

# SOPHOCLES

## OEDIPUS THE KING

Translated by  
Ian Johnston  
Vancouver Island University  
Nanaimo, BC  
Canada

### TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

In the following text the numbers in square brackets refer to the Greek text; the numbers without brackets refer to the English text. The asterisks indicate links to explanatory notes inserted by the translator.

### BACKGROUND NOTE

Sophocles (495 BC-405 BC) was a famous and successful Athenian writer of tragedies in his own lifetime. Of his 120 plays, only 7 have survived. *Oedipus the King*, also called *Oedipus Tyrannos* or *Oedipus Rex*, written around 420 BC, has long been regarded not only as his finest play but also as the purest and most powerful expression of Greek tragic drama.

Oedipus, a stranger to Thebes, became king of the city after the murder of king Laius, about fifteen or sixteen years before the start of the play. He was offered the throne because he was successful in saving the city from the Sphinx, an event referred to repeatedly in the text of the play. He married Laius' widow, Jocasta, and had four children with her, two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, and two daughters, Antigone and Ismene.

### 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

OEDIPUS THE KING

*[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 laurel branches decorated with wool 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,  
why are you sitting here with wreathed sticks  
in supplication to me, while the city  
fills with incense, chants, and cries of pain?<sup>1</sup>  
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  
who ought to speak for those assembled here.     10     [10]  
What feeling brings you to me—fear or desire?  
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.

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' two shrines,     [20]  
or where Ismenus prophesies with fire.<sup>2</sup>  
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,

<sup>1</sup>Cadmus was the legendary founder of Thebes. Hence, the citizens of Thebes were often called children of Cadmus or Cadmeians.

<sup>2</sup>Pallas is the name of the goddess Pallas Athena. There were two shrines to her in Thebes. Ismenus was a temple to Apollo Ismenios where burnt offerings were the basis for the priest's divination.

OEDIPUS THE KING

swoops down to blast the city, emptying  
the House of Cadmus, and fills black Hades [30]  
with groans and howls. These children and myself  
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—and yet you knew  
no more than we did and had not been taught.<sup>1</sup>

In their stories, the people testify  
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  
or learning from some other human being. 50

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,  
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,

so that it stands secure. In those times past 60  
you brought us joy—and with good omens, too.

Be that same man today. If you're to rule  
as you are doing now, better to be king  
in a land of men than in a desert.

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.

<sup>1</sup>The phrase cruel singer is a reference to the Sphinx, a monster with the body of a lion, wings, 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 provided the answer (a human being), and thus saved the city. The Sphinx then committed suicide.

OEDIPUS THE KING

For I understand that you are ill, and yet, [60]  
sick as you are, there is not one of you 70  
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 the soul inside me sorrows for myself,  
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  
I grasped the only help that I could find 80  
and acted on it. So I have sent away  
my brother-in-law, son of Menoeceus,  
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—  
the time he's been away—I now 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.

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?

<sup>1</sup>A suppliant to Apollo's shrine characteristically wore such a garland if he received favourable news.

OEDIPUS THE KING

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  
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  
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 clearly orders us to drive away  
the polluting stain this land has harboured.  
It will not be healed if we keep nursing it.

OEDIPUS

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

CREON

By banishment— [100]  
or atone for murder by shedding blood again,  
for blood brings on the storm which blasts our state.

OEDIPUS

And the one whose fate the god revealed— 120  
what sort of man is he?

CREON

Before you came, my lord,  
to steer our ship of state, Laius ruled this land.

OEDIPUS

I have heard that, but I never saw the man.

CREON

Laius was killed. And now the god is clear:  
those murderers, he tells us, must be punished,  
whoever they may be.

OEDIPUS

And where are they?

OEDIPUS THE KING

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  
is found, but what is overlooked escapes. 130 [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,  
but did not return.

OEDIPUS

Was there no messenger—  
no companion who made the journey with him  
and witnessed what took place—a person  
who might provide some knowledge men could use?

CREON

They all died—except for one who was afraid  
and ran away. There was only one thing 140  
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  
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,  
unless he had financial help from Thebes? 150

CREON

That's what we guessed. But once Laius was dead  
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?

OEDIPUS THE KING

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  
I will remove, not for some distant friends,  
but for myself. For whoever killed this man [140]  
may soon enough desire to turn his hand  
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  
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.  
O Delian healer, for whom we cry aloud  
in holy awe, what obligation  
will you demand from me, a thing unknown  
or now renewed with the revolving years?  
Immortal voice, O child of golden Hope, 190  
speak to me!

OEDIPUS THE KING

First I call on you, Athena the immortal,  
daughter of Zeus, and on your sister, too, [160]  
Artemis, who guards our land and sits  
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  
a fiery plague to keep disaster 200  
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,  
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.  
As you can see—one by one they swoop away, 210  
off to the shores of the evening god, 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]  
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—  
they mingle with the voices of lament. 220  
O Zeus' golden daughter,  
send your support and strength,  
your lovely countenance!

And that ravenous Ares, god of killing,  
who now consumes me as he charges on  
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  
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]



OEDIPUS THE KING

O father Zeus, with your lighting blast  
let Ares be destroyed!<sup>1</sup>

O Lycean lord, 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.

I call the god who binds his hair with gold,  
the one whose name our country shares, [210]  
the one to whom the Maenads shout their cries,  
Dionysus with his radiant face—  
may he come to us with his flaming torchlight,  
our ally against Ares,  
a god dishonoured among gods.<sup>2</sup>

*[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,  
a stranger to the crime. If I alone  
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:  
Whoever among you knows the man it was 260  
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  
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.

<sup>1</sup>Ares, god of war and killing, was often disapproved of by the major Olympian deities. Amphitrite was a goddess of the sea, married to Poseidon.

<sup>2</sup>Lyceian lord is a reference to Apollo, god of light. Dionysus was also called Bacchus, and Thebes was sometimes called Baccheia (belonging to Bacchus). The Maenads are the followers of Dionysus.

OEDIPUS THE KING

As well as a reward, he'll earn my thanks. 270  
 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  
 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]  
 Ban him from your homes, every one of you, 280  
 for he is our pollution, as the Pythian god  
 in his oracles has just revealed to me.  
 In this I'm acting as an ally of the god  
 and also of dead Laius. And I pray  
 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  
 in my own home and with my knowledge, 290 [250]  
 I may suffer all those things I've just called down  
 upon the killers. And I urge you now  
 to make sure all these orders take effect,  
 for my sake, for the sake of the god,  
 and for our barren, godless, ruined land.  
 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.  
 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,

<sup>1</sup>Lustral water is water purified in a communal religious ritual.

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,  
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.  
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.

CHORUS LEADER

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

OEDIPUS

You may indeed,  
and if there is 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.  
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  
and have been wondering for some time now 340  
why he has not come.

<sup>1</sup>Agenor was the founder of the Theban royal family; his son Cadmus moved from Sidon in Asia Minor to Greece and founded Thebes. Polydorus was son of Cadmus, father of Labdacus, and hence grandfather of Laius.

OEDIPUS THE KING

CHORUS LEADER

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

OEDIPUS

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

CHORUS LEADER

It was said  
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.

OEDIPUS

When a man has no fear of doing the act, 350  
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  
more so than in all other men.

*[Enter TEIRESIAS led by a small BOY]*

OEDIPUS

Teiresias, [300]  
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.

And so we find in you alone, great seer, 360  
our shield and saviour. For Phoebus Apollo,  
in case you have not heard the news, has sent us  
an answer to our question: the only cure  
for this infecting pestilence is to find  
the men who murdered Laius and kill them  
or else expel them from this land as exiles.

So do not withhold from us your prophecies [310]  
from voices of the birds or other means.

Save this city and yourself. Rescue me.  
 Deliver us from all pollution by the dead. 370  
 We are in your hands. For a mortal man  
 the finest labour he can do is help  
 other human beings as best he can.

TEIRESIAS

Alas, alas! How dreadful it can be  
 to have wisdom when it brings no benefit  
 to the man possessing it. This I knew,  
 but it had slipped my mind. Otherwise,  
 I would not have journeyed here.

OEDIPUS

What is wrong? You have come, but seem distressed.

TEIRESIAS

Let me go home. You must bear your burden 380 [320]  
 to the very end, and I will carry mine,  
 if you'll agree with me.

OEDIPUS

What you are saying  
 is not customary and shows little love  
 toward the city state which nurtured you,  
 if you deny us your prophetic voice.

TEIRESIAS

I see your words are also out of place.  
 I do not speak for fear of doing the same.

OEDIPUS

If you know something, then, by the gods,  
 do not turn away. We are your suppliants—  
 all of us—we bend our knees to you. 390

TEIRESIAS

You are all ignorant. I will not reveal  
 the troubling things inside me, nor will I state  
 they are your griefs as well.

OEDIPUS

What are you saying? [330]  
 Do you know and will not say? Do you intend  
 to betray me and destroy the city?

TEIRESIAS

I will cause neither me nor you distress.  
 Why do you vainly question me like this?  
 You will not learn a thing from me.

OEDIPUS

You most disgraceful of disgraceful men!  
You would move something made of stone to rage! 400  
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 are finding fault with me.

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,  
if you wish, as fiercely as you can. 410

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,  
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 [350]  
the very words which you yourself proclaimed  
and from now on not speak to these men or me. 420  
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  
within me makes me strong.

OEDIPUS

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

OEDIPUS THE KING

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.

TEIRESIAS

Did you not grasp my meaning earlier,                   430  
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.

OEDIPUS

That's twice you've stated that disgraceful lie—  
something you'll regret.

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]  
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?

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  
 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—  
 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,  
 to stand up there with Creon, once he's king.                   480 [400]  
 But I think you and your conspirator in this  
 will regret trying to drive me from the state.  
 If you did not look so old, you'd find out  
 the punishment your arrogance deserves.

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?

TEIRESIAS

You may be king, but I do have the right 490  
 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,  
 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?  
 Without your knowledge you have turned into 500  
 the enemy of your own relatives,  
 those in the world below and those up here,  
 and the dreadful scourge of that two-edged curse  
 of father and mother will one day drive you  
 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 will they not soon be heard,  
 once you have learned the truth about the wedding  
 by which you sailed into this royal house— 510  
 a lovely voyage, but the harbour's doomed?<sup>1</sup>  
 You have no notion of the quantity  
 of other troubles which will render you  
 and your own children equals. So go on—  
 keep insulting Creon and my prophecies,  
 for among 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.

<sup>1</sup>Cithaeron was a sacred mountain outside Thebes.

OEDIPUS

I did not know you would speak so stupidly.  
If I had, you would have waited a long time  
before I called you here.

TEIRESIAS

I was born like this.  
You think I am a fool, but to your parents,  
the ones 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.

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—  
that man is here. According to reports,  
he is a stranger who lives here in Thebes.

OEDIPUS THE KING

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 a 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  
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]  
If you discover I have spoken falsely, 560  
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  
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  
on horses riding like a storm. 570  
Against him Zeus' son now springs, [470]  
armed with lightning fire and leading on  
the inexorable and terrifying Furies.<sup>1</sup>  
  
From the snowy peaks of Mount Parnassus  
the message has just flashed, ordering all  
to seek the one whom no one knows.<sup>2</sup>  
Like a wild bull he wanders now,  
hidden in the untamed wood,  
through rocks and caves, alone  
with his despair on joyless feet, 580  
keeping his distance from that doom  
uttered at earth's central navel stone. [480]  
But that fatal oracle still lives,  
hovering above his head forever.

<sup>1</sup>Zeus' son is a reference to Apollo. The Furies are the goddesses of blood revenge.

<sup>2</sup>Parnassus is a famous mountain some distance from Thebes, but visible from the city.

OEDIPUS THE KING

That wise interpreter of prophecies  
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,  
with no clear glimpse of past or future. 590  
I have never heard of any quarrelling,  
past or present, between those two,  
the house of Labdacus and Polybus' son,  
which could give me evidence enough  
to undermine the fame of Oedipus,  
as he seeks vengeance for the unsolved murder  
in the family line of Labdacus.<sup>1</sup>

Apollo and Zeus are truly wise—  
they understand what humans do.  
But there is no sure way to ascertain 600  
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,  
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 endeared himself  
to all the city. So in my thinking now 610 [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.  
That I cannot bear, so I have come here.  
In these present troubles, if he believes  
that he has suffered injury from me,  
in word or deed, then I have no desire  
to keep on living into ripe old age  
still bearing his reproach. For me 620  
the injury produced by this report

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

is not a single isolated matter— [520]  
 no, it has the greatest scope of all,  
 if I end up being called a wicked man  
 here in the city, a bad citizen,  
 by you and by my friends.

CHORUS LEADER

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

CREON

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

CHORUS LEADER

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

CREON

Did he accuse me  
 and announce the charges with a steady gaze,  
 in a normal state of mind?

CHORUS LEADER

I do not know. [530]  
 What those in power do I do not see.  
 But he's approaching from the palace—  
 here he comes in person.

*[Enter OEDIPUS from the palace]*

OEDIPUS

You! How did you get here?  
 Have you grown so bold-faced that you now come  
 to my own home—you who are obviously  
 the murderer of the man whose house it was, 640  
 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  
 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— [540]  
 to chase after the king's place without friends,  
 without a horde of men, to seek a goal 650  
 which only gold or factions could attain?

OEDIPUS THE KING

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.

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

There's one thing you do not have to tell me—  
that you have not done wrong.

CREON

                  If you think being stubborn                   660  
and forgetting common sense is wise,  
then you're not thinking as you should.                   [550]

OEDIPUS

And if you think you can try to injure  
a man who is a relative of yours  
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.

OEDIPUS

Did you or did you not persuade me                   670  
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?  
What's Laius got to do with anything?

OEDIPUS

. . . since Laius was carried off and disappeared,  
since he was killed so brutally?                   [560]

OEDIPUS THE KING

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.

OEDIPUS

And back then did he ever mention me? 680

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?

CREON

I do not know. And when I don't know something,  
I like to hold my tongue.

OEDIPUS

You know enough— [570]  
at least you understand enough to say . . .

CREON

What? If I really do know something  
I will not deny it.

OEDIPUS

If Teiresias  
were not working with you, he would not name me 690  
as the one who murdered Laius.

CREON:

If he says this,  
well, you're the one who knows. But I think  
the time has come for me to question you  
the way that you've been questioning me.

OEDIPUS

Ask whatever you wish. You'll never prove  
that I'm the murderer.

OEDIPUS THE KING

CREON

Then tell me this—  
are you not married to my sister?

OEDIPUS

Since you ask me, yes. I don't deny that.

CREON

And you two rule this land as equals?

OEDIPUS

Whatever she desires, she gets from me. 700 [580]

CREON

And am I not third, equal to you both?

OEDIPUS

That's what makes your friendship so deceitful.

CREON

No, not if you think this through, as I do.  
First, consider this. In your view, would anyone  
prefer to rule and have to cope with fear  
rather than live in peace, carefree and safe,  
if his powers were the same? I, for one,  
have no natural desire to be king  
in preference to performing royal acts.  
The same is true of any other man 710  
whose understanding grasps things properly.  
For now I get everything I want from you, [590]  
but without the fear. If I were king myself,  
I'd be doing many things against my will.  
So how can being a king be sweeter to me  
than royal power without anxiety?  
I am not yet so mistaken in my mind  
that I want things which bring no benefits.  
Now all men are my friends and wish me well,  
and those who seek to get something from you 720  
now flatter me, since I'm the one who brings  
success in what they want. So why would I  
give up such benefits for something else?  
A mind that's wise will not turn treacherous. [600]  
It's not my nature to love such policies.  
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 back to you  
exactly what was said. At that point, 730  
if you discover I have planned something,



that I've 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.  
 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]  
 In my view, to throw 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, since 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,  
 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.

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>

<sup>1</sup>There is some argument about who speaks which lines in 622-626 of the Greek text. I follow Jebb's suggestions, ascribing 625 to Creon, to whom it seems clearly to belong (in spite of the manuscripts) and adding a line to indicate Oedipus' response.

OEDIPUS THE KING

OEDIPUS

I'm sane enough to defend my interests. 760

CREON

You should be protecting mine as well.

OEDIPUS

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

CREON

What if you are wrong?

OEDIPUS

I still have to govern.

CREON

Not if you do it badly.

OEDIPUS

O Thebes—

my city!

CREON

I, too, have some rights in Thebes— [630]  
it is not yours alone.

*[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]*

JOCASTA

You foolish men, why are you arguing 770  
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  
a trivial matter into something huge?

CREON

Sister, your husband Oedipus intends  
to punish me in one of two dreadful ways— [640]  
to banish me from my fathers' country  
or arrest me and then have me killed.

OEDIPUS

That's right.

OEDIPUS THE KING

Lady, I caught him committing treason, 780  
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.  
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. [650]

OEDIPUS

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

CHORUS LEADER

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

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  
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—  
seeking to exile me from Thebes or kill me. 800

CHORUS LEADER

No, no, by sacred Helios, 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,

OEDIPUS THE KING

if I have ever harboured such a thought!  
 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—  
 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—just leave me alone?

CREON

I'll leave— 820  
 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 and JOCASTA and the CHORUS on stage]*

CHORUS LEADER

Lady, will you escort our king inside?

JOCASTA

Yes, once I have learned what happened here. [680]

CHORUS LEADER

They talked—  
 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?

OEDIPUS THE KING

CHORUS LEADER

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

OEDIPUS

Now do you see 830  
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]  
so you must know it would have been quite mad  
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  
why in this present matter you now feel 840  
such unremitting rage.

OEDIPUS

To you I'll speak, lady, [700]  
since I respect you more than I do these men.  
It's Creon's fault. He conspired against me.

JOCASTA

In this quarrel what was said? Tell me.

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 all sounds quite innocent.

JOCASTA

All right, forget about those things you've said. 850  
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.  
I won't say it came straight from Apollo,  
but it was from those who do assist the god.

OEDIPUS THE KING

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.  
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 . . .

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 took over royal power  
here in Thebes.

OEDIPUS

O Zeus, what have you done?  
What have you planned for me?

OEDIPUS THE KING

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—with hair starting to turn 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,  
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,  
but if you ask me, I will answer you. 900

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!  
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, not now.

Once he returned and understood that you  
 had just assumed the power of slaughtered Laius, 910  
 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.  
 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?

OEDIPUS

Lady, I'm afraid I may have said too much. 920  
 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  
 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.  
 There I was regarded as the finest man 930  
 in all the **town**, until, as chance would have it,  
 something most astonishing took place,  
 though it was not worth what it made me do.  
 At dinner there a man who was quite drunk  
 from too much wine began to shout at me,  
 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.  
 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.  
 From then on I thought of it just as 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 will 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,  
 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 **goad**  
 struck me on the head, right here on top.  
 Well, I retaliated in good measure— [810]  
 with the staff I held I hit 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?  
 What man could be more hateful to the gods? 980  
 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]  
 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,

OEDIPUS THE KING

never set foot in my native land again— 990  
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,  
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.  
But you must sustain your hope until you hear 1000  
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?

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.  
If he still says that there were several men, 1010  
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.  
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?

OEDIPUS THE KING

As far as these predictions go, from now on  
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 1030  
which does not meet with your approval.

*[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,  
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  
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]  
That god I will hold onto always, 1050  
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,  
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]

<sup>1</sup>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.

when he strives to benefit himself,  
 appropriates all things impiously, 1060  
 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?  
 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, [900]  
 if these prophecies fail to be fulfilled 1070  
 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.  
 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  
 it is appropriate for me to visit 1080  
 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,  
 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, 1090 [920]  
 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 I find



OEDIPUS THE KING

JOCASTA

What?

Has Oedipus' father died?

MESSENGER

Yes.

If what I'm telling you is not the truth,  
then I deserve to die.

JOCASTA [*to a servant*]

You there—

1120

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.  
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  
to leave our home and come out here?

[950]

JOCASTA

You must hear this man, and as you listen,  
decide for yourself what these prophecies,  
these solemn proclamations from the gods,  
amount to.

1130

OEDIPUS

Who is this man? What report  
does he have for me?

JOCASTA

He comes from Corinth,  
**and brings** news that Polybus, your father,  
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 passed away. He's gone.

OEDIPUS THE KING

OEDIPUS

By treachery,  
or was it the result of some disease? 1140 [960]

MESSENGER

With old bodies a slight weight on the scales  
brings final peace.

OEDIPUS

Apparently his death  
was from an illness?

MESSENGER

Yes, and from old age.

OEDIPUS

Alas! Indeed, lady, why should any man  
pay due reverence to Apollo's shrine,  
where his prophet lives, or to those birds  
which scream out overhead? For they foretold  
that I was going to murder my own father.  
But now he's dead and lies beneath the earth,  
and I am here. I never touched my spear. 1150  
Perhaps he died from a desire to see me—  
so in that sense I brought about his death. [970]  
But as for those prophetic oracles,  
they're worthless. Polybus has taken them  
to Hades, where he lies.

JOCASTA

Was I not the one  
who predicted this some time ago?

OEDIPUS

You did,  
but then I was misguided by my fears.

JOCASTA

You must not keep on filling up your heart  
with all these things.

OEDIPUS

But my mother's bed—  
Surely I should still be afraid of that? 1160

JOCASTA

Why should a man whose life seems ruled by chance  
live in fear—a man who never looks ahead,  
who has no certain vision of his future?  
It's best to live haphazardly, as best one can.  
Do not worry you will wed your mother. [980]

OEDIPUS THE KING

It's true that in their dreams a lot of men  
have slept with their own mothers, but someone  
who ignores all this bears life more easily.

OEDIPUS

Everything you say would be commendable,  
if my mother were not still alive. 1170  
But since she is, I must remain afraid,  
though all that you have said is right.

JOCASTA

But still,  
your father's death is a great comfort to us.

OEDIPUS

Yes, it is good, I know. But I do fear  
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.

MESSENGER

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

OEDIPUS

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

<sup>1</sup>Loxias was a common name for Apollo.



OEDIPUS THE KING

MESSENGER

And because you were afraid of her [1000]  
you stayed away from Corinth?

OEDIPUS

And because 1190  
I did not want to be my father's killer.

MESSENGER

My lord, since I came to make you happy,  
why do I not relieve you of this fear?

OEDIPUS

You would receive from me a worthy thanks.

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

MESSENGER

. . . if that's the reason you're a fugitive [1010]  
and won't go home.

OEDIPUS

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

MESSENGER

You were afraid  
you might become corrupted through your parents?

OEDIPUS

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

MESSENGER

Are you aware these fears of yours are groundless?

OEDIPUS

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

MESSENGER

Because you and Polybus were not related.



OEDIPUS THE KING

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,  
the one that you still carry.

OEDIPUS:

Tell me,  
in the name of heaven, did my parents,  
my father or my mother, do this to me?

MESSENGER

I don't know. The man who gave you to me  
knows more of that than I do.<sup>1</sup>

OEDIPUS

You mean to say 1240  
you got me from someone else? It wasn't you  
who stumbled on me?

MESSENGER

No, it wasn't me.  
Another shepherd gave you to me. [1040]

OEDIPUS

Who?  
Who was he? Do you know? Can you tell me  
any details, things you are quite sure of?

<sup>1</sup>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 THE KING

MESSENGER

Well, I think he was one of Laius' servants—  
that's what people said.

OEDIPUS

You mean king Laius,  
the one who ruled this country years ago?

MESSENGER

That's right. He was one of the king's shepherds.

OEDIPUS

Is he still alive? Can I still see him? 1250

MESSENGER

You people live here. You'd best answer that.

OEDIPUS [*turning to the Chorus*]

Do any of you here now know the man,  
this shepherd he describes? Have you seen him,  
either in the fields or here in Thebes?  
Answer me. It's critical, time at last  
to find out what this means. [1050]

CHORUS LEADER

The man he mentioned  
is, I think, the very peasant from the fields  
you wanted to see earlier. But of this  
Jocasta could tell more than anyone.

OEDIPUS

Lady, do you know the man we sent for— 1260  
just minutes ago—the one we summoned here?  
Is he the one this messenger refers to?

JOCASTA

Why ask me what he means? Forget all that.  
There's no point trying to sort out what he said.

OEDIPUS

With all these indications of the truth  
here in my grasp, I cannot end this now.  
I must reveal the details of my birth.

JOCASTA

In the name of the gods, no! If you have 1060  
some concern for your own life, then stop!  
Do not keep on investigating this. 1270  
I will suffer—that will be enough.

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.

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]

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 1290  
will soon break through her silence.

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—  
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 1300  
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.

CHORUS

If I have any power of prophecy  
or skill in knowing things,  
then, by the Olympian deities,  
you, Cithaeron, at tomorrow's moon [1090]  
will surely know that Oedipus 1310  
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  
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  
bore you to your father Pan, 1320 [1100]  
who roams the mountainsides?  
Was it some bedmate of Apollo,  
the god who loves all country fields?  
Perhaps Cyllene's royal king?  
Or was it the Bacchanalian god  
dwelling on the mountain tops  
who took you as a new-born joy  
from maiden nymphs of Helicon  
with whom he often romps and plays?<sup>1</sup>

OEDIPUS [*looking out away from the palace*]

You elders, though I've never seen the man 1330 [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.  
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.

<sup>1</sup>Cyllene's king is the god Hermes, who was born on Mount Cyllene; the Bacchanalian god is Dionysus.

OEDIPUS THE KING

CHORUS LEADER

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

*[Enter SERVANT, an old shepherd]*

OEDIPUS

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

MESSENGER

Yes, he is—  
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?

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 run into him? [1130]

SERVANT

Right now I can't say I remember him.

MESSENGER

My lord, that's surely not surprising.  
Let me refresh his failing memory.  
I think he will remember all too well

OEDIPUS THE KING

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]

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?

MESSENGER

                    This man here, my friend, 1370  
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?

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,  
once we start to hurt you, you will talk. 1380

SERVANT

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

OEDIPUS

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



OEDIPUS THE KING

SERVANT

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

OEDIPUS

That child he mentioned—  
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. [1160]

SERVANT

No, no, I'm not. I've already told you— 1390  
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?

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 . . .  
it's horrible.

OEDIPUS THE KING

OEDIPUS

And I'm about to hear it. 1400 [1170]  
But nonetheless I have to know this.

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.

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.

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.

OEDIPUS

If that was true, 1410  
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,  
only to save him for the greatest grief of all. [1180]  
For if you're the one this man says you are  
you know your birth carried an awful fate.

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, 1420

cursed by my own family, and cursed  
by murder where I should not kill.

*[OEDIPUS moves 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 [1190]  
than mere appearances, a joy  
which seems to fade away to nothing?  
Poor wretched Oedipus, your fate  
stands here to demonstrate for me 1430  
how no mortal man is ever blessed.

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, [1200]  
and from that moment, Oedipus,  
we have called you our king  
and honoured you above all other men, 1440  
the one who rules in mighty Thebes.

But now who is there whose story  
is more terrible to hear? Whose life  
has been so changed by trouble,  
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]  
How could the furrow where your father planted, 1450  
poor wretched man, have tolerated you  
in such silence for so long?

Time, which watches everything  
and uncovered you against your will,  
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]  
To tell it right, it was through you 1460

OEDIPUS THE KING

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,  
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,  
brought on by choice and not by accident.       1470       [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—  
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.       1480       [1240]  
She left here frantic and rushed inside,  
the fingers on 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  
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,  
her final pain. We watched him charge around,

OEDIPUS THE KING

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,  
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 his eyeballs, [1270]  
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,  
and what I wished to know you did not see. 1520  
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  
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  
they had before in their rich ancestry 1530  
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  
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.

OEDIPUS THE KING

He wants them to cast him out of Thebes, [1290]  
so the curse he laid will not come on this house 1540  
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  
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.  
O you poor man, what madness came on you? 1550  
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.  
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 1560 [1310]  
sweep up my voice? O my destiny,  
how far you have sprung now!

CHORUS LEADER

To a fearful place from which men turn away,  
a place they hate to look upon.

OEDIPUS

O the dark horror wrapped around me,  
this nameless visitor I can't resist  
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, [1320]  
a double load of pain.

OEDIPUS

Ah, my friend,

OEDIPUS THE KING

so you still care for me, as always,  
and with patience nurse me now I'm blind.  
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 eyes  
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, 1590 [1340]  
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!

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,  
I would not have brought such agony 1600  
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  
of the woman who gave birth to me.

OEDIPUS THE KING

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.  
If there is some suffering more serious 1610  
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.

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.  
Against those two I have committed acts 1620  
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!  
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]  
I have condemned myself, telling everyone 1630  
they had to banish for impiety  
the man the gods have now exposed  
as sacrilegious—a son of Laius, too.  
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  
the nature of my birth? Ah Polybus  
and Corinth, the place men called my home,





OEDIPUS THE KING

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.  
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.

CREON

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

OEDIPUS

But what he said [1440]  
was all so clear—the man who killed his father  
must be destroyed. And that corrupted man  
is me.

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 depraved?

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  
 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  
 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 [1460]  
 they'll always have enough to live on.<sup>1</sup>  
 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.  
 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. 1740 [1470]

*[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?  
 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.

<sup>1</sup>Oedipus' two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, would probably be fifteen or sixteen years old at this time, not old enough to succeed Oedipus.

OEDIPUS THE KING

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

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

What citizens will associate with you? 1760

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,  
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—  
conceiving you where he, too, was conceived. 1770

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.

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.

Have pity. You see them now at their young age 1780  
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.

CREON

You have grieved enough.

Now go into the house.

OEDIPUS THE KING

OEDIPUS

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

CREON

In due time                      1790  
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.

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.

CREON

All right,                      1800  
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.

OEDIPUS THE KING

*[CREON, OEDIPUS, ANTIGONE, ISMENE, and ATTENDANTS all enter the palace]*<sup>1</sup>

CHORUS

You residents of Thebes, our native land,  
look on this man, this Oedipus, the one  
who understood that celebrated riddle.  
He was the most powerful of men.  
All citizens who witnessed this man's wealth  
were envious. Now what a surging tide                    1810  
of terrible disaster sweeps around him.  
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]

<sup>1</sup>It is not entirely clear from these final lines whether Oedipus now leaves Thebes or not. According to Jebb's commentary (line 1519), in the traditional story on which Sophocles is relying, Oedipus was involuntarily held at Thebes for some time before the citizens and Creon expelled him from the city. Creon's lines suggest he is going to wait to hear from the oracle before deciding about Oedipus. However, there is a powerful dramatic logic in having Oedipus stumble off away from the palace.