

Oedipus Rex

by Sophocles



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Notes

The *Oedipus Rex*, without argument one of the greatest plays ever written in any language, is also one of the most complex. Scholars have spent millennia debating Sophocles' intentions and how he achieved such a powerful effect. At the root of the play's popularity lies its humanity: All human beings search for themselves during life, and we all want to know who we really are. Through science, religion, and art, we try to discover who we are as a species—what it means to be human. This is precisely the search undertaken by Oedipus, and his quest to understand himself and its horrifying consequences resonate deeply inside all of us. The play communicates to us even though we are separated from it by time and language.

In preparing this translation from the Greek, I have used the Oxford text of Lloyd-Jones and Wilson. I have also availed myself of the excellent commentaries by Jebb and Kammerbeek. The manuscripts for the *Oedipus Rex*, although generally coherent, do contain several gaps and troublesome passages. In some cases, I have used an alternate reading to that of Lloyd-Jones and Wilson; in these instances, I generally follow the manuscript reading over the emendation and have rarely deviated without the authority of one of the commentators.

J. E. Thomas, Translator

Providence, R.I.

Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

As you read *Oedipus Rex*, be aware of the following:

1. the role of dramatic irony in the play (the audience knows information, specifically about Oedipus' past, that the characters on stage do not).
2. the emergence of the following themes, concepts, and questions:
 - ◆ sin and retribution
 - ◆ divine justice: Do people deserve what happens to them, and do the gods allow it?
 - ◆ What characteristics make a good ruler?
 - ◆ The search for one's own identity is universal.
 - ◆ Complete control of one's own fate is not possible.
 - ◆ In life, suffering is inevitable, but wisdom can be gained through it.
 - ◆ There exists a need to search for truth.
 - ◆ What is the value of human intellect?
3. the conventions of Greek drama:
 - ◆ the use of masks with wigs attached
 - ◆ the chorus, which would sing in verse and dance
 - ◆ multiple roles played by the same actor

Dramatis Personae

- OEDIPUS, king of Thebes
- the PRIEST of Zeus
- CREON, Oedipus' brother-in-law
- CHORUS of the old men of Thebes
- TIRESIAS, blind prophet
- JOCASTA, wife of Oedipus, sister of Creon, widow of Laius, the former king
- MESSENGER from Corinth
- SHEPHERD of Laius, the former king (in the manuscripts called the Servant)
- SERVANT, from inside the house (in the manuscripts the Second Messenger or Messenger from the House)

Oedipus Rex

[Scene: outside, in front of the palace of Oedipus. There is also a shrine to Apollo at which are seated many suppliants. Oedipus enters the stage from the palace.]

OEDIPUS:

My children, new-sprung race of old Cadmus,
why do you sit at my shrines, wearing garlands
of the suppliants' olive? All around
the city is filled with the smell of incense,
all around filled with the sound of hymns and groans.⁽⁵⁾
These things I did not think it right to learn
from messengers, and so I have come here myself,
who am called Oedipus and known to all.
But you, old man, tell me, since it is fitting
for you to speak on their behalf, why you⁽¹⁰⁾
sit out here, afraid of something or wanting it?
So I would be willing to help you
in any way, for he would be hardhearted
who did not pity such an assembly.

PRIEST:

Oedipus, you who rule my land, you see⁽¹⁵⁾
how many of us sit here at your altars;
some do not yet have the strength to fly far;
others are heavy with age. I am the priest
of Zeus, and these were chosen from the young men.
There is another group wreathed as suppliants⁽²⁰⁾
sitting in the marketplace and another
at the double-gated temple of Athena
and at the smoke-filled oracle of Ismenus.
For the city, as you yourself can see,
is badly shaken already and from the waves⁽²⁵⁾
can no longer lift her head above this
bloody tossing; there is death in the fruitful buds
from the earth and in the pasturing herds,
and even in the childless births of women.
Falling upon us, the fire-bringing god,⁽³⁰⁾
most hateful disease, drives the city,
and by him the house of Cadmus is drained,
and dark Hades grows rich with groans and wails.
Now, I do not hold you equal to the gods,
nor do these children who sit at your hearth,⁽³⁵⁾
but we judge you the first of men both
in the ordinary chances of life
and in the contingencies of the divine.
It was you who came and released Cadmus' town
from the tribute we paid to the cruel songstress,⁽⁴⁰⁾
and these things you did knowing nothing from us,
nor instructed at all, but with help from god

you spoke and knew how to set our lives straight.
And now, Oedipus, greatest in the eyes of all,
we who are here as your suppliants beseech you⁽⁴⁵⁾
to find some defense for us, as you may have heard
the voice of one of the gods or have learned
something from a man—for I think that the ideas
of experienced men most often succeed.
Come, o best of mortals, and save our city;⁽⁵⁰⁾
come, but be careful, since now this land
calls you her savior for your former zeal,
and let us never recall of your reign
that we first stood straight, but stumbled later.
Rather, then, restore this city to safety.⁽⁵⁵⁾
For at that time you gave us great fortune,
be now equal to what you were then.
Since, if indeed you would rule this land,
just as you do now, it is far better
to rule over men than a wasteland;⁽⁶⁰⁾
nothing matters, neither tower nor ship,
if it is empty of men to dwell within it.

OEDIPUS:

My poor children, what you desire is
known and not unknown to me, for I see well
that everyone is sick, and being sick,⁽⁶⁵⁾
still, not one of you is as sick as I am.
For your pain comes upon the individual,
one by one, to each man alone and no other,
but my soul groans for the city, for me and you
together. Hence, you do not wake me from sleep,⁽⁷⁰⁾
but know that I have been weeping much
and wandering many roads of the mind.
And that which my inquiry found our only cure
I have done, for I have sent Creon,
son of Menoeceus, my own brother-in-law,⁽⁷⁵⁾
to Apollo's home at Pytho, so that he may
learn what I should do or say to save this city.
And already enough time has passed that
I wonder what he is doing, for he has stayed
beyond the proper time. But whenever he comes,⁽⁸⁰⁾
I would surely be an evil man not to do
whatever the god reveals.

PRIEST:

Wonderful news! Both what you have said,
and what these have just pointed out to me:
Creon is approaching!⁽⁸⁵⁾

OEDIPUS:

Lord Apollo, if only he might come as bright
with redeeming fortune as shine his eyes!

PRIEST:

It seems he brings good news, for otherwise⁽⁹⁰⁾
he would not come crowned with berry-laden laurel.

OEDIPUS:

We shall know soon, for he is close enough to hear.⁽⁹⁵⁾
Lord, kinsman of my wife, child of Menoeceus,
what reply do you bring us from the god?

[Enter Creon from offstage.]

CREON:

A good one, for I say that even misfortunes,
if somehow put right, bring only good luck.

OEDIPUS:

What sort of reply is this? For what you say⁽¹⁰⁰⁾
gives me neither confidence nor fear.

CREON:

If you wish these people nearby to hear,
I am ready to speak, or should we go inside?

OEDIPUS:

Speak to everyone, for I consider their pain
more important even than that of my own soul.

CREON:

I shall say all I heard from the god.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾
Phoebus clearly ordered us, my lord,
to drive out the pollution being fostered
in this very land, not to nurture it unhealed.

OEDIPUS:

With what cleansing and for what type of disaster?⁽¹¹⁰⁾

CREON:

By driving a man into exile,
or undoing murder with murder again,
since this blood shakes our city like a storm.

OEDIPUS:

And who is the man whose fate he decrees?

CREON:

My lord, once Laius was our leader in this land,
before you came to govern this city.⁽¹¹⁵⁾

OEDIPUS:

So I have heard, though I never saw him.

CREON:

He died, and the god now orders us clearly
to take violent vengeance on the murderers.

OEDIPUS:

Where on earth are they? Where will be found
this indistinct track of ancient guilt?(120)

CREON:

In this very land, he said. What is sought
can be captured, but what is ignored escapes.

OEDIPUS:

Did Laius meet his bloody fate in his home
or estate or in some other land?

CREON:

He left home to consult an oracle, he said,(125)
and never returned again, once he had set out.

OEDIPUS:

Did no messenger or fellow traveler see,
whom we might use to find something out?

CREON:

No, they died, except one, who, fleeing in fear
of those he saw had nothing to say but one thing.(130)

OEDIPUS:

What? For one thing could lead us to learn many,
if from hope might come a small beginning.

CREON:

He said that bandits fell upon them and killed him,
not with one man's strength, but the hands of many.

OEDIPUS:

How did a bandit come to dare so much,(135)
unless he acted with money from here?

CREON:

This was suspected. But with Laius fallen,
we had no helper in our troubles.

OEDIPUS:

What kind of trouble, when your kingship had
fallen thus, made you see to this so poorly?(140)

CREON:

The riddle-singing Sphinx compelled us to look
at what lay at hand, forgetting things unseen.

OEDIPUS:

Then I shall reveal these things anew,
 for justly did Phoebus, and justly did you
 assign me this case on behalf of the dead,⁽¹⁴⁵⁾
 so that you will rightly see me as an ally,
 avenging both this land and the god together.
 For not on behalf of more distant friends,
 but as if from myself I shall dispel the stain.
 For whoever he was who killed that man⁽¹⁵⁰⁾
 would as soon kill me with that same violent hand.
 Helping that one, therefore, I am helping myself.
 But you, my children, as soon as you can, rise
 from these seats, stopping these suppliant wails.
 Someone, muster here the people of Cadmus,⁽¹⁵⁵⁾
 as I will leave nothing undone. For with God's help
 we shall see whether we are saved or lost.

PRIEST:

Let us stand up, my children; those things for which
 we came here this man himself has promised.
 But may Phoebus who sent these prophecies⁽¹⁶⁰⁾
 come at once as savior and stayer of disease!

[Exeunt omnes.]

[The Chorus marches into the orchestra.]

CHORUS:

Str 1 O sweetly worded voice of Zeus, who are you
 who come from all-gold Pytho to glorious Thebes?
 My frightened mind shakes in fear, quivering,⁽¹⁶⁵⁾
 o healing Delian Paean,
 in awe before you. What is it you will achieve for me,
 something new or something known and coming back again?
 Tell me, o child of golden Hope,
 immortal Utterance.⁽¹⁷⁰⁾
Ant 1 First I call on you, daughter of Zeus, immortal Athena,
 and your earth-protecting sister, Artemis,
 who sit, famous, on your throne in the marketplace;
 and Phoebus the farshooter
 I call: my threefold protection from death, shine forth on me.⁽¹⁷⁵⁾
 If ever when madness was set upon the city,
 you sent away our burning scourge,
 come also now.
Str 2 Alas! for I bear countless woes;
 disease falls upon my entire crew,⁽¹⁸⁰⁾
 and no mind's weapon can protect me,
 for the fruit of our famous land does not grow,
 nor do our women emerge from their
 mournful labors with offspring.
 One upon another you might see each soul,⁽¹⁸⁵⁾

like a well-winged bird, surer than irresistible fire,
setting out for the promontory of the western god.

Ant 2 Unable to count their number,

the city is destroyed, and unpitied,

their generations lie upon the ground,⁽¹⁹⁰⁾

spreading death, finding no mourners.

While brides and white-haired mothers come together

and groan as suppliants over their mournful labors,

the hymn for healing and the lament ring loud together.

Because of these, o golden daughter of Zeus,⁽¹⁹⁵⁾

send bright-eyed Strength.

Str 3 Furious Ares, now without bronze shields,

yet still surrounded by cries, confronts me and burns me;

let him, in hurried running, turn his back

on our fatherland, either borne by a wind⁽²⁰⁰⁾

into the great chamber of Amphitrite

or rushing to the inhospitable Thracian wave.

For, if night ever leaves something undone,

day comes along to complete it.

This one, o reverend lightning-bearer,⁽²⁰⁵⁾

father Zeus, make him perish with your thunderbolt.

Ant 3 And you, lord of light, from your golden bow

I would have your unconquered arrows fly

as a guard set in front of me before my enemy,

and those of shining, fire-bringing Artemis,⁽²¹⁰⁾

with which she darts across the hills of Lycia.

And I call upon the one with the golden headband,

eponym of this land, wine-faced Bacchus,

hailed companion of the Maenads' throng,

to approach with a torch of shining pine,⁽²¹⁵⁾

against this god dishonored by the gods.

[Enter Oedipus from the palace.]

OEDIPUS:

You seek, and what you seek, if you are willing

to listen to my words and help in this sickness,

you may take as help and relief from your troubles.

Although a stranger to both report and victim,⁽²²⁰⁾

I shall announce these things, for I would not be far
in tracking it, if I did not have some clue.

But now, since only later did I become

a citizen among citizens, I decree

the following to the people of Cadmus:⁽²²⁵⁾

whoever among you knows at whose hands

Laius son of Labdacus was destroyed,

I order this man to tell it all to me.

And if the culprit fears this accusation,

he should lose his fear and come forward,⁽²³⁰⁾

for he will suffer nothing worse than safe exile

from this land. But if someone knows that another

or one from some other land is the murderer,
 let him not be silent! For I myself
 shall complete his reward, and he will have⁽²³⁵⁾
 my favor. But if you are silent again,
 and someone out of fear pushes away
 responsibility from himself or a friend,
 then you must hear from me what I intend to do.
 I ban this man, whoever he is, from all land⁽²⁴⁰⁾
 over which I hold power and the throne.
 I decree that no one shall receive him
 or speak to him, nor make him partner
 in prayers to the gods or sacrifices,
 nor allow to him holy water;⁽²⁴⁵⁾
 but instead that everyone must expel him
 from their homes, as this man is the source
 of our pollution, as the oracle
 of Pytho has just revealed to me.
 And so I myself am become an ally⁽²⁵⁰⁾
 both to the god and the man who died.
 And I curse the doer, whether he worked alone
 or evaded us with accomplices,
 that he wear out his unlucky life
 as badly as he himself is bad.⁽²⁵⁵⁾
 And I pray, if he should be known to me
 and share in my hearth among my family,
 that I suffer all that I called upon these.
 All these things I charge you to complete,
 on my behalf and on the god's, and for this land,⁽²⁶⁰⁾
 wasted away, fruitless and godless.
 But even if this problem were not put
 before us by god, you should not suffer
 this unclean thing, since the man lost was
 both very noble and your king, so see this through.⁽²⁶⁵⁾
 Now, since I am ruler and hold this kingdom
 that he held before—holding also the bed
 and wife we have both sown; and children
 of the same mother would have been born to us,
 had his line not been ill-fated—since chance⁽²⁷⁰⁾
 has driven me into that one's powers,
 therefore I shall fight for him in this matter,
 as if for my own father, and I shall try
 everything, seeking to find the one who
 committed the murder, for Labdacus' son,⁽²⁷⁵⁾
 son of Polydorus, and before him
 Cadmus and Agenor, kings of old.
 I pray god that to those who do not do these things
 no crop may spring up from the ground, nor children
 from their wives, but they be destroyed in suffering⁽²⁸⁰⁾
 more hateful than that which holds us now.
 But to you other people of Cadmus,
 to however many approve what I say,

may Justice and all the gods stay with you
always as your ally.(285)

CHORUS:

Just as you adjured me under a curse, my lord,
so shall I speak. For neither did I kill
nor am I able to show the killer.
But it is the task of the one who sent it,
Phoebus, to say whoever has done this thing.(290)

OEDIPUS:

You have spoken justly, but no man can
compel the gods when they are unwilling.

CHORUS:

I would say things secondary to this,
but things which, I think, ought to be said.

OEDIPUS:

And if there are matters tertiary to it,(295)
do not fail to say them also.

CHORUS:

I know that my lord Tiresias most always
sees the same as my lord Apollo; from him one
investigating this might learn the wisest things.

OEDIPUS:

But this has not been neglected! No,(300)
even this I have done, for I sent two guides
after Creon mentioned him, and it is only
surprising that he is not already here.

CHORUS:

There are still other reports, though mute and old...

OEDIPUS:

What's this? I will investigate any story.(305)

CHORUS:

It is said he died at the hands of bandits.

OEDIPUS:

So I have heard, but no one sees the one who saw.

CHORUS:

But if he has any fear at all, hearing
such curses as yours he will not remain here.

OEDIPUS:

But to a man who does not shrink from doing⁽³¹⁰⁾
the thing, a word will not be frightening.

CHORUS:

But the one to accuse him is here, for
already those men lead hither the godlike
seer, in whom alone of men lives the truth.

[Enter Tiresias, led by guides.]

OEDIPUS:

O Tiresias, who grasp all things,⁽³¹⁵⁾
both what can be learned and what is unspeakable,
both of heaven and treading the earth,
even if you cannot see, you still understand
what sickness plagues our city, and we find, lord,
you alone are our savior and defender.⁽³²⁰⁾
For Phoebus, if you have not heard this also
from the messengers, in response to our question
said relief from this sickness would only come
if we should discover and punish well
the murderers of Laius or send them forth⁽³²⁵⁾
as fugitives from this land. Therefore,
grudging nothing from the speech of birds
or something known from another sort
of divination, save yourself and the city,
and save me, and ward off all the pollution⁽³³⁰⁾
from the dead man. We are in your hands,
and to help a man from troubles when you have
the power is the sweetest of labors.

TIRESIAS:

Alas, alas! How terrible to know
when it does not help the knower; for knowing this⁽³³⁵⁾
well I let it slip—I should not have come here.

OEDIPUS:

What's this? How dispiritedly you have come!

TIRESIAS:

Send me home, for you will bear your lot easily
and I mine, if you will yield to me.

OEDIPUS:

You speak neither clearly nor helpfully⁽³⁴⁰⁾
to this city, which raised you, if you guard your thoughts.

TIRESIAS:

For I see that your words come at the wrong time,
and since I would not suffer the same thing...

OEDIPUS:

No, by the gods, don't hold back what you know, when
all of us as suppliants bow down before you.(345)

TIRESIAS:

None of you understand, but I shall never
reveal my own troubles, and so I shall not say yours.

OEDIPUS:

What are you saying? You will not explain
what you understand, but rather intend
to betray us and destroy the city.(350)

TIRESIAS:

I cause no pain for you or myself. Why do you
vainly seek this? For you can learn nothing from me.

OEDIPUS:

You worst of wicked men! You would anger
a stone! Will you reveal nothing, but instead
show yourself unmovable and impractical?(355)

TIRESIAS:

You have found fault with my anger, but your own,
living within you, you did not see, but blamed me.

OEDIPUS:

Who could hear such words and not grow angry,
words with which you dishonor the city?

TIRESIAS:

It will end the same, though I hide it in silence.(360)

OEDIPUS:

Why not, then, tell me what will come anyway?

TIRESIAS:

I should explain no further. At these things,
if you wish, rage as much as your heart is able.

OEDIPUS:

Indeed, since I am so angry, I'll pass over none
of what I understand. Know that I think(365)
you, too, had your hand in this deed and did it,
even though you did not kill with your own hands.
But if you could see, I would think the deed yours alone.

TIRESIAS:

Really? I say to you: Abide by that decree
you made earlier, and from this day address(370)
neither these men here nor me, since you

are the unholy polluter of this land.

OEDIPUS:

Did you throw out this word so boldly?
And where do you think you will escape it?

TIRESIAS:

I *have* escaped it, for I hold the potent truth.(375)

OEDIPUS:

Who told you to say this? It is no prophecy!

TIRESIAS:

You did! For you forced me to speak unwillingly!

OEDIPUS:

What do you mean? Speak again, that I may learn more.

TIRESIAS:

Didn't understand before? Or do you test me?

OEDIPUS:

No, I don't know what you mean. Explain again.(380)

TIRESIAS:

I say that you slew the man whose slayer you seek.

OEDIPUS:

You'll not rejoice to have said these evils twice.

TIRESIAS:

Should I now say more, too, to anger you further?

OEDIPUS:

Whatever you deem best; it will be said in vain.

TIRESIAS:

I say that you secretly have lived most foully(385)
with those who should be most dear, nor do you see
to what extent of evil you have come.

OEDIPUS:

Do you really think you can say this unpunished?

TIRESIAS:

If there is any strength in the truth.

OEDIPUS:

There is, but not for you. You don't have this,(390)
since you are blind in your ears and mind and eyes.

TIRESIAS:

You are truly pathetic, hurling these insults,
which soon every man here will hurl at you.

OEDIPUS:

You live in one single night, so that you can never
harm me or any other who sees the light.⁽³⁹⁵⁾

TIRESIAS:

No, for fate will not befall you at my doing;
Apollo is enough, who works to see this done.

OEDIPUS:

Did Creon invent all this, or someone else?

TIRESIAS:

Creon is no burden on you, but you on yourself.

OEDIPUS:

O wealth and power and skill reaching⁽⁴⁰⁰⁾
beyond skill, in a much-envied life
how much resentment gathers up inside you,
if for the sake of this realm, which the city put
into my hands as a gift, not something sought,
the trusted Creon, my friend from the beginning,⁽⁴⁰⁵⁾
beguiles me and secretly desires to oust me,
engaging this craftily-working wizard,
this tricky beggar, who sees clearly only
for profit, but is blind when it comes to skill.
So tell me, when are you the wise seer?⁽⁴¹⁰⁾
How is it that, when the singing hound was here,
you never said how the citizens might be freed?
Even though the riddle could not be solved by
the first man who met it, but required prophecy.
But you did not come forth with this, knowing some clue⁽⁴¹⁵⁾
from birds or gods; instead I came along,
the idiot Oedipus! I stopped her,
working from intellect, not learning from birds.
The very man you're trying to overthrow,
thinking to stand beside Creon's throne.⁽⁴²⁰⁾
I think you both—you and the one who framed these things—
will regret your urge to cleanse the land, but if you
were not so old, you'd learn now what such words earn.

CHORUS:

To us it seems that both this man's words
and your own, Oedipus, were said in anger.⁽⁴²⁵⁾
But we must not dwell on such things. Only this:
how best we may fulfill the god's instructions.

TIRESIAS:

Even though you are a tyrant, I must at least
be granted an equal reply, for I, too,
have the right to speech. For I am no slave to you,⁽⁴³⁰⁾
at all, but to Loxias, so I will not be
written off as Creon's client. I will reply,
since you reproach me as blind: You, even though you
see clearly, do not see the scope of your evil,
nor where you live, nor with whom you dwell.⁽⁴³⁵⁾
Do you know your true descent? And secretly
you are an enemy to your own kin,
both under the earth and on it. Striking you
from both sides the terrible hounds of your mother's
and father's curse will drive you from this land;⁽⁴⁴⁰⁾
though you see well enough now, then you will be blind.
What place will not be harbor to your shouting?
What Cithaeron will not echo back your cries,
when you truly understand that wedding?
You sailed home into it, no proper harbor⁽⁴⁴⁵⁾
after such good sailing before! Nor do you
perceive the multitude of other evils,
which will make you the equal of your children.
Go ahead—insult Creon and this mouth of mine,
for of all mortals who will be destroyed⁽⁴⁵⁰⁾
root and branch, there is not one sadder than you.

OEDIPUS:

Am I to tolerate hearing this from this man?
No, to hell with him! No! Turn around quickly
and head back home, far away from here.

TIRESIAS:

I would not have come here, if you had not called me.⁽⁴⁵⁵⁾

OEDIPUS:

I did not know what nonsense you would speak,
or I would hardly have sent for you.

TIRESIAS:

Men like myself are born, to your eyes, fools,
but to the parents who bore you we seem wise.

OEDIPUS:

To whom? Wait! Who on earth are my parents?⁽⁴⁶⁰⁾

TIRESIAS:

This very day will sire you and destroy you.

OEDIPUS:

How riddling and foolish is all you say!

TIRESIAS:

Then you of all people should understand it.

OEDIPUS:

With these same taunts you now hurl, you will find me great.

TIRESIAS:

This same stroke, however, has destroyed you.⁽⁴⁶⁵⁾

OEDIPUS:

But if I saved this city, that doesn't matter.

TIRESIAS:

Then I will leave. You, boy, lead me home.

OEDIPUS:

Yes, go! When you are here, you are in the way,
but rushing off you cannot pain us further.

TIRESIAS:

I will leave after I have said what I came to say,⁽⁴⁷⁰⁾
not fearing your face, for you cannot destroy me.
I say to you: That man, whom you have long sought,
threatening him and naming as the murderer
of Laius, that man is here.
An immigrant in theory, soon he will be⁽⁴⁷⁵⁾
revealed a native Theban, though he will not be
happy to learn it; for blind instead of seeing,
a beggar instead of rich he will travel
foreign earth, tapping it with his staff.
He will be revealed to live with his children⁽⁴⁸⁰⁾
as brother and father both; and to his parents
he is both his wife's son and lord and his father's
fellow-sower and slayer. Go inside and
consider this. Should you find that I am lying,
you will prove I have no skill at prophecy.⁽⁴⁸⁵⁾

[Exeunt omnes except Chorus]

CHORUS:

Str. /Who was it the oracle-speaking
rock of Delphi saw
committing the most unspeakable acts
with red hands?⁽⁴⁹⁰⁾
Now, stronger than swift-footed horses,
he must deftly move his foot in flight.
For in arms against him leaps
the son of Zeus with fire and lightning
and, following after him,⁽⁴⁹⁵⁾
the terrible, unerring Furies.
Ant. /For, recently from snowy Parnassus
shone clearly the call

to track by every possible method
the unknown man.⁽⁵⁰⁰⁾
For he wanders through the wild wood
and up to caves like a bull upon the rocks,
miserable, with miserable foot, living alone,
seeking to escape the prophecies
of the prophetic navel of the world,⁽⁵⁰⁵⁾
yet they forever hover, living, around him.
Str. 2Therefore, terribly, terribly does
the wise bird-interpreter shake
me; I can neither approve nor deny,
but I am confused.⁽⁵¹⁰⁾
My heart hovers with expectation,
seeing neither here nor in the future.
For never have I learned
that any quarrel lay between
the Labdacids and the son of Polybus,⁽⁵¹⁵⁾
neither before nor now,
which I could use as proof
or trust as touchstone
to go against the public fame of Oedipus
as I seek to help the Labdacids⁽⁵²⁰⁾
in the undiscovered murder.
Ant. 2But, though Zeus and Apollo know
the ways of mortals, among men,
there is no sure rule that a seer's opinion⁽⁵²⁵⁾
counts more than mine,
though a man may surpass wisdom
with his own wisdom.
But, no, until I see an account
confirmed, never would I⁽⁵³⁰⁾
agree when men are speaking slanders.
For once the winged maiden
came openly against him,
and he was seen wise
and found friendly to the city; therefore⁽⁵³⁵⁾
by the judgment of my mind
never will he merit suspicion.

[Enter Creon from offstage.]

CREON:

Gentlemen of the city, I have learned that
the tyrant Oedipus has spoken terrible
words against me, so I am here, unable⁽⁵⁴⁰⁾
to bear it. If in our present distress
he thinks he has suffered at my hands,
then I have no desire for long life
if I must bear this reputation, for
its damage affects no single part of my life,⁽⁵⁴⁵⁾
rather the greatest part of it, if I am called

base in my city, base even by my friends.

CHORUS:

But, while this censure did come, it came quickly
and pushed out in anger, not from rational thoughts.

CREON:

Was it said that won over by advice⁽⁵⁵⁰⁾
of mine the seer uttered false words?

CHORUS:

He said these things, but I do not know why.

CREON:

Did he make this accusation of me
with eyes set straight and from his right mind?

CHORUS:

I don't know, for what rulers do I do not see.⁽⁵⁵⁵⁾

[Enter Oedipus from the palace.]

OEDIPUS:

You there, how did you come here? Or do you have
so much daring that you approach my roof,
although the patent murderer of this man
and the manifest thief of my kingdom?
Come then, say, by the gods, did you think me a fool⁽⁵⁶⁰⁾
or coward that you would weave these schemes?
That I would not discover this deed of yours
creeping forth in treachery or, when I learned,
I would not defend myself? Isn't this venture
of yours foolish, to hunt tyranny⁽⁵⁶⁵⁾
without wealth or friends, a thing only captured
with a mob and cash?

CREON:

Do you know what you should do? Hear an answer in
response to your speech, then learn and judge for yourself.

OEDIPUS:

You're a clever speaker, but I'm a bad student,⁽⁵⁷⁰⁾
for I have found you hostile and troubling to me.

CREON:

Hear now this one thing that I came to say.

OEDIPUS:

'This one thing' should not be that you are not false.

CREON:

If you think that stubbornness is of value
apart from reason, you are a madman!(575)

OEDIPUS:

If you think a man who does his kinsman ill
will not pay the price, you are a fool.

CREON:

I understand you think these things legitimate,
but tell me what suffering you had at my hands.

OEDIPUS:

Did you or did you not persuade me that I must(580)
send a man for the reverend seer?

CREON:

Even now I hold the same opinion.

OEDIPUS:

How long a time has passed since Laius...

CREON:

Did what deed? I do not understand.

OEDIPUS:

... wanders invisible, conquered by death?(585)

CREON:

Many long years have been measured out since then.

OEDIPUS:

Next, was this seer in business at that time?

CREON:

Just as wise and revered as he is today.

OEDIPUS:

Did he say anything about me at the time?

CREON:

Never when I stood near and listened.(590)

OEDIPUS:

Did you not hold an inquiry for the killer?

CREON:

We held one; how could we not? Yet we heard nothing.

OEDIPUS:

How, then, did this wise man not tell you anything?

CREON:

I don't know; I prefer to keep quiet
in matters when I don't comprehend them.(595)

OEDIPUS:

There is one thing you could say with comprehension...

CREON:

What is it? If I know, I will not deny it.

OEDIPUS:

For whom, if he did not meet with you, did he say
that the death of Laius was my work?

CREON:

If he says that, then he himself knows, but I(600)
would learn from you, as you now ask from me.

OEDIPUS:

Learn away! For I will not be caught as slayer.

CREON:

Well, then—are you still married to my sister?

OEDIPUS:

There is no denial of your question.

CREON:

Do you grant equal rule of this land to her?(605)

OEDIPUS:

All that she desires she has from me.

CREON:

Am I not, then, the third, equal with you both?

OEDIPUS:

Indeed, for it's here you are proved a bad friend.

CREON:

Not if you would reckon with yourself as I do!
Consider this first: Would anyone choose(610)
to rule with fear rather than to sleep untrembling,
if he could have the same power? And so I
myself was not born preferring to be tyrant
rather than do a tyrant's acts, nor was
any other who has good sense. For now I have(615)
everything from you without fear; but if I
myself were ruler, I'd do much against my will.
How then could tyranny be sweeter to me
than trouble-free rule and sovereignty?

In no way will you find me so deceived⁽⁶²⁰⁾
that I require fair things that hold no profit.
Now I can be with anyone; all salute me.
Now those wanting something from you call on me;
I am their whole path to success. How could I
exchange this life for the other? An evil mind⁽⁶²⁵⁾
could not reason fairly. But I am no lover
of such schemes, anyway, nor would I ever
support it even if another did the deed.
And this will be the proof of it: go to Pytho
and learn the oracles, if I have⁽⁶³⁰⁾
reported them correctly. Then, if you catch me
plotting something with the seer, don't kill me
with one vote, but with two, mine and yours.
But, don't blame me just like that, with mere suspicion.
For it is not just either to randomly⁽⁶³⁵⁾
consider wicked men good or the good wicked.
I think that casting off a good friend is equal
even to throwing out one's own dear life.
In time, though, you will surely know these things, since
time alone shows that a man is just,⁽⁶⁴⁰⁾
but you might learn he is bad in a single day.

CHORUS:

He spoke as one should to a man worried he will
fall, my lord, for quick thinkers are not safe ones.

OEDIPUS:

Whenever someone swiftly moves secret plots
against me, I must also counter-plot swiftly.⁽⁶⁴⁵⁾
But if I wait in silence, these things will be
accomplished, not as his deeds, but my mistakes.

CREON:

What do you want? To cast me from this land?

OEDIPUS:

Hardly—I want you to die, not flee.

CREON:

You are the form of jealousy.⁽⁶⁵⁰⁾

OEDIPUS:

You speak neither to concede nor to persuade?

CREON:

For I see well that you do not understand.

OEDIPUS:

I understand my own affairs well enough.

CREON:

You must know mine equally well.

OEDIPUS:

Not when they are false!(655)

CREON:

Do you understand nothing?

OEDIPUS:

Yet, there must be rule.

CREON:

Not if ruled badly!

OEDIPUS:

O city, city!

CREON:

The city is mine, too, not yours alone!(660)

CHORUS:

Stop, my lords! I see, at just the right moment,
Jocasta, coming from the house to you, with whom
you ought to settle this present quarrel.

[Enter Jocasta from the palace.]

JOCASTA:

Why, unhappy men, do you stir up this
unwelcome revolution of the tongue? Aren't you(665)
ashamed to stir private evils when the land is
so sick? Come inside, and you, Creon, return home;
don't make this foolish grief into something big.

CREON:

Sister, this husband of yours, Oedipus, judges
terrible things for me, choosing two evils:(670)
to forsake my fatherland or to die.

OEDIPUS:

I concede this, for, my lady, I caught him
basely conspiring against me with evil craft.

CREON:

May I live no more, but die accursed, if I have done
against you any of what you accuse me.(675)

JOCASTA:

By the gods, Oedipus, believe this,
respecting this oath to the gods most of all,

then me and these who are here with you.
Str.

CHORUS:

Yield to these wishes and thoughts,
my lord, I pray.(680)

OEDIPUS:

What would you have me yield?

CHORUS:

Respect a man who never before was foolish
and now is powerful from his oath.

OEDIPUS:

Do you know what you seek?

CHORUS:

I do.(685)

OEDIPUS:

Then tell me why.

CHORUS:

Never should you cast out a friend who is bound with an oath,
dishonored, with only the charge of obscure words.

OEDIPUS:

Know well that when you seek this, you seek either(690)
my destruction or exile from this land.

CHORUS:

No, by the foremost of all the gods,
the Sun! May I perish godless and friendless,
the worst fate, if I have this in mind!
But for me, the dying land eats away(695)
at my ill-starred heart, if this fight between you two
will join itself to our old problems.

OEDIPUS:

Then let him go, since I must either die
or be driven by force from this land, dishonored.
For I pity your speech, since it is piteous,(700)
not his. He will be hated wherever he goes.

CREON:

You are clearly hateful in yielding, and severe
when you pass from anger. But personalities
like yours are justly painful to themselves.

OEDIPUS:

Will you not let me be and go away?(705)

CREON:

I'll go,
finding you ignorant, but just in their eyes.

[Exit Creon offstage.]

Ant.

CHORUS:

Lady, why do you hesitate
to take this man inside the house?

JOCASTA:

I would learn what has befallen.(710)

CHORUS:

Suspicion through unknown words
came, and even an unjust word can bite.

JOCASTA:

From both of them?

CHORUS:

Yes.

JOCASTA:

But, what was the cause?(715)

CHORUS:

It has done enough to me, enough when the land
already suffers so, that it should stay departed.

OEDIPUS:

Do you see where you've gotten, despite your good
intentions, trying to ease and blunt my anger?

CHORUS:

My lord, I've said it not only once,(720)
but know that I am mad, helpless in rational thought,
if I forsake you,
who, when my dear country was lost in troubles,
set her upright again.
But now, become once more our guide to better things!(725)

JOCASTA:

By the gods, tell me also, my lord,
what problem puts you in so much anger!

OEDIPUS:

Since I respect you, my wife, more than them, I shall
speak of Creon and what he plots against me.

JOCASTA:

Speak, if you will explain the quarrel clearly.(730)

OEDIPUS:

He said I was the murderer of Laius.

JOCASTA:

Knowing this for himself, or learning from hearsay?

OEDIPUS:

He sent that criminal seer, since regarding
his own affairs, he keeps his tongue unstained.

JOCASTA:

You now, free yourself from these matters;(735)
listen to me and learn why nothing mortal
can show you anything of prophecy.
I shall tell a quick tale to prove my words.
A prophecy came to Laius once—I won't say
from Apollo himself, but from his servants —(740)
that death would come to him from his child,
whoever was born to him from me. But then,
just as the report is, some foreign brigands
slew him where the three wagon-roads meet.
Yet three days had not passed from the birth of my child,(745)
when that man, binding his ankles together,
sent him in another's hands into the wild
of the mountain. And so Apollo brought about
neither that he slay his father nor that Laius
suffer the terrible thing he feared from his child.(750)
Such things the speeches of seers predict,
you should ignore; for whatever the god
requires, he himself will easily reveal.

OEDIPUS:

Hearing you just now, my lady, how
my soul wanders, how my mind shakes me!(755)

JOCASTA:

What care compels you to say such a thing?

OEDIPUS:

I thought I heard you say this: that Laius
was cut down where the three wagon-roads meet.

JOCASTA:

So it was announced, nor has it changed at all.

OEDIPUS:

And where is the place where he suffered this?(760)

JOCASTA:

The land is called Phocis, and a split road
leads to it both from Delphi and from Daulia.

OEDIPUS:

And how long has passed since these things happened?

JOCASTA:

It was announced in the city just
before you took the rule of this land.(765)

OEDIPUS:

O Zeus, why have you willed me to do this?

JOCASTA:

What is it, Oedipus, that grips your heart?

OEDIPUS:

Do not question me further, but tell me:
What did Laius look like, how old was he?

JOCASTA:

Tall, his hair just sprinkled with white like snow,(770)
though his figure was not far from yours.

OEDIPUS:

Alas, alas! It seems that I have just cast
myself unknowing under terrible curses!

JOCASTA:

Why say that? I tremble to look at you, my lord!

OEDIPUS:

I am terribly afraid the prophet can see.(775)
You will prove it, if you tell me one thing further.

JOCASTA:

Though I still tremble, I shall speak what you ask me.

OEDIPUS:

Did he go with a small escort, or having
a large bodyguard, as befits a prince?

JOCASTA:

There were five men in all, among them a herald,(780)
and a single chariot that carried Laius.

OEDIPUS:

Alas! Already matters are clear! Who was it
who announced these matters to you, my lady?

JOCASTA:

A servant, who returned the sole survivor.

OEDIPUS:

And does he chance to still be at the palace?(785)

JOCASTA:

No, indeed. For when he returned from there
and saw you holding power and Laius lost,
he grasped my hand and beseeched me to send
him to the country to tend the flocks, so that
he would be far from the sight of this city.(790)
This I did, for he was worthy, although a slave,
to take even greater grace than this.

OEDIPUS:

How quickly could he return to us here?

JOCASTA:

He could be here now! But why do you order this?

OEDIPUS:

I fear myself, lady, lest I have(795)
said too much, and so I wish to see him.

JOCASTA:

But he will come! Now, however, I deserve
to learn what holds so badly for you, my lord.

OEDIPUS:

Nor will you be deprived, when I am gone so far
into expectations. For how could I speak to one(800)
more important than you as I meet such fortune?
My father is Polybus of Corinth,
my mother Merope of the line of Dorus.
I was thought the greatest of the citizens there,
before chance befell me, worthy of marvel,(805)
but not worthy, at least, of my energy.
At a banquet a man overwhelmed by drink
called me a fraud in whom I claimed for my father.
That day I tried to hold in my anger,
but the next day I went home and asked(810)
my mother and father, and they angrily
treated the insult as the speech of a drunkard.
I rejoiced with them both at this, but still
it chafed me always, for the rumor spread far.
Unknown to my mother and father I set out(815)
to Delphi, and Phoebus sent me away

as unworthy of the answers I had sought,
but telling me other terrible, awful things—
that I must sleep with my mother, and
that I would bring to light a brood unbearable⁽⁸²⁰⁾
for men to see, and that I must be the slayer
of the father who sired me. I heard and fled,
henceforth to share with Corinth only the stars,
where I would never see completed
the disgrace of those evil oracles of mine.⁽⁸²⁵⁾
In my travels I came to that place
in which you say that your king was lost.
And to you, lady, I shall speak the truth.
When traveling near that very triple road,
a herald and a man riding there⁽⁸³⁰⁾
in a chariot, like the man you described,
encountered me. Both the one in front
and the old man himself drove me from the road
with force. In my anger I struck the driver,
turning me off the road, and the old man,⁽⁸³⁵⁾
when he saw, watched me as I passed the chariot
and struck me on the head with the two-pronged goad.
But he more than paid for it and soon was struck
by the scepter from this very hand, lying
on his back, at once thrown out of the car.⁽⁸⁴⁰⁾
I killed them all. But if that stranger
had some connection with Laius,
who would be more wretched than this man you see?
What man would be more hateful to God,
the man whom no man, foreign or citizen,⁽⁸⁴⁵⁾
may receive at home, nor anyone address,
but all must cast from their house? And no other
called down such curses on me than myself!
I even stain the dead man's bed with the hands
at which he perished. Am I so evil?⁽⁸⁵⁰⁾
Not entirely unholy? If I must flee,
then in my flight I may neither see my own kin
nor step inside my fatherland, or I must
take my mother in marriage and kill my father
Polybus, who raised and sired me. Who would not,⁽⁸⁵⁵⁾
judging these things, say truly in my case
that they come from a cruel divinity?
Never, o holy reverence of the gods,
never may I see this day, but I would rather
be blotted out from humanity before⁽⁸⁶⁰⁾
I saw this stain of my doom arrive upon me.

CHORUS:

Although these things trouble us, my lord, until
you learn from the one who was present, have hope.

OEDIPUS:

Indeed, this much of hope is left to me:
only to await that man, the herdsman.(865)

JOCASTA:

And what do you want of him, when he appears?

OEDIPUS:

I shall tell you; for if he is found saying
the same tale as you, I shall have escaped this woe.

JOCASTA:

What special tale did you hear from me?(870)

OEDIPUS:

You said he reported that brigands
killed Laius. If, then, he still says the same
number, I did not kill him, for surely one man
could not be equal to many. But if he
clearly names a single man, a lone traveler,(875)
then already this deed comes down upon me.

JOCASTA:

Yet, know that his account stood thus, and he cannot
take it back now, for the city heard these things,
not I alone. But even if he does alter
something from his previous story,
not even thus, my lord, will he bring to(880)
light Laius' killer truly accomplished,
who, indeed, Loxias said must die at the hands
of my child. Yet my poor boy never slew
him, but rather perished himself long before.
And so I would not look to prophecies,(885)
not here or anywhere else.

OEDIPUS:

You reason well, but, nevertheless, send someone
to fetch the servant, and don't neglect it.

JOCASTA:

And soon I shall, but let us go inside the house,
for I would do nothing but that it is your wish.(890)

[Exeunt omnes.]

CHORUS:

Str. If only fate may find me still acting
with reverent holiness in words
and all my deeds, for which lofty laws
are ordained, born(895)
in heaven above, their only
father Olympus,

no mortal form of men
 bore them, nor does
 forgetfulness ever lull them to sleep.(900)
 In them is a great god, who does not grow old.
Ant. 1 Audacity sires the tyrant—audacity, if
 filled up rashly with all excess,
 neither timely nor useful,
 scaling the highest eaves(905)
 rushes into precipitous necessity
 where it suffers from its ill-placed foot.
 I pray that God
 will never end the struggle
 that is good for the city.(910)
 I will never cease clinging to God as my protector.
Str. 2 But if someone goes
 disdainful in hands or speech,
 nor fearing Justice,
 nor revering the seats of the holy gods,(915)
 let a bad fate take him,
 the wages of unlucky insolence,
 unless he reaps his profit justly
 and retreats from impious acts,
 or if he touches untouchable things in his folly.(920)
 What man can protect himself, warding
 away the shafts of anger when such things happen?
 For if deeds like this are honored,
 why must I dance?
Ant. 2 No longer will I worship(925)
 at the inviolate navel of the world,
 nor at Abae,
 nor ever in the Olympian shrine,
 unless these events are made
 manifestly clear to all mortals.(930)
 But, o powerful one, if you are correctly called that,
 Zeus, who rule all things, may they not elude
 you and your eternal, deathless empire!
 For already the old prophecies of Laius
 are waning and being set aside.(935)
 Apollo does not seem to be honored;
 faith wanders, lost.

[Enter Jocasta from the palace.]

JOCASTA:

Lords of this land, the thought came to me
 to supplicate the shrines of the gods, taking
 in my hands these wreaths and offerings of incense.(940)
 For Oedipus unduly twists his spirit
 with every sort of grief, not like a man
 of reason, judging new matters by the old,
 but whoever talks has him, if he speaks his fears.

And so, since my assurances achieve nothing,⁽⁹⁴⁵⁾
I have come as a suppliant with these tokens,
to you, Lycean Apollo, for you are nearest,
so that you will render us unpolluted,
since now we are all afraid, seeing him
so shaken, who is pilot of our ship.⁽⁹⁵⁰⁾

[Enter Messenger from offstage.]

MESSENGER:

Could I learn from you, strangers, where lies
the house of King Oedipus? Or, indeed,
tell me where he himself is, if you know.

CHORUS:

This is his roof; he himself is within, stranger.
Here is his wife and mother of his children.⁽⁹⁵⁵⁾

MESSENGER:

Then may there be happiness to you, now
and always, since you are his wedded wife.

JOCASTA:

And likewise to you also, stranger, which you earn
through your welcome words; but explain what
you have come needing and what you wish to tell him.⁽⁹⁶⁰⁾

MESSENGER:

Good tidings for your house and your lord, my lady.

JOCASTA:

What tidings are these, and whence have you come?

MESSENGER:

From Corinth. The word I shall speak—at first you might
rejoice; how could you not? But you may also mourn.

JOCASTA:

What's this? What twofold power do you hold?⁽⁹⁶⁵⁾

MESSENGER:

The people of the land of the Isthmus
make him their king, as it is announced there.

JOCASTA:

But why? Does old Polybus no longer rule there?

MESSENGER:

No, indeed, for death holds him in the tomb.

JOCASTA:

What did you say? Polybus is dead, old man?(970)

MESSENGER:

If I do not speak the truth, I should die here.

JOCASTA:

Maid, won't you go inside as quick as you can,
and tell the master of these things? O prophecies
of the gods, where are you? This man Oedipus
has long feared and fled lest he kill him, and now(975)
this very man has died by chance and not by him.

[Enter Oedipus from the palace.]

OEDIPUS:

My dearest Jocasta, my wife, why did you
send for me to come here from the house?

JOCASTA:

Listen to this man, and discover in his words
where the august prophecies of God have come.(980)

OEDIPUS:

But who is he, and why would he speak to me?

JOCASTA:

He is from Corinth, announcing that your father
Polybus is no more, but has perished.

OEDIPUS:

What's this, stranger? You yourself tell me.

MESSENGER:

If I must state this exactly to you first,(985)
know well that the man is gone, deceased.

OEDIPUS:

By treachery, or meeting some disease?

MESSENGER:

A small turn of the scale lays old bodies to rest.

OEDIPUS:

Destroyed by disease, it seems, the poor man.

MESSENGER:

Yes, and by the long measuring of his years.(990)

OEDIPUS:

Well, well! Why, my wife, would anyone look
to the prophesying hearth of Pytho or to

the shrieking birds above, under whose guidance
I was to kill my own father? But, he died
and sleeps below the earth; and I am here,⁽⁹⁹⁵⁾
without touching a spear—unless somehow he
perished from longing for me, and thus died by me.
But still, Polybus has taken those prophecies
as they are—worthless—with him and lies in Hades.

JOCASTA:

Did I not predict it thus earlier?⁽¹⁰⁰⁰⁾

OEDIPUS:

You did, but I was led by my fear.

JOCASTA:

Now, then, toss none of these matters in your heart.

OEDIPUS:

And how can I not dread my mother's bed?

JOCASTA:

Why should a person fear when the ways of fortune
are supreme, when there is no clear foresight?⁽¹⁰⁰⁵⁾
It's best to live at random, however one can.
Do not worry you will wed your mother,
for many mortals already have lain with
their mothers in dreams. Rather, the one for whom
these things are nothing bears life easiest.⁽¹⁰¹⁰⁾

OEDIPUS:

All these matters you would explain well,
if my mother were dead; but since she lives,
I must fear, however prettily you speak.

JOCASTA:

Surely your father's tomb is also a bright sign?

OEDIPUS:

Bright, I agree, but my fear is of her who lives.⁽¹⁰¹⁵⁾

MESSENGER:

And who is this woman who so frightens you?

OEDIPUS:

Merope, old man, with whom Polybus lived.

MESSENGER:

But what in her moves you to such fear?

OEDIPUS:

A terrible prophecy sent by God, stranger.

MESSENGER:

Tell me—or is it lawful that another know?(1020)

OEDIPUS:

Certainly: Loxias once told me
that I must sleep with my own mother and
shed paternal blood with my own hands.
Thus for a long time I have kept Corinth
far from me—and prosperously, but still(1025)
your parents' eyes are the sweetest thing to see.

MESSENGER:

Dreading those things, then, you are exiled from that place?

OEDIPUS:

And wishing not to murder my father, old man!

MESSENGER:

Why, then, have I not freed you from this fear,
my lord, since indeed I come in good will?(1030)

OEDIPUS:

Indeed, you would take deserved grace from me.

MESSENGER:

I came for this very purpose, so that when you
returned home I would have done well by you!

OEDIPUS:

But I will never go where my parents are!

MESSENGER:

O child, you clearly do not know what you do.(1035)

OEDIPUS:

How's that, old man? By the gods, teach me!

MESSENGER:

If it is because of this you flee your home...

OEDIPUS:

I dread that Phoebus accomplish these things for me.

MESSENGER:

Or that you might take pollution from your parents?

OEDIPUS:

This very thing, old sir, has ever been my fear.(1040)

MESSENGER:

Don't you know you may justly fear nothing?

OEDIPUS:

How so, if I am the child of those parents?

MESSENGER:

Because Polybus is nothing to you by birth!

OEDIPUS:

How can you say this? Did Polybus not sire me?

MESSENGER:

You have nothing from him, no more than from me.(1045)

OEDIPUS:

How can my father be equal to nothing?

MESSENGER:

That man did not beget you, no more than I!

OEDIPUS:

But then...why did he call me his child?

MESSENGER:

Know that he took you as a gift from my own arms.

OEDIPUS:

And still he loved me greatly, though not his own?(1050)

MESSENGER:

His former childlessness persuaded him.

OEDIPUS:

But you—had you purchased me or found me by chance?

MESSENGER:

I found you in the woody glens of Cithaeron.

OEDIPUS:

Why were you traveling in that place?

MESSENGER:

At that time I had the care of mountain flocks.(1055)

OEDIPUS:

Why, you were a shepherd, a nomad for hire?

MESSENGER:

And also at that time, my child, your savior.

OEDIPUS:

What misfortune was mine when you found me?

MESSENGER:

Your ankles should testify to that.

OEDIPUS:

Oh, why must you mention that old affliction?(1060)

MESSENGER:

I freed you when your feet were pierced at the ankles.

OEDIPUS:

Such terrible disgrace I took from my cradle.

MESSENGER:

Such that you were named from this misfortune.

OEDIPUS:

Tell me, by god, from my mother or father?

MESSENGER:

I don't know; he who gave you to me would know this.(1065)

OEDIPUS:

You took me from someone, didn't find me yourself?

MESSENGER:

No, another shepherd gave you to me.

OEDIPUS:

Who was he? Could you describe him clearly?

MESSENGER:

I believe he was called one of Laius' people.

OEDIPUS:

The former king of this very land?(1070)

MESSENGER:

Exactly—he was a herdsman of that man.

OEDIPUS:

And is this man still alive, so I could see him?

MESSENGER:

You who live here would know that better than I.

OEDIPUS:

Does anyone standing here now know
the herdsman of whom he speaks? You might(1075)
have seen him in the fields or even here! Tell me,
for now it is time for this to be learned at last!

CHORUS:

I know of none other than the one from the fields
whom you wanted to see earlier, but
Jocasta here could say these things best of all.(1080)

OEDIPUS:

Lady, do you know that man, whom just now
we summoned? Is he the one this man speaks of?

JOCASTA:

What does it matter whom he means? Ignore it.
Don't think about it—it will all end in vain.

OEDIPUS:

It is impossible that when I have found(1085)
such signs, I will not discover my birth.

JOCASTA:

No, by the gods! If indeed you care for your
own life, do not go after this! I grieve enough.

OEDIPUS:

Cheer up, for even if I am revealed a slave
three generations back, you will not be proved base.(1090)

JOCASTA:

All the same, obey me, I pray. Do not do this.

OEDIPUS:

I cannot be persuaded not to learn this clearly.

JOCASTA:

Yet I understand it well—what I say is best.

OEDIPUS:

What you say is best has long annoyed me.

JOCASTA:

Unlucky man, may you never know who you are!(1095)

OEDIPUS:

Will someone go and bring the shepherd to me?
Let this one rejoice in her own rich birth.

JOCASTA:

Alas, alas—unhappy man! This alone can
I say to you, and nothing else ever after.

[Exit Jocasta into the palace.]

CHORUS:

Why ever did your wife go away,(1100)
Oedipus, stirred by wild grief? I fear that
something evil will burst out from that silence.

OEDIPUS:

Let it all burst out, if it must! As for me,
though it be small, I wish to know my stock.
But she, since a woman is proud of such things,(1105)
she is troubled by this low birth of mine.
But I deem myself the child of Chance,
who gives good things, and I will not be dishonored.
She is my mother, and my brothers,
the Months, have seen me both small and great.(1110)
Being born what I am, I could never be
another, so I should seek out my descent.

CHORUS:

Str. If I am a prophet
and wise with intelligence,(1115)
by heaven, o Cithaeron, you will surely know
at tomorrow's full moon
that you are the fellow countryman of Oedipus
and, as nurse and mother, made him grow.
We will sing and dance for you, for you(1120)
have served our kings!
Hail, Phoebus, to you also
may these things be pleasing.
Ant. Who bore you, child,
which of the long-lived maids(1125)
was the mountain-ranging bride of Pan?
for to him all the beast-pasturing highlands are dear.
Perhaps the lord of Cyllene
or the Bacchic god
who dwells on mountain tops,(1130)
will accept you, foundling,
from one of the glancing-eyed nymphs,
with whom he plays most of all.

OEDIPUS:

If I must surmise the identity of one
I've never met, aged sirs, I think I see(1135)
the shepherd we have long been seeking. For measured
by his great old age he could be this man,
and moreover those leading him I know as
my own servants; but you should have surer
knowledge than I, as you've seen the man before.(1140)

[Enter Shepherd.]

CHORUS:

Yes, I recognize him. Know it clearly, for if
any man were Laius' trusted shepherd, it's him.

OEDIPUS:

First I will ask you, the Corinthian stranger,
is this the man you meant?

MESSENGER:

That very man you see.(1145)

OEDIPUS:

You there, old man, look at me and say
whatever I ask you: Were you once Laius' man?

SHEPHERD:

Yes, his slave, not purchased, but born to his house.

OEDIPUS:

What work and what livelihood was your care?

SHEPHERD:

For most of my life I have followed flocks.(1150)

OEDIPUS:

In what regions did you live most of the time?

SHEPHERD:

Sometimes Cithaeron, sometimes places near it.

OEDIPUS:

Did you see this man at some point and know him?

SHEPHERD:

See him doing what? Who are you talking about?

OEDIPUS:

This one who's here! Have you ever met him?(1155)

SHEPHERD:

Not such that my memory quickly answers yes.

MESSENGER:

This, at least, is nothing strange, master, but I
clearly remember him; and I know well that
he remembers when that same spot on Cithaeron
he grazed with two flocks and I with one.(1160)
I was his neighbor there three whole times,
six months apiece, from spring to autumn.
Then in winter I drove my flocks to the
fold and he to the stables of Laius.
Didn't it happen just like I said?(1165)

SHEPHERD:

You speak the truth, although a long time has passed.

MESSENGER:

Then say now, do you remember giving me then
a child to raise for myself as my foster-son?

SHEPHERD:

What does it matter? Why do you ask this question?

MESSENGER:

Here is that man, my friend, who was so little then!(1170)

SHEPHERD:

Go to hell! Will you not be silent?

OEDIPUS:

Ah! Do not reproach him, old man, when
your words deserve more reproach than him.

SHEPHERD:

But what, o best of masters, have I done wrong?

OEDIPUS:

You do not discuss the child whom he researches.(1175)

SHEPHERD:

Because he speaks without knowing, but acts in vain.

OEDIPUS:

If you'll not speak for my favor, you'll speak in pain!

SHEPHERD:

By the gods, surely you will not hurt an old man!

OEDIPUS:

Quickly—someone twist back this man's arms!

SHEPHERD:

Unhappy me! Why? What do you desire to learn?(1180)

OEDIPUS:

Did you give him the child he mentioned?

SHEPHERD:

I did, but I should have died that day!

OEDIPUS:

If you don't talk, you'll come to that today!

SHEPHERD:

Oedipus Rex

I will be destroyed even more if I do talk.

OEDIPUS:

This man, it seems, is trying to stall.(1185)

SHEPHERD:

No, no! I said long ago that I did give it.

OEDIPUS:

Where did you get it? From your house or another's?

SHEPHERD:

It was not mine, but I took it from another.

OEDIPUS:

From one of the citizens here, and from what house?

SHEPHERD:

By the gods, master, do not inquire further!(1190)

OEDIPUS:

You are dead if I have to ask it again!

SHEPHERD:

Then...he was from the house of Laius.

OEDIPUS:

A slave, or one born to his family?

SHEPHERD:

Oh, I am about to say something terrible.

OEDIPUS:

And I to hear it, but still it must be heard!(1195)

SHEPHERD:

He was said to be the child of that man himself,
but your wife could explain the situation best.

OEDIPUS:

Because she gave it to you?

SHEPHERD:

Yes, my lord.

OEDIPUS:

To what end?(1200)

SHEPHERD:

So that I would kill it.

OEDIPUS:

Its mother dared this?

SHEPHERD:

Fearing evil prophecies.

OEDIPUS:

What were they?

SHEPHERD:

That he would kill his parents.(1205)

OEDIPUS:

Why, then, did you entrust him to this old man?

SHEPHERD:

Out of pity, master. It seemed he would bear him
away to another land, his home. But he
rescued him into the greatest evils. For if
you are who he says, know that you were born cursed.(1210)

OEDIPUS:

Alas, alas. It's all come out so clearly.
Light, let me see the last of you now,
surrounded by those I ought to avoid—
born from them, living with them, killing them.

[Exit Oedipus into the palace.]

CHORUS:

Str. / Oh, the generations of man—
while you live, I count you
as worthless, equal to nothing.
For who, what man
wins more happiness than(1220)
just its shape
and the ruin when that shape collapses?
With your example, your fate, your self,
suffering Oedipus,
I call nothing of mortals blessed.(1225)
Ant. / He shot with unsurpassed aim
and gained every kind of
happiness, o Zeus; destroying
the riddle-singer,
the maiden with twisted talons,(1230)
like a tower
he stood and defended my land from death.
Since that time he has been called my king
and beyond all men
was honored, ruling in glorious Thebes.(1235)
Str. 2 But now, who could be called

more wretched, more bound to toil and wild madness,
more the paradigm of life's reversals?
Oh, famous Oedipus,
you alone sufficed to lie⁽¹²⁴⁰⁾
as son, father, and bridegroom;
how was it, how, poor man,
could your paternal furrows
bear you in such long silence?
Ant. 2All-seeing time discovered you unwilling,⁽¹²⁴⁵⁾
it judged long ago your marriage that is no marriage,
you, both the siring and sired.
Alas, o child of Laius,
if only, if only we had never
set eyes on you!⁽¹²⁵⁰⁾
My grief is like a libation poured from my mouth.
But to speak the truth, because of you I could breath again
and because of you I sink my eyes into sleep.

[Enter Servant from the palace.]

SERVANT:

Gentlemen, of this land always the most honored,
what deeds you shall hear, what deeds you shall see, and what⁽¹²⁵⁵⁾
grief you will take upon yourselves, if you still care
as kin for the house of the Labdacids.
For I think that neither the Danube nor Volga
could wash through this house to purify all
it conceals, but soon will come into the light⁽¹²⁶⁰⁾
evils both willing and unwilling, but even
the self-chosen of these pains will grieve you greatly.

CHORUS:

What we knew before did not fail to be
grievous, but what will you say in addition?

SERVANT:

It is the fastest of words both to say and⁽¹²⁶⁵⁾
to learn: Our divine queen, Jocasta, is dead.

CHORUS:

O poor woman! By whatever cause?

SERVANT:

By herself! But, of what has been done the worst pain
you will avoid, for you cannot see it.
Still, as much as I can remember⁽¹²⁷⁰⁾
of that poor woman's woes you shall learn.
After she had gone into her chamber, frenzied,
she threw herself onto her bridal couch,
snatching at her hair with both hands. Bolting the doors
from the inside, she called on Laius, so long⁽¹²⁷⁵⁾

a corpse, remembering that ancient creation,
 by which he himself died and left her, as mother,
 to his offspring for their own evil brood.
 She groaned over her bed, where twice doomed she had
 born husband from husband, children from her child.⁽¹²⁸⁰⁾
 When she died, I do not know; for Oedipus
 burst in shouting, and so we did not note her doom,
 but were looking at him, ranging about.
 He paced back and forth, asking us to bring a sword,
 asking where she had gone, his wife who was no wife,⁽¹²⁸⁵⁾
 but a doubly-ploughed field, mother of him
 and his children. Some god led him on,
 for it was none of us men who were nearby;
 shouting terribly, as if led there by some guide,
 he was driven to the doors, and from their sockets⁽¹²⁹⁰⁾
 he forced the groaning bolts and fell into the room.
 Then inside we saw the woman hanging,
 all twisted up in a twisted noose.
 When he saw her, the wretch shouted awfully
 and cut her down from the noose. When she lay⁽¹²⁹⁵⁾
 on the ground, poor thing, it was terrible to see.
 For he removed from her garment the golden
 brooches which she was wearing; he lifted them
 and struck the sockets of his own eyes,
 shouting that they would not see either the evils⁽¹³⁰⁰⁾
 he had suffered or the evils he had done,
 now only in darkness could they see those whom
 they must not see, in darkness could they mistake
 those whom they wanted to recognize.
 Repeating these things, many times and not once⁽¹³⁰⁵⁾
 only he raised his hands and struck his eyes. At once
 his bloody eyeballs moistened his cheeks.
 In torrent together flowed the drops of blood;
 all at once a dark storm of blood like hail rained down.
 From two, not one alone, these evils burst forth,⁽¹³¹⁰⁾
 evils wedded together for husband and wife.
 Their old happiness that was before was justly
 called happiness, but now on this one day
 mourning, madness, death, disgrace, every way
 to name all evils—none have been absent.⁽¹³¹⁵⁾

CHORUS:

Does the poor wretch now have some rest from evil?

SERVANT:

He shouts at us to open the doors and reveal
 to all the people of Cadmus the parricide,
 and his mother's...what he said I will not repeat.
 He wants to cast himself from the land and not⁽¹³²⁰⁾
 stay at home accursed with his own curses.
 He lacks, however, strength and a guide,

for the pain is greater than he can bear.
But he will show you also, for the doors
are opening. Soon you will see a sight⁽¹³²⁵⁾
that even his enemy would pity.

[Enter Oedipus from the palace with attendants.]

CHORUS:

O suffering terrible for men to see,
o most terrible of all I have
encountered! What mania, poor wretch,
stood by you? What spirit⁽¹³³⁰⁾
leapt from beyond the highest places
onto your unhappy fate?
Alas, alas, unfortunate man,
I cannot look at you,
though I wish to ask many things,⁽¹³³⁵⁾
to learn and ponder them;
how you make me shudder and fear!

OEDIPUS:

Ah! Ah! How miserable is my life!
Where does my pain take me?
How does my voice rush about me?⁽¹³⁴⁰⁾
O doom, how you've pounced!

CHORUS:

Onto horror that can neither be heard nor viewed.
Str. 1

OEDIPUS:

Oh, darkness!
This cloud of mine, abominable, approaching ineffable,
unconquered, driven on by a fatally favorable wind.⁽¹³⁴⁵⁾
Sorrow!
And still more sorrow—Upon me fall together
so many stinging goads and the memory of evils.

CHORUS:

And it is no wonder that in such woes
you suffer doubly and doubly cry aloud.⁽¹³⁵⁰⁾
Ant. 1

OEDIPUS:

Oh, my friend!
You are still my only companion, for
still you remain by me, tending the blind man.
Sorrow!⁽¹³⁵⁵⁾
For I have not missed your presence, but, although
in darkness, I recognize your voice clearly.

CHORUS:

O agent of terrors, how could you dare to
put out your eyes like that? What god set you to it?
Str. 2

OEDIPUS:

Apollo, my friends—these things are Apollo,⁽¹³⁶⁰⁾
who brought to pass these evil, evil sufferings of mine.
But no man struck me with his hand,
but I myself dared it.
For why must I see,
I for whom no sight is sweet?⁽¹³⁶⁵⁾

CHORUS:

Indeed, it is as you say.

OEDIPUS:

What, then, could be worth seeing to me,
or lovable, what word addressed to me
could I hear gladly, friends?
Lead me into exile quickly,⁽¹³⁷⁰⁾
lead me away, friends, completely destroyed,
the most accursed, and to the gods
the most hated of men!

CHORUS:

Equally wretched in your mind and your
misfortune, how I wish I had never known you.⁽¹³⁷⁵⁾
Ant. 2

OEDIPUS:

Let him die who took off the fierce fetters,
feeding off my feet, and rescued and saved
me from my death, no good deed for me!
For if I had died then,
I would not have brought⁽¹³⁸⁰⁾
so much pain to my friends or me!

CHORUS:

It is my wish, too, that it have been thus.

OEDIPUS:

I'd not then be my father's slayer,
nor called the groom of her whence I was born.
Abandoned by the gods, child of sacrilege,⁽¹³⁸⁵⁾
sharing the source of those I myself sired.
Were some evil greater still than evil,
this, too, would be Oedipus' lot.

CHORUS:

I do not know how to agree with your judgment,
for you are better not living than living blind.⁽¹³⁹⁰⁾

OEDIPUS:

Do not tell me that these things were not
done well, nor offer me further counsel.
For I don't know with what eyes I could look
and see my father when I go down to Hell,
nor again my poor mother; to those two⁽¹³⁹⁵⁾
my deeds are beyond what hanging could punish.
Or is the sight of my children desirable
for me to see, sprouting as they sprouted?
Surely never to those eyes of mine!
Nor the city nor citadel, nor the holy⁽¹⁴⁰⁰⁾
shrines of the gods, from which I, the worst of men,
removed myself, myself decreeing
that all expel the impious one, revealed
unholy by the gods and, now, of Laius' race.
Exposing such defilement as this,⁽¹⁴⁰⁵⁾
did I intend to see them with my own eyes?
Not at all. Rather if I could somehow block
my hearing from the ears, I would not hold back
from fully shutting off this wretched frame of mine,
so that I'd be blind and hear nothing, for to live⁽¹⁴¹⁰⁾
outside comprehension of these woes would be sweet.
Oh, Cithaeron! Why did you accept me? Why did
you not kill me at once, so that I would never
reveal to men my origins? O Polybus
and Corinth and my old ancestral home—⁽¹⁴¹⁵⁾
so-called—in what a pretty festering
of evils you brought me up! For now I
find myself evil and born from evil people.
O three paths and hidden groves and the
narrow oak coppice at the triple crossroads,⁽¹⁴²⁰⁾
which drank my own blood from my father
from my own hands, do you still remember me?
What deeds I performed in your presence,
what deeds I was still to do! O marriage, marriage,
you brought me forth, and afterwards again⁽¹⁴²⁵⁾
you harvested that same seed and revealed
father-brothers, children of kin blood,
brides who were wives and mothers, and all else
counted the most shameful acts by men.
But, since these matters are as foully said as done,⁽¹⁴³⁰⁾
by the gods, quickly hide me from the sight of men
somehow, or kill me or cast me into the sea,
where you will never see me again.
Go, deem it worthy to touch a poor man!
Yield, do not fear; for my evils are⁽¹⁴³⁵⁾
such that no one of men can bear but me.

CHORUS:

No, Creon is here, the right one to decide
whether to act or advise on what you ask; since
he alone remains to guard our land in your stead.

[Enter Creon from offstage.]

OEDIPUS:

Alas! What can I say to this man?⁽¹⁴⁴⁰⁾
What real faith can he have in me? For in all
that went before I am found false to him.

CREON:

I have not come to mock you, Oedipus,
nor to scold you for some previous wrong.
[He addresses the attendants.]⁽¹⁴⁴⁵⁾
But you, if you feel no shame before the races
of men, then revere at least the nourishing
light of lord Helios, and do not thus
show this blight unconcealed, which neither
earth nor holy rain nor light accept.⁽¹⁴⁵⁰⁾
Take him into the house as quick as you can,
for it is right for only blood relatives
to see and hear familial evils.

OEDIPUS:

By the gods, since you've cheated my expectations
and come as the best of men to me, the worst,⁽¹⁴⁵⁵⁾
grant me this; I ask for you and not for me.

CREON:

What is this thing you need so greatly?

OEDIPUS:

Cast me immediately from this land,
somewhere I can avoid all mortal speech.

CREON:

Know well that I would do this, but first I⁽¹⁴⁶⁰⁾
must learn from the god what must be done.

OEDIPUS:

But his entire prophecy was made clear;
destroy the patricide, the accursed, me!

CREON:

It was said thus, but still, where we stand
it is better to learn what must be done.⁽¹⁴⁶⁵⁾

OEDIPUS:

You would ask on behalf of one so wretched?

CREON:

Yes, for now even you should bear faith to the god.

OEDIPUS:

Then I enjoin you and make this request:
to her...who is inside...bury her as you will,
rightly will you act on behalf of your own—(1470)
but as for me, may this, my native city,
suffer me to dwell here while I live,
but let me to dwell in the mountains, with my own
famous Cithaeron, which my mother and
father while they lived appointed as my tomb,(1475)
so that I may die as those two wished.
Although this much at least I know: No disease
nor anything else can kill me, for I would not
have been saved from death, but for some dire fate.
This destiny of mine, let it go where it may,(1480)
but for my children, Creon—don't worry
over my sons; they are men, so that
they will never lack a livelihood, wherever
they may be. But, for my poor little girls,
they've not so much as eaten a meal(1485)
apart from me; but whatever I touched,
those two always had a share in all of it.
Worry over them, and most of all I beg you,
let me touch them with my hands and mourn our woes.
Please, my lord!(1490)
Please, o truly noble man, could my hands touch them,
I'd think I held them as I did when I could see.

[Servants lead onstage the two girls.]

What's this now?
By the gods, do I somehow hear my two dear girls
crying? Has Creon pitied me and(1495)
sent to me the dearest of my offspring?
Is it true?

CREON:

You are, for I am the one who prepared these things,
knowing the joy they have long brought you.

OEDIPUS:

Then may you be blessed, and for this meeting(1500)
may fate guard you better than it did me!
My children, where are you? Come here, come
to these hands of mine that are siblings to yours,
hands that brought to this sad state the once
bright eyes of your begetting father,(1505)
who, children, neither seeing nor knowing was
proved your father from the same place he himself sprang.

And I weep for you, although I cannot see you;
contemplating the bitterness of your lives,
the sort of life men will force you to live.⁽¹⁵¹⁰⁾
What sort of company will you keep in town?
What festivals will you attend that will not
send you home in tears, instead of joy?
When you come to the age ripe for marriage,
who will he be who will run the risk, children,⁽¹⁵¹⁵⁾
to take for himself the reproaches that will
be banes for my parents and offspring alike?
What evil is absent? Your father
slew his father; he ploughed his mother,
where he himself was sown, and he sired⁽¹⁵²⁰⁾
you in the same fount where he himself was sired.
Such taunts you will hear, and then who will marry you?
There is no one, my children, but surely
you must die untitled and unmarried.
Son of Menoeceus, since you alone are left⁽¹⁵²⁵⁾
as father to them, for we who created them
have both been destroyed, do not allow them,
your kin, to die unwed and beggars,
nor make them party to my evils;
but pity them, seeing how young they are⁽¹⁵³⁰⁾
and bereft of everything, except for you.
Consent, noble one, and touch me with your hand.
Oh, children, if you could understand, I would
give you so much advice; as it is, just pray
with me that you obtain a better life⁽¹⁵³⁵⁾
than did the father who sired you.

CREON:

You have gone far enough in weeping; go inside.

OEDIPUS:

I will, though sadly.

CREON:

All things are fair in time.

OEDIPUS:

Do you know my conditions?⁽¹⁵⁴⁰⁾

CREON:

Speak; I shall learn them.

OEDIPUS:

Send me from this land.

CREON:

You ask me what is God's to give.

OEDIPUS:

The gods hate me.

CREON:

Then they will grant your wish.(1545)

OEDIPUS:

Then you will do it?

CREON:

I'll say only what I think.

OEDIPUS:

Then lead me away.

CREON:

Come, let go of the children.

OEDIPUS:

Do not take them from me!(1550)

CREON:

It is not your place to decide;
the power you had has not remained with you.

[Exeunt Creon and Oedipus with the attendants and children into the palace.]

CHORUS:

People of our country Thebes, behold this Oedipus,
who knew the famous riddle and was a most powerful man,
whose fortunes all the citizens watched with emulation,(1555)
how deep the sea of dire misfortune that has taken him!
Therefore, it is necessary to call no man blessed
as we await the final day, until he has reached
the limit of life and suffered nothing grievous.

Mythological Background

Greek tragedies were based on widely-known myths or famous historical events, so the audience would know the characters and outline of the story they were about to see. Seeing a play about Oedipus, for instance, Sophocles' Athenian audience would already know that this story came from the cycle of myths about the city of Thebes, one of Athens' rivals in the 5th century. Most surprises did not come from the plot, but from the new way the playwright used familiar material.

The Oedipus story is set a few generations before the Trojan War, which the ancient Greeks placed in 1184 BCE. King Laius of Thebes received a prophecy that his son would kill him. To avoid the outcome of the prophecy, Laius had his baby *exposed* (abandoned without protection from the elements—a common way to get rid of unwanted infants) on Mount Cithaeron, one of the most remote points of his kingdom. As an extra precaution, he nailed the child's feet together. Unfortunately for Laius, the baby survived and was raised as a prince of the city of Corinth. He was named Oedipus, which means “swollen feet” in Greek.

Many years later, Oedipus, not knowing his true birth, met Laius on the road and killed him. At the time, Thebes was being terrorized by a monster with the head of a woman, body of a lion, and wings of an eagle called the Sphinx. She was particularly famous for telling everyone she encountered a riddle: “What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs in the evening?” Men who answered incorrectly were devoured.

Oedipus answered the challenge by guessing “man” (who crawls as a baby, walks on two legs as an adult, and leans on a cane in his old age). Her riddle solved, the Sphinx threw herself from a cliff, and Oedipus was crowned king of Thebes. Oedipus married the recently widowed queen, Jocasta. He did not know his real relationship to the man he killed and the woman he married.

Because Sophocles' audience was already familiar with this information, he does not need to explain it in the drama; he can simply allude to it.

The Origins of Greek Drama

We do not know much about the origin of Greek theater. The plays that survive all date from the 5th century BCE, but tragedy had been performed in Athens for at least decades before the earliest play, and the actual roots of drama reach even farther back. The word *drama* itself comes from a verb meaning “to do” or “to act.” Thus, a *drama* is simply something acted. The two most important influences on Athenian drama were the epics of Homer and the tradition of narrative lyric poetry performed by large choruses.

Homer and Epic Poems

The ancient Greeks traced all their literary traditions back to the author of two epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Although we now know that these were the products of an oral tradition, the Greeks believed that the blind poet Homer had written both works. The *Iliad*, which narrates just a little of the Trojan War, was considered by the philosopher Aristotle to be the parent of tragedy, and very many Greek tragedies took their subject matter from the heroes portrayed in the *Iliad*. Although they do not survive, other epic poems told the myths of the city of Thebes and the fall of its ruling house—the subject matter of the *Oedipus Rex*.

Lyric Poetry

While tragedy takes much of its subject matter from epic, its closest relatives in form were the long lyric poems sung by large choruses. In fact, some scholars have speculated that the chorus leader of the lyric poems evolved into a main character, then was replaced by a new chorus leader; the final result could have been a form with a chorus, chorus leader, and main character. Dialogue arising between these three speakers may have grown into the dramatic action of the first Greek plays.

It is interesting to note that the lyric poems continued to be an important form in their own right even as drama became popular. At the Great Dionysia, one of the major festivals of Athens, performance of the dithyramb (a special kind of lyric poem dedicated to the god Dionysus) was as important as the performance of plays. Each of the ten tribes of Athens submitted an entry in the contest and was represented by a chorus of up to fifty men.

Tragedy and the City

5th-century Athens saw advances in philosophy, rhetoric, literature, science, architecture, and the visual arts; it was a time of almost unparalleled cultural achievement. Tragedy was the premiere literary genre of this period, and it is fitting that the high point of the democracy should be symbolized by a genre of poetry that involves the entire body of citizens. Performed at one of the major festivals of the city, the Great Dionysia, each tragedy was part of a contest. Three playwrights would be chosen by a city official, and each playwright would produce three tragedies and a satyr-play (a kind of farce intended to lighten the mood after three tragedies); all four plays were performed in a single day. The audience consisted of about 15,000 citizens, and the festival itself became a pageant of Athenian power and glory.

We know of many playwrights from this century, but only the works of three men have survived. Fortunately, the three poets we have were universally considered to be the best: Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. From Sophocles, who won twenty victories (compared to Aeschylus' thirteen and Euripides' four) we have the seven plays chosen by ancient critics as his finest: *Ajax*, *The Women of Trachis*, *Electra*, *Philoctetes*, and the so-called "Theban plays," *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*. These three plays are not a trilogy; they were not written in order or performed together at one festival. In fact, about forty years separates the first play written, *Antigone*, from the last, *Oedipus at Colonus*! Each play, therefore, should be considered a separate work, and while Sophocles alludes to his earlier work, he pursued different goals and used different methods for each one.

Conventions of Greek Drama

The most important convention of the Greek stage was the wearing of masks with attached wigs by all performers. The elaborate costumes worn by the actors and chorus members were often the most striking visual element. Staging was usually limited to the painted background behind the stage. Greek tragedies are all set outside, so this background usually depicted the exterior of the main characters' residence—in the case of the *Oedipus Rex*, the palace of Oedipus and the shrine to Apollo in front of it. The action of a Greek tragedy takes place in a single day, so changes of scene are rare, and props are kept to a minimum. In addition to the chorus and the three actors, mute characters could also appear on stage as needed. In front of the stage, which was not raised from the ground as in modern theaters, was a circular area called the *orchestra*, in which the chorus performed its dances. These would be accompanied by the music of an *aulos*, a double pipe similar to a modern oboe.

The plays followed a fairly strict structure, with a prologue, the entrance of the chorus, and then several episodes separated by choral odes. The dialogue of the plays is written in meter, but was spoken, like the plays of Shakespeare, whereas the choral odes were written in a more complicated meter for the chorus to sing and dance. The plays also include a *kommos*, in which the main character(s) lament in song with the chorus. All in all, the form of Greek tragedy somewhat resembles a cross between Shakespeare and opera. It is important for modern readers to remember that, without the benefit of any music or the elaborate costumes and scenery, we are getting a small portion of what the original audience received.

Aristotle's Influence on Our Understanding of Tragedy

Aristotle was a great 4th century BCE philosopher who spent much of his life in Athens. He wrote one of the earliest and most important pieces of literary criticism, the *Poetics*. It is important to note, however, that the ideas about tragedy expressed in the *Poetics* were not necessarily held by the playwrights themselves, and most tragedies do not fit the strict guidelines established by Aristotle. The *Poetics* is the origin of the “tragic hero” concept, but in many tragedies, it is hard to figure out exactly who this tragic hero is. We should not hold a play to a philosopher’s standard, and just because Aristotle says something about tragedy or a specific play does not make it true. In general, the influence of the *Poetics* on future scholars has been somewhat excessive.

Aristotle can, nevertheless, help us understand how these plays were read and received about by the ancient Greeks themselves. *Oedipus Rex* was the tragedy that most closely fit his guidelines. Oedipus is the model of the “tragic hero,” because the concept is based on him. Because of his *hamartia* (mistake), he suffers a *peripeteia* (reversal), which, for Aristotle, is the heart of tragedy. Although often translated as “tragic flaw,” *hamartia* does not indicate a deep or abiding personality failure, such as “pride” or “lust,” but means a mistake of perception or recognition, although scholars debate the precise meaning and scale of this mistake. The *peripeteia* we might call a “reversal of fortune,” and in most tragedies, we do see the protagonists change from better to worse circumstances.

For Aristotle, this reversal was the key towards rousing fear and pity in the audience, which led to *catharsis*, another term that has become widely used in the study of literature. A word from Greek religion, *catharsis* indicates ritual purification from pollution, an important concept for Greek life. This pollution, or *miasma*, came about as the result of crime, especially murder. Just as the physical blood spilled had to be cleaned up, so the more abstract *miasma* needed to be purified through the proper rituals. This applied to the space where the crime occurred and to the person who committed it; if a murderer went somewhere without being purified, he would bring pollution onto this new place. This is precisely the situation at the beginning of *Oedipus Rex*, in which the gods have sent a plague against Thebes because of the presence of Laius’ murderer in the city and because of the incest of Oedipus and Jocasta.

Aristotle uses the term *catharsis* to refer to the purging of excessive emotions from a person. By watching the tragedy and feeling the strong emotions of fear and pity on behalf of the characters on stage, the spectator experiences a kind of cleansing of the soul. Just as ritual *catharsis* allowed the formerly polluted person to return to the community and take part in communal life without bringing *miasma* with him, so the metaphorical *catharsis* from watching tragedy gave the spectators a shared experience that bound them closer together. In other works, Aristotle locates the essence of the self in perception; by sharing perception or perceiving the same things, the spectators develop a sort of common identity. Thus, for Aristotle, watching tragedies was a beneficial activity, both for the individual and the community.

Glossary

- **Chorus** Since Greek tragedy grew out of the performances of lyric poetry sung by large choruses, it is only natural that the chorus should remain a large part of Greek tragedy. Every play's chorus (usually fourteen men) took on an identity appropriate to the play. For example, in the *Oedipus Rex*, they are old men of Thebes; in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, they are the dread goddesses, the Furies.

The word *chorus* in Greek means "dance," and the chorus' main function was to sing and dance lyric odes in between dramatic episodes. These odes comment on the action of the preceding episode. The chorus could also, however, act as a character; one chorus member would be designated leader and speak lines of dialogue, interacting with the other characters on stage. They react as their characters should—in the *Oedipus Rex*, the chorus, while concerned about Oedipus' personal problems, care first and foremost about the fate of the city and finding a cure for the plague.

- **Cithaeron** The mountain in southern Boeotia (the region in which Thebes is located) where Oedipus was to have been exposed as an infant. Cithaeron's position on the border of Theban territory allowed Laius' herdsman to encounter someone who worked for Polybus of Corinth.
- **Daimones** In addition to major gods and goddesses like Zeus and Apollo, the Greeks believed in divine forces, not quite gods, who could influence human life and events. They acted somewhat like guardian angels, but could also be malicious. The word "demons" comes directly from the Greek word *daimones*.
- **Gods and goddesses** Greek religion was polytheistic; the Greeks worshipped many gods. The most powerful god was Zeus, the sky god, who was thought to have taken power when he overthrew his father Cronus. After Zeus came the other Olympian deities, including Zeus' queen Hera, his brother Poseidon, and his children Athena, Ares, Artemis, and Apollo. There were also other gods, older deities from the reign of Cronus who remained powerful and were often irrational. Among these are the Furies, dreadful goddesses who hunt down and drive mad humans who kill blood-relatives.

The most important god for the *Oedipus Rex* is Apollo, whose oracle at Delphi gives the important prophecies to Oedipus and Creon (Laius was traveling to this oracle when he was killed). Apollo's knowledge is absolute—if Apollo says something will happen, it will happen. His prophecies in this play, however, are not warnings: He does not tell Laius not to have children, merely that his child will kill him. He does not tell Oedipus to kill his father, but that he will kill his father. When Oedipus sends Creon to find out how to end the plague, Apollo tells them to drive the murderer of Laius out of Thebes, but this is not an instruction so much as a simple answer.

Two other gods mentioned are both sons of Zeus: Hermes, divine messenger and patron of cattle-rustlers, and Dionysus, god of wine and ecstatic intoxication. In myth, Dionysus was accompanied by satyrs (crudely sexual half-gods) and enraptured nymphs called *maenads*. He was also the god of theatre, and Greek tragedies were performed at a festival in his honor.

- **Hybris (hubris)** Debate over the precise meaning of this word, so important for our understanding of Greek literature and Greek law, has been going on for centuries, and studies still come out offering

new interpretations. In his *Rhetoric*, the great philosopher Aristotle, who lived in Athens in the century after Sophocles' death, defined *hybris* as physical or verbal assault that brings shame to the victim, but no reward to the agent other than the personal satisfaction received from inflicting disgrace on another. Aristotle associates the act of *hybris* with the state of anger. (It is important to note that *hybris* is the act of violence itself; modern readers often make the mistake of thinking of it as some kind of attitude or pride.)

In Athenian law, *hybris* was more serious than simple assault, whether the act was physical or verbal; it could be punished by death. Because someone who got away with *hybris* would have placed himself in a position of superiority, the Chorus of our play can say that "*hybris* creates a tyrant" by giving him power over other men.

Originally, the idea of *hybris* seems to have referred to cultivated plants that grew beyond their designated boundaries and, thus, had to be pruned; eventually, its metaphorical application to humans became the only meaning of the word.

- **Oracles** In order to understand the will of the gods, the Greeks consulted oracles. These were places holy to a specific deity (often Apollo); humans could pose questions and the god would answer through a chosen intermediary. The most important oracle in the Greek world was Apollo's temple at Delphi (also called Pytho, because legend said that it was founded when Apollo killed the previous resident, a giant snake, or *python*.). Here, Apollo answered questions through his priestess, the Pythia, who entered an ecstatic state and babbled out responses, which were in turn interpreted and delivered in verse by the priests. It was customary for kings and cities to consult the oracle of Delphi before making any big decision.
- **Pollution (*miasma*)** Murder and incest violate natural law as well as human law, so these crimes were seen to offend the gods. Both the agent and location of the crime were polluted by the act, as were people or places harboring the polluted individual; proper ritual cleansing (*catharsis*) was necessary to restore both person and place to an acceptable state. In the presence of pollution, sacrifices and prayers would be ignored by the gods, who were offended by the pollution. Hence, the community had to become involved—just one polluted person could destroy an entire city, which is the case in the beginning of the *Oedipus Rex*, when the presence of Laius' uncleansed murderer brings a plague upon Thebes. Apollo's oracle tells the Thebans to either kill or drive out the guilty man, which will remove the source of pollution from Thebes. Assuming that the guilty man left Thebes for voluntary exile, he could approach a temple or powerful person and ask for ritual cleansing, at which point he would no longer be considered polluted or bring pollution upon his location.
- **Religion** For the most part, Greek religion did not follow a moral code. The Greeks did not love their gods, but respected their power. Humans won the favor of the gods through sacrifice and offerings, whether blood sacrifice of an animal (the kind of animal would be determined by tradition and the means of the sacrificer); pouring out a liquid offering (libation) of milk, wine, or honey; placing a gift of flowers or incense by the statue of a god; or dedicating an object of value in a temple. In return for such gifts, the gods would heed one's prayers. Since crimes like homicide or incest offended the gods (see "pollution"), they threatened the effectiveness of the prayers and sacrifices of the entire community, so the entire community could become involved in punishing those crimes.

- **Sphinx** A monster sent by the goddess Hera against the city of Thebes. The Sphinx was part lion, part eagle, and part woman; she asked a riddle and devoured anyone who could not answer it. When Oedipus correctly answered the riddle, the Sphinx threw herself from a cliff and perished, thus ending the terror at Thebes.
- **Suppliant** anyone who makes a request or prayer from a position of powerlessness. In Greek culture, the suppliant was a sacred position with special rights, responsibilities, and visual symbols. Suppliants wore or carried special emblems, such as olive branches, to identify themselves. Traditionally, they knelt before the person they were supplicating and touched either his knees or chin (it was thought that the knees and chin were directly connected to a person's heart). Suppliants also took refuge at altars. It was taboo to harm a suppliant, and anyone who did so would be cursed.
- **Stage directions** The manuscripts of Greek tragedies do not give stage directions, so we must figure out for ourselves the entrances and exits of characters. The dialogue, however, is filled with special clues for directions, especially Greek words that one uses when pointing. Hence, we can often tell when a character would gesture.
- **Tyche** Chance. This force was personified by the Greeks as a fickle goddess. *Tyche* governed coincidences, simple mistakes, and luck, whether good or bad. When Oedipus declares himself a child of Chance, he does not seriously mean that this goddess is his mother, but that his life has been dominated by fortune, as he is a foundling who became a king.
- **Thebes** One of the major cities in Greece (one of Athens' rivals in Sophocles' time) and the scene of the action of the *Oedipus Rex*. Hera sends the monstrous Sphinx to punish Thebes; when Oedipus defeats the Sphinx, he earns the kingship, marrying the queen Jocasta, widowed by the murder of Laius. The city of Thebes played a large role in Greek mythology—the “Theban cycle” in epic rivaled the “Trojan cycle” of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Many Greek tragedies are set in Thebes besides the *Oedipus*, e.g. Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*, Sophocles' *Antigone*, and Euripides' *Bacchae*.
- **Tyrannus** *Oedipus Rex* is the Latin title of a play that was called *Oedipus Tyrannus* in Greek. The English translation is “Oedipus the King.”

The Ancient Greeks had two words for “king”: *basileus*, which indicated a hereditary king, and *tyrannus*, which was used for kings who had not inherited their throne, but taken it. *Tyrannus* did not have the negative connotations that “tyrant” has for us today, although to the freedom-loving men of the Athenian democracy, tyranny of any kind was as unacceptable as it is to us.