

Oedipus the King¹

CHARACTERS

OEDIPUS, king of Thebes
 A PRIEST of Zeus
 CREON, brother of Jocasta
 A CHORUS of Theban citizens and
 their LEADER
 TRESIAS, a blind prophet
 JOCASTA, the queen, wife of
 Oedipus

A MESSENGER from Corinth
 A SHEPHERD
 A MESSENGER from inside the
 palace
 ANTIGONE, ISMENE, daughters of
 Oedipus and Jocasta
 GUARDS and attendants
 PRIESTS of Thebes

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

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

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

OEDIPUS: Oh my children, the new blood of ancient Thebes, why are you here? Huddling at my altar, praying before me, your branches wound in wool.² Our city reeks with the smoke of burning incense, rings with cries for the Healer³ and wailing for the dead. I thought it wrong, my children, to hear the truth from others, messengers. Here I am myself—you all know me, the world knows my fame: I am Oedipus.

[Helping a PRIEST to his feet.]

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

PRIEST: Oh Oedipus, king of the land, our greatest power! You see us before you now, men of all ages clinging to your altars. Here are boys, still too weak to fly from the nest, and here the old, bowed down with the years, the holy ones—a priest of Zeus myself—and here the picked, unmarried men, the young hope of Thebes. And all the rest, your great family gathers now,

1. Translated by Robert Fagles. 2. The insignia of suppliants, laid on the altar and left there until the suppliant's request was granted. At the end of the scene, when Oedipus promises action, he will tell them to take the branches away. 3. Apollo.

branches wreathed, massing in the squares, kneeling before the two temples of queen Athena or the river-shrine where the embers glow and die and Apollo sees the future in the ashes.⁴

Our city—

look around you, see with your own eyes—our ship pitches wildly, cannot lift her head from the depths, the red waves of death . . . Thebes is dying. A blight on the fresh crops and the rich pastures, cattle sicken and die, and the women die in labor, children stillborn, and the plague, the fiery god of fever hurls down on the city, his lightning slashing through us—raging plague in all its vengeance, devastating the house of Cadmus!⁵ And black Death luxuriates in the raw, wailing miseries of Thebes.

Now we pray to you. You cannot equal the gods, your children know that, bending at your altar. But we do rate you first of men,

both in the common crises of our lives and face-to-face encounters with the gods. You freed us from the Sphinx, you came to Thebes and cut us loose from the bloody tribute we had paid that harsh, brutal singer.⁶ We taught you nothing, no skill, no extra knowledge, still you triumphed. A god was with you, so they say, and we believe it—you lifted up our lives.

So now again,

Oedipus, king, we bend to you, your power—we implore you, all of us on our knees: find us strength, rescue! Perhaps you've heard the voice of a god or something from other men, Oedipus . . . what do you know?

The man of experience—you see it every day—his plans will work in a crisis, his first of all.

Act now—we beg you, best of men, raise up our city!

Act, defend yourself, your former glory!

Your country calls you savior now for your zeal, your action years ago.

Never let us remember of your reign:

you helped us stand, only to fall once more.

Oh raise up our city, set us on our feet.

The omens were good that day you brought us joy—

4. At a temple of Apollo in Thebes the priests foretold the future according to patterns they saw in the ashes of the burned flesh of sacrificial victims.

5. Mythical founder of Thebes and its first king. 6. The sphinx was the winged female monster that terrorized the city of Thebes until her riddle was finally answered by Oedipus. The riddle was "What is it that walks on four feet and two feet and three feet and has only one voice; when it walks on most feet, it is weakest?" Oedipus's answer was "Man." (We have four feet as children crawling on all fours and three feet in old age when we walk with the aid of a stick.) Many young men of Thebes had tried to answer the riddle, failed, and been killed.

be the same man today!
Rule our land, you know you have the power,
but rule a land of the living, not a wasteland.
Ship and towered city are nothing, stripped of men
alive within it, living all as one.

OEDIPUS:

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

my wife's own brother, to Delphi—
Apollo the Prophet's oracle⁷—to learn
what I might do or say to save our city.

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

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

OEDIPUS: [*Sighting CREON, then turning to the altar.*]

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

PRIEST: Welcome news, I think—he's crowned, look,
and the laurel wreath is bright with berries.⁸

OEDIPUS: We'll soon see. He's close enough to hear—
[*Enter CREON from the side; his face is shaded with a wreath.*]
Creon, prince, my kinsman, what do you bring us?
What message from the god?

CREON:

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

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

CREON: If you want my report in the presence of these . . .
[*Pointing to the priests while drawing OEDIPUS toward the palace.*]
I'm ready now, or we might go inside.

7. Below Mount Parnassus in central Greece. 8. Creon is wearing a crown of laurel as a sign that he brings good news.

OEDIPUS:

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

CREON:

Very well,
I will tell you what I heard from the god.

Apollo commands us—he was quite clear—
“Drive the corruption from the land,
don't harbor it any longer, past all cure,
don't nurse it in your soil—root it out!”

OEDIPUS: How can we cleanse ourselves—what rites?
What's the source of the trouble?

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

OEDIPUS:

Whose murder?
Whose fate does Apollo bring to light?

CREON:

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

OEDIPUS:

I know—
or so I've heard. I never saw the man myself.

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

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

CREON:

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

OEDIPUS:

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

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

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

CREON:

No,
they were all killed but one. He escaped,
terrified, he could tell us nothing clearly,
nothing of what he saw—just one thing.

OEDIPUS:

What's that?
one thing could hold the key to it all,
a small beginning give us grounds for hope.

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

OEDIPUS:

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

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

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

CREON: The singing, riddling Sphinx. She . . . persuaded us to let the mystery go and concentrate on what lay at our feet.

OEDIPUS: No,

I'll start again—I'll bring it all to light myself!

Apollo is right, and so are you, Creon, to turn our attention back to the murdered man.

Now you have me to fight for you, you'll see:

I am the land's avenger by all rights,

and Apollo's champion too.

But not to assist some distant kinsman, no,

for my own sake I'll rid us of this corruption.

Whoever killed the king may decide to kill me too,

with the same violent hand—by avenging Laius

I defend myself.

[*To the priests.*]

Quickly, my children.

Up from the steps, take up your branches now.

[*To the guards.*]

One of you summon the city⁹ here before us,

tell them I'll do everything. God help us,

we will see our triumph—or our fall.

[OEDIPUS and CREON enter the palace, followed by the guards.]

PRIEST: Rise, my sons. The kindness we came for

Oedipus volunteers himself.

Apollo has sent his word, his oracle—

Come down, Apollo, save us, stop the plague.

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

CHORUS, the citizens of Thebes, who have not heard the news that

CREON brings. They march around the altar, chanting.]

CHORUS:

Great welcome voice of Zeus,¹ what do you bring?

What word from the gold vaults of Delphi

comes to brilliant Thebes? Racked with terror—

terror shakes my heart

and I cry your wild cries, Apollo, Healer of Delos²

I worship you in dread . . . what now, what is your price?

some new sacrifice? some ancient rite from the past

come round again each spring?—

what will you bring to birth?

Tell me, child of golden Hope

warm voice that never dies!

You are the first I call, daughter of Zeus deathless Athena—I call your sister Artemis,³ heart of the market place enthroned in glory,

guardian of our earth—

I call Apollo, Archer astride the thunderheads of heaven—

O triple shield against death, shine before me now!

If ever, once in the past, you stopped some ruin

launched against our walls

you hurled the flame of pain

far, far from Thebes—you gods

come now, come down once more!

No, no

the miseries numberless, grief on grief, no end—

too much to bear, we are all dying

O my people . . .

Thebes like a great army dying

and there is no sword of thought to save us, no

and the fruits of our famous earth, they will not ripen

no and the women cannot scream their pangs to birth—

screams for the Healer, children dead in the womb

and life on life goes down

you can watch them go

like seabirds winging west, outracing the day's fire

down the horizon, irresistibly

striking on to the shores of Evening

Death

so many deaths, numberless deaths on deaths, no end—

Thebes is dying, look, her children

stripped of pity . . .

generations strewn on the ground

unburied, unwept, the dead spreading death

and the young wives and gray-haired mothers with them

clinging to the altars, trailing in from all over the city—

Thebes, city of death, one long cortege

and the suffering rises

wails for mercy rise

and the wild hymn for the Healer blazes out

clashing with our sobs our cries of mourning—

O golden daughter of god,⁴ send rescue

radiant as the kindness in your eyes!

Drive him back!—the fever, the god of death

that raging god of war

not armored in bronze, not shielded now, he burns me,⁵

battle cries in the onslaught burning on—

3. Apollo's sister, a goddess associated with hunting and also a protector of women in childbirth.

4. Athena, daughter of Zeus. 5. The plague is identified with Ares, the war god, though he comes now without armor and shield. Ares is not elsewhere connected with plague; this passage may be an allusion to the early years of the Peloponnesian War, when Spartan troops threatened the city from a position across the walls.

O rout him from our borders!
Sail him, blast him out to the Sea-queen's chamber
the black Atlantic gulfs
or the northern harbor, death to all
where the Thracian⁶ surf comes crashing.
Now what the night spares he comes by day and kills—
the god of death.

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

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

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

God of the headress gleaming gold, I cry to you—
your name and ours are one, Dionysus—
come with your face aflame with wine
your raving women's⁷ cries

your army on the march! Come with the lightning
come with torches blazing, eyes ablaze with glory!
Burn that god of death that all gods hate!

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

OEDIPUS: You pray to the gods? Let me grant your prayers.

Come, listen to me—do what the plague demands:
you'll find relief and lift your head from the depths.
I will speak out now as a stranger to the story,
a stranger to the crime. If I'd been present then,
there would have been no mystery, no long hunt
without a clue in hand. So now, counted
a native Theban years after the murder,
to all of Thebes I make this proclamation:
if any one of you knows who murdered Laius,
the son of Labdacus, I order him to reveal
the whole truth to me. Nothing to fear,
even if he must denounce himself,
let him speak up
and so escape the brunt of the charge—
he will suffer no unbearable punishment,
nothing worse than exile, totally unharmed.
[OEDIPUS pauses, waiting for a reply.]

6. Ares was thought to be at home among the savages of Thrace, to the northeast of Greece proper.
7. The Bacchantes, nymphs or human female votaries of the god Dionysus (Bacchus) who celebrated him with wild dancing rites.

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if anyone knows the murderer is a stranger,
a man from alien soil, come, speak up.
I will give him a handsome reward, and lay up
gratitude in my heart for him besides.
[Silence again, no reply.]

But if you keep silent, if anyone panicking,
trying to shield himself or friend or kin,
rejects my offer, then hear what I will do.

I order you, every citizen of the state
where I hold throne and power: banish this man—
whoever he may be—never shelter him, never
speak a word to him, never make him partner
to your prayers, your victims burned to the gods.
Never let the holy water touch his hands
Drive him out, each of you, from every home.
He is the plague, the heart of our corruption,
as Apollo's oracle has just revealed to me.
So I honor my obligations:
I fight for the god and for the murdered man.

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

These are your orders: perform them to the last.
I command you, for my sake, for Apollo's, for this country
blasted root and branch by the angry heavens.
Even if god had never urged you on to act,
how could you leave the crime uncleansed so long?

A man so noble—your king, brought down in blood—
you should have searched. But I am the king now,
I hold the throne that he held then, possess his bed
and a wife who shares our seed . . . why, our seed
might be the same, children born of the same mother
might have created blood-bonds between us
if his hope of offspring hadn't met disaster—
but fate swooped at his head and cut him short.
So I will fight for him as if he were my father,
stop at nothing, search the world
to lay my hands on the man who shed his blood,
the son of Labdacus descended of Polydorus,
Cadmus of old and Agenor, founder of the line:
their power and mine are one.

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Oh dear gods,
Let no crops grow out of the earth for them —
shrivel their women, kill their sons,
burn them to nothing in this plague
that hits us now, or something even worse.

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But you, loyal men of Thebes who approve my actions,
may our champion, justice, may all the gods
be with us, fight beside us to the end!

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

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

LEADER: Then if I might mention
the next best thing . . .

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

LEADER: I still believe . . .
Lord Tiresias⁸ sees with the eyes of Lord Apollo.
Anyone searching for the truth, my king,
might learn it from the prophet, clear as day.

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

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

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OEDIPUS: Which rumors? I'll search out every word.
LEADER: Laius was killed, they say, by certain travelers.
OEDIPUS: I know — but no one can find the murderer.

LEADER: If the man has a trace of fear in him
he won't stay silent long,
not with your curses ringing in his ears.
OEDIPUS: He didn't flinch at murder,
he'll never flinch at words.

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[Enter Tiresias, the blind prophet, led by a boy with escorts in attendance. He remains at a distance.]

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

OEDIPUS: O Tiresias,

master of all the mysteries of our life,
all you teach and all you dare not tell,
signs in the heavens, signs that walk the earth!
Blind as you are, you can feel all the more

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what sickness haunts our city. You, my lord,
are the one shield, the one savior we can find.

We asked Apollo — perhaps the messengers
haven't told you — he sent his answer back:

"Relief from the plague can only come one way.
Uncover the murderers of Laius,

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put them to death or drive them into exile."

So I beg you, grudge us nothing now, no voice,
no message plucked from the birds, the embers
or the other mantic ways within your grasp.

Rescue yourself, your city, rescue me —
rescue everything infected by the dead.

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We are in your hands. For a man to help others
with all his gifts and native strength:
that is the noblest work.

TIRESIAS: How terrible — to see the truth
when the truth is only pain to him who sees!

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I knew it well, but I put it from my mind,
else I never would have come.

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

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

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

TIRESIAS: I fail to see
that your own words are so well-timed.

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I'd rather not have the same thing said of me . . .

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

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

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OEDIPUS: What? You know and you won't tell?

You're bent on betraying us, destroying Thebes?

TIRESIAS: I'd rather not cause pain for you or me.
So why this . . . useless interrogation?

You'll get nothing from me.

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Nothing! You,

you scum of the earth, you'd enrage a heart of stone!
You won't talk? Nothing moves you?

Out with it, once and for all!

TIRESIAS: You criticize my temper . . . unaware
of the one⁹ you live with, you revile me.

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8. The blind prophet of Thebes (whose ghost Odysseus goes to consult in Hades in *Odyssey* XI).

9. In the Greek the veiled reference to Jocasta is more forceful, because the word translated "the one" has a feminine ending (agreeing with the feminine noun *orgē*, "temper").

OEDIPUS: Who could restrain his anger hearing you?

What outrage—you spurn the city!

TIRESIAS: What will come will come.

Even if I shroud it all in silence.

OEDIPUS: What will come? You're bound to tell me that.

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

OEDIPUS: Oh I'll let loose, I have such fury in me—

now I see it all. You helped hatch the plot,

you did the work, yes, short of killing him.

with your own hands—and given eyes I'd say

you did the killing single-handed!

TIRESIAS:

Is that so!

I charge you, then, submit to that decree

you just laid down: from this day onward

speak to no one, not these citizens, not myself.

You are the curse, the corruption of the land!

OEDIPUS: You, shameless—

aren't you appalled to start up such a story?

You think you can get away with this?

TIRESIAS:

I have already.

The truth with all its power lives inside me.

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

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

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

TIRESIAS: Didn't you understand, just now?

Or are you tempting me to talk?

OEDIPUS: No, I can't say I grasped your meaning.

Out with it, again!

TIRESIAS: I say you are the murderer you hunt.

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

TIRESIAS: Shall I say more, so you can really rage?

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

TIRESIAS: You cannot imagine . . . I tell you,

you and your loved ones live together in infamy,

you cannot see how far you've gone in guilt.

OEDIPUS: You think you can keep this up and never suffer?

TIRESIAS: Indeed, if the truth has any power.

OEDIPUS:

It does

but not for you, old man. You've lost your power,

stone-blind, stone-deaf—senses, eyes blind as stone!

TIRESIAS: I pity you, flinging at me the very insults

each man here will fling at you so soon.

OEDIPUS:

Blind,

lost in the night, endless night that cursed you!

You can't hurt me or anyone else who sees the light—

you can never touch me.

TIRESIAS:

True, it is not your fate

to fall at my hands. Apollo is quite enough

and he will take some pains to work this out.

OEDIPUS: Creon! Is this conspiracy his or yours?

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

OEDIPUS: O power—

wealth and empire, skill outstripping skill

in the heady rivalries of life,

what envy lurks inside you! Just for this,

the crown the city gave me—I never sought it,

they laid it in my hands—for this alone, Creon,

the soul of trust, my loyal friend from the start

steals against me . . . so hungry to overthrow me

he sets this wizard on me, this scheming quack,

this fortune-teller peddling lies, eyes peeled

for his own profit—seer blind in his craft!

Come here, you pious fraud. Tell me,

when did you ever prove yourself a prophet?

When the Sphinx, that chanting Fury kept her deathwatch here,

why silent then, not a word to set our people free?

There was a riddle, not for some passer-by to solve—

it cried out for a prophet. Where were you?

Did you rise to the crisis? Not a word,

you and your birds, you gods—nothing.

No, but I came by, Oedipus the ignorant,

I stopped the Sphinx! With no help from the birds,

the flight of my own intelligence hit the mark.

And this is the man you'd try to overthrow?

You think you'll stand by Creon when he's king?

You and the great mastermind—

you'll pay in tears, I promise you, for this,

this witch-hunt. If you didn't look so senile

the lash would teach you what your scheming means!

LEADER: I would suggest his words were spoken in anger,

Oedipus . . . yours too, and it isn't what we need.

The best solution to the oracle, the riddle

posed by god—we should look for that.

TIRESIAS: You are the king no doubt, but in one respect,

at least, I am your equal: the right to reply.

I claim that privilege too.

I am not your slave. I serve Apollo.

I don't need Creon to speak for me in public.

So,

you mock my blindness? Let me tell you this.

You with your precious eyes,

you're blind to the corruption of your life,

to the house you live in, those you live with—

who are your parents? Do you know? All unknowing

you are the scourge of your own flesh and blood,

the dead below the earth and the living here above.

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and the double lash of your mother and your father's curse will whip you from this land one day, their footfall treading you down in terror, darkness shrouding your eyes that now can see the light!

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Soon, soon

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you'll scream aloud—what haven won't reverberate? What rock of Cithaeron¹ won't scream back in echo? That day you learn the truth about your marriage, the wedding-march that sang you into your halls, the lusty voyage home to the fatal harbor! And a crowd of other horrors you'd never dream will level you with yourself and all your children.

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

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

500

TIRESIAS: I would never have come if you hadn't called me here. OEDIPUS: If I thought you would blurt out such absurdities, you'd have died waiting before I'd had you summoned. TIRESIAS: Absurd, am I! To you, not to your parents: the ones who bore you found me sane enough. OEDIPUS: Parents—who? Wait . . . who is my father? TIRESIAS: This day will bring your birth and your destruction. OEDIPUS: Riddles—all you can say are riddles, murk and darkness. TIRESIAS: Ah, but aren't you the best man alive at solving riddles? OEDIPUS: Mock me for that, go on, and you'll reveal my greatness. TIRESIAS: Your great good fortune, true, it was your ruin. OEDIPUS: Not if I saved the city—what do I care? TIRESIAS: Well then, I'll be going.

505

[To his attendant.]

Take me home, boy.

510

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

515

[Turning his back on TIRESIAS, moving toward the palace.]²

I will go,

once I have said what I came here to say.

I'll never shrink from the anger in your eyes—

you can't destroy me. Listen to me closely:

the man you've sought so long, proclaiming,

cursing up and down, the murderer of Laius—

he is here. A stranger,

you may think, who lives among you,

he soon will be revealed a native Theban

520

1. The mountain range near Thebes, on which Oedipus was left to die when an infant. 2. There are no stage directions in the text. It is suggested here that Oedipus moves off stage and does not hear the critical section of Tiresias's speech (lines 520ff.), which he could hardly fail to connect with the prophecy made to him by Apollo many years ago.

but he will take no joy in the revelation. Blind who now has eyes, beggar who now is rich, he will grope his way toward a foreign soil, a stick tapping before him step by step.

520

[OEDIPUS enters the palace.]

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

Go in and reflect on that, solve that.

And if you find I've lied

from this day onward call the prophet blind.

[TIRESIAS and the boy exit to the side.]

CHORUS:

Who—

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

530

The horror too dark to tell, whose ruthless bloody hands have done the work? His time has come to fly

to outrace the stallions of the storm

his feet a streak of speed—

Cased in armor, Apollo son of the Father

lunges on him, lightning-bolts afire!

And the grim unerring Furies?

closing for the kill.

535

Look,

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

That man who left no trace—

after him, hunt him down with all our strength!

Now under bristling timber

up through rocks and caves he stalks

like the wild mountain bull—

cut off from men, each step an agony, frenzied, racing blind

but he cannot outrace the dread voices of Delphi

ringing out of the heart of Earth,

the dark wings beating around him shrieking doom

the doom that never dies, the terror—

The skilled prophet scans the birds and shatters me with terror!

I can't accept him, can't deny him, don't know what to say,

I'm lost, and the wings of dark foreboding beating—

I cannot see what's come, what's still to come . . .

and what could breed a blood feud between

Laius' house and the son of Polybus?⁴

I know of nothing, not in the past and not now,

no charge to bring against our king, no cause

535

3. Avenging spirits who pursued a murderer when no earthly avenger was at hand. 4. King of Corinth and, so far as anyone except Tiresias knows, the father of Oedipus.

to attack his fame that rings throughout Thebes—
not without proof—not for the ghost of Laius,
not to avenge a murder gone without a trace.

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

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

a man can outstrip a rival. No, not till I see
these charges proved will I side with his accusers.

We saw him then, when the she-hawk⁵ swept against him,
saw with our own eyes his skill, his brilliant triumph—
there was the test—he was the joy of Thebes!

Never will I convict my king, never in my heart.
[*Enter CREON from the side.*]

CREON: My fellow-citizens, I hear King Oedipus
levels terrible charges at me. I had to come.
I resent it deeply. If, in the present crisis

he thinks he suffers any abuse from me,
anything I've done or said that offers him

the slightest injury, why, I've no desire
to linger out this life, my reputation in ruins.

The damage I'd face from such an accusation
is nothing simple. No, there's nothing worse:
branded a traitor in the city, a traitor
to all of you and my good friends.

LEADER:

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

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

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

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

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

[*The doors open. OEDIPUS enters.*]

Wait,

here's Oedipus now.

OEDIPUS: You—here? You have the gall
to show your face before the palace gates?

You, plotting to kill me, kill the king—

I see it all, the marauding thief himself
scheming to steal my crown and power!

Tell me,

5. The Sphinx.

in god's name, what did you take me for,
coward or fool, when you spun out your plot?
Your treachery—you think I'd never detect it
creeping against me in the dark? Or sensing it,
not defend myself? Aren't you the fool,

you and your high adventure. Lacking numbers,
powerful friends, out for the big game of empire—
you need riches, armies to bring that quarry down!

CREON: Are you quite finished? It's your turn to listen.
for just as long as you've . . . instructed me.

Hear me out, then judge me on the facts.

OEDIPUS: You've a wicked way with words, Creon,
but I'll be slow to learn—from you.

I find you a menace, a great burden to me.

CREON: Just one thing, hear me out in this.

OEDIPUS: Just one thing, hear me out in this.
Just one thing,
don't tell me you're not the enemy, the traitor.

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

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

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

OEDIPUS: Did you induce me, yes or no,

to send for that sanctimonious prophet?

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

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

CREON: Laius—what did he do?

OEDIPUS: Vanished,
swept from sight, murdered in his tracks.

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

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

CREON: Skilled as he is today, and just as honored.

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

CREON: No,

never, at least, when I was in his presence.

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

CREON: We did our best, of course, discovered nothing.

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

CREON: I don't know. And when I don't, I keep quiet.

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

CREON:

If I know, I won't hold back.

OEDIPUS: What?

Simply this:

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

CREON: If that's what he says . . . well, you know best.

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But now I have a right to learn from you as you just learned from me.

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

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

OEDIPUS: A genuine discovery—there's no denying that.

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

OEDIPUS: She receives from me whatever she desires.

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

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

CREON: Not at all.

Not if you see things calmly, rationally,

as I do. Look at it this way first:

who in his right mind would rather rule

and live in anxiety than sleep in peace?

Particularly if he enjoys the same authority.

Not I, I'm not the man to yearn for kingship,

not with a king's power in my hands. Who would?

No one with any sense of self-control.

Now, as it is, you offer me all I need,

not a fear in the world. But if I wore the crown . . .

there'd be many painful duties to perform,

hardly to my taste.

How could kingship

please me more than influence, power

without a qualm? I'm not that deluded yet,

to reach for anything but privilege outright,

profit free and clear.

Now all men sing my praises, all salute me,

now all who request your favors curry mine.

I am their best hope: success rests in me.

Why give up that, I ask you, and borrow trouble?

A man of sense, someone who sees things clearly

would never resort to treason.

No, I've no lust for conspiracy in me,

nor could I ever suffer one who does.

Do you want proof? Go to Delphi yourself,

examine the oracle and see if I've reported

the message word-for-word. This too:

if you detect that I and the clairvoyant

have plotted anything in common, arrest me,

execute me. Not on the strength of one vote,

two in this case, mine as well as yours.

But don't convict me on sheer unverified surmise.

How wrong it is to take the good for bad,

purely at random, or take the bad for good.

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tear out the life within us, priceless life itself. You'll learn this well, without fail, in time. Time alone can bring the just man to light—the criminal you can spot in one short day.

LEADER: Good advice, my lord, for anyone who wants to avoid disaster.

Those who jump to conclusions may go wrong.

OEDIPUS: When my enemy moves against me quickly,

plots in secret, I move quickly too, I must,

I plot and pay him back. Relax my guard a moment,

waiting his next move—he wins his objective,

I lose mine.

CREON: What do you want?

You want me banished?

OEDIPUS: No, I want you dead.

CREON: Just to show how ugly a grudge can . . . So,

OEDIPUS: still stubborn? you don't think I'm serious?

CREON: I think you're insane.

OEDIPUS: Quite sane—in my behalf.

CREON: Not just as much in mine?

OEDIPUS: You—my mortal enemy?

CREON: What if you're wholly wrong?

OEDIPUS: No matter—I must rule.

CREON: Not if you rule unjustly.

OEDIPUS: Hear him, Thebes, my city!

CREON: My city too, not yours alone!

LEADER: Please, my lords.

[Enter JOCASTA from the palace.]

Look, Jocasta's coming,

and just in time too. With her help

you must put this fighting of yours to rest.

JOCASTA: Have you no sense? Poor misguided men,

such shouting—why this public outburst?

Aren't you ashamed, with the land so sick,

to stir up private quarrels?

[To OEDIPUS.]

Into the palace now. And Creon, you go home.

Why make such a furor over nothing?

CREON: My sister, it's dreadful . . . Oedipus, your husband,

he's bent on a choice of punishments for me,

banishment from the fatherland or death.

OEDIPUS: Precisely. I caught him in the act, Jocasta,

plotting, about to stab me in the back.

CREON: Never—curse me, let me die and be damned

if I've done you any wrong you charge me with.

JOCASTA: Oh god, believe it, Oedipus,

honor the solemn oath he swears to heaven.

Do it for me, for the sake of all your people.

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[*The CHORUS begins to chant.*]

CHORUS: Believe it, be sensible

give way, my king, I beg you!

OEDIPUS: What do you want from me, concessions?

CHORUS: Respect him—he's been no fool in the past

and now he's strong with the oath he swears to god.

OEDIPUS: You know what you're asking?

CHORUS: I do.

OEDIPUS: Then out with it!

CHORUS: The man's your friend, your kin, he's under oath—

don't cast him out; disgraced

branded with guilt on the strength of hearsay only.

OEDIPUS: Know full well, if that is what you want

you want me dead or banished from the land.

CHORUS: Never—

no, by the blazing Sun, first god of the heavens!

Stripped of the gods, stripped of loved ones,

let me die by inches if that ever crossed my mind.

But the heart inside me sickens, dies as the land dies

and now on top of the old griefs you pile this,

your fury—both of you!

OEDIPUS: Then let him go,

even if it does lead to my ruin, my death

or my disgrace, driven from Thebes for life.

It's you, not him, I pity—your words move me.

He, wherever he goes, my hate goes with him.

CREON: Look at you, sullen in yielding, brutal in your rage—

you'll go too far. It's perfect justice:

natures like yours are hardest on themselves.

OEDIPUS: Then leave me alone—get out!

CREON:

I'm going.

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

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

CHORUS: Why do you hesitate, my lady

why not help him, in?

JOCASTA: Tell me what's happened first.

CHORUS: Loose, ignorant talk started dark suspicions

and a sense of injustice cut deeply too.

JOCASTA: On both sides?

CHORUS: Oh yes.

JOCASTA: What did they say?

CHORUS: Enough, please, enough! The land's so racked already

or so it seems to me . . .

End the trouble here, just where they left it.

OEDIPUS: You see what comes of your good intentions now?

And all because you tried to blunt my anger.

CHORUS:

My king,

I've said it once, I'll say it time and again—

I'd be insane, you know it.

senseless, ever to turn my back on you.

You who set our beloved land—storm-tossed, shattered—

straight on course. Now again, good helmsman,

steer us through the storm!

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

JOCASTA:

For the love of god,

Oedipus, tell me too, what is it?

Why this rage? You're so unbending.

OEDIPUS: I will tell you. I respect you, Jocasta,

much more than these . . .

[*Glancing at the CHORUS.*]

Creon's to blame, Creon schemes against me.

JOCASTA: Tell me clearly, how did the quarrel start?

OEDIPUS: He says I murdered Laius—I am guilty.

JOCASTA: How does he know? Some secret knowledge

or simple hearsay?

OEDIPUS: Oh, he sent his prophet in

to do his dirty work. You know Creon,

Creon keeps his own lips clean.

JOCASTA: A prophet?

Well then, free yourself of every charge!

Listen to me and learn some peace of mind:

no skill in the world,

nothing human can penetrate the future.

Here is proof, quick and to the point.

An oracle came to Laius one fine day

(I won't say from Apollo himself

but his underlings, his priests) and it said

that doom would strike him down at the hands of a son,

our son, to be born of our own flesh and blood. But Laius,

so the report goes at least, was killed by strangers,

thieves, at a place where three roads meet . . . my son—

he wasn't three days old and the boy's father

fastened his ankles, had a henchman fling him away

on a barren, trackless mountain.

There, you see?

Apollo brought neither thing to pass. My baby

no more murdered his father than Laius suffered—

his wildest fear—death at his own son's hands.

That's how the seers and all their revelations

mapped out the future. Brush them from your mind.

Whatever the god needs and seeks

he'll bring to light himself, with ease.

OEDIPUS:

Strange,

hearing you just now . . . my mind wandered,

my thoughts racing back and forth.

JOCASTA: What do you mean? Why so anxious, startled?

OEDIPUS: I thought I heard you say that Laius

was cut down at a place where three roads meet.

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

OEDIPUS: Where did this thing happen? Be precise.

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

OEDIPUS: When? How long ago?

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

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

JOCASTA: What, Oedipus? What haunts you so?

OEDIPUS:

Laius—how did he look? Describe him.

Had he reached his prime?

JOCASTA: He was swarthy,

and the gray had just begun to streak his temples,

and his build . . . wasn't far from yours.

OEDIPUS: Oh no no,

I think I've just called down a dreadful curse upon myself—I simply didn't know!

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

OEDIPUS: I have a terrible fear the blind seer can see.

I'll know in a moment. One thing more—

JOCASTA:

Anything,

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

OEDIPUS: Did he go with a light or heavy escort,

several men-at-arms, like a lord, a king?

JOCASTA: There were five in the party, a herald among them,

and a single wagon carrying Laius.

OEDIPUS:

Ai—

now I can see it all, clear as day.

Who told you all this at the time, Jocasta?

JOCASTA: A servant who reached home, the lone survivor.

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

JOCASTA: No indeed. Soon as he returned from the scene

and saw you on the throne with Laius dead and gone,

he knelt and clutched my hand, pleading with me

to send him into the hinterlands, to pasture,

far as possible, out of sight of Thebes.

I sent him away. Slave though he was,

he'd earned that favor—and much more.

OEDIPUS: Can we bring him back, quickly?

JOCASTA: Easily. Why do you want him so?

OEDIPUS:

I'm afraid,

Jocasta, I have said too much already.

That man—I've got to see him.

JOCASTA: Then he'll come.

OEDIPUS: And so you shall—I can hold nothing back from you, now I've reached this pitch of dark foreboding.

Who means more to me than you? Tell me,

whom would I turn toward but you

as I go through all this?

My father was Polybus, king of Corinth.

My mother, a Dorian, Merope. And I was held

the prince of the realm among the people there,

till something struck me out of nowhere,

something strange . . . worth remarking perhaps,

hardly worth the anxiety I gave it.

Some man at a banquet who had drunk too much

shouted out—he was far gone, mind you—

that I am not my father's son. Fighting words!

I barely restrained myself that day.

but early the next I went to mother and father,

questioned them closely, and they were enraged

at the accusation and the fool who let it fly.

So as for my parents I was satisfied,

but still this thing kept gnawing at me,

the slander spread—I had to make my move.

And so,

unknown to mother and father I set out for Delphi,

and the god Apollo spurned me, sent me away

denied the facts I came for,

but first he flashed before my eyes a future

great with pain, terror, disaster—I can hear him cry,

"You are fated to couple with your mother, you will bring

a breed of children into the light no man can bear to see—

you will kill your father, the one who gave you life!"

I heard all that and ran. I abandoned Corinth,

from that day on I gauged its landfall only

by the stars, running, always running

toward some place where I would never see

the shame of all those oracles come true.

And as I fled I reached that very spot

where the great king, you say, met his death.

Now, Jocasta, I will tell you all.

Making my way toward this triple crossroad

I began to see a herald, then a brace of colts

drawing a wagon, and mounted on the bench . . . a man,

just as you've described him, coming face-to-face,

and the one in the lead and the old man himself

were about to thrust me off the road—brute force—

and the one shouldering me aside, the driver,

I strike him in anger!—and the old man, watching me

striking him, along his wheels—he brings down

I paid him back with interest!

Short work, by god—with one blow of the staff
in this right hand I knock him out of his high seat,
roll him out of the wagon, sprawling headlong—
I killed them all—every mother's son!

Oh, but if there is any blood-tie
between Laius and this stranger . . .
what man alive more miserable than I?
More hated by the gods? I am the man
no alien, no citizen welcomes to his house,
law forbids it—not a word to me in public,
driven out of every hearth and home.

And all these curses I—no one but I
brought down these piling curses on myself!
And you, his wife, I've touched your body with these,
the hands that killed your husband cover you with blood.

Wasn't I born for torment? Look me in the eyes!

I am abomination—heart and soul!
I must be exiled, and even in exile
never see my parents, never set foot
on native ground again. Else I am doomed
to couple with my mother and cut my father down . . .
Polybus who reared me, gave me life.

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

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

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

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

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

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

JOCASTA: What did I say? What struck you so?

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

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JOCASTA: Impossible. Trust me,
I told you precisely what he said,
and he can't retract it now;
the whole city heard it, not just I.

And even if he should vary his first report
by one man more or less, still, my lord,
he could never make the murder of Laius
truly fit the prophecy. Apollo was explicit:
my son was doomed to kill my husband . . . my son,
poor defenseless thing, he never had a chance
to kill his father. They destroyed him first.

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

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

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

[OEDIPUS and JOCASTA enter the palace.]

CHORUS: Destiny guide me always

Destiny find me filled with reverence
pure in word and deed.

Great laws tower above us, reared on high
born for the brilliant vault of heaven—

Olympian Sky their only father,
nothing mortal, no man gave them birth,
their memory deathless, never lost in sleep:
within them lives a mighty god, the god does not grow old.

Pride breeds the tyrant

violent pride, gorging, crammed to bursting
with all that is overripe and rich with ruin—
clawing up to the heights, headlong pride
crashes down the abyss—sheer doom!

No footing helps, all foothold lost and gone.
But the healthy strife that makes the city strong—
I pray that god will never end that wrestling:
god, my champion, I will never let you go.

But if any man comes striding, high and mighty
in all he says and does,

no fear of justice, no reverence
for the temples of the gods—
let a rough doom tear him down,

repay his pride, breakneck, ruinous pride!
If he cannot reap his profits fairly
cannot restrain himself from outrage—
mad, laying hands on the holy things untouchable!

Can such a man, so desperate, still boast

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If all such violence goes with honor now
why join the sacred dance?

Never again will I go reverent to Delphi,
the inviolate heart of Earth
or Apollo's ancient oracle at Abae
or Olympia⁶ of the fires—
unless these prophecies all come true
for all mankind to point toward in wonder.
King of kings, if you deserve your titles
Zeus, remember, never forget!
You and your deathless, everlasting reign.

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

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

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

JOCASTA: Lords of the realm,⁷ it occurred to me,
just now, to visit the temples of the gods,
so I have my branch in hand and incense too.

Oedipus is beside himself. Racked with anguish,
no longer a man of sense, he won't admit
the latest prophecies are hollow as the old—
he's at the mercy of every passing voice
if the voice tells of terror.

I urge him gently, nothing seems to help,
so I turn to you, Apollo, you are nearest.

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

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

MESSENGER: [*Approaching JOCASTA and the CHORUS.*]

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

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

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

JOCASTA: And the same to you, stranger, you deserve it . . .

6. In the western Peloponnese, a site of an oracle of Zeus. Abae is a city in central Greece.
chorus. 7. The

such a greeting. But what have you come for?
Have you brought us news?

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

JOCASTA: Really, what? Who sent you?

MESSENGER: Corinth.

I'll give you the message in a moment.

You'll be glad of it—how could you help it?—
though it costs a little sorrow in the bargain.

JOCASTA: What can it be, with such a double edge?

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

JOCASTA: Why? Isn't old Polybus still in power?

MESSENGER: No more. Death has got him in the tomb.

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

MESSENGER: If not,

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

JOCASTA: [*To a servant.*] Quickly, go to your master, tell him this!

You prophecies of the gods, where are you now?

This is the man that Oedipus feared for years,

he fled him, not to kill him—and now he's dead,

quite by chance, a normal, natural death,

not murdered by his son.

OEDIPUS: [*Emerging from the palace.*]

Dearest,

what now? Why call me from the palace?

JOCASTA: [*Bringing the MESSENGER closer.*]

Listen to him, see for yourself what all

those awful prophecies of god have come to.

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

JOCASTA: He's from Corinth, he's come to tell you

your father is no more—Polybus—he's dead!

OEDIPUS: [*Wheeling on the MESSENGER.*]

What? Let me have it from your lips.

MESSENGER: Well,

if that's what you want first, then here it is:

make no mistake, Polybus is dead and gone.

OEDIPUS: How—murder? sickness?—what? what killed him?

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

OEDIPUS: Sickness then—poor man, it wore him down.

MESSENGER: That,

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

OEDIPUS: So!

Jocasta, why, why look to the Prophet's hearth,

the fires of the future? Why scan the birds

that scream above our heads? They winged me on

to the murder of my father, did they? That was my doom?

Well look, he's dead and buried, hidden under the earth,

and here I am in Thebes, I never put hand to sword—

OEDIPUS: What a rich reward you'd have for that!

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

OEDIPUS: Never, I will never go near my parents.

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

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

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

OEDIPUS: Always, terrified Apollo's oracle might come true—

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

OEDIPUS: Then why did he call me his son?

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

OEDIPUS: No, from another's hands?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

OEDIPUS: Why remind me of that, that old affliction?

MESSENGER: Your ankles were pinned together. I set you free.

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

MESSENGER: And you got your name⁸ from that misfortune too,
the name's still with you.

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

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

8. In Greek the name *Oedipus* suggests "swollen foot."

unless some longing for me wasted him away,
then in a sense you'd say I caused his death.

But now, all those prophecies I feared—Polybus
packs them off to sleep with him in hell!
They're nothing, worthless.

JOCASTA: There.
Didn't I tell you from the start?

OEDIPUS: So you did. I was lost in fear.

JOCASTA: No more, sweep it from your mind forever.

OEDIPUS: But my mother's bed, surely I must fear—
Fear?

JOCASTA: What should a man fear? It's all chance,
chance rules our lives. Not a man on earth
can see a day ahead, groping through the dark.
Better to live at random, best we can.

And as for this marriage with your mother—
have no fear. Many a man before you,
in his dreams, has shared his mother's bed.
Take such things for shadows, nothing at all—
Live, Oedipus,
as if there's no tomorrow!

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

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

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

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

OEDIPUS: Merope, old man. The wife of Polybus.

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

OEDIPUS: A dreadful prophecy, stranger, sent by the gods.

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

OEDIPUS: Not at all.
Apollo told me once—it is my fate—
I must make love with my own mother,
shed my father's blood with my own hands.
So for years I've given Corinth a wide berth,
and it's been my good fortune too. But still,
to see one's parents and look into their eyes
is the greatest joy I know.

MESSENGER: You're afraid of that?
That kept you out of Corinth?

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

MESSENGER: So that's it.
Well then, seeing I came with such good will, my king,
why don't I rid you of that old worry now?

that is the only name I have for you,
 that, no other—ever, ever, ever!
 [*Flinging through the palace doors. A long, tense silence follows.*]

1180

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

OEDIPUS: Let it burst! Whatever will, whatever must!
 I must know my birth, no matter how common
 it may be—I must see my origins face-to-face.
 She perhaps, she with her woman's pride
 may well be mortified by my birth,
 but I, I count myself the son of Chance,
 the great goddess, giver of all good things—
 I'll never see myself disgraced. She is my mother!

1185

And the moons have marked me out, my blood-brothers,
 one moon on the wane, the next moon great with power.
 That is my blood, my nature—I will never betray it,
 never fail to search and learn my birth!

1190

CHORUS: Yes—if I am a true prophet
 if I can grasp the truth,
 by the boundless skies of Olympus,
 at the full moon of tomorrow, Mount Cithaeron

1195

you will know how Oedipus glories in you—
 you, his birthplace, nurse, his mountain-mother!
 And we will sing you, dancing out your praise—
 you lift our monarch's heart!
 Apollo, Apollo, god of the wild cry
 may our dancing please you!

1200

Oedipus—
 son, dear child, who bore you?
 Who of the nymphs who seem to live forever?
 mated with Pan,¹ the mountain-striding Father?

1205

Who was your mother? who, some bride of Apollo
 the god who loves the pastures spreading toward the sun?
 Or was it Hermes, king of the lightning ridges?
 Or Dionysus,² lord of frenzy, lord of the barren peaks—
 did he seize you in his hands, dearest of all his lucky finds?—
 found by the nymphs, their warm eyes dancing, gift
 to the lord who loves them dancing out his joy!

1210

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

1215

OEDIPUS: I never met the man, my friends . . . still,
 if I had to guess, I'd say that's the shepherd,

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

1140

MESSENGER: No sir,
 another shepherd passed you on to me.
 OEDIPUS: Who? Do you know? Describe him.
 MESSENGER: He called himself a servant of . . .
 if I remember rightly—Laius.

1145

[JOCASTA turns sharply.]
 OEDIPUS: The king of the land who ruled here long ago?
 MESSENGER: That's the one. That herdsman was his man.
 OEDIPUS: Is he still alive? Can I see him?
 MESSENGER: They'd know best, the people of these parts.
 [OEDIPUS and the MESSENGER turn to the CHORUS.]

1150

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

1155

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

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

1160

JOCASTA: That man . . .
 why ask? Old shepherd, talk, empty nonsense,
 don't give it another thought, don't even think—
 OEDIPUS: What—give up now, with a clue like this?
 Fail to solve the mystery of my birth?
 Not for all the world!

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

1165

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

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

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

1170

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

OEDIPUS: Your best is more than I can bear.
 JOCASTA: You're doomed—

may you never fathom who you are!
 OEDIPUS: [To a servant.] Hurry, fetch me the herdsman, now!
 Leave her to glory in her royal birth.

1175

JOCASTA: Aieeeeeee—
 man of agony—

9. Nymphs were not immortal, like the gods, but lived much longer than mortals. 1. A woodland god, patron of shepherds and flocks. 2. Dionysus, like Pan and Hermes, haunted the wild country, woods, and mountains. Hermes was born on Mount Kyllene in Arcadia.

the very one we've looked for all along.
 Brothers in old age, two of a kind,
 he and our guest here. At any rate
 the ones who bring him in are my own men,
 I recognize them.

[Turning to the LEADER.]

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

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

OEDIPUS: You, I ask you first, stranger,

you from Corinth—is this the one you mean?

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

OEDIPUS: [To the SHEPHERD.]

You, old man, come over here—

look at me. Answer all my questions.

Did you ever serve King Laius?

SHEPHERD: So I did . . .

a slave, not brought on the block though,

born and reared in the palace.

OEDIPUS: Your duties, your kind of work?

SHEPHERD: Herding the flocks, the better part of my life.

OEDIPUS: Where, mostly? Where did you do your grazing?

SHEPHERD: Well,

Cithaeron sometimes, or the foothills round about.

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

SHEPHERD: [Confused, glancing from the MESSENGER to the King.]

Doing what?—what man do you mean?

OEDIPUS: [Pointing to the MESSENGER.]

This one here—ever have dealings with him?

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

MESENKER: No wonder he doesn't know me, master.

But let me refresh his memory for him.

I'm sure he recalls old times we had

on the slopes of Mount Cithaeron;

he and I, grazing our flocks, he with two

and I with one—we both struck up together,

three whole seasons, six months at a stretch

from spring to the rising of Arcturus³ in the fall,

then with winter coming on I'd drive my herds

to my own pens, and back he'd go with his

to Laius' folds.

[To the SHEPHERD.]

Now that's how it was,

wasn't it—yes or no?

3. The principal star in the constellation Boötes; its appearance in the sky (rising) just before dawn in September signals the end of summer.

SHEPHERD: Yes, I suppose . . .

it's all so long ago.

MESENKER: Come, tell me,

you gave me a child back then, a boy, remember?

A little fellow to rear, my very own.

SHEPHERD: What? Why rake up that again?

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

SHEPHERD: Damn you, shut your mouth—quiet!

OEDIPUS: Don't lash out at him, old man—

you need lashing more than he does.

SHEPHERD:

Why,

master, majesty—what have I done wrong?

OEDIPUS: You won't answer his question about the boy.

SHEPHERD: He's talking nonsense, wasting his breath.

OEDIPUS: So, you won't talk willingly—

then you'll talk with pain.

[The guards seize the SHEPHERD.]

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

OEDIPUS: Twist his arms back, quickly!

SHEPHERD:

God help us, why?—

what more do you need to know?

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

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

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

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

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

[Motioning to his men for torture.]

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

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

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

OEDIPUS: Which one of them?

[Looking at the citizens.]

Whose house?

No—

SHEPHERD: god's sake, master, no more questions!

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

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

OEDIPUS: A slave? or born of his own blood?

SHEPHERD: Oh no,

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

OEDIPUS: And I'm at the edge of hearing horrors, yes, but I must hear! 1285

SHEPHERD: All right! His son, they said it was—his son!

But the one inside, your wife,

she'd tell it best.

OEDIPUS: My wife—

she gave it to you?

SHEPHERD: Yes, yes, my king.

OEDIPUS: Why, what for?

SHEPHERD: To kill it.

OEDIPUS: Her own child,
how could she?

SHEPHERD: She was afraid—
frightening prophecies.

OEDIPUS: What?

SHEPHERD: They said—
he'd kill his parents.

OEDIPUS: But you gave him to this old man—why?

SHEPHERD: I pitied the little baby, master,
hoped he'd take him off to his own country,
far away, but he saved him for this, this fate.

If you are the man he says you are, believe me,
you were born for pain.

OEDIPUS: O god—
all come true, all burst to light!

O light—now let me look my last on you!
I stand revealed at last—

cursed in my birth, cursed in marriage,
cursed in the lives I cut down with these hands!

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

CHORUS: O the generations of men

the dying generations—adding the total
of all your lives I find they come to nothing . . .

does there exist, is there a man on earth
who seizes more joy than just a dream, a vision?

And the vision no sooner dawns than dies
blazing into oblivion.

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

You outraged all men!
Bending your bow to the breaking-point
you captured priceless glory, O dear god,
and the Sphinx came crashing down,
the virgin, claws hooked

like a bird of omen singing, shrieking death—
like a fortress reared in the face of death
you rose and saved our land.

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

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

1295

1300

1305

1310

1315

1320

1325

1330

1335

one and the same wide harbor served you
son and father both
son and father came to rest in the same bridal chamber.
How, how could the furrows your father plowed
bear you, your agony, harrowing on
in silence O so long?

1340

But now for all your power
Time, all-seeing Time has dragged you to the light,
judged your marriage monstrous from the start—
the son and the father tangling, both one—
O child of Laius, would to god

1345

I'd never seen you, never never!

Now I weep like a man who wails the dead
and the dirge comes pouring forth with all my heart!
I tell you the truth, you gave me life

1350

and now you bring down night upon my eyes.
[*Enter a MESSENGER from the palace.*]

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

1355

if you are true to your birth, if you still have
some feeling for the royal house of Thebes.
I tell you neither the waters of the Danube
nor the Nile⁴ can wash this palace clean.

1360

Such things it hides, it soon will bring to light—
terrible things, and none done blindly now,
all done with a will. The pains
we inflict upon ourselves hurt most of all.

LEADER: God knows we have pains enough already.

What can you add to them?

MESSENGER: The queen is dead.

1365

LEADER: Poor lady—how?

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

1370

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

1375

4. The Greek reads "Phasis," a river in Asia Minor. The translator has substituted a big river more familiar to modern readers.

its mother to mother living creatures
with the very son she'd borne.

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

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

Give him a sword!⁵ His wife,
no wife, his mother, where can he find the mother earth
that cropped two crops at once, himself and all his children?
He was raging—one of the dark powers pointing the way,
none of us mortals crowding around him, no,
with a great shattering cry—someone, something leading him on—
he hurled at the twin doors and bending the bolts back
out of their sockets, crashed through the chamber.
And there we saw the woman hanging by the neck,
cradled high in a woven noose, spinning,
swinging back and forth. And when he saw her,
giving a low, wrenching sob that broke our hearts,
slipping the halter from her throat, he eased her down,
in a slow embrace he laid her down, poor thing . . .
then, what came next, what horror we beheld!

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

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

1380

1385

1390

1395

1400

1405

1410

1415

1420

all the griefs in the world that you can name,
all are theirs forever.

LEADER: Oh poor man, the misery—
has he any rest from pain now?
[A voice within, in torment.]

MESSENGER: He's shouting,
"Loose the bolts, someone, show me to all of Thebes!
My father's murderer, my mother's—"

No, I can't repeat it, it's unholy.
Now he'll tear himself from his native earth,
not linger, curse the house with his own curse.
But he needs strength, and a guide to lead him on.
This is sickness more than he can bear.

[The palace doors open.]

1430

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

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

CHORUS: O the terror—

the suffering, for all the world to see,
the worst terror that ever met my eyes.

1435

What madness swept over you? What god,
what dark power leapt beyond all bounds,
beyond belief, to crush your wretched life?—
godforsaken, cursed by the gods!

1440

I pity you but I can't bear to look.
I've much to ask, so much to learn,
so much fascinates my eyes,
but you . . . I shudder at the sight.

OEDIPUS: Oh, Ohh—

the agony! I am agony—
where am I going? where on earth?

1445

where does all this agony hurt me?
where's my voice?—

winging, swept away on a dark tide—

My destiny, my dark power, what a leap you made!

1450

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

OEDIPUS: Dark, horror of darkness
my darkness, drowning, swirling around me
crashing wave on wave—unspeakable, irresistible

headwind, fatal harbor! Oh again,

1455

the misery, all at once, over and over
the stabbing daggers, stab of memory
raking me insane.

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

5. Presumably so that he could kill himself.

OEDIPUS: Dear friend, still here?

Standing by me, still with a care for me,
the blind man? Such compassion,
loyal to the last. Oh it's you,

I know you're here, dark as it is
I'd know you anywhere, your voice—
it's yours, clearly yours.

CHORUS: Dreadful, what you've done . . .

how could you bear it, gouging out your eyes?

What superhuman power drove you on?

OEDIPUS: Apollo, friends, Apollo—

he ordained my agonies—these, my pains on pains!

But the hand that struck my eyes was mine,
mine alone—no one else—

I did it all myself!

What good were eyes to me?

Nothing I could see could bring me joy.

CHORUS: No, no, exactly as you say.

OEDIPUS:

What love, what call of the heart

can touch my ears with joy? Nothing, friends.

Take me away, far, far from Thebes,
quickly, cast me away, my friends—

this great murderous ruin, this man cursed to heaven,

the man the deathless gods hate most of all!

CHORUS: Pitiful, you suffer so, you understand so much . . .

I wish you'd never known.

OEDIPUS:

Die, die—

whoever he was that day in the wilds

who cut my ankles free of the ruthless pins,

he pulled me clear of death, he saved my life
for this, this kindness—

Curse him, kill him!

If I'd died then, I'd never have dragged myself,

my loved ones through such hell.

CHORUS: Oh if only . . . would to god.

OEDIPUS: I'd never have come to this,

my father's murderer—never been branded

mother's husband, all men see me now! Now,

loathed by the gods, son of the mother I defiled

coupling in my father's bed, spawning lives in the loins

that spawned my wretched life. What grief can crown this grief?

It's mine alone, my destiny—I am Oedipus!

CHORUS: How can I say you've chosen for the best?

Better to die than be alive and blind.

OEDIPUS: What I did was best—don't lecture me,

no more advice. I, with my eyes,

how could I look my father in the eyes

I have done such things to the two of them,
crimes too huge for hanging.

Worse yet,

the sight of my children, born as they were born,

how could I long to look into their eyes?

No, not with these eyes of mine, never.

Not this city either, her high towers,

the sacred glittering images of her gods—

I am misery! I, her best son, reared

as no other son of Thebes was ever reared,

I've stripped myself, I gave the command myself.

All men must cast away the great blasphemer,

the curse now brought to light by the gods,

the son of Laius—I, my father's son!

Now I've exposed my guilt, horrendous guilt,

could I train a level glance on you, my countrymen?

Impossible! No, if I could just block off my ears,

the springs of hearing, I would stop at nothing—

I'd wall up my loathsome body like a prison,

blind to the sound of life, not just the sight.

Oblivion—what a blessing . . .

for the mind to dwell a world away from pain.

O Cithaeron, why did you give me shelter?

Why didn't you take me, crush my life out on the spot?

I'd never have revealed my birth to all mankind.

O Polybus, Corinth, the old house of my fathers,

so I believed—what a handsome prince you raised—

under the skin, what sickness to the core.

Look at me! Born of outrage, outrage to the core.

O triple roads—it all comes back, the secret,

dark ravine, and the oaks closing in

where the three roads join . . .

You drank my father's blood, my own blood

spilled by my own hands—you still remember me?

What things you saw me do? Then I came here

and did them all once more!

Marriages! O marriage,

you gave me birth, and once you brought me into the world

you brought my sperm rising back, springing to light

fathers, brothers, sons—one murderous breed—

brides, wives, mothers. The blackest things

a man can do, I have done them all!

No more—

it's wrong to name what's wrong to do. Quickly,

for the love of god, hide me somewhere,

kill me, hurl me into the sea

how could I look my father in the eyes

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[*Beckoning to the CHORUS as they shrink away.*]

Closer,

it's all right. Touch the man of grief.

Do. Don't be afraid. My troubles are mine and I am the only man alive who can sustain them.

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

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

OEDIPUS: Oh no, what can I say to him?

How can I ever hope to win his trust?

I wronged him so, just now, in every way.

You must see that—I was so wrong, so wrong.

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

[*Turning to the guards.*]

You there,

have you lost all respect for human feelings?

At least revere the Sun, the holy fire

that keeps us all alive. Never expose a thing

of guilt and holy dread so great it appalls

the earth, the rain from heaven, the light of day!

Get him into the halls—quickly as you can.

Piety demands no less. Kindred alone

should see a kinsman's shame. This is obscene.

OEDIPUS: Please, in god's name . . . you wipe my fears away, coming so generously to me, the worst of men.

Do one thing more, for your sake, not mine.

CREON: What do you want? Why so insistent?

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

CREON: I'd have done that already, I promise you.

First I wanted the god to clarify my duties.

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

CREON: So he did. Still, in such a crisis

it's better to ask precisely what to do.

OEDIPUS: So miserable—

you'd consult the god about a man like me?

CREON: By all means. And this time, I assume,

even you will obey the god's decrees.

OEDIPUS: I will,

I will. And you, I command you—I beg you . . .

the woman inside, bury her as you see fit.

It's the only decent thing.

to house my body, not while I'm alive, no, let me live on the mountains, on Cithaeron, my favorite haunt, I have made it famous.

Mother and father marked out that rock

to be my everlasting tomb—buried alive.

Let me die there, where they tried to kill me.

Oh but this I know: no sickness can destroy me, nothing can. I would never have been saved from death—I have been saved

for something great and terrible, something strange.

Well let my destiny come and take me on its way!

About my children, Creon, the boys at least,

don't burden yourself. They're men,

wherever they go, they'll find the means to live.

But my two daughters, my poor helpless girls,

clustering at our table, never without me

hovering near them . . . whatever I touched,

they always had their share. Take care of them,

I beg you. Wait, better—permit me, would you?

Just to touch them with my hands and take

our fill of tears. Please . . . my king.

Grant it, with all your noble heart.

If I could hold them, just once, I'd think

I had them with me, like the early days

when I could see their eyes.

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

What's that

O god! Do I really hear you sobbing?—

my two children. Creon, you've pitied me?

Sent me my darling girls, my own flesh and blood!

Am I right?

CREON: Yes, it's my doing.

I know the joy they gave you all these years, the joy you must feel now.

OEDIPUS: Bless you, Creon!

May god watch over you for this kindness,

better than he ever guarded me.

Children, where are you?

Here, come quickly—

[*Crooping for ANTIGONE and ISMENE, who approach their father cautiously, then embrace him.*]

your brother's hands, your own father's hands

that served his once bright eyes so well—

that made them blind. Seeing nothing, children.

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

And when you reach perfection, ripe for marriage,
who will he be, my dear ones? Risking all
to shoulder the curse that weighs down my parents,
yes and you too—that wounds us all together.
What more misery could you want?
Your father killed his father, sowed his mother,
one, one and the selfsame womb sprang you—
he cropped the very roots of his existence.

Such disgrace, and you must bear it all!

Who will marry you then? Not a man on earth.

Your doom is clear: you'll wither away to nothing,
single, without a child.

[Turning to CREON.]

Oh Creon,
you are the only father they have now . . .
we who brought them into the world

are gone, both gone at a stroke—
Don't let them go begging, abandoned,
women without men. Your own flesh and blood!

Never bring them down to the level of my pains.
Pity them. Look at them, so young, so vulnerable,
shorn of everything—you're their only hope.
Promise me, noble Creon, touch my hand!

[Reaching toward CREON, who draws back.]

You, little ones, if you were old enough
to understand, there is much I'd tell you.
Now, as it is, I'd have you say a prayer.

Pray for life, my children,

live where you are free to grow and season.

Pray god you find a better life than mine,
the father who begot you.

CREON: Enough.

You've wept enough. Into the palace now.

OEDIPUS: I must, but I find it very hard.

CREON: Time is the great healer, you will see.

OEDIPUS: I am going—you know on what condition?

CREON: Tell me. I'm listening.

OEDIPUS: Drive me out of Thebes, in exile.

CREON: Not I. Only the gods can give you that.

OEDIPUS: Surely the gods hate me so much—

OEDIPUS: You consent?

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

OEDIPUS: Then take me away. It's time.

CREON: Come along, let go of the children.

OEDIPUS: No—

don't take them away from me, not now! No no no!
[Clutching his daughters as the guards wrench them loose and take
them through the palace doors.]

CREON: Still the king, the master of all things?

No more: here your power ends.

None of your power follows you through life.

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

CHORUS: People of Thebes, my countrymen, look on Oedipus.

He solved the famous riddle with his brilliance,
he rose to power, a man beyond all power.

Who could behold his greatness without envy?

Now what a black sea of terror has overwhelmed him.

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

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

[Exit in procession.]

EURIPIDES

480—406 B.C.

Euripides' *Medea*, produced in 431 B.C., the year that brought the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, appeared earlier than Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, but it has a bitterness that is more in keeping with the spirit of a later age. If *Oedipus* is, in one sense, a warning to a generation that has embarked on an intellectual revolution, *Medea* is the ironic expression of the disillusion that comes after the shipwreck. In this play we are conscious for the first time of an attitude characteristic of modern literature, the artist's feeling of separation from the audience, the isolation of the poet. "Often previously," says Medea to the king,

Through being considered clever I have suffered much . . .

If you put new ideas before the eyes of fools

They'll think you foolish and worthless into the bargain;

And if you are thought superior to those who have

Some reputation for learning, you will become hated.

The common background of audience and poet is disappearing, the old certainties are being undermined, the city divided. Euripides is the first Greek poet to suffer the fate of so many of the great modern writers: rejected by most of his contemporaries (he rarely won first prize and was the favorite target for the scurrilous humor of the comic poets), he was universally admired and revered by the Greeks of the centuries that followed his death.

It is significant that what little biographical information we have for Euripides makes no mention of military service or political office; unlike Aeschylus, who

