

OEDIPUS THE KING

SOPHOCLES

Translated by David Grene

INTRODUCTION TO SOPHOCLES' OEDIPUS THE KING

The date is unknown. Many scholars are inclined to place it about 427 BCE, shortly after the great plague at Athens, which they think may have suggested the plague at Thebes in the play. But there is no reliable evidence. We happen to be told that this play, on its first presentation, gained Sophocles only the second prize.

Aeschylus had already composed a Theban trilogy, of which an *Oedipus* (lost) was the second play, and we may assume that the largest outlines of the story were familiar to all. Or at least so much: that it was predicted that Oedipus would kill his father and marry his mother; that, unwittingly, he did both; and that these offenses were discovered and made public. Concerning details, there were certainly variations. There were different stories about how, when, and where Oedipus died; Euripides in his lost *Oedipus* had the hero blinded by the henchmen of Laius; the traditions about Antigone and Ismene are not fixed.

Still, in *Oedipus the King*, once the hero appears and announces his identity, the audience will know the great glaring facts about Oedipus and will realize almost at once that Oedipus does not know these facts. The situation makes for a story heavily charged with irony. The advance of the action consists of a probing into the past. Every “act” or episode brings in a new “helper”—Oedipus himself, Creon, Teiresias, Jocasta, Messenger, Herdsman—each of whom contributes his clue, until the whole secret is out. A fresh dimension of irony lies in the fact that the ghastly tragedy is mounted on the frame of a happy romance—the lost baby miraculously saved, thought dead but restored and united with his parents. The search for the murderer of Laius and the identity of Oedipus come out at the same point. The discovery is the climax.

Some have wanted to interpret *Oedipus the King* as a story of the punishment of pride, overconfidence, and hot temper. But such an interpretation is only of limited value. The deeds for which this hero would be “punished” were preordained before he was even conceived. Yet it is true that the endowments which make him grand—his impulsive intellect, his passion for truth, his integrity, and his pride—all contribute to the pattern of his fate, down to its final fulfillment in the realization of what that fate has been.

OEDIPUS THE KING

Characters

OEDIPUS, king of Thebes

A PRIEST

CREON, his brother-in-law (Jocasta's brother)

CHORUS of old men of Thebes

TEIRESIAS, an old blind prophet

JOCASTA, his wife (and mother)

FIRST MESSENGER

A HERDSMAN

SECOND MESSENGER

Scene: In front of the palace of Oedipus at Thebes. On one side stands the Priest with a crowd of children.

(Enter Oedipus, from the palace door.)

OEDIPUS

Children, young sons and daughters of old Cadmus,
why do you sit here with your suppliant crowns?
The town is heavy with a mingled burden
5 of sounds and smells, of groans and hymns and incense;
I did not think it fit that I should hear
of this from messengers but came myself—
I, Oedipus whom all men call the Great.

(To the Priest.)

You're old and they are young; come, speak for them.
10 What do you fear or want, that you sit here
suppliant? Indeed I'm willing to give all
that you may need; I would be very hard
should I not pity suppliants like these.

PRIEST

O ruler of my country, Oedipus,
15 you see our company around the altar;
you see our ages; some of us, like these,
who cannot yet fly far, and some of us
heavy with age; these children are the chosen
among the young, and I the priest of Zeus.
20 Within the market place sit others crowned
with suppliant garlands, at the double shrine
of Pallas and the temple where Ismenus
gives oracles by fire. King, you yourself
have seen our city reeling like a wreck
already; it can scarcely lift its prow
out of the depths, out of the bloody surf.
25 A blight is on the fruitful plants of the earth,
a blight is on the cattle in the fields,
a blight is on our women that no children
are born to them; a god that carries fire,
a deadly pestilence, is on our town,
strikes us and spares not, and the house of Cadmus
is emptied of its people while black Death
30 grows rich in groaning and in lamentation.

We have not come as suppliants to this altar
because we think of you as of a god,
but rather judging you the first of men
in all the chances of this life and when
we mortals have to do with more than man.
35 You came and by your coming saved our city,
freed us from tribute which we paid of old

to the Sphinx, cruel singer. This you did
in virtue of no knowledge we could give you,
in virtue of no teaching; it was god
that aided you, men say, and you are held
with god's assistance to have saved our lives.

40 Now Oedipus, greatest in all men's eyes,
here falling at your feet we all entreat you,
find us some strength for rescue.
Perhaps you'll hear a wise word from some god,
perhaps you will learn something from a man
(for I have seen that for those with experience
45 the outcomes of their counsels live the most).
Noblest of men, go, and raise up our city,
go—and give heed. For now this land of ours
calls you its savior since you saved it once.
So, let us never speak about your reign
50 as of a time when first our feet were set
secure and straight, but later fell to ruin.
Raise up our city, save it and set it straight.
Once you have brought us luck with happy omen;
be no less now in fortune.
If you will rule this land, as now you rule it,
55 better to rule it full of men than empty.
For neither tower nor ship is anything
when empty, and none live in it together.

OEDIPUS

I pity you, children. You have come full of longing,
but I have known the story before you told it
60 only too well. I know you are all sick,
yet there is not one of you, sick though you are,
that is as sick as I myself.
Your several sorrows each have single scope
and touch but one of you. My spirit groans
for city and myself and you at once.

65 You have not roused me like a man from sleep;
know that I have given many tears to this,
gone many ways wandering in thought.
But as I thought I found only one remedy
and that I took. I sent Menoeceus' son
Creon, Jocasta's brother, to Apollo,
70 to his Pythian temple,
that he might learn there by what act or word
I could save this city. As I count the days,
it worries me what he's doing; he is gone
75 far longer than he needed for the journey.
But when he comes, then, may I prove a villain,
if I shall not do all the god commands.

PRIEST

Your words are opportune: for here, your men
signal that Creon is this moment coming.

OEDIPUS

80 O holy lord Apollo, may his news
be bright for us and bring us light and safety.°

PRIEST

It is happy news, I think, for else his head
would not be crowned with sprigs of fruitful laurel.

(Enter Creon, from one side.)

OEDIPUS

We will know soon,
85 he's within hail. Lord Creon, my good kinsman,
what is the word you bring us from the god?

CREON

A good word—for even things quite hard to bear,
if the final issue turns out well,
I count complete good fortune.

OEDIPUS

What do you mean? What you have said so far
90 leaves me uncertain whether to trust or fear.

CREON

If you'll hear my news in the presence of these others
I am ready to speak, or else to go within.

OEDIPUS

Speak it to all; the grief I bear, I bear it
more for these people than for my own life.

CREON

95 I will tell you, then, what I heard from the god.
King Phoebus in plain words commanded us
to drive out a pollution from our land,
pollution grown ingrained within the soil;
drive it out, said the god, not cherish it,
till it's past cure.

OEDIPUS

What is the rite
of purification? How shall it be done?

CREON

100 By banishing a man, or expiation
of blood by blood, since it is murder guilt
which shakes our city in this destroying storm.

OEDIPUS

Who is this man whose fate the god pronounces?

CREON

My Lord, before you piloted the state
we had a king called Laius.

OEDIPUS

105 I know of him by hearsay. I never saw him.

CREON

The god commanded clearly: that we must
punish with force this dead man's murderers,
whoever they are.

OEDIPUS

Where are they in the world? Where would a trace
of this old crime be found? It would be hard
to guess where.

CREON

110 The guilt is in this land;
that which is sought can be found;
the unheeded thing escapes:
so said the god.

OEDIPUS

Was it at home, or in the countryside
that death came to Laius, or traveling abroad?

CREON

He left, he said himself, upon an embassy,
115 but never returned after he set out from home.

OEDIPUS

Was there no messenger, no fellow traveler
who saw what happened? Such a one might tell
something of use.

CREON

They were all killed save one. He fled in terror
and he could tell us nothing in clear terms
of what he knew, except for one thing only.

OEDIPUS

What was it?
120 If we could even find a slim beginning
in which to hope, we might discover much.

CREON

This man said that the robbers they encountered
were many and the hands that did the murder
were many; it was no man's single power.

OEDIPUS

How could a robber dare a deed like this
125 were he not helped with money from the city?

CREON

That indeed was thought. But Laius was dead
and in our trouble there was none to help.

OEDIPUS

What trouble was so great to hinder you
inquiring out the murder of your king?

CREON

130 The riddling Sphinx induced us to neglect
mysterious crimes and rather seek solution
of troubles at our feet.

OEDIPUS

I'll begin again and bring this all to light.
Fittingly King Phoebus took this care
about the dead, and you too, fittingly.
135 And justly you will see in me an ally,
a champion of this country and the god.
For when I drive pollution from the land
I will not serve a distant friend's advantage,
but act in my own interest. Whoever
he was that killed the king may readily
140 wish to dispatch me with his murderous hand;
so helping the dead king I help myself.

Come, children, take your suppliant boughs and go;
up from the altars now. Call the assembly
and let the people of Cadmus meet and know

145 that I'll do everything. God will decide
whether we shall prosper or shall fail.

PRIEST

Rise, children—it was this we came to seek,
which of himself the king now offers us.
May Phoebus who gave us the oracle
150 come to our rescue and stop the plague.

(Exit all. The Chorus enters from the side.)

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE A

*What is the sweet spoken word of god from the shrine of Pytho
rich in gold
that has come to glorious Thebes?
I am stretched on the rack of doubt, and terror and trembling hold
155 my heart, O Delian Healer, and I worship full of fears
for what doom you will bring to pass, new or renewed in the
revolving years.
Speak to me, immortal voice,
child of golden Hope.*

ANTISTROPHE A

*First I call on you, Athena, deathless daughter of Zeus,
160 and Artemis, Earth upholder,
who sits in the midst of the marketplace in the throne which
men call Fame,
and Phoebus, the far-shooter, three averters of Fate,
165 come to us now, if ever before, when ruin rushed upon the state,
you drove destruction's flame away
out of our land.*

STROPHE B

*Our sorrows defy number;
all the ship's timbers are rotten;*

170 *taking of thought is no spear for the driving away of the plague.*
There are no growing children in this famous land;
there are no women bearing the pangs of childbirth.
175 *You may see them one with another, like birds swift on the wing,*
quicker than fire unmastered,
speeding away to the coast of the Western god.

ANTISTROPHE B

In the unnumbered deaths
180 *of its people the city dies;*
the children that are born lie dead on the naked earth
unpitied, spreading contagion of death; and grey-haired mothers
and wives
185 *everywhere stand at the altar's edge, suppliant, moaning;*
the hymn to the healing god rings out, but with it the wailing
voices are blended.
From these our sufferings grant us, O golden Daughter of Zeus,
glad-faced deliverance.

STROPHE C

190 *There is no clash of brazen shields but our fight is with the war god,*
a war god ringed with the cries of men, a savage god who burns us;
grant that he turn in racing course backward out of our country's bounds
195 *to the great palace of Amphitrite or where the waves of the Thracian sea*
deny the stranger safe anchorage.
Whatsoever escapes the night
at last the light of day revisits;°
so smite him, Father Zeus,
200 *beneath your thunderbolt,*
for you are the lord of the lightning, the lightning that carries fire.

ANTISTROPHE C

And your unconquered arrow shafts, winged by the golden-corded bow,
Lycian king, I beg to be at our side for help;
and the gleaming torches of Artemis with which she scours the

205 *Lycian hills,*
and I call on the god with the turban of gold, who gave his name
210 *to this country of ours,*
the Bacchic god with the wind-flushed face,
you who travel with the maenad company crying Euhoi,
come with your torch of pine;
215 *for the god that is our enemy is a god unhonored among the gods.*

(Enter Oedipus.)

OEDIPUS

For what you ask me—if you will hear my words,
and hearing welcome them and fight the plague,
you will find strength and lightening of your load.
Listen now to me; what I say to you, I say
220 as one that is a stranger to the story
as stranger to the deed. For I would not
be far upon the track if I alone
were tracing it without a clue or helper.
But since, though late, I also have become
a citizen among you, citizens—
now I proclaim to all the men of Thebes:
who so among you knows the murderer
225 by whose hand Laius, son of Labdacus,
died—I command him to tell everything
to me—yes, though he fears himself to take the blame
on his own head; for bitter punishment
he shall have none, but leave this land unharmed.
230 Or if he knows the murderer, another,
maybe a foreigner, still let him speak the truth.
For I will pay him and be grateful, too.
But if you shall keep silence, if perhaps
some one of you, to shield a guilty friend,
or for his own sake shall reject my words—
235 hear what I shall do then:

I forbid that man, whoever he be, my land,
this land where I hold sovereignty and throne;
and I forbid any to welcome him
or give him greeting or make him a sharer
in sacrifice or offering to the gods,
240 or give him water for his hands to wash.
I command all to drive him from their homes,
since he is our pollution, as the oracle
of Pytho's god proclaimed him now to me.
So I stand forth a champion of the god
245 and of the man who died.
Upon the murderer I invoke this curse—^o
whether he is one man and all unknown,
or one of many—may he wear out his life
in misery to miserable doom!
250 If with my knowledge he lives at my hearth
I pray that I myself may feel my curse.
 On you I lay my charge to fulfill all this
for me, for the god, and for this land of ours
destroyed and blighted, by the gods forsaken.
255 Even were this no matter of god's ordinance
it did not fit you so to leave it lie,
unpurified, since a great man is dead,
a king. Indeed, you should have searched it out.
Since I am now the holder of his office,
260 and have his bed and wife that once was his,
and had his line not been unfortunate
we would have children in common—(but fortune leaped
upon his head)—because of all these things,
265 I fight in his defense as for my father,
and I shall try all means to take the murderer
of Laius the son of Labdacus
the son of Polydorus and before him
of Cadmus and before him of Agenor.

Those who do not obey me, may the gods
270 grant no crops springing from the ground they plough
nor children to their women! May a fate
like this, or one still worse than this, consume them!
For you whom these words please, the other Thebans,
may Justice as your ally and all the gods
275 live with you, blessing you now and for ever!

CHORUS LEADER

As you have held me to my oath, I speak:
I neither killed the king nor can declare
the killer; but since Phoebus set the quest
it is his part to tell us who has done it.

OEDIPUS

280 Right; but to put compulsion on the gods
against their will—no man can do that.

CHORUS LEADER

May I then say what I think second best?

OEDIPUS

If there's a third best, too, spare not to tell it.

CHORUS LEADER

I know that what the lord Teiresias
285 sees is most often what the lord Apollo
sees. If you should inquire of this from him
you might find out most clearly.

OEDIPUS

Even in this my actions have not been slow.
On Creon's word I have sent two messengers,
and why the prophet is not here already
I have been wondering.

CHORUS LEADER

His skill apart,

290 there is besides only an old faint story.

OEDIPUS

What is it? I look at every rumor.

CHORUS LEADER

It was said that he was killed by certain wayfarers.

OEDIPUS

I heard that, too, but no one sees who did it.°

CHORUS LEADER

Yet if he has a share of fear at all,
295 his courage will not stand firm, hearing your curse.

OEDIPUS

The man who in the doing did not shrink
will fear no word.

CHORUS LEADER

Here comes his prosecutor:
led by these men the godly prophet comes,
in whom alone of humankind the truth
is his by nature.

(Enter Teiresias from the side, led by a boy.)

OEDIPUS

300 Teiresias, you are versed in everything,
things teachable and things not to be spoken,
things of the heaven and earth-creeping things.
You have no eyes but in your mind you know
with what a plague our city is afflicted.
My lord, in you alone we find a champion,
in you alone one that can rescue us.
305 Perhaps you have not heard the messengers,
but Phoebus sent in answer to our sending
an oracle declaring that our freedom

from this disease would only come when we
should learn the names of those who killed King Laius,
and kill them or expel from our country.

310 Do not begrudge us messages from birds,
or any other way of prophecy
within your skill; save yourself and the city,
save me; save all of us from this pollution
that lies on us because of that dead man.
We are in your hands; it's a man's most noble labor
315 to help another when he has the means and power.

TEIRESIAS

Alas, how terrible is wisdom when
it brings no profit to the man that's wise!
This I knew well, but had forgotten it,
else I would not have come here.

OEDIPUS

What is this?
How gloomy you are now you've come!

TEIRESIAS

Let me
320 go home. It will be easiest for us both
to bear our several destinies to the end
if you will follow my advice.

OEDIPUS

You'd rob us
of this your gift of prophecy? You talk
as one who had no care for law nor love
for Thebes who reared you.

TEIRESIAS

Yes, but I see that even your own words
325 miss the mark; therefore I must fear for mine.

OEDIPUS

For god's sake if you know of anything,
do not turn from us; all of us kneel to you,
all of us here, your suppliants.

TEIRESIAS

All of you here know nothing. I will not
bring to the light of day my troubles, mine—
rather than call them yours.

OEDIPUS

What do you mean?

330 You know of something but refuse to speak.
Would you betray us and destroy the city?

TEIRESIAS

I will not bring this pain upon us both,
neither on you nor on myself. Why is it
you question me and waste your labor? I
will tell you nothing.

OEDIPUS

335 You would provoke a stone! Tell us, you villain,
tell us, and do not stand there quietly
unmoved, unhelpful, set on doing nothing.

TEIRESIAS

You blame my temper but you do not see
your own that lives within you; so you chide
me instead.

OEDIPUS

340 Who would not feel his temper rise
at words like these with which you shame our city?

TEIRESIAS

Of themselves things will come, although I hide them
and breathe no word of them.

OEDIPUS

Since they will come
tell them to me.

TEIRESIAS

I will say nothing further.
Against this answer let your temper rage
as wildly as you will.

OEDIPUS

Indeed I am
345 so angry I shall not hold back a jot
of what I think. For I would have you know
I think you were coplotter of the deed
and doer of the deed save insofar
as for the actual killing. Had you had eyes
I would have said alone you murdered him.

TEIRESIAS

350 Yes? Then I warn you faithfully to keep
the letter of your proclamation and
from this day forth to speak no word of greeting
to these nor me; you are the land's pollution.

OEDIPUS

How shamelessly you started up this taunt!
355 How do you think you will escape?

TEIRESIAS

I have.
I have escaped; the truth is what I cherish
and that's my strength.

OEDIPUS

And who has taught you truth?
Not your profession surely!

TEIRESIAS

You have taught me,
for you have made me speak against my will.

OEDIPUS

Speak what? Tell me again that I may learn it better.

TEIRESIAS

360 Did you not understand before or would you
provoke me into speaking?

OEDIPUS

I did not grasp it,
not so to call it known. Say it again.

TEIRESIAS

I say you are the murderer of the king
whose murderer you seek.

OEDIPUS

Not twice you shall
say ghastly things like this and stay unpunished.

TEIRESIAS

Shall I say more to tempt your anger further?

OEDIPUS

365 As much as you wish; it will be said in vain.

TEIRESIAS

I say that, unknowing, with those you love the best
you live in foulest shame unconsciously
and do not see where you are in calamity.

OEDIPUS

Do you imagine you can always talk
like this, and live to rejoice at it hereafter?

TEIRESIAS

Yes, if the truth has anything of strength.

OEDIPUS

370 It has, but not for you; it has no strength
for you because you are blind in mind and ears
as well as in your eyes.

TEIRESIAS

You are a poor wretch
to taunt me with the very insults which
everyone soon will heap upon yourself.

OEDIPUS

Your life is one long night so that you cannot
375 hurt me or any other who sees the light.

TEIRESIAS

It is not fate that I should be your ruin,
Apollo is enough; it is his care
to work this out.

OEDIPUS

Was this your own design
or Creon's?

TEIRESIAS

Creon is no hurt to you.
but you are to yourself.

OEDIPUS

380 Wealth, kingly rule, and skill outmatching skill
for the contrivance of an envied life!
How great a store of jealousy you are hoarding,
if, for the sake of the office which I hold,
given me by the city, not sought by me,
385 my friend Creon, friend from the first and loyal,
thus secretly attacks me, secretly
desires to drive me out and secretly
suborns this juggling, trick-devising quack,

this wily beggar who has only eyes
for his own gains, but blindness in his skill.

390 For, tell me, where have you seen clear, Teiresias,
with your prophetic mind? When the dark singer,
the Sphinx, was in your country, did you speak
word of deliverance to these citizens?
Yet solving the riddle then was not the province
of a chance comer: it was a prophet's task,
and plainly you had no such gift of prophecy
395 from birds nor otherwise from any god
to glean a word of knowledge. But I came,
Oedipus, who knew nothing, and I stopped her.
I solved the riddle by my wit alone.
Mine was no knowledge got from birds. And now
you would expel me,
400 because you think that you will find a place
by Creon's throne. I think you will be sorry,
both you and your accomplice, for your plot
to drive me out. And did I not regard you
as an old man, some suffering would have taught you
that what was in your heart was treason.

CHORUS LEADER

We look at this man's words and yours, my king,
405 and we find both have spoken them in anger.
We need no angry words but only thought
how we may best hit the god's meaning for us.

TEIRESIAS

If you are king, at least I have the right
no less to speak in my defense against you.
Of that much I am master. I am no slave
410 of yours, but Loxias', and so I shall not
enroll myself with Creon for my patron.
Since you have taunted me with being blind,

here is my word for you.

You have your eyes but see not where you are
in evil, nor where you live, nor whom you live with.

415 Do you know who your parents are? Unknowing
you are an enemy to kith and kin
in death, beneath the earth, and in this life.
A deadly footed, double-striking curse,
from father and mother both, shall drive you forth
out of this land, with darkness on your eyes,
that now have such straight vision. Shall there be
420 a place will not be harbor to your cries,
a corner of Cithaeron will not ring^o
in echo to your laments, soon, soon,
when you shall learn the secret of your marriage,
which steered you to a haven in this house,
haven no haven, after lucky voyage?
And of the multitude of other evils
425 establishing a grim equality^o
between you and your children, you know nothing.
So, muddy with contempt my words and Creon's!
Misery shall grind no man as it will you.

OEDIPUS

Is it endurable that I should hear
430 such words from him? Go and a curse go with you!
Quick, home with you! Away from my house at once!

TEIRESIAS

I would not have come either, had you not called me.

OEDIPUS

I did not know then you would talk like a fool—
or it would have been long before I called you.

TEIRESIAS

435 I am a fool then, as it seems to you—

but to the parents who begot you, wise.

OEDIPUS

What parents? Stop! Who are they of all the world?

TEIRESIAS

This day will show your birth and will destroy you.

OEDIPUS

How needlessly your riddles darken everything.

TEIRESIAS

440 But aren't you best at answering such riddles?

OEDIPUS

Yes. Taunt me where you will find me great.

TEIRESIAS

It is this very luck that has destroyed you.

OEDIPUS

I do not care, if it has saved this city.

TEIRESIAS

Well, I will go. Come, boy, lead me away.

OEDIPUS

445 Yes, lead him off. So long as you are here,
you are a stumbling block and a vexation;
once gone, you will not trouble me again.

TEIRESIAS

I have said
what I came here to say not fearing your
countenance: there is no way you can hurt me.

450 I tell you, king, this man, this murderer
(whom you have long declared you are in search of,
indicting him in threatening proclamation
as murderer of Laius)—he is here.

In name he is a stranger among citizens
but soon he will be shown to be homegrown,
true native Theban, and he'll have no joy
of the discovery: blindness for sight
455 and beggary for riches his exchange,
he shall go journeying to a foreign country
tapping his way before him with a stick.
He shall be proved father and brother both
to his own children in his house; to her
that gave him birth, a son and husband both;
a fellow sower in his father's bed
460 with that same father that he murdered.
Go within, reckon that out, and if you find me
mistaken, say I have no skill in prophecy.

(Exit separately, Teiresias to the side, Oedipus indoors.)

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE A

*Who is the man proclaimed
by Delphi's prophetic rock
465 as the bloody-handed murderer,
the doer of deeds that none dare name?
Now is the time for him to run
with a stronger foot
than wind-swift Pegasus
470 for the child of Zeus leaps in arms upon him
with fire and the lightning bolt,
and terribly close on his heels
are the Fates that never miss.*

ANTISTROPHE A

*Lately from snowy Parnassus
clearly the voice flashed forth,
475 bidding everyone track him down,*

*the unknown murderer.
In the savage forests he lurks and in
the caverns like
the mountain bull.
He is sad and lonely, and lonely his feet^o
480 that carry him far from the navel of earth;
but its prophecies, ever living,
flutter around his head.*

STROPHE B

*The skilled bird-prophet bewilders me terribly;
I do not approve what was said
485 nor can I deny it.
I do not know what to say;
I am in a flutter of foreboding;
I do not see the present
nor the past; I never heard of a quarrel between
the sons of Labdacus and of Polybus,
490 neither in the past nor now,
that I might bring as proof
in attacking the popular fame
495 of Oedipus, seeking
to take vengeance for undiscovered
death in the line of Labdacus.*

ANTISTROPHE B

*Truly Zeus and Apollo are wise
and in human things all-knowing;
but amongst men there is no
distinct judgment, between the prophet
500 and me—which of us is right.
One man may pass another in wisdom
but I would never agree
with those that find fault with the king
505 till I should see the word*

*proved right beyond doubt. For once
in visible form the Sphinx
came against him, and all of us
510 saw his wisdom and in that test
he saved the city. So he will not be condemned by my mind.*

(Enter Creon, from the side.)

CREON

Citizens, I have come because I heard
deadly words spread about me, that the king
515 accuses me. I cannot take that from him.
If he believes that in these present troubles
he has been wronged by me in word or deed
I do not want to live on with the burden
of such a scandal on me. The report
520 injures me doubly and most vitally—
for I'll be called a traitor to my city
and traitor also to my friends and you.

CHORUS LEADER

Perhaps it was a sudden gust of anger
that forced that insult from him, and no judgment.

CREON

525 But did he say that it was in compliance
with schemes of mine that the seer told him lies?

CHORUS LEADER

Yes, he said that, but why, I do not know.

CREON

Were his eyes straight in his head? Was his mind right
when he accused me in this fashion?

CHORUS LEADER

530 I do not know; I have no eyes to see
what princes do. Here comes the king himself.

(Enter Oedipus, from the palace.)

OEDIPUS

You, sir, how is it you come here? Have you so much
brazen-faced daring that you venture to
my house although you are proved manifestly
the murderer of that man, and though you tried,
535 openly, highway robbery of my crown?
For god's sake, tell me what you saw in me,
what cowardice or what stupidity,
that made you lay a plot like this against me?
Did you imagine I should not observe
your crafty scheme that stole upon me or
seeing it, take no means to counter it?
540 Was it not stupid of you to make the attempt,
to try to hunt down royal power without
the people at your back or friends? For only
with the people at your back and money can
this hunt end in the capture of a crown.

CREON

Do you know what you're doing? Will you listen
to words to answer yours, and then pass judgment?

OEDIPUS

545 You're quick to speak, but I am slow to grasp you,
for I have found you dangerous—and my foe.

CREON

First of all hear what I shall say to that.

OEDIPUS

At least don't tell me that you are not guilty.

CREON

If you think obstinacy without wisdom
550 a valuable possession, you are wrong.

OEDIPUS

And you are wrong if you believe that one
can harm a kinsman and then not be punished.

CREON

This is but just—
but tell me, then, of what offense I'm guilty.

OEDIPUS

555 Did you or did you not urge me to send
to this prophetic mumbler?

CREON

I did indeed,
and I shall stand by what I told you.

OEDIPUS

How long ago is it since Laius ...

CREON

What about Laius? I don't understand.

OEDIPUS

560 Vanished—died—was murdered?

CREON

It is long,
a long, long time to reckon.

OEDIPUS

Was this prophet
in the profession then?

CREON

He was, and honored
as highly as he is today.

OEDIPUS

At that time did he say a word about me?

CREON

565 Never, at least when I was near him.

OEDIPUS

You never made a search for the killer?°

CREON

We searched, indeed, but never learned of anything.

OEDIPUS

Why did our wise old friend not say this then?

CREON

I don't know; and when I know nothing, I usually hold my tongue.

OEDIPUS

570 You know this much,
and can declare it if you are truly loyal.

CREON

What is it? If I know, I'll not deny it.

OEDIPUS

That he would not have said that I killed Laius had he not met with you first.

CREON

You know yourself
whether he said this, but I demand that I
575 should hear as much from you as you from me.

OEDIPUS

Then hear—I'll not be proved a murderer.

CREON

Well, then. You're married to my sister?

OEDIPUS

Yes,

that I am not disposed to deny.

CREON

 You rule
this country giving her an equal share
in the government?

OEDIPUS

 Yes, everything she wants
580 she has from me.

CREON

 And I, as third with you,
am rated as the equal of you both?

OEDIPUS

 Yes, and it's there you've proved yourself false friend.

CREON

Not if you will reflect on it as I do.
Consider, first, if you think anyone
585 would choose to rule and fear rather than rule
and sleep peacefully, if the power
were equal in both cases. I, at least,
I was not born with such a frantic yearning
to be a king—but to do what kings do.
And so it is with everyone who has learned
590 wisdom and self-control. As it stands now,
I get from you all the prizes—and without fear.
But if I were the king myself, I must
do much that went against the grain.
How should despotic rule seem sweeter to me
than painless power and an assured authority?
I am not so deluded yet that I
595 want other honors than those that come with profit.
Now all men wish me joy; every man greets me;
those who want things from you all fawn on me,

success for them depends upon my favor.
Why should I let all this go to win that?
600 My mind would not be traitor if it's wise;^o
I am no treason lover, by my nature,
nor could I ever bear to join a plot.

Prove what I say. Go to the oracle
at Pytho and inquire about the answers,
if they are as I told you. For the rest,
605 if you discover I laid any plot
together with the seer, kill me, I say,
not only by your vote but by my own.
But do not charge me on obscure opinion
without some proof to back it. It's not just
610 lightly to count bad men as honest ones,
nor honest men as bad. To throw away
an honest friend is, as it were, to throw
your life away, which a man loves the best.
In time you'll know all this with certainty;
time is the only test of honest men,
615 one day is space enough to know who's bad.

CHORUS LEADER

His words are wise, king, for one who fears to fall.
Those who are quick of temper are not safe.

OEDIPUS

When he that plots against me secretly
moves quickly, I must quickly counterplot.
620 If I wait taking no decisive measure
his business will be done, and mine be spoiled.

CREON

What do you want to do then? Banish me?

OEDIPUS

No, certainly; kill you, not banish you.

CREON

I do not understand why you resent me so.°

.

OEDIPUS

625 You speak as if you'll not listen nor obey.

CREON

I do not think that you've your wits about you.

OEDIPUS

For my own interests, yes.

CREON

But for mine, too,
you should think equally.

OEDIPUS

You are a traitor.

CREON

Suppose you do not understand?

OEDIPUS

But yet
I must be ruler.

CREON

Not if you rule badly.

OEDIPUS

O, city, city!

CREON

630 I too have some share
in the city; it is not yours alone.

CHORUS LEADER

Stop, my lords! Here—and in the nick of time
I see Jocasta coming from the house;

with her help settle the quarrel that now stirs you.

(Enter Jocasta, from the palace.)

JOCASTA

For shame! Why have you raised this foolish squabbling?

635 Are you not ashamed to air your private
troubles when the country's sick? Go inside, Oedipus,
and you, too, Creon, go to your house. Don't magnify
your nothing troubles.

CREON

My sister: Oedipus,
your husband, thinks he has the right to do
640 terrible wrongs to me—he is choosing
between either banishing or killing me.°

OEDIPUS

He's right, Jocasta; for I find him plotting
with evil tricks against my person.

CREON

May never god bless me! May I die
accursed, if I've been guilty in any way
645 of any of the charges you bring against me!

JOCASTA

I beg you, Oedipus, trust him in this,
spare him for the sake of his oath to god,
for my sake, and the sake of those who stand here.

CHORUS [*singing in what follows, while Oedipus speaks*]

STROPHE

*Think carefully: be gracious, be merciful,
650 we beg of you.*

OEDIPUS

In what would you have me yield?

CHORUS

*He has never been foolish in the past.
He is strong in his oath now.
Spare him.*

OEDIPUS

Do you know what you ask?

CHORUS

Yes.

OEDIPUS

655 Tell me then.

CHORUS

*He has been your friend, he has sworn an oath; do not cast him
away dishonored on an obscure conjecture.*

OEDIPUS

I would have you know that this request of yours
really requests my death or banishment.

CHORUS

660 *May the sun god, king of gods, forbid!
May I die without god's blessing, without friends' help,
if I had any such thought.*
665 *But my spirit is broken by my unhappiness for my wasting country;
and this would but add troubles amongst ourselves to the other troubles.*

OEDIPUS

Well, let him go then—if I must die ten times for it,
670 or be sent out dishonored into exile.
It is your lips praying for him I pitied,
not his; wherever he is, I shall hate him.

CREON

I see you sulk in yielding and you're dangerous
when you are out of temper; natures like yours

675 are justly hardest for themselves to bear.

OEDIPUS

Leave me alone! Take yourself off, I tell you.

CREON

I'll go. You have not known me, but they have,
and they have known my innocence.

(Exit Creon, to the side.)

CHORUS [*singing in what follows, while Jocasta and Oedipus speak*]

ANTISTROPHE

Won't you take him inside, lady?

JOCASTA

680 Yes, when I've found out what was the matter.

CHORUS

*There was some misconceived suspicion
of a story, and on the other side
the sting of injustice.*

JOCASTA

So, on both sides?

CHORUS

Yes.

JOCASTA

What was the story?

CHORUS

685 *I think it best, in the interests of our country,
to leave it where it ended.*

OEDIPUS

You see where you have ended, straight of judgment
although you are, by softening my anger.

CHORUS

690 *Sir, I have said before and I say again—
be sure that I would have been proved a madman,
bankrupt in sane council,
if I should put you away, you who steered the country I love safely*
695 *when it was crazed with troubles. God grant that now, too,
you may prove a fortunate guide for us.*

JOCASTA

Tell me, my lord, I beg of you, what was it
that roused your anger so?

OEDIPUS

700 Yes, I will tell you.
I honor you more than I honor them.
It was Creon and the plots he laid against me.

JOCASTA

Tell me—if you can clearly tell the quarrel—

OEDIPUS

Creon says that I'm the murderer of Laius.

JOCASTA

Of his own knowledge or on information?

OEDIPUS

705 He sent this rascal prophet to me, since
he keeps his own mouth clean of any guilt.

JOCASTA

Do not concern yourself about this matter;
listen to me and learn that human beings
have no part in the craft of prophecy.
710 Of that I'll show you a short proof.
There was an oracle once that came to Laius—
I will not say that it was Phoebus' own,
but it was from his servants—and it told him

that it was fate that he should die a victim
at the hands of his own son, a son to be born
of Laius and me. But, see now, he,
715 the king, was killed by foreign highway robbers
at a place where three roads meet—so goes the story;
and for the son—before three days were out
after his birth King Laius pierced his ankles
and by the hands of others cast him forth
upon a pathless hillside. So Apollo
720 failed to fulfill his oracle to the son,
that he should kill his father, and to Laius
also proved false in that the thing he feared,
death at his son's hands, never came to pass.
So clear in this case were the oracles,
describing the future. Give them no heed, I say;
what the god discovers need of, easily
725 he will show to us himself.

OEDIPUS

O dear Jocasta,
as I hear this from you, what wandering in my soul
now comes upon me—what turbulence of mind.

JOCASTA

What trouble is it, that you turn again
and speak like this?

OEDIPUS

I thought I heard you say
730 that Laius was killed at a crossroads.

JOCASTA

Yes, that was how the story went and still
that word goes round.

OEDIPUS

Where is this place, Jocasta,

where he was murdered?

JOCASTA

Phocis is the country
and the road splits there, one of two roads from Delphi,
another comes from Daulia.

OEDIPUS

735

How long ago was this?

JOCASTA

The news came to the city just before
you became king and all men's eyes looked to you.
What is it, Oedipus, that's in your mind?

OEDIPUS

What have you designed, O Zeus, to do with me?

JOCASTA

What is the thought that troubles your heart?

OEDIPUS

740

Don't ask me yet—tell me of Laius—
How did he look? How old or young was he?

JOCASTA

He was a tall man and his hair was grizzled
already—partly white—and in his form
not unlike you.

OEDIPUS

745

O god, I think I have
called curses on myself in ignorance.

JOCASTA

What do you mean? I'm frightened now, my king,
when I look at you.

OEDIPUS

I have a deadly fear
that the old seer had eyes. You'll show me more
if you can tell me one more thing.

JOCASTA

I will.
I'm frightened—but you ask and I will listen,
I'll tell you all I know.

OEDIPUS

750 How was his company?
Had he few with him when he went this journey,
or many servants, as would suit a prince?

JOCASTA

In all there were but five, and among them
a herald; and one carriage for the king.

OEDIPUS

755 It's plain—it's plain—who was it told you this?

JOCASTA

The only servant that escaped safe home.

OEDIPUS

Is he at home now?

JOCASTA

No, when he came home again
and saw that you were king and Laius dead,
760 he came to me and touched my hand and begged
that I should send him to the fields to be
my shepherd and so he might see the city
as far off as he could. So I
sent him away. He was an honest man,
as slaves go, and was worthy of far more
than what he asked of me.

OEDIPUS

765 So could he quickly now be brought back here?

JOCASTA

It can be done. Why is your heart so set on this?

OEDIPUS

O dear Jocasta, I am full of fears
that I have spoken far too much; and therefore
I wish to see this shepherd.

JOCASTA

He will come;
but, Oedipus, I think I too deserve
770 to know what is it that disquiets you.

OEDIPUS

It shall not be kept from you, since my mind
has gone so far with its forebodings. Whom
should I confide in rather than you? Who is there
of more importance to me who have passed
through such a fortune?
Polybus was my father, king of Corinth,
775 and Merope, the Dorian, my mother.
I was held greatest of the citizens
in Corinth till a curious chance befell me,
as I shall tell you—curious, indeed,
but hardly worth the store I set upon it.
There was a dinner and at it was a man,
a drunken man, who accused me in his drink
780 of being bastard. I was furious
but held my temper under for that day.
Next day I went and taxed my parents with it;
they took the insult ill and came down hard
on the man who had uttered it. So I
785 was comforted with regard to the two of them;

but still this thing rankled with me, for the story
kept on recurring. And so I went at last
to Pytho, though my parents did not know.
But Phoebus sent me home again unhonored
in what I came to learn, but he foretold
790 other and desperate horrors to befall me,
that I was fated to lie with my mother,
and show to daylight an accursed breed
which men would not endure, and I was doomed
to be murderer of the father that begot me.

When I heard this I fled, and in the days
795 that followed I would measure from the stars
the whereabouts of Corinth—yes, I fled
to somewhere where I should not see fulfilled
the infamies told in that dreadful oracle.
And as I journeyed I came to the place
where, as you say, this king met with his death.
800 Jocasta, I will tell you the whole truth.
When I was near that branching of the crossroads,
going on foot, I was encountered by
a herald and a carriage with a man in it,
just as you tell me. He that led the way
805 and the old man himself wanted to thrust me
out of the road by force. I became angry
and struck the coachman who was pushing me.
When the old man saw this he waited for his chance,
and as I passed he struck me from his carriage,
full on the head with his two-pointed goad.
810 He paid for this in full, and more: my stick
quickly struck him backward from the car
and he rolled out of it. And then I killed them
all. If it happens there was any tie
of kinship between this man and Laius,
815 who is there now more miserable than I,

what man on earth so hated by the gods,
since neither citizen nor foreigner
may welcome me at home or even greet me,
but drive me out of doors? And it is I,
820 I and no other have so cursed myself.
And I pollute the bed of him I killed
by the hands that killed him. Was I not born evil?
Am I not utterly unclean, if I have to flee
and in my banishment not even see
my kindred nor set foot in my own country,
825 or otherwise my fate is to be yoked
in marriage with my mother and kill my father,
Polybus who begot me and who reared me?
Would not one rightly judge and say that on me
these things were sent by some malignant god?
830 O no, no, no—O holy majesty
of god on high, may I not see that day!
May I be gone out of men's sight before
I see the deadly taint of this disaster
come upon me.

CHORUS LEADER

My lord, we fear this too. But till this man
835 is here and you have heard his story, hope.

OEDIPUS

Yes, I have just this much of hope as well:
to wait until the herdsman comes.

JOCASTA

And what
will you want with him, once he has appeared?

OEDIPUS

I'll tell you; if I find that his story is
840 the same as yours, I will be clear of guilt.

JOCASTA

What in particular did you learn from my story?

OEDIPUS

You said that he spoke of highway robbers who
killed Laius. Now if he still uses that
same number, I was not the one who killed him.
One man cannot be the same as many.

845 But if he speaks clearly of one man on his own,
indeed the guilty balance tilts toward me.

JOCASTA

Be sure, at least, that this was how he told the story;
and he cannot unsay this now, for everyone
850 in the city heard it—not just I alone.

But even if he turns from what he said then,
not ever will he prove, my lord, that rightly
the murder of Laius squares with Apollo's words,
Apollo, who declared that by his son
from me he would be killed. And yet
855 that poor creature surely did not kill him—
for he himself died first. As far as prophecy
goes, henceforward I won't look to the right
nor to the left hand either.

OEDIPUS

860 Your opinion's sound. But yet, send someone for
the peasant to bring him here; do not neglect it.

JOCASTA

I will send, and quickly. Now let us go indoors.
I will do nothing except what pleases you.

(Exit, into the palace.)

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE A

*May destiny ever find me
pious in word and deed*
865 *prescribed by the laws that live on high:
laws begotten in the clear air of heaven,
whose only father is Olympus;
no mortal nature brought them to birth,*
870 *no forgetfulness shall lull them to sleep;
for god is great in them and grows not old.*

ANTISTROPHE A

*Insolence breeds the tyrant, insolence
if it is glutted with a surfeit, unseasonable, unprofitable,*
875 *climbs to the rooftop and plunges
sheer down to the ruin that must be,
and there its feet are no service.*
880 *But I pray that the god may never
abolish the eager ambition that profits the state.
For I shall never cease to hold the god as our protector.*

STROPHE B

If a man walks with haughtiness
885 *of hand or word and gives no heed
to Justice and the shrines of gods
despises—may an evil doom
smite him for his ill-starred pride of heart!—
if he reaps gains without justice*
890 *and will not hold from impiety
and his fingers itch for untouchable things.
When such things are done, what man shall contrive
to shield his life from the shafts of the god?*
895 *When such deeds are held in honor,
why should I honor the gods in the dance?*

ANTISTROPHE B

No longer to the holy place,

to the navel of earth I'll go
900 *to worship, nor to Abae*
nor to Olympia,
unless the oracles are proved to fit,
for all men's hands to point at.
O Zeus, if you are rightly called
the sovereign lord, all-mastering,
905 *let this not escape you nor your ever-living power!*
The oracles concerning Laius
are old and dim and men regard them not.
910 *Apollo is nowhere clear in honor; the gods' service perishes.*

(Enter Jocasta from the palace, carrying garlands.)

JOCASTA

Lords of the land, I have had the thought to go
to the gods' temples, bringing in my hand
garlands and gifts of incense, as you see.
For Oedipus excites himself too much
915 with all kinds of worries, not conjecturing,
like a man of sense, what will be from what was,
but he is always at the speaker's mercy,
when he speaks terrors. I can do no good
by my advice, and so I come as suppliant
920 to you, Lycian Apollo, who are nearest.
These are the symbols of my prayer and this
my prayer: grant us escape free of the curse.
Now when we look to him we are all afraid;
he's pilot of our ship and he is frightened.

(Enter Messenger, from the side.)

MESSENGER

925 Might I learn from you, sirs, where is the house of Oedipus?
Or better, if you know, where is the king himself?

CHORUS LEADER

This is his house and he is within; the lady
here is his wife and mother of his children.

MESSENGER

God bless you, lady! God bless your household too!
930 God bless the noble wife of Oedipus!

JOCASTA

And god bless you, sir, for your kind greeting!
What do you want of us that you have come here?
What have you to tell us?

MESSENGER

Good news, lady.
Good for your house and also for your husband.

JOCASTA

935 What is your news? And who sent you to us?

MESSENGER

I come from Corinth; the news I bring will give you
pleasure, for sure. Perhaps some pain as well.

JOCASTA

What is it, then, this news of double meaning?

MESSENGER

The people of the Isthmus will choose Oedipus
940 to be their king. That is the rumor there.

JOCASTA

But isn't their king still aged Polybus?

MESSENGER

No. He is in his grave. Death has got him.

JOCASTA

Is that the truth? Is Oedipus' father dead?

MESSENGER

May I die myself if it be otherwise!

(To a servant.)

JOCASTA

945 Be quick and run to tell the king the news!
O oracles of the gods, where are you now?
It was from this man Oedipus fled, long ago,
lest he should be his murderer! And now, by chance,
he is dead, in the course of nature, not killed by him.

(Enter Oedipus from the palace.)

OEDIPUS

950 Dearest Jocasta, why have you sent for me?

JOCASTA

Listen to this man and when you hear, reflect
on what the god's holy oracles have come to.

OEDIPUS

Who is he? What is his message for me?

JOCASTA

955 He comes from Corinth and tells us that your father
Polybus is no more, but dead and gone.

OEDIPUS

What's this you say, stranger? Tell me yourself.

MESSENGER

If this is what you first want clearly told:
be sure, Polybus has gone down to death.

OEDIPUS

960 Was it by treachery, or from sickness?

MESSENGER

A small thing will put old bodies asleep.

OEDIPUS

So he died of sickness, it seems—poor old man!

MESSENGER

Yes, and of age—the long years he had measured.

OEDIPUS

Ah! Ah! O dear Jocasta, why should one
965 look to the Pythian hearth? Why should one look
to the birds screaming overhead? They prophesied
that I should kill my father! But he's dead,
and hidden deep in earth, and I stand here
who never laid a hand on spear against him —
unless perhaps he died of longing for me,
970 and thus I am his murderer. But they,
the oracles, as they stand—he's taken them
away with him, they're dead as he himself is,
and worthless.

JOCASTA

That I already told you before now.

OEDIPUS

You did, but I was misled by my fear.

JOCASTA

975 Then lay no more of them to heart, not one.

OEDIPUS

But surely I must fear my mother's bed?

JOCASTA

Why should man fear since chance is all in all
for him, and he can clearly foreknow nothing?
Best to live lightly, as one can, unthinkingly.
980 As to your mother's marriage bed—do not
feel fear about this: before now, many a man

in his dreams has lain with his own mother.
But he to whom such things are nothing bears
his life most easily.

OEDIPUS

All that you say would be said perfectly
985 if she were dead; but since she lives I must
still fear, although you talk so well, Jocasta.

JOCASTA

Still in your father's death there's light of comfort?

OEDIPUS

Great light of comfort; but I fear the living.

MESSENGER

Who is the woman that makes you afraid?

OEDIPUS

990 Merope, old man, Polybus' wife.

MESSENGER

What about her frightens the queen and you?

OEDIPUS

A terrible oracle, stranger, from the gods.

MESSENGER

Can it be told? Or does the sacred law
forbid another to have knowledge of it?

OEDIPUS

O no! Once on a time Loxias said
995 that I should lie with my own mother and
take on my hands the blood of my own father.
And so for these long years I've lived away
from Corinth; it has been to my good fortune;
but yet it's sweet to see the face of parents.

MESSENGER

1000 This was the fear that drove you out of Corinth?

OEDIPUS

Old man, I did not wish to kill my father.

MESSENGER

Why should I not free you from this fear, sir,
since I have come to you in all goodwill?

OEDIPUS

You would not find me thankless if you did.

MESSENGER

1005 Why, it was just for this I brought the news—
to earn your thanks when you had come safe home.

OEDIPUS

No, I will never come near my parents.

MESSENGER

Son,
it's very plain you don't know what you're doing.

OEDIPUS

What do you mean, old man? For god's sake, tell me.

MESSENGER

1010 If your homecoming is checked by fears like these.

OEDIPUS

Yes, I'm afraid that Phoebus may prove right.

MESSENGER

Pollution from your parents?

OEDIPUS

Yes, old man;
that is my constant terror.

MESSENGER

Do you know
that all your fears are empty?

OEDIPUS

How is that,
1015 if they are father and mother and I their son?

MESSENGER

Because Polybus was no kin to you in blood.

OEDIPUS

What, was not Polybus my father?

MESSENGER

No more than I but just so much.

OEDIPUS

How can
my father be my father as much as one
that's nothing to me?

MESSENGER

1020 Neither he nor I
begot you.

OEDIPUS

Why then did he call me son?

MESSENGER

A gift he took you from these hands of mine.

OEDIPUS

Did he love so much what he took from another's hand?

MESSENGER

His childlessness before persuaded him.

OEDIPUS

1025 Was I a child you bought or found when I

was given to him?

MESSENGER

On Cithaeron's slopes
in the twisting thickets you were found.

OEDIPUS

And why
were you a traveler in those parts?

MESSENGER

I was
in charge of mountain flocks.

OEDIPUS

You were a shepherd?
A hireling vagrant?

MESSENGER

1030 Yes, but at least at that time
the man that saved your life, son.

OEDIPUS

What ailed me when you took me in your arms?

MESSENGER

In that your ankles should be witnesses.

OEDIPUS

Why do you speak of that old pain?

MESSENGER

I loosed you;
1035 the tendons of your feet were pierced and fettered—

OEDIPUS

My swaddling clothes brought me a rare disgrace.

MESSENGER

so that from this you're called your present name.

OEDIPUS

Was this my father's doing or my mother's?
For god's sake, tell me.

MESSENGER

I don't know, but he
who gave you to me has more knowledge than I.

OEDIPUS

You yourself did not find me then? You took me
from someone else?

MESSENGER

1040 Yes, from another shepherd.

OEDIPUS

Who was he? Do you know him well enough
to tell?

MESSENGER

He was called one of Laius' men.

OEDIPUS

You mean the king who reigned here in the old days?

MESSENGER

Yes, he was that man's shepherd.

OEDIPUS

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

MESSENGER

You who live here
would know that best.

OEDIPUS

Do any of you here

know of this shepherd whom he speaks about
in town or in the fields? Tell me. It's time
1050 that this was found out once for all.

CHORUS LEADER

I think he is none other than the peasant
whom you have sought to see already; but
Jocasta here can tell us best of that.

OEDIPUS

Jocasta, do you know about this man
1055 whom we have sent for? Is that the man he mentions?

JOCASTA

Why ask of whom he spoke? Don't give it heed;
nor try to keep in mind what has been said.
It will be wasted labor.

OEDIPUS

With such clues
I could not fail to bring my birth to light.

JOCASTA

1060 I beg you—do not hunt this out—I beg you,
if you have any care for your own life.
What I am suffering is enough.

OEDIPUS

Keep up
your heart, Jocasta. Though I'm proved a slave,
thrice slave, and though my mother be thrice slave,
you'll not be shown to be of lowly lineage.

JOCASTA

O be persuaded by me, I entreat you;
do not do this.

OEDIPUS

1065 I will not be persuaded to let be
the chance of finding out the whole thing clearly.

JOCASTA

It is because I wish you well that I
give you this counsel—and it's the best counsel.

OEDIPUS

Then the best counsel vexes me, and has
for some while since.

JOCASTA

O Oedipus, god help you!
God keep you from the knowledge of who you are!

OEDIPUS

Here, someone, go and fetch the shepherd for me;
1070 and let her find her joy in her rich family!

JOCASTA

O Oedipus, unhappy Oedipus!
that is all I can call you, and the last thing
that I shall ever call you.

(Exit Jocasta into the palace.)

CHORUS LEADER

Why has the queen gone, Oedipus, in wild
grief rushing from us? I am afraid that trouble
1075 will break out of this silence.

OEDIPUS

Break out what will! I at least shall be
willing to see my ancestry, though humble.
Perhaps she is ashamed of my low birth,
for she has all a woman's high-flown pride.
1080 But I account myself a child of Fortune,
beneficent goddess, and I shall not be

dishonored. Fortune's the mother from whom I spring;
the months, my brothers, marked me, now as small,
and now again as mighty. Such is my breeding,
and I shall never prove so false to it,
1085 as not to find the secret of my birth.

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE

*If I am a prophet and wise of heart
you shall not fail, Cithaeron,
by the limitless sky, you shall not!—
1090 to know that tomorrow's full moon
shall honor you as Oedipus' compatriot,
his mother and nurse at once;
and that you shall be honored in dancing by us,
1095 for rendering service to our king.
Apollo, to whom we cry, find these things pleasing!*

ANTISTROPHE

*Who was it bore you, child? One of
1100 the long-lived nymphs who lay with Pan—
the father who treads the hills?
Or was your mother a bride of Loxias? The grassy slopes
are all of them dear to him. Or perhaps Cyllene's king
1105 or the Bacchants' god that lives on the tops
of the hills received you, a gift from some
one of the dark-eyed Nymphs, with whom he mostly plays?*

(Enter an old Herdsman from the side, led by Oedipus' servants.)

OEDIPUS

1110 If someone like myself who never met him
may make a guess—I think this is the herdsman,
whom we were seeking. His old age is consonant
with the other's. And besides, the men who bring him
I recognize as my own servants. But you

1115 perhaps may better me in knowledge since
you've seen the man before.

CHORUS LEADER

You can be sure
I recognize him. For if Laius
had ever an honest shepherd, this was he.

OEDIPUS

You, sir, from Corinth, I must ask you first,
is this the man you spoke of?

MESSENGER

1120 This is he
before your eyes.

OEDIPUS

Old man, look here at me
and tell me what I ask you. Were you ever
a servant of King Laius?

HERDSMAN

I was—
no slave he bought but reared in his own house.

OEDIPUS

What did you do as work? How did you live?

HERDSMAN

1125 Most of my life was spent among the flocks.

OEDIPUS

In what part of the country did you live?

HERDSMAN

Cithaeron and the places near to it.

OEDIPUS

And somewhere there perhaps you knew this man?

Death take you! Won't you hold your tongue?

OEDIPUS

No, no,
do not find fault with him, old man. Your words
are more at fault than his.

HERDSMAN

O best of masters,
how do I give offense?

OEDIPUS

When you refuse
1150 to speak about the child of whom he asks you.

HERDSMAN

He speaks out of his ignorance, without meaning.

OEDIPUS

If you'll not talk to gratify me, you
will talk with pain to urge you.

HERDSMAN

O please, sir,
don't hurt an old man, sir.

(To the servants.)

OEDIPUS

Here, one of you,
twist his hands behind him.

HERDSMAN

Why, god help me, why?
1155 What do you want to know?

OEDIPUS

You gave a child
to him—the child he asked you of?

HERDSMAN

I did.

I wish I'd died the day I did.

OEDIPUS

You will
unless you tell me truly.

HERDSMAN

And I'll die
far worse if I should tell you.

OEDIPUS

1160 This fellow
is bent on more delays, as it would seem.

HERDSMAN

O no, no! I have told you that I gave it.

OEDIPUS

Where did you get this child from? Was it your own
or did you get it from another?

HERDSMAN

Not
my own at all; I had it from someone.

OEDIPUS

One of these citizens? And from what house?

HERDSMAN

1165 O master, please—I beg you, master, please
don't ask me more.

OEDIPUS

You're a dead man if I
ask you again.

HERDSMAN

The child came from the house
of Laius.

OEDIPUS

A slave? Or born from himself?

HERDSMAN

O god, I am on the brink of frightful speech.

OEDIPUS

1170 And I of frightful hearing. But I must hear.

HERDSMAN

The child was called his child; but she within,
your wife would tell you best how all this was.

OEDIPUS

She gave it to you?

HERDSMAN

Yes she did, my lord.

OEDIPUS

To do what with it?

HERDSMAN

Make away with it.

OEDIPUS

1175 She was so hard—its mother?

HERDSMAN

Aye, through fear
of evil oracles.

OEDIPUS

Which?

HERDSMAN

They said that he

should kill his parents.

OEDIPUS

How was it that you
gave it away to this old man?

HERDSMAN

O master,
I pitied it, and thought that I could send it
off to another country: and this man
1180 was from another country. But he saved it
for the most terrible troubles. If you are
the man he says you are, you're bred to misery.

OEDIPUS

O, O, O, they will all come,
all come out clearly! Light of the sun, let me
look upon you no more after today!
I who first saw the light bred of a coupling
accursed, and accursed in my living
1185 with them I lived with, cursed in my killing.

(Exit Oedipus into the palace. All but the Chorus depart to the side.)

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE A

*O generations of men, how I
count you as equal with those who live
not at all!*
1190 *What man, what man on earth wins more
of happiness than a seeming
and after that falling away?
Oedipus, you are my pattern of this,*
1195 *Oedipus, you and your fate!
Luckless Oedipus, as I look at you,
I count nothing in human affairs happy.*

ANTISTROPHE A

*Inasmuch as you shot your bolt
beyond the others and won the prize
of happiness complete—
O Zeus—and killed and reduced to naught
1200 the hooked taloned maid of the riddling speech,
standing a tower against death for my land;
hence you are called my king and hence
have been honored the highest of all
honors; and hence you ruled
in the great city of Thebes.*

STROPHE B

*But now whose tale is more miserable?
1205 Who is there lives with a savager fate?^o
Whose troubles so reverse his life as his?
O Oedipus, the famous prince
for whom the same great harbor
the same both for father and son
1210 sufficed for bridal bed,
how, O how, have the furrows ploughed
by your father endured to bear you, poor wretch,
and remain silent so long?*

ANTISTROPHE B

*Time who sees all has found you out
against your will; judges your marriage accursed,
1215 begetter and begotten at one in it.
O child of Laius,
would I had never seen you.
I weep for you and cry
a dirge of lamentation.
1220 To speak directly, I drew my breath
from you at the first and so now I lull
my eyes to sleep with your name.*

(Enter a Second Messenger, from the palace.)

SECOND MESSENGER

O princes always honored by our country,
what deeds you'll hear of and what horrors see,
1225 what grief you'll feel, if you as trueborn Thebans
care for the house of Labdacus's sons.
No river, not Phasis nor Ister, can purge this house,
I think, with all their streams, such things
it hides, such evils shortly will bring forth
1230 into the light, evils done on purpose;
and troubles hurt the most
when they prove self-inflicted.

CHORUS LEADER

What we had known before did not fall short
of bitter groaning; now what's more to tell?

SECOND MESSENGER

Shortest to hear and say—our glorious queen
1235 Jocasta's dead.

CHORUS LEADER

Unhappy woman! How?

SECOND MESSENGER

By her own hand. You're spared the greatest pain
of what was done—you did not see the sight.
Yet insofar as I remember it
1240 you'll hear the sufferings of our unlucky queen.
When she came raging into the house she went
straight to her marriage bed, tearing her hair
with both her hands, and slammed the bedroom doors
behind her shut, crying upon Laius
1245 long dead—"Do you remember, Laius,
that night long past which bred a child for us
to send you to your death and leave

a mother making children with her son?"
And then she groaned and cursed the bed in which
1250 she brought forth husband by her husband, children
by her own child, an infamous double bond.
How after that she died I do not know—
for Oedipus distracted us from seeing.
He burst upon us shouting and we looked
to him as he paced frantically around,
1255 begging us always: "Give me a sword, I say,
to find this wife no wife, this mother's womb,
this field of double sowing whence I sprang
and where I sowed my children!" As he raved
some god showed him the way—none of us there.
1260 Bellowing terribly and led by some
invisible guide he rushed on the two doors—
wrenching the bending bolts out of their sockets,
he charged inside. There, there, we saw his wife
hanging, the twisted rope around her neck.
1265 When he saw her, he cried out fearfully
and cut the dangling noose. Then, as she lay,
poor woman, on the ground, what happened after,
was terrible to see. He tore the brooches—
the gold chased brooches fastening her robe—
away from her and lifting them up high
1270 dashed them on his own eyeballs, shrieking out
such things as: "You will never see the crime
I have committed or had done upon me!
Dark eyes, now in the days to come look on
forbidden faces, do not recognize
those whom you long for"—with such imprecations
1275 he struck his eyes again and yet again
with the brooches. And the bleeding eyeballs gushed
and stained his cheeks—no sluggish oozing drops
but a black rain and bloody hail poured down.

1280 So it has broken—and not on one head alone^o
but troubles mixed for husband and for wife.
The fortune of the days gone by was true
good fortune—but today groans and destruction
and death and shame—of all ills that can be named
1285 not one is missing.

CHORUS LEADER

Is he now in any ease from pain?

SECOND MESSENGER

 He shouts
for someone to unbar the doors and show him
to all the men of Thebes, his father's killer,
his mother's—no I cannot say the word,
1290 it is unholy—for he'll cast himself,
out of the land, he says, and not remain
to bring a curse upon his house, the curse
he called upon it in his proclamation. But
he wants for strength, aye, and someone to guide him;
his sickness is too great to bear. You, too,
will be shown that. The bolts are opening.
1295 Soon you will see a sight to waken pity
even in one who feels disgust or hatred.

(Enter the blinded Oedipus, from the palace.)

CHORUS [*chanting*]

*This is a terrible sight for men to see!
I never encountered a worse horror!*
1300 *Poor wretch, what madness came upon you?
What evil spirit leaped upon your life
to your ill luck—a leap beyond man's strength!
Indeed I pity you, but I cannot
look at you, though there's much I want to ask
1305 and much to learn and much to see.*

I shudder at the sight of you.

OEDIPUS [*singing in what follows, while the Chorus speaks*]

*O, O,
where am I going? Where is my voice
1310 borne on the wind to and fro?
Spirit, how far have you sprung?*

CHORUS LEADER

To a terrible place which men's ears
may not hear of, nor their eyes see it.

OEDIPUS

STROPHE A

*Darkness!
1315 Horror of darkness enfolding, resistless, unspeakable visitant sped
by an ill wind in haste!^o
Madness and stabbing pain and memory
of my evils!*

CHORUS LEADER

In such misfortunes it's no wonder
1320 if double weighs the burden of your grief.

OEDIPUS

ANTISTROPHE A

*My friend,
you are the only one steadfast, the only one that attends on me;
you still stay nursing the blind man.
1325 Your care is not unnoticed. I recognize
your voice, although this darkness is my world.*

CHORUS LEADER

Doer of dreadful deeds, how did you dare
so far to do despite to your own eyes?
What spirit urged you to it?

OEDIPUS

STROPHE B

*It was Apollo, friends, Apollo,
1330 that brought this bitter bitterness, my sorrows to completion.
But the hand that struck me
was none but my own.
Why should I see
1335 whose vision showed me nothing sweet to see?*

CHORUS [*now singing*]

These things are as you say.

OEDIPUS

*What can I see to love?
What greeting can touch my ears with joy?
1340 Take me away, and haste—to a place out of the way!
Take me away, my friends, the greatly miserable,
1345 the most accursed, whom the gods too hate
above all men on earth!*

CHORUS LEADER

*Unhappy in your mind and your misfortune,
would I had never known you!*

OEDIPUS

ANTISTROPHE B

*Curse on the man^o who took
1350 the cruel bonds from off my legs, as I lay there.
He stole me from death and saved me,
no kindly service.
Had I died then,
1355 I would not be so burdensome to friends or to myself.*

CHORUS

I, too, could have wished it had been so.

OEDIPUS

*Then I would not have come
to kill my father and marry my mother infamously.*

1360 *Now I am godless and child of impurity,
begetter in the same seed that created my wretched self.*

1365 *If there is any ill worse than ill,
that is the lot of Oedipus.*

CHORUS LEADER

I cannot say your remedy was good;
you would be better dead than blind and living.

OEDIPUS [*now speaking*]

What I have done here was best done—don't tell me
1370 otherwise, do not give me further counsel.

I do not know with what eyes I could look
upon my father when I die and go
under the earth, nor yet my wretched mother—
those two to whom I have done things deserving
worse punishment than hanging. Would the sight
1375 of children, bred as mine are, gladden me?

No, not these eyes, never. And my city,
its towers and sacred places of the gods,
1380 where I was raised as the noblest man in Thebes,
of these I robbed my miserable self
when I commanded all to drive him out,
the criminal since proved by the gods impure
and of the race of Laius.

To this guilt I bore witness against myself—
1385 with what eyes was I to look upon my people?
No. If there were a means to choke the fountain
of hearing I would not have stayed my hand
from locking up my miserable carcass,
seeing and hearing nothing; it is sweet
1390 to keep our thoughts out of the range of hurt.

Cithaeron, why did you receive me? Why
having received me did you not kill me straight?
And so I'd not have shown to men my birth.
O Polybus and Corinth and the house,
1395 the old house that I used to call my father's—
what fairness you were nurse to, and what foulness
festered beneath! Now I am found to be
evil and a son of evil. Crossroads,
and hidden glade, oak and the narrow way
1400 at the crossroads that drank my father's blood—
my own blood—from my hands, do you remember
still what I did as you looked on, and what
I did when I came here? O marriage, marriage!
you bred me and again when you had bred
1405 you produced the same seed again and displayed to men
fathers, brothers, children, an incestuous brood,
brides, wives, and mothers, all the foulest deeds
that can be in this world of ours.

Come—it's unfit to say what is unfit
1410 to do.—I beg of you in the gods' name hide me
somewhere outside your country, yes, or kill me,
or throw me into the sea, to be forever
out of your sight. Approach and deign to touch me
for all my wretchedness, and do not fear.
1415 No man but I can bear my evil doom.

(Enter Creon, from the side, with attendants.)

CHORUS LEADER

Here Creon comes in fit time to perform
or give advice in what you ask of us.
Creon is left sole ruler in your stead.

OEDIPUS

Creon! Creon! What shall I say to him?
1420 How can I justly hope that he will trust me?

In what is past I have been proved toward him
an utter liar.

CREON

Oedipus, I've come
not so that I might laugh at you nor taunt you
with evil of the past.

(To attendants.)

But even if you men
have no more shame before the face of men,
1425 reverence at least the flame that gives all life,
our lord the Sun, and do not show unveiled
to him pollution such that neither land
nor holy rain nor light of day can welcome.
Be quick and take him in. It is most decent
1430 that only kin should see and hear the troubles
of kin.

OEDIPUS

I beg you, since you've torn me from
my dreadful expectations and have come
in a most noble spirit to a man
that has used you vilely—do a thing for me.
I shall speak for your own good, not for my own.

CREON

1435 What do you need that you would ask of me?

OEDIPUS

Drive me from here with all the speed you can
to where I may not hear a human voice.

CREON

Be sure, I would have done this had not I
wished first of all to learn from the god the course
of action I should follow.

they are, they will not lack a livelihood.
But my two girls—so sad and pitiful—
whose table never stood apart from mine,
1465 and everything I touched they always shared—
O Creon, have a thought for them! And most
I wish that you might allow me to touch them
and sorrow with them.

(Enter Antigone and Ismene from the palace.)

O my lord! O true noble Creon! May I
1470 really touch them, as when I saw?
What shall I say?
Can I hear them sobbing—my two darlings!—
and Creon has had pity and has sent me
what I loved most?
1475 Am I right?

CREON

You're right: it was I gave you this
because I knew from old days how you loved them
as I see now.

OEDIPUS

God bless you for it, Creon,
and may god guard you better on your road
than he did me!

O children,
1480 where are you? Come here, come to my hands,
a brother's hands which turned your father's eyes,
those bright eyes you knew once, to what you see,
a father seeing nothing, knowing nothing,
1485 begetting you from his own source of life.
I weep for you—I cannot see your faces—
I weep when I think of the bitterness
there will be in your lives, how you must live

before the world. At what assemblages
of citizens will you attend? To what
1490 festivals will you go and not come home
in tears instead of sharing in the holiday?
And when you're ripe for marriage, who will he be,
the man who'll risk to take such infamy
as shall cling to my children, to bring hurt
1495 on them and those that marry with them? What
evil is not there? "Your father killed his father
and sowed the seed where he had sprung himself
and begot you out of the womb that held him."
1500 Such insults you will hear. Then who will marry you?
No one, my children; clearly you are doomed
to waste away in barrenness unmarried.

Son of Menoeceus, since you are all the father
left these two girls, and we, their parents, both
1505 are dead to them—do not allow them to wander
like beggars, poor and husbandless.
They are of your own blood.
And do not make them equal with myself
in wretchedness; for you can see them now
so young, so utterly alone, save for you only.
1510 Touch my hand, noble Creon, and say yes.

If you were older, children, and were wiser,
there's much advice I'd give you. But as it is,
let this be what you pray: to find a life
wherever there is opportunity
to live, a better life than was your father's.

CREON

1515 Your tears have had enough of scope; now go within the house.

OEDIPUS

I must obey, though bitter of heart.

CREON

In season, all is good.

OEDIPUS

Do you know on what conditions I obey?

CREON

You tell me them,
and I shall know them when I hear.

OEDIPUS

That you shall send me out
to live away from Thebes.

CREON

That gift you must ask of the god.

OEDIPUS

But I'm now hated by the gods.

CREON

So quickly you'll obtain your prayer.

OEDIPUS

1520 You consent then?

CREON

What I do not mean, I do not use to say.

OEDIPUS

Now lead me away from here.

CREON

Let go the children, then, and come.

OEDIPUS

Do not take them from me.

CREON

Do not seek to be master in everything,
for the things you mastered did not follow you throughout your life.

(Creon and Oedipus depart.)

CHORUS^o

You that live in my ancestral Thebes, behold this Oedipus—
1525 him who knew the famous riddles and was a man most masterful;
not a citizen who did not look with envy on his lot—
see him now and see the breakers of misfortune swallow him!
Look upon that last day always. Count no mortal happy till
1530 he has passed the final limit of his life secure from pain.