

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.

 Translation by F. Storr, BA

Formerly Scholar of Trinity College, Cambridge, England

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The text has been edited and revised, with notes by Ted Wadley.

 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.

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.

50

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).

60

The city has towers and
 ships.

pride

70

He has been worried and
 thinking what to do.

Menoceus ≈ *father of Jocasta
 and Creon*

80

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. 90
My royal cousin, Menoeceus' child,
What message have you brought us from the god?

Enter CREON

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 100
Is more for these my subjects than myself.

Oedipus does things openly.

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, 110
The sovereign of this land was King Laius.

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

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. 120

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, 130
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 140
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. 150
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.

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

Exeunt OEDIPUS and CREON

Exeunt ≈ they leave.

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.	160	<i>Strophe</i> ≈ direction of the chorus' dance back and forth as they sing. The translator uses rhyme to indicate song, but rhythm dominated the original. They call upon the gods to save them from suffering.
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!	170	<i>Artemis</i> ≈ goddess of the hunt and moon, sister of Apollo
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.	180	famine Pregnant women go into labor without giving birth, killing both mother and baby – an awful plague.
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!	190	So many people are dying, there are not enough living to bury them properly.
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,		<i>Ares</i> ≈ god of war, here identified with fire <i>Amphitrite</i> ≈ goddess of

	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!	200	the sea (wife of Poseidon) Zeus, king of the gods, wielded thunderbolts.
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.		Apollo (Lycia is a region near Greece.) 210 Bacchus, god of wine, was said to have been born in Thebes. <i>Maenads</i> ≈ women who worshipped Bacchus; <i>EUOI</i> ≈ sound of their cry (onomatopoeia)
	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.	220	Oedipus and the others believe that he was a foreigner who came to Thebes after Laius died. 230 240

	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.	250	irony
	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.	260	irony
		270	ancestors of Thebans
		280	
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.		The oracle would not answer questions directly.
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.	290	
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.	300
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.	<p><i>seer</i> ≈ one who sees</p> <p>310 Theme of ignorance and knowledge – it is ironic that Teiresias is physically blind but knows (“sees”) the past and the future.</p> <p>320</p>
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.	330 first warning to Oedipus not to go on

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! 340
Would you betray us and destroy your people?

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?	350
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.	Accusation – if Teiresias won't tell, he "must" be the murderer.
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.	360 Oedipus provokes Teirisiias into telling.
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.	370
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?	

- 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. 420
- 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 *Loxias ≈ Apollo*
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, *Compare Matthew 7:2-5, Luke 6:41-42.*
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 430
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 *Cithaeron ≈ mountains near Thebes*
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! 440
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.
- 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. 450
- 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. 460

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; 470
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. 480

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.

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, 540 irony – theme of
Or else too weak to stop it when I saw. ignorance and
You are foolish yourself seeking to possess knowledge
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. 550
- CREON If you count stubbornness a virtue ,
Untaught by reason, you are much in error.
- OEDIPUS If you think a kinsman may be wronged, irony
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. 560
- 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?

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. 610
 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.

ironic allusion to
 Oedipus' reversal of
 fate in one day

CHORUS To one who walks warily his words 620
 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. 630

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. He won't admit he
 might be wrong.

CREON Not if they rule badly.

OEDIPUS Oh city, my city!

CREON	Your city? Am not I a Theban too?		theme of government
CHORUS	Cease, princes; look who comes, and none too soon, Jocasta from the palace. Who else is fit As peacemaker to reconcile your feud?	640	Enter JOCASTA from the palace.
JOCASTA	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.		Jocasta is queenly, but also ironically sounds like a mother scolding children.
CREON	My royal sister, Oedipus, your husband, Wants me to choose (O dread alternative!) An outlaw's exile or a felon's death.	650	
OEDIPUS	Yes, lady; I have caught him practicing Against my royal person his vile arts.		
CREON	May I never prosper but die accursed, if I In any way am guilty of this charge.		
JOCASTA	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.		
CHORUS	Listen, King, reflect, we pray you, be not stubborn but relent.		
OEDIPUS	Say to what should I consent?	660	
CHORUS	Respect a man whose integrity and truth Are known to all and now confirmed by oath.		
OEDIPUS	Do you know what you're asking for?		
CHORUS	Yes, I know.		
OEDIPUS	Declare it then and make your meaning plain.		
CHORUS	Condemn not a friend whom babbling tongues assail; Let not suspicion against his oath prevail.		
OEDIPUS	Do you realize that in seeking this you are Really seeking my death or banishment?		
CHORUS	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	670	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, 680
Wherever he be, my heart shall still abhor.

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 ill to leave at rest. second warning to
let things be

OEDIPUS Strange counsel, friend! I know you mean me well,
And yet want to mitigate and blunt my zeal. Oedipus' is proud to
be zealous.

CHORUS King, I say it once again,
Foolish were I proved, insane,
If I lightly put away
You my country's prop and stay, 700
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	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		irony
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.	760	theme of ignorance /knowledge, blind- ness/sight
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?		A king usually had many servants.
JOCASTA	They were but five in all, and one of them A herald; Laius rode in a carriage.		A herald went first to clear the way.

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.	770	
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.	780	
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."	790	Oedipus tells his story. <i>Corinth</i> ≈ another city-state in Greece, the Dorians were one of the Greek peoples.
	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.	800	Another riddle is Oedipus' identity.
	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:		The oracle often refused to give straight answers.

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.

810 Oedipus tried to
 avoid the horrible
 fate.

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.

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

820

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

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.

830

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?

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

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!

840

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.

850

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. 860
- 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. 870
- 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 880
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. 890
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?

900

Defying the oracle,
however horrible,
was an act of pride.
Upper-class people,
especially rulers see
themselves as “above
the law,” even of
god.

Antistrophe
2

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.

910

They call on the gods
to reassert the
mythical order of
faith.

Enter JOCASTA.

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.

920

She is dressed for
religious service (in
contrast to her
sacrilege above).

930

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.	<i>Isthmian</i> ≈ 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.	950 Enter OEDIPUS.
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.	970	An emotional high point – Sophocles takes us up and down several times before the final downfall.
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.	980	Cynical again, she says people are subject to luck and might as well live for the present. Freud also thought “oedipal” desires were universal.
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.	990	
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.	1000	

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. 1010 as Teirisias said (334)
theme of ignorance/
knowledge

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? *sire* ≈ biological father

MESSENGER As much your sire as I am, and no more. 1020

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 was
adopted.

OEDIPUS A foundling or a purchased slave, this child?

MESSENGER I found you in Cithaeron's wooded glens.

	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.	1060	
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.		third warning
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.		Oedipus thinks he might have been born a servant.
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.	1070	
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.		Her king, hero is now pitiful.
Exit JOCASTA			<i>Exit</i> ≈ he or she leaves
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.	1080	Is his stubbornness, a form of pride, a strength as well as a weakness? Ironic – he will soon be cursing fortune.
CHORUS			
Strophe	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	1090	They sing about Oedipus' birth, wondering if it were

MESSENGER No wonder, master. But I will revive
 His blunted memories. Sure he can recall
 What time together both we drove our flocks, 1130
 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. *Arcturus ≈ star rising*
 Did these things happen as I say, or no? *in autumn*

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. 1140

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? 1150
 What more do you want to know?

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 1	Races of mortal man Whose life is but a span, I count you but the shadow of a shade!	1190	They sing of Oedipus' tragedy, 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.

1200 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?

1230

SECOND
 MESSENGER My tale is quickly told and quickly heard.
 Our sovereign lady queen Jocasta is dead.

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

<p>SECOND MESSENGER</p>	<p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>Violence occurs offstage and is described, not shown. Compared to modern drama, "special effects" were lacking; also there was more sense of decorum.</p> <p>1240</p> <p>1250</p> <p>1260</p> <p>1270</p> <p>1280</p> <p>The image is brought to our imaginations – quite strongly.</p>
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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.

He was king this
 morning – it all
 happened in one
 day.

CHORUS But has he still no respite from his pain?

SECOND He cries, "Unbar the doors and let all Thebes
 MESSENGER 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.

1290

1300

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.

The Greeks made
 good use of the
 effects they had
 (masks, singing).

1310

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?

1320

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?	1330	
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?		He blames fate and the gods, but also accepts his own responsibility.
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.	1340	
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.		Compare Job's curses (3:3, 7:6, etc.)
CHORUS	I too had wished it so.	1350	
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,	1360	<i>shades</i> ≈ afterlife

Sights from which I, now most wretched of all,
 Once ranked the foremost in all Thebes, 1370
 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, 1380
 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! 1390
 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 1400
 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.

He would have
 made himself
 deaf and
 completely
 isolated.

Polybus and
 Merope hadn't
 told him he was
 adopted.

He's become a
 scandal, a
 spectacle.

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. 1410

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. to Oedipus

	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.	1420	to the others
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.	1430	
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.	1440	
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,	1450	No more boasting against prophecy – Oedipus finally accepts his fate. Laius and Jocasta had ordered baby Oedipus left to die in the mountains.

And can fend for themselves, wherever they are .
 But for my two daughters, poor innocent maids,
 Who ever sat beside me at the table 1460
 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?

Oedipus'
 daughters,
 Antigone and
 Ismene, are led
 in.

1470

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, 1480
 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 1490
 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. 1500
 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,

