Oedipus the King

SOPHOCLES

c. 497–406 BC

Oedipus the King

Οἰδίπους Τύραννος

Translated from the Greek with AI (Claude) and edited



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INTRODUCTION

Thebes is dying of a plague, and its king, Oedipus—the clever outsider who once saved the city by answering the riddle of the Sphinx—promises to find the cause. The oracle at Delphi says the plague will end only when the killer of the previous king, Laius, is found and driven out. Oedipus throws himself into the hunt.

What follows is the most famous detective story ever written, in which the investigator is also the culprit. Each witness—the blind prophet Teiresias, Oedipus' wife Jocasta, a messenger from Corinth, an old shepherd—brings him closer to a truth everyone in the audience already knew: that he has killed his father and married his mother.

First staged in Athens around 429 BC, the play was Aristotle's model of the perfect tragedy, and it has shaped ideas of fate, guilt and self-knowledge ever since, from Freud's "Oedipus complex" to the modern crime novel.

Oedipus the King

Before the royal palace at Thebes, during a plague.
Oedipus hunts for the killer of Laius and discovers who he is.

PROLOGUE

Thebes is dying of plague, and Creon brings Apollo's order to drive out the killer of Laius.

OEDIPUS 1 Children, newest brood of ancient Cadmus, why are you sitting here before me like this, wreathed with suppliants' branches? The whole city is full of incense, and full of hymns to the Healer and groans together. I didn't think it right, children, to hear about this from messengers, from other people, so I have come here myself: I, Oedipus, whose name everyone knows. Come, old man, tell me, since you're the one fit to speak for these people. What has brought you here? Fear, or something you long for? You can be sure I'd be willing to help in every way. I'd be a hard-hearted man if I felt no pity for a gathering like this.[1]

PRIEST 14 Oedipus, ruler of my land, you see how young and how old we are who sit at your altars. Some aren't yet strong enough to fly far, and some are heavy with age. We are priests, and I am the priest of Zeus, and these were chosen from the young men. The rest of the people sit wreathed in the marketplaces, at the twin temples of Pallas, and by the prophetic

1 Cadmus was the legendary founder of Thebes; its people are often called his descendants.

embers of Ismenus.[2] 22 For the city, as you can see for yourself, is already pitching too violently, and can no longer lift its head above the depths of the bloody swell. It is wasting away in the fruit-bearing buds of the earth, wasting away in its grazing herds, and in its women's labors that bring no birth. And the fire-bearing god, most hateful plague, has swooped down and is driving through the city. He is emptying the house of Cadmus, while black Hades grows rich on groans and wailing. It isn't because we count you equal to the gods that I and these children sit here at your hearth. It's because we judge you the first of men, both in the chances of life and in dealings with the gods. 35 You were the one who came to the city of Cadmus and freed us from the tribute we were paying to the harsh singer. And you did it without learning anything more from us, without being taught. It was with a god's help, so people say and believe, that you set our lives upright. And now, Oedipus, mightiest in the eyes of all, all of us here turn to you as suppliants and beg you to find us some defense, whether you've heard a voice from one of the gods or know of help from some man. For I see that when men have experience, the outcomes of their counsels are the likeliest to live. Come, best of mortals, set the city upright again. Come, take care. For now this land calls you its savior for your zeal in the past.[3] 49 Let us never remember your reign as the time we were set upright and later fell. No, set this city upright on firm footing. With a bird of good omen you gave us good fortune then; be the same man now. If you're going to rule this land, as you do now, it's better to rule it with people in it than empty. A tower or a ship is nothing when it is empty, with no men living together inside.

OEDIPUS 58 My poor children, what you've come here longing for is known to me, not unknown. I know well that you are all sick. And sick as you are, there isn't one of you whose sickness is

2 Ismenus is a river of Thebes; at Apollo's temple beside it, prophecies were read from the ashes of burnt offerings.

3 The "harsh singer" is the Sphinx, a monster who killed every Theban who failed to answer her riddle, until Oedipus solved it.

equal to mine. Your pain comes to each of you alone, to himself and to no one else. But my soul grieves for the city, for myself, and for you, all at once. So you aren't waking me from sleep. Know that I have wept many tears, and traveled many roads in the wanderings of my thoughts. [68] The one remedy I could find after careful thought, I have put into action. I sent Creon, Menoeceus' son, my own brother-in-law, to Phoebus' Pythian house, to find out what I might do or say to save this city. And already, when I count the days, I'm troubled about how he's faring. He has been away longer than one would expect, past the proper time. But when he comes, I'd be a bad man if I didn't do everything the god reveals.[4]

PRIEST [78] You speak just in time: these men have just signaled to me that Creon is approaching.

OEDIPUS [80] Lord Apollo, if only he comes with some saving fortune, bright as his face is bright!

PRIEST [82] As far as one can guess, his news is welcome. Otherwise he wouldn't be coming with his head crowned so thickly with berry-laden laurel.

OEDIPUS [84] We'll know soon. He's close enough to hear. My lord, my kinsman, son of Menoeceus, what word from the god have you brought us?

CREON [87] Good news. I say that even what is hard to bear, if it happens to turn out right, will end well.

OEDIPUS [89] But what is the word? What you've said so far makes me neither bold nor afraid.

CREON [91] If you want to hear it with these people close by, I'm ready to speak, or else to go inside.

OEDIPUS [93] Speak out to everyone. The grief I carry is more for them than for my own life.

CREON [95] Then I'll tell you what I heard from the god. Lord Phoebus plainly commands us to drive out a pollution from the

4 Phoebus is Apollo, whose oracle was at Pytho (Delphi); "Pythian" refers to it.

land, one that has been nurtured in this soil, and not to nurture it until it can't be cured.

OEDIPUS [99] With what purification? What is the nature of the trouble?

CREON [100] By banishing a man, or by paying for blood with blood again, since it's this blood that brings the storm upon the city.

OEDIPUS [102] And whose fate is it that he reveals?

CREON [103] Once, before you came to steer this city, we had a leader of this land, Laius.

OEDIPUS [105] I know that from hearing of him. I never set eyes on him.

CREON [106] He was killed, and now the god plainly commands us to punish the men who killed him with their own hands, whoever they are.

OEDIPUS [108] And where on earth are they? Where will this faint track of an old crime be found?

CREON [110] In this land, he said. What is sought can be caught; what is neglected escapes.

OEDIPUS [112] Was it at home, or in the country, or in some other land that Laius met this death?

CREON [114] He had gone abroad, so he said, to consult the oracle, and once he'd set out, he never came home again.

OEDIPUS [116] And no messenger, no fellow traveler saw it, someone whose story could have been put to use?

CREON [118] No, they were killed, all but one. He fled in fear, and of what he saw he could say only one thing for certain.

OEDIPUS [120] What was that? One thing could lead us to learn many, if we could get a small beginning for hope.

CREON [122] He said robbers met them and killed him, not with the strength of one man, but with many hands.

OEDIPUS [124] Then how could the robber have dared go so far, unless something was being paid for with silver from here?

CREON [126] That was suspected. But with Laius dead, no one rose to help us in our troubles.

OEDIPUS [128] And what trouble stood in your way, when royal power had fallen like that, to stop you from finding this out?

CREON [130] The Sphinx with her intricate songs made us let go of what was hidden and look at what lay at our feet.

OEDIPUS [132] Then I'll start again from the beginning and bring it to light. Phoebus has rightly, and you have rightly, turned this attention to the dead man. So you will see me too as an ally, as is just, avenging this land and the god as well. Not on behalf of some distant loved one, but for my own sake I will drive away this defilement myself. [139] For whoever it was that killed him might soon want to lay that same hand on me too, as I seek vengeance. So in helping him I'm helping myself. Now, children, quickly: rise from the steps and take up these suppliant branches. Let someone else gather the people of Cadmus here, for I will leave nothing undone. With the god's help we will be shown to be fortunate, or fallen.

PRIEST [147] Children, let us rise. What he has just announced is what we came here for. And may Phoebus, who sent these oracles, come as our savior too, and put an end to the sickness.

PARODOS

The elders of Thebes pray to Athena, Artemis, Apollo and Dionysus to end the plague.

CHORUS

Sweet-spoken word of Zeus, what are you,
that have come from Pytho rich in gold
to shining Thebes?
I am stretched on the rack, my fearful heart shaking with dread,
Healer of Delos, to whom we cry,
in awe of you: what will you bring to pass for me,
something new,
or something that comes again with the circling seasons?
Tell me, child of golden Hope,
immortal Voice.[5]

First I call on you, daughter of Zeus, immortal Athena,
and on your sister who guards our land,
Artemis, who sits on her glorious throne in the circle of the marketplace,
and on Phoebus, who shoots from afar: oh,
you three who ward off death, appear to me!
If ever before, when ruin came rushing on the city,
you drove the flame of suffering out of our land,
come now too.

5 The Healer (Paean) is Apollo, who was born on the island of Delos.

Oh, oh, numberless are the sorrows I bear.
My whole people is sick,
and thought has no weapon
to ward it off.
The children of our famous earth do not grow,
and women do not rise from their crying labor
with children born.
One after another you can see them,
like birds on swift wings,
speeding faster than raging fire
to the shore of the western god.

In their numberless deaths the city perishes.
Its children lie unpitied on the ground,
spreading death, with no one to mourn them.
And wives, and gray-haired mothers with them,
at the altars' edge, from every side,
groan as suppliants for their bitter pains.
The healing hymn blazes out,
and with it the voice of lament.
For all this, golden daughter of Zeus,
send us help with a bright face.

190 And Ares the raging,
who now without bronze shields
burns me as he comes amid cries,
I pray he will turn his back and run from our homeland,
swept by a fair wind,
either to the great chamber of Amphitrite
or to the Thracian waves
where no harbor welcomes strangers.
For if night leaves anything undone,
day comes on to finish it.
Him, you who wield the power
of fire-bearing lightning,
Father Zeus, destroy him beneath your thunderbolt.[6]

203 Lycean lord, I would have your arrows,
unconquerable, from your gold-twisted bowstring,
scattered among us, set before us to help,
and the fire-bearing light of Artemis' torches,
with which she darts across the Lycian hills.
And I call on the god of the golden headband,
who shares his name with this land,
wine-flushed Bacchus, hailed with joyful cries,
companion of the Maenads,
to come near, blazing
with a bright ...
torch, against the god dishonored among the gods.[7]

FIRST EPISODE

Oedipus curses the unknown killer, and the prophet Teiresias names Oedipus himself.

OEDIPUS 216 You pray. And what you pray for, if you are willing to hear and accept my words and do what the sickness demands,

6 Ares, the god of war, here stands for the plague; Amphitrite is a sea goddess, and her "great chamber" is the open sea.
7 "Lycean" is a title of Apollo; Bacchus (Dionysus), son of the Theban princess Semele, was Thebes' own god.

you may receive: defense and relief from your troubles. I will speak as a stranger to this story, and a stranger to the deed. I couldn't track it far on my own without some clue. But as it is, since I became a citizen among citizens only later, I proclaim this to all of you, people of Cadmus: whoever among you knows by what man Laius, son of Labdacus, was killed, I command him to reveal everything to me. [227] And if he is afraid, let him remove the charge by speaking out against himself. He will suffer nothing else unpleasant; he will leave the land unharmed. Or if someone knows that the killer is another man, from another land, let him not keep silent. I will pay him the reward, and my gratitude will be his as well. But if you keep silent, and someone, fearing for a loved one or for himself, rejects my command, then you must hear from me what I will do. [236] As for this man, whoever he is, I forbid anyone in this land, where I hold power and the throne, to receive him or speak to him, or to make him a partner in prayers or sacrifices to the gods, or to share the holy water with him. All must drive him from their homes, since he is our pollution, as the god's Pythian oracle has just revealed to me. This, then, is the kind of ally I am to the god and to the dead man. [246] And I pray that the one who did it, whether he has escaped notice alone or with others, may wear out his wretched life wretchedly, with no share of good. And I pray that if he should become a sharer of my hearth, in my own house, with my knowledge, I may suffer what I have just called down on them. I charge you to carry all this out, for my sake, and the god's, and for this land, wasting away like this, fruitless and forsaken by the gods.

[255] Even if this matter weren't driven on by a god, it wasn't right for you to leave it unpurified like this, when a man so noble, your king, had died. You should have searched it out. But now, since I happen to hold the power he once held, and have his bed, and a wife we have both sown, and children of one mother would have bound us together, if his line had not met misfortune— [263] but as it is, fortune came leaping down on his head—for all these reasons I will fight for him as if he were my

own father. I will go to any length searching to seize the man who killed him with his own hand, for the son of Labdacus, son of Polydorus, son of Cadmus before him, and of Agenor of old. And for those who don't do this, I pray that the gods send them up no harvest from the earth, and no children from their wives, but that they perish by the fate we suffer now, or one still more hateful. [273] But to the rest of you, people of Cadmus, all who approve of this, may Justice our ally and all the gods be with you for good, forever.

CHORUS [276] Since you have bound me under your curse, my lord, I will speak in the same spirit. I didn't kill him, and I can't point out who did. It was for Phoebus, who sent us on this search, to tell us who has done it.

OEDIPUS [280] That's fair. But no man alive could force the gods to do what they don't want.

CHORUS [282] Then I'd tell you what seems to me the next best course.

OEDIPUS [283] And if there's a third, don't fail to tell me that too.

CHORUS [284] I know that the lord Teiresias sees most nearly what the lord Phoebus sees. Anyone looking into this could learn it from him most clearly.

OEDIPUS [287] I haven't left this undone either. On Creon's advice I sent two men to bring him. I've been wondering for some time why he isn't here.

CHORUS [290] And then there are the other rumors, faint and old.

OEDIPUS [291] What are they? I'm looking into every story.

CHORUS [292] It was said he was killed by some travelers.

OEDIPUS [293] I've heard that too. But no one sees the man who saw it.

CHORUS [294] Well, if he has any share of fear, he won't stay once he hears curses like yours.

OEDIPUS [296] A man who has no fear of the deed won't be frightened by a word.

CHORUS [297] But here is the one who will expose him. They are bringing the godlike prophet now, the only man in whom the truth is inborn.

OEDIPUS [300] Teiresias, you who grasp everything, what can be taught and what cannot be spoken, things of heaven and things that walk the earth: even though you cannot see, you still understand what sickness lives with our city. Against it, my lord, we find you alone as our protector and savior. For Phoebus, if you haven't heard it from the messengers, sent back an answer to us when we sent to him: the only release from this sickness would come if we found out for certain who killed Laius, and killed them or sent them out of the land as exiles. [310] So don't begrudge us any word from the birds, or any other path of prophecy you have. Save yourself and the city, save me, save us from all the pollution of the dead man. We are in your hands. For a man to help others with whatever he has and whatever he can is the finest of labors.

TEIRESIAS [316] Ah, ah, how terrible it is to be wise when wisdom brings no profit to the wise! I knew this well, and let it slip from my mind. Otherwise I would never have come here.

OEDIPUS [319] What is it? How downhearted you are, coming in!

TEIRESIAS [320] Let me go home. You will bear your lot most easily, and I mine, if you listen to me.

OEDIPUS [322] What you say isn't lawful, and it's no kindness to this city that raised you, if you hold back this word.

TEIRESIAS [324] Because I see that your own words aren't going where they should. So, so that I won't suffer the same—

OEDIPUS [326] For the gods' sake, if you know, don't turn away, when all of us here kneel to you as suppliants.

TEIRESIAS [328] Because none of you understands. I will never reveal my troubles, so as not to speak of yours.

OEDIPUS [330] What are you saying? You know, and you won't tell? You mean to betray us and destroy the city?

TEIRESIAS [332] I will not cause pain to myself or to you. Why do you question me in vain? You won't learn it from me.

OEDIPUS [334] You lowest of the low, you'd enrage a stone! Won't you ever speak out? Will you go on like this, unmoved, never coming to the point?

TEIRESIAS [337] You blame my temper, but you don't see the one that lives right there with you. Instead you find fault with me.

OEDIPUS [339] Who wouldn't be angry, hearing words like these, with which you now dishonor this city?

TEIRESIAS [341] It will come of itself, even if I shroud it in silence.

OEDIPUS [342] Then what is coming, you ought to tell me.

TEIRESIAS [343] I will say no more. So, if you like, rage away, with the wildest anger you have.

OEDIPUS [345] All right, then. I'm so angry I'll leave out nothing of what I understand. Know that I think you helped plan the deed, and did it too, short of killing with your own hands. And if you had your sight, I'd say the deed was yours alone.

TEIRESIAS [350] Really? I tell you to abide by the proclamation you made, and from this day on to speak neither to these people nor to me, since you are the unholy polluter of this land.

OEDIPUS [354] You dare start up a story like this, so shamelessly? And how do you think you'll get away with it?

TEIRESIAS [356] I have escaped. The truth I nurture is strong.

OEDIPUS [357] Who taught you that? It wasn't your craft, certainly.

TEIRESIAS [358] You did. You drove me to speak against my will.

OEDIPUS [359] Speak what? Say it again, so I can understand it better.

TEIRESIAS [360] Didn't you understand before? Or are you testing me, to make me talk?

OEDIPUS [361] Not so I could say I've grasped it. Tell me again.

TEIRESIAS [362] I say you are the killer of the man whose killer you are seeking.

OEDIPUS [363] You'll regret saying such vile things twice.

TEIRESIAS [364] Shall I tell you something more, then, to make you angrier still?

OEDIPUS [365] As much as you like. It will be said for nothing.

TEIRESIAS [366] I say that without knowing it you are living in the most shameful intimacy with those closest to you, and you can't see how deep in evil you are.

OEDIPUS [368] Do you really think you'll go on saying these things and enjoy it?

TEIRESIAS [369] Yes, if the truth has any strength.

OEDIPUS [370] It does, except for you. In you it has none, since you are blind in your ears, your mind, and your eyes.

TEIRESIAS [372] And you're a poor wretch, throwing these insults at me, which everyone here will soon be throwing at you.

OEDIPUS [374] You live in one unbroken night, so you could never harm me, or anyone else who sees the light.

TEIRESIAS [376] No, it isn't your fate to fall by my hand. Apollo is enough; it is his concern to bring this about.

OEDIPUS [378] Are these Creon's inventions, or yours?

TEIRESIAS [379] Creon is no harm to you. You are your own.

OEDIPUS [380] Wealth, and kingship, and skill that outstrips every other skill in a life that others envy, how much jealousy you store up against yourselves! This power was put into my hands by the city as a gift; I never asked for it. And if for its sake Creon, the trusted one, my friend from the first, longs to creep up on me in secret and throw me out, he has set this wizard on me, this weaver of schemes, a crafty beggar-priest who has eyes only for profit and was born blind in his own art. [390] Come on, tell me: where have you ever shown yourself a true seer? When the hound who chanted her riddles was here, why didn't you say something to set these citizens free? And the riddle wasn't for any passer-by to solve. It called for prophecy, and you were shown to have none, either from birds or from any god. But I

came along, Oedipus who knew nothing, and I stopped her. I hit on the answer by my own wits, not by learning it from birds. [399] And I'm the one you're trying to throw out, thinking you'll stand close beside Creon's throne. You'll be sorry, I think, you and the man who cooked this up, for trying to drive out the pollution. If you didn't look like an old man, you'd learn by suffering just what your thinking is worth.

CHORUS [404] As far as we can guess, both his words and yours, Oedipus, were spoken in anger. That isn't what we need. We need to look at how we can best fulfill the god's oracle.

TEIRESIAS [408] You may be king, but I have an equal right to answer you, word for word. In that, I too have power. I don't live as your slave but as Loxias', so I won't be enrolled with Creon as my patron. And since you've taunted me with being blind, I'll say this. You have your sight, and you don't see the evil you're in, or where you live, or whom you live with. Do you even know where you come from? Without knowing it, you're an enemy to your own, those below the earth and those above it. And the double-striking curse of your mother and your father will come on its terrible feet and drive you one day out of this land. Now you see straight; then you'll see darkness.[8] [420] What harbor won't ring with your cries? What part of Cithaeron won't soon be echoing them, when you understand that wedding song, the marriage you sailed into in this house, a harbor that was no harbor, after so fair a voyage? And there's a crowd of other evils you don't perceive, which will make you level with yourself and with your children. So go on, throw mud at Creon and at what comes out of my mouth. No man alive will ever be crushed more wretchedly than you.[9]

OEDIPUS [429] Am I really supposed to stand here and hear this from him? Curse you! Get out, quickly! Won't you turn around and get away from this house?

8 Loxias is a title of Apollo. In Athens a resident foreigner had to be registered under a citizen patron.
9 Cithaeron is the mountain range near Thebes.

TEIRESIAS [432] I would never have come at all if you hadn't called me.

OEDIPUS [433] I didn't know you'd talk such nonsense, or I'd have been in no hurry to fetch you to my house.

TEIRESIAS [435] That's what I am: a fool, as it seems to you, but sensible enough to the parents who gave you birth.

OEDIPUS [437] What parents? Wait! Who on earth is my father?

TEIRESIAS [438] This day will give you birth, and destroy you.

OEDIPUS [439] Everything you say is riddles and darkness.

TEIRESIAS [440] Well, aren't you the best man alive at solving riddles?

OEDIPUS [441] Go ahead, mock me for the very thing in which you'll find me great.

TEIRESIAS [442] And yet that very luck has been your ruin.

OEDIPUS [443] But if I saved this city, I don't care.

TEIRESIAS [444] Then I'll go. Boy, lead me away.

OEDIPUS [445] Yes, let him lead you. While you're here you're underfoot and a nuisance. Once you're gone, you won't trouble me anymore.

TEIRESIAS [447] I'll go once I've said what I came to say. I'm not afraid of your face; there's no way you can destroy me. And I tell you this. The man you've long been hunting with threats and proclamations about the murder of Laius is here. He's called a foreigner living among us, but he'll be revealed as a native-born Theban, and he won't be glad of the discovery. Blind instead of seeing, a beggar instead of rich, he will make his way to a foreign land, feeling the ground ahead of him with a staff. [457] He will be revealed as both brother and father to the children he lives with, as son and husband to the woman who bore him, and as the man who sowed where his father sowed, and killed him. Go inside and think it over. And if you find I've lied, then say I have no understanding of prophecy.

FIRST STASIMON

The chorus pictures the hunted killer but refuses to believe the charge against Oedipus.

CHORUS

463 Who is the man the prophesying rock of Delphi spoke of,
the man who did the most unspeakable of unspeakable
things
with blood-red hands?
Now is his hour to ply his feet in flight,
stronger than storm-swift horses.
For armed against him the son of Zeus leaps
with fire and lightning,
and close behind him follow
the dread death-spirits that never miss.

473 For just now the word has flashed
from snowy Parnassus:
everyone track down the hidden man!
He roams under the wild woods,
through caves and over rocks,
like a bull,
wretched, alone, on wretched feet,
trying to keep far from him the oracles
from the earth's central navel.
But they live forever,
and flutter round him.[10]

10 Parnassus is the mountain above Delphi, whose shrine was held to be the navel, the center, of the earth.

483 Terrible, terrible is the trouble
the wise reader of birds stirs in me.
I can't accept it, I can't deny it;
I don't know what to say.
I float on hopes,
seeing neither what is here nor what lies behind.
What quarrel lay between the Labdacids
and the son of Polybus
I have never learned,
not before, not now,
no proof to test it by,
that I should go against the fame
Oedipus has among the people,
as an ally to the Labdacids
for deaths no one has seen.[11]

496 Zeus and Apollo, yes, have understanding
and know the ways of mortals.
But that among men a seer counts for more than I do,
there's no true way to judge.
One man may outstrip another's wisdom with his own.
But never, until I see the word proved straight,
would I side with those who blame him.
For in plain sight the winged maiden
came against him once,
and he was seen to be wise;
he stood the test, the city's joy.
So in my mind
he will never be found guilty of evil.

11 The Labdacids are the royal house of Laius, son of Labdacus; Polybus is the king of Corinth, known as Oedipus' father.

SECOND EPISODE

Oedipus accuses Creon of treason, and Jocasta's story of the three roads makes him fear he killed Laius.

CREON 513 Fellow citizens, I've heard that King Oedipus is bringing terrible charges against me, and I'm here because I can't bear it. If he thinks that in our present troubles he has suffered anything from me, in word or in deed, that tends to do him harm, then I have no desire for a long life with this reputation hanging over me. The damage this charge does me is no simple matter. It's the greatest there is, if I'm to be called a traitor in the city, a traitor by you and by my friends.

CHORUS 523 Well, that insult may have come out forced by anger, rather than from considered judgment.

CREON 525 And did he openly say that the seer was won over by my advice to tell lies?

CHORUS 527 That was said. With what intention, I don't know.

CREON 528 And was this charge made against me with steady eyes and a steady mind?

CHORUS 530 I don't know. I don't see what those in power do. But here he is himself, coming out of the house.

OEDIPUS 532 You! How did you get here? Do you have such a brazen face that you've come to my house, when you're plainly the murderer of the man before you and clearly a thief of my throne? Come, tell me, by the gods: what cowardice or foolishness did you see in me, that you planned to do this? Did you think I wouldn't notice this plot of yours creeping up on me by stealth, or that I wouldn't defend myself once I found out? Isn't it foolish, this attempt of yours, to hunt for kingship without numbers and friends, when it's a prize that is caught with numbers and money?

CREON 543 Do you know what you should do? Hear an equal answer to what you've said, and then judge for yourself, once you know.

OEDIPUS [545] You're clever at talking, but I'm a bad learner, from you. I've found you hostile and dangerous to me.

CREON [547] On that very point, first hear me out.

OEDIPUS [548] On that very point, don't tell me you're not a traitor.

CREON [549] If you think stubbornness without sense is something worth having, you're not thinking straight.

OEDIPUS [551] If you think you can wrong a kinsman and not pay the penalty, you're not thinking right.

CREON [553] I agree that's justly said. But tell me what harm it is you say you've suffered.

OEDIPUS [555] Did you or didn't you persuade me that I ought to send someone for that revered prophet?

CREON [557] And I still hold the same view now.

OEDIPUS [558] How long is it now since Laius—

CREON [559] Did what? I don't follow.

OEDIPUS [560] —vanished from sight, struck down by a deadly hand?

CREON [561] You would count a long time back, years and years.

OEDIPUS [562] Was this seer practicing his art back then?

CREON [563] Just as wise as now, and just as respected.

OEDIPUS [564] Did he mention me at all at that time?

CREON [565] Not, at any rate, when I was standing anywhere near.

OEDIPUS [566] But didn't you hold an inquiry into the killer?

CREON [567] We did, of course we did, and heard nothing.

OEDIPUS [568] Then why didn't this wise man say all this back then?

CREON [569] I don't know. Where I have no understanding, I prefer to keep quiet.

OEDIPUS [570] This much you do know, and you'd say it if you had any sense.

CREON [571] What's that? If I know it, I won't deny it.

OEDIPUS [572] That if he hadn't put his head together with yours, he would never have called the killing of Laius mine.

CREON [574] Whether that's what he says, you know yourself. But I have the right to learn from you just as much as you've learned from me.

OEDIPUS [576] Ask away. I'll never be convicted as a murderer.

CREON [577] Well then. You're married to my sister?

OEDIPUS [578] There's no denying what you ask.

CREON [579] And you rule this land with her, giving her an equal share?

OEDIPUS [580] Whatever she wants, she gets from me.

CREON [581] And aren't I the third, equal to the two of you?

OEDIPUS [582] Yes, and that's exactly where you show yourself a false friend.

CREON [583] Not if you reasoned it through with yourself as I do. Consider this first: do you think anyone would choose to rule amid fears rather than sleep untroubled, if he were going to have the same power either way? I, for one, was not born longing to be king rather than to act like a king, and neither is anyone else who knows how to be sensible. As it is, I get everything from you without any fear. If I ruled myself, I'd be doing many things against my will. [592] How then could kingship be sweeter for me to have than painless rule and power? I'm not yet so deluded that I'd want anything but honors that bring profit with them. Now I'm welcome everywhere, now everyone greets me, now those who want something from you call me aside, since everything they hope for depends on that. How then could I let go of all this and grab at that? A mind that thinks well would never turn traitor. [601] No, I'm no lover of that idea, and I'd never stand for it if someone else acted on it. And as proof of this, first go to Pytho and ask whether I reported the oracle to you accurately. Next, if you catch me plotting anything with the reader of

portents, don't put me to death by a single vote but by a double one, mine and yours, once you've caught me. But don't accuse me on your own, on an unproven guess. [609] It isn't just to think bad men good at random, or good men bad. To throw away a good friend, I say, is like throwing away your own life, which you love more than anything. But in time you'll know this for certain, since time alone reveals a just man; a bad one you could recognize in a single day.

CHORUS [616] He has spoken well for anyone careful not to fall. Those who are quick to decide are not safe.

OEDIPUS [618] When the man plotting against me in secret moves quickly, I have to be quick with my own plans. If I wait and do nothing, his plans will be accomplished, and mine will have failed.

CREON [622] What do you want, then? To throw me out of the country?

OEDIPUS [623] Not at all. I want you dead, not exiled, so that you can show the world what envy comes to.

CREON [625] You talk like a man who won't give way or believe me.
[626] Because I can see you're not thinking straight.

OEDIPUS About my own interests, I am.

CREON [627] But you should be about mine as well.

OEDIPUS But you were born a traitor.

CREON [628] And what if you understand nothing?

OEDIPUS Even so, I must rule.

CREON [629] Not if you rule badly.

OEDIPUS City, my city!

CREON [630] I have a share in this city too, not just you.

CHORUS [631] Stop, both of you. I see Jocasta coming out of the house just in time, and with her help you should settle this quarrel that's broken out.

JOCASTA 634 You wretched men, why have you started this senseless war of words? Aren't you ashamed to be stirring up private quarrels while the land is so sick? You go inside, and you, Creon, go home, and don't blow up a grievance that's nothing into something huge.

CREON 639 Sister, your husband Oedipus thinks it right to do terrible things to me. He's chosen between two evils: to drive me out of my homeland, or to seize me and kill me.

OEDIPUS 642 I agree. Wife, I caught him plotting harm against my person with his wicked craft.

CREON 644 May I never prosper; may I die accursed, if I've done to you any of what you accuse me of doing.

JOCASTA 646 Please, by the gods, believe him, Oedipus! Above all out of respect for this oath he's sworn by the gods, and then for my sake, and for these men here with you.

CHORUS 649 Be persuaded, willingly, wisely, / my lord, I beg you.

OEDIPUS 650 What do you want me to give way on?

CHORUS 651 Respect the man who was no fool before, / and now is made great by his oath.

OEDIPUS 652 Do you know what you're asking?

CHORUS 653 I do.

OEDIPUS 654 Then tell me what you mean.

CHORUS

655 Never cast your friend,
who has sworn himself under a curse,
into disgrace
on an unproven charge.

OEDIPUS 657 Then know this well: when you ask for this, you're asking for my death, or my exile from this land.

CHORUS

No, by the foremost god of all the gods,
the Sun!
Godless, friendless,
may I die the worst death there is,
if that is my thought.
But the dying land
wears away my unhappy soul,
if to its old troubles
are joined new troubles from you two.

OEDIPUS Then let him go, even if it means I must die outright, or be thrust out of this land in disgrace by force. It's your words that move me to pity, they're so pitiful, not his. Wherever he is, he'll be hated.

CREON You're plainly sullen when you give way, and harsh when your anger goes too far. Natures like yours are, rightly, the hardest for themselves to bear.

OEDIPUS Won't you leave me alone and get out?

CREON I'm going. You never knew me, but in these men's eyes I'm the same as ever.

CHORUS Lady, why do you wait / to take him into the house?

JOCASTA When I've learned what has happened.

CHORUS A suspicion came from words no one could vouch for, / and even what is unjust can bite.

JOCASTA From both sides?

CHORUS Yes.

JOCASTA And what was said?

CHORUS

Enough, for me, enough,
with the land already in pain.
Let it stay where it stopped.

OEDIPUS [687] Do you see where you've ended up, for all your good judgment, letting my cause drop and blunting the edge of my heart?

CHORUS

[690] I've said it, and not just once:
know that I'd be shown out of my mind,
lost to all good sense,
if I turned away from you,
you who set my beloved land on a straight course
when it was wandering in its troubles.
Now, if you can,
be our good guide again.

JOCASTA [697] By the gods, tell me too: what is it that has stirred up such anger in you?

OEDIPUS [700] I'll tell you, wife, since I respect you more than these men. It's Creon, and the plots he's laid against me.

JOCASTA [702] Go on, if you can state the charge clearly and say what started the quarrel.

OEDIPUS [703] He says I'm the murderer of Laius.

JOCASTA [704] Does he claim to know it himself, or did he learn it from someone else?

OEDIPUS [705] No, he sent in a scoundrel of a seer, and that way he keeps his own mouth entirely clear.

JOCASTA [707] Then let yourself off all you're talking about and listen to me. Learn that no mortal has any share in the art of prophecy. I'll give you a brief proof of it. An oracle came to Laius once, I won't say from Phoebus himself, but from his servants, saying that it would be his fate to die at the hands of a son, who would be born to him and me. [715] And yet, as the story goes, foreign robbers killed him one day at a place where three roads meet. As for the child, not three days had passed after his birth when Laius pinned his ankles together and had him thrown, by other men's hands, onto a trackless mountain. So in this case

Apollo didn't make the boy his father's killer, or make Laius suffer the terrible thing he feared, death at his son's hands. [723] That's what prophetic voices laid down, and you shouldn't pay them any attention. Whatever the god sees a need to search out, he will easily bring to light himself.

OEDIPUS [726] Wife, since I heard you just now, what a wandering of my soul has seized me, what a churning of my mind!

JOCASTA [728] What worry has turned you round, to make you say this?

OEDIPUS [729] I thought I heard you say that Laius was cut down where three roads meet.

JOCASTA [731] That was what was said, and the story hasn't died away yet.

OEDIPUS [732] And where is this place where it happened?

JOCASTA [733] The country is called Phocis, and the road forks there: the ways from Delphi and from Daulia meet at the same spot.[12]

OEDIPUS [735] And how much time has passed since then?

JOCASTA [736] It was announced to the city just a little before you appeared and took power over this land.

OEDIPUS [738] Zeus, what have you planned to do with me?

JOCASTA [739] Oedipus, why does this weigh on your mind?

OEDIPUS [740] Don't ask me yet. Tell me about Laius: what did he look like, and how old was he?

JOCASTA [742] Tall, his hair just beginning to be flecked with white, and in build not so very different from you.

OEDIPUS [744] Oh, no, the misery! It seems I've just flung myself into terrible curses without knowing it.

JOCASTA [746] What do you mean? I tremble when I look at you.

12 Phocis is the region around Delphi; Daulia (Daulis) is a town in Phocis to the east of Delphi.

OEDIPUS [747] I'm terribly afraid the seer can see. But you'll make it clearer if you tell me one thing more.

JOCASTA [749] I'm afraid, I really am. But whatever you ask, if I know it, I'll tell you.

OEDIPUS [750] Was he traveling light, or with a large band of armed men, as a ruler would?

JOCASTA [752] There were five in all, and one of them was a herald. A single carriage carried Laius.

OEDIPUS [754] Oh, no! Now it's all too clear. Wife, who was it who told you all this?

JOCASTA [756] A household servant, the only one who got back alive.

OEDIPUS [757] Is he in the house now, by any chance?

JOCASTA [758] No. When he came back from there and saw you in power and Laius dead, he took my hand and begged me to send him to the fields and the sheep pastures, so that he'd be as far as possible out of sight of this town. And I sent him. For a slave, he deserved a greater favor even than that.

OEDIPUS [765] Could he be brought back to us quickly?

JOCASTA [766] He can be. But why do you want this?

OEDIPUS [767] I'm afraid for myself, wife. I'm afraid I've said far too much already, and that's why I want to see him.

JOCASTA [769] He'll come. But I think I too deserve to learn what weighs on you so heavily, my lord.

OEDIPUS [771] And you won't be denied it, now that my fears have gone so far. Who is there that matters more than you, for me to tell, as I go through a fortune like this? My father was Polybus of Corinth, my mother Merope, a Dorian. I was held the greatest man among the citizens there, until something happened to me. It was worth wondering at, but it wasn't worth all the heat I gave it. [779] At a banquet a man who'd had far too much to drink called me, over the wine, a fake, not my father's real son. It weighed on me. For the rest of that day I barely held myself in, but the next

day I went to my mother and father and questioned them. They took the insult hard and were angry with the man who'd let the word slip. What they said pleased me, but still the thing kept gnawing at me, because the story kept creeping around. [787] Without telling my mother and father, I set off for Pytho. And Phoebus sent me away without the answer I had come for. Instead he foretold other things, wretched and terrible and grim: that I was fated to lie with my mother, to show the world a brood that people could not bear to look on, and to be the murderer of the father who begot me. When I heard this, I fled the land of Corinth, measuring my way by the stars from then on, to somewhere I would never see the shame of my evil oracles come true. [798] On my way I came to the very region where you say this king was killed.

[800] And I'll tell you the truth, wife. When I was walking near this place where three roads meet, there I met a herald, and a man riding in a carriage drawn by colts, just as you describe. The man in front and the old man himself tried to force me off the road. The one who was shoving me aside, the driver, I struck in my anger. And the old man, when he saw it, waited until I was passing the carriage and brought his double goad down on the middle of my head. [810] He paid for it, though, and not in equal measure. In an instant, struck by the staff in this hand, he rolled right out of the carriage onto his back. And I killed them all. Now if this stranger had any tie of blood with Laius, who could be more wretched than the man you see here? What man could be more hated by the gods? No stranger and no citizen may take him into their home or speak a word to him; they must drive him from their doors. And it was no one else but I who laid these curses on myself. [821] And I defile the dead man's bed with these hands, the very hands he died by. Was I born evil? Am I not wholly unclean? I must go into exile, and in exile I may not see my own people or set foot in my homeland—or else I must be yoked in marriage to my mother and kill my father, Polybus, who begot me and raised me. Wouldn't anyone who judged that all this came on me from some cruel power be right? [830] No, no,

holy majesty of the gods, never let me see that day! Let me vanish from among mortals before I see a stain like that of disaster come upon me.

CHORUS 834 This frightens us too, my lord. But until you've heard it from the man who was there, keep hoping.

OEDIPUS 836 Yes, this much hope I still have: to wait for the herdsman, and that alone.

JOCASTA 838 And when he comes, what is it you're so eager for?

OEDIPUS 839 I'll tell you. If he turns out to say the same as you, I'll have escaped disaster.

JOCASTA 841 What did you hear me say that matters so much?

OEDIPUS 842 You said he told of robbers killing him. Now if he still speaks of the same number, I didn't kill him: one man can't be the same as many. But if he names one man traveling alone, then clearly the deed now tips toward me.

JOCASTA 848 Well, be sure that this is how the story was told; he can't take it back now. The city heard it, not I alone. And even if he does veer a little from his earlier account, he'll never show that Laius' death at your hands squares with the prophecy. Loxias declared that Laius must die by my son. Yet that poor child never killed him; he died first himself. So as far as prophecy goes, from now on I wouldn't look this way or that.

OEDIPUS 859 You're right. All the same, send someone to fetch the laborer. Don't let this go.

JOCASTA 861 I'll send at once. But let's go inside. I wouldn't do anything that isn't your wish.

SECOND STASIMON

The chorus prays for reverence, condemns arrogance, and fears the oracles are being ignored.

CHORUS

May fate be with me as I keep
a reverent purity in all my words
and all my deeds, for which laws stand set before us,
laws that stride on high,
begotten in the heavenly air,
whose only father is Olympus;
no mortal nature of men
gave them birth,
nor shall forgetfulness ever lull them to sleep.
Great is the god in them, and he does not grow old.

Arrogance breeds the tyrant.
Arrogance, if it is glutted in vain
with much that is neither timely nor good for it,
climbs to the topmost height
and plunges down the sheer drop into doom,
where its foot is no use to it.
But the struggle that serves the city well
I pray the god may never end.
The god I will never cease to hold as my protector.

884 But if anyone goes his way in contempt, in deed or word,
with no fear of Justice, no reverence for the shrines of the
gods,
may an evil fate seize him
for his ill-starred luxury,
if he will not win his gains justly
and keep from impious things,
or lays hands in his folly on what must not be touched.
When things are so, what man will ever boast again
that he can ward off the gods' arrows from his soul?
For if deeds like these are honored,
why should I dance?

897 No longer will I go in reverence
to the untouchable navel of the earth,
nor to the temple at Abae, nor to Olympia,
unless these oracles and these events come together
so plainly that all mortals can point to them.
But you who hold power, if you are rightly called so,
Zeus, ruler of all, do not let this escape
you and your undying, everlasting rule.
For the old prophecies about Laius are fading;
already people are setting them aside,
and nowhere is Apollo shown honor.
Things divine are perishing.[13]

THIRD EPISODE

A Corinthian brings news of Polybus' death and reveals that Oedipus was a foundling; Jocasta rushes away.

JOCASTA 911 Lords of this land, the thought came to me to visit the temples of the gods, carrying in my hands these garlands and offerings of incense. For Oedipus is working his spirit up too high with all kinds of griefs. He doesn't judge the new by the old,

13 The navel of the earth is Delphi; Abae in Phocis had an oracle of Apollo, and Olympia an oracle of Zeus.

as a man of sense would; he is at the mercy of whoever is speaking, as long as the speaker speaks of terrors. So since my advice does no good, I've come to you, Lycean Apollo, for you are nearest, as a suppliant with these prayers, so that you may grant us some release that brings no defilement. Right now we are all afraid, seeing him shaken, as sailors are when they see the helmsman of their ship shaken.

MESSENGER 924 Strangers, could you tell me where the house of King Oedipus is? Better still, tell me where he is himself, if you know.

CHORUS 927 This is the house, stranger, and he himself is inside. And this lady is his wife and mother of his children.

MESSENGER 929 Then may she be happy always, and among the happy, since she is his wife in every sense.

JOCASTA 931 And the same to you, stranger; your kind words deserve it. But tell me what you've come for and what news you mean to give.

MESSENGER 934 Good news for the house and for your husband, my lady.

JOCASTA 935 What news is that? And who has sent you?

MESSENGER 936 I come from Corinth. The news I'm about to tell will please you—how could it not?—though perhaps it will grieve you too.

JOCASTA 938 What is it? How can it have this double power?

MESSENGER 939 The people of the Isthmus are going to make him their king. That's what they were saying there.

JOCASTA 941 What? Isn't old Polybus still in power?

MESSENGER 942 No, not anymore. Death has him in the tomb.

JOCASTA 943 What did you say? Polybus is dead, old man?

MESSENGER 944 If I'm not telling the truth, I deserve to die.

JOCASTA 945 You there, go to your master as fast as you can and tell him this! Oracles of the gods, where are you now? This is the

man Oedipus fled long ago, terrified that he would kill him, and now he has died by chance, not by his hand.

OEDIPUS 950 Jocasta, my dearest wife, why have you sent for me to come out of the house?

JOCASTA 952 Listen to this man, and as you listen, see what the god's solemn oracles have come to.

OEDIPUS 954 And who is he? What has he to tell me?

JOCASTA 955 He's from Corinth, here to report that your father Polybus is no more. He's dead.

OEDIPUS 957 What are you saying, stranger? Tell me yourself.

MESSENGER 958 If this is what I must report first and plainly, be sure of it: he is dead and gone.

OEDIPUS 960 By treachery, or did some sickness come upon him?

MESSENGER 961 A small tip of the scale puts old bodies to sleep.

OEDIPUS 962 So the poor man died of sickness, it seems.

MESSENGER 963 Yes, and of the long span of years that measured out his life.

OEDIPUS 964 Ah, ah! Why then, wife, should anyone look to the prophetic hearth at Pytho, or to the birds screaming overhead? By their guidance I was going to kill my father. But he is dead and lies hidden deep beneath the earth, and here I am, never having touched a weapon—unless he wasted away from missing me; in that sense he'd have died because of me. Anyway, Polybus has gathered up these oracles, just as they stand, and lies with them in Hades, worth nothing.

JOCASTA 973 Didn't I tell you this long ago?

OEDIPUS 974 You did. But fear led me astray.

JOCASTA 975 Then don't take any of it to heart anymore.

OEDIPUS 976 But how can I not dread my mother's bed?

JOCASTA 977 What should a human being fear, when chance rules everything and there's no clear foresight about anything? It's best to live at random, as well as one can. And don't you be

afraid of marrying your mother. Many men before now have slept with their mothers in dreams as well. But the one who counts these things as nothing bears his life most easily.

OEDIPUS 984 All this would have been well said, if my mother weren't still alive. But since she lives, I have every reason to shrink from it, however well you speak.

JOCASTA 987 And yet your father's grave is a great light.

OEDIPUS 988 Great, I understand. But I'm afraid of her, while she lives.

MESSENGER 989 And who is this woman you're so afraid of?

OEDIPUS 990 Merope, old man, who lived with Polybus.

MESSENGER 991 And what is there about her that frightens you?

OEDIPUS 992 A terrible oracle, sent by a god, stranger.

MESSENGER 993 Can it be told? Or is it not right for anyone else to know?

OEDIPUS 994 Of course it can. Loxias once said that I was fated to lie with my own mother and to shed my father's blood with my own hands. That's why I've lived far away from Corinth for a long time now. Happily, yes—but still, it's sweetest to look into your parents' eyes.

MESSENGER 1000 So that was the fear that made you an exile from there?

OEDIPUS 1001 That, and I didn't want to be my father's murderer, old man.

MESSENGER 1002 Then why don't I free you from this fear, my lord, since I came here meaning you well?

OEDIPUS 1004 You'd certainly get a fitting reward from me.

MESSENGER 1005 Well, that's the main reason I came: so that when you came home I'd do well out of it.

OEDIPUS 1007 But I'll never go where my parents are.

MESSENGER 1008 Son, it's quite clear you don't know what you're doing.

OEDIPUS [1009] How so, old man? For the gods' sake, tell me.

MESSENGER [1010] If that's why you're avoiding going home.

OEDIPUS [1011] Yes—I'm afraid Phoebus may turn out to be right about me.

MESSENGER [1012] Afraid you'd take on pollution through your parents?

OEDIPUS [1013] That's it, old man, that's exactly what has always frightened me.

MESSENGER [1014] Then don't you know you have no real reason to be afraid?

OEDIPUS [1015] How could I not, if I was born the son of these parents?

MESSENGER [1016] Because Polybus was no blood relation of yours.

OEDIPUS [1017] What are you saying? Wasn't Polybus my father?

MESSENGER [1018] No more than this man here. Exactly as much.

OEDIPUS [1019] How can my father be no more to me than a nobody?

MESSENGER [1020] Well, he didn't father you, and neither did I.

OEDIPUS [1021] Then why did he call me his son?

MESSENGER [1022] He received you once as a gift, I tell you, from my own hands.

OEDIPUS [1023] And he loved me so much, though I came from someone else's hands?

MESSENGER [1024] He had no children before that; that won him over.

OEDIPUS [1025] And you—had you bought me, or found me, when you gave me to him?

MESSENGER [1026] I found you in the wooded glens of Cithaeron.

OEDIPUS [1027] And why were you traveling in those parts?

MESSENGER 1028 I was looking after flocks on the mountain there.

OEDIPUS 1029 So you were a shepherd, a wandering hired hand?

MESSENGER 1030 And your savior, my son, at that time.

OEDIPUS 1031 What pain was I in when you took me in your arms?

MESSENGER 1032 The joints of your feet could bear witness to that.

OEDIPUS 1033 Oh, no—why do you speak of that old trouble?

MESSENGER 1034 I untied you. Your ankles had been pierced right through.

OEDIPUS 1035 A dreadful shame I took with me from my swaddling clothes.

MESSENGER 1036 So that from this misfortune you were given the name you bear.[14]

OEDIPUS 1037 For the gods' sake—was that my mother's doing, or my father's? Tell me.

MESSENGER 1038 I don't know. The man who gave you to me knows more about that than I do.

OEDIPUS 1039 So you got me from someone else? You didn't find me yourself?

MESSENGER 1040 No. Another shepherd handed you over to me.

OEDIPUS 1041 Who was he? Do you know enough to tell me?

MESSENGER 1042 He was said to be one of Laius' people, I think.

OEDIPUS 1043 The man who was king of this land long ago?

MESSENGER 1044 That's the one. He was that man's herdsman.

OEDIPUS 1045 Is he still alive, so that I can see him?

MESSENGER 1046 You people from here would know that best.

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14 The name Oedipus was heard as "swollen foot" (from oidein, "to swell," and pous, "foot"); it also echoes oida, "I know."

OEDIPUS 1047 Is there anyone among you standing here who knows the herdsman he's talking about, from having seen him either out in the fields or here? Speak up. It's time these things were found out.

CHORUS 1051 I think it's none other than the man from the fields you were trying to see before. But Jocasta here could tell you that better than anyone.

OEDIPUS 1054 Wife, do you know the man we sent for just now? Is he the one this man means?

JOCASTA 1056 Why ask whom he meant? Pay no attention. Don't even try to remember what was said. It's pointless.

OEDIPUS 1058 It can't be that, with clues like these in my hands, I won't bring my birth to light.

JOCASTA 1060 For the gods' sake, if you care at all for your own life, don't search into this. My suffering is enough.

OEDIPUS 1062 Don't worry. Even if I turn out to be a slave three times over, born of three generations of slave mothers, you won't be shown to be low-born.

JOCASTA 1064 Even so, listen to me, I beg you. Don't do this.

OEDIPUS 1065 I won't be persuaded not to find out the truth of this.

JOCASTA 1066 But I mean you well. I'm telling you what's best for you.

OEDIPUS 1067 Well, that "best" has been tormenting me for a long time now.

JOCASTA 1068 Doomed man—may you never learn who you are!

OEDIPUS 1069 Someone go and bring that herdsman here to me. As for her, let her enjoy her wealthy family.

JOCASTA 1071 Oh, oh, you wretched man! That's the only name I have left to call you, and never anything else again.

CHORUS [1073] Why has your wife gone, Oedipus, rushing off in such wild grief? I'm afraid that out of this silence some disaster will break forth.

OEDIPUS [1076] Let it break out, whatever it will! As for me, however humble my origins, I will want to see them. She, perhaps—she has a woman's pride—is ashamed of my low birth. But I count myself the son of Chance, who gives good things, and I will not be dishonored. She is the mother I was born from, and the months, my kin, have marked me out small and great. Born of such a mother, I could never turn out to be someone else and leave my birth unknown.

THIRD STASIMON

The chorus happily guesses that Oedipus was born on Mount Cithaeron to some god.

CHORUS

[1086] If I am a prophet
and wise in judgment,
by Olympus, Cithaeron,
you will not fail to know,
at tomorrow's full moon,
that we exalt you
as Oedipus' countryman,
his nurse and his mother,
and honor you with our dances
for bringing favors to my kings.
Phoebus, to whom we cry,
may this be pleasing to you.

1098 Who bore you, child, which of the long-lived nymphs,
who lay with Pan, the father who roams the mountains?
Or was it some bride of Loxias?
For all the upland pastures are dear to him.
Or was it the lord of Cyllene,
or the Bacchic god who dwells on the mountain peaks
who took you as a lucky find
from one of the nymphs of Helicon,
the playmates he loves best?[15]

FOURTH EPISODE

Under threat, Laius' old shepherd admits the baby was Laius' son, and Oedipus understands.

OEDIPUS 1110 Elders, if I may make a guess too, though I've never had any dealings with the man, I think I see the herdsman we've been looking for all this while. His great age matches this man's here, and besides, I recognize the men bringing him as servants of my own. But you may know better than I do, since you've seen the herdsman before.

CHORUS 1117 Yes, I know him, be sure of that. He was Laius' man, as trustworthy a herdsman as any he had.

OEDIPUS 1119 You first, our stranger from Corinth: is this the man you mean?

MESSENGER 1120 That's him, the one you're looking at.

OEDIPUS 1121 You there, old man, look at me and answer whatever I ask. Did you once belong to Laius?

SHEPHERD 1123 I did. I was a slave, not bought, but raised in the house.

OEDIPUS 1124 What work did you do? How did you make your living?

SHEPHERD 1125 For most of my life I followed the flocks.

15 The lord of Cyllene, a mountain in Arcadia, is Hermes; the Bacchic god is Dionysus.

OEDIPUS 1126 And where did you mostly keep them?

SHEPHERD 1127 There was Cithaeron, and there was the country round about.

OEDIPUS 1128 Then do you know this man here? Did you come across him somewhere there?

SHEPHERD 1129 Doing what? What man do you mean?

OEDIPUS 1130 This one, here. Have you ever had any dealings with him?

SHEPHERD 1131 Not so I could say right off, from memory.

MESSENGER 1132 And no wonder, master. But I'll remind him clearly of what he's forgotten. I'm sure he remembers the time on Cithaeron, he with two flocks and I with one, when I was his neighbor for three whole seasons, six months each, from spring until Arcturus. Then, when winter came, I'd drive mine home to my folds and he'd drive his to Laius' steadings. Am I telling it as it happened, or not?[16]

SHEPHERD 1141 It's the truth, though it was long ago.

MESSENGER 1142 Well then, tell me now: do you remember giving me a baby back then, to raise as my own?

SHEPHERD 1144 What is this? Why are you asking me that?

MESSENGER 1145 This man here, my friend, is the one who was that baby.

SHEPHERD 1146 Curse you! Won't you hold your tongue?

OEDIPUS 1147 Ah, don't scold him, old man. It's your words that need scolding, more than his.

SHEPHERD 1149 But what am I doing wrong, best of masters?

OEDIPUS 1150 Not telling us about the child he's asking about.

SHEPHERD 1151 He's talking without knowing anything. He's wasting his breath.

16 Arcturus rises just before dawn in mid-September, marking the end of the summer grazing season.

OEDIPUS [1152] If you won't talk to oblige me, you'll talk in pain.

SHEPHERD [1153] No, for the gods' sake, don't hurt an old man!

OEDIPUS [1154] Someone twist his arms behind him, now!

SHEPHERD [1155] Oh, poor me, what for? What more do you want to know?

OEDIPUS [1156] Did you give him the child he's asking about?

SHEPHERD [1157] I did. I wish I had died that day.

OEDIPUS [1158] You'll come to that, if you don't tell the truth.

SHEPHERD [1159] And if I do tell it, I'm far more surely destroyed.

OEDIPUS [1160] This man, it seems, is playing for time.

SHEPHERD [1161] No, not me! I said a moment ago that I gave it.

OEDIPUS [1162] Where did you get it? Was it your own, or someone else's?

SHEPHERD [1163] Not mine, no. I got it from someone.

OEDIPUS [1164] From which of these citizens? From what house?

SHEPHERD [1165] No, for the gods' sake, master, no, don't ask anymore!

OEDIPUS [1166] You're a dead man if I have to ask you this again.

SHEPHERD [1167] Well, then: it was one of those born in the house of Laius.

OEDIPUS [1168] A slave? Or someone of his own blood?

SHEPHERD [1169] Oh, no. Here I am at the very edge of the horror, and I have to say it.

OEDIPUS [1170] And I have to hear it. But hear it I must.

SHEPHERD [1171] It was called his son, then. But the woman inside, your wife, could tell you best how things stand.

OEDIPUS [1173] She gave it to you?

SHEPHERD She did, my lord.

OEDIPUS [1174] For what purpose?

SHEPHERD For me to do away with it.

OEDIPUS [1175] Its own mother? The wretch!

SHEPHERD Yes, out of fear of evil prophecies.

OEDIPUS [1176] What prophecies?

SHEPHERD The word was that it would kill its parents.

OEDIPUS [1177] Then why did you let it go to this old man?

SHEPHERD [1178] Out of pity, master. I thought he'd take it away to another country, where he came from himself. But he saved it, for the greatest evils. Because if you are the man he says you are, know that you were born to misery.

OEDIPUS [1182] Oh, oh! It's all come out, all of it, clear. Light, let me look on you now for the last time: I who stand revealed as born from those I should not have been born from, living with those I should not have lived with, and killing those I should never have killed.

FOURTH STASIMON

The chorus mourns Oedipus' fall as proof that human happiness is nothing.

CHORUS

[1186] Ah, generations of men,
how I count your lives
as equal to nothing at all!
For who, what man
carries off more happiness
than just enough to seem happy,
and, having seemed, to sink away?
With yours as my example,
your fate, yours,
unhappy Oedipus,
I call no mortal blessed.

You, who shot your arrow
beyond all others
and won the prize of wealth and happiness complete—
Zeus!—you who destroyed
the maiden with the hooked talons,
singer of oracles,
and rose up for my land
as a tower against death.
Since then you have been called my king,
and honored above all,
ruling in great Thebes.

But now, whose story is more pitiful to hear?
Who lives with wilder ruin, with deeper pain,
his whole life overturned?
Ah, Oedipus, famous one,
for whom one great harbor
was enough
to receive both son and father as bridegroom!
How, how could the furrows your father sowed
bear you, poor man,
in silence for so long?

Time, which sees all things, has found you out against your will,
and passes judgment on the marriage that is no marriage,
where for so long begetter and begotten were one.
Ah, child of Laius,
I wish, I wish
I had never seen you.
I grieve like one
pouring a dirge from his lips.
But to tell the truth,
it was you who gave me breath again,
and you who laid my eyes to sleep.

EXODOS

Jocasta hangs herself; Oedipus blinds himself, says goodbye to his daughters, and is led inside.

SECOND MESSENGER 1223 You who are always held in highest honor in this land, what deeds you will hear of, what things you will see, how great a grief you will take up, if you still care, as true kinsmen should, for the house of Labdacus! I don't think the Danube or the Phasis could wash this house clean, so much does it hide; and soon it will bring evils to the light, evils willed, not unwilled. And of all sufferings, those hurt most that prove to be self-chosen.[17]

CHORUS 1232 What we knew already lacked nothing to make it grievous. What do you have to tell beyond that?

SECOND MESSENGER 1234 The quickest thing to say and to hear: our royal lady Jocasta is dead.

CHORUS 1236 Poor, unhappy woman! What was the cause?

SECOND MESSENGER 1237 She did it herself. The most painful part of what happened you were spared, since you weren't there to see it. Still, as far as my memory serves, you'll learn what that wretched woman suffered. When she came inside the doorway in her passion, she rushed straight to her bridal bed, tearing her hair with the fingers of both hands. Once in, she slammed the doors shut and called on Laius, long since dead, remembering the seed they had sown long ago, by which he himself would die and leave her, the mother, to bear ill-starred children to his own son. 1249 She wailed over the bed where, in her misery, she had borne a double brood: a husband by her husband, and children by her child. How she died after that I don't know. For Oedipus burst in, shouting, and because of him we couldn't watch her end; we were all looking at him as he ranged about. He went from one of us to another, demanding a sword, and asking

17 The Phasis, flowing from the Caucasus into the Black Sea, was, like the Danube, one of the great rivers at the edge of the Greek world.

where he could find his wife, no wife, but a mother's field that had borne twice, himself and his children. 1258 And as he raged, some power showed him the way, for it was none of us men standing close by. With a terrible cry, as if someone were leading him, he hurled himself at the double doors, bent the bolts back out of their sockets, and burst into the room. There we saw the woman hanging, caught in a twisted noose. When he saw her, the poor man gave a terrible bellow and loosened the hanging rope. And when the poor woman lay on the ground, what came next was terrible to see. 1268 He tore from her clothes the golden brooches she had dressed herself with, lifted them high, and struck the sockets of his own eyes, crying out words like these: that they would not see him, nor the evils he was suffering, nor the evils he was doing; that from now on they would see in darkness those they should never have seen, and fail to know those he longed to know. Chanting this again and again, not once only, he kept raising his eyelids and striking. And the bloody eyeballs wet his beard, not letting fall a few slow drops of gore: all at once a dark shower, a hail of blood, came pouring down. 1279 These evils have broken out from two, not from one alone; they are evils mingled for husband and wife together. The happiness they had of old was rightly called happiness, before. But now, on this one day, groaning, ruin, death, disgrace: of all the evils there are names for, not one is missing.

CHORUS 1285 And now, has the poor man any respite from his pain?

SECOND MESSENGER 1286 He's shouting for someone to open the bolts and show all the people of Cadmus the man who killed his father, the man whose mother—he's saying unholy things, things I can't repeat—and that he'll cast himself out of the land and not stay in the house under his own curse, the curse he laid. But he needs strength, and someone to guide him; his sickness is more than he can bear. He'll show you too. The bolts of the doors are opening. Soon you'll see a sight that even one who loathed him would pity.

CHORUS

What terrible suffering for men to see,
the most terrible of all
I have ever come upon!
What madness, poor man,
came over you? What power
leapt, with a leap beyond the longest,
upon your ill-fated life?
Ah, ah, unhappy man!
I cannot even look at you,
though I long
to ask so much, to learn so much,
to see so much:
such a shudder you send through me.

OEDIPUS

Ah, ah! Ah, ah! How wretched I am!
Where on earth am I carried, in my misery?
Where does my voice
go flying, borne away?
Oh, my fate, how far you have leapt!

CHORUS Into something terrible, not to be heard of, not to be looked on.

OEDIPUS

Ah, cloud of darkness,
mine, abhorrent,
sweeping over me, unspeakable,
unconquerable, driven by a wind I can't escape!
Oh, no,
oh, no, again! How they pierce me together,
the stab of these goads
and the memory of evil!

CHORUS And it's no wonder, amid so many sufferings, that you mourn twice over and bear evils twice over.

OEDIPUS

Ah, my friend,
you are still my steadfast attendant;
you still stay by me, caring for the blind man.
Ah, ah.
You can't hide from me: dark as I am,
I know your voice all the same, and clearly.

CHORUS You've done terrible things! How could you bring yourself to put out your eyes like this? What god drove you to it?

OEDIPUS

It was Apollo, my friends, Apollo,
who brought to pass these evils, these evils of mine,
these sufferings of mine.
But the hand that struck them was no one's but mine,
    wretch that I am.
Why should I see,
when there was nothing sweet for me to see?

CHORUS It was so, / just as you say.

OEDIPUS

What, then, is left for me to see,
or love, or speak to,
or hear with any pleasure, my friends?
Lead me away from this place as fast as you can,
lead me away, my friends, the utterly ruined,
the most accursed,
the mortal most hated by the gods.

CHORUS Poor man, as pitiful for knowing it as for what has befallen you, how I wish I had never even known you.

OEDIPUS

Death take whoever he was
who freed me from the cruel shackle on my feet,
left there alone, and snatched me from death and saved me
—
no kindness that he did me.
For if I had died then,
I would not be such grief to those I love, or to myself.

CHORUS I too / would have wished it so.

OEDIPUS

Then I would not have come to be my father's killer,
nor been called by mortals
the bridegroom of the one who bore me.
Now I am godforsaken, the son of unholy parents,
sharing a bed, wretch that I am, with the one I was born
from.
And if there is an evil greater still than evil,
that is the portion of Oedipus.

CHORUS I don't know how I can say you've chosen well. You would be better off dead than living blind.

OEDIPUS Don't tell me that what I've done was not done for the best, and don't give me anymore advice. I don't know with what eyes I could have looked at my father when I went down to Hades, or at my poor mother either—the two of them, against whom I've done things too great for hanging to pay for. Or was the sight of my children something I could long to look at, sprung as they were sprung? Never, not with these eyes of mine. Nor the city, nor its walls, nor the sacred images of the gods. I, the most wretched of men, who was raised in Thebes in finer state than any other man, robbed myself of them when I myself proclaimed that everyone should drive out the impious one, the one the gods have shown to be unclean, and of the line of Laius. Having exposed such a stain as mine, was I going to look these people straight in the eye? Hardly! No: if there were any way to

dam the spring of hearing in my ears, I would not have held back from shutting up my wretched body, so I'd be blind and hear nothing. It's sweet for the mind to live outside its sorrows. 1391 Ah, Cithaeron, why did you take me in? Why didn't you take me and kill me at once, so that I would never have shown mankind where I came from? Polybus, and Corinth, and the house I called my ancestral home, what a beauty you raised in me, festering underneath with evils! For now I am found to be evil, and born of evil. 1398 You three roads, you hidden glen, you thicket and narrow pass where three ways meet, you who drank my own blood, my father's, spilled by my hands: do you still remember me, the things I did in your sight, and then what I did again when I came here? Marriage, marriage, you gave me birth, and having planted me you raised up the same seed again, and brought to light fathers, brothers, sons, blood of one kin, brides, wives, and mothers, and all the most shameful acts there are among mankind. 1409 But since one shouldn't speak of what it's shameful even to do: quickly, for the gods' sake, hide me somewhere outside the land, or kill me, or throw me into the sea, where you'll never see me again. Come, bring yourselves to touch a wretched man. Do as I say, don't be afraid. My evils no mortal can carry but me.

CHORUS 1416 But here is Creon, just in time to do what you ask or to decide on it, since he alone is left to guard the land in your place.

OEDIPUS 1419 Oh, no. What can I say to him? What claim to his trust can I rightly show? In everything before, I've been found to have wronged him.

CREON 1422 I haven't come to mock you, Oedipus, or to reproach you for any of the wrongs of the past. But you there: if you no longer feel shame before the race of mortals, at least have reverence for the all-nourishing flame of our lord the Sun, and don't display so openly a pollution like this, which neither earth nor holy rain nor light will welcome. Take him into the house as

quickly as you can. It is most reverent for kin alone to see and hear the sufferings of kin.

OEDIPUS [1432] For the gods' sake, since you've overturned what I expected, coming as the best of men to me, the worst, do one thing for me. I'll ask it for your good, not mine.

CREON [1435] And what is it you beg so hard to get from me?

OEDIPUS [1436] Cast me out of this land as fast as you can, to some place where no mortal will speak to me.

CREON [1438] I would have done that, you can be sure, if I hadn't wanted first of all to find out from the god what must be done.

OEDIPUS [1440] But his word was made perfectly plain: destroy the father-killer, the impious one. Me.

CREON [1442] That is what was said. Still, with things where they stand now, it's better to find out what must be done.

OEDIPUS [1444] So you'll ask about a wretched man like me?

CREON [1445] Yes. Now even you would put your trust in the god.

OEDIPUS [1446] Then I lay this charge on you, and I'll beg it of you. For her who lies in the house, give her whatever burial you wish yourself; it's right for you to perform the rites for your own. But as for me, never let this city of my fathers be condemned to have me living in it. Let me live in the mountains, where my Cithaeron is, as they call it, the one my mother and father, while they lived, appointed as my proper grave, so that I may die by their will, since they tried to kill me. [1455] And yet I know this much: neither sickness nor anything else will destroy me. I would never have been saved when I was dying, unless it were for some terrible evil. But let my fate go wherever it's going. As for my children, Creon, don't trouble yourself about my sons. They are men; wherever they are, they'll never lack a living. [1462] But my two poor, pitiful girls, who never had a table set for their meals apart from me, but always shared everything I touched: take care of them for me. And above all, let me touch them with my hands and weep over our sorrows. Please, my lord, please, you who are noble born! If I could touch them with my hands,

I'd feel I had them, as I did when I could see. 1471 What's that? For the gods' sake, don't I hear my two dear ones crying? Has Creon taken pity on me and sent me my children, my dearest? Am I right?

CREON 1476 You are. I'm the one who arranged it. I knew the joy you'd take in them now, the joy you've felt so long.

OEDIPUS 1478 Then may you prosper, and for this journey may some power watch over you better than it did over me! Children, where are you? Come here, come to these hands of mine, your brother's hands, which have brought your father's once-bright eyes to see like this: your father, children, who, seeing nothing, knowing nothing, became your father in the field where he himself was sown. I weep for you both, since I can't look at you, 1487 when I think of the bitter life that's left for you, the life the world will force you to live. What gatherings of the citizens will you go to, what festivals, without coming home in tears instead of enjoying the spectacle? And when you reach the ripe age for marriage, who will he be, children, who will take the risk of accepting such reproaches, which will be a curse on my line and on you two alike? What evil is missing? Your father killed his father. He plowed the woman who bore him, where he himself was sown, and he got you from the same source from which he himself came. 1500 That's how you'll be taunted. And then who will marry you? There's no one, children. No, it's plain that you must wither away barren and unmarried. Son of Menoeceus, since you're the only father left to these two—for we who gave them life are both destroyed—don't stand by and watch them wander as beggars without husbands, your own kin, and don't bring them down to the level of my evils. Pity them, seeing them so young, stripped of everything except what you can be to them. 1510 Promise me, noble man, with the touch of your hand. And to you two, children, if you were old enough to understand, I'd give much advice. As it is, make this your prayer for me: that you may live wherever the moment allows, and find a better life than the father who gave you life.

CREON [1515] You've gone far enough with your weeping. Now go inside the house.

OEDIPUS [1516] I must obey, even if it's not sweet.

CREON Everything is good in its proper time.

OEDIPUS [1517] Do you know on what terms I'll go, then?

CREON You'll tell me, and then I'll know, once I've heard.

OEDIPUS [1518] That you'll send me away from this land to live in exile.

CREON You're asking me for what only the god can give.

OEDIPUS [1519] But I've come to be the man the gods hate most.

CREON Then you'll get your wish soon enough.

OEDIPUS [1520] You mean it, then?

CREON I don't like to say what I don't mean, just for the sake of it.

OEDIPUS [1521] Then lead me away from here, now.

CREON Come along, then, but let go of the children.

OEDIPUS [1522] No, don't take them from me!

CREON Don't try to be master in everything. Even the mastery you had did not stay with you through your life.

CHORUS [1524] People of Thebes, our native land, look: this is Oedipus, who knew the answer to the famous riddle and was the most powerful of men, whose fortunes every citizen looked on with envy. See into what a sea of terrible disaster he has come! So, being mortal, one should keep watch for that final day and call no one happy until he has crossed the boundary of life without suffering pain.