

Oedipus the King

Sophocles - Oedipus the King 1 **Dramatis Personae**

Sophocles (c. 420 BCE) (CC) BY-NC-SA, Ian Johnston 2004

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Translator's Note

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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.

OEDIPUS: king of Thebes

PRIEST: the high priest of Thebes

CREON: Oedipus' brother-in-law

CHORUS of Theban elders

TEIRESIAS: an old blind prophet

BOY: attendant on Teiresias

JOCASTA: wife of Oedipus, sister of

Creon MESSENGER: an old man

SERVANT: an old shepherd

SECOND MESSENGER: a servant of Oedipus

ANTIGONE: daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta, a child

ISMENE: daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta, a child

SERVANTS and ATTENDANTS on Oedipus and
Jocasta

[The action takes place in Thebes in front of the royal palace. The main doors are directly facing the audience. There are altars beside the doors. A crowd of citizens carrying branches decorated with laurel garlands and 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. 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 sticks
or else in front of Pallas' two shrines,
or where Ismenus prophesies with fire.²
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 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 singer³—and yet you knew
no more than we did and had not been
taught. In their stories, the people testify

¹ *Cadmus*: legendary founder of Thebes. Hence, the citizens of Thebes were often called children of Cadmus or Cadmeians. ² *Pallas*: Pallas Athena. There were two shrines to her in Thebes. Ismenus: A temple to Apollo Ismenios where burnt offerings were the basis for the priest's divination.

³ *cruel singer*: 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.

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how, with gods' help, you gave us back our lives. So now,
Oedipus, our king, most powerful 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,
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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
or learning from some other human being. 50 For, in my
view, men of experience
provide advice which 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
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, it's 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 your life together there.

OEDIPUS: My poor children, I know why you have
come—I am not ignorant of what you yearn for.
For I well know that you are ill, and yet,
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,
I followed up the one thing 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,
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,
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]*

⁴berries: a suppliant to Apollo's shrine characteristically wore such a garland if he received favourable

news.(CC) BY-NC-SA, Ian Johnston 2004

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

CREON: Good news. I tell you even troubles difficult to bear will all end happily if events lead to the right conclusion.

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

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—which will not be healed if we keep nursing it.

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

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CREON: By banishment— or atone for murder by shedding blood again. This 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. (CC) BY-NC-SA, Ian Johnston 2004

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

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—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?

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CREON: It was the
Sphinx— she sang her enigmatic song and thus forced
us to put aside something we found obscure
to look into the urgent 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, as is right, you will see how I
work with you, seeking vengeance for this
land, as well as for the god. This polluting stain
I will remove, not for some distant friend,
but for myself. For whoever killed this man
may soon enough desire to turn his hand

in the same way against me, too, and kill me.
Thus, in avenging Laius, I serve myself. 170 But now, my
children, as quickly as you can
stand up from these altar steps and take
your suppliant branches. Someone must call

death,
appear to me!
If before now you have ever driven off

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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 it 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.

*[The PRIEST and the CITIZENS leave. Enter the CHORUS OF
THEBAN ELDERS]*

CHORUS: Oh 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
on her glorious round throne in our market
place, and on Phoebus, who shoots from far
away. O you three guardians against

a fiery plague to keep away 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
to serve as 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.
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 chambers of Amphitrite⁵
or inhospitable waves of Thrace. 230
destruction does not come at night,

then day arrives to see it does its work.
O you who wield that mighty flash of fire,
O father Zeus, with your lighting blast
let Ares be destroyed!

O Lyceian lord,⁶ 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 the blazing fires of Artemis, as well, 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,
the one to whom the Maenads shout their
cries, Dionysus with his radiant face—⁷
may he come to us with his flaming
torchlight, our ally against Ares,
a god dishonoured among gods.

[Enter OEDIPUS from the palace]

For if

⁵ 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.

⁶ lord of Lyceia: a reference to Apollo, god of light.

⁷ ... *among gods*: Dionysus was also called Bacchus, and Thebes was sometimes called Baccheia (belonging to Bacchus). The Maenads are the followers of Dionysus.

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OEDIPUS: You pray. But if you listen now to me,
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one of you, 280

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 shall 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. That being the case,
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 murderer's 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,
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.⁸

⁸ *lustral water*: water purified in a communal religious ritual.

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for he is our pollution, as the Pythian god
has just revealed to me. In doing this,
I'm acting as an ally of the god
and of dead Laius, too. 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 a honoured guest
in my own home and with my knowledge, 290 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 prompting 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 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 will fight on his behalf, as if this matter
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to let me know.

CHORUS LEADER: Our lord Teiresias,
I know, can see into things, like lord Apollo.
concerned my father, and I will strive 310 to do everything
I can to find him,
the man who spilled his blood, and thus
avenge the son of Labdacus and Polydorus,
of Cadmus and Agenor from old times. ⁹
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, 320 may Justice,
our ally, and all the gods
attend on us with kindness always.

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.

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

From him, my king, a man investigating this
might well find out the 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.

CHORUS LEADER: Apart from
that, there are rumours—but inconclusive ones
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.

⁹ *Agenor*: founder of the Theban royal family; his son Cadmus moved from Sidon in Asia Minor to Greece and founded Thebes. *Polydorus*: son of Cadmus, father of Labdacus, and hence grandfather of Laius.

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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 the truth resides more so than in all other men.

[Enter TEIRESIAS led by a small BOY]

OEDIPUS:

Teiresias, you who understand all things—what can be taught and what cannot be spoken of, what goes on

in heaven and here on the earth—you know, although you cannot see, how sick our state is. 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 in voices of the birds or by some other means. Save this city and yourself. Rescue me.

Deliver us from this pollution by the dead. 370 We are in your hands. For a mortal man the finest labour he can do is help with all his power other human beings.

TEIRESIAS: Alas, alas! How dreadful it can be to have wisdom when it brings no benefit to the man possessing it. This I knew,

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but it had slipped my mind. Otherwise, I would not have journeyed here.

OEDIPUS: What's wrong? You've come, but seem so sad.

TEIRESIAS: Let me go home. You must bear your burden 380 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 heaven, 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, which I can call your grief as well.

OEDIPUS: What are you saying? 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'd move something made of stone to rage! 400

Will you not speak out? Will your stubbornness never have an end?

TEIRESIAS: You blame my temper, but do not see the one which lives within you. Instead, you are finding fault with me.

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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? Speak it again,

OEDIPUS: What man who listened to these words of yours would not be enraged—you insult the city!

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 the very words which you yourself proclaimed and from now on not speak to me or these men. 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.

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so I can understand you more precisely.

TEIRESIAS: Did you not grasp my words before, 430 or are you trying to test me with your question?

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

TEIRESIAS: I say that you yourself are the very man you're looking for.

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—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. It's up to Apollo to 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 riches, ruling power, skill after skill surpassing all in this life's 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

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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 470 to set the people free. Why not? Her riddle

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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 But I think you and your conspirator in this will regret trying to usurp the state. If you did not look so old, you'd find 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's not what we need. Instead we should be looking into this: How can we best carry out the god's decree?

TEIRESIAS: You may be king, but I have the right 490 to answer you—and I control that right, for I am not your slave. I serve Apollo,

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've become 500 the enemy of
your own kindred,
those in the world below and those up here,
and the dreadful feet of that two-edged curse

from father and mother both will 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? Where on
Cithaeron¹⁰ will they not soon be heard, once you have learned
the truth about the wedding

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OEDIPUS: Everything you speak is all so cryptic— 530 like a
riddle.

TEIRESIAS: Well, in solving riddles,
are you not the best there is?

OEDIPUS: Mock my excellence,
by which you sailed into this royal house— 510 a lovely
voyage, but the harbour's doomed?
You've no idea 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 no one
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! 520 And don't
come back here to my home again.

TEIRESIAS: I would not have come, but you summoned me.

OEDIPUS: I did not know you 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.

¹⁰ *Cithaeron*: the sacred mountain outside Thebes.

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but you will find out I am truly great.

TEIRESIAS: That quality of yours now ruins you.

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'll just 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
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. 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 them. He sowed the same womb as
his father and murdered him. Go in and think on this.
Sophocles - Oedipus the King 13

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 naval stone.
But that fatal oracle still lives,
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 on the storm. 570 Against him Zeus' son
now springs,
armed with lightning fire and leading on
the inexorable and terrifying Furies.¹¹

From the snowy peaks of Mount Parnassus¹²
the message has just flashed, ordering all
to seek the one whom no one knows.

¹¹ *Zeus' son*: a reference to Apollo. *The Furies*: goddesses of blood revenge.
hovering above his head forever.

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 flutter 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,¹³
which could give me evidence enough
to undermine the fame of Oedipus,
as he seeks vengeance for the unsolved murder
for the family of Labdacus.

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

¹² *Parnassus*: a famous mountain some distance from Thebes, but visible from the city. [

¹³ *Polybus*: 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).

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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
Sophocles - Oedipus the King 14

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. to all the city. So in my thinking now 610 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 any injury from me, in word or deed, then I have no desire to continue living into ripe old age still bearing his reproach. For me 620 the injury produced by this report

is no 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.

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 opinions convinced Teiresias to utter lies? 630 (CC) BY-NC-SA, Ian

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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? Has your face grown so bold 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—

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?

CREON: Will you listen to me? It's your turn now
to hear me make a suitable response.
Once you know, then judge me for yourself.

OEDIPUS: You are a clever talker. But from you I will learn
nothing. I know you now— a troublemaker, an enemy of mine.

CREON: At least first listen to what I have to say.
Sophocles - Oedipus the King 15

CREON: That was long ago—
many years have passed since then.

OEDIPUS: At that time,
was Teiresias as skilled in prophecy?

OEDIPUS: There's one thing you do not have to tell
me— you have betrayed me.

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

OEDIPUS: And if you think you can act to injure
a man who is a relative of yours
and escape without a penalty
then you're not thinking as you should.

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?

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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 keep my mouth shut.

OEDIPUS: You know enough—
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 all you want. You'll not 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?

Sophocles - Oedipus the King 16

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.
It's not my nature to love such policies.
And if another man pursued such things,
I'd not work with him. I couldn't bear to.
If you want proof of this, then go to Delphi.
Ask the prophet if I brought back to you

OEDIPUS: Whatever she desires, she gets from me. 700

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,
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 I greet all men, and they all welcome me.

Those who wish to get something from you 720 now flatter
me, since I'm the one who brings

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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 just on your own authority,
but on mine as well, a double judgment.

Do not condemn me on an unproved charge.
It's not fair to judge these things by guesswork,
to assume bad men are good or good men bad.

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'll 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
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's no way that I can trust you.

CREON: I can see that you've become unbalanced.¹⁴
Sophocles - Oedipus the King 17

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
silly way? With our land so sick,
are you not ashamed to start a private fight?
You, Oedipus, go in the house, and you,
Creon, return to yours. Why blow up

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: Oh
Thebes— my city!

CREON: I have some rights in Thebes as well—
it is not yours alone.

[The palace doors open]

a trivial matter into something huge?

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

OEDIPUS: That's right. Lady, I
caught him committing treason, 780 conspiring against my
royal authority.

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: They
talked—their words gave rise to uninformed suspicions,
an all-consuming lack of proper justice.

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 my firmer purpose?

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
which now consume us, should prove a trusty guide.

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

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.

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 sounds

innocent.

Sophocles - Oedipus the King 19

JOCASTA: All right, forget about those things you've said. 850
Listen to me, and ease your mind with this—

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no human being has skill in prophecy.
I'll show you why with this example.
King Laius once received a prophecy.
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 conceived by 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 fused 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. 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. JOCASTA:

That's what was said and people still believe. OEDIPUS: Where
is this place? Where did it happen? 880

Sophocles - Oedipus the King 20

will tell me one thing more.

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: Oh 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,
no questions yet. Tell me this—Laius,
how tall was he? How old a man? 890

JOCASTA: He was big—his hair was turning
white. In shape he was not all that unlike you.

OEDIPUS: The worse for me! I may have just 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

JOCASTA: I'm shaking,
but if you ask me, I will answer you. 900 (CC) BY-NC-SA, Ian

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OEDIPUS: Did Laius have a small escort with him
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 servant—the only one who got
away. He came back here.

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

JOCASTA: No.
Once he returned and understood that you
had now assumed the power of slaughtered Laius, 910 he
clasped my hands, begged me to send him off to where our
animals graze out 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.

In my rage, I lashed out at the driver,
 who was shoving me aside. The old man, 970 seeing me
 walking past him in the carriage,
 kept his eye on me, and with his double whip
 struck me on my head, right here on top.
 Well, I retaliated in good measure—
 I hit him a quick blow with the staff I held
 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,
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,

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

JOCASTA: What was so remarkable in what I said?

Sophocles - Oedipus the King 22

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 I'm the one responsible for this.

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.

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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?
So as far as these oracular sayings go,
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.

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.
In them lives an ageless mighty god. 1040

Insolence gives birth to tyranny—
that insolence which vainly crams itself
and overflows with so much stuff
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 rivalry so beneficial to our state.
Sophocles - Oedipus the King 23

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.
That god I will hold on to always, 1050 the one who

stands as our protector.¹⁵

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, 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,
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.

[JOCASTA enters from the palace and moves to an altar to Apollo which stands outside the palace doors. She is accompanied by one or two SERVANTS]

JOCASTA: You leading men of Thebes, I think
it is appropriate for me to visit 1080 our god's sacred
shrine, 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 for him with my advice,
and so, Lycean Apollo, I come to you,
who stand here beside us, a suppliant, 1090 with
offerings and prayers for you to find
some way of cleansing what corrupts us.
For now we are 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]

¹⁵ 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.

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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?
Sophocles - Oedipus the King 24

JOCASTA: What are you saying?
Is old man Polybus no longer king?

MESSENGER: No. He's dead and in his grave.

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

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

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
you will, no doubt, be glad, although perhaps 1110 you
will be sad, as well.

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

MESSENGER: The people who live there, in the

lands beside the Isthmus, will make him their king.¹⁶

They have announced it.

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]

Oh, you oracles of the gods, so much for you.
Oedipus has for so long been afraid
that he would murder him. He ran away.
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?

JOCASTA: You must hear this man, and as you listen, decide
for yourself what these prophecies, 1130 these solemn
proclamations from the gods,
amount to.

¹⁶ *Isthmus*: The city of Corinth stood on the narrow stretch of land (the Isthmus) connecting the Peloponnese with mainland Greece, a very strategic

report does he have for me?

JOCASTA: He comes from
Corinth, bringing 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

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.
But as for those prophetic oracles,

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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— I am
afraid of that. And surely I should be? 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.

OEDIPUS: Everything you say would be commendable, if my
mother were not still alive. 1170 But since she is, I must
remain afraid,
although what you are saying 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.

what sort of suffering was I going through?

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 tied together.
I set them free.

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

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

MESSENGER: Well, before you came, he had no
children—that made him love you.

OEDIPUS: When you gave me to him, 1220 had
you bought me or found me by accident?

MESSENGER: I found you in Cithaeron's forest
valleys. OEDIPUS: What were you doing wandering up
there? MESSENGER: I was looking after flocks of
sheep.

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

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

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 which you still carry.¹⁸

OEDIPUS: Tell me,
in the name of heaven, why 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.

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.

OEDIPUS: Who?
Who was he? Do you know? Can you tell me
any details, ones you know for certain?

¹⁸ ... *still carry*: 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.

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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.

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 in trying to sort out what he said.

OEDIPUS: With all these indications of the truth

Sophocles - Oedipus the King 28

here in my grasp, I cannot end this now. I must reveal the details of my birth.

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JOCASTA: In the name of the gods, no! If you have some concern for your own life, then stop! Do not keep 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: Oh, 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 family.

JOCASTA: Alas, you poor miserable man!

There's nothing more that I can say to you.
And now I'll never speak 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.
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 change
to someone else, 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
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!

Sophocles - Oedipus the King 29

Who gave birth to you, my child?
Which one of the immortal gods
bore you to your father Pan, 1320 who roams the
mountainsides?

Was it some daughter 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?¹⁹

OEDIPUS: *[looking out away from the palace]*
You elders, although I've never seen the man 1330 we've
been looking 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.

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 mentioned?

¹⁹ Cyllene's king is the god Hermes, who was born on Mount Cyllene; the Bacchanalian god is

Dionysus.(CC) BY-NC-SA, Ian Johnston 2004

MESSENGER: Yes, he
is— he's the man you see in front of you.

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: Where? In what particular areas?

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?

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
the time we spent around Cithaeron.

Sophocles - Oedipus the King 30

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.

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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've just said?

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,
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.

Sophocles - Oedipus the King 31

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?

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

OEDIPUS: And I'm about to hear it. 1400 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

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're going to die if you don't speak the truth.

SERVANT: And if I do, there's an even greater chance that I'll be killed.

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

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

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.

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,
Sophocles - Oedipus the King 32

has been so changed by trouble,
by such ferocious agonies?
Alas, for celebrated Oedipus,
the same spacious place of refuge

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
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,
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

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served you both as child and father,
the place you entered as a new bridegroom.
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. To tell it right, it was through you 1460 I found my life and breathed again, and then through you my eyesight failed.

[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,
Sophocles - Oedipus the King 33 her final pain. We watched him

charge around,

brought on by choice and not by accident.²⁰ 1470 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 see
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 She left

here frantic and rushed inside,
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 by the bed, where she, 1490 poor
woman, had given birth twice over—

a husband from a husband, children from a child.

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,

back and forth. As he moved, he kept asking
us to give him a sword, as 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
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

out of 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,
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
those you never should have looked upon,
and those 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 spattered like hail.

²⁰ This line refers, not to the entire story, but to what Jocasta and Oedipus have just done to

themselves.(CC) BY-NC-SA, Ian Johnston 2004

So what these two have done has overwhelmed not one
alone—this disaster swallows up a man and wife together. That
old happiness
Sophocles - Oedipus the King 34

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.
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. He wants them to cast him out of
Thebes,

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
and, springing further than the longest leap,
brought you this awful doom? Alas! Alas!
You unhappy man! I cannot look at you.

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OEDIPUS: Aaaiiii, aaaiii ... Alas! Alas!
How miserable I am ... such wretchedness ...
Where do I go? How can the wings of air 1560 sweep up
my voice? Oh 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 agony of stabbing brooches
pierces me! The memory of aching shame! 1570

CHORUS LEADER: In your distress it's not
astonishing you bear a double load of suffering,
a double load of pain.

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 nothing I could see
would bring me joy?

Sophocles - Oedipus the King 35

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.
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 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! 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 would have preferred your death, as
well.

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

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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 could see 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 one of all those bred in Thebes,

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.

world of sorrow.

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 father's ancient house, you raised me
well— so fine to look at, so corrupt inside!
Now I've been exposed as something bad, 1650
contaminated in my origins.
Oh 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 then when I was born, you gave birth again, children
from the child of that same womb, 1660 creating an
incestuous blood family
of fathers, brothers, children, brides,
wives and mothers—the most atrocious act
that human beings commit! But it is wrong
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. 1670
Listen to me, and do not be afraid—
for this disease infects no one but me.

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CHORUS LEADER: Creon is coming. He is just in
time to plan and carry out what you propose.
With you gone he's the only one who's 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 treated him with such contempt.

[Enter Creon]

CREON: Oedipus, I have not come here to mock 1680 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.

[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. 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.

Sophocles - Oedipus the King 37

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—

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

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

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.
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'll be following
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—thus, no matter where they are,
1730 they'll always have enough to live on.²¹

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—that's how it's always
been. So take care of them for me. But first let
me

feel them with my hands and then I'll grieve.
Oh 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

*[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.

²¹ Oedipus' two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, would probably be fifteen or sixteen years old at this time, not old enough to succeed

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OEDIPUS: I wish you well. And for this
act, may the god watch over you and treat you better than he
treated me.

Sophocles - Oedipus the King 38

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

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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.

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.

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?

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

OEDIPUS: Come then, lead me off.
Sophocles - Oedipus the King 39 **Notes**

berries: a suppliant to Apollo's shrine characteristically wore such

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 be in charge of everything.
Your life has lost the power you once had.

*[CREON, OEDIPUS, ANTIGONE, ISMENE, and ATTENDANTS
all enter the palace]*²²

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.
a garland if he received favourable news.

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.

lord of Lyceia: a reference to Apollo, god of light.

... among gods: Dionysus was also called Bacchus, and Thebes
was sometimes called Baccheia (belonging to Bacchus). The
Maenads are the followers of Dionysus.

lustral water: water purified in a communal religious ritual.

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

Cithaeron: the sacred mountain outside Thebes.

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

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

²² 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. In Book 23 of the Iliad, Homer indicates that Oedipus died at Thebes, and there were funeral games held in his honour in that city.

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Polybus: 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).

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.

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

Loxias: a common name for Apollo.

... still carry: 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.

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

This line refers, not the entire story, but to what Jocasta and Oedipus have just done to themselves.

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

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Sophocles - Oedipus the King 40

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