

Sophocles
OEDIPUS THE KING

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

In the following text the line numbers in square brackets refer to the Greek text; the line numbers without brackets refer to the English text. The footnotes and stage directions have been provided by the translator.

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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's widow, Jocasta, and had four children with her, two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, and two daughters, Antigone and Ismene.

OEDIPUS THE KING

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

OEDIPUS: king of Thebes.

PRIEST: the high priest of Thebes.

CREON: Oedipus's 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 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?¹
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.
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.

10 [10]

PRIEST

Oedipus, ruler of my native land,
you see how people here of every age

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

OEDIPUS THE KING

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's two shrines,
or where Ismenus prophesies with fire.² [20]
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
with groans and howls. These children and myself[30]
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.³
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.

²Pallas 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.

³The 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

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
declare that we were first set right again
and later fell. No. Restore our city,
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, 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.

[50]

60

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,
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 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
and acted on it. So I have sent away
my brother-in-law, son of Menoeceus,
Creon, to Pythian Apollo's shrine,
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.

[60]

70

80

[70]

90

PRIEST

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

OEDIPUS THE KING

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.⁴

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,
what message do you bring us from the god?

100

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
than any pain I feel for my own life.

110

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.

⁴A suppliant to Apollo's shrine characteristically wore such a garland if he received favourable news.

OEDIPUS THE KING

OEDIPUS

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

CREON

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

[100]

OEDIPUS

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

120

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?
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 THE KING

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
he could inform us of with confidence
about the things he saw.

140

OEDIPUS

What was that?

We might get somewhere if we had one fact—
we could find many things, if we possessed
some slender hope to get us going.

[120]

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?

CREON

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

[130]

OEDIPUS

Then I will start afresh and once again

OEDIPUS THE KING

shed light on darkness. It is most fitting
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
may soon enough desire to turn his hand
to punish me in the same way, as well.

160

Thus, in avenging Laius, I serve myself.
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.

[140]

170

[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,
come as our saviour and end our sickness.

180

[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!

First I call on you, Athena the immortal,
daughter of Zeus, and on your sister, too,
Artemis, who guards our land and sits

[160]

OEDIPUS THE KING

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
from the city and have banished it,
then come to us this time as well!

200

Alas, the pains I bear are numberless—
my people now all sick with plague,
our minds can find no weapons
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,
off to the shores of the evening god, like birds
faster than fire which no one can resist.

[170]

210

Our city dies—we've lost count of all the dead.
Her sons lie in the dirt unpitied, unlamented.
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.

[180]

220

O Zeus's 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!⁵

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
with which she races through the Lycian hills.

240

I call the god who binds his hair with gold,
the one whose name our country shares,
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.⁶

[210]

[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
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
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
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.

250

[220]

260

⁵Ares, god of war and killing, was often disapproved of by the major Olympian deities. Amphitrite was a goddess of the sea, married to Poseidon.

⁶Lycean 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 female followers of Dionysus.

OEDIPUS THE KING

If someone knows the killer is a stranger, [230]
from some other state, let him not stay mute.
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.⁷ [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—
she would have borne his children, if his hopes [260]
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

⁷Lustral water is water purified in a communal religious ritual.

OEDIPUS THE KING

concerned my own father, and I will strive
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.⁸
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—
may they all perish in our present fate
or one more hateful still. To you others,
you Cadmeians who support my efforts,
may Justice, our ally, and all the gods
attend on us with kindness all our days.

310

[270]

320

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
to force the gods to speak against their will.

280

CHORUS LEADER

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

330

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.

⁸Agenor 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

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 why he has not come.

340

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
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,
he's not afraid of words. 35a

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]

OEDIPUS THE KING

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,
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
from voices of the birds or other means.

Save this city and yourself. Rescue me.

Deliver us from all pollution by the dead.

We are in your hands. For a mortal man
the finest labour he can do is help
other human beings as best he can.

360

[310]

370

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
to the very end, and I will carry mine,
if you'll agree with me.

380 [320]

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 THE KING

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 THE KING

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
the very words which you yourself proclaimed
and from now on not speak to these men or me.
For the accursed polluter of this land is you.

[350]

420

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.

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,
or are you trying to test me with your question?

430

[360]

OEDIPUS

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

OEDIPUS THE KING

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.
You have no idea how bad things are.

440

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—
for your ears, your mind, your eyes are blind!

[370]

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
who can glimpse daylight.

450

TEIRESIAS

It is not your fate
to fall because of me. Lord Apollo
will make that happen. He will be enough.

OEDIPUS THE KING

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
surpassing all in life's rich rivalries,
how much envy you must carry with you,
if, for this kingly office—which the city
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
how you have ever given evidence
of your wise prophecy. When the Sphinx,
that singing bitch, was here, you said nothing
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.
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.

[380]

460

[390]

470

480 [400]

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?

OEDIPUS THE KING

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, 490
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—
a lovely voyage, but the harbour's doomed?⁹ 510
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!
Off with you! Now! Turn your back and go! 430
And don't come back here to my home again. 520

TEIRESIAS

I would not have come, but you summoned me.

OEDIPUS

I did not know you would speak so stupidly.

⁹Cithaeron was a sacred mountain outside Thebes.

OEDIPUS THE KING

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—

OEDIPUS THE KING

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
about the one who murdered Laius—
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.
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.

[450]

550

If you discover I have spoken falsely,
you can say I lack all skill in prophecy.

[460]

560

[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's son now springs,
armed with lightning fire and leading on
the inexorable and terrifying Furies.¹⁰

[470]

From the snowy peaks of Mount Parnassus
the message has just flashed, ordering all
to seek the one whom no one knows.¹¹
Like a wild bull he wanders now,

¹⁰Zeus's son is a reference to Apollo. The Furies are the goddesses of blood revenge.

¹¹Parnassus is a famous mountain some distance from Thebes, but visible from the city.

OEDIPUS THE KING

hidden in the untamed wood,
through rocks and caves, alone
with his despair on joyless feet,
keeping his distance from that doom
uttered at earth's central navel stone.
But that fatal oracle still lives,
hovering above his head forever.

580

[480]

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.
I have never heard of any quarrelling,
past or present, between those two,
the house of Labdacus and Polybus's 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.¹²

590

Apollo and Zeus are truly wise—
they understand what humans do.
But there is no sure way to ascertain
if human prophets grasp things any more
than I do, although in wisdom one man
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
he never will be guilty of a crime.

600

[500]

610 [510]

[Enter CREON.]

¹²Polybus 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).

OEDIPUS THE KING

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
the injury produced by this report
is not a single isolated matter—
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.

620

[520]

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.
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 THE KING

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,
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—
to chase after the king's place without friends,
without a horde of men, to seek a goal
which only gold or factions could attain?

640

[540]

650

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
and forgetting common sense is wise,
then you're not thinking as you should.

660

[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.

OEDIPUS THE KING

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]

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?

OEDIPUS THE KING

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—
at least you understand enough to say . . .

[570]

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.

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 THE KING

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
whose understanding grasps things properly.

710

For now I get everything I want from you,
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?

[590]

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
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?

720

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,
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.

730

OEDIPUS THE KING

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,
the thing most dear to him. Give it some time. 740
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
and wait for him to act, then he'll succeed
in what he wants to do, and I'll be finished. 750 [620]

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.¹³

OEDIPUS

I'm sane enough to defend my interests. 760

¹³There 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's response.

OEDIPUS THE KING

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—
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.]

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
a trivial matter into something huge?

770

CREON

Sister, your husband Oedipus intends
to punish me in one of two dreadful ways—

[640]

OEDIPUS THE KING

to banish me from my fathers' country
or arrest me and then have me killed.

OEDIPUS

That's right.

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

780

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
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

OEDIPUS THE KING

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
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!
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.

[660]

OEDIPUS

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

810

[670]

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

820

[Exit CREON away from the palace, leaving OEDIPUS and JOCASTA and the CHORUS on stage.]

OEDIPUS THE KING

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?

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,
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.

[690]

JOCASTA

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

840

OEDIPUS THE KING

OEDIPUS

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

[700]

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.
Listen to me, and ease your mind with this—
no human being has skill in prophecy.

850

I'll show you why with this example.
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.
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,
by robbers, at a place where three roads meet.

[710]

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
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.

860

[720]

So don't concern yourself with prophecies.

870

OEDIPUS THE KING

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?

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

OEDIPUS THE KING

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,
 he clasped my hands, begged me to send him off
 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.

910
 [760]

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.
 That's why I want to see him here before me.

920

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
 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.

930

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.
 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,

[780]

my father and mother. They were angry
 at the man who had insulted them this way,

940

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, 970
 who was shoving me aside. The old man,
 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

OEDIPUS THE KING

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,
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,
would he not be right? O you gods,
you pure, blessed gods, may I not see that day!
Let me rather vanish from the sight of men,
before I see a fate like that engulf me!

990

[830]

CHORUS LEADER

My lord, to us these things are ominous.
But you must sustain your hope until you hear
the servant who was present at the time.

1000

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,
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.

1010

JOCASTA

Well, that's certainly what he reported then.

OEDIPUS THE KING

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
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]

OEDIPUS THE KING

That god I will hold onto always,
the one who stands as our protector.¹⁴

1050

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
when he strives to benefit himself,
appropriates all things impiously,
and, like a fool, profanes the sacred.

[890]

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?

1060

No longer will I go in reverence
to the sacred stone, earth's very centre,
or to the temple at Abae or Olympia,
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.
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.

[900]

1070

[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
our gods' sacred shrines, bearing in my hands
this garland and an offering of incense.
For Oedipus has let excessive pain

1080

¹⁴This 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.

OEDIPUS THE KING

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,
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.

1090 [920]

[JOCASTA sets her offerings on the altar. A MESSENGER enters, an older man.]

MESSENGER

Strangers, can you tell me where I find
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,
for she is his queen, true mistress of his house.

1100

[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?

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

OEDIPUS THE KING

you will, no doubt, be glad, although perhaps
you will be sad, as well.

110

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, will make him their king.¹⁵
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's 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.]

¹⁵The city of Corinth stood on the narrow stretch of land (the Isthmus) connecting the Peloponnese with mainland Greece, a very strategic position.

OEDIPUS THE KING

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

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 THE KING

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.
Perhaps he died from a desire to see me—
so in that sense I brought about his death.
But as for those prophetic oracles,
they're worthless. Polybus has taken them
to Hades, where he lies.

1150

[970]

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.
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.

[980]

OEDIPUS

Everything you say would be commendable,
if my mother were not still alive.

1170

OEDIPUS THE KING

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,
which other people have no right to know? [1180]

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.¹⁶ 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
you stayed away from Corinth? [1000]

¹⁶Loxias is a common name for Apollo.

OEDIPUS THE KING

OEDIPUS

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

1190

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
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?

OEDIPUS

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

MESSENGER

Are you aware these fears of yours are groundless?

OEDIPUS THE KING

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?

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.

OEDIPUS

When you gave me to him,
had you bought me or found me by accident?

1220

MESSENGER

I found you in Cithaeron's forest valleys.

OEDIPUS THE KING

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?

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,
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?

OEDIPUS THE KING

MESSENGER

I don't know. The man who gave you to me
knows more of that than I do.¹⁷

OEDIPUS

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

1240

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?

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]

¹⁷The 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

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—
just minutes ago—the one we summoned here?
Is he the one this messenger refers to? 1260

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
some concern for your own life, then stop! [1060]
Do not keep on investigating this.
I will suffer—that will be enough. 1270

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 THE KING

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 hurries off 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—
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

CHORUS

If I have any power of prophecy
or skill in knowing things,

OEDIPUS THE KING

then, by the Olympian deities,
you, Cithaeron, at tomorrow's moon
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
so pleasing to our king.
O Phoebus, we cry out to you—
may our song fill you with delight!

[1090]

1310

Who gave birth to you, my child?
Which one of the immortal gods
bore you to your father Pan,
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?¹⁸

1320 [1100]

OEDIPUS [*looking out away from the palace*]
You elders, though I've never seen the man
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.

1330 [1110]

CHORUS LEADER

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

[Enter SERVANT, an old shepherd.]

¹⁸Cyllene's king is the god Hermes, who was born on Mount Cyllene; the Bacchanalian god is Dionysus.

OEDIPUS

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

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.

OEDIPUS THE KING

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.
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?

1360

[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,
was that young child back then.

1370

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,
the one he asked about.

[1150]

OEDIPUS THE KING

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.

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—
I did give him the child.

1390

OEDIPUS

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

OEDIPUS THE KING

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's house.

OEDIPUS

From a slave or from some relative of his?

SERVANT

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

OEDIPUS

And I'm about to hear it.
But nonetheless I have to know this.

1400 [1170]

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 THE KING

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,
why did you give the child to this old man?

1410

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.
For if you're the one this man says you are
you know your birth carried an awful fate.

[1180]

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 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
than mere appearances, a joy
which seems to fade away to nothing?
Poor wretched Oedipus, your fate

[1190]

stands here to demonstrate for me
how no mortal man is ever blessed.

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.

[1200]

1440

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,
poor wretched man, have tolerated you
in such silence for so long?

1450

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
I found my life and breathed again,
and then through you the darkness veils my eyes.

1460

[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.
 What we do to ourselves brings us most pain.

1470 [1230]

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,
 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—

OEDIPUS THE KING

no human in the room came close to him.
With a dreadful howl, as if someone
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,
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,
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.
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.
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
was truly joy, but now lament and ruin,
death and shame, and all calamities
which men can name are theirs to keep.

[1260]

1510

[1270]

1520

[1280]

1530

[1290]

1540

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.
He wants them to cast him out of Thebes,
so the curse he laid will not come on this house

OEDIPUS THE KING

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?
What eternal force pounced on your life
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.

1550

[1300]

OEDIPUS

Aaaиии, aaиии . . . 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!

1560 [1310]

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

OEDIPUS THE KING

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.
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—
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? [1330]

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
and rescued me from death, may that man die! [1350]
It was a thankless act. Had I perished then,

OEDIPUS THE KING

I would not have brought such agony
to myself or to my friends.

1600

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.

Now I am abandoned by the gods,
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
than all the rest, then it too belongs
in the fate of Oedipus.

[1360]

1610

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.
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.

[1370]

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!
They could never bring delight to eyes of mine.

1620

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,
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.

[1380]

1630

OEDIPUS THE KING

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,
completely sealed off from a world of pain.
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,
my fathers' ancient house, you raised me well—
so fine to look at, so corrupt inside!

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

O you three roads and hidden forest grove,
you thicket and defile where three paths meet,
you who swallowed down my father's blood
from my own hands, do you remember me,
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 once more,
children from the child of that same womb,
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
to talk about what it is wrong to do,
so in the name of all the gods, act quickly—
hide me somewhere outside the land of Thebes,
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.
Listen to me, and do not be afraid—
for this disease infects no one but me.

1640

[1390]

1650

[1400]

1660

[1410]

1670

CHORUS LEADER

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

OEDIPUS THE KING

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.]

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
pollution of this kind in such a public way,
for neither earth nor light nor sacred rain
can welcome such a sight.
1680

[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.

OEDIPUS THE KING

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

[1440]

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—
and thus, when I die, I shall be following
the orders of the ones who tried to kill me.

1720

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]

OEDIPUS THE KING

they'll always have enough to live on.¹⁹
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.
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,
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?
What feasts will you attend and not come home
in tears, with no share in the rejoicing?

1750 [1480]

1760

[1490]

¹⁹Oedipus's 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

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.
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.

[1500]

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,
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.

1780

[1510]

CREON

You have grieved enough.

Now go into the house.

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.

OEDIPUS THE KING

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.

[*CREON, OEDIPUS, ANTIGONE, ISMENE, and ATTENDANTS all enter the palace.*]²⁰

²⁰It 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.

OEDIPUS THE KING

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
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.

1810

[1530]

[The Chorus exits.]

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.