

Oedipus Rex

Sophocles

Three Theban Plays

Translated by Jamey Hecht

Wordsworth Classics

OEDIPUS THE TYRANT

The title of the play

Although Sophocles' play *Oedipus* is often called *Oedipus The King* or Latin *Oedipus Rex*, I chose *Oedipus the Tyrant* because that title better matches the sound of the traditional (though post-Sophoclean) Greek title *Oidipous Turannos*, and because I wanted to suggest the obstinacy and wilfulness Oedipus shows in his confrontations with Creon and Teiresias. Finally, part of what the Greek *turannos* denotes is the *irregularity* of the ruler's acquisition of power; that he comes to the throne either by force, or from a foreign country, or perhaps both. It seems to me that this word in Sophocles' title is bitterly ironic, because though Oedipus truly is the heir to the Theban throne, no one knew this when he became king – least of all himself. *Turannos* is not used of hereditary sovereignty acquired in the normal succession, the kind to which Oedipus was unwittingly entitled. To call him *turannos*, as Sophocles does in the course of the play, is to specify that he came to the Theban throne from *outside* Thebes (by answering the riddle of the Sphinx), and not by the hereditary succession which he nevertheless fulfilled.

Enter OEDIPUS, PRIEST and CHORUS

OEDIPUS

Children of ancient Cadmus, descended of him now,
Why do you come before me so, desperate in supplication
With wool and laurel garlands out of season?
The city teems with incense, and prayers,
And moaning. Nor do I hear these second hand,
From some messenger – I myself have come,
Children, to hear these things aright,
Whom all men call the famous Oedipus.
Therefore tell, O Elder, as befits your place,

On their behalf, what mood it is you stand in,
 Yearning, or afraid? — So eager am I
 All things to repair — for hard of heart
 I should be, if your kneeling did not move me.

PRIEST

Great Oedipus who make me strong,
 You see the diverse ages seated close
 Before your altars; these who yet lack
 The strength for far flight, and these
 Heavy with age. I am a priest of Zeus,
 And here are chosen boys yet unwedded —
 And another crowd with wreaths sits
 In the marketplace, before the two temples
 Of Pallas Athena, where Ismenus
 Plies his prophecies with ashes.
 For the city, as you yourself perceive,
 Already pitches and heaves its head from the depths,
 And cannot stop the murderous rocking.
 The land wanes, with fruit in calyx all unripe;
 The herds are barren, the women childless;
 And the fire-bearing God
 With hateful plague drives diving through the city
 By whom the house of Cadmus is made empty,
 While dark hell grows wealthy with groans and weeping.
 For these children and I sit at the hearth
 Judging you to be, not like the Gods, but
 First among men — in common affairs
 As in demonic ones: and it was you
 Who came to Cadmus' town and freed us
 From the bitter tribute the relentless Sphinx demanded.
 Alone you did it, and knew no more than we,
 Untutored, unprepared — and as is known and said
 You fixed it, and repaired our life.
 And now, Oedipus mightiest in all men's sight,
 We all beseech you in earnest, simple prayer:
 Find us some strength. Hearing the voice of some God,
 Or knowing from a man some source, speak,
 Since tested people give the best advice.
 Come, O noblest of mortals, and make the city straight.

10

20

30

40

Come, preserve your fame, for now this country
 Lauds its saviour for his former zeal.
 And may we never your great reign remember
 Standing straight and later falling down!
 But justify in steadfastness this city.
 For then in augured birds you brought good omens
 To us, and we are but the same nation now —
 So if you will rule this land, as rule you shall,
 Better reign over living men than empty ground,
 Without a ship, a house, a tower, but desolate
 And vain.

OEDIPUS

O piteous children, I know full well
 Your yearning: I know you suffer, being ill —
 And none among you therefore suffers so much
 As myself: for the pain of all comes into one,
 Alone, unto himself, and none beside.
 My soul groans for the city, and for myself,
 And for you, so that I rise sleepless —
 And be aware, I have wept much, and many
 A wandering road of thought have I gone down.
 So searching have I found but this recourse,
 And done it: I've sent Creon, Menoeceus' child,
 Into the Pythia, at Apollo's shrine
 That he might learn how, by action or command,
 I may save this city. And already, counting the days,
 I worry: what keeps him? For he is gone beyond
 The term of such a journey — but when he comes,
 I should be vile if I performed
 One jot less than what the God reveals.

PRIEST

But you've spoken with luck — those penitents
 Are waving to me now, that Creon approaches.

OEDIPUS

O Lord Apollo, may he come brilliant in fortune
 With a bright face to bring salvation.

PRIEST

To guess from here, it bodes well — his head
 Goes crowned with wreaths of berried laurel.

50

60

70

80

Enter CREON

OEDIPUS

We will soon know; the distance draws,
And we can hear him. O prince,
My cousin son of Menoeceus, carrying what word
Have you come from the God to speak to us?

CREON

Good word. And if our woes are straightly overborne,
They all will settle to the good.

OEDIPUS

But what was the oracle? What sort of words?
For what you've spoken gives me neither peace nor fear.

90

CREON

If you require that these should listen too,
I am ready to report it; or if you will, to speak inside.

OEDIPUS

Speak before everyone. For the misery I carry
Is for them, more than for my soul.

CREON

Then may I say the words I heard from the God.
Manifestly, the Lord Apollo rages at us
Over a pollution of the country, which we harbour
In this land. He rages, that we drive it out,
And no more nurture this abomination
Lest it grow incurable.

100

OEDIPUS

And what cleansing? What sort of pollution?

CREON

Banishment, or else new death requite old murder;
For this blood overcomes our city in thunder.

OEDIPUS

What kind of man does he denounce?

CREON

There was among us, great king, a certain Laius
Ruling before you came to steer the city straight.

OEDIPUS

I am told that. I never saw the man.

CREON

He died. And now the God demands, clearly,

The punishment by force of Laws' killers,
Whosoever they were.

110

OEDIPUS

But where in the earth are they? Where will the faded trace
Of this old guilt be found?

CREON

In this very land, according to the oracle –
And they can be found, it said,
Provided we take care lest they escape.

OEDIPUS

And Laius, is he murdered at home,
Or in a field, or in some other country?

CREON

He told us he was going to consult the oracle.
And being abroad, he was coming back home:
But he never arrived.

120

OEDIPUS

And no herald, no other pilgrim saw it,
Whose testimony one could use?

CREON

They all died – except for one, who fled in fear;
And he could only say one thing he saw for certain.

OEDIPUS

What sort of thing? For with one clue
We could discover many, and out of slow beginnings,
Take hope.

CREON

He said that thieves came on them, and killed the man
Not with one, but many men's hands together.

OEDIPUS

And how would any thief come into such courage,
Unless money was involved? A plot –

130

CREON

So it appeared. But Laius having perished,
The right man could not be found in the darkness that came on.

OEDIPUS

But what sort of darkness would prevent
A full inquiry in the murder of your very sovereign?

CREON

The riddles of the Sphinx compelled us, and her violence
Drove that other mystery from our attention.

OEDIPUS

But I will go back again, again show everything
From the beginning. Worthily has Lord Apollo,
And worthily have you, brought this case around 140
On the slaughtered man's behalf; so that with justice
Shall you see me allied, avenging God and Thebes together.
Not for some far-off friends, but for myself
Will I scatter this pollution from us. For whoever
Killed that king might soon attack ourself.
And so taking that king's cause, we help our own.
But rise, children of Cadmus, from these steps,
Praying with your wreaths of twisted wool and laurel,
And some attendant summon up the whole people,
Advised that I will try everything. 150
For we will be seen – or waxing with the God,
Or shining in our ruin.

PRIEST

Arise, my children, for this man has spoken out
The very grace for which we came here.
And may Saviour Apollo, sending this oracle,
Arrive and arrest our disease.

[*Exeunt Oedipus, Priest, Creon*]

First Choral Ode

CHORUS

O sovereign speech of Zeus,
How do you incline to Thebes from golden Pythia?⁴³
I am drawn upon the rack;
Fear and exhausting worry thrash my heart; 160
O Delian healer, called by our wild cries,
The sacred dread of You rises about me;
Either utterly anew, or else from long ago returning,
You compel old debts down the encircling years.
Speak to me, O voice immortal, child of golden Hope.
Daughter of Zeus, deathless Athena, first do I call upon you

And Your sister, protector of the land
Who sits enthroned within the marketplace's circle,
And Phoebus Apollo, who strikes from far away, oh
Shine on me Your threefold care to ward off death. 170
If ever before now ruin drove upon the city,
And You expelled the burning plague, come now!

Alas. Measureless sorrows I carry.
The whole people sickens,
And can find no sword of thought for its defence.
Earth bears no fruit; no birth relieves the women's keening
labour.⁴⁴

One after another may you see them gone, like birds,
Swifter than wild flames, into the western shore of the
Death-God;

Of whose unnumbered loss the city perishes,
And at her feet her wretched children unlamented lie, 180
Carriers of death. Upon the altar-steps,
Young wives and mothers gray
Bewail in prayer the grievous chore before them.
So sighing as one voice, their paean shines;
For whose sakes, O golden daughter of Zeus,
Send clear-eyed strength.

Grant that Ares the destroyer, who burns me now,
Attacking without shield amid the screaming crowd,
May turn His back and run His course, far from our country,
Into the vast Atlantic, or the harbourless Thracian waves. 190
Whatever Night spares, Day seizes to destroy.
O Zeus, Father, dealing fire and lightning,
With thunderbolts stop Him.

Bright Lord Apollo, I pray Your rigid arrows
Scattered from the twisted bowstring may defend us;
And the lights of Artemis, flashing through the Lycean hills;
I call upon the gold-belted God, that shares His

name with Thebes,
Bacchus dark with wine, companion of the Maenads
Among brilliant torches crying to Him 'euoi!'⁴⁵
Approach us as our ally, 200

Against the God unhonoured among Gods.

Enter OEDIPUS

OEDIPUS

You pray. And what you pray for – if you are willing to receive,
 And hearing my words to tend your illness,
 You might take courage and relief from sorrows.
 I will speak out about these things, foreign as I am
 To the story of it and to the deed itself,
 For I could not track it far alone
 Unless I held some clue; but as it is,
 Given that I was reckoned a Theban among Thebans
 Only after these things took place, 210
 I'll tell you all, Cadmus' children, these things:
 Whoever of you knows the man by whom
 Laius son of Labdacus was killed,
 I command him to relate it all to me;
 And if he fears for himself, let him remove
 The retribution lurking in his way,
 By himself, himself accusing.
 For nothing more unpleasant shall he suffer
 Than to leave the land, unharmed.
 Or if someone knows a foreigner with guilty hands, 220
 Let him not keep silent. For I will pay
 Reward, and my thanks shall he lay in store.
 But if you keep your silence, and fearing for some friend
 Put from you my word and my requiring,
 What I shall do then, you must hear from me now:
 I do forbid that man – whosoever he is,
 To be received by any person of this land,
 Of which I am the sovereign and enthroned king;
 To be spoken to with voice, pray in temples,
 Sacrifice in company with us, or pass 230
 The water-vessel at the rites.
 From every house I banish him, as he is our scourge;
 So has the Pythian seer of Apollo told us at the first.
 Therefore I am the ally of the God, and of the slain man too.
 I curse in prayer the one that did this,
 Whether he hides alone or with some several men,

To smother out unhallowed his evil life in wretchedness.

I do condemn myself – if ever in my house

I knowingly make him my guest –

To suffer all the sentence I have just decreed. 240

I charge you to fulfil these things,

For me and for the God, and for this land

Forsaken by the Gods and fruitless in destruction.

For even if the God did not thus drive the case upon us,

We should be base not to investigate

When such a man, high-born and a king,

Is murdered thus. And now I do confirm it,

Since I have and keep the rule he held before me;

I have his bed, I have the wife who shared his seed.

And common children would we have, if that man had

sired any – 250

If he weren't so unlucky getting heirs. But as it is,

Fate drove down into his power.

Therefore just as if he were my father

I shall fight for him, and through every trial

Searching shall I come, to take his killer down;

For Laius son of Labdacus, Polydorus' child,

And he the son of Cadmus, begotten by Agenor.

I pray that those who fail to do these things

Be ruined by the Gods – no harvest in the field,

No children from the women; but let them, 260

By their new condition, or a worse one yet,

Be thus destroyed. But you others of Cadmus,

Who see these things through, may justice fight for you

Always, and always the Gods be graciously with you.

CHORUS

As you have bound me to speak with this curse,

Lord, so shall I speak. For neither have I killed,

Nor can I show the killer. But as for whom we seek,

It was for sign-sending Apollo to declare

Whosoever it was that did the work.

OEDIPUS

Well said. But for a man to compel the Gods 270

When They're unwilling, is impossible.

CHORUS

I might say a second way, that appears to me beside these

OEDIPUS

Even if there is a third, speak it out unsparing.

CHORUS

I know the Lord Teiresias can see as the very God sees,
And asking of him, my lord, one might most clearly learn
these things.

OEDIPUS

Nor have I left that out of my concern,
For since Creon spoke, I've twice sent messengers to
bring him —

And I marvel that he is not here.

CHORUS

Yet . . . aside from him, there was an old and blunted rumour . . .

OEDIPUS

Of what kind? I must examine everything. 280

CHORUS

He was said to have been killed by travellers.

OEDIPUS

I heard that too, but no one has seen the witness.

CHORUS

No, but if he has his share in human fear
He will not slight such dread commands as yours.

OEDIPUS

But if he fears no action, he will not fear words.

CHORUS

Yet there is one who will convict him.
For these already lead the godlike seer
In whom alone the truth of mankind inward blooms.

Enter TEIRESIAS, led by a boy

OEDIPUS

O Teiresias who know all things,
Teachable and unspeakable, of heaven and of earth, 290
Though you cannot see, you yet know in your mind
In what disease the city stands. And you alone,
Great Lord, have we found to be our saviour
And defence against the plague. For Phoebus,

If you have not heard it from the messengers,
Sent back the man we sent, answering
That freedom from this plague would only come
If, finding out who Laius' killers were,
We killed them, or drove them from the country.
Therefore, do not withhold what augury you know 300
From birdsong, nor any other path of prophecy within your ken;
The city and myself take into your concern;
Deliver all from death's pollution. We are in your hands;
A man's most noble labour is to give his aid,
From all the powers he has.

TEIRESIAS

Damn . . . damn . . . how terrible it is to understand
Where understanding is useless.⁴⁶
I knew that well once, and I forgot it —
Or I would not have come here.

OEDIPUS

What is it? You've come so fainthearted — 310

TEIRESIAS

Let me go home. Most easily shall you bear
Your burden to the end, and I mine, if you consent.

OEDIPUS

You speak against all custom and all love for this your city,
Which turns toward you, while you hoard your wisdom.

TEIRESIAS

I see you speak at the wrong time;
And I will keep my silence,
Lest my suffering be like your own.

OEDIPUS

Do not refuse to speak if you have knowledge,
When, by the Gods, all we suppliants come beseeching you!

TEIRESIAS

All of you misunderstand. But let me never speak out 320
My miseries — lest I call them yours.

OEDIPUS

What are you saying? Though you know, you will not tell,
But think to betray us and destroy the city?

TEIRESIAS

I will not trouble you, nor myself.

What else will you accuse me of?
For you will not persuade me.

OEDIPUS

O you worst of evils, you would infuriate a stone!
Will you never speak out, but only stand, relentless?

TEIRESIAS

You deride my spirit; but you know not
What dwells inside your own. And you blame me.

OEDIPUS

And who would not be angry, hearing these words
By which even now you disregard the city?

TEIRESIAS

Even if I hide the words, the things will come.

OEDIPUS

If they must come, you must tell me of them.

TEIRESIAS

I cannot say more. Rage at it if you wish,
To the most savage fury of your heart.

OEDIPUS

My wrath is such that I will leave unsaid
Nothing of what I understand: therefore know,
It seems to me you conspired for this deed,
And so far performed it, all but killing with your hands.
If you could see, I should call the work yours alone.

TEIRESIAS

In truth? I tell you by that self command
You bid us all obey: from this moment
Never speak to these nor to myself:
For of this land thou art the wretched scourge.

OEDIPUS

So shamelessly you throw such talk at me?
Pray, how do you expect to escape?

TEIRESIAS

I am free, for the truth is my strength.

OEDIPUS

Where were you taught that? Not from your art.

TEIRESIAS

From you: for you made me speak, against my will.

OEDIPUS

What speech? Say it again, that I may learn it straight.

TEIRESIAS

You did not understand it then? Or are you baiting me to speak?

OEDIPUS

Not to retell what is known, but to say more –

TEIRESIAS

I say that you are the murderer, and the man whom ye seek.

OEDIPUS

But not unpunished shall you twice speak slander!

TEIRESIAS

Shall I unfold to you more yet,
That you may grow more angry?

OEDIPUS

So much as you can use –
Since you will speak in vain.

TEIRESIAS

It has eluded you, that with your dearest one
You are conjoined in the greatest shame
And do not see the evil of it.

OEDIPUS

You expect to blithely say such things forever?

TEIRESIAS

If there is some power in the truth.

OEDIPUS

But there is – though not for you: to you the truth is nothing,
Since you are blind, in your ears, in your mind, and in your eyes.

TEIRESIAS

Poor fool, to cast the very curses in my teeth
That soon every Theban soul will hurl at you.

OEDIPUS

Your life is one great night; and me,
And anyone who can see sunshine, you cannot harm.

TEIRESIAS

Your fate is not to fall at *my* hands –
Apollo is enough,⁴⁷ the vengeance of it all
Is His affair.

OEDIPUS

Is this Creon's invention, or your own?

TEIRESIAS

Creon is not your enemy, but you yourself.

OEDIPUS

O wealth, and power, and skill surpassing skill
 In ceaseless competition, how great the jealousy
 You summon in your train – if for this crown,
 The gift the city gave me all unasked-for,
 Placing it in trust within my hands – for this
 The faithful Creon, dear from the beginning,
 Should lust in undermining darkness to depose me
 In secret league with a conniving, magical fraud –
 A charlatan, whose eyes are keen to profit,
 Blind to prophecy. Or if not, come, explain
 Wherein you are this great divining genius.
 How is it, that when that murderous riddling dog was here,
 You said nothing that could liberate this town?
 That enigma was not for some bystander to resolve;
 No, a wizard was required. You were exposed
 As having nothing known from birds, or from the Gods;
 But when I came, the ignorant Oedipus, I stopped her:
 I hit the mark by my own mind,⁴⁸ not learning from birds.
 I whom indeed you struggle to unseat, expecting to attend
 Hard by Creon's throne. I think you and your accomplice
 Shall lament this scheme of driving out the scapegoat.
 I think if you were not so old,
 That you might learn from pain the final merit of your thoughts.

CHORUS

It seems to us his words were said in anger like your own,
 O Oedipus, a mood that cannot help;
 And that we may best unfold the portent of the God,
 Let us look to it.

TEIRESIAS

King that you are, each of us is free to speak in turn;
 That power, even I possess.
 For I do not live as your slave, but Apollo's.
 I need not Creon for my patron, but in mine own defence
 Declare, that you have reviled me, that I am blind.
 You are sighted, yet you do not see
 That you are wretched; nor where you dwell,

Nor with whom you live;
 Do you know from whom you come?
 Nor do you know that of your parents,
 Living and dead, you are the ruin.
 One day in lame but terrible speed
 The double whip of their compounded curse –
 Mother and father, shall drive you from this country:
 Now you see aright, but then . . . darkness.
 What safe haven will not know your cries,
 What reaches of the mainland shall be spared their speeding
 echo,

When at last you come to understand
 The wedding on which you embarked with such a fair wind,
 Though your home is no harbour.
 But a crowd of other griefs you cannot guess
 Will make you the peer of your own children;
 So drag the name of Creon, and my message, through the mud:
 For never mortal man shall be so wretchedly destroyed as thou.

OEDIPUS

Can it be borne, to hear these things from him?
 Go to ruin! Go, quickly! Get away from this house,
 And never come back.

TEIRESIAS

I would never have come, had you not called.

OEDIPUS

I did not know what nonsense you would say,
 Or I would not soon have called.

TEIRESIAS [*turning and walking off*]

That is what I am, as it seems to you –
 An idiot; but to those who made you, I am wise.

OEDIPUS

What sort of – wait! –
 Who among mortals made me?

TEIRESIAS

This very day will make and then dissolve you.

OEDIPUS

Everything you utter is so dark a riddle.

TEIRESIAS

But weren't you born the best at solving them?

OEDIPUS

Mock me for that wherein you'll find me great.

TEIRESIAS

Of course that very talent has destroyed you.

OEDIPUS

If I have rescued Thebes, that does not vex me.

TEIRESIAS

I am leaving now.

[to his boy:] And you, lead me, my child.

OEDIPUS

Yes, take him off; being where his presence grates,
Make haste, that he never rankle me again.

TEIRESIAS

I leave explaining why I came, not in fear
Of your face. For by no means could you kill me.
I say to you: this man, the one you searched for to arrest,
Proclaiming your manhunt for the slayer of Laius —
That man is here; a guest, a resident foreigner
By reputation, who soon shall be revealed
A true-born Theban, though he did not expect that happy hour.
For from his vision, blindness; and beyond his wealth
Homeless shall he trail his exile, feeling with a stick
His way along the foreign ground. He shall be shown,
That of those children of his house he is the brother
And the father, and of her who bore him,
He is the husband and the son;
And of his father both the rival and the murderer.
Go into these affairs, and reckon them:
If you find I am mistaken,
Say that I have no mind for prophecy.

[Exeunt Teiresias and Oedipus in different directions]

Second Choral Ode

CHORUS

Who is it whom the oracle accused
Of deeds unspeakable in bloody hands?
The hour is come for him to drive his steps
Faster than horses riding like a storm:
For the Son of Zeus

With armanent of fire and lightning
Leaps upon him;
And unfaltering
The dreadful Furies follow.

470

For the holy edict
Shines from Parnassus' slopes of snow,
And all things hunt the hidden man.
Bereaved, he ranges mad amid the wild caves,
And up the forest among stones
He wends his miserable footsteps
Like a bull,
Yearning to avoid
The prophecy that dogs him
From the centre of the world.
But his sentence is alive,
And it hovers on him, endless.

480

Withal how gravely hath the wise interpreter of birdsong
moved me;

Whose word I cannot doubt nor yet believe; so shall I say it:
I am at a loss.
I fly at hopes, but cannot see the future, nor today.
For what quarrel there was made
Between the house of Labdacus, and Polybus' son,
In the past or present, I do not know;
I know of no feud that might be used
As evidence to move against the mighty reputation of our king,
And so avenge the house of Labdacus for its mysterious fall.

490

Zeus and Apollo know the lives of mortals utterly;
But though a prophet may discern more than I myself,
Yet there is no certain reckoning of truth;
Even if some man's wisdom overtake another's.
But may I never, till I see the word is straight, agree
When blame is cast.
Everyone knows: the man was seen to be wise
When the winged, girl-faced lion came against him,
And he stood our city in good stead —
Therefore in my heart I cannot call him criminal.

500

*Enter CREON, having changed from his
travel-does into princely ones*

CREON

Gentlemen citizens, having heard by rumoured, dire speeches
That King Oedipus denounces me, I have come, impatient.
If he believes that in our present crisis
He has suffered from my bringing him to injury
By word or deed, then I have no desire for a long life
Under such a reputation. For in no single care
The damage of this charge has brought me pain,
But in the general scope, if I should soon be called
A villain in the city, and an enemy of you and of my kin.

CHORUS

But surely this reproach came rather in his haste,
Constrained by rage, than in the wisdom of his knowledge.

CREON

But was it really claimed, that by mine own advice
The prophet was convinced to make a false report?

CHORUS

The things were said, but in what earnest
I do not know.

CREON

Did he with straight eyes and sound heart
Impugn me with this accusation?

CHORUS

I know not. For the doings of the great I do not see –
But he himself emerges from his home.

Enter OEDIPUS from the palace

OEDIPUS

It is you – how can you be here?
Or have you such a brazen face,
To come beneath my roof when you are known
For my assassin, and the proven thief of all my throne?
Come, tell me by the Gods,
Was it stupidity or fear you thought you found in me,
That you would plan to do such things?
That I would fail to note your work of stealthy treason,
Or that learning of it I would let it lie?

Or is yours not a mindless undertaking,
To attempt the throne without a following,
No crowds, no noble friends – a thing
Requiring money and support for its achievement?

CREON

Will you mark me? Against what has been said
Hear me in turn, and then judge, having learned my mind.

OEDIPUS

You are too eloquent, and I learn badly from you.
For I find your will toward me is cruel and heavy.

CREON

Now for the first time hear from me this very matter,
As I shall explain it –

OEDIPUS

'This very matter' do not tell me, that you are not false.

CREON

If you believe that stubbornness without reflection
Is a virtue, you are thinking crookedly.

OEDIPUS

If you believe you can betray a kinsman
And not answer for it, you do not think straight.

CREON

I agree, that is quite justly said –
But what these sufferings are, that you are said
To suffer at my hands – that you must teach me.

OEDIPUS

Were you or were you not convinced
That I should send for that pompous sage?

CREON [*nodding 'yes'*]

And I am of the same mind even now.

OEDIPUS

How long is the time since Laius –

CREON

What has that to do with it? I don't have him in mind.

OEDIPUS

Since he disappeared, overborne by lethal force?

CREON

The long years of it reach far behind.

OEDIPUS

Therefore this prophet was at that time practising?

CREON

He was just as wise, and just as honoured.

OEDIPUS

Did he mention me at all at that time?

566

CREON

Not, at any rate, within my hearing.

OEDIPUS

But you were powerless to find the killer?

CREON

We made a search, but we heard nothing.

OEDIPUS

Then how is it this wizard did not tell
His version of it *then*?

CREON

I have no idea. And I keep silent where I'm ignorant.

OEDIPUS

If you're wise, you'll tell me what you know.

CREON

Concerning what? If I know anything, I'll not refuse.

OEDIPUS

Just this: that unless he had conspired with you,
He never would have spoken of *my* having murdered Laius.

570

CREON

If he said that, you must know about it. But I expect
To learn as much from you as you now learn from me.

OEDIPUS

Learn thoroughly; for I will not be taken for a murderer.

CREON

Well then – are you not married to my sister?

OEDIPUS

You ask about what no one would deny.

CREON

And you rule the land with her, in equal power?

OEDIPUS

Whatever she desires, I grant it to her.

CREON

And with you both I do enjoy a third share of power?

OEDIPUS

Yes, and given that, you seem the more spiteful as a traitor.

CREON

But I am none, if you will reason it as I do.
First examine this: would any man prefer
To rule in fear, rather than to sleep at night at ease
And have the selfsame power?

580

For my part I had rather exercise
The royal privilege, than be a king;
And so would anyone who reasons prudently.
For now I benefit in everything from you
Without a care; but if I were king myself
There would be much to do against my will.
How on earth could it be sweeter to be king
Than painlessly to share the rule, and 'prince' be called?

590

I am not so confused as to desire
Other honours than the useful, pleasant ones.
Now I delight in everyone and all men bid me welcome;
Now those who need you seek my intercession,
For on it, all the fortunes of their enterprise depend.
Why should I ever change my station for the crown?
No sound mind would ever turn to treason;

I have no love for such a policy,
Nor would I have the gall to take another's part who did.
And let this be the proof of it: go to Delphi,
Discover for yourself what the oracle has said,
And whether my report of it was right;
Then if you find me in collusion with our soothsayer
Kill me not by one vote, but join my own to yours;
Do not condemn me on such cloudy inference.

600

For it is not just, idly to suppose
That evil men are honest, and honest men evil.
For I think losing one good friend
Is like the banishing of very life from one's own breast.
But in time you shall know all my loyalty;
For time alone reveals the virtue of a man,
But his evil can be gathered in a single day.

610

CHORUS

He has spoken well, cautious lest he fall;

For they are not secure who speak with haste.

OEDIPUS

When the contriving, secret rebel moves upon me swiftly,
I must swiftly make my stratagems in turn.
But if I wait in silence till his purpose be performed,
Mine own will all miscarry.

CREON

What do you intend? To banish me from Thebes?

OEDIPUS

I had rather kill than liberate you,
That you may show, for all, the meaning of pretension.

CREON

So you will neither test me nor believe me, speaking thus?
[*Oedipus shakes his head, 'no'. His line in the text here is lost*]

CREON

I see you are not in your right mind.

OEDIPUS

Oh, but I am.

CREON

But I must be sane myself.

OEDIPUS

But you are wicked by nature.

CREON

So you will agree on nothing?

OEDIPUS

And I must govern all the same.

CREON

Not if you govern madly.

OEDIPUS

O city, city!

CREON

I too share the city; it is not yours alone.

CHORUS

Stop, Lords! I see that none too soon,
Jocasta comes to you out of the palace door
With whom you must put right your present quarrel.

Enter JOCASTA, crowned

620

630

JOCASTA

O sorry men, why have you tried each other with bickering?
Are you not ashamed, dragging out your private grievance
While the country languishes in sickness?
Won't you return home, and you, Creon, to your chambers,
And no more magnify a petty cause?

640

CREON

Sister, your husband Oedipus decides
Which of two terrible punishments to put me to:
To be exiled from my country, or be put to death.

OEDIPUS

I affirm it, O my wife, for I have found him
Practising with treacherous designs
His spite upon our royal person.

CREON

May I never thrive, but be damned, — may I die,
If I have done the least of what you charge me with.

JOCASTA

O Oedipus, believe him by the Gods;
First in piety before his sacred oath,
And then for my sake, and for these your subjects.

650

CHORUS

Consent, take heed, and be wise, I beg you my Lord.

OEDIPUS

What would you have me grant?

CHORUS [*indicating Creon*]

That he, who never trifled with you in the past,
Be held in your respect, by this, his late sworn testimony.

OEDIPUS

Do you understand for what you ask?

CHORUS

I understand.

OEDIPUS

Then tell me what you mean.

CHORUS

That never on uncertain grounds should you condemn
To guilt and shame a friend who swears so gravely.

660

OEDIPUS

But understand this now: in seeking this,

You seek my exile and my death.

CHORUS

Not by the foremost God of all the Gods,
Not by the sun: friendless and godless may I die,
In uttermost despair, if ever I have such thoughts.
But the wasting country withers up my soul,
The worse if you should join
The evils of your discord to our older sorrows.

OEDIPUS

Then let him go, and if need be, rather let me die
Than be shamed in lifelong exile from my homeland. 670
For your mouth moves me to pity, though his cannot.
But while he is here, he shall be hated.

CREON

I see you are as bitter now as you were heavy
When your anger drove your heart so far.
And it is just, that natures like your own
Are most difficult for their bearers to withstand.

OEDIPUS

Now get thee gone, away from me.

CREON

I am leaving, and though you will not know me,
[*indicating the Chorus*] To these I am the same man I ever was.⁴⁹
[*Exit Creon*]

CHORUS

Lady, why do you delay, to bring your man inside the house? 680

JOCASTA

To learn what argument this was.

CHORUS

Ignorant suspicions rose from gossip,
And the wrong of it is ravenous.

JOCASTA

Did it come from both of them?

CHORUS

Yes.

JOCASTA

And what was the story?

CHORUS

It seems enough, with the land already sore,

To let the quarrel rest where it was left.

OEDIPUS

I see that you have come, though I know you mean well,
To merely trying to appease my heart. 690

CHORUS

My sovereign lord, I have not said this only once:
May you know me for insane, and set my mind at naught,
If ever I have yet rejected you,
Who have borne my dear homeland swiftly forward
With your labours, and now shall lead it into safety.

JOCASTA

By the Gods tell me also, my good Lord,
For what event you have upraised in you
So great an anger?

OEDIPUS

I'll tell you; for I reverence you more, Lady,
Than those who know it now. 700
The cause is Creon, and his designs against me.

JOCASTA

Explain, and clearly tell me all the fight from the beginning.

OEDIPUS

He claimed that it was I who murdered Laius.

JOCASTA

He said that by himself, or learned it from another?

OEDIPUS

No, by sending in the prophet
He left his own mouth free of any slander.

JOCASTA

Now put by you all the cares you speak of,
And hear from me, and learn
How no one among mortals truly has the art of prophecy;
And let me briefly show you all the proof of it: 710
The answer of an oracle once came to Laius —
I will not say it was from Apollo Himself,
But from the ones through whom He speaks —
That to Laius the fate would come,
That he be killed by his own child,
Whoever should be born from me and that king.
But as the tale is told, the man was murdered

By some foreigners, robbers at the crossroads
 Where three trails come together.
 And when our child was barely three days old,
 Through the ankles of its feet he drove a little stake,
 And in the hands of other men he sent it to the wilderness.
 So here Apollo did not bear it out,
 That the child should become the killer of his father,
 Nor what so sorely frightened Laius,
 That he be slaughtered by his son.
 Thus did the prophecies scribble out their circles –
 So do not vex yourself with turning through them.
 For whatever needful thing the God seeks,
 He Himself will effortlessly show it.

720

OEDIPUS

How my soul wanders back, woman,
 And my spirit heaves, as I hear you speak.

JOCASTA

What sort of worry do you think on, saying that?

OEDIPUS

I thought I heard you say it, that Laius
 Was slaughtered where three roads meet.

JOCASTA

Yes, that was said, and they still say it now.

OEDIPUS

And where is the place where he suffered?

JOCASTA

The place is called Phocis, and the set of roads
 Goes out from Daulia and into Delphi itself.

OEDIPUS

And how much time has come and gone
 Since this thing happened?

740

JOCASTA

It was about the time when you appeared in Thebes
 And were proclaimed the ruler of the city.

OEDIPUS

O Zeus, what have You decided to do to me?

JOCASTA

But what is that to you, Oedipus, in your heart?

OEDIPUS

Do not ask me. But tell me.
 To what age of his life had Laius come?

JOCASTA

He was old, and the white had started growing in his hair.
 His face was not much different from your own.

OEDIPUS

Oh my soul – wretched. I think that just now
 I have thrown myself under a grievous curse
 And did not know what I was doing.

750

JOCASTA

What are you saying? My lord, I tremble looking on you.

OEDIPUS

My heart quails, that the seer may not have been so blind.
 But show me better, and explain one thing more.

JOCASTA

Though I shrink from it, when you tell me what it is
 I promise I will speak.

OEDIPUS

Whether he left with just a few,
 Or many royal escorts to accompany the man?

JOCASTA

In all they were but five, and among them
 Was a messenger. But Laius travelled in a single wagon.

760

OEDIPUS

Oh, already all of it is proved!
 Who was it, woman, who told you these things?

JOCASTA

A servant, the only survivor to return.

OEDIPUS

And is he still here in the house, now?

JOCASTA

Not at all. For when he came back from that place,
 And saw you reigning after Laius perished,
 He came and took me by the hands and begged me
 That I send him off into the fields, out to the sheepfold,
 So he could be as far as possible from sight of Thebes –
 And so I sent him. For I thought him such a worthy slave
 That he deserved at least that grace.

770

OEDIPUS

How can he be brought in haste back to the city?

JOCASTA

It is possible, but what do you want of him?

OEDIPUS

O woman, I am frightened for myself,
That I have said so many things
For which I need to see him —

JOCASTA

But he will come. And I hope I may be worthy,
O my Lord, to learn what thoughts you bear so heavily.

OEDIPUS

And that hope shall not be slighted: 780
I am so far gone — to whom can I speak but you,
As I move into a fate like mine?
Polybus of Corinth was my father,
And my mother Merope the Dorian.
I was held to be the greatest man
Of all that city, until something happened
Worthy of amazement, though not of all the tears
I gave it. Once at supper
A man who had drunk too much wine
Called me the 'counterfeit' son of my father. 790
And being burdened with that, I scarcely could restrain myself
All day, and next day I confronted both my parents with
close questions —

And they were furious at him for his reproach,
The one who threw those words at me.
As for their explanation, I was so far satisfied.
But the thing still gnawed at me,
For the rumour of it spread.
So all in secret from my mother and my father
I made a journey into Delphi;
And Apollo, not honouring the questions I had come to ask, 800
Revealed to me the abject misery and terror of His word:
That I must be coupled with my mother
And show to mankind children that they find
Unbearable to look upon,
And become the killer of my father who begat me.

And heaving this, by the distant stars I gauged my way
To flee the land of Corinth, and seek exile
In some place where I might never see
Fulfilment of those miserable portents.
And travelling I came to those same regions 810
Where you say this king was killed.
And to you, woman, I will explain the truth:
I was walking near the triple-crossroads, and there came
A herald, and a man in a wagon drawn by colts,
Of the sort you spoke of, coming toward me
From the opposite direction; the driver
And the old man himself were bent
On throwing me from the road by force;
And the one who swore at me — that I must stand aside —
The driver — I struck him in a rage. 820
And when the old man saw me,
He watched for me walking close to his chariot
And beat me on the middle of my head with the sharpened rod
They use to goad the horses. I paid him back
In more than equal measure:
With a quick jab of my staff, from this hand
He was pitched down from the middle of the car
Onto his back, in a moment.
And I killed them all.
But if this stranger was related in some way to Laius, 830
Then who is now more wretched than this man? [*indicating himself*]
And what man more despised by spirits,
Whom no town, no stranger may receive,
Nor can any even talk to him,
But they must drive him from their houses.
And it was none but I myself who set this curse in place
To fall upon my head, — I defile the dead man's bed
With these hands by which he died;
Am I not evil? Am I not utterly unclean?
Now must I be banished, and when I go 840
I may not see my family, nor set my foot
Into my country, lest I be bound into a marriage
With my mother, and kill my father Polybus
Who begat me, and raised me —

And wouldn't one be right, to judge
That all this came upon me from a spirit
Cruel, and beyond the things of man?
Do not, do not, You sovereign holy Gods,
Let me see this day;
But let me vanish from the mortal world
Before a stain like this pollutes my life!

850

CHORUS

Your highness, we are frightened at these things;
But keep your hopes until you listen to the witness.

OEDIPUS

I have only so much hope
As makes me wait here for the shepherd.

JOCASTA

And when he has appeared, what will you do with him?

OEDIPUS

I'll teach you that – if he is found
Repeating your selfsame story,
I escape disaster.

JOCASTA

But what, of all you've heard me say,
Is so important to you?

860

OEDIPUS

You told me that the shepherd said
Laius was killed by thieves.
So if he still says it was *several*,
Clearly then, it was not I who killed him.
For one and many cannot be made equal.⁵⁰
But if he says it was one solitary traveller,
Then the deed is already fallen on my head.

JOCASTA

But know that the story ran like so –
And he cannot contradict this –
I heard that it was many,
And I am not the only one who heard it thus.
But even if he sway from that report,
Never, O my king, will Laius' murderer
Be properly revealed to justice –
Since the oracle expressly said

870

That he must die at the hands of *my child*;
But that poor infant never killed him,
For he himself had perished long before;
So that where prophets are concerned,
I see their merit neither here nor there.

880

OEDIPUS

Well reasoned. But all the same,
Do not delay, but send a man to fetch the shepherd.

JOCASTA

I will send someone immediately.
But let us go inside the house.
For I will do nothing but what pleases you.

[*Exeunt Creon and Jocasta*]*Third Choral Ode*

CHORUS

May it be my portion to remain
In graceful purity of word and deed
Beneath established laws that walk on high
Begotten in the air of heaven
And only Olympus is their father,
Nor were they born from the race of men,
Nor shall Lethe ever close their eyes;
The God in them is great,
And they do not grow old.

890

Hubris breeds a tyrant;
Hubris, if it gorges on abundance
And in vain, against the moment and the circumstance
It mounts up to the highest,
Stepping from the precipice
To ruin, where the footsteps cannot help.
And I request it of the God,
That He never end our striving to be noble to the city.
I will never stop my reverence of God as our protector.

900

And if one should, in word or deed of hands,
Be proud and have no fear of justice,
Nor no awe before the statues of the Gods,
May some terrible fortune take him,

Cursed in his arrogance,
 If he does not gain his profit fairly,
 And puts by him pious ways,
 To tamper recklessly with sacred things.
 What man in such straits will boast
 That he can shield his soul from the arrows of the Gods?
 For if such acts are respected,
 Why should I join in the dance and worship?

No longer will I go into the centre of all land
 Praying at its sanctity,
 Nor into the Abaian temple,
 Nor Olympus, if these prophecies do not take hold
 And teach by their example all the mortal race.
 Therefore, O Ruler Zeus, Lord of all,
 If ever You hear us clearly,
 Let nothing go unseen
 By You in Your eternal reign;
 For now they slight the prophecies
 Of Laius' legendary death,
 And nowhere is Apollo given honour manifest,
 But religion limps away.

Enter JOCASTA from the palace as a suppliant, with wool and laurel

JOCASTA

My lords of Thebes,
 The thought came to me to betake myself
 Into the temple of our household Gods,
 Taking in hand these wreaths and incense.
 For the heart of Oedipus rises to the height
 Of every kind of pain; nor like a sane man
 Will he compare new omens
 To older ones that failed;
 But the talker has his ear,
 If he speaks of horrors.
 And since my counsel can do nothing,
 I have come to You, O Lycean Apollo,
 Nearest God, as a suppliant with prayers,
 That You might show us some solution
 Undeiled by stigma.

910

920

930

940

For now we all are frightened,
 Like the crew that sees its captain tremble.

Enter an old MESSENGER

MESSENGER

Can someone tell me, strangers,
 Where is the house of Oedipus the king?
 Or better, tell me where he is himself, if you know.

CHORUS

Beneath this roof, for the man is at home, Sir.
 And the mother of his children is there also.

950

MESSENGER

And may she thrive in happiness and wealth,
 Ever the mistress of that master's house.

JOCASTA

And the same happiness to you, Sir;
 For your sweet words are deserving.
 But speak, and tell us what you need,
 Or what you've come to say.

MESSENGER

I bring good words to your house, and to your husband,
 And to you, my Lady.

JOCASTA

And what words are those? From whom have you come here? 960

MESSENGER

From Corinth. And the speech I make will please you,
 As how could it not? But perhaps it may trouble you -

JOCASTA

But what is it? And how can it have such double powers?

MESSENGER

The people of that land will have him for their king,
 Of all the realm of Corinth, where they said this.

JOCASTA

Why? Does not the elder Polybus yet rule there?

MESSENGER

No more; for he is dead, and in the grave.

JOCASTA

What did you say? Has Polybus died, old man?

MESSENGER

If I am lying, I deserve to die.

JOCASTA

Handmaid! Go and quickly tell your master all of this.
O you oracles divine, what are you now?
Oedipus long ago fled from this man,
Afraid lest he kill him — and now that same man
Perishes not by Oedipus, but by gentle fortune.

Enter OEDIPUS from the palace

OEDIPUS

O Jocasta, most beloved woman,
Why have you summoned me from out my house?

JOCASTA

To hear this man — and as you listen,
Consider what those pompous oracles have come to.

OEDIPUS

But who is this man, and what concerns me in his speech?

JOCASTA

He comes announcing it from Corinth,
That your father Polybus is no more;
He has perished.

OEDIPUS

What say you, stranger? Tell me again.

MESSENGER

Since I must tell you this thing clearly first of all,
Know well that the man has gone down into death.

OEDIPUS

Was it by some treachery, or did disease break in?

MESSENGER

A slight decline hath laid his aged body down.

OEDIPUS

The patient man was killed by illness, I suppose.

MESSENGER

And by the long measure of his years.

OEDIPUS

Alas, my wife, why should anyone look to the shrine
Of Pythia, or the shrieking birds who taught
That I was bound to kill my father?

For he died, and he is hidden in the ground,
While for my part I did not touch a sword.
Unless he withered longing for my company.
But the prophecies, at least the ones we heard,
Polybus has taken down to Hades,
Where they worthless lie.

JOCASTA

And have I not said as much to you before?

OEDIPUS

You have. But I was led by fear.

JOCASTA

Now brood no more upon them in your heart.

OEDIPUS

Must I not fear my mother's bed?

JOCASTA

Why should a man be afraid, for whom Nature rules,
And for whom no foreboding can be clear?
The greatest strength is but to live at ease,
As far as one is able. And you —
Never fear about your mother's marriage:
For already in their dreams have many mortals
Lain down with their mothers. But life is easy
For the one who sets such things at naught.

OEDIPUS

All this would be well spoken of you,⁵¹
If my mother did not happen to be yet alive.
But as it is, since she lives still,
I still must fear, even if you speak well.

JOCASTA

But how great a comfort is your father's grave.

OEDIPUS

It is, I understand. But I do fear her,
Who still is living —

MESSENGER

Who is the woman who is so much to be feared?

OEDIPUS

Merope, who was Polybus' wife.

MESSENGER

But what is there in her that frightens you?

OEDIPUS

A terrible omen that the Gods thrust down,
O stranger.

MESSENGER

Tell me, won't you? Or is it not for other men to know?

OEDIPUS

Just so. For Apollo told me
That I and my mother would be joined;
That I must take my father's blood upon my hands.
Because of that I long ago left my home of Corinth far behind.
And with fortunate result. But all the same,
It would be sweetest to my eyes
To look upon my parents.

MESSENGER

And it was fearing these things
That you went to exile?

OEDIPUS

Old man, I needed not to be my father's killer.

MESSENGER

And have I not delivered you, great Lord,
From this fear, by coming here with good news?

OEDIPUS

Indeed you may take from me a worthy thanks.

MESSENGER

In fact, I rather came for that –
That when you come back home,
Some good may come to me.

OEDIPUS

But I will never go back to my parents.

MESSENGER

O child, it's clear that you know not what you do.

OEDIPUS

How so, old man? Teach me, by the Gods.

MESSENGER

If you're afraid to come back home because of those things –

OEDIPUS

Yes, terrified lest Phoebus prove His word to me.

MESSENGER

Lest you take corruption from your parents?

1030

1040

OEDIPUS

Of just that, I shall be frightened forever.

MESSENGER

Do you realise that your worry is not justified?

OEDIPUS

How is it not, if I am the child of my parents?

MESSENGER

Because Polybus is no relative of yours.

OEDIPUS

What say you? Did not Polybus father me?

MESSENGER [*indicating himself*]

No more than this man, but just as much.

OEDIPUS [*indicating the messenger as he says 'no father'*]

And how can my father be no father?

MESSENGER

Ah, it was not I, nor that man, who begat you.

OEDIPUS

But – why then did he call me his child?

MESSENGER

From the time – know it – when he took the gift of you
From my hands.

OEDIPUS

And though this child had come from other hands,
He learned to love it so much?

MESSENGER

Yes, for his former childlessness won him over.

OEDIPUS

And did you buy me, or finding me by chance
You gave me to him?

MESSENGER

I found you in the wooded gorge in the Cithaeron mountains.

OEDIPUS

Why had you made your way to such a place?

MESSENGER

I had set my flocks to graze there on the mountainside.

OEDIPUS

So you were a shepherd, and a wandering tradesman?

MESSENGER

And of you, child, I was the saviour, back then.

1050

1060

OEDIPUS

And what was my suffering, when you took me in your arms?

MESSENGER

Your ankles are the witness of that.

OEDIPUS

Ah me, why have you spoken of that old evil?

MESSENGER

I freed you, for there were spikes run through your feet.

1070

OEDIPUS

A dreadful shame I carried from the very cradle.

MESSENGER [*indicating Oedipus' ankles*]

So that from that fortune you are named as you are.

OEDIPUS

Oh, was it from the Gods, or my mother, or my father? Tell me!

MESSENGER

I don't know. But the one who gave you to me

Knows this better than I.

OEDIPUS

You did not find me yourself—

But had me from another?

MESSENGER

No, another shepherd gave you to me.

OEDIPUS

Who is he? Do you know him, to point him out

With some description?

1080

MESSENGER

He was surely called some servant of Laius.

OEDIPUS

Of the king of this country, long ago?

MESSENGER

Exactly. And this man was his shepherd.

OEDIPUS

And does he yet live, so that I can see him?

MESSENGER [*to the Chorus*]

You men of the country would know best.

OEDIPUS

Who is it of all you men present here

Who knows the one he talks of, having seen him

In the fields, or in this place?

Show it; for this is the moment

For it all to be discovered.

1090

CHORUS

I think it is no other than the man from the fields

Whom you lately sought to look upon.

But Jocasta might tell this matter best.

OEDIPUS

Woman, do you think this is the very man

To whom we lately sent command to come here?

Is that the man he speaks of?

JOCASTA

Why ask whom this man talks about? Do not linger on it;

And for the rest of what was said,

You need not deign but to remember it in idleness.

OEDIPUS

It could not happen, that taking evidence like this

I should fail to show my origins!

1100

JOCASTA

Do not by the Gods, if you care at all for your life,

Pursue this! I am aggrieved enough—

OEDIPUS

Take courage. For if I show myself descended

Of a mother who is thrice a slave,

Still *you* will not be baseborn.

JOCASTA

Still, obey me— I beg you. Don't do this.

OEDIPUS

I will not be persuaded not to learn it clearly.

JOCASTA

But I speak knowing too well what is best for you!

OEDIPUS

And your best advice enrages me again.

1110

JOCASTA

O damned one, may you never know who you are!

OEDIPUS

Someone go bring the shepherd here to me,

And leave this woman to rejoice in her nobility.

JOCASTA

O, O, you sorry, doomed man!

For that is all I can say to you,
And no other words ever again.

[*exit Jocasta into the palace*]

CHORUS

Why did she go, O Oedipus, the lady
Wildly racing from her pain?
I fear that evils will burst upon this silence.

OEDIPUS

Let break forth what must:
But I will seek to know my origins,
However humble they shall be.
And perhaps milady, who lords it like a queen,
Is ashamed that I am ill-derived.
But I hold myself to be the child of Fortune,
Who has sometime blessed me,
And I shall not be dishonored.
For I am born from such a mother;
And the months, that are my brothers,
Have made me both a small man and a great one.
So being born from such a parent,
I will never more be any other kind of man,
Nor fail to learn my lineage.

Fourth Choral Ode

CHORUS

If I am a soothsayer, wise in judgment and discerning,
By Olympus, it shall be you, O Cithaeron mountains,
That we shall glorify as Oedipus' nurse,
And his companion, and his mother,
On the next full moon; and we will dance for you,
Who brought such succour to our king.
And Apollo, to whom we cry, may these things please You.

Which one, child,
Which of the long-lived Nymphs made love to Pan,
Roaming through the mountains, and begat you?
Or did Apollo's lover bear you?
For He adores all the wild highlands.
Or else Lord Hermes,

Or the God of Bacchanalian joy,
Dwelling on the heights of stone
Received the sweet surprise
From some nymph on Mount Helicon
In whom He delights the most in dalliance.

OEDIPUS

If I must guess, even I who haven't dealt with him before,
Old man, I seem to see the shepherd
Whom we have been seeking.
He seems as aged as this man (*indicating the Messenger*)
And I recognise the ones that lead him
As my servants. But you will quickly overtake me
In that knowledge, having seen the man before.

CHORUS

Be certain of it, you are right.
For the man was in Laius' service,
As trusted by him as any other herdsman.

Enter the old SHEPHERD

OEDIPUS [*addressing the Messenger and indicating the Shepherd*]

I ask you first, my guest of Corinth,
Is this the man you mean?

MESSENGER [*indicating the Shepherd*]

The very man you look upon.

OEDIPUS [*to the Shepherd*]

You, Sir, look at me, old man, look here
And answer whatever I ask you.
Did ever you belong to Laius?

SHEPHERD

I did. But not as a slave he bought,
For I was born in his house.

OEDIPUS

What labour had you? What kind of life?

SHEPHERD

For the most part of my life
I have been called a shepherd.

OEDIPUS

What places had you for your neighbourhood?

SHEPHERD

I was in the Cithaeron Mountains,

And around there I was.

OEDIPUS

And therefore, do you know of having met this man
In that place?

SHEPHERD

Doing what? And what man do you mean?

OEDIPUS

This man right here. Have you ever had any dealings with him?

SHEPHERD

Not to speak of, at the call of memory.

MESSENGER

And it is no wonder, Master. But I shall awaken his

forgetfulness 1180

To lucid memory. For I am sure he does remember,
When near Cithaeron, tending my one flock,
I used to meet him as his two flocks grazed;
This for three half-years, from each spring's beginning
To Arcturus' rise in the autumn dawn.

And when the winter came,

I drove mine homeward to the sheepfold,

And this man drove his back to Laius' pastures.

Did any of these things happen as I say they did, or no?

SHEPHERD

You speak the truth; but from a long time ago.

1190

MESSENGER

Come now and tell me, do you remember giving me
A child, that I might raise the foundling as mine own?

SHEPHERD

What of that? Why do you ask that question?

MESSENGER

Old friend, this is that one, who was an infant then.

SHEPHERD

Go to ruin! Will you not be quiet, at last?

OEDIPUS

Don't punish him, old man. Your words need punishing
More than his.

SHEPHERD

O most brave master, how have I done wrong?

OEDIPUS

In not answering when this one asks about the child.

SHEPHERD

For he speaks in ignorance, talking in vain.

1200

OEDIPUS

If you will not speak from your free grace,
You may yet from compulsion speak.

SHEPHERD

No, by the Gods, don't torture me in my old age!

OEDIPUS

Quickly — someone tie his hands behind him.

SHEPHERD

For what? What else do you want to know?

OEDIPUS

Did you give a child to this man,
The child he asked about?

SHEPHERD

I gave it. And I wish I had died that day.

OEDIPUS

You will come to that pass yourself
Unless you tell the honest truth.

1210

SHEPHERD

I am likelier by far to perish if I speak.

OEDIPUS

It seems this man is stalling . . .

SHEPHERD

Not I, not at all. But I told you before,
I gave the child away!

OEDIPUS

Having taken it from where?

From your own house, or from another's?

SHEPHERD

It wasn't mine, I had it from another man.

OEDIPUS [*indicating the Chorus*]

From what citizen, and out of what home?

SHEPHERD

No, by the Gods, master, ask no more!

OEDIPUS

If I ask you again, you are a dead man.

1220

SHEPHERD

He was a child of Laius' household.

OEDIPUS

A slave or some relative of his?

SHEPHERD

Oh, my soul! I am close to uttering the horror.

OEDIPUS

As am I to hearing it. But I must hear it still.

SHEPHERD

Indeed it was called a child of Laius.

But the woman inside, your lady, might tell it best –

For she is able.

OEDIPUS

Did *she* give it to you?

SHEPHERD

Yes, my Lord.

OEDIPUS

With what design?

SHEPHERD

That I should do away with him.

OEDIPUS

The mother was so hard?

SHEPHERD

She was afraid of the predicted evils.

OEDIPUS

What kind?

SHEPHERD

The word was, that he would kill his father.

OEDIPUS

Then why didst thou give it to this old man?

SHEPHERD

From pity, Master,

Thinking he would take it to another country,

Where he came from. But he saved him –

And brought him thus into the worst of misery.

For if you are the one he saved,

Know that you have been born to disaster.

[*Exeunt Shepherd and Messenger*]

OEDIPUS

Oh, Oh, it's clear, it's all happened!

O light, I look upon you for the last time –

I who have been shown

That I am born from whom I must not be,

Married whom I must not marry,

And whom I must not murder, I have killed.

[*Exit Oedipus into the palace*]

Fifth Choral Ode

CHORUS

O generations, nations of mortality

How I do rate your lives at nothing:

For what man hath a fuller share of happiness

Than the resemblance of it – and after semblance, ruin?

And having you for mine example,

Your fate, yours, wretched Oedipus –

I call no mortal life a happy one.

By prodigious skill,

Oedipus shooting his arrow became

The thriving master of every joy;

O Zeus, he destroyed

The riddle-chanting maiden with her twisted claws,

And he did rouse him like a tower

Against the deaths she brought my country;

[*turning toward the palace and speaking in the second person again*]

And from that time,

You have been called my sovereign,

And honoured in the highest things

Have you ruled in great Thebes.

Whose lot is now more piteous to hear?

Who lives among more savage hardship

In the throes of misery, his life undone?

O world-renowned Lord Oedipus,

How one great bed contained you

That upon it you should fall

As father, son, and bridegroom!

And how did that place where thy father sired thee,

1250

1230

1260

1240

1270

Wretched one, suffer thee in silence for so long?

Time that sees all
Has exposed you – in spite of you –
It passed sentence
Upon your marriage that is no marriage,
Wherein the getter of children
Has so long been the child.
O son of Laius,
How I do wish I had never seen thee;
For I do mourn for thee as though
The dirges of the funeral were pouring from my lips.
To say it plain: from thee I drew a new breath of life once,
That now must close mine eyes again.

Enter PAGE from the palace

PAGE

O you ever-honoured ones of this great country,
You will hear of such deeds
And see such works –
But take the grief upon yourselves
Like true-born Thebans of Labdacus' house,
For I do not think
The Danube nor the river Phasis
Could wash these houses to purity
But only cover and conceal them;
And the hidden, grievous works
Shall be exposed into the sun –
Deliberate ones, not accidents.
And those griefs hurt the most
Which we discover we have brought upon ourselves.

CHORUS

What we were so afraid of
Cannot but be heavy.
But what do you say about those two? [*indicating the palace*]

PAGE

The soonest said and understood of all words:
Divine Jocasta is dead.

CHORUS

O poor, unhappy woman! By whose hand,

And how came her death?

PAGE

She slew herself. But the bitterest of these deeds
Is lacking yet – for you were spared the sight of it. 1310
Still, so far as what my memory holds,
You shall learn that woman's sufferings.
For when, compelled by rage,
She came inside the vestibule
She threw herself upon her bridal bed,
Beating her own head with both hands;
And she came inside slamming the great doors,
And called upon the long-dead Laius,
And the memory of when she had his seed, long ago;
By whose hand he was killed, 1320
Leaving the mother to conceive
Accursed children by the dead man's son.
And she mourned for all her love, wherein
Doubly undone, she had a husband by her husband,
And children by her child.
And how she died thereafter I know not.
For Oedipus rushed in shouting
That her grief was not for us to stare at;
And so we stared at him pacing frantically,
And he flew upon us crying for a sword 1330
Demanding of us where he might find
His wife that was no wife,
The mother of himself and of his children.
And then some demon showed her to him,
For of all of us no man was near him then.
But with a sudden scream, as if someone were guiding him
He drove apart the double-doors,
Breaking from their hollow pits the dead-bolt locks,
And he fell into the bedroom.
Wherein we saw his wife hanging by the neck, 1340
Entangled in the twisted noose.
And when he saw her, with a deep and miserable roar
He untied the ropes, and when the poor queen lay upon
the ground –
What came next was horrible to see;

For he unpinned the golden brooches from her robe,
 The ones she always wore, and lifting them up high
 He struck down into his eyeballs, to the sockets,
 Screaming at them: that they would not see
 The shames that he had suffered nor those he had performed,
 And henceforth what he never should have seen
 Shall be in darkness, and what he longed for
 He shall never know again. And chanting such things
 Many times, and not just once, he struck and hit his eyes.
 The holes were red, and his face was wet;
 Nor did he bleed some few drops,
 But like a dark rain, like hail,
 He wept his blood. Oh, the old prosperity
 They joyed in for so long before this moment –
 It was a just and proper happiness.
 But now, on this day,
 Moaning, rage, death, shame:
 Such are the names of all their woes,
 And there is none they lack.

CHORUS

And what relief has the poor man now?

PAGE

He calls for one to open up the palace doors
 And show to all of Cadmus' folk
 The patricide, whose mother is destroyed,
 He to whom it is unclean even to speak,
 That from this land they must banish him,
 No longer to remain here, a curse upon his house –
 Just as he once commanded. But he lacks strength
 And needs someone for a guide;
 For the pain is unbearable.
 And he will show himself to you,
 For he opens the locks of the palace doors –
 And now behold a sight
 That you will hate . . . with sympathy.

Enter OEDIPUS, blind, led by servants

CHORUS

O suffering, horrible for mankind to behold –

O most horrible of all that I have ever known –
 What madness, sorry wretch, came over you?
 Which God is it, that from the farthest reaches
 Leaps down upon your miserable portion?
 Woe, woe, cursed one!
 But I cannot look upon you,
 Eager though I am, so much to ask of you,
 So much to learn from you,
 So much to see you –
 You make me tremble so.

OEDIPUS

Aiai . . . aiai . . . I am so sad;
 Where on earth am I brought in my misery?
 Where does this voice go, fluttering about me?
 O my demon, where have you gone?

CHORUS

To the dire place, that cannot be heard,
 And cannot be looked upon.

OEDIPUS

O my cloud of darkness,
 From which I turn away,
 Your coming-on is merciless, unspeakable,
 And all-too-good for me.
 Oh me! Oh me again!
 Such piercing stabs
 And such a stinging memory of evils
 Come into me all at once.

CHORUS

And it is not strange
 That in such great anguish
 You should doubly mourn that double loss you bear.

OEDIPUS

O Friend,
 You are still my true companion,
 For you still attend me in my blindness.
 – Oh! –
 For you don't forget me,
 And though I am in darkness
 Yet I clearly know your voice.

CHORUS

O you who have done terrible things,
How did you endure the breaking of your eyes?
Which of the Gods had set you on?

OEDIPUS

It was Apollo! Apollo, O my friends --
That brought my wicked sufferings to pass;
But no one struck my eyes
But I myself in desperation.
But what need I see,
To whom the sight of nothing is a pleasure?

CHORUS

These things are all exactly as you say.

OEDIPUS

And what is there left for me to see,
Or to love, or to talk with,
That it might still be sweet to hear,
O my friends?
Get me out of here, quickly.
Lead me away, my dear ones;
I am the great pollution,
The most vile man;
I am still among all mortals
The one the Gods despise the most.

CHORUS

O, sad in circumstances as in spirit,
How I wish I never knew you!

OEDIPUS

May he die, whoever he was
In the wild nomad pastures,
Who loosed my feet and saved me,
Rescued me from murder,
Doing nothing worthy of my thanks.
For had I died then,
There would not be so much agony
For me nor for the ones I love.

CHORUS

Then I, too, wish this were so.

OEDIPUS

I would not have come to be my father's killer
And be called by men
The husband of the one who gave me birth.
But I am godless now,
And an abomination as a son,
Sharing a wife with the man
Who begat me to my shame.
And if there is some older evil
Deeper than all crimes,
Oedipus is by his fortune such a one.

CHORUS

I do not know if you have chosen well --
For you would do better to be no more
Than to live blind.

OEDIPUS

Do not lecture me, that what I've done
Is not the best course; advise me no more.
For even if I yet could see
I do not know how I should look upon my father
As I came into Hades,
Nor upon my wretched mother,
To whom I have done things more vile
Than suicide could punish.
And my children -- born as they were,
Was the sight of them dear to me?
Never to my eyes, never again,
Nor this town, nor its towers,
Nor its sacred statues of the Gods --
I, the most noble man alone
Of all the sons of Thebes -- utterly undone,
I renounce them all;
I who commanded everyone
To banish the unholy one,
The one the Gods declared unclean,
And a relative of Laius.
And I, exposed with such a filthy stain as mine,
Is it for me to look upon those things
With lucid eyesight? Not at all.

1420

1430

1440

1450

1460

1470

But if there were a way
 To block the flow of hearing through mine ears
 I would avail myself of that,
 And stop up all my frame,
 That I might be blind and never hear again;
 For it is sweet to live in thought,
 Away from the noise and flashing.
 O Cithaeron, why did you protect me?
 Why did you not take me and kill me straight,
 So that I never showed myself to humankind
 Nor whence I came? O Polybus and Corinth,
 And the country I have so long called my home,
 How beautiful I was, as you raised me,
 With such revolting sores corrupt beneath the skin!
 For now I find myself a criminal born from crimes.
 O three roads, and the hidden clearing
 In the wooded glen,
 And then the narrow passage to the triple crossroads;
 My father's blood, that was mine own,
 You roads drank at my hands!
 Do you remember me at all?
 The things I did before you,
 And then what followed when I came here?
 O weddings, marriages, you make us;
 And having made us you raise up again
 The same seeds – and you have exposed
 Fathers, brothers, children in a kinship of the blood,
 Brides and wives and mothers
 In the most shameful actions ever undertaken
 By any mortal. But to speak is not the same
 As never having done the ugly things;
 Therefore cover me and hide me somewhere
 Far away, as fast as you can go, or murder me,
 Or secret me away under the Ocean
 Where you may never look on me again.
 Go on, and deem a wretched man
 Worthy to be handled – heed me,
 Do not be afraid – for all my evils
 Could not be borne by any other mortal than myself.

1485

1490

1500

1510

CHORUS

But your plea is timely now –
 Creon comes here, to act and to advise;
 For he is the only guardian of the country
 Left after you.

1520

OEDIPUS

Oh me, what word shall we say to him?
 What good claim can I make upon his trust?
 For before now I denounced him as all base.

Enter CREON, with Oedipus' daughters

CREON

I have not come as a mocker, Oedipus,
 Nor to revile your old mistakes,
 [*to the Chorus*] But if the things of mortals do not move you,
 Fear yet Lord Helios, whose flame sustains us all,
 And do not tempt Him with the sight of such contagion,
 That neither earth, nor light, nor the sacred rain
 Shall willingly receive. But with all haste
 Get him inside the house.
 For only kin may hear and see with righteousness
 A kinsman's shame.

1530

OEDIPUS

By the Gods, since you have swept away my expectations,
 And come as a noble man, to me, the worst of men,
 Obey me a little – for I speak to your concern
 And not to mine.

CREON

And for what favour do you beg me so?.

1540

OEDIPUS

Banish me from this land, as soon as may be,
 To some place where I never shall be seen
 Or spoken to by any mortal person.

CREON

I would already have done so –
 You would have gone there well enough,
 If it were not that I must learn first from the God
 What must be done.

OEDIPUS

But that God's message is entirely revealed:
The patricide, the guilty one, me,
You must destroy.

CREON

That was said, yes. But all the same,
Seeing in what great need we stand,
It is better to find out what must be done.

OEDIPUS

And will you ask the oracle,
On behalf of one wretched man?

CREON

Yes, for now even you
Might bring your trust to the God's word.

OEDIPUS

Aye, and now I lay this charge before you,
And I urge you on:
Raise up whatever burial mound you wish
For her who is inside; for your own kin
Fulfil her final rites.
And may this my father's city never be condemned
To harbour me inhabitant while I live,
But let me dwell in the mountains
Where my Cithaeron is famous,
That my mother and my father chose
For my appointed tomb – so that I may die
The way they wanted, those two who planned to kill me;
And yet this much I know –
I will not die from sickness,
Or any other cause of such a sort;
For I would not have been saved thus far from death
Unless it were for some enormous sorrow.
But let our fate come on, whatever it be.
For my male children, Creon, do not mind them;
They are men now, and they shall not starve
Wherever they may go, while their lives last.
But my poor, pitiable maiden daughters
Who have never sat at the supper table
Without me there; who have shared in all

I have ever touched –
Take care of them for me. But first –
Let me embrace them, and weep our fill.
Come, my Lord. Come, highborn nobleman;
If I could touch them with my hands
It would seem to me as though I had them still,
As I did when I could see.
What have I said?
Or can it be that somehow by the Gods
I hear my daughters weeping, and Creon,
Out of pity, sends me my darlings?
Have I spoken truly?

CREON

You have. For I arranged it,
Knowing their presence would delight you
As it always has.

OEDIPUS

And may you thrive – for this grace
May the God keep better watch upon your fate
Than He has upon mine.
O children, where are you? Come here, come
Into thy brother's hands, my hands,
Whose work has brought about that these,
Thy father's once-bright eyes, should see this way.
O my children, I became your father
All unseeing, and unquestioning,
Where I myself was fathered.
And I weep for you. But I have not the power to see you.
I weep when I think upon your bitter futures:
What life you both must live out at men's hands:
For to what public gatherings, what festivals shall ye go,
From which you will not homeward turn in tears
And miss the holiday? And when the time has come
When you are ripe for marriage,
Who will be the man? – who will run the risk, my children,
Of taking on this kind of stigma, that shall be
The burden of my children and of yours?
What evil is lacking? Your father
Slaughtered his own father; he made love

To her who bore him, even her out of whose body he was born,
And you were born from the same place,
The same from which he had come —

1620

Thus shall you be mocked. And then who will marry you?
There is no one, O my children, and it is certain:
Barren and unmarried you shall pine away to nothing.
[to Creon] Child of Menoeceus, you are the only father
They have left to them; for we who made them,
We are dead, the both of us.

Therefore, do not look on while these your kinswomen
Drift about as beggars, without husbands,
Nor reduce them to the level of my crimes;
But have pity on them, seeing how young they are,
And withal how destitute,
Except for what your care may tender.

1630

Nobleman, with your hand's touch give me your consent.
And to you, my children, I would have given much advice,
If your spirits were grown up enough,
But now pray for me this prayer:
That the right moment may grant you a life to live,
And you may come into a better life than your father's.

CREON

You have cried enough; come inside the house.

1640

OEDIPUS

I must obey, though it is not sweet.

CREON

For all things are noble at their proper time.

OEDIPUS

You understand the terms on which I take my leave?

CREON

You will tell me again, and hearing them I will know.

OEDIPUS

See that you send me out of the country, far from home.

CREON

The gift you ask of me is for the Gods to grant.

OEDIPUS

But I have become the one they hate the most.

CREON

Therefore your exile will speed well.

OEDIPUS

Then you agree to it?

CREON

I would not speak in vain what I did not intend.

1650

OEDIPUS

Then lead me away, now.

CREON

Let go of your children, and now walk away.

OEDIPUS

Don't take them from me!

CREON

Do not demand your will in everything,
For even your achievements have not followed you through life.

[Exeunt Oedipus, Creon, Page

CHORUS

Inhabitants of Thebes our fatherland, behold
This Oedipus that solved the famous riddle,
That was the man of greatest power,
Upon whom there was no citizen but stared
In admiring envy of his great good fortune;
See, into what deadly waves of circumstance
He has come. Therefore, fixing our gaze
Upon life's final day, we shall call no mortal happy,
Until he cross the threshold of this life, free from pain.

1660

Oedipus Rex

Sophocles

Three Theban Plays

Translated by Jamey Hecht

Wordsworth Classics