OEDIPUS THE KING

Sophocles, ca. 496-406 BC

The play won second prize in the festival of Dionysus, Athens, Greece, ca. 429 BC.

Like stories and poetry, drama originates from preliterate folk traditions, such as song, dance and religious ceremonies. Body painting (make-up), masks and other devices also have ancient antecedents. According to Aristotle, Greek tragedy originated from the dithyramb, a choral hymn to the god of wine, Dionysus. The legend is that in 534 BC, the lead singer at the Festival of Dionysus, a man named Thespis, added an actor to the chorus and carried on a dialogue, creating the possibility for dramatic action. The great playwright Aeschylus (525-456 BC) added a second actor, and his younger rival, Sophocles, a third. Sophocles triumphed over Aeschylus at the festival in 468 BC. Sophocles won first prize over twenty times and never finished lower than second. The dramatic Festival of Dionysus in Athens compared in prestige with the athletic games at Olympia, another city in ancient Greece. The plays were staged in an amphitheater, like those in Lakewood or Chastain Park in Atlanta, which have excellent natural acoustics (no electricity – so the plays were performed in the afternoon). Nine speaking characters are listed, but no more than three appear on stage at one time. So each actor, wearing masks, could play multiple characters. Sophocles makes good use of this feature of ancient drama with the horrific, gory mask Oedipus wears at the end. Sophocles was also a wealthy man, a general considered a hero long after his death, and a priest.

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ARGUMENT (by the translator, Storr, not by Sophocles)

To Laius, King of Thebes, an oracle foretold that the child born to him by his queen Jocasta would slay his father and wed his mother. So when in time a son was born the infant's feet were riveted together and he was left to die on Mount Cithaeron. But a shepherd found the babe and tended him, and delivered him to another shepherd who took him to his master, the King of Corinth. Polybus being childless adopted the boy, who grew up believing that he was indeed Polybus' son. Afterwards doubting his parentage he inquired of the Delphic god and heard himself the prophesy declared before to Laius. Therefore he fled from what he deemed his father's house and in his flight he encountered and unwillingly slew his father Laius. Arriving at Thebes he answered the riddle of the Sphinx and the grateful Thebans made their savior king. So he reigned in the city of Laius, and married the widowed queen. Children were born to them and Thebes prospered under his rule, until again a grievous plague fell upon the city. Again the oracle was consulted and it bade them purge themselves of blood-guilt. Oedipus denounces the crime of which he is unaware, and undertakes to track down the criminal. Step by step it is brought home to him that he is the man. The closing scene reveals Jocasta slain by her own hand and Oedipus blinded by his own act and praying for death or exile.
Characters in the Play

Oedipus, King of Thebes
The Priest of Zeus
Creon, Jocasta’s brother, Oedipus’ brother-in-law
Chorus of Theban Elders
Teiresias, a legendary seer

Jocasta, Queen of Thebes, married to Oedipus
Messenger
Shepherd
Second Messenger

Scene: Thebes, a city in ancient Greece, before the Palace of Oedipus – Supplicants of all ages are seated round the altar at the palace doors, at their head a PRIEST OF ZEUS. To them enters OEDIPUS.

OEDIPUS My children, descendants of ancient Cadmus,
Why have you come as beggars, holding
Olive branches banded with wool?
What means this odor of incense,
And everywhere laments and cries?
Children, it would not be proper to hear
From assistants, and so I have come myself,
I Oedipus, your world-renowned king.

And you, Elder, respect for your age
Makes you spokesman of this assembly.
Explain your mood and purpose. Is it fear
That moves you or a favor that you want?
My zeal on your behalf cannot be doubted;
I would be stubborn and pitiless indeed
To spurn such petitioners as you.

PRIEST Yes, Oedipus, my sovereign lord and king,
You see both extremes of youth and age
Before your palace altars – fledglings hardly winged,
And greybeards bowed with years; priests, as am I
Of Zeus, and these the flower of our youth.
Meanwhile, the common folk, with wreathed boughs
Crowd our marketplaces, or congregate before
Both the shrines of Pallas, or the place where
Ismenus gives his oracles by fire.

For, as you see yourself, our ship of State,
Sorely buffeted, can no more lift her head,
Founder beneath a weltering surge of blood.
A blight is on our harvest in the fields,
A blight upon the grazing flocks and herds,
A blight on women in labor; and all around
Armed with his blazing torch the God of Plague
Has swooped down upon us, emptying
The city of Cadmus, and the murky realm
Of Hades is fed full with groans and tears.
Therefore, O King, here at your hearth we sit,
I and these children; not because we find you
A new god, but as the first of men;

Oedipus addresses the chorus, suffering citizens of Thebes who have come to him for help. He also addresses the audience in the theater. All of them are adults, not "children." The first words establish Oedipus’ arrogance, and his noble claim to protect his people. They also bring up the theme of government. Thebes was a kingdom, but Athens, where the play was staged, was a "democracy."

fledglings ≈ young birds with their first flight feathers, a metaphor for young adults

Pallas ≈ Athena, goddess of wisdom; Ismenus ≈ son of Apollo

There is a famine and a plague now in Thebes.

Cadmus ≈ legendary founder of Thebes; Hades ≈ underworld
First in the common affairs of life,  
And first in dealing with the gods.  
Aren’t you the one who came to the town  
Of Cadmus and freed us from the tax we paid  
To the deadly singer? And you had not received  
Prompting from us or learned from others;  
No, a god inspired you (so all men believe,  
And testify) to save our lives.

And now, O Oedipus, our peerless king,  
We your followers beg you, find us  
Some relief, whether from heaven’s oracle  
Whispered, or else learned from mortal man.  
Experienced counselors are often those  
Who give the best advice in times like these.

O chief of men, restore our State!  
Look to your laurels! for your former heroism  
You are justly hailed our country's savior.  
O never may we thus record your reign:  "He raised us up only to cast us down."  
Uplift us, build our city on a rock.  
Your happy star ascendant brought us luck,  
O let it not decline! If you would rule  
This land, as now you do, better sure  
To rule a peopled rather than a desert realm.  
Neither towers nor ships mean anything,  
If they are empty and no people remain.

OEDIPUS  
Ah! my poor children, I know too well,  
The quest that brings you here and your need.  
You are all suffering, yet my pain  
Is greater, and I suffer the most of all.  
Sorrow touches each of you individually,  
But I grieve at once both for myself  
And for the general commonwealth.  
You have not roused a slacker from daydreams.  
Many, my children, are the tears I've wept,  
And wandered many a maze of weary thought.

Thus pondering one clue of hope I caught,  
And followed it up: I have sent Menoeceus' son,  
Creon, my wife’s brother, to inquire  
Of Pythian Phoebus at his Delphic shrine,  
How I might save the State by act or word.  
And now I reckon up the account of days  
Since he set forth, and wonder how he fares.  
It's strange, how long he's taking to return,  
But when he comes, I would be base indeed,  
Not to perform all the god commands.

PRIEST  
Your words are well timed; even as you speak

A sphinx (monster with body of a lion and head of woman) was devouring people who couldn’t answer her riddle. Oedipus arrived and answered the riddle, causing the sphinx to kill herself.

laurels ≈ evergreen branches made into a crown for heroes – Oedipus saved the city before (from the sphinx) and they want him to save it again (from the plague).

The city has towers and ships.

pride

Menoceceus ≈ father of Jocasta and Creon

Pythian ≈ of Delphi, a city in Greece; Phoebus ≈ Apollo, god of the sun

A legendary oracle was at Delphi, were Apollo responded to questions, but often ambiguously.
Those shouts tell us Creon is approaching.

OEDIPUS  O Lord Apollo! may his joyous looks
Foreshadow of the joyous news he brings!

PRIEST  As I surmise, it is welcome; or else his head
Would not be crowned with berry-laden laurels.

OEDIPUS  We soon shall know; he's now in earshot range.
My royal cousin, Menoeceus' child,
What message have you brought us from the god?

CREON  Good news, for our intolerable ills,
When removed from us, leave us nothing but good.

OEDIPUS  How runs the oracle? So far your words
Give me no ground for confidence or fear.

CREON  If you want to hear my message publicly,
I'll tell you now, or go with you inside the palace.

OEDIPUS  Speak before all; the burden that I bear
Is more for these my subjects than myself.

CREON  Let me report then all the god declared:
Lord Phoebus orders us instantly eliminate
A dreadful pollution that infests the land,
And no more harbor a deep-rooted sore.

OEDIPUS  What atonement does he demand? What must we do?

CREON  Banishment, or the shedding of blood for blood.
A sin of blood makes shipwreck of our state.

OEDIPUS  Who can he be, the villain thus denounced?

CREON  Before you assumed the helm of State,
The sovereign of this land was King Laius.

OEDIPUS  I heard as much, but never saw the man.

CREON  He was killed; and now the god's command is plain:
Punish his murderers, whoever they may be.

OEDIPUS  Where are they? Where in the wide world to find
The far, faint traces of a bygone crime?

CREON  In this land, said the god; "whoever seeks shall find,
But whoever sits with folded hands or sleeps is blind."

OEDIPUS  Was Laius within his palace, or in his fields,
Or was he traveling, when he met his fate?
CREON  Traveling, so he told us, to the oracle  
         At Delphi, but he never returned.  

OEDIPUS  Was there no news, no fellow-traveler  
         To give some clue that might be followed up?  

CREON  Only one escaped, who fleeing for dear life,  
         Could tell of all he saw only one thing sure.  

OEDIPUS  And what was that? One clue might lead us far,  
         With a spark of hope to guide our quest.  

CREON  Bandits, he told us, not one robber but  
         A troop of knaves, attacked and murdered Laius.  

OEDIPUS  Would any bandits dare so bold a stroke,  
         Unless they were bribed from Thebes?  

CREON  So it was surmised, but none was found to avenge  
         His murder with all the trouble that followed.  

OEDIPUS  What trouble can have hindered a full inquest,  
         When royalty had fallen thus miserably?  

CREON  The riddling Sphinx compelled us to let slide  
         The dim past and attend to instant needs.  

OEDIPUS  Well, I will start afresh and once again  
         Make dark things clear. It is worth the concern  
         Of Phoebus, and yours too, for sake of the dead;  
         I also, as is proper, will lend my aid  
         To avenge this wrong to Thebes and to the god.  
         Not for some far-off kinsman, but myself,  
         Shall I expel this poison in the blood;  
         For whoever slew that king might have a mind  
         To strike me too with his assassin’s hand.  
         Therefore in avenging him I serve myself.  
         Up, children, hurry from these altar stairs,  
         Take away your suppliant branches, go summon  
         The Theban people. With the god's good help  
         Success is sure; but it is ruin if we fail.  

Exeunt OEDIPUS and CREON

Oedipus operates by solving  
riddles: the sphinx’s, the  
cause of the plague, the  
killer of Laius.

PRIEST  Come, children, let us go; these gracious words  
         Fulfill the very purpose of our suit.  
         And may the god who sent this oracle  
         Save us and rid us of this pest.

Exeunt PRIEST and SUPPLIANTS
CHORUS

Strophe 1
Sweet-voiced daughter of Zeus
From your gold-paved Pythian shrine
Ride the wind to Thebes divine,
What do you bring me?
My soul is racked and shivers with fear.
Healer of Delos, hear!
Do you have some pain unknown before,
Or with the circling years renew a penance of yore?
Offspring of golden Hope, your voice immortal,
O tell me.

Antistrophe 1
First on Athene I call; O Zeus-born goddess, defend!
Goddess and sister, Artemis, befriend!
Lady of Thebes, high-throned in the midst of our mart!
Lord Phoebus of the death-winged dart!
The aid of you three I crave
From death and ruin our city to save.
If in the days of old when we almost perished,
You drove from our land the fiery plague,
So now be near and defend us!

Strophe 2
Ah me, what countless woes are mine!
All our comrades are in decline;
Defenseless my spirit lies.
Earth her gracious fruits denies;
Women wail in barren throes;
Life after life struck down goes,
Swifter than a bird's flight,
Swifter than the Fire-God's might,
To the western shores of Night.

Antistrophe 2
Wasted thus by death on death
All in our city perish.
Corpses spread infection round;
None to tend or mourn is found.
There's wailing on the altar stair;
Cries of mothers rend the air –
Long-drawn moans and piercing shrieks
Blend with prayers and litanies.
Golden child of Zeus, O hear
Let your angel face appear!

Strophe 3
And grant that Ares whose hot breath I feel,
He stalks without shield or sword of steel
Whose voice is as the battle shout,
May turn back in sudden rout,
To the perilous Thracian waters sped,
Or Amphitrite's bed.
For what he leaves at night undone,
He finishes by the morning sun –
All his victims die. Father Zeus, whose hand
Wields the lightning brand,
Slay him beneath your thunder, we pray,
Slay him, O slay!

Antistrophe 3 O that your arrows too, Lycean King,
From your taut bow's golden string,
Might fly abroad— the champions of our rights;
Yea, and the flashing lights
Of Artemis, by which the huntress sweeps
Across the Lycian steeps.
And you too with golden beveled hair,
Whose name our land does bear,
Bacchus – to whom the Maenads EUOI shout;
Come with your bright torch, rout,
Cheerful god whom we adore,
The god whom other gods abhor.

Enter OEDIPUS from the palace.

OEDIPUS You pray; it is well, but will you hear my words
And heed them and apply the remedy?
You might perchance find comfort and relief.
Mind you, I speak as one who comes a stranger
To this report, no less than to the crime;
For how unaided could I track it far
Without a clue? Only afterwards
Was I enrolled a citizen of Thebes.
This proclamation I address to all:

Thebans, if anyone knows the man by whom
Laius, son of Labdacus, was slain,
I summon him to declare everything to me.
And if he is afraid, let him reflect that thus
Confessing he shall escape the death penalty;
For the worst that shall befall him
Is banishment – unscathed he shall depart.
But if an alien from a foreign land
Be known to any as the murderer,
Let him who knows speak out, and he shall have
Due recompense from me and thanks as well.
But if you still keep silence, if through fear
For self or friends disregard my request,
Hear what I then resolve: I banish that man
Whosoever he may be.
Let no man in this land, where I hold
The sovereign rule, harbor or speak to him;
Give him no part in prayer or sacrifice
Or worship of the gods, but hound him from your homes.
For our delay is sinful, so the god
Has lately shown to me by oracles.
Thus as their champion I maintain the cause
Both of the god and of the murdered King.
And on the murderer this curse I lay
And on all the partners in his guilt:
Wretch, may he pine in utter misery!
And for myself, if with my consent
He gain admittance to my hearth, I pray
This curse I laid on others fall on me.
See that you carry out my command,
For my sake and the gods’ and for our land,
A desert blasted by the wrath of heaven.
For, let alone the god’s express command,
It is a scandal you should leave unpunished
The murder of a great man and your king,
Nor track it home. And now that I am lord,
Successor to his throne, his bed, his wife –
And had he not been frustrated in the hope
For heirs, common children of one womb
Had forced a closer bond between him and me,
But Fate came down upon him – therefore I
His blood-avenger will maintain his cause
As though he were my father, and leave no stone
Unturned to track the assassin or avenge
The son of Labdacus, of Polydore,
Of Cadmus, and Agenor first of the race.
And for those who disobey my order, I pray:
May the gods send them neither timely fruits
Of earth, nor teeming increase of the womb,
But may they waste and pine, as now they waste,
Aye and worse stricken; but to all of you,
My loyal subjects who approve my acts,
May Justice, our ally, and all the gods
Be gracious and attend you forever.

CHORUS The oath you prescribe, king, I take and swear.
I did not kill Laius myself, nor can I name
The murderer. For the quest, I think
That Phoebus, who proposed the riddle, himself
Should give the answer – who the murderer was.

OEDIPUS Well argued; but no living man can hope
To force the gods to speak against their will.

CHORUS May I then say what seems next best to me?

OEDIPUS Yes, and if there be a third best, tell it too.

CHORUS My lord, if any man sees eye to eye
With our god Phoebus, it’s our prophet,
Teiresias; he of all men best might guide
A searcher of this matter to the light.

OEDIPUS Here too my zeal has nothing lagged, for twice
At Creon's urging have I sent to fetch him,
And I begin to wonder why he is not here.

CHORUS I remember some rumors long ago – mere gossip.

OEDIPUS Tell me, I want to know all.

CHORUS It was said Laius was killed by travelers.

OEDIPUS So I heard, but no one has seen the man who saw it.

CHORUS Well, if he knows what fear is, he will cower
And flee before the terror of your curse.

OEDIPUS Words don't scare one who hesitates not at deeds.

CHORUS But here is the man to denounce him. Look,
They bring the god-inspired seer for whom
Above all other men the truth is known.

Enter TEIRESIAS, led by a boy.

OEDIPUS Teiresias, seer who comprehends all,
Master of the wise and hidden mysteries,
High things of heaven and low things of the earth,
You know, though your blinded eyes cannot see,
What plague infects our city; and we turn
To you, O seer, our one defense and shield.
The content of the answer that the God
Returned to us who sought his oracle,
The messengers have doubtless told you – how
One course alone could rid us of the pest:
To find the murderers of Laius,
And slay them or expel them from the land.
Therefore begrudging neither clairvoyance
Nor other divination that is in your power,
O save yourself, your country, and your king,
Save us all from this defilement of bloodshed.
We depend on you. This is man's highest end,
To others' service all his powers to lend.

TEIRESIAS Alas, alas, what misery it is to be wise
When wisdom profits nothing! This old story
I had forgotten; I should not have come here.

OEDIPUS What ails you? Why this melancholy mood?

TEIRESIAS Let me go home; prevent me not; it's best
For you to bear your burden and I mine.
OEDIPUS For shame! no true-born Theban patriot
Would thus withhold the word of prophecy.

TEIRESIAS Your words, O king, are ill-spoken, and I
Fear that I too may err as well.

OEDIPUS Oh speak, I implore you, if you know anything,
Share your knowledge. We are all begging you.

TEIRESIAS Yes, for you are all foolish, but my voice
Will never reveal my miseries – or yours.

OEDIPUS What then, you know, and yet will not speak!
Would you betray us and destroy your people? 340

TEIRESIAS I will not vex myself nor you. Why ask
Thus idly what from me you shall not learn?
OEDIPUS Monster! your silence would incense a rock.  
Will nothing loose your tongue? Can nothing melt you,  
Or shake your stubborn silence?  

Anger is another manifestation of Oedipus' pride.

TEIRESIAS You blame my mood and see not your own  
Which overcomes you; no, you're bothering me.

OEDIPUS And who could control his temper when he heard  
How insolently you flout the State?  

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TEIRESIAS Well, it will come what will, though I be mute.

OEDIPUS Since come it must, your duty is to tell me.

TEIRESIAS I have no more to say; storm as much as you want,  
And give free rein to all your pent-up rage.

OEDIPUS Yes, I am angry, and will not hold my words,  
But speak my whole mind. I think you're the one,  
Who planned the crime, and performed it too,  
All save the assassination; and if you  
Were not blind, I would swear as well  
That you alone did the bloody deed.  

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TEIRESIAS Is that so? Then I charge you to submit  
To your own proclamation; from this day  
Speak not to these or me. You are the man,  
The accursed polluter of this land.

OEDIPUS Vile slanderer, you blurt out these taunts,  
And think as seer you'll go free.

TEIRESIAS Yes, I am free, secure in the strength of truth.

OEDIPUS Who was your teacher? not your own expertise.

TEIRESIAS You, bullying me against my will to speak.

OEDIPUS What speech? Repeat it and resolve my doubt.  

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TEIRESIAS Did you miss my words? Would you force me on?  

OEDIPUS I only half caught your meaning; say it again.

TEIRESIAS I say you are the murderer of the man  
Whose killer you pursue.

OEDIPUS You'll regret twice uttering so gross a lie.

TEIRESIAS Must I say more to aggravate your rage?
OEDIPUS    Say all you want; it will be but waste of breath.

TEIRESIAS  I say you live with your nearest kin
            In infamy, ignorant of your shame.

OEDIPUS    Do you think it’s safe so to wag your tongue?

TEIRESIAS  Yes, if the light of truth can ever prevail.

OEDIPUS    For other men, but not for you, for you
            In ear, wit, eye, in everything are blind.

TEIRESIAS  Poor fool to utter insults at me which all
            Here present will cast back on you before long

OEDIPUS    Offspring of endless Night, you have no power
            Over me or any man who sees the sun.

TEIRESIAS  No, for your fate is not to fall by me.
            I leave to Apollo what concerns the god.

OEDIPUS    Is this a plot of Creon, or your own?

TEIRESIAS  Not Creon, you are your own misfortune.

OEDIPUS    O wealth and power and victorious skill
            Proven in the battlefield of life,
            What spite and envy follow in your turn!
            See, for this crown the State conferred on me.
            A gift, a thing I sought not, for this crown
            The trusty Creon, my familiar friend,
            Has lain in wait to oust me and suborned
            This charlatan, this juggling impostor,
            This phony beggar-priest, for money alone
            Keen-eyed, but in his proper art stone-blind.

            Say, villain, have you ever proved yourself
            A prophet? When the riddling Sphinx was here
            Why had you then no deliverance for your people?
            And yet the riddle was not to be solved
            By guess-work but required the prophet’s art
            Which you were found to lack; neither birds
            Nor sign from heaven helped you, but I came,
            The simple Oedipus; I stopped her mouth
            By natural wit, untaught of auguries.
            This is the man whom you would undermine,
            In hope to reign with Creon in my stead.
            I think that you and your ally will soon
            Repent your plot to drive the scapegoat out.
            Thank your gray hairs that you don’t feel
            The punishment such arrogance deserves.

     Hubris – Oedipus
cannot “see” past his success.

     familiar ≈ of a family
Oedipus shows
paranoia.

     Watching the flight of
birds was a way to tell
the future.

     augury ≈ art of reading
omens
CHORUS To us it seems that both the seer and you, O Oedipus, have spoken angry words. This is no time to quarrel but consider. How best we may fulfill the oracle.

TEIRESIAS King though you are, free speech at least is mine. To make reply; in this I am your peer. I obey no lord but Loxias; him I serve. And never stand acknowledged as Creon's man. Thus then I answer: since you have not refrained From mocking my blindness – you who have eyes, Yet see not into what misery you have fallen, Nor where you live nor with whom you mate. Do you know who your parents are? No, you do not, And all unaware are a double enemy. To your own kin, the living and the dead; And the stubborn curse of mother and father This day shall drive you, like a two-edged sword, Beyond our borders, and the eyes that now See clear shall henceforth behold endless night. Ah, where shall your bitter cry not reach, What cliff in all Cithaeron shall not then Echo your wail, when you have found out With what a wedding song you were carried Home, but to no fair haven, on that night! And a flood of ills you don't even imagine Shall set up you and your children in one line. Flout then both Creon and my words, for none Of mortals shall be doomed worse than you.

LOXIAS ≈ Apollo


CITHAERON ≈ mountains near Thebes

OEDIPUS Must I endure this fellow's insolence? A plague on you! Go away! Begone, and never cross my threshold more.

TEIRESIAS I never had come had you not summoned me.

OEDIPUS If I had known you would speak such folly, You would have waited a long time to be invited here.

TEIRESIAS Such as I am – it seems to you a fool, But the parents who begat you found me wise.

OEDIPUS What are you saying? Who were my parents?

TEIRESIAS This day shall give you parents, and your ruin.

OEDIPUS You love to speak in riddles and dark words.

TEIRESIAS In solving riddles, who is more skilled than you?

OEDIPUS Mock me with my greatness.

TEIRESIAS And yet this very greatness proved your curse.
OEDIPUS  No matter if I saved the commonwealth.
TEIRESIAS  It's time I left you. Come, boy, take me home.
OEDIPUS  Yes, take him quickly, for his presence irks me.
Go where you cannot plague me more.
TEIRESIAS  I go, but first I'll tell you why I came.
Your frown I dread not, for you cannot harm me.
Hear then: this man whom you want to arrest
With threats and warrants this long while, the wretch
Who murdered Laius – that man is here.
He passes for an alien in the land
But soon shall prove a Theban, native born.
And yet his fortune brings him little joy;
Blind, though he could see, dressed in beggar's rags,
Not purple robes, and leaning on his staff,
To a strange land he soon shall grope his way.
And of his children, who live in his home,
He shall be proved brother and father,
Of his mother who bore him son and husband both,
Co-partner, and assassin of his own father.
Go in and ponder this, and if you find
That I have missed the mark, henceforth declare
I have no wit nor skill in prophecy.

Exeunt TEIRESIAS and OEDIPUS

CHORUS

Strophe 1
Who is the one named from Pythia's rocky cell,
Doer of foul deeds of bloodshed,
Horrors that no tongue can tell?
A foot for flight he needs
Fleeter than storm-swift steeds,
For on his heels does follow,
Armed with lightning of his Sire, Apollo.
Like bloodhounds too
The Fates pursue.

Choral songs provide emotional responses to the plot. Before they sang of the plague, and here about the pursuit of Laius’ killer. Apollo’s father was Zeus.
Antistrophe

1

Just now flashed forth from Parnassus' snowy peak:
"Near and far must Thebes the hidden murderer seek!"
Now like a sullen bull he roves
Through forest thickets and upland groves,
And vainly seeks to fly.
The doom that ever nigh,
Flits over his head –
Still by avenging Phoebus sped,
The voice divine,
From Earth's middle shrine.

Strophe

2

Sore perplexed am I by the words of the master seer.
Are they true, are they false? I hold my tongue for fear,
I don't know; neither present nor future is clear.
Quarrel of ancient date or in recent days know I none
Between the Labdacidan house and our ruler, Polybus' son.
Without proof, how can I challenge our King's good name,
How in a blood-feud join for a concealed deed of shame?

Antistrophe

2

All wise are Zeus and Apollo; nothing is hid from their ken;
They are gods; but in wits a man may surpass his fellow men;
But that a mortal seer knows more than I know – where
Has this been proven? Or how without sign assured, can I blame
Him who saved our State when the winged singer came,
Tested and tried in the light of us all, like gold assayed?
How can I now assent when a crime is on Oedipus laid?

CREON

Friends, countrymen, King Oedipus
Has laid against me a most grievous charge,
And I come to you protesting. If he deems
That I have harmed or injured him in any way
By word or deed in this our present trouble,
I care not to prolong the span of life,
Thus ill-reputed; for the infamy
Hits not a single blot, but blasts my name,
If by the general voice I am denounced
False to the State and false by you my friends.

CHORUS

This taunt, it well may be, was blurted out
In anger, not spoken advisedly.

CREON

Did anyone dare pretend that it was I who
Prompted the seer to utter a false charge?

CHORUS

Such things were said; with what intent I don’t know.

CREON

Were not Oedipus’ wits and vision all astray
When upon me he fixed this monstrous charge?

CHORUS

I don’t know; to my sovereign's acts I am blind.

Enter OEDIPUS.
But look, he comes to answer for himself.

**OEDIPUS**

Traitor, what are you doing here? Do you presume
To approach my doors, you brazen-faced rogue,
My murderer and the thief of my crown?
Come, answer this, did you detect in me
Some touch of cowardice or stupidity,
That made you undertake this enterprise?
I seemed to you too simple to perceive
The serpent stealing on me in the dark,
Or else too weak to stop it when I saw.
You are foolish yourself seeking to possess
Without a following or friends the crown,
A prize that followers and wealth must win.

**CREON**

Listen to me. You have spoken, it’s my turn
To make reply. After hearing me, you may judge.

**OEDIPUS**

You art glib of tongue, but I am slow to learn
From you; I know too well your venomous hate.

**CREON**

First I would argue out this very point.

**OEDIPUS**

O argue not that you are not a rogue.

**CREON**

If you count stubbornness a virtue,
Untaught by reason, you are much in error.

**OEDIPUS**

If you think a kinsman may be wronged,
And no pains follow, you have much to learn.

**CREON**

You’re right about that, but this crime
That you allege against me – tell me what it is.

**OEDIPUS**

Did you or did you not advise that I should call the priest?

**CREON**

Yes, and I stand by it.

**OEDIPUS**

Tell me how long is it since Laius….

**CREON**

Since Laius...what? I do not follow you.

**OEDIPUS**

By violent hands was spirited away.

**CREON**

In the dim past, a many years ago.

**OEDIPUS**

Did the same prophet then pursue his craft?

**CREON**

Yes, skilled as now and in no less repute.

**OEDIPUS**

Did he at that time ever glance at me?
CREON  Not to my knowledge, not when I was there.

OEDIPUS  But was no search and inquisition made?

CREON  Surely, a full inquest was made, but nothing learned.

OEDIPUS  Why didn't the seer tell his story then?

CREON  I don’t know, and not knowing hold my tongue. 570

OEDIPUS  This much you know and can surely tell.

CREON  What do you mean? All I know I will declare.

OEDIPUS  If you hadn’t prompted him, the seer never would
Have accused me of killing Laius.

CREON  If he said that, you know it best; but I
Would question you in my turn.

OEDIPUS  Question and prove me murderer if you can.

CREON  Then let me ask you, did you marry my sister?

OEDIPUS  A fact so plain I cannot well deny.

CREON  And as your queen she shares the throne?

OEDIPUS  I grant her freely all her heart desires.

CREON  And with you two I share the triple rule?

OEDIPUS  Yes, and that fact proves you a false friend.

CREON  Not so, if you think about it reasonably,
As I do. First, I ask you think,
Would any mortal choose a troubled reign
Of terrors rather than secure peace,
If the same power were given him? As for me,
I have no natural craving to have the name
Of king, preferring to do the deeds of a king,
And so thinks every sober-minded man.
Now all my needs are satisfied through you,
And I have nothing to fear; but if I were king,
My acts would often run counter to my will.
How could a title then have charms for me
Above the sweets of boundless influence?
I am not so eager to grasp
The shadow when I hold the substance.
Now all men cry me Godspeed! wish me well,
And every suitor seeks to gain my ear,
If he would hope to win a favor from you.

Creon says he has the benefits of power without the burdens of being king – paradox that those at the top have the most to suffer. 590

A ruler has responsibilities. 600
Why should I leave the better, choose the worse?
That were sheer madness, and I am not mad.
No such ambition ever tempted me,
Nor would I have a share in such intrigue.

And if you doubt me, first to Delphi go,
There ascertain if my report was true
Of the god’s answer; next investigate
If with the seer I plotted or conspired,
And if it prove so, sentence me to death,
Not by your voice alone, but with mine as well.
But O condemn me not, without appeal,
On mere suspicion. It is not right to judge
Randomly that bad men are good, or good men bad.
I would rather a man should cast away
The thing he counts most precious, his own life,
As spurn a true friend. In time, you will learn
The truth, for time alone reveals the just;
A villain is detected in a day.

CHORUS To one who walks warily his words
Commend themselves; swift judgments are not sure.

OEDIPUS When with swift strides a stealthy plotter stalks
I must be quick too with my counterplot.
To await his attack passively, for him
Is sure success, for me assured defeat.

CREON What then is your will? to banish me from the land?
OEDIPUS I would not have you banished, no, but dead,
That men may mark the wages envy earns.
CREON I see you will not yield, nor believe me.
OEDIPUS None but a fool would believe such as you.
CREON You art not wise.
OEDIPUS Wise for myself at least
CREON Why not for me too?
OEDIPUS Why for such a villain?
CREON Suppose you are wrong.
OEDIPUS Yet kings must rule.
CREON Not if they rule badly.
OEDIPUS Oh city, my city!
Your city? Am not I a Theban too?

Cease, princes; look who comes, and none too soon,
Jocasta from the palace. Who else is fit
As peacemaker to reconcile your feud?

Misguided men, why are you raising
Such a loud noise? Aren’t you ashamed,
When the whole land lies suffering, thus to voice
Your private injuries? Go in, Oedipus;
Go home, Creon, and stop making
A public scandal of a petty grief.

My royal sister, Oedipus, your husband,
Wants me to choose (O dread alternative!)
An outlaw’s exile or a felon’s death.

Yes, lady; I have caught him practicing
Against my royal person his vile arts.

May I never prosper but die accursed, if I
In any way am guilty of this charge.

Believe him, Oedipus, I beseech you,
First for his solemn oath’s sake, then for mine,
And for your elders’ sake who wait on you here.

Listen, King, reflect, we pray you, be not stubborn but relent.

Say to what should I consent?

Respect a man whose integrity and truth
Are known to all and now confirmed by oath.

Do you know what you’re asking for?

Yes, I know.

Declare it then and make your meaning plain.

Condemn not a friend whom babbling tongues assail;
Let not suspicion against his oath prevail.

Do you realize that in seeking this you are
Really seeking my death or banishment?

No, by the leader of the host divine!
Witness, lord Sun, such thought was never mine,
Damned by gods, abandoned by friends may I perish,
If ever such intent I did cherish!
But O my heart is desolate
Musing on our fallen State,
Doubly abused should discord grow

The chorus is anxious because the leaders are quarreling in time of trouble for the city.
Between you two, to crown our woe.

OEDIPUS  Well, let him go, no matter what it costs me,
My certain death or shameful banishment,
For your sake I relent, not his; and Creon,
Wherever he be, my heart shall still abhor. 680

CREON  You are as sullen in your yielding mood
As in your anger you were savage.
Your temper justly plagues you the most.

OEDIPUS  Leave me in peace and go away now.

CREON  I go, misjudged by you, but cleared by these others. Exit CREON

CHORUS  Lady, lead him indoors; why stay here any longer?

JOCASTA  First tell me how the argument started.

CHORUS  Rumors bred suspicions, and injustice provoked quarrel.

JOCASTA  Were both at fault? 690

CHORUS  Yes, both.

JOCASTA  What was the tale?

CHORUS  Ask me no more. The land is sore distressed;
It is better sleeping ills to leave at rest.

OEDIPUS  Strange counsel, friend! I know you mean me well,
And yet want to mitigate and blunt my zeal.

CHORUS  King, I say it once again,
Foolish were I proved, insane,
If I lightly put away
You my country's prop and stay,
Pilot who, in danger sought,
To a quiet haven brought
Our distracted State; and now
Who can guide us right but you?

JOCASTA  Let me know, I implore you, O king
What cause has stirred this unrelenting wrath.

OEDIPUS  I will, for you are more to me than these
Lady, the cause is Creon and his plots.

JOCASTA  But what provoked the quarrel? Make this clear.

OEDIPUS  He points me out as Laius' murderer. 710

JOCASTA  Of his own knowledge or upon report?
OEDIPUS He is too cunning to commit himself,  
And makes a mouthpiece of a dishonest seer.  

JOCASTA Then you may ease your conscience on that score.  
Listen and I'll convince you that no man  
Has power in the prophetic art.  
Here is the proof in brief. An oracle  
Once came to Laius (I will not say  
It was from the Delphic god himself, but from  
His ministers) declaring he was doomed  
To perish by the hand of his own son,  
A child that should be born to him by me.  
Now Laius – so at least report affirmed –  
Was murdered one day by highwaymen,  
No natives, at a spot where three roads meet.  

As for the child, it was but three days old,  
When Laius, its ankles pierced and pinned  
Together, gave it to be cast away  
By others on the trackless mountain side.  
So then Apollo brought it not to pass that  
The child should be his father's murderer,  
Or the dread terror find accomplishment.  
Laius was not slain by his own son.  
As was the prophet's horoscope. O king,  
Do not listen to oracles. Whatever the god wants us  
To know, he himself unaided will reveal.  

OEDIPUS What memories, what wild tumult of the soul  
Came over me, lady, as I heard you speak!  

JOCASTA What do you mean? What has shocked and startled you?  

OEDIPUS I thought I heard you say that Laius  
Was murdered at the meeting of three roads.  

JOCASTA So ran the story that is current still.  

OEDIPUS Where did this happen? Do you know the place?  

JOCASTA Phocis the land is called; the spot is where  
The road forks, one way to Delphi, the other to Daulia.  

OEDIPUS And how long is it since these things happened?  

JOCASTA It was just before you were proclaimed  
Our country's ruler that the news was brought.  

OEDIPUS O Zeus, what have you done with me!  

JOCASTA What is it, Oedipus, that moves you so strongly?
OEDIPUS  Ask me not yet; tell me the build and height
Of Laius? Was he still in manhood's prime?  750

JOCASTA  Tall was he, and his hair was lightly strewn
With silver; and not unlike you in form

OEDIPUS  O woe is me! I think unwittingly
I laid just now a dread curse on myself.

JOCASTA  What are you saying? When I look upon you, my king, I tremble.

OEDIPUS  It's a dread premonition
That in the end the seer will prove not blind.
One further question to resolve my doubt.

JOCASTA  I shudder, but I will answer all.

OEDIPUS  Had he but few attendants or a train
Of armed retainers with him, like a king?

JOCASTA  They were but five in all, and one of them
A herald; Laius rode in a carriage.
OEDIPUS  Alas! It’s clear as noonday now. But say,  
Lady, who carried this report to Thebes?

JOCASTA  A servant, the sole survivor who returned.

OEDIPUS  Is he here or in the house?

JOCASTA  No, for as soon as he returned and found  
You reigning in the place of Laius slain,  
He clasped my hand and begged me  
To send him to the wilds and pastures, where  
He might be farthest from the sight of Thebes.  
And so I sent him. He was an honest slave  
And well deserved some better recompense.

OEDIPUS  Fetch him at once. I want to see the man.

JOCASTA  He shall be brought; but why summon him?

OEDIPUS  Lady, I fear my tongue has overrun  
Discretion; therefore I would question him.

JOCASTA  Well, he shall come, but may not I too claim  
To share the burden of your heart, my king?

OEDIPUS  And you shall not be frustrated in your wish.  
Now my imaginings have gone so far.  
Who has a higher claim that you to hear  
My tale of dire adventures? Listen then.  
My father was Polybus of Corinth, and  
My mother Merope, a Dorian;  
And I was held the foremost citizen,  
Till a strange thing befell me, strange indeed,  
Yet scarce deserving all the heat it stirred.  
A party-goer at some banquet, drunk with wine,  
Shouted "You are not the true son of your father."

It irked me, but I stomached the insult  
For the night; in the morning I sought out  
My parents and questioned them.  
They were indignant at the random slur  
Cast on my parentage and did their best  
To comfort me, but still the venomous taunt  
Rankled, for still the scandal spread and grew.

So privately without their leave I went  
To Delphi, where Apollo refused to give me  
The knowledge that I came to seek.  
Instead, other grievous things he prophesied,  
Woes, lamentations, mourning, portents dire:
That I should defile my mother's bed
And raise up seed too loathsome to behold,
And slay the father from whose loins I sprang.
Hearing this, I fled in the opposite direction
From Corinth, never to see my parents again,
So that monstrous prophecy would never be fulfilled.

Then, lady – you shall hear the very truth –
As I drew near the place where three roads meet,
A herald confronted me, followed by an old man
Who sat in a car drawn by colts – as in your tale –
The herald in front and the old man himself
Threatened to thrust me rudely from the path,
Then the driver jostled me angrily.
I struck him, and the old man, seeing this,
Watched till I passed and from his car brought down
Full on my head the double-pointed goad.
Yet I got even with him and more; one stroke
Of my good staff sufficed to fling him clean
Out of the chariot seat and lay him prone.
And so I killed them all.

But if
This stranger had anything to do
With Laius, who is more miserable than I,
What mortal could you find more god-abhorred?
Wretch whom no traveler, no citizen
May harbor or address, whom all are bound
To harry from their homes. And this same curse
I laid myself, on myself alone.
Yes, with these gory hands I pollute
The bed of him I slew. Say, am I vile?
Am I not utterly unclean, a wretch
Doomed to be banished, and in banishment
Forgo the sight of all my dearest ones,
And never tread again my native earth;
Or else to wed my mother and slay my father,
Polybus, who sired and reared me?
If one should say, this is the handiwork
Of some inhuman power, who could blame
His judgment? But, you pure and awful gods,
Forbid, forbid that I should see that day!
May I be blotted out from living men
Before such a calamity befall me!

Oedipus tried to avoid the horrible fate.

The argument was over the right-of-way, between two proud men (road-rage?).

Odead ≈ club used to prod cattle, symbol of royal power

Hypothetical ("if," line 825 above) – there is still hope, but foreshadowing his misery is dramatic.

CHORUS We too, O king, are troubled; but till you
Have questioned the survivor, still hope on.

OEDIPUS My hope is faint, but still enough survives
To bid me bide the coming of this shepherd.

JOCASTA If he were here, what would you learn from him?
OEDIPUS: I'll tell you, lady; if his tale agrees
With yours, I shall have escaped calamity.

JOCASTA: And what of special import did I say?

OEDIPUS: In your report of what the herdsman said,
Laius was slain by robbers; now if the servant
Still speaks of robbers, not a robber, I
Slew Laius not; "one" with "many" cannot square.
But if he says one lonely wayfarer,
The last link to my guilt is forged.

JOCASTA: Well, rest assured, his tale has always been the same,
Nor can he now retract what then he said;
Not I alone but all our townsfolk heard it.
Even if he should vary somewhat in his story,
He cannot make the death of Laius
In any way consistent with the oracle.
For Loxias said expressly he was doomed
To die by my child's hand, but he, poor babe,
He shed no blood, but perished first himself.
So much for divination. Henceforth I
Will look for signs neither to right nor left.

OEDIPUS: You reason well. Still I would have you send
Someone to bring the servant here. See to it.

JOCASTA: That will I straightway. Come, let us within.
I would do nothing that my lord dislikes.

Exeunt OEDIPUS and JOCASTA

CHORUS

Strophe
1 May my lot be still to lead
The life of innocence and deny
Irreverence in word or deed,
To follow still those laws ordained on high
Whose birthplace is the bright ethereal sky
No mortal birth they own,
Olympus their progenitor alone:
Never shall they slumber in oblivion cold,
The god in them is strong and grows not old.

Antistrophe
1 Of insolence is bred
The tyrant; insolence full blown,
With empty riches surfeited,
Scales the precipitous height and grasps the throne.
Then he topples over and lies in ruin prone;
No foothold on that dizzy steep.
But O may Heaven the true patriot keep

The myths seem quaint to us, but were religion in Greece 300 years before Christ.
The chorus testifies to their faith.

But Oedipus, as well as Jocasta and Laius, sought to thwart the oracle, “the will of god” (Apollo).
Who burns with emulous zeal to serve the State.
God is my help and hope, on him I wait.

Strophe

2
But the proud sinner, or in word or deed,
That will not Justice heed,
Nor reverence the shrine
Of images divine,
Perdition seize his vain imaginings,
If, urged by greed profane,
He grasps at ill-gotten gain,
And lays an impious hand on holiest things.
Who when such deeds are done
Can hope heaven's bolts to shun?
If sin like this to honor can aspire,
Why dance I still and lead the sacred choir?

Antistrophe

No more I'll seek earth's central oracle,
Or Abae's hallowed cell,
Nor to Olympia bring
My votive offering.
If before all God's truth be not made plain.
O Zeus, reveal your might,
King, if you are named aright
Omnipotent, all-seeing, as of old;
For Laius is forgot;
His fate, men heed it not;
Apollo is forsaken and faith grows cold.

JOCASTA
My lords, you look amazed to see your queen
With wreaths and gifts of incense in her hands.
I had a mind to visit the high shrines,
For Oedipus is overwrought, alarmed
With terrors manifold. He will not use
His past experience, like a man of sense,
To judge the present need, but lends an ear
To any gossip if it forebodes ill.
Since then my counsels don't help, I turn
To you, our present help in time of trouble,
Apollo, Lord Lycean, and to you
My prayers and supplications here I bring.
Deliver us, lord, and cleanse us from this curse!
For now we all are cowed like mariners
Who see their helmsman dumbstruck in the storm.

Enter Corinthian MESSENGER.

MESSENGER
My masters, tell me where the palace is
Of Oedipus; or better, where's the king?

CHORUS
Here is the palace and he waits within;
This is his queen, the mother of his children.
MESSENGER  All happiness attend her and the house,  
            Blessed is her husband and her marriage-bed.  
            irony

JOCASTA  My greetings to you, stranger; your fair words  
            Deserve a like response. But tell me why  
            You’ve come – what the need or what the news.

MESSENGER  Good for your husband and the royal house.  
            940

JOCASTA  What may it be? Whose messenger are you?

MESSENGER  The Isthmian commons have resolved to make  
            Your husband king – so it was reported there.  
            Isthmian ≈ Corinth  
            was on an isthmus.

JOCASTA  What! Isn’t aged Polybus still king?

MESSENGER  No, truly; he's dead and in his grave.

JOCASTA  What! Is he dead, the father of Oedipus?

MESSENGER  If I speak falsely, may I die myself.

JOCASTA  Quick, maiden, bear these tidings to my lord.  
            Your god-sent oracles, where stand you now!  
            This is the man whom Oedipus long shunned,  
            In dread to prove his murderer; and now  
            He dies in nature's course, and not by Oedipus' hand.

OEDIPUS  My wife, my queen, Jocasta, why have you  
            Summoned me from my palace?

JOCASTA  Hear this man, and as you hear, judge what has  
            Become of all those awe-inspiring oracles.

OEDIPUS  Who is this man, and what’s his news for me?

JOCASTA  He comes from Corinth and his message this:  
            Your father Polybus has passed away.

OEDIPUS  What? Let me hear it, stranger, from your mouth.  
            960

MESSENGER  If I must first make plain beyond a doubt,  
            My message is, that Polybus is dead.

OEDIPUS  By treachery, or by sickness visited?

MESSENGER  One touch will send an old man to his rest.

OEDIPUS  So of some malady he died, poor man.

MESSENGER  Yes, having reached the full span of years.
OEDIPUS  This is it, lady! Why should one regard
The Pythian hearth or birds that scream in the air?
Did they not point at me as doomed to slay
My father? But he's dead and in his grave
And here am I who never unsheathed a sword;
Unless the longing for his absent son
Killed him and so I slew him in a sense.
But, as they stand, the oracles are dead –
Dust, ashes, nothing, dead as Polybus.

JOCASTA  Say, did not I foretell this long ago?
OEDIPUS  You did: but I was misled by my fear.
JOCASTA  Then let it no more weigh upon your soul.
OEDIPUS  Must I not fear my mother's marriage bed?
JOCASTA  Why should a mortal man, the plaything of chance,
With no knowledge of the future, be afraid?
Best live a careless life from hand to mouth.
Fear not this wedlock with your mother.
How often it chances that in dreams a man
Has slept with his mother! He who least regards
Such brainsick fantasies lives most at ease.

OEDIPUS  I should have shared fully in your confidence,
Were not my mother living; since she lives
Though half-convinced, I still must live in dread.

JOCASTA  And yet your father's death illuminates much darkness.
OEDIPUS  Much, but my fear is touching her who lives.

MESSENGER  Who is this woman you fear?
OEDIPUS  Merope, stranger, wife of Polybus.

MESSENGER  And what of her can cause you any fear?
OEDIPUS  A heaven-sent oracle of dread import.

MESSENGER  A mystery, or may a stranger hear it?
OEDIPUS  It is no secret. Loxias once foretold
That I should mate with my own mother, and shed
With my own hands the blood of my father.
Thus I have kept my distance from Corinth
For many a year; and I lived abroad,
But missed the sweetest sights, my parents' faces.

An emotional high point – Sophocles takes us up and down several times before the final downfall.

Cynical again, she says people are subject to luck and might as well live for the present. Freud also thought “oedipal” desires were universal.
MESSENGER Was this the fear that exiled you from home?

OEDIPUS Yes, and the dread of slaying my own father.

MESSENGER Why, since I came to give you pleasure, King, Have I not rid you of this second fear?

OEDIPUS Well done, you shall have due reward for your pains.

MESSENGER Well, I confess what chiefly made me come Was hope to profit by your coming home.

OEDIPUS No, I will never go near my parents more.

MESSENGER My son, it's plain, you don't know what you're doing. 

OEDIPUS How so, old man? For heaven's sake tell me all.

MESSENGER If this is why you dread to return. . .

OEDIPUS Yes, lest the god's word be fulfilled in me.

MESSENGER And through your parents you would be accursed?

OEDIPUS This and none other is my constant dread.

MESSENGER Don't you know your fears are baseless?

OEDIPUS How baseless, if I am their very son?

MESSENGER Since Polybus was nothing to you in blood.

OEDIPUS What are you saying? Was not Polybus my sire?

MESSENGER As much your sire as I am, and no more.

OEDIPUS My father is no more to me than one who is nothing?

MESSENGER Since I did not sire you, no more did he.

OEDIPUS What reason had he then to call me son?

MESSENGER Know that he took you from my hands, as a gift.

OEDIPUS Yet, if no child of his, he loved me well

MESSENGER A childless man till then, he came to love you.

OEDIPUS A foundling or a purchased slave, this child?

MESSENGER I found you in Cithaeron's wooded glens.
OEDIPUS: What led you to explore those upland glades?

MESSENGER: My business was to tend the mountain flocks.

OEDIPUS: A vagrant shepherd journeying for hire?

MESSENGER: True, but your savior in that hour, my son.

OEDIPUS: My savior? from what harm? What ailed me then?

MESSENGER: Those ankle joints are evidence enough.

OEDIPUS: Ah, why remind me of that ancient sore?

MESSENGER: I loosened the pin that riveted your feet.

OEDIPUS: Yes, from my cradle that handicap I have born.

MESSENGER: From which you derive the name that still is yours.

“Oedipus” means “wounded foot.”

OEDIPUS: Who did it? I demand you, tell me who.

MESSENGER: I don’t know. The man from whom I got you may know more.

OEDIPUS: What, did another find me, not you?

MESSENGER: Not I, another shepherd gave you to me.

OEDIPUS: Who was he? Would you know the man again?

MESSENGER: He was one of Laius’ house.

OEDIPUS: The king who ruled the country long ago?

MESSENGER: The same – that man was a herdsman of the king.

OEDIPUS: And is he living still for me to see him?

MESSENGER: His fellow-countrymen should best know that.

OEDIPUS: Does any bystander among you know

MESSENGER: The shepherd he speaks of, or has seen him

OEDIPUS: In the field or in the city? Answer straight!

MESSENGER: The hour has come to clear this business up.

CHORUS: I think he means none other than the servant

OEDIPUS: Whom you just asked to see; but that

CHORUS: Our queen Jocasta best of all could tell.

OEDIPUS: Madam, do you know the man we sent to fetch?
Is the same of whom the stranger speaks?

JOCASTA  Who is the man? What matter? Let it be.
It is waste of thought to weigh such idle words.  

OEDIPUS  No, with such guiding clues I cannot fail
To bring to light the secret of my birth.

JOCASTA  Oh, if you care for your life, abandon
This quest! The anguish I endure is enough.

OEDIPUS  Be of good cheer; though I be proved the son
And grandson of slaves, even through three generations
Triply a slave, your honor is untouched.

JOCASTA  Yet humor me, I pray you; do not do this.

OEDIPUS  I cannot; I must probe this matter home.

JOCASTA  It's for your sake; I advise you for the best.

OEDIPUS  I grow impatient of this best advice.

JOCASTA  Ah, may you never discover who you are!

OEDIPUS  Go, fetch me here the shepherd, and leave this woman
To glory in her pride of ancestry.

JOCASTA  O woe on you, poor wretch! With that last word
I leave you, never will speak to you again.

Exit JOCASTA

CHORUS  Why, Oedipus, why stung with passionate grief
Has the queen thus departed? Much I fear
From this dead calm will burst a storm of woes.

OEDIPUS  Let the storm burst, my fixed resolve still holds,
To learn my lineage, be it ever so low.
It may be she with all a woman's pride
Thinks scornfully of my base parentage. But I
Who rank myself as Fortune's favorite child,
The giver of good gifts, shall not be shamed.
Fortune is my mother and the changing moons
My brethren, and with them I wax and wane.
Thus born why should I fear to trace my birth?
Nothing can make me other than I am.

CHORUS  If my prophetic soul errs not, if my wisdom has any worth,
You, Cithaeron, as the nurse and foster-mother
Of our Oedipus I shall greet

STROPHE

Exit = he or she leaves

1060  third warning

1070

1080  Is his stubbornness, a form of pride, a strength as well as a weakness?
Ironic – he will soon be cursing fortune.

1090  They sing about Oedipus' birth, wondering if it were
Before tomorrow's full moon rises, and exalt you as is meet.
Dance and song shall exalt your praises, lover of our royal race.
Phoebus, may my words find grace!

Antistrophe
Child, who bore you, nymph or goddess?
Surely it was more than man,
Perhaps the hill-roamer Pan.

Of did Loxias beget you, for he haunts the upland wild;
Or Cyllene's lord, or Bacchus, dweller on the hilltops cold?
Did some Heliconian Oread give him a new-born joy?
Nymphs with whom he loves to toy?

Pan ≈ god of forest, flocks, shepherds
Cyllene, Helicon ≈ mountains with gods and nymphs

OEDIPUS
Elders, if I, who never yet before
Have met the man, may make a guess, I think
I see the herdsman who we long have sought;
His time-worn aspect matches with the years
Of yonder aged messenger; besides
I seem to recognize the men who bring him
As servants of my own. But you, perchance,
Having in past days known or seen the shepherd,
May have surer knowledge.

CHORUS
I recognize him; one of Laius' house;
A simple herdsman, but true as any man.

Enter HERDSMAN.

OEDIPUS
Corinthian, stranger, I address you first,
Is this the man you mean?

MESSENGER
This is he.

OEDIPUS
And now old man, look up and answer all
I ask you. Were you once of Laius' house?

HERDSMAN
I was a slave, not purchased but home-bred.

OEDIPUS
What was your business? How were you employed?

HERDSMAN
The best part of my life I tended sheep.

OEDIPUS
What were the pastures you visited most?

HERDSMAN
Cithaeron and the neighboring mountains.

OEDIPUS
Then there you must have known this man.

HERDSMAN
That man? in what way? What man do you mean?

OEDIPUS
The man here, having met him in past times.

HERDSMAN
Off-hand I cannot call him well to mind.
MESSENGER  No wonder, master. But I will revive
His blunted memories. Sure he can recall
What time together both we drove our flocks,
He two, I one, on the Cithaeron range,
For three long summers; together from spring
Till rose Arcturus; then in winter time
I led mine home, he his to Laius' folds.
Did these things happen as I say, or no?

HERDSMAN  It was long ago, but all you say is true.

MESSENGER  Well, you must then remember giving me
A child to rear as my own foster-son?

HERDSMAN  Why do you ask this question? What of that?

MESSENGER  Friend, he that stands before you was that child.

HERDSMAN  A plague upon you! Hold your wanton tongue!

OEDIPUS  Softly, old man, rebuke him not; your words
Are more deserving chastisement than his.

HERDSMAN  O best of masters, what is my offense?

OEDIPUS  Not answering what he asks about the child.

HERDSMAN  He speaks at random, babbles like a fool.

OEDIPUS  If you lack grace to speak, I'll loosen your tongue.

HERDSMAN  For mercy's sake abuse not an old man.

OEDIPUS  Arrest the villain, seize and pinion him!

HERDSMAN  Alas, alas! What have I done?

OEDIPUS  Did you give this man the child of whom he speaks?

HERDSMAN  I did; and would that I had died that day!

OEDIPUS  And die you shall unless you tell the truth.

HERDSMAN  But, if I tell it, I am doubly lost.

OEDIPUS  I think the man will still prevaricate.

HERDSMAN  No, I have confessed I gave him the child.

OEDIPUS  Where did it come from? Was it yours,
Or had someone given it to you?
HERDSMAN I had it from another; it was not mine. 1160
OEDIPUS From whom of these our townsmen, and what house?
HERDSMAN Stop, master, for God's sake, ask no more. fourth warning
OEDIPUS If I must ask you again, you are lost.
HERDSMAN Well then – it was a child of Laius' house.
OEDIPUS Slave-born or one of Laius' own race?
HERDSMAN Ah me! I stand upon the perilous edge of speech.
OEDIPUS And I of hearing, but still I must hear. fate, but also his strong character
HERDSMAN Know then the child was by repute his own, But she within, your wife best could tell.
OEDIPUS What! she, she gave it to you? 1170 Jocasta was "in denial" (726-729).
HERDSMAN It is so, my king.
OEDIPUS With what intent?
HERDSMAN To do away with it.
OEDIPUS What a heartless mother! Loss of wife as well – she becomes a monster.
HERDSMAN Fearing a dread fate.
OEDIPUS What fate?
HERDSMAN It was said that he should slay his father.
OEDIPUS Why did you give it then to this old man?
HERDSMAN Through pity, master, for the babe. I thought He'd take it to the country where he lived; But he preserved it for the worst of woes. For if you are truly what this man says, God help you! You were born to misery. 1180
OEDIPUS Ah me! ah me! All brought to pass, all true! O light, may I behold you nevermore! I stand a wretch, in birth, in wedlock cursed, A parricide, incestuously, triply cursed! recognition
Exit
CHORUS
Strophe Races of mortal man
1 Whose life is but a span, I count you but the shadow of a shade! They sing of Oedipus’ tragedy, 1190 how swift his
For he who most does know
Of bliss, has but the show;
A moment, and the visions pale and fade.
Your fall, O Oedipus, your piteous fall
Warns me none born of women blest to call.

downfall was.

Antistrophe
1 For he of marksmen best,
O Zeus, outshot the rest,
And won the prize supreme of wealth and power.
By him the vulture maid
Was quelled, her witchery laid;
He rose our savior and the land's strong tower.
We hailed you king and from that day adored
Of mighty Thebes the universal lord.

Oedipus’ victory over the sphinx made him savior and king.

Strophe
2 O heavy hand of fate!
Who now more desolate,
Whose tale more sad than yours, whose lot more dire?
O Oedipus, heavily crowned head,
Your cradle was your marriage bed;
One chamber sufficed for son and sire.
How could the soil your father plowed so long
Endure in silence such a wrong?

1210

Antistrophe
2 All-seeing Time has caught
Guilt, and to justice brought
The son and sire commingled in one bed.
O child of Laius' ill-starred race
Would I had never beheld your face;
I raise for you a dirge as for the dead.
Yet, truth to say, through you I drew new breath,
And now through you I feel a second death.

They have lost their hero.

Enter SECOND MESSENGER.

SECOND MESSENGER
Most grave and reverend senators of Thebes,
What deeds you soon must hear, what sights behold
How will you mourn, if, true-born patriots,
Your reverence still the race of Labdacus!
Not Ister nor all Phasis' flood, I know,
Could wash away the blood-stains from this house,
The ills it shrouds or soon will bring to light,
Ills wrought of malice, not unwittingly.
The worst to bear are self-inflicted wounds.

1220

Ister, Phasis ≈ rivers (compare the handwashing in Macbeth)

CHORUS Grievous enough for all our tears and groans
Our past calamities; what can you add?

SECOND MESSENGER Our sovereign lady queen Jocasta is dead.

1230

CHORUS Alas, poor queen! how came she by her death?
SECOND MESSENGER

By her own hand. And all the horror of it,
Not having seen, yet cannot comprehend.
Nonetheless, as far as my poor memory serves,
I will relate the unhappy lady's woe.
When in her frenzy she had passed inside
The vestibule, she hurried straight into
The bridal-chamber, clutching at her hair
With both her hands, and, once within the room,
She shut the doors behind her with a crash.
"Laius," she cried, and called her husband dead
Long, long ago; her thought was of that child
By him begot, the son by whom the sire
Was murdered and the mother left to breed
With her own seed a monstrous progeny.

Then she bewailed the marriage bed whereon
Poor wretch, she had conceived a double brood,
Husband by husband, children by her child.
What happened after that I cannot tell,
Nor how the end befell, for with a shriek
Oedipus burst on us; all eyes were fixed
On him, as up and down he strode,
Nor could we mark her agony to the end.
For stalking to and fro "A sword!" he cried,
"Where is the wife, no wife, the teeming womb
That bore a double harvest, me and mine?"
And in his frenzy some supernal power
(No mortal, surely, none of us who were watching)
Guided his footsteps; with a terrible shriek,
As though one beckoned him, he crashed against
The folding doors, and from their hinges forced
The wrenched bolts and hurled himself within.
Then we beheld the woman hanging there,
Swinging by a noose entwined about her neck.
But when he saw her, with a maddened roar
He loosened the cord; and when her wretched corpse
Lay stretched on earth, what followed – O it was dreadful!
He tore the golden brooches that held
Her queenly robes, raised them high and plunged them
Fully into his eyeballs, uttering words like these:
"No more shall I behold such sights of woe,
Deeds I have suffered and myself have wrought;
Henceforward quenched in darkness shall I see
Those I should never have seen; now blind to those
Whom, when I saw, I vainly yearned to know."
Such was the burden of his moaning, all the while,
Not once but often, he struck with his hand uplifted
His eyes, and at each stroke the bloody orbs
Fell on his beard, not oozing drop by drop,
But one dark gory downpour, thick as hail.

Violence occurs
offstage and is
described, not
shown.
Compared to
modern drama,
"special effects"
were lacking; also
there was more
sense of
decorum.
Such evils, issuing jointly from these two,
Have overwhelmed them both, confounding man and wife.
Till now the storied fortune of this house
Was favorable indeed; but from this day
Woe, lamentation, ruin, death, disgrace,
All ills that can be named, all, all are theirs.

CHORUS  But has he still no respite from his pain?

SECOND MESSENGER  He cries, "Unbar the doors and let all Thebes
Behold the slayer of his sire, his mother's. . .."
That shameful word my lips may not repeat.
He vows to flee self-banished from the land,
Nor stay to bring upon his house the curse
Himself had uttered; but he has no strength
Nor one to guide him, and his torture's more
Than man can suffer, as yourselves will see.
For look, the palace doors are opening,
And soon you shall behold a sight so sad
That even the spiteful would pity it.

Enter OEDIPUS blinded, wearing a gory mask with the eyes dripping blood and guts. very dramatic

CHORUS  Woeful sight! more woeful none
These sad eyes have looked upon.
Where came this madness? None can tell
Who cast on you this spell,
Turning your life all around,
A demon leaping on you with a bound.
Doomed wretch! How can I stand
To look on your misery?
Though I am driven to gaze on you, with
Much to question, much to learn,
Horror-struck away I turn.

OEDIPUS  Ah me! Woe is me!
Where am I being taken?
How like a ghost forlorn
My voice flies away on the air!
On, on the demon goads me.
To the end, but where?

CHORUS  An end too dread to tell, too dark to see.

OEDIPUS  Dark, dark! The horror of darkness, like a shroud,
Wraps me and bears me on through mist and cloud.
Ah me, ah me! What spasms shoot through me,
What pangs of agonizing memory?

CHORUS  It's no wonder if in such a plight you feel
The double weight of past and present woes.

OEDIPUS  Ah friend, still loyal, constant still and kind,
You care for the blind.
I know you’re near, and though bereft of eyes,
Your voice still I recognize.

CHORUS  O doer of dread deeds, how could you mar
Your vision thus? What demon goaded you?

OEDIPUS  Apollo, friend, Apollo, it was he
Who brought these ills to pass;
But the hand that dealt the blow
Was mine, none other. How,
How, could I see any longer when sight
Brought no delight?

CHORUS  Alas! It is as you say.

OEDIPUS  Say, friends, can any look or voice
Or touch of love ever make my heart rejoice?
Haste, friends, no fond delay,
Take this double-cursed man away
Far from all others’ concern,
The man abhorred of gods, accursed of men.

CHORUS  O your despair well suits your pathetic case.
Would I had never looked upon your face!

OEDIPUS  My curse on whoever loosened
The babe’s cruel fetters and saved my life!
He meant me well, yet had he left me there,
He had saved my friends and me a world of care.

CHORUS  I too had wished it so.

OEDIPUS  Then had I never come to shed
My father's blood nor climbed into my mother's bed;
The monstrous offspring of a womb defiled,
Co-mate of him who fathered me, and his child.
Was ever man before afflicted thus,
Like Oedipus?

CHORUS  I cannot say that you have considered well
For you would be better dead than living blind.

OEDIPUS  What's done was well done. You can never shake
My firm belief – a truce to argument.
For, had I sight, I know not with what eyes
I could have met my father in the shades,
Or my poor mother, since against them both
I sinned, a sin no gallows could atone.
Yes but, you say, the sight of children cheers
A parent’s eyes. What, born as mine were born?
No, such a sight could never bring me joy;
Nor this fair city with its battlements,
Its temples and the statues of its gods,
Sights from which I, now most wretched of all,
Once ranked the foremost in all Thebes,
By my own sentence am cut off, condemned
By my own proclamation against the wretch,
The miscreant by heaven declared
Unclean – and of the race of Laius.
Thus branded as a felon by myself,
How had I dared to look you in the face?
Nay, had I known a way to choke the source
Of hearing, I had never hesitated to make
A dungeon of this miserable frame,
Cut off from sight and hearing; for it's bliss
To bide in regions sorrow cannot reach.
Why did you harbor me, Cithaeron, why
Did you not take and slay me? Then I never
Had shown to men the secret of my birth.
O Polybus, O Corinth, O my home,
Home of my ancestors (as told to me!)
How fair a child then I seemed, how foul
The canker that lay festering in the bud!
Now is the blight revealed of root and fruit.
You three highways, and you hidden glen,
The pass where three ways meet,
You drank my blood, the life-blood these hands spilt,
My father's; do you call to mind perhaps
Those deeds of mine you witnessed and the work
I wrought thereafter when I came to Thebes?
O fatal wedlock, you gave me birth,
And, having borne me, sowed again my seed,
Mingling the blood of fathers, brothers, children,
Brides, wives and mothers, an incestuous brood,
All horrors that are wrought beneath the sun,
Horrors so foul to name them would be vulgar.
O, I implore you, hide me anywhere
Far from this land, or kill me now, and cast me
Down to the depths of ocean out of sight.
Come here, stoop to touch an abject wretch;
Draw near and fear not; I myself must bear
The load of guilt that no other can share.

Enter CREON.

CHORUS Look, here is Creon, the one man to grant
Your prayer by action or advice, for he
Has become the State's sole guardian.

OEDIPUS Ah me! what words to greet him can I find?
What cause has he to trust me? In the past
I have been his rancorous enemy.

CREON Not in derision, Oedipus, I come
Nor to upbraid you with your past misdeeds.
But shame upon you! If you feel no sense
Of human decencies, at least revere
The Sun whose light beholds and nurtures all.
Don’t leave him naked for all to gaze at,
A horror neither earth nor rain from heaven
Nor light will endure. Lead him straight within,
For it is seemly that a kinsman's woes
Be heard by kin and seen by kin alone.

OEDIPUS  O listen, since your presence comes to me
A shock of glad surprise – you are so noble,
And I am so vile – O grant me one small favor.
I ask it not on my behalf, but yours.

CREON  And what is the favor that you beg of me?

OEDIPUS  Thrust me forth from your borders with all speed;
Set me within some vast desert where
No mortal voice shall greet me any more.

CREON  This had I done already, but I find
It wise for me first to consult the god.

OEDIPUS  His will was set forth fully – to destroy
The parricide, the scoundrel; and I am he.

CREON  Yes, so he spoke, but in our present plight
It is better to consult the god anew.

OEDIPUS  Dare you inquire concerning such a wretch?

CREON  Yes, for now even you would trust his word.

OEDIPUS  Certainly, and on you in all humility
I lay this charge: let her who lies within
Receive such burial as you shall ordain;
Such rites are yours, as brother, to perform.
But for myself, O never let my Thebes,
The city of my fathers, be doomed to bear
The burden of my presence while I live.
No, let me be a dweller on the hills,
On yonder mount Cithaeron, famed as mine,
My tomb predestined for me by my sire
And mother, while they lived, that I may die
Slain as they sought to slay me, when alive.

This much I know full surely, neither disease
Shall end my days, nor any common chance;
For I had never been snatched from death, unless
I was predestined for some awful doom.
So be it. I reckon not how Fate deals with me
But my unhappy children – for my sons
Be not concerned, O Creon, they are men,
And can fend for themselves, wherever they are.
But for my two daughters, poor innocent maids,
Who ever sat beside me at the table
Sharing my food, drinking of my cup,
Take care of them, I pray you, and if you will,
Might I feel their touch and make my moan?
Hear me, O prince, my noble-hearted prince!
Could I but blindly touch them with my hands
I'd think they still were mine, as when I could see.
What is that now? Can it be my pretty ones
Whose sobs I hear? Has Creon pitied me
And sent me my two darlings? Can this be?

CREON
It’s true; I brought you this delight,
Knowing the joy they were to you of old.

OEDIPUS
God bless you! And as reward for bringing them
May Providence deal with you more kindly
Than it has dealt with me! O my children,
Where are you? Let me clasp you with these hands,
A brother's hands, a father's; hands that made
Dull sockets of these once bright eyes;
Hands of a man who blindly, recklessly,
Became your sire by her from whom he sprang.

Though I cannot behold you, I must weep
In thinking of the evil days to come,
The slights and wrongs that men will put upon you.
Wherever you go to feast or festival,
No merrymaking will it prove for you,
But often abashed in tears you will return.
And when you come to marriageable years,
Where are the bold suitors who will jeopardize
To take on themselves such disrepute
As to my children's children still must cling,
For what of infamy is not theirs?
"Their father slew his father, sowed the seed
Where he himself was conceived, and begat
These maidens at the source from which he sprang."
Such are the gibes that men will cast at you.
Who then will wed you? None, I know, but you
Must pine, poor maids, in single barrenness.

O Prince, Menoeceus' son, to you, I turn,
To be as a father to them, for we
Their natural parents, both of us, are lost.
O leave them not to wander poor, unwed,
Your kin, nor let them share my low estate.
O pity them so young, and but for you
All destitute. Put your hand upon them, Prince.
To you, my children I had much to say,
 Were you but ripe to hear. Let this suffice:
Pray you may find some home and live content,
And may your lot prove happier than your father's.

CREON You have had enough of weeping; go inside. 1510
OEDIPUS I must obey, though it grieves me.
CREON Weep not, everything must have its day.
OEDIPUS Well I go, but on conditions.
CREON What are your terms for going? Say.
OEDIPUS Send me from the land an exile.
CREON Ask this of the gods, not me.
OEDIPUS But I am the gods' abomination.
CREON Then they soon will grant your plea.
OEDIPUS Then lead me away, I am willing.
CREON Come, but let your children go. 1520
OEDIPUS Rob me not of these my children!
CREON Crave not mastery in all, for the mastery
That raised you was your curse and caused your fall.
CHORUS Look you, countrymen and Thebans, this is Oedipus the great,
He who solved the Sphinx's riddle and was mightiest in our state.
Who of all our townsmen gazed not on his fame with envious eyes?
Now, in what a sea of troubles sunk and overwhelmed he lies!
Therefore wait to see life's ending before you count one mortal blest;
Wait till free from pain and sorrow he has gained his final rest.

It is prideful to try to control all things.
They say no one's life can be called blessed until it is over.