delphic rock  
 the oracular voice intoned a name.  
 But who is the man, the one  
 565 who with his blood-red hands  
 has done unspeakable brutality?  
 The time has come for him to flee—  
 to move his powerful foot  
 more swiftly than those hooves  
 570 of horses riding like a storm.  
 Against him Zeus' son<sup>1</sup> now springs, [470]  
 armed with lightning fire and leading on  
 the inexorable and terrifying Furies.<sup>2</sup>

From the snowy peaks of Mount Parnassus<sup>3</sup>  
 575 the message has flashed, ordering all  
 to seek the one whom no one knows.  
 Like a wild bull he wanders now,  
 hidden in the untamed wood,  
 through rocks and caves, alone  
 580 with his despair on joyless feet,  
 keeping his distance from that doom  
 uttered at earth's central navel stone.<sup>4</sup> [480]

1 *Zeus' son* Apollo.

2 *Furies* Goddesses of blood revenge.

3 *Mount Parnassus* Famous mountain some distance from Thebes, but visible from the city.

4 *earth's ... stone* A stone at Delphi was said to mark the centre of the earth.

But that fatal oracle still lives,  
 hovering above his head forever.

That wise interpreter of prophecies 585  
 stirs up my fears, unsettling dread.  
 I cannot approve of what he said  
 and I cannot deny it.  
 I am confused. What shall I say?  
 My hopes are fluttering here and there, 590  
 with no clear glimpse of past or future.  
 I have never heard of any quarrelling,  
 past or present, between those two,  
 the house of Labdacus and Polybus' son,<sup>1</sup> [490]  
 which could give me evidence enough 595  
 to undermine the fame of Oedipus,  
 as he seeks vengeance for the unsolved murder  
 in the family line of Labdacus.

Apollo and Zeus are truly wise—  
 they understand what humans do. 600  
 But there is no sure way to ascertain  
 if human prophets grasp things any more  
 than I do, although in wisdom one man [500]  
 may leave another far behind.  
 But until I see the words confirmed, 605  
 I will not approve of any man  
 who censures Oedipus, for it was clear  
 when that winged Sphinx went after him  
 he was a wise man then. We witnessed it.  
 He passed the test and thus endeared himself 610  
 to all the city. So in my thinking now [510]  
 he never will be guilty of a crime.

[*Enter Creon.*]

CREON. You citizens, I have just discovered  
 that Oedipus, our king, has levelled charges  
 against me, disturbing allegations. 615

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1 *house of Labdacus* The Theban royal family (i.e., the family of Laius, Jocasta, and Creon); *Polybus* The ruler of Corinth, who raised Oedipus and is thus believed to be his father.

That I cannot bear, so I have come here.  
 In these present troubles, if he thinks  
 that he has suffered injury from me,  
 in word or deed, then I have no desire  
 620 to keep on living into ripe old age  
 still bearing his reproach. For me  
 the injury produced by this report  
 is not a single isolated matter—  
 no, it has the greatest scope of all,  
 625 if I end up being called a wicked man  
 here in the city, a bad citizen,  
 by you and by my friends.

[520]

CHORUS LEADER. Perhaps he charged you  
 spurred on by the rash power of his rage,  
 rather than his mind's true judgment.

630 CREON. Was it publicized that my persuasion  
 convinced Teiresias to utter lies?

CHORUS LEADER. That's what was said. I have no idea  
 just what that meant.

CREON. Did he accuse me  
 and state the charges with a steady gaze,  
 635 in a normal frame of mind?

CHORUS LEADER. I do not know.  
 What those in power do I do not see.  
 But he's approaching from the palace—  
 here he comes in person.

[530]

[*Enter Oedipus from the palace.*]

OEDIPUS. You! How did you get here?  
 Have you grown so bold-faced that you now come  
 640 to my own home—you who are obviously  
 the murderer of the man whose house it was,  
 a thief who clearly wants to steal my throne?  
 Come, in the name of all the gods, tell me this—  
 did you plan to do it because you thought  
 645 I was a coward or a fool? Or did you think  
 I would not learn about your actions  
 as they crept up on me with such deceit—  
 or that, if I knew, I could not deflect them?  
 This attempt of yours, is it not madness—  
 650 to chase after the king's place without friends,

[540]

- without a horde of men, to seek a goal  
 which only gold or factions could attain?
- CREON. Will you listen to me? It's your turn now  
 to let me make a suitable response.
- Once you hear that, then judge me for yourself. 655
- OEDIPUS. You are a clever talker. But from you  
 I will learn little. I know you now—  
 a troublemaker, an enemy of mine.
- CREON. At least first listen to what I have to say.
- OEDIPUS. Do not bother trying to convince me 660  
 that you have done no wrong.
- CREON. If you think being stubborn  
 and forgetting common sense is wise,  
 then you have not been thinking properly. [550]
- OEDIPUS. And if you think that you can try to harm  
 a man who is a relative of yours 665  
 and walk away without a penalty  
 then you have not been thinking wisely.
- CREON. I agree. What you've just said makes sense.  
 So tell me the nature of the damage  
 you claim you're suffering because of me. 670
- OEDIPUS. Did you or did you not persuade me  
 to send for Teiresias, that prophet?
- CREON. Yes. And I'd still give you the same advice.
- OEDIPUS. How long is it since Laius ... [*pauses*]
- CREON. Did what? 675  
 What's Laius got to do with anything?
- OEDIPUS. ... since Laius was carried off and disappeared,  
 since he was killed so brutally? [560]
- CREON. A long time—  
 many years have passed since then.
- OEDIPUS. At that time,  
 was Teiresias as skilled in prophecy?
- CREON. Then, as now, he was honoured for his wisdom. 680
- OEDIPUS. And back then did he ever mention me?
- CREON. No, never—not while I was with him.
- OEDIPUS. Did you not investigate the killing?
- CREON. Yes, of course we did. But we found nothing.
- OEDIPUS. Why did this man, this wise man, not speak up? 685
- CREON. I do not know. And when I don't know something,  
 I like to hold my tongue.



It's not my nature to love such policies. 725  
 And if another man pursued such things,  
 I would not work with him. I could not bear to.  
 If you want proof of this, then go to Delphi.  
 Ask the prophet if I brought to you  
 exactly what was said. At that point, 730  
 if you discover I have planned something,  
 that I have conspired with Teiresias,  
 then arrest me and have me put to death,  
 not merely on your own authority,  
 but on mine as well, a double judgment. 735  
 Do not condemn me on an unproved charge.  
 It is not right to judge these things by guesswork,  
 to assume bad men are good or good men bad. [610]  
 I say a man who throws away a noble friend  
 is like a man who parts with his own life, 740  
 the thing most dear to him. Give it some time.  
 Then you will see clearly; only time  
 can fully validate a man who's true.  
 A bad man is exposed in just one day.  
 CHORUS LEADER. For a man concerned about being killed, 745  
 my lord, he has spoken eloquently.  
 Those who are unreliable give rash advice.  
 OEDIPUS. If some conspirator moves against me,  
 in secret and with speed, I must be quick  
 to make my counter plans. If I just rest 750  
 and wait for him to act, then he'll succeed [620]  
 in what he wants to do, and I'll be finished.  
 CREON. What do you want—to exile me from here?  
 OEDIPUS. No. I want you to die, not just run off—  
 so I can demonstrate what envy means. 755  
 CREON. You are determined not to change your mind  
 or listen to me?  
 OEDIPUS. You'll not convince me,  
 for there is no way that I can trust you.  
 CREON. I can see that you've become unbalanced.<sup>1</sup>  
 OEDIPUS. I'm sane enough to guard my interests. 760

1 *No. I ... unbalanced* There is some argument about who speaks which lines in 622–26 of the Greek text. I follow Jebb's suggestions, ascribing 625 ("You are determined ... to me?") to Creon, to whom it seems clearly to belong (in spite of the manuscripts) and adding a line ("You'll not ... trust you") to indicate Oedipus' response.

CREON. You should be protecting mine as well.

OEDIPUS. But you're a treacherous man. It's your nature.

CREON. What if you're wrong?

OEDIPUS. I still have to govern.

CREON. Not if you do it badly.

OEDIPUS. O Thebes—

765 my city!

CREON. I, too, have some rights in Thebes—  
it is not yours alone.

[630]

[*The palace doors open.*]

CHORUS LEADER. My lords, an end to this.  
I see Jocasta coming from the palace,  
and just in time. With her assistance  
you should bring this quarrel to a close.

[*Enter Jocasta from the palace.*]

770 JOCASTA. You foolish men, why are you arguing  
in such a stupid way? With our land so sick,  
aren't you ashamed to start a private fight?  
You, Oedipus, go in the house, and you,  
Creon, return to yours. Why inflate  
775 a trivial matter into something huge?

CREON. Sister, your husband Oedipus intends  
to punish me in one of two dreadful ways—  
to banish me from my own fathers' land  
or to arrest me and then have me killed.

[640]

OEDIPUS. That's right.

780 Lady, I caught him committing treason,  
a vicious crime against me personally.

CREON. Let me not prosper but die a man accursed,  
if I have done what you accuse me of.

JOCASTA. Oedipus,  
for the sake of the gods, trust him in this.

785 Respect that oath he made before all heaven—  
do it for my sake and for those around you.

CHORUS LEADER. I beg you, my lord, consent to this—  
agree with her.

OEDIPUS. What is it then  
you're asking me to do?

[650]

CHORUS LEADER. Pay Creon due respect.

He has not been foolish in the past, and now  
that oath he's sworn has power. 790

OEDIPUS. Are you aware  
just what you're asking?

CHORUS LEADER. Yes. I understand.

OEDIPUS. Then tell me clearly what you mean to say.

CHORUS LEADER. You should not accuse a friend of yours  
and thus dishonour him with a mere story 795  
which may be false, when he has sworn an oath  
and therefore could be subject to a curse.

OEDIPUS. By this point you should clearly understand,  
what you are doing when you request this—  
you're seeking to exile me from Thebes or kill me. 800

CHORUS LEADER. No, no, by sacred Helios,<sup>1</sup> the god [660]  
who stands pre-eminent before the rest!  
May I die the most miserable of deaths,  
abandoned by the gods and by my friends,  
if I have ever harboured such a thought! 805  
But the destruction of our land wears down  
my troubled heart—and so does this quarrel,  
if you two add new problems to the ones  
which have for so long been afflicting us.

OEDIPUS. Let him go, then, even though it means 810  
I must be killed or sent from here in exile,  
forced out in disgrace. I have been moved [670]  
to act compassionately by what you said,  
not by Creon's words. But if he stays here,  
he will be hateful to me.

CREON. You are stubborn— 815  
obviously unhappy to concede,  
and when you lose your temper, you go too far.  
But men like that find it most difficult  
to tolerate themselves. In that there's justice.

OEDIPUS. Why not go—leave me alone? 820

CREON. I'll leave—  
since I see you do not understand me.  
But these men here know I'm a reasonable man.

[Exit Creon away from the palace, leaving Oedipus, Jocasta, and the chorus  
on stage.]

1 Helios Sun god, sometimes identified with Apollo.

CHORUS LEADER. Lady, will you escort our king inside?

JOCASTA. Yes, once I've learned what happened here. [680]

CHORUS LEADER. They talked—

825 their words gave rise to uninformed suspicions,  
but even unjust words inflict sore wounds.

JOCASTA. From both of them?

CHORUS LEADER. Yes.

JOCASTA. What caused it?

CHORUS LEADER. With our country already in distress,  
it is enough, it seems to me, enough  
to leave things as they are.

830 OEDIPUS. Now do you see  
the point you've reached thanks to your noble wish  
to dissolve and dull what I felt in my heart?

CHORUS LEADER. My lord, I have declared it more than once, [690]

835 if I abandoned you, who, when this land,  
my cherished Thebes, was in great trouble,  
set it right again and who, in these harsh times  
should prove a trusty and successful guide.

JOCASTA. By all the gods, my king, please let me know  
840 why in this present matter you now feel  
such unremitting rage.

OEDIPUS. To you I'll speak, lady, [700]  
since I respect you more than all these men.

It's Creon's fault. He conspired against me.

JOCASTA. In this quarrel what was said? Tell me.

845 OEDIPUS. Creon claims that I'm the murderer—  
that I killed Laius.

JOCASTA. Does he know this first hand,  
or has he picked it up from someone else?

OEDIPUS. No. He set up that treasonous prophet.  
What he says himself sounds innocent.

850 JOCASTA. All right, forget about those things you've said.  
Listen to me, and ease your mind with this—  
no human being has skill in prophecy.  
I'll show you why with this example. [710]  
King Laius once received an oracle.

855 I won't say it came straight from Apollo,  
but it was from those who do assist the god.  
It said Laius was fated to be killed

- by a child of ours, one born to him and me.  
 Now, at least according to the story,  
 one day Laius was killed by foreigners, 860  
 by robbers, at a place where three roads meet.  
 Besides, before our child was three days old,  
 Laius pinned his ankles tight together  
 and ordered other men to throw him out  
 on a mountain rock where no one ever goes. 865  
 And so Apollo's plan that he'd become [720]  
 the one who killed his father didn't work,  
 and Laius never suffered what he feared,  
 that his own son would be his murderer,  
 although that's what the oracle had claimed. 870  
 So don't concern yourself with prophecies.  
 Whatever gods intend to bring about  
 they themselves make known quite easily.
- OEDIPUS. Lady, as I listen to these words of yours,  
 my soul is shaken, my mind confused ... 875
- JOCASTA. Why do you say that? What's worrying you?
- OEDIPUS. I thought I heard you say that Laius  
 was murdered at a place where three roads meet. [730]
- JOCASTA. That's what was said and people still believe.
- OEDIPUS. Where is this place? Where did it happen? 880
- JOCASTA. In a land called Phocis. Two roads lead there—  
 one from Delphi and one from Daulia.
- OEDIPUS. How long is it since these events took place?
- JOCASTA. The story was reported in the city  
 just before you assumed royal power 885  
 here in Thebes.
- OEDIPUS. O Zeus, what have you done?  
 What have you planned for me?
- JOCASTA. What is it,  
 Oedipus? Why is your spirit so troubled?
- OEDIPUS. Not yet, [740]  
 no questions yet. Tell me this—Laius,  
 how tall was he? How old a man? 890
- JOCASTA. He was big—his hair was turning white.  
 In shape he was not all that unlike you.
- OEDIPUS. The worse for me! I may have set myself  
 under a dreadful curse without my knowledge!
- JOCASTA. What do you mean? As I look at you, my king, 895

I start to tremble.

OEDIPUS. I am afraid,  
full of terrible fears the prophet sees.  
But you can reveal this better if you now  
will tell me one thing more.

JOCASTA. I'm shaking,

900 but if you ask me, I will answer you.

OEDIPUS. Did Laius have a small escort with him [750]  
or a troop of soldiers, like a royal king?

JOCASTA. Five men, including a herald, went with him.  
A carriage carried Laius.

OEDIPUS. Alas! Alas!

905 It's all too clear! Lady, who told you this?

JOCASTA. A slave—the only one who got away.  
He came back here.

OEDIPUS. Is there any chance  
he's in our household now?

JOCASTA. No.

910 Once he returned and understood that you  
had now assumed the power of slaughtered Laius,  
he clasped my hands, begged me to send him off [760]  
to where our animals graze in the fields,  
so he could be as far away as possible  
from the sight of town. And so I sent him.

915 He was a slave but he'd earned my gratitude.  
He deserved an even greater favour.

OEDIPUS. I'd like him to return back here to us,  
and quickly, too.

JOCASTA. That can be arranged—  
but why's that something you would want to do?

920 OEDIPUS. Lady, I'm afraid I may have said too much.  
That's why I want to see him here before me.

JOCASTA. Then he will be here. But now, my lord,  
I deserve to know why you are so distressed. [770]

OEDIPUS. My forebodings now have grown so great  
925 I will not keep them from you, for who is there  
I should confide in rather than in you  
about such a twisted turn of fortune.

My father was Polybus of Corinth,  
my mother Merope, a Dorian.

930 There I was regarded as the finest man

in all the city, until, as chance would have it,  
 something most astonishing took place,  
 though it was not worth what it made me do.  
 At a dinner there a man who was quite drunk  
 from too much wine began to shout at me, 935  
 claiming I was not my father's real son. [780]  
 That troubled me, but for a day at least  
 I said nothing, though it was difficult.  
 The next day I went to ask my parents,  
 my father and mother. They were angry 940  
 at the man who had insulted them this way,  
 so I was reassured. But nonetheless,  
 the accusation always troubled me—  
 the story had become known everywhere.  
 And so I went in secret off to Delphi. 945  
 I didn't tell my mother or my father.  
 Apollo sent me back without an answer,  
 so I didn't learn what I had come to find.  
 But when he spoke he uttered monstrous things, [790]  
 strange terrors and horrific miseries— 950  
 my fate was to defile my mother's bed,  
 to bring forth to men a human family  
 that people could not bear to look upon,  
 and slay the father who engendered me.  
 When I heard that, I ran away from Corinth. 955  
 From then on I thought of it as just a place  
 beneath the stars. I went to other lands,  
 so I would never see that prophecy fulfilled,  
 the abomination of my evil fate.  
 In my travelling I came across that place 960  
 in which you say your king was murdered.  
 And now, lady, I'll tell you the truth. [800]  
 As I was on the move, I passed close by  
 a spot where three roads meet, and in that place  
 I met a herald and a horse-drawn carriage 965  
 with a man inside, just as you described.  
 The guide there tried to force me off the road—  
 and the old man, too, got personally involved.  
 In my rage, I lashed out at the driver,  
 who was shoving me aside. The old man, 970  
 seeing me walking past him in the carriage,

kept his eye on me, and with his double whip  
struck me on the head, right here on top.

Well, I retaliated in good measure—

[810]

975 With the staff I held I gave him a quick blow  
and knocked him from his carriage to the road.  
He lay there on his back. Then I killed them all.  
If that stranger was somehow linked to Laius,  
who is now more unfortunate than me?

980 What man could be more hateful to the gods?  
No stranger and no citizen can welcome him  
into their lives or speak to him. Instead,  
they must keep him from their doors, a curse  
I laid upon myself. With these hands of mine,

[820]

985 these killer's hands, I now contaminate  
the dead man's bed. Am I not depraved?  
Am I not utterly abhorrent?

Now I must fly into exile and there,  
a fugitive, never see my people,  
990 never set foot in my native land again—  
or else I must get married to my mother  
and kill my father, Polybus, who raised me,  
the man who gave me life. If anyone  
claimed this came from some malevolent god,  
995 would he not be right? O you gods,  
you pure, blessed gods, may I not see that day!

[830]

Let me rather vanish from the sight of men,  
before I see a fate like that engulf me!

CHORUS LEADER. My lord, to us these things are ominous.

1000 But you must sustain your hope until you hear  
the servant who was present at the time.

OEDIPUS. I do have some hope left, at least enough  
to wait for the man we've summoned from the fields.

JOCASTA. Once he comes, what do you hope to hear?

1005 OEDIPUS. I'll tell you. If we discover what he says  
matches what you say, then I'll escape disaster.

[840]

JOCASTA. What was so remarkable in what I said?

OEDIPUS. You said that in his story the man claimed  
Laius was murdered by a band of thieves.

1010 If he still says that there were several men,  
then I was not the killer, since one man  
could never be mistaken for a crowd.

But if he says it was a single man,  
then the scales of justice sink down on me.

JOCASTA. Well, that's certainly what he reported then. 1015

He cannot now withdraw what he once said.

The whole city heard him, not just me alone. [850]

But even if he changes that old news,

he cannot ever demonstrate, my lord,

that Laius' murder fits the prophecy. 1020

For Apollo clearly said the man would die  
at the hands of an infant born from me.

Now, how did that unhappy son of ours

kill Laius, when he'd perished long before?

As far as these predictions go, from now on 1025

I would not look for confirmation anywhere.

OEDIPUS. You're right in what you say. But nonetheless,

send for that peasant. Don't fail to do that. [860]

JOCASTA. I'll call him here as quickly as I can.

Let's go inside. I'll not do anything

which does not meet with your approval. 1030

[*Oedipus and Jocasta go into the palace together.*]

CHORUS. I pray fate still finds me worthy,

demonstrating piety and reverence

in all I say and do—in everything

our loftiest traditions consecrate, 1035

those laws engendered in the heavenly skies,

whose only father is Olympus.

They were not born from mortal men,

nor will they sleep and be forgotten. [870]

In them lives an ageless mighty god.

1040

Insolence gives birth to tyranny—

that insolence which vainly crams itself

and overflows with so much wealth

beyond what's right or beneficial,

that once it's climbed the highest rooftop,

it's hurled down by force—such a quick fall 1045

there's no safe landing on one's feet.

But I pray the god never will abolish

the type of rivalry that helps our state. [880]

1050 That god I will hold onto always,  
the one who stands as our protector.<sup>1</sup>

But if a man conducts himself  
disdainfully in what he says and does,  
and manifests no fear of righteousness,  
1055 no reverence for the statues of the gods,  
may miserable fate seize such a man  
for his disastrous arrogance,  
if he does not behave with justice [890]  
when he strives to benefit himself,  
1060 appropriates all things impiously,  
and, like a fool, profanes the sacred.  
What man is there who does such things  
who can still claim he will ward off  
the arrow of the gods aimed at his heart?  
1065 If such actions are considered worthy,  
why should we dance to honour god?

No longer will I go in reverence  
to the sacred stone, earth's very centre,  
or to the temple at Abae or Olympia,<sup>2</sup> [900]  
1070 if these prophecies fail to be fulfilled  
and manifest themselves to mortal men.  
But you, all-conquering, all-ruling Zeus,  
if by right those names belong to you,  
let this not evade you and your ageless might.  
1075 For ancient oracles which dealt with Laius  
are withering—men now set them aside.  
Nowhere is Apollo honoured publicly,  
and our religious faith is dying away. [910]

[*Jocasta enters from the palace and moves to an altar to Apollo which stands outside the palace doors. She is accompanied by servants.*]

JOCASTA. You leading citizens of Thebes, I think  
1080 it is appropriate for me to visit

1 *Insolence ... protector* This part of the choral song makes an important distinction between two forms of self-assertive action: the first breeds self-aggrandizement and greed; the second is necessary for the protection of the state.

2 *Abae* Site of the temple of Apollo Abaeus, known for its oracles; *Olympia* Site of the temple of Zeus.

our gods' sacred shrines, bearing in my hands  
 this garland and an offering of incense.  
 For Oedipus has let excessive pain  
 seize on his heart and does not understand  
 what's happening now by thinking of the past, 1085  
 like a man with sense. Instead he listens to  
 whoever speaks to him of dreadful things.  
 I can do nothing more with my advice,  
 and so, Lycean Apollo, I come to you,  
 who stand here beside us, a suppliant, [920] 1090  
 with offerings and prayers for you to find  
 some way of cleansing what corrupts us.  
 For now we are all afraid, just like those  
 who on a ship see their helmsman terrified.

*[Jocasta sets her offerings on the altar. A messenger enters, an older man.]*

MESSENGER. Strangers, can you tell me where to find 1095  
 the house of Oedipus, your king? Better yet,  
 if you know, can you tell me where he is?

CHORUS LEADER. His home is here, stranger, and he's inside.  
 This lady is the mother of his children.

MESSENGER. May her happy home always be blessed, 1100  
 for she is his queen, true mistress of his house. [930]

JOCASTA. I wish the same for you, stranger. Your fine words  
 make you deserve as much. But tell us now  
 why you have come. Do you seek information,  
 or do you wish to give us some report? 1105

MESSENGER. Lady, I have good news for your whole house—  
 and for your husband, too.

JOCASTA. What news is that?  
 Where have you come from?

MESSENGER. I've come from Corinth.  
 I'll give you my report at once, and then  
 you will, no doubt, be glad, although perhaps 1110  
 you will be sad, as well.

JOCASTA. What is your news?  
 How can it have two such effects at once?

MESSENGER. The people who live there, in the lands  
 beside the Isthmus,<sup>1</sup> will make him their king.

1 *lands beside the Isthmus* The city of Corinth stood on the narrow stretch of land (the Isthmus) connecting the Peloponnese with mainland Greece, a very strategic position.

- 1115 They have announced it. [940]  
 JOCASTA. What are you saying?  
 Is old man Polybus no longer king?  
 MESSENGER. No. He is dead and in his grave.  
 JOCASTA. What?  
 Has Oedipus' father died?  
 MESSENGER. Yes.  
 If what I'm telling you is not the truth,  
 1120 then I deserve to die.  
 JOCASTA. [*to a servant*] You there—  
 go at once and tell this to your master.  
 [*Servant goes into the palace.*]  
 O you oracles of the gods, so much for you.  
 Oedipus has for so long been afraid  
 that he would murder him. He ran away.  
 1125 And now Polybus has died, killed by fate  
 and not by Oedipus.  
 [*Enter Oedipus from the palace.*]  
 OEDIPUS. Ah, Jocasta,  
 my dearest wife, why have you summoned me [950]  
 to leave our home and come out here?  
 JOCASTA. You must hear this man, and as you listen,  
 1130 decide for yourself what these prophecies,  
 these solemn proclamations from the gods,  
 amount to.  
 OEDIPUS. Who is this man? What report  
 does he have for me?  
 JOCASTA. He comes from Corinth,  
 bringing news that Polybus, your father,  
 1135 no longer is alive. He's dead.  
 OEDIPUS. What?  
 Stranger, let me hear from you in person.  
 MESSENGER. If I must first report my news quite plainly,  
 then I should let you know that Polybus  
 has died. He's gone.  
 OEDIPUS. By treachery,  
 1140 or was it the result of some disease? [960]  
 MESSENGER. With old bodies a slight weight on the scales  
 brings final peace.



1175 that lady—she is still alive.

MESSENGER. This one you fear,  
what kind of woman is she?

OEDIPUS. Old man,  
her name is Merope, wife to Polybus.

[990]

MESSENGER. And what in her makes you so fearful?

OEDIPUS. Stranger,  
a dreadful prophecy sent from the god.

1180 MESSENGER. Is it well known? Or something private,  
which other people have no right to know?

OEDIPUS. No, no. It's public knowledge. Loxias<sup>1</sup>  
once said it was my fate that I would marry  
my own mother and shed my father's blood

1185 with my own hands. That's why, many years ago,  
I left my home in Corinth. Things turned out well,  
but nonetheless it gives the sweetest joy  
to look into the eyes of one's own parents.

MESSENGER. And because you were afraid of her

[1000]

1190 you stayed away from Corinth?

OEDIPUS. And because  
I did not want to be my father's killer.

MESSENGER. My lord, since I came to make you happy,  
why don't I now relieve you of this fear?

OEDIPUS. You would receive from me a worthy thanks.

1195 MESSENGER. That's really why I came—so your return  
might prove a benefit to me back home.

OEDIPUS. But I will never go back to my parents.

MESSENGER. My son, it is so clear you've no idea  
what you are doing ...

OEDIPUS. [*interrupting*] What do you mean, old man?

1200 In the name of all the gods, tell me.

MESSENGER. ... if that's the reason you're a fugitive  
and won't go home.

[1010]

OEDIPUS. I feared Apollo's prophecy  
might reveal itself in me.

MESSENGER. You were afraid  
you might become corrupted through your parents?

1205 OEDIPUS. That's right, old man. That was my constant fear.

MESSENGER. Are you aware these fears of yours are groundless?

1 *Loxias* A common name for Apollo.

OEDIPUS. And why is that? If I was born their child ...

MESSENGER. Because you and Polybus were not related.

OEDIPUS. What do you mean? Was not Polybus my father?

MESSENGER. He was as much your father as this man here,  
no more, no less. 1210

OEDIPUS. But how can any man  
who means nothing to me be just the same  
as my own father?

MESSENGER. But Polybus  
was not your father, no more than I am. [1020]

OEDIPUS. Then why did he call me his son? 1215

MESSENGER. If you must know,  
he received you as a gift, many years ago.  
I gave you to him.

OEDIPUS. He really loved me.  
How could he if I came from someone else?

MESSENGER. Because, before you came, he had no children—  
that made him love you. 1220

OEDIPUS. When you gave me to him,  
had you bought me or discovered me by chance?

MESSENGER. I found you in Cithaeron's forest valleys.

OEDIPUS. What were you doing wandering up there?

MESSENGER. I was looking after flocks of sheep.

OEDIPUS. You were a shepherd, just a hired servant  
roaming here and there? 1225

MESSENGER. Yes, my son, I was.  
But at that time I was the one who saved you. [1030]

OEDIPUS. When you picked me up and took me off,  
what sort of suffering did you save me from?

MESSENGER. The ankles on your feet could tell you that. 1230

OEDIPUS. Ah, my old misfortune. Why mention that?

MESSENGER. Your ankles had been pierced and pinned together.  
I set them free.

OEDIPUS. My dreadful mark of shame—  
I've had that scar there since I was a child.

MESSENGER. That's why fortune gave you your very name,<sup>1</sup>  
the one which you still carry. 1235

1 *That's why ... name* The name *Oedipus* can be construed to mean either "swollen feet" or "knowledge of one's feet." Both terms evoke a strongly ironic sense of how Oedipus, for all his fame as a man of knowledge, is ignorant about his origin.



OEDIPUS. Be brave. Even if I should turn out to be  
 born from a shameful mother whose family  
 for three generations have been slaves,  
 you will still have your noble lineage. 1275

JOCASTA. Listen to me, I beg you. Do not do this.

OEDIPUS. I will not be convinced I should not learn  
 the whole truth of what these facts amount to.

JOCASTA. But I care about your own well being—  
 what I tell you is for your benefit. 1280

OEDIPUS. What you're telling me for my own good  
 just brings me more distress.

JOCASTA. O you unhappy man!  
 May you never find out who you really are!

OEDIPUS. [*to Chorus*] Go, one of you, and bring that shepherd here.  
 Leave the lady to enjoy her noble line. [1070] 1285

JOCASTA. Alas, you poor miserable man!  
 There's nothing more that I can say to you.  
 I'll never speak another word again.

[*Jocasta runs into the palace.*]

CHORUS LEADER. Why has the queen rushed off, Oedipus,  
 so full of grief? I fear a disastrous storm  
 will soon break through her silence. 1290

OEDIPUS. Then let it break,  
 whatever it is. As for myself,  
 no matter how base born my family,  
 I wish to know the seed from where I came.  
 Perhaps my queen is now ashamed of me  
 and of my insignificant origin— 1295  
 she likes to play the noble lady.

But I will never feel myself dishonoured. [1080]  
 I see myself as a child of Fortune—  
 and she is generous, that mother of mine  
 from whom I spring, and the months, my siblings,  
 have seen me by turns both small and great.  
 That's how I was born. I cannot prove false  
 to my own nature, nor can I ever cease  
 from seeking out the facts of my own birth. 1300  
 1305

CHORUS. If I have any power of prophecy  
 or skill in knowing things,  
 then, by the Olympian deities,

1310 you, Cithaeron, at tomorrow's moon [1090]  
 will surely know that Oedipus  
 pays tribute to you as his native land  
 both as his mother and his nurse,  
 and that our choral dance and song  
 acknowledge you because you are  
 1315 so pleasing to our king.  
 O Phoebus, we cry out to you—  
 may our song fill you with delight!

Who gave birth to you, my child?  
 Which one of the immortal gods  
 1320 bore you to your father Pan,<sup>1</sup> [1100]  
 who roams the mountainsides?  
 Was it some bedmate of Apollo,  
 the god who loves all country fields?  
 Perhaps Cyllene's royal king?<sup>2</sup>  
 1325 Or was it the Bacchanalian god<sup>3</sup>  
 dwelling on the mountain tops  
 who took you as a new-born joy  
 from maiden nymphs of Helicon<sup>4</sup>  
 with whom he often romps and plays?

1330 OEDIPUS. You elders, though I've never seen the man [1110]  
 we've been seeking for a long time now,  
 if I had to guess, I think I see him.  
 He's coming here. He looks very old—  
 as is appropriate, if he's the one.  
 1335 And I know the people coming with him,  
 servants of mine. But if you've seen him before,  
 you'll recognize him better than I will.

CHORUS LEADER. Yes, I recognize the man. There's no doubt.  
 He worked for Laius—a trusty shepherd.

[*Enter servant, an old shepherd.*]

1340 OEDIPUS. Stranger from Corinth, let me first ask you—  
 is this the man you spoke of?

MESSENGER. Yes, he is—

1 *Pan* God of shepherds, mountains, and wilderness.

2 *Cyllene's royal king* Hermes, a god born on Mount Cyllene.

3 *Bacchanalian god* Dionysus.

4 *Helicon* Sacred mountain near Cithaeron.

- he's the man you see in front of you. [1120]
- OEDIPUS. You, old man, over here. Look at me.  
Now answer what I ask. Some time ago  
did you work for Laius? 1345
- SERVANT. Yes, as a slave.  
But I was not bought. I grew up in his house.
- OEDIPUS. How did you live? What was the work you did?
- SERVANT. Most of my life I've spent looking after sheep.
- OEDIPUS. Whereabouts? In what specific places?
- SERVANT. On Cithaeron or the neighbouring lands. 1350
- OEDIPUS. Do you know if you came across this man  
anywhere up there?
- SERVANT. Doing what?  
What man do you mean?
- OEDIPUS. The man over here—  
this one. Have you ever met him before? [1130]
- SERVANT. Right now I can't say I remember him. 1355
- MESSENGER. My lord, that's surely not surprising.  
Let me refresh his failing memory.  
I think he will remember all too well  
the time we spent around Cithaeron.  
He had two flocks of sheep and I had one. 1360  
I was with him there for six months at a stretch,  
from early spring until the autumn season.  
In winter I'd drive my sheep down to my folds,  
and he'd take his to pens that Laius owned.  
Isn't that what happened—what I just said? [1140] 1365
- SERVANT. You spoke the truth. But it was long ago.
- MESSENGER. All right, then. Now, tell me if you recall  
how you gave me a child, an infant boy,  
for me to raise as my own foster son.
- SERVANT. What? Why ask about that? 1370
- MESSENGER. This man here, my friend,  
was that young child back then.
- SERVANT. Damn you!  
Can't you keep quiet about it!
- OEDIPUS. Hold on, old man.  
Don't criticize him. What you have said  
is more objectionable than his account.
- SERVANT. My noble master, what have I done wrong? 1375
- OEDIPUS. You did not tell us of that infant boy, [1150]

the one he asked about.

SERVANT. That's what he says,  
but he knows nothing—a useless busybody.

OEDIPUS. If you won't tell us of your own free will,  
1380 once we start to hurt you, you will talk.

SERVANT. By all the gods, don't torture an old man!

OEDIPUS. One of you there, tie up this fellow's hands.

SERVANT. Why are you doing this? It's too much for me!  
What is it you want to know?

OEDIPUS. That child he mentioned—  
1385 did you give it to him?

SERVANT. I did. How I wish  
I'd died that day!

OEDIPUS. Well, you are going to die  
if you don't speak the truth.

SERVANT. And if I do,  
the death I suffer will be even worse.

OEDIPUS. It seems to me the man is trying to stall.

1390 SERVANT. No, no, I'm not. I've already told you—  
I did give him the child.

OEDIPUS. Where did you get it?  
Did it come from your home or somewhere else?

SERVANT. It was not mine—I got it from someone.

OEDIPUS. Which of our citizens? Whose home was it?

1395 SERVANT. In the name of the gods, my lord, don't ask!  
Please, no more questions!

OEDIPUS. If I have to ask again,  
then you will die.

SERVANT. The child was born in Laius' house.

OEDIPUS. From a slave or from some relative of his?

SERVANT. Alas, what I'm about to say now ...  
1400 it's horrible.

OEDIPUS. It may be horrible,  
but nonetheless I have to hear it.

SERVANT. If you must know, they said the child was his.  
But your wife inside the palace is the one  
who could best tell you what was going on.

1405 OEDIPUS. You mean she gave the child to you?

SERVANT. Yes, my lord.

OEDIPUS. Why did she do that?

SERVANT. So I would kill it.

[1160]

[1170]

OEDIPUS. That wretched woman was the mother?

SERVANT. Yes.

She was afraid of dreadful prophecies.

OEDIPUS. What sort of prophecies?

SERVANT. The story went  
that he would kill his father.

1410

OEDIPUS. If that was true,  
why did you give the child to this old man?

SERVANT. I pitied the boy, master, and I thought  
he'd take the child off to a foreign land  
where he was from. But he rescued him,  
and saved him for the greatest grief of all.  
For if you are who this man says you are  
you know your birth carried an awful fate.

[1180] 1415

OEDIPUS. Ah, so it all came true. It's so clear now.  
O light, let me look at you one final time,  
a man who stands revealed as cursed by birth,  
cursed by my own family, and cursed  
by murder where I should not kill.

1420

[*Oedipus goes into the palace.*]

CHORUS. O generations of mortal men,  
how I count your life as scarcely living.  
What man is there, what human being,  
who attains a greater happiness  
than mere appearances, a joy  
which seems to fade away to nothing?  
Poor wretched Oedipus, your fate  
stands here to demonstrate for me  
how no mortal man is ever blessed.

1425

[1190]

1430

Here was a man who fired his arrows well—  
his skill was matchless—and he won  
the highest happiness in everything.  
For, Zeus, he slaughtered the hook-taloned Sphinx  
and stilled her cryptic song. For our state,  
he stood there like a tower against death,  
and from that moment, Oedipus,  
we have called you our king  
and honoured you above all other men,  
the one who rules in mighty Thebes.

1435

[1200]

1440

But now who is there whose story  
 is more terrible to hear? Whose life  
 has been so changed by trouble,  
 1445 by such ferocious agonies?  
 Alas for celebrated Oedipus,  
 the same spacious place of refuge  
 served you both as child and father,  
 the place you entered as a new bridegroom. [1210]  
 1450 How could the furrow where your father planted,  
 poor wretched man, have tolerated you  
 in such silence for so long?

Time, which watches everything  
 and uncovered you against your will,  
 1455 now sits in judgment of that fatal marriage,  
 where child and parent have been joined so long.  
 O child of Laius, how I wish  
 I'd never seen you—now I wail  
 like one whose mouth pours forth laments. [1220]  
 1460 To tell it right, it was through you  
 I found my life and breathed again,  
 and then through you the darkness veils my eyes.

*[The second messenger enters from the palace.]*

SECOND MESSENGER. O you most honoured citizens of Thebes,  
 what actions you will hear about and see,  
 1465 what sorrows you will bear, if, as natives here,  
 you are still loyal to the house of Labdacus!  
 I do not think the Ister or the Phasis rivers  
 could cleanse this house. It conceals too much  
 and soon will bring to light the vilest things,  
 1470 brought on by choice and not by accident. [1230]  
 What we do to ourselves brings us most pain.

CHORUS LEADER. The calamities we knew about before  
 were hard enough to bear. What can you say  
 to make them worse?

SECOND MESSENGER. I'll waste no words—  
 1475 know this—noble Jocasta, our queen, is dead.

CHORUS LEADER. That poor unhappy lady! How did she die?

SECOND MESSENGER. She killed herself. You did not witness it,  
 so you'll be spared the worst of what went on.

But from what I recall of what I saw  
 you'll learn how that poor woman suffered. [1240] 1480  
 She left here frantic and rushed inside,  
 the fingers of both hands clenched in her hair.  
 She ran through the hall straight to her marriage bed.  
 She went in, slamming both doors shut behind her  
 and crying out to Laius, who's been a corpse 1485  
 a long time now. She was remembering  
 that child of theirs born many years ago—  
 the one who killed his father, who left her  
 to conceive cursed children with that son.  
 She lay moaning beside the bed, where she, 1490  
 poor woman, had given birth twice over—  
 a husband from a husband, children from a child. [1250]  
 How she died after that I don't fully know.  
 With a scream Oedipus came bursting in.  
 He would not let us see her suffering, 1495  
 her final pain. We watched him charge around,  
 back and forth. As he moved, he kept asking us  
 to give him a sword, while he tried to find  
 that wife who was no wife—whose mother's womb  
 had given birth to him and to his children. 1500  
 As he raved, some immortal power led him on—  
 no human in the room came close to him.  
 With a dreadful howl, as if someone [1260]  
 had pushed him, he leapt at the double doors,  
 bent the bolts by force out of their sockets, 1505  
 and burst into the room. Then we saw her.  
 She was hanging there, swaying, with twisted cords  
 roped round her neck. When Oedipus saw her,  
 with a dreadful groan he took her body  
 from the noose in which she hung, and then, 1510  
 when the poor woman was lying on the ground—  
 what happened next was a horrific sight—  
 from her clothes he ripped the golden brooches  
 she wore as ornaments, raised them high,  
 and drove them deep into the sockets of his eyes, [1270] 1515  
 crying as he did so: "You will no longer see  
 all those atrocious things I suffered,  
 the dreadful things I did! No. You have seen  
 what you never should have looked upon,

1520 and what I wished to know you did not see.  
 So now and for all future time be dark!"  
 With these words he raised his hand and struck,  
 not once, but many times, right in the sockets.  
 With every blow blood spurted from his eyes  
 1525 down on his beard, and not in single drops,  
 but showers of dark blood spattering like hail. [1280]  
 So what these two have done has overwhelmed  
 not one alone—this disaster swallows up  
 a man and wife together. That old happiness  
 1530 they had before in their rich ancestry  
 was truly joy, but now lament and ruin,  
 death and shame, and all calamities  
 which men can name are theirs to keep.

CHORUS LEADER. And has that suffering man found some relief  
 1535 to ease his pain?

SECOND MESSENGER. He shouts at everyone  
 to open up the gates and thus reveal  
 to all Cadmeians his father's killer,  
 his mother's ... but I must not say those words.  
 He wants them to cast him out of Thebes, [1290]  
 1540 so the curse he laid will not come on this house  
 if he still lives inside. But he is weak  
 and needs someone to lead him on his way.  
 His agony is more than he can bear—  
 as he will show you—for on the palace doors  
 1545 the bolts are being pulled back. Soon you will see  
 a sight which even a man filled with disgust  
 would have to pity.

[*Oedipus enters through the palace doors.*]

CHORUS LEADER. An awful fate for human eyes to witness,  
 an appalling sight—the worst I've ever seen.  
 1550 O you poor man, what madness came on you?  
 What eternal force pounced on your life [1300]  
 and, springing further than the longest leap,  
 brought you this fearful doom? Alas! Alas!  
 You unhappy man! I cannot look at you.  
 1555 I want to ask you many things—there's much  
 I wish to learn. You fill me with such horror,  
 yet there is so much I must see.

- OEDIPUS. Aaaiiii, aaaiii ... Alas! Alas!  
 How miserable I am ... such wretchedness ...  
 Where do I go? How can the wings of air  
 sweep up my voice? O my destiny,  
 how far you have sprung now! [1310] 1560
- CHORUS LEADER. To a fearful place from which men turn away,  
 a place they hate to look upon.
- OEDIPUS. O the dark horror engulfing me,  
 this nameless visitor I can't resist 1565  
 swept here by fair and fatal winds.  
 Alas for me! And yet again, alas for me!  
 The pain of stabbing brooches pierces me!  
 The memory of agonizing shame! 1570
- CHORUS LEADER. In your distress it's not astonishing  
 you bear a double load of suffering,  
 a double load of pain. [1320]
- OEDIPUS. Ah, my friend,  
 so you still care for me, as always,  
 and with patience nurse me now I'm blind. 1575  
 Alas! Alas! You are not hidden from me—  
 I recognize you all too clearly.  
 Though I am blind, I know that voice so well.
- CHORUS LEADER. You have carried out such dreadful things—  
 how could you dare to blind yourself this way? 1580  
 What god drove you to it?
- OEDIPUS. It was Apollo, friends.  
 It was Apollo. He brought on these troubles— [1330]  
 the awful things I suffer. But the hand  
 which stabbed out my eyes was mine alone.  
 In my wretched life, why should I have sight 1585  
 when there was nothing sweet for me to see?
- CHORUS LEADER. What you have said is true enough.
- OEDIPUS. What is there for me to see, my friends?  
 What can I love? Whose greeting can I hear  
 and feel delight? Hurry now, my friends, [1340] 1590  
 lead me away from Thebes—take me somewhere,  
 a man completely lost, utterly accursed,  
 the mortal man the gods despise the most.
- CHORUS LEADER. Unhappy in your fate and in your mind  
 which now knows all. Would I had never known you! 1595
- OEDIPUS. Whoever the man is who freed my feet,

who released me from that cruel shackle [1350]  
 and rescued me from death, may that man die!  
 It was a thankless act. Had I perished then,  
 1600 I would not have brought such agony  
 to myself or to my friends.

CHORUS LEADER. I agree—  
 I, too, would have preferred if you had died.

OEDIPUS. I would not have come to kill my father,  
 and men would not see in me the husband  
 1605 of the woman who gave birth to me.  
 Now I am abandoned by the gods, [1360]  
 the son of a corrupted mother,  
 conceiving children with the woman  
 who gave me my own miserable life.  
 1610 If there is some horrific suffering  
 worse than all the rest, then it too belongs  
 in the fate of Oedipus.

CHORUS LEADER. I do not believe  
 what you did to yourself is for the best.  
 Better to be dead than alive and blind.

1615 OEDIPUS. Don't tell me what I've done is not the best.  
 And from now on spare me your advice. [1370]  
 If I could see, I don't know how my eyes  
 could look at my own father when I come  
 to Hades or at my wretched mother.  
 1620 Against those two I have committed acts  
 so vile that even if I hanged myself  
 that would not be sufficient punishment.  
 Perhaps you think the sight of my own children  
 might give me joy? No! Look how they were born!  
 1625 They could never bring delight to eyes of mine.  
 Nor could the city or its massive walls,  
 or the sacred images of its gods.  
 I am the most abhorred of men, I,  
 the finest man of all those bred in Thebes, [1380]  
 1630 I have condemned myself, telling everyone  
 they had to banish for impiety  
 the man the gods have now exposed  
 as sacrilegious—a son of Laius, too.  
 1635 With such polluting stains upon me,  
 could I set eyes on you and hold your gaze?

No. And if I could somehow block my ears  
and kill my hearing, I would not hold back.  
I'd make a dungeon of this wretched body,  
so I would never see or hear again.

For there is joy in isolated thought, 1640  
completely sealed off from a world of pain. [1390]

O Cithaeron, why did you shelter me?

Why, when I was handed over to you,  
did you not do away with me at once,  
so I would never then reveal to men 1645  
the nature of my birth? Ah Polybus,

and Corinth, the place men called my home,  
my father's ancient house, you raised me well—  
so fine to look at, so corrupt inside!

Now I've been exposed as something gross, 1650  
contaminated in my origins.

O you three roads and hidden forest grove,  
you thicket and defile<sup>1</sup> where three paths meet,  
you who swallowed down my father's blood [1400]  
from my own hands, do you remember me, 1655

what I did there in front of you and then  
what else I did when I came here to Thebes?  
Ah, you marriage rites—you gave birth to me,  
and when I was born, you gave birth again,  
children from the child of that same womb, 1660

creating an incestuous blood family  
of fathers, brothers, children, brides,  
wives and mothers—the most atrocious act  
that human beings commit! But it is wrong 1665  
to talk about what it is wrong to do,

so in the name of all the gods, act quickly—  
hide me somewhere far from the land of Thebes, [1410]  
or slaughter me, or hurl me in the sea,  
where you will never gaze on me again.

Come, allow yourself to touch a wretched man. 1670

Listen to me, and do not be afraid—

for this disease infects no one but me.

CHORUS LEADER. Creon is coming. He is just in time  
to plan and carry out what you propose.

1 *defile* I.e., narrow place in the road.

1675 With you gone he's the only one still left  
to act as guardian of Thebes.

OEDIPUS. Alas,  
how will I talk to him? How can I ask him  
to put his trust in me? Not long ago  
I showed I had no faith in him at all.

[1420]

[*Enter Creon.*]

1680 CREON. Oedipus, I have not come here to mock  
or blame you for disasters in the past.  
But if you can no longer value human beings,  
at least respect our lord the Sun, whose light  
makes all things grow, and do not put on show  
1685 pollution of this kind in such a public way,  
for neither earth nor light nor sacred rain  
can welcome such a sight.

[*Creon speaks to the attending servants.*]

Take him inside the house  
as quickly as you can. The kindest thing  
would be for members of his family  
to be the only ones to see and hear him.

[1430]

1690 OEDIPUS. By all the gods, since you are acting now  
so differently from what I would expect  
and have come here to treat me graciously,  
the very worst of men, do what I ask.

1695 I will speak for your own benefit, not mine.

CREON. What are you so keen to get from me?

OEDIPUS. Cast me out as quickly as you can,  
away from Thebes, to a place where no one,  
no living human being, will cross my path.

1700 CREON. That is something I could do, of course,  
but first I wish to know what the god says  
about what I should do.

OEDIPUS. But what he said  
was all so clear—the man who killed his father  
must be destroyed. And that corrupted man  
is me.

[1440]

1705 CREON. Yes, that is what was said. But now,  
with things the way they are, the wisest thing  
is to ascertain quite clearly what to do.

OEDIPUS. Will you then be making a request  
 on my behalf when I am so deprived?

CREON. I will. For even you must now trust in the gods. 1710

OEDIPUS. Yes, I do. And I have a task for you  
 as I make this plea—that woman in the house,  
 please bury her as you see fit. You are the one  
 to give your own the proper funeral rites.  
 But never let my father's city be condemned 1715  
 to have me living here while I still live. [1450]

Let me make my home up in the mountains  
 by Cithaeron, whose fame is now my own.  
 When my father and mother were alive,  
 they chose it as my special burying place— 1720  
 and thus, when I die, I shall be following  
 the orders of the ones who tried to kill me.  
 And yet I know this much—no disease  
 nor any other suffering can kill me—  
 for I would never have been saved from death 1725  
 unless I was to suffer a strange destiny.

But wherever my fate leads, just let it go.  
 As for my two sons, Creon, there's no need  
 for you to care for them on my behalf.

They are men, and, no matter where they are, 1730  
 they'll always have enough to live on.<sup>1</sup> [1460]

But my two poor daughters have never known  
 my dining table placed away from them  
 or lacked their father's presence. They shared  
 everything I touched—so it has always been. 1735

So take care of them for me. But first let me  
 feel them with my hands, and then I'll grieve.  
 O my lord, you noble heart, let me do that—  
 if my hands could touch them it would seem  
 as if I were with them when I still could see. [1470] 1740

[Some servants lead Antigone and Ismene out of the palace.]

What's this? By all the gods I hear something—  
 is it my two dear children crying ... ?  
 Has Creon taken pity on me  
 and sent out the children, my dear treasures?

1 *As for ... live on* Oedipus' two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, would probably be fifteen or sixteen years old at this time, not old enough to succeed Oedipus.

1745 Is that what's happening?

CREON. Yes. I sent for them.

I know the joy they've always given you—  
the joy which you feel now.

OEDIPUS. I wish you well.

And for this act, may the god watch over you  
and treat you better than he treated me.

1750 Ah, my children, where are you? Come here, [1480]

come into my arms—you are my sisters now—  
feel these hands which turned your father's eyes,  
once so bright, into what you see now,  
these empty sockets. He was a man who,  
1755 seeing nothing, knowing nothing, fathered you  
with the woman who had given birth to him.

I weep for you. Although I cannot see,  
I think about your life in days to come,  
the bitter life which men will force on you.

1760 What citizens will associate with you?  
What feasts will you attend and not come home  
in tears, with no share in the rejoicing? [1490]

When you're mature enough for marriage,  
who will be there for you, my children,

1765 what husband ready to assume the shame  
tainting my children and their children, too?

What perversion is not manifest in us?

Your father killed his father, and then ploughed  
his mother's womb—where he himself was born—  
1770 conceiving you where he, too, was conceived.

Those are the insults they will hurl at you. [1500]

Who, then, will marry you? No one, my children.

You must wither, barren and unmarried.

1775 Son of Menoeceus, with both parents gone,  
you alone remain these children's father.

Do not let them live as vagrant paupers,  
wandering around unmarried. You are  
a relative of theirs—don't let them sink  
to lives of desperation like my own.

1780 Have pity. You see them now at their young age  
deprived of everything except a share  
in what you are. Promise me, you noble soul,  
you will extend your hand to them. And you, [1510]

my children, if your minds were now mature,  
 there's so much I could say. But I urge you—  
 pray that you may live as best you can  
 and lead your destined life more happily  
 than your own father. 1785

CREON. You have grieved enough.  
 Now go into the house.

OEDIPUS. I must obey,  
 although that's not what I desire. 1790

CREON. In due time  
 all things will work out for the best.

OEDIPUS. I will go.  
 But you know there are conditions.

CREON. Tell me.  
 Once I hear them, I'll know what they are.

OEDIPUS. Send me away to live outside of Thebes.

CREON. Only the god can give you what you ask. 1795

OEDIPUS. But I've become abhorrent to the gods.

CREON. Then you should quickly get what you desire.

OEDIPUS. So you agree? [1520]

CREON. I do not like to speak  
 thoughtlessly and say what I don't mean.

OEDIPUS. Come then, lead me off. 1800

CREON. All right,  
 but let go of the children.

OEDIPUS. No, no!  
 Do not take them away from me.

CREON. Don't try to keep control of everything.  
 You have lost the power your life once had.

[*Creon, Oedipus, Antigone, Ismene, and attendants all enter the palace.*]

CHORUS. You residents of Thebes, our native land,  
 look on this man, this Oedipus, the one  
 who understood that celebrated riddle. 1805

He was the most powerful of men.

All citizens who witnessed this man's wealth  
 were envious. Now what a surging tide

of terrible disaster sweeps around him. 1810

So while we wait to see that final day,  
 we cannot call a mortal being happy  
 before he's passed beyond life free from pain.

[1530]