

(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!