

Oedipus the King

Cast of Characters in Order of Appearance

OEDIPUS, King of Thebes, son of Jocasta and King Laius

PRIEST of Zeus

CREON, brother of Jocasta

CHORUS of fifteen Theban elders

TEIRESIAS, a blind prophet

JOCASTA, wife and mother of Oedipus

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER, old man of Corinth, servant of King Polybus

SHEPHERD, slave of the royal house of Thebes

SECOND MESSENGER, servant within the house

Nonspeaking Parts

ANTIGONE, daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta

ISMENE, daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta

GUARDS and ATTENDANTS

YOUNG BOY who leads Teiresias

SCENE: *In front of the palace of Thebes. Double doors on the stage are the entrance to the palace, and an altar of the god Apollo is in the middle of the orchestra. One entrance, on the left side of the stage, represents the road to Corinth and Delphi. The entrance on the right side of the stage is the direction of the city of Thebes.*

TIME: *Two generations before the Trojan War. Oedipus has been king for many years since solving the riddle of the Sphinx. A plague has struck the city.*

(A procession of citizens and priests, carrying the signs of suppliants, enters. The double doors open and OEDIPUS comes forward.)

OEDIPUS

My children, new stock of old Cadmus, 1
 why are you seated here before me
 crowned by suppliants' wreaths,
 and the air of the city dense with incense,
 groans, paeans, and prayers? 5
 It is not enough to learn such things
 from others, and so I come myself.
 I, Oedipus, whose fame is known to all.

Tell me, old man, you are the one 10
 who should speak for the people—why are you here,
 what do you want, and fear? I will help
 however I can. It would be heartless
 not to pity such desperate pleas.

PRIEST

O Oedipus, ruler of our country, 15
 you see us gathered at the altar—
 some not yet strong enough to fly the nest,
 others crippled by age. I am a priest of Zeus.
 The best of our youth stand here with me.
 All your people, garlanded, wait in the marketplace
 at the double shrines of Pallas Athena, 20
 the mantic fire on the banks of Ismenus.

You can see that the city is in turmoil,
 everything in confusion. Bloody plague
 crashes over our heads like a tide of death,
 blighting the fruits of the earth, 25

blighting the wombs of cattle and women.
 A fiery fever god stalks among us,
 the city is emptied, the house of Cadmus
 is mortally weakened, and black
 Hades fattens on groans and tears. 30
 No man can be the equal of the gods.
 We do not compare you to them. But,
 as first among men, tempered by life,
 you know how to deal with whatever the gods bring.
 You came to Cadmus' city and freed us 35
 from the tribute payment the Sphinx demanded—
 that cruel singer! We could not tell you what
 to do or how to do it—but we are sure
 that the gods must have helped you to save our lives.

O Oedipus, most powerful of all, 40
 as humble suppliants we beg for help.
 Strengthen us now—either
 through the inspiration of a god or
 by human wisdom. I know that
 the man who has lived most gives the best advice. 45
 Come, noblest of men, rescue our city.
 Come—act—because the whole country calls you
 its hero since you first saved us.
 Let your reign not be remembered
 as starting in triumph but ending in disaster. 50
 Save us again and rescue our city.
 You brought good luck then and good omens—
 bring equal fortune now.
 You have power over this land—surely
 it is better to rule living men. 55
 An abandoned ship or the broken walls and towers
 of an empty city are nothing.

OEDIPUS

Pitiful children, you come to me
 wanting answers I cannot always give.
 I already know how sick you are—but you 60
 must know that I am stricken most of all.
 The misery of each is for himself alone, none other.
 But my soul groans for the whole city,

for each of you as well as for myself.
 Do not think you woke me from sleep. 65
 Sleepless I pace and weep and my mind
 wanders all the roads of thought
 in search of remedy. The only one I found
 was this: to send my kinsman Creon,
 Menoecus' son, my wife Jocasta's brother, 70
 to the Pythia at the shrine of Phoebus Apollo,
 to ask the god what I could do or say to save my city.
 But too much time has passed, and now
 I wonder, what is he doing?—
 he has been away so long. 75
 Whatever message he brings,
 I shall obey the god's command.

PRIEST

These are gracious and timely words—and look,
 your servants wave and call that he approaches.

OEDIPUS

O lord Apollo, let it be your favored blessing on us 80
 that shines from his eyes.

PRIEST

And all seems well—why else would his head
 be garlanded with full-berried bay leaves?

OEDIPUS

Soon we shall know. He is close enough to hear.
 Creon, welcome, my kinsman, son of Menoecus. 85
 What word do you bring from the shrine of Apollo?

(Enter CREON from direction of Delphi.)

CREON

Good news, I say, because if it ends well,
 even what seems the worst would be good fortune.

OEDIPUS

What do you mean? As yet
 I do not know whether to hope or fear. 90

CREON

Do you want these others to hear,
or should we go inside?

OEDIPUS

Speak to us all. I bear the pain
of everyone, not merely my own.

CREON

I shall tell what I heard from the god. 95
Lord Phoebus commands
that to drive this plague from our land, nourished by our land,
we must root it out, or it will be past cure.

OEDIPUS

What rite will expiate this crime?

CREON

Banishment or death for death—blood unavenged 100
menaces the city like a storm.

OEDIPUS

Does Apollo reveal the man who was killed?

CREON

Laius, O lord, was the ruler
of this city, before you saved it.

OEDIPUS

I have heard about him. But I never saw him. 105

CREON

He was killed, and the god clearly commands
vengeance upon his murderers.

OEDIPUS

Where can they be? Where
can we find the traces of this ancient crime?

CREON

He says it lies in this land. What is sought
is found; the ignored will disappear. 110

OEDIPUS

Was it in another place, or here
in his own house or fields, that Laius died?

CREON

He was traveling abroad, so he said, on pilgrimage to Delphi,
but never returned home. 115

OEDIPUS

Did no one survive, was there no one else on the road
who saw what happened and could tell us something?

CREON

Everyone died, except one, who fled in fear
and could remember only one thing—

OEDIPUS

What did he say? From one clue
much can be deduced. This gives me hope. 120

CREON

He said it was a band of robbers
that attacked and killed him, not one, but many hands.

OEDIPUS

How could a single robber, unless bribed
by some vile man from here, dare to kill him? 125

CREON

That was thought of then. But with Laius' death,
we had no defender against the many evils.

OEDIPUS

The king overthrown,
what evil was enough to stop the search?

CREON

The Sphinx's riddling demands
kept our thoughts on what was at our feet. 130

OEDIPUS

I shall go back to the start of it all—
I know the god's and your concern
for the one who has died.

You will see me as a true ally 135
avenging this land and Phoebus Apollo.

Not only for old friends but also for myself
must I drive away this defilement.
Whoever killed Laius now might choose
to murder me. To solve that crime 140
is to protect myself.

Come, children, hasten
from the altar steps, and raise your olive wreaths.
Let someone call the people of Cadmus
to join us. I vow to do all that I can. 145
With the god's help, either we triumph or fail.

PRIEST

Rise to your feet.
We have heard what we want: Oedipus agrees.
And may the sacred power of Phoebus Apollo,
and the oracles he sent, defeat this plague. 150

*(The PRIEST and suppliant leave through the right side, toward Thebes.
OEDIPUS exits through the double doors. CREON exits on the right.)*

*(The CHORUS of fifteen elders of Thebes enters the orchestra from the right
and sings the opening ode, the parodos.)*

CHORAL ENTRY SONG (*parodos*)

CHORUS Strophe A (151–57)
Is that the sweet-sounding voice of Zeus
from the gold-decked Pythian shrine
come to glorious Thebes?
My mind shudders with fear.
In awe we invoke you, healer-god of Delos.
What price will you exact, now or in the future,

for what we ask?
 Speak, immortal child of golden Hope,
 we crave your words.

Antistrophe A (158–67)

First we call on you, daughter of Zeus,
 deathless Athena, and your sister Artemis,
 queen of our earth, on her throne in the marketplace,
 and on Phoebus the far-shooting archer—
 O you three, with your threefold power
 to defend us now from death, appear!
 As you have saved us before from destruction
 racing toward our city,
 save us again from these new flames of woe.
 Come to us here.

Strophe B (168–78)

Alas, our troubles are endless.
 All the people are sick—
 no one knows how we can defend ourselves,
 even the hardest thought cannot forge spear or sword.
 Our richest fields are sterile now.
 Our women labor in stillbirth.
 Wherever you look, like winged birds
 or forest fire, crowds flee toward
 the darkening west, to Hades' land.

Antistrophe B (179–89)

The city dies through these unnumbered deaths.
 Its unmourned children rot on the plain
 in pitiless contagion,
 its wives and faded mothers wander
 from one altar to another
 groaning their woes and prayers.
 The voices blend with the flutes in a paean to you,
 O bright-faced, golden daughter of Zeus.
 Send us your aid.

Strophe C (190–202)

We hear no clash of brazen arms,
 but Ares' threats and war cries ring through the city,
 torment us night and day.
 Oh, drive him from the borders of our fatherland
 out to the furthest reaches of the western sea
 and Amphitrite's chamber,

or toward the rocky northern shores of Thrace
beyond the Hellespont,
for what night leaves unfinished, day completes—
you who wield the power of lightning stroke
to blast, and thunderbolt to crush him,
Great Father Zeus.

Antistrophe C (203–15)

And you, shining wolf-god Apollo,
let the adamantine shafts, our defenders,
fly from your plaited golden bowstring
like Artemis' fiery torches
when she hunts on the Lycian hills.
Let the gold-crowned god
named for this land, wine-faced Bacchus,
come with his troop of maenads
brandishing their pitchy torches
and crying *Euoi!*
to drive off Ares our enemy—
that god despised by every other god.

(*OEDIPUS enters through the double doors.*)

OEDIPUS

I hear what you ask. And if you heed my words,
and tend the plague, much might be done
to overcome these evils.

I speak as a stranger to the story
and commission of this crime, with no idea
where to hunt for clues and signs. 220

But now I am one of you, a citizen
of Thebes—and announce to all Cadmeans
that whoever knows the name of the killer
of Laius, son of Labdacus, 225

I command him to reveal it to me.

Even if he must confess the crime

* * * * *

himself, he has nothing to fear but banishment.

Unharméd he may depart this land.

If someone knows the murderer, 230

be he citizen or stranger, he should speak now.

He will be rewarded and thanked.

But if no one will speak, and shielding a friend

or himself, ignores my words,
let him hear the punishment. 235

This man, whoever he is, will be forbidden
in any part of my realm,
nor may anyone give him aid
or shelter or greeting,
nor with him share the rites, libations, 240
and sacrifice to the gods, but should
thrust him from their house—being one accursed—
as the Pythian Oracle revealed to me.

Thus I honor my duty to the god
and to the dead man. 245

I pray that whoever did this—even if he has,
alone or with his murderous accomplices, escaped—
may his life always be wretched.

And I pray that if he should be one of my household—
and I know it—then let me suffer 250
every punishment I call down on others.

I ask you to make sure these things are done—
not only for my sake and for the sake of the god
but for our barren, god-forsaken land.

Even if it were not god-urged, 255
it would be wrong to allow this foulness to survive.

A noble man, a king, has died.

We must seek out the cause and avenge it.

Now that I rule with the same power he held,
become his kin, his wife and bed now mine— 260
and if he had been blessed with children as I have,
their birth from the same mother
would have bound us even closer.

But evil fortune came to that man.

Now, as if he were my own father, 265

I shall do everything I can to find the murderer
of the son of Labdacus, son of Polydorus,
of Cadmus before him, and ancient Agenor.

And whoever does not help me, I pray the gods
may blight their land and the wombs 270
of their wives, that their fate will be
to die an even worse death than his.

But for all loyal Cadmeans,

may their ally Justice,
and all the gods, be gracious and kind. 275

CHORUS (*The coryphaeus, the leader of the CHORUS, speaks.*)
Because of your curse, my lord, I must speak,
for I did not kill him nor can I say who did.
Phoebus set the task—it is for the god to tell
who did the deed.

OEDIPUS
You are right. But no one can force 280
the gods to speak if they do not wish.

CHORUS
The second thing I'll say—

OEDIPUS
And if you have one, give me your third reason also!

CHORUS
I know that the seer Teiresias sees most like Phoebus.
If you can know what he sees, 285
you will come closest to the truth.

OEDIPUS
But I have not been idle and done nothing.
After hearing Creon talk of him, I sent two messengers,
and it is strange that he is not yet here.

CHORUS
All those old reports are dull and stale— 290

OEDIPUS
What reports? Is there something I have not looked into?

CHORUS
They say he was attacked by a gang of thieves and killed on the road.

OEDIPUS
That's what I heard. But no one saw who did it.

CHORUS

If he knows what fear is, that man,
he will not linger, after your curses. 295

OEDIPUS

If he did not fear murder, he will not fear curses.

CHORUS

But here comes the one to find him—
Teiresias. They lead him in, the divine seer—he who,
alone among men, always knows the truth.

*(Enter TEIRESIAS, a blind seer, led by a YOUNG BOY, from the direction
of Thebes.)*

OEDIPUS

O Teiresias, you who know and teach 300

Olympian secrets and mysteries here on the earth!

Though sightless, you perceive everything.

You know what sickness gnaws at the city.

Like a soldier in the front row of the phalanx

who takes the first onslaught, you alone can save us. 305

You must already know Phoebus' message—

that the end to this plague will only come

when we track down Laius' murderers

and kill them, or drive them from this land.

Whatever method you have to read the future— 310

from the flight of birds, or other ways of augury—

use it now to save yourself, your city, and me

from the pollution of unavenged murder.

We are all in your hands. For a man to use

his gifts to help others is the most noble labor. 315

TEIRESIAS

Alas, how awful it is to have wisdom, when such knowledge

is useless. I knew this already, but ignored it—

or else I would have known better than to come.

OEDIPUS

How is it that you are so reluctant?

TEIRESIAS

Let me go home. It will be better. 320
We shall each bear our fate easier if you obey me.

OEDIPUS

It is neither right nor kind to the city that bred you
if you deny it your prophetic powers.

TEIRESIAS

I see your words fall wide of the mark and miss their aim.
I don't want mine to do the same. 325

OEDIPUS

With the knowledge you have from the gods,
we bow at your feet and implore you to speak, not turn away.

TEIRESIAS

You cannot imagine what evil I know already—
though I will not reveal it.

OEDIPUS

Do I hear right—that you will not tell what you know? 330
Do you want to betray us and destroy the city?

TEIRESIAS

I do not want to harm you—or myself.
Do not interrogate me. I will say nothing.

OEDIPUS

O wicked, heartless man—you would madden
even a stone. Why will you not speak out 335
but insolent, stay stubbornly mute?

TEIRESIAS

You attack my anger and blame me,
unconscious of your own.

OEDIPUS

Who would not be angry, hearing how
you deny me and dishonor our city? 340

TEIRESIAS

These things will come, though I muffle them in silence.

OEDIPUS

What will come? You must tell me!

TEIRESIAS

I shall say nothing else, but stay silent,
no matter how you rage and storm.

OEDIPUS

And I shall not hold back what I know, my anger
will not allow it. Know that I think you
were part of the plot, and even, I say,
that you alone would have done the evil deed
with your own hands, if you were not a blind man. 345

TEIRESIAS

Is this so? Let me tell you—
you must abide by your own decree. 350
From this day forth, you must not speak to me or any man.
You yourself are the sacrilegious curse of this land.

OEDIPUS

Shameless to say such things!
Where do you think to escape now? 355

TEIRESIAS

No need to escape. My words are true.

OEDIPUS

Who taught you this? Not your prophetic skill!

TEIRESIAS

It was you; and made me speak against my will.

OEDIPUS

What did I say? Tell me once more, so I can try to take it in.

TEIRESIAS

Have you not yet understood? Do you want to test me? 360

OEDIPUS

Perhaps I did not comprehend—explain it again.

TEIRESIAS

I repeat that you yourself are the murderer you seek.

OEDIPUS

You will be sorry if you say that again—

TEIRESIAS

I'll tell you something else, which will anger you even more.

OEDIPUS

Spew out whatever you like—it will mean nothing to me. 365

TEIRESIAS

All unaware, you have done shameless things with
your closest and dearest, and do not yet see the full horror of your
deeds.

OEDIPUS

Do you think you can say that and go unpunished?

TEIRESIAS

There is strength in truth.

OEDIPUS

In truth, yes. But this is not truth, 370
but the ravings of a deaf, witless, blind man—blind in all his senses.

TEIRESIAS

And you, poor wretch, will soon be the butt
of every insult you now direct at me.

OEDIPUS

You are a creature of night, and cannot
harm me, nor any other who can see the light. 375

TEIRESIAS

It is not I who has made your fate.
That was Apollo's task—that is his care.

OEDIPUS

Is it Creon, or another, who set you to this?

TEIRESIAS

Creon is not your enemy—it is yourself.

OEDIPUS

Power and wealth, kingship and skill 380
surpassing skill in every art of life—

how they all produce only envy!

And is it because of this power—which the city
granted of its own free will, unasked for—

that Creon, whom I trusted as a friend, 385

now tries to undermine and depose me

by sending this trickster, this wizard

who can see nothing but his own gain,

being blind in his supposed art?

Give me an example of your vision. 390

How is it that when the dog-haunched singer squatted here

you said nothing to save the city and its people?

The riddle should not have waited for a stranger

to solve it. There was need of a prophet—

but neither from birds nor gods did you learn 395

the answer. It was I, Oedipus,

the ignorant, who stopped her, who triumphed

through my own intelligence, not the help of gods or birds—

I, whom you call the curse, and think to depose, hoping

it will bring you closer to power in Creon's court. 400

Believe me, the two of you, your plotting

will end in tears. If you were not so old

I would punish you for such disloyal thoughts.

CHORUS

It seems to us that the words of both—his

and yours—are spoken in anger. Oedipus, 405

this is pointless, and will get us no further

toward obeying the words of the oracle.

TEIRESIAS

Even though you are the king, I am your equal

in this—the right to reply.

I am no man's slave. I serve Loxias. 410
 Creon has no power over me.

But I say to you, who have taunted me in my blindness,
 that though you have sight, you cannot see your own evil
 nor the truth of where you live and whom you live with.
 Do you know your origin, know that you are the enemy 415
 of all your line, those below the earth and those still on it,
 and that your mother's and father's double-edged curse
 with deadly step will drive you from this land—
 like a light revealing all, before it blinds you.

Every cave and shelter in Cithaeron will echo 420
 with your cries, when you realize
 the full meaning of the marriage
 you thought would be your safe harbor.

You cannot yet see the throng of other evils
 which will reduce you to the level of your children. 425
 Say the worst that you can about me and about Creon—
 pelt us with mud—but there is no mortal
 who will be more befouled than you.

OEDIPUS

I will not suffer this! I refuse to listen!
 Damn you—get out— 430
 why have you not gone, why are you still here?

TEIRESIAS

I would not have come if you had not summoned me.

OEDIPUS

If I had known you would say such foolish things
 I would not have ordered you here.

TEIRESIAS

I might seem a fool to you— 435
 but your parents thought me wise.

OEDIPUS

My parents? Wait—you knew those who bore me?

TEIRESIAS

This day bears your birth and destruction.

OEDIPUS

Riddling again!

TEIRESIAS

You are good at riddles.

440

OEDIPUS

You mock my talent.

TEIRESIAS

The same talent has destroyed you.

OEDIPUS

But if I saved the city—that is all I care about.

TEIRESIAS

Good. I shall go. You, boy, lead me away.

OEDIPUS

Yes, let him lead you away. Your presence disturbs me.

445

I shall be glad when you have gone.

TEIRESIAS

When I have said what I came to say, then I shall leave—
not because I fear you. You cannot do me harm.

I tell you—the man you have sought for so long,
threatened, and denounced as the murderer
of Laius—that man is here.

450

Now he is called a stranger, an alien, but soon
will be known as a native-born Theban—
which will bring him no joy.

A beggar not a rich man, blind who now has eyes,
hesitantly tapping his staff through a foreign land,
he will be exposed as brother and father
to his own children, son and husband

455

to the woman who bore him, sharer of the marriage bed
with the father he murdered.

460

You go inside, but think on this. If I have seen wrong,
then call me blind—a false prophet.

(Exit TEIRESIAS, led by the BOY, toward Thebes, stage right. OEDIPUS exits through the double doors into the palace. The CHORUS sings the first stasimon.)

FIRST STASIMON

CHORUS

Strophe A (463–72)

Who is this man the oracular rocks of Delphi curse
for unspeakable deeds
too terrible to describe?
Whose blood-drenched hands have done such work?
The hour has come for him to flee
like a horse before the storm
from the wrath of leaping Apollo,
armed like his father Zeus with fire and lightning bolt,
and from the implacable Keres,
goddesses of death, who snap at his heels.

Antistrophe A (473–82)

See how the signal flashes
from snow-capped Parnassus
for all to hunt the fugitive
through the tangled forest
and the deepest caverns
where he lurks between boulders
like a mountain bull with a crippled foot,
wretched and solitary, desperate to hide
from the oracles of the Omphalos
who flutter and squeak around his head.

Strophe B (483–97)

What this wise old prophet reads
from the auguries, agitates me, agitates me.
I am torn, and cannot decide
if I should believe what he says, or deny it—
waver between hope and fear,
uncertain where to seek the truth.

Tell me, what was the quarrel
between the house of Labdacus
and Polybus' son?

I have never heard talk of one,
 now or in the past,
 which might serve as proof; without it
 how can I go against the good name of Oedipus—
 I who am defender of the house of Labdacus—
 and blame him for this obscure death?

Antistrophe B (498–512)

Zeus and Apollo are wise,
 see deep into the hearts of men.
 But even the most famous seer
 is only a man, in the end—
 need be no wiser than me.
 Until I am convinced
 that what the auger says is true,
 I shall not believe those who blame the king.
 When he bested the Sphinx, the Winged Maiden,
 and saved our city
 everyone loved him—
 that will be my touchstone.
 Until his guilt is proved,
 for me he will be innocent.

(Enter CREON from the direction of Thebes, stage right.)

CREON

Citizens, I am told
 that King Oedipus makes vile accusations against me.
 It is unbearable!

515

If in his present misfortunes
 he thinks he has suffered at my hands,
 his troubles caused by anything I've done
 by word or deed, I would not want to live.
 Such slander is not a simple thing to bear
 but the worst of all—it taints me doubly
 as an evil, both to my city and to my friends.

520

CHORUS *(The coryphaeus speaks.)*

He says it, yes—but perhaps
 he speaks without thinking, in anger.

CREON

Does he claim that I persuaded the seer
to make these accusations and say these lying words? 525

CHORUS

That is what he said, but I do not know the reason.

CREON

Were his eyes clear, did he seem calm
when he laid this charge against me?

CHORUS

I cannot tell you, I am not witness of my master's acts. 530
But he himself now comes out of the house.

(Enter OEDIPUS through the double doors of the palace.)

OEDIPUS

You—wretch—how dare you show your face? Or
are you so shameless that you come to my house
openly, as an acknowledged murderer,
who schemes to rob me of my kingdom? 535

By the gods—do you regard me
as such a fool and coward that you can do these things,
or think I would not guess your most secret
plans and then protect myself?

And what a stupid plan—without 540
the backing of party and fortune and friends—
to think that you could track and seize the crown.

CREON

Do you have a better idea? Listen to me,
I will speak calmly, and you can judge.

OEDIPUS

You are good at making excuses, but I am bad 545
at believing them. To me, they sound like threats.

CREON

At least, hear what I have to say.

OEDIPUS

As long as you do not claim you are not evil.

CREON

If you think this mindless bluster
is something to be proud of, you think wrong. 550

OEDIPUS

And if you think you can do evil against your kinsman
and not be punished, you think wrong.

CREON

I admit your words are just. But tell me,
what harm have I done you?

OEDIPUS

Did you, or did you not, insist I must
send for that man, that famous prophet? 555

CREON

And I would still give the same advice—

OEDIPUS

And how long is it since Laius—

CREON

Since Laius did what? What do you mean?

OEDIPUS

Vanished. Was murdered. 560

CREON

It was a very long time ago.

OEDIPUS

And was this seer as famous then?

CREON

Yes, and just as honored.

OEDIPUS

Did he mention my name then?

CREON

Not as far as I know.

565

OEDIPUS

But you searched for the killer?

CREON

Of course we did. But we discovered nothing.

OEDIPUS

And if he was so wise, why could he not find out these things?

CREON

I do not know, and so can give no answer.

OEDIPUS

You know very well—so say what you know.

570

CREON

What do I know? I would speak if I had something to say.

OEDIPUS

Because—if he were not in league with you,
he would never have said I killed Laius!

CREON

If he does say that, then you know why—
I am learning as much from you as from me.

575

OEDIPUS

Learn then that I will not be named a murderer.

CREON

Yet, did you not take my sister for wife?

OEDIPUS

How can I deny it?

CREON

And rule with equal power, you and she, over this land?

OEDIPUS

She has an equal share in everything. 580

CREON

And therefore am I not also equal to you both, one third of three?

OEDIPUS

Now you show your true thoughts—treacherous friend!

CREON

Not if you think about it coolly, as I have.
 Consider this first: would anyone
 choose to rule with all the fear that brings, rather 585
 than sleep in peace, yet with the same power?
 It is not in my nature to crave
 the name of king—I'd rather do what a king does,
 like anyone with good judgment.

Now, I have everything—except the fear. 590
 If I were king, I would be forced into actions I hated.
 How much sweeter to have the power
 but not the grief of being king.
 I am not such a fool that I need
 more than the privilege and profit. 595

Now, I greet everyone equally, and they all praise me.
 Now, whoever wants a favor from you, shows favor to me,
 hoping it will help them gain what they wish.
 Why would I give up all this?
 A man who sees the world clearly does not plot treason. 600
 No, I would never think like that,
 nor fraternize with those who did.
 And for proof, to test my words, go to the Pythia at Delphi,
 question the oracle whether what I say is true.
 If you should catch me out, plotting 605
 with the seer, then sentence and slay me, not only
 with your one vote, but with two—both mine and yours.

But if you are not sure, do not accuse me.
 It is not justice to believe without proof
 in the virtue of bad men, or that good men are evil. 610
 To reject a true friend
 is like casting away your own life.
 In time you will understand such things,
 for time alone reveals the just man—
 but the evil-doer is recognized at once. 615

CHORUS

What he says makes sense—safer to heed it
 than to act in haste, stumble, and fall.

OEDIPUS

If he plots swift and secret
 I must be as quick.
 Otherwise, he will act while I wait 620
 and all my aims miss their targets.

CREON

What do you want? To banish me?

OEDIPUS

Exile is not enough. I want your death.
 * * * * *

CREON

That's what envy leads to!
 * * * * *

OEDIPUS

Stubborn wretch! Why don't you believe me? 625

CREON: Because it's clear your mind is in chaos.

OEDIPUS: —about myself?

CREON: Certainly about me.

OEDIPUS: You are treacherous!

CREON: And you understand nothing—

OEDIPUS: Except that I am king, and rule.

CREON: —rule badly.

OEDIPUS: O city, my city!

CREON

My city also, not only yours!

630

CHORUS

Stop, lords! Here, just in time

I see Jocasta come from the house.

She will make peace between you.

(Enter JOCASTA, through the double doors.)

JOCASTA

You foolish men, why have you begun

to quarrel? Aren't you ashamed,

635

the whole land sick, to flaunt your petty discontents?

Go home, the two of you. You—and you also, Creon.

You are making much of nothing.

CREON

Sister, your husband thinks he can do

what he likes to me—either drive me

640

out of my home and land, or kill me.

OEDIPUS

Yes wife, it's true, exactly that—for I caught him

plotting evil against me.

CREON

May I never prosper and let me die accursed

if I have done any of this!

645

JOCASTA

If he swears by the gods it is true,

then by the gods, trust him, Oedipus—

do this for me, and all these others.

FIRST KOMMOS

CHORUS

Think carefully, then yield,

I beg you, my lord.

Strophe (649–78)

OEDIPUS

What exactly do you want me to do?

CHORUS

Accept his word. He is no fool,
and swears before the gods.

OEDIPUS

Do you know what you are asking?

CHORUS (*The coryphaeus speaks*): I know— 655

OEDIPUS: Say it again—make it absolutely clear.

CHORUS

That you should not believe an unproved charge
against a friend who swears his innocence.

OEDIPUS

Can you not understand that what you ask
signifies my banishment and destruction?

CHORUS

Never! not even by the greatest of the gods, 660

Helios. Let me die godless,
friendless and desperate,
before I think such things.

My grief is the fate of this blighted land, 665

and my heart will be torn in two
if to this evil is added
such hatred between you both.

OEDIPUS

Let him go, then—even if it means I must die,
or be forced into exile, dishonored. 670

It is not his words that move me, but yours.
Wherever he is, I shall always hate him.

CREON

How hard it is for you to yield!
The weight of your own nature
is heavier for you to bear than any other. 675

OEDIPUS

Get away from me—leave me alone!

CREON

I am going. You are vicious—
but these others have saved me.*(Exit CREON toward Thebes, stage right.)*

CHORUS

Antistrophe (679–96)

Why so slow, O wife of Oedipus,
to lead this man into the house?

680

JOCASTA

When I know what's happened—

CHORUS

Unjust suspicions, ignorant accusations
gnaw at the heart.

JOCASTA

From each of them?

CHORUS: Yes.

685

JOCASTA: But what was said?

CHORUS

Already we suffer enough through our land's misfortunes.
We need no other cause of grief.

OEDIPUS

Good man that you are—yet
you see what it leads to, your effort to soothe my anger.

CHORUS

Dear lord, I say it again—
that I would be quite mad, an idiot,
to turn from you now, you
who carried our land to safety,
like a ship before a fair wind,

690

from its time of woes. 695
 Now once again may you be our good pilot.

JOCASTA
 By the gods, tell me the truth,
 my lord—what it was
 that caused such anger?

OEDIPUS 700
 Wife whom I respect more than these men,
 I say it is Creon who has plotted against me.

JOCASTA
 But can you tell me clearly the cause of the quarrel?

OEDIPUS
 He dares to say that it was I who murdered Laius.

JOCASTA
 Is this his own accusation, or is he repeating another's?

OEDIPUS 705
 He sent his charlatan-wizard to speak for him,
 so he is free of blame.

JOCASTA
 My dear, forget all that.
 Listen to what I have to say, and learn
 that no mortal can prophesy the future—
 and I can prove it. 710

Long ago, an oracle came here to Laius—
 I will not claim from Phoebus himself, but one of his priests—
 who told him it was his fate to die by the hand
 of any child born to me and him.
 But you know the story—it was foreign robbers 715
 who killed him at the crossroad where three roads meet.

And three days after the birth of our boy
 Laius pinned the infant's feet together
 and gave the order to expose him on the pathless mountainside.
 So Apollo's prophecy was not accomplished: 720
 that child could never murder his father,

nor Laius suffer the fate he feared.
Such predictions can be ignored;
they mean nothing. Whatever a god wants,
he can tell us himself. 725

OEDIPUS
What agitation grips my mind and spirit
as I hear you, wife.

JOCASTA
But why does this make you so anxious?

OEDIPUS
I seemed to hear you say that Laius
was butchered where three roads meet. 730

JOCASTA
That was the story then, and still is now.

OEDIPUS
Where did this awful thing happen?

JOCASTA
Phocis the place is called,
where the roads from Daulis and Delphi join.

OEDIPUS
And how long ago was it? 735

JOCASTA
It was just before you appeared and took power in this land,
that the news came to the city.

OEDIPUS
O Zeus, what are your plans for me?

JOCASTA
Tell me what troubles your heart, Oedipus.

OEDIPUS

Don't ask yet. Just say—what did he look like, 740
how old was Laius then?

JOCASTA

Tall enough, and beginning to go grey.
Very much as you look now.

OEDIPUS

Woe is me! How wretched I am, self-cursed
through my own ignorance. 745

JOCASTA

I don't want to understand what you mean.

OEDIPUS

I dread that seer saw right.
But you will help me most if you can tell me one more thing.

JOCASTA

I shrink with dread also, but if I can, I'll answer your question.

OEDIPUS

Was he alone, or did he have armed men with him, 750
the proper escort of a leader?

JOCASTA

There were five of them, including a herald,
and Laius rode in the carriage.

OEDIPUS

Alas, it all comes clear. Who was it
who told this to you, wife? 755

JOCASTA

A servant who returned alone, the only survivor.

OEDIPUS

Is he still here in the house now?

JOCASTA

No. Because when he arrived from that place and saw
that you were lord now Laius had perished,
he knelt, taking my hand, and begged me 760
to send him away to the fields to be my shepherd,
far from all sight of this city.
And I agreed. He was the sort, though a slave,
who deserved even greater favor.

OEDIPUS

Can he be brought here, quickly? 765

JOCASTA

Yes, it can be done. But why do you ask?

OEDIPUS

I am afraid, Jocasta. I have said too much already.
That is why I must see him.

JOCASTA

Then he will come. But surely I deserve to be told
what is tormenting you, lord. 770

OEDIPUS

I shall not hold back from telling you
my worst fears. Who else is dearer to me, or better
to share these things than you?

My father was Polybus of Corinth,
my mother, Merope, a Dorian. And I 775
was thought the first among our citizens
until, one night, something unexpected happened—
which I would have done better to ignore.
A drunken guest at a banquet called out
that I was a bastard, not my father's son. 780
I managed to hold my tongue then, but it rankled,
and the next day went to my parents, repeated
what he had said and demanded the truth.
They were furious and denied it absolutely.
I believed them, but was still angry. 785
And the story spread—the way they always do.

Not saying a word to my parents,
 I presented myself to the Pythian oracle,
 but Phoebus refused my question—
 instead, made terrible forecasts 790
 that I was doomed to sleep with my mother
 and engender a monstrous brood; become
 the murderer of my own father.
 Hearing such awful things, I fled,
 using the stars as guides to make sure 795
 I always moved away from Corinth,
 so the evil oracle would never be accomplished,
 and at last arrived at the place
 where you say your old king died.

Wife, to you I can tell the truth. 800
 As I came near to where the three roads join
 I met a herald, and a horse-drawn carriage
 like those you describe—
 and the herald, and the man in the carriage,
 forced me off the road. 805
 It was the driver, as he tried to turn me aside,
 I struck out at first in my anger.
 Then, as I pushed past, the old man
 jabbed from above at my head with his double goad.
 But he paid for this—for now, 810
 with the staff in my hand, I tumbled him out of the cart
 and onto his back in the road
 and slaughtered them all. If that stranger
 had any connection with Laius,
 what man is more wretched than I? 815
 Who could be more hated by the gods than he
 whom no stranger or citizen must allow into their house
 nor speak to, but must cast out
 and turn away—and it is I alone
 who laid these curses on myself! 820
 The very bed of the murdered man
 is polluted by the same hands that killed him.
 O awful! Totally evil, I must seek even further
 exile, to make sure I'll never meet one of my own kin
 nor tread the soil of my birth, or else I am doomed 825
 to mate with my own mother and slay Polybus,

the father who begot and raised me.
How could someone, judging such a fate,
not think me the plaything of a savage god?
No, let me vanish and die first, 830
before my name is stained forever by such shame.
Never, never, believe me, shall I allow
such things to happen, or commit such acts.

CHORUS

We shrink from such knowledge, O lord,
but until he has spoken, you can have hope. 835

OEDIPUS

Indeed, this is my only hope—
to wait for the shepherd.

JOCASTA

And when he comes, what is it you want to hear?

OEDIPUS

I shall tell you. If his story confirms yours,
my suffering will be over. 840

JOCASTA

What did I say that seemed so important?

OEDIPUS

You insisted he said that robber men
had killed him. Men—not a man. If he still
says that, I could not have done it,
because one is not the same as many. 845
But if he is sure it was one man alone,
then the scales of justice tilt and make me guilty.

JOCASTA

That is what he said at first
and he cannot deny it.
Everyone heard, not only me. 850
And even if he should say something different now
it still will prove nothing
about the murder of Laius, whom Loxias said

would be killed by my son.
 That wretched child could never 855
 have done it—he was already dead.
 I pay no heed to prophecies—look neither
 to right nor left, but on the road ahead.

OEDIPUS

That may be so. Still, do not neglect
 to send someone to bring that man here. 860

JOCASTA

It shall be done at once. Now come into the house.
 I wish only to please you.

(Exit OEDIPUS and JOCASTA into the palace, through the double doors.)

Second STASIMON

CHORUS

Strophe A (863–72)

Let me fulfill my fate
 through the holy purity
 of all my words and deeds
 and follow the heavenly laws,
 engendered in the bright ether
 by their father Olympus,
 laws we humans could not have framed;
 they will never be forgotten
 nor blotted out by sleep—the god lives
 in them, eternal and mighty.

Antistrophe A (873–82)

Pride breeds tyrants, arrogant,
 glutted on folly.
 Pride blindly mounts the heights
 then tumbles down the precipice
 to the utmost depths,
 losing its footing.
 I pray the god will not revoke the need
 for that healthy rivalry
 which strengthens the city,
 that he will always be our champion.

Strophe B (883–896)

The man who struts through life
 vicious and arrogant in word and act,
 who does not fear Justice
 nor honors the gods—
 may evil befall him
 for such insolent impiety.
 But if he profits fairly, shuns all outrage
 nor lays profaning hands on holy things,
 and still is punished,
 then how can any mortal man evade
 the angry arrows aimed from Olympus,
 or the threat of heavenly vengeance?
 If evil deeds like his are honored,
 who would dance before god's altar?

Antistrophe B (897–910)

No longer shall I go
 in reverence to Delphi,
 Omphalos of Earth.
 I shall not visit the oracle at Abae
 nor that of Olympia
 because their words
 no longer ring true,
 though every mortal still wants to believe them.
 O Zeus, as you are indeed called, ruler of all,
 do not be unaware of this.
 For the old prophecies about Laius
 are already dismissed, and Apollo's glory dimmed;
 the gods grow weak and feeble.

910

(Enter JOCASTA from the palace, through the double doors. She is carrying wreaths and incense.)

JOCASTA

Lords of the land, I have decided to go
 on pilgrimage to the temples,
 bearing wreathes and incense-offerings to the gods,
 for Oedipus torments himself with fear of the future
 as much as dread of the past.
 Whatever he's told he believes.
 He pays no heed to what I say.
 I can do no more, but turn to you,

915

(JOCASTA *makes an offering at the altar.*)
 shining wolf-god Apollo, closest and dearest of all gods,
 entreating your aid with these prayers— 920
 that you release us from this curse.
 For now we are all dismayed, to see
 the pilot of our vessel himself disoriented.

(*Enter CORINTHIAN MESSENGER from the direction of Corinth, stage left. He is elderly.*)

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER
 Strangers, can you tell me where
 Is the house of King Oedipus? 925
 Better still—tell me if you know where he is?

CHORUS
 Here is his house, stranger, and he himself inside,
 and this his fruitful wife, mother of his children.

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER
 May she be blessed, and all her kind—
 the legitimate wife. 930

JOCASTA
 And blessings on you, stranger. You deserve them,
 for your good words. But tell me,
 why have you come, what news do you bring?

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER
 Good news for your house and your husband, woman.

JOCASTA
 What is it—and who sent you? 935

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER
 I come from Corinth, and what I have to say
 will surely give you pleasure—how not?—yet will grieve you as much.

JOCASTA
 Tell me—how can it have this double power?

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

The people of Isthmian Corinth
want him for king—that is what they say. 940

JOCASTA

Why? Isn't old Polybus still king?

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

No—not since Death took him to his kingdom.

JOCASTA

You say that Oedipus' father is dead?

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

May I die, if I'm not telling the truth.

JOCASTA

Maid, hurry, go to your master, and tell him
at once. So much for prophecies! 945

(Maid exits through the double doors into the palace.)

Where are they now? How many years is it
since Oedipus fled his land, fearing he must kill his father—
who now has died quite naturally, not by a son's hand!

(Enter OEDIPUS from the palace, through the double doors.)

OEDIPUS

Jocasta, my dearest, 950
why did you send for me to come from the house?

JOCASTA

Hear what this man says—then tell me
where they have gone, those prophecies of the gods?

OEDIPUS

Who is he, and what does he have to tell me?

JOCASTA

He's from Corinth, come to inform you
that your father Polybus has died. 955

OEDIPUS

What! Stranger, let me hear it from you.

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

If you want to hear it clearly again,
then know that he is dead and gone.

OEDIPUS

How did he die? Was it treachery? Sickness? 960

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

The least tilt of the scales puts an old man to rest—

OEDIPUS

Poor man, to die of sickness.

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

—and the many years he'd lived.

OEDIPUS

Ah, wife, why would anyone go
to the shrine of the Pythian seer, or look for auguries 965
from the screeching birds above, who prophesied
that I would kill my father. Now he is dead,

rests beneath the earth, and I am here, innocent,
with sword untouched—unless you could say

that it was longing for me that killed him. 970

Those useless oracles now rot in Hades,
taken there by Polybus.

JOCASTA

Isn't that just what I always said?

OEDIPUS

Yes, but I was frightened and did not believe you.

JOCASTA

Now you know not to take any of it to heart. 975

OEDIPUS

But surely I must still fear the bed of my mother—

JOCASTA

Why be afraid?

Chance rules us all.

No one can foresee the future.

Best to live in the present, making no plans. 980

And why should you fear the bed of your mother?

Many a man has slept with his mother in dreams.

He who dismisses such thoughts lives easiest.

OEDIPUS

All that you say might be true,

if she who bore me were not still alive. But she is, 985

and so I have every reason to fear.

JOCASTA

Yet your father's funeral is a cause to rejoice.

OEDIPUS

Yes—but she is still alive.

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

Who is this woman you fear?

OEDIPUS

Merope, old man—who lived with Polybus. 990

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

Why be frightened of her?

OEDIPUS

A dreadful prophecy from a god.

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

Can you tell it to me, or is that forbidden?

OEDIPUS

It was Loxias who said

I was doomed to couple with my mother 995

and kill my father with my own hands.

Because of this dreadful prophecy, many years ago

I quit Corinth. Since then, my life has been fortunate—yet to look into the eyes of one's parents is the greatest joy.

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

And this is the reason you fled the city? 1000

OEDIPUS

I had no wish to be my father's murderer!

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

I can so easily free you of these fears, my lord, since I am well-disposed toward you.

OEDIPUS

What a favor you would grant me!

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

And I came especially for this— to bring you home, and reap the benefit. 1005

OEDIPUS

I can never go near there.

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

My child, you don't know what you are doing.

OEDIPUS

How, old man? For the gods' sake, tell me!

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

So you won't go back because of this story? 1010

OEDIPUS

I dread that Phoebus' curse will come true.

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

Or that pollution would come from your parents?

OEDIPUS

Exactly that is what most terrifies me.

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

Well, you can be sure that you have nothing to fear.

OEDIPUS

How could that be, if they begot me? 1015

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

There is no kinship of blood between you and Polybus.

OEDIPUS

What do you say? Polybus not my father?

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

No more than I am. In that we were equal.

OEDIPUS

A nothing like you the equal of he who sired me!

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

He did not sire you, neither he nor I. 1020

OEDIPUS

Then why did he name me his child?

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

I gave you to him as a gift—he received you from my hands.

OEDIPUS

Yet strange, that from another's hands, he loved me dearly.

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

It was the years of childlessness won him over.

OEDIPUS

Had you bought me somewhere, or did you find me? 1025

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

I found you on the wooded slopes of Cithaeron.

OEDIPUS

Did you have some reason to be there?

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

It was on that mountain I kept my flocks.

OEDIPUS

Ah—a wandering shepherd—

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

—and your savior, then. 1030

OEDIPUS

Was I crying, when you took me up?

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

Crying with pain—your ankles still bear witness.

OEDIPUS

Why must I be reminded of that old story?

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

Your feet were pierced and pinned together, and I freed them.

OEDIPUS

This fearful scar I've borne since my cradle. 1035

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

And so you are called “swollen foot.”

OEDIPUS

But tell me, for the gods' sake, was this done by my mother or my
father?

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

That I cannot. The one who gave you to me knows better than I.

OEDIPUS

So you did not find me yourself?

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

No, another shepherd handed you over. 1040

OEDIPUS

But who was he? Can you tell me?

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

They said he was one of Laius' men.

OEDIPUS

You mean the old king of this land?

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

Yes, a shepherd of Laius.

OEDIPUS

And is he still alive? Can I see him?

1045

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

Your local people can answer that best.

OEDIPUS (*addressing the CHORUS*)Do any of you know if he is still alive,
the shepherd of whom he speaks,

or has seen him out in the fields or here in the city?

Speak at once!—the time has come to learn these things.

1050

CHORUS (*The coryphaeus speaks.*)I think he must be the countryman
you wanted to see. But here's Jocasta—
she can tell you better than I.

OEDIPUS

Wife, do you know if the man we sent for
is the same person this shepherd mentions?

1055

JOCASTA

Why even try to find out? Pay no attention
to all that nonsense.

OEDIPUS

Having come so far, do you think I can hold myself back
from trying to learn the truth of my birth?

JOCASTA

Stop, in the name of the gods—if you value your life— 1060
from going further. I have been plagued enough!

OEDIPUS

Be brave, woman! Even if I am proved three times a slave,
from three generations of slaves, that will not make you base-born.

JOCASTA

I beg you to heed me. Do not do this.

OEDIPUS

You cannot stop me from learning the truth. 1065

JOCASTA

Believe me, I only want the best for you.

OEDIPUS

Your “best,” it seems, is what can grieve me most.

JOCASTA

Unlucky man, may you never learn who you are.

OEDIPUS

Someone go—bring her shepherd to me—
And leave her to gloat over her own noble birth! 1070

JOCASTA

Oh, poor doomed man! That is all I can say—
my final words.

(JOCASTA rushes off stage through the double doors.)

CHORUS

Why has she fled, your wife,
in such wild pain? Oedipus, I fear this silence
will be torn apart by evil. 1075

OEDIPUS

Whatever may come, let it burst forth! Even
if I spring from lowly stock, I must know.

Being a woman, she might have grand ideas
 and feel ashamed of my base birth.
 But I am a child of Fortune— 1080
 who has treated me well—and cannot be dishonored.
 She is my mother, and the months, my brothers,
 have marked me out to wax and wane like them from slave to king.
 Such is my nature, I have no wish
 to change it—nor not seek out the truth of my birth. 1085

(OEDIPUS and CORINTHIAN MESSENGER remain on stage.)

THIRD STASIMON

CHORUS Strophe A (1086–97)

If I am a seer,
 gifted by Olympus to speak the truth,
 I prophesy, Mount Cithaeron, that you will know,
 at tomorrow's full moon,
 how Oedipus exalts you as his native land,
 his nurse and mother.
 And we shall praise you
 with wild cries, song and dance,
 because you honor our king,
 and make him glad.
 Phoebus Apollo,
 may these things please you!

Antistrophe A (1098–1109)

Oedipus, who was your mother?
 Was she a long-lived nymph,
 consort of goat-legged father Pan,
 roamer of mountains,
 or some mistress of Loxias,
 who loves the empty pastures?
 Maybe the Lord of Cyllene, or Bacchus himself,
 god of the stormy peaks,
 found you—a present left there
 by one of his favorite playmates,
 those almost-immortal
 Helicon girls!

(Enter elderly SHEPHERD with OEDIPUS' men from Thebes, stage right.)

OEDIPUS

Though I have never met him, 1110
 yet, Elders, I can guess this is the shepherd
 we have looked for—he is old enough
 to be that man.

I also recognize the ones who lead him as servants of mine.
 But having seen the shepherd before, 1115
 you must know better than I.

CHORUS

I know him well—he was Laius' man,
 one of his trusty shepherds.

OEDIPUS

Tell me, Corinthian stranger,
 is this the one you mean? 1120

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

The very man before your eyes.

OEDIPUS (*addressing the SHEPHERD*)

You there, old fellow—look at me, answer
 my questions. Were you one of Laius' men?

SHEPHERD

Yes, a slave—not bought though, but born into the household.

OEDIPUS

What sort of work did you do?

SHEPHERD

I followed the flocks for most of my life. 1125

OEDIPUS

Where did you usually camp when you were out with the flocks?

SHEPHERD

Sometimes in Cithaeron, or else nearby.

OEDIPUS

Then you must know this man—maybe you met him there?

SHEPHERD

What has he done—who do you mean?

OEDIPUS

This man here. Have you ever had anything to do with him? 1130

SHEPHERD

I can't remember just like that!

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

And no wonder, my master! But

I'll jog his memory—then I'm sure

he'll remember when we both were at Cithaeron.

He with his two flocks, I with my one, 1135

* * * * *

three seasons we stayed together up there,

the six months from spring to the rising of Arcturus.

When winter came, I would drive

my herd to its fold, and he went back to Laius' barns.

He can't deny that all this happened. 1140

SHEPHERD

It's true—though it was long ago.

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

And do you remember that child you gave me

to rear as my own?

SHEPHERD

What's it to you—why do you talk of it?

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER

And here, my friend, is the one who was that child. 1145

SHEPHERD

May you be cursed! Why won't you be quiet?

OEDIPUS

Do not attack him, old man. It is you
who should be punished.

SHEPHERD

What have I done wrong, O best of masters?

OEDIPUS

You would not describe the child he asks about. 1150

SHEPHERD

He doesn't know what he's saying—he wastes his breath.

OEDIPUS

If you won't speak willingly, I'll make you talk.

SHEPHERD

For the gods' sake, don't put an old man to the torture.

OEDIPUS

Quickly, someone, twist back his arms.

(OEDIPUS' men grab the SHEPHERD and twist back his arms.)

SHEPHERD

Wretched me! What do you want to know? 1155

OEDIPUS

Did you give the child he asks about to this very man?

SHEPHERD

I did. I wish I had died on that day.

OEDIPUS

You'll come to it now, if you don't speak the truth.

SHEPHERD

It will be worse for me, if I do speak.

OEDIPUS

This man, it seems, is determined to waste my time. 1160

SHEPHERD

No, no, I've already said I gave him the child.

OEDIPUS

Where did he come from? Your own house, or somewhere else?

SHEPHERD

Not mine. Someone gave him to me.

OEDIPUS

Which of the citizens here—which house?

SHEPHERD

For the gods' sake, do not ask me more, master! 1165

OEDIPUS

You're dead already if I have to ask again.

SHEPHERD

Then—if I must speak—it was someone from the house of Laius.

OEDIPUS

Slave—or kin?

SHEPHERD

Now it comes—the terrible thing I must say—

OEDIPUS

—and I to hear. Whatever must be heard. 1170

SHEPHERD

They said the child was his. She—she, the one inside—
your wife—she can best tell it all.

OEDIPUS: It was she who gave the child to you?

SHEPHERD: Yes, master.

OEDIPUS: Why?

SHEPHERD: So I would kill it.

OEDIPUS The poor woman—her own child. Why? Why? 1175
 SHEPHERD Because of the evil prophecies.

OEDIPUS: What prophecies?

SHEPHERD: That he would kill his parents.

OEDIPUS

Then why did you not obey—but give him to this man?

SHEPHERD

I felt so sorry for him, master, and thought
 he would take the child away to his own land.

But instead, he saved him for an awful fate. 1180

For if you are who he says you are, you were doomed from birth.

OEDIPUS

Alas, alas, it all comes clear!

O light of day, this is the last time I see you!

I am exposed as cursed—in my birth

and my marriage bed, and by those I should never have slain. 1185

(OEDIPUS rushes off through the double doors. SHEPHERD and ATTENDANTS exit toward Thebes, stage right, and the CORINTHIAN MESSENGER toward Corinth, stage left.)

FOURTH STASIMON

CHORUS Strophe A (1186–96)

O mortal generations,
 lives passing so quickly and
 equaling nothing. Show me
 a man who thinks he is happy
 and I will show you a man deluded—
 his life means nothing.
 Your fate, O wretched Oedipus,
 is the example I take,
 to prove the gods bless nothing.

Antistrophe A (1197–1203)

You it was who drew back your bow
 beyond mortal limit, and gained the blessing of wealth.
 By Zeus, it was you who destroyed the Sphinx,
 the oracle singer, with her crooked-taloned claws,

and stood like a tower
 against the death that threatened our land.
 Since then, we have called you our king
 and crowned you with grand honors,
 ruler of mighty Thebes.

Strophe B (1204–12)

And now, whose story is more wretched?
 Who has suffered a worse agony or more painful
 fate than you, your life in chaos.
 O famous Oedipus, how could the same deep harbor
 serve for son and father,
 sharing the same marriage bed and chamber;
 how could the furrows your father ploughed first
 be strong enough to bear you in silence?

Antistrophe B (1213–22)

Against your will, all-seeing Time has found you out
 and judged your marriage an abomination
 of begetting and begotten,
 parent and child as one.
 O son of Laius,
 would I never had seen you.
 Lamentations pour from my mouth.
 I must say this—for it was you
 who gave me the courage to live,
 but now bring darkness down into my eyes.

(Enter SECOND MESSENGER from the palace, through the double doors.)

SECOND MESSENGER

Honored nobles of this land
 what dreadful thing you are about to hear, and see
 with your minds' eye; what great woe will overcome you, 1225
 if you feel kinship to the house of Labdacus!
 Not even the mighty rivers, not Ister nor Phasis,
 could scour this house clean from pollution.
 So much hidden evil exposed,
 will it or no. The worst woes 1230
 seem those we bring upon ourselves.

CHORUS

What we know already
is bad enough. What more will you say?

SECOND MESSENGER

The shortest tale to tell and to hear—
our royal lady, Jocasta, is dead. 1235

CHORUS

Poor wretched woman—how?

SECOND MESSENGER

By her own hand.

But you are spared the worst—you did not see it all.
I'll tell you, though, what I can drag from my mind—
where it's already buried—of her pitiful end.

Frantic, she rushed into her rooms, 1240
to the marriage chamber, slammed the door behind her,
and threw herself onto the bed,
tearing her hair with desperate fingers
and calling on Laius as if he were not dead
to remember the night they lay together 1245
and made the one who would kill him—
and then left her to be a mother to polluted children.
Weeping, she cursed her evil double fate:
to bear a husband from a husband,
and children from her own son. 1250

I cannot tell you more about her death,
for then, Oedipus, roaring with grief,
burst into the hall and I could only watch him,
raging around the walls, begging one after another
to give him a sword—and tell him where 1255
to find it, that double-ploughed field:
his wife not a wife, his mother the mother to his children.
One of the gods must have shown him the way—
it was none of us who were near—we were too frightened,
because shouting in frenzy, he threw himself 1260
at the great double doors,
tore the hinges from their sockets, and fell into her room—

and we saw, O horrid spectacle, the woman hanging,
her neck entangled in a noose of coiled rope.

Then, with what a ghastly roar he leapt 1265
to loosen the cord and lay her gently on the ground.
Poor suffering man—and the horror,
to watch him tear away the beaten golden brooches
from each shoulder of her robe, lift them high
and plunge them into the sockets of his eyes, 1270
crying out that they should never see him again,
nor what he suffered nor the evil he did,
nor look on those they should not—
but only darkness, forever.
Like a dirge, over and over he chanted, 1275
lifting the pins, striking through his eyelids
until bloody matter spurted down his cheeks and beard—
not drops, but a gush like black rain
or hail drenching him.

All this was their doom, 1280
husband and wife—evils doubled between them.
The old happiness was finished,
but it had been real. Now,
anguish and despair, madness, dishonor and death—
every evil assailed them; no curse forgotten. 1285

CHORUS

And has he no relief from this agony?

SECOND MESSENGER

Hear how he shouts for someone to swing back the doors
and let all the people of Cadmus see the father-killer,
the mother— . . . ;—no, I will not speak that sinful word!—
that he will banish himself from his house and land, 1290
the curse invoked by his own mouth.
But he is feeble now, and needs a guide.
The shock and pain are more than he can bear.
Look—he is showing us—the gates are opening.
Soon you will see such a sight 1295
that would move to pity even those who hate him.
(Exit SECOND MESSENGER toward Thebes, stage right.)

(Enter OEDIPUS from the palace, through the double doors, wearing a mask that shows he is blind.)

CHORUS

Terrible, to witness how men suffer.

I have never seen worse suffering.

What frenzy possessed you,

O ill-fated one? What god, leaping 1300

from the furthest peaks, forced you

to the depths of ill-fortune?

Poor wretch!

I can hardly bear to watch you, though

there is so much I want to ask, 1305

so many things I want to learn and understand—

but even the sight of you makes me shudder.

OEDIPUS

Woe, woe, wretched I am indeed.

To what place am I being driven?

Where is my voice flying, carried before me? 1310

O fates, where are you rushing?

CHORUS

To a terrible place—silent, invisible.

SECOND KOMMOS

OEDIPUS

Strophe A (1313–20)

A cloud of darkness

overwhelms me—nameless

it conquers, driven

by a resistless wind.

Ah woe is me—the gadfly-goats

of memory torment me cruelly!

CHORUS

Who can wonder that you suffer doubly

these present evils and remembered ones.

OEDIPUS

Antistrophe A (1321–28)

Friends—

you are still here for me,

stay to take care of me

though I am blind—still loyal.
I sense you there and recognize your voices
though I am in darkness.

CHORUS

How could you dare such a dreadful thing—
to blind yourself? Which god drove you to it?

OEDIPUS

Strophe B (1329–49)

Apollo, my friends, it was Apollo
who made me do these acts which caused such suffering.
But it was my own hands, no one else's, that blinded me.
What need for eyes
when there was nothing I could see that gave me joy?

CHORUS

That is what happened—just as you say.

OEDIPUS

There was nothing worth seeing
or loving or hearing. Friends,
are there still joyful sounds to hear?
Take me away from this place
as fast as you can.
O friends, lead away this evil,
murderous man,
the most accursed,
the most hated of mortals—
even to the gods.

CHORUS

Equally wretched in your thoughts and fate—
better never to have known you!

OEDIPUS

Antistrophe B (1349–69)

Let him die, whoever he was, the one
who cut the fetters from my ankles
and saved me from death.
That was no favor.
If I had died then,

how much pain would have been kept
from my dear ones, and me.

CHORUS

If only it had been that way!

OEDIPUS

Then I would not have become the murderer
of my father nor be called
the defiler of the mother who bore me.
Now I am rejected by the gods—an unholy child—
the one who shared the bed of his engenderer.
If there are worse things yet
to be said or done,
be sure they are the lot of Oedipus.

CHORUS

You have not planned this well—better,
it seems to me, to be a dead man than a blind one.

OEDIPUS

Do not tell me how things are best done nor try to give
me advice. 1370
What sort of eyes would I need, to look
at my father when I meet him in Hades,
and at my poor mother? What I have done
to the two of them deserves worse than hanging.
And the sight of my children, conceived 1375
as they were, should I want to see them?
Far better not to have eyes.
And the city with its high towers, sacred statues, and temples
of the gods, from all of this—
Thebes, the city that nourished me— 1380
I, wretched creature, have banished myself, I myself insisting
that the impious one should be thrust out. Now, I am
the one revealed by the gods as defiled—of Laius' lineage.
My sinfulness exposed,
how could I face the people with open eyes? 1385
Never. And if it were possible
to block the stream of sound from entering my ears,
I would not have held back from sealing off my wretched body,

not only blind but able to hear nothing.
It would be good to be beyond the reach of dreadful thoughts. 1390

O Cithaeron, why did you accept me—why
did you not kill me at once, so that I could never
reveal my origins to any human?
O Polybus, and Corinth—my so-called
ancestor and home, what sort of creature, 1395
beautiful to see but foul underneath, you nurtured.
Now evil I am revealed, evil from birth.

Those three roads, the deep valley
and woods, the narrow place where they crossed
which drank my father's blood 1400
spilled by my hands—how can I forget,
having done this, how I arrived here, and what I did next?
Oh, marriages, marriages,
one after another: first to give me life
and then for me to sow my own seed in the same field 1405
and bring forth confusion of fathers, brothers, sons,
sisters, daughters, mothers, and wives—every
atrocious thing a human can do, I have done.

But it is wrong to talk of wrongful acts.
Quickly, for the gods' sake, hide me somewhere 1410
far from this land; kill me or throw me
into the sea so you will never have to look at me again.
Come, don't be frightened to touch such a wretched creature.
Don't flinch away—my sins are not contagious.
No mortal can bear them but me. 1415

CHORUS

For that which you ask, Creon is here
and will do whatever is necessary.
He alone remains to be the guardian of this land.

OEDIPUS

What can I say to him?
How can he trust me? Everything 1420
I've said and done to him was wrong.

(Enter CREON from Thebes, stage right.)

CREON

I do not come to mock you, Oedipus,
nor to reproach you for past crimes.

And you—*(he turns to CHORUS and ATTENDANTS)*

—if you have no regard

for human feelings, still you should respect 1425

the sun, Lord Helios, whose fire feeds all life, and not display

such an ill-fated being, which neither the earth,

the rain, nor the light of day can bear to see,

but hurry him into the house.

Only the closest kin should witness 1430

the shame of one of their own.

OEDIPUS

This is not what I expected, that you, the best of men,
would be so generous to the worst of men; so with the gods' help,
let me persuade you, for your sake more than mine—

CREON

What is it you wish to persuade me to do? 1435

OEDIPUS

Expel me from this land, as soon as you can, to some place
far from the sight of man, where I cannot hear another human voice.

CREON

I would already have done it—but first
I must learn if that is the god's will.

OEDIPUS

Everything cries out in his voice 1440
that I, the parricide and sinner, must die!

CREON

So it is said. Nevertheless, when unsure,
better to ask for a clear message.

OEDIPUS

You would consult the god for such a miserable creature?

CREON

And you must trust what he says. 1445

OEDIPUS

I charge you, I implore you,
to arrange her burial—she inside the house—
however you think fit. It is your right as her kin.
And as for me—never let this city
of my fathers be cursed by my presence again. 1450

I'll go to the peak of Cithaeron—
that is the name of the place my mother
and father chose for me to die—
so that I can fulfill their wish at last.
Yet I am sure that nothing can destroy me, neither sickness 1455
nor anything else. I have been saved for another fate—
strange and terrible.

I must let what is destined happen.
As for my sons, Creon,
no need to worry about them. They are grown men, 1460
and can look after themselves, wherever they go.
But my two daughters—pity the poor young creatures
who always were close to me, ate at my table,
shared all that I touched.

Take care of them—even let me 1465
touch them with these hands
and for a moment break the evil spell.
Please, my lord,
noble one—if I could feel them with my hands,
it would be as it was before, when I could see. 1470

(ANTIGONE and ISMENE, weeping, enter with ATTENDANT from the
palace, through the double doors.)

What am I saying?
By the gods—can I really hear my two darlings
weeping; has Creon, taking pity,
sent for my two dear children?
Am I right? 1475

CREON

You are right—I did arrange it, remembering
the joy they gave you in the past.

OEDIPUS

I wish you all good fortune—that a god
 will guard you and guide you along a better road than mine.
 Children, where are you? Come, 1480
 come to these brotherly hands
 which destroyed the shining eyes
 of one who never saw nor learned nor understood
 that he fathered you, O sister-children,
 in the same furrow where he himself was sown. 1485
 All I can do is weep for you both—I cannot bear to contemplate
 the bitterness of the rest of your lives
 and all you will suffer at the hands of men.
 If you ever should dare to join the people's celebrations
 you will go back home in tears 1490
 long before seeing the festival's ending.
 When the time for marriage comes,
 what sort of man would risk
 the scorn and reproaches, the insults
 and hints about your lineage, 1495
 yours and mine alike.
 Such an evil heritage: your father his father's killer,
 who ploughed where he was sown—the mother of his children—
 and you two come from the same place.
 Taunted with this, who would marry you? 1500
 No one, dear children—it is clear
 you must die virgin and barren.

O son of Menoeceus, you are the only father
 left to them—their natural parents
 no longer exist. Now, their only kin, 1505
 do not let them wander like beggars,
 husbandless, punished for my evils.
 Have pity on them, so young
 and vulnerable except for your protection.
 Noble Creon, I'll know you'll do it, by the touch of your hand. 1510
 And daughters, if you were old enough to understand
 I would give you much advice. But promise me this,
 wherever your future—to live a better life
 than the father who sired you.

CREON

Enough of weeping. Go now into the house. 1515

OEDIPUS: Though it's hard, I shall obey.

CREON: What must be done, in time will seem good.

OEDIPUS: You know my terms?

CREON: State them and I shall hear and know.

OEDIPUS: That you banish me from Thebes into exile.

CREON: You ask of me what only the gods can give.

OEDIPUS: But the gods hate me.

CREON: Then your wish will soon be granted.

OEDIPUS: Does that mean you consent? 1520

CREON: I don't equivocate, I only say what I mean.

OEDIPUS: I am ready, lead me inside.

CREON: The time has come—let go of the children.

OEDIPUS: Oh no, no—do not take them from me as well!

CREON: You cannot control everything.

All your former power is ended.

(Exit CREON, ANTIGONE, and ISMENE to the palace, through the double doors. Exit OEDIPUS through the double doors into the palace.)

CHORUS

Fellow Thebans, look on Oedipus—
 he who solved the famous riddles, the man of power 1525
 whom every citizen envied. See
 what a wave of terrible misfortune has submerged him.

Before that final day when one can say
 his life has reached its end with no distress or grief,
 no man should be called happy. 1530

(Exit CHORUS toward Thebes, stage right.)