

it in modern dress and in modern terms. The director, Daniel Brooks, was described as offering up the play as a “great living drama.” By contrast, the previous Stratford performance in 1997 employed masks and period costume. Currently, Greek companies perform the play regularly in the theater of Dionysus in Athens as well as in Epidaurus and elsewhere.

SOPHOCLES (c. 496–c. 406 BCE)

Oedipus the King

c. 430 BCE

TRANSLATED BY DAVID GRENE

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,^o

why do you sit here with your suppliant crowns?
The town is heavy with a mingled burden
of sounds and smells, of groans and hymns and incense;

5 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.

1. Cadmus: The founder of Thebes.

PRIEST: O ruler of my country, Oedipus,
you see our company around the altar;
you see our ages; some of us, like these, 15
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.
Within the market place sit others crowned
with suppliant garlands, at the double shrine
of Pallas^o and the temple where Ismenus 20
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, 30
strikes us and spares not, and the house of Cadmus
is emptied of its people while black Death
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, 35
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.
You came and by your coming saved our city,
freed us from tribute which we paid of old 40
to the Sphinx,^o cruel singer. This you did

21. Pallas: Pallas Athena, Zeus's daughter, goddess of wisdom. 41. Sphinx: Monster with the head of a lion, face of a woman, and wings. She posed a riddle and killed those in Thebes who could not solve it. After Oedipus solved the riddle, she killed herself.

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.

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
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
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,
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
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.

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,⁷⁹

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

79. Apollo: Son of Zeus and Leto, god of arts and prophecy.
His oracle at Delphi (the Pythia) was consulted in all major
decisions, such as saving the city of Thebes.

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,
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

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: I will tell you, then, what I heard from the
god.

King Phoebus¹⁰⁶ 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: 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: 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: 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,
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.

106. Phoebus: Another name for Apollo.

LINES 136 TO 208

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?
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
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: 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.
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
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
that I'll do everything. God will decide

whether we shall prosper or shall fail.

170 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
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
my heart, O Delian Healer, and I worship full of
fears

174. Strophe: The chorus dances from stage right to stage
left as it sings these lines.

for what doom you will bring to pass, new or
renewed in the
revolving years.
Speak to me, immortal voice,
child of golden Hope.

180

ANTISTROPHE° A

First I call on you, Athena,° deathless daughter of
Zeus,

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,

come to us now, if ever before, when ruin rushed
upon the state,

you drove destruction's flame away
out of our land.

185

190

STROPHE B

Our sorrows defy number;

all the ship's timbers are rotten;

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.

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.

195

ANTISTROPHE B

In the unnumbered deaths

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

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.

200

205

183. Antistrophe: The chorus dances back from stage
right to stage left singing these lines. Athena: Daughter
of Zeus, goddess of wisdom and protectress of Athens.

184. Artemis: The huntress and sister of Apollo.

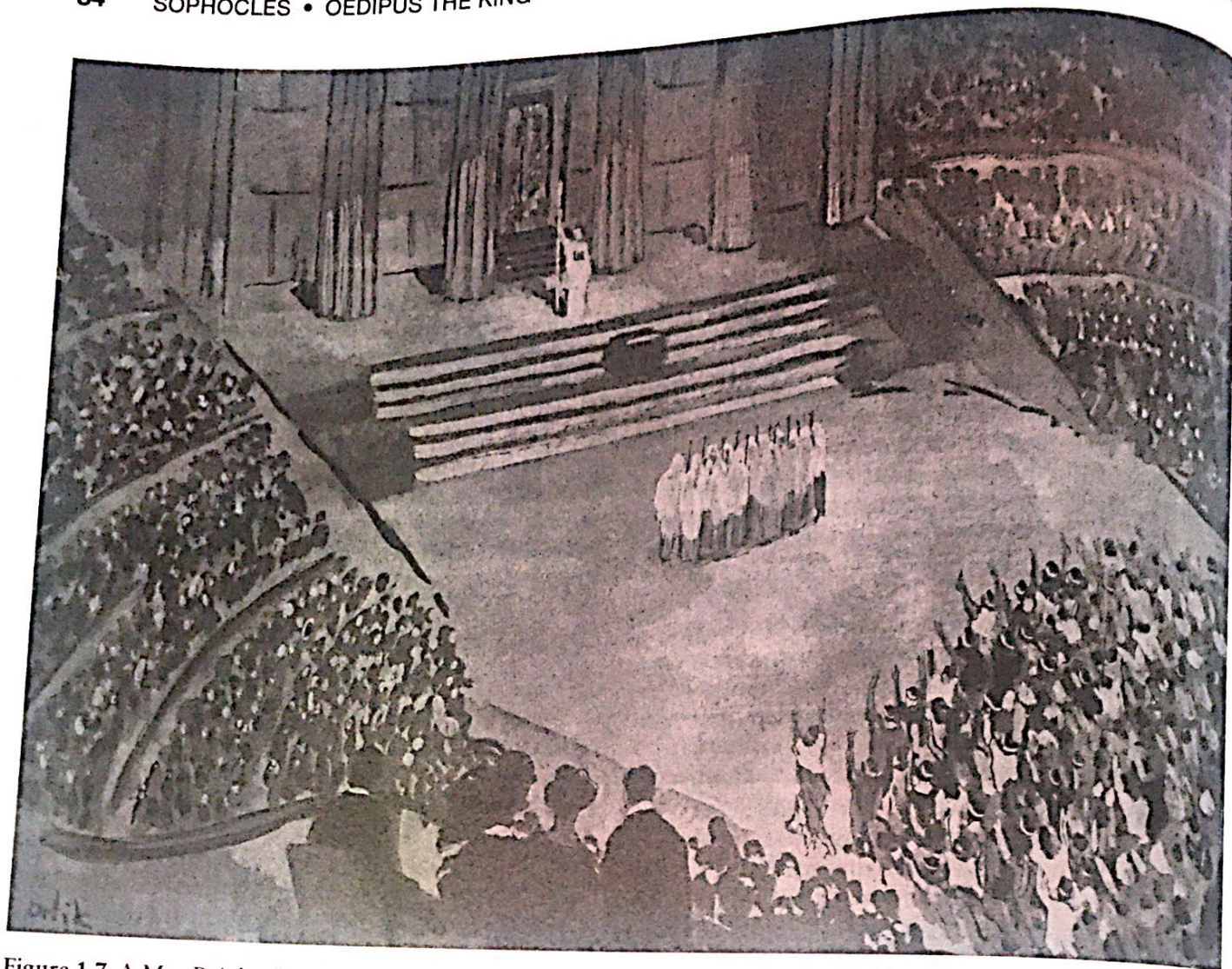


Figure 1.7 A Mac Reinhardt stage design for the 1910 Berlin production of *Oedipus the King* at Circus Schumann. (Queen's University Library)

STROPHE C

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
to the great palace of Amphitrite²¹² 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,
beneath your thunderbolt,
for you are the lord of the lightning, the lightning
that carries fire.

212. Amphitrite: Sea-goddess and wife of Poseidon.

ANTISTROPHE C

And your unconquered arrow shafts, winged by
the golden-cord bow,
Lycian king,²²⁰ I beg to be at our side for help;
and the gleaming torches of Artemis with which
she scour the
Lycian hills,
and I call on the god with the turban of gold, who
gave his name
to this country of ours,
the Bacchic god²²⁵ with the wind-flushed face,
you who travel with the maenad company crying
Euhoi,

220. Lycian king: Lycias was in Anatolia (Turkey); its king was Apollo (see l. 1008). 225. Bacchic god: Bacchus (Dionysius).

*come with your torch of pine;
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
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
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.
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—
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,
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 god²⁶¹ proclaimed him now to me.
So I stand forth a champion of the god
and of the man who died.

Upon the murderer I invoke this curse—
whether he is one man and all unknown,
or one of many—may he wear out his life
in misery to miserable doom!
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.
Even were this no matter of god's ordinance

261. Pytho's god: Apollo. Pytho, or Delphi, was where the oracle dwelled.

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,
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,
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
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
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: 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
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,
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,
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.



Josef Svoboda's stage design for M. Machacek's 1963 production of *Oedipus the King* in Prague. (National Theater Narodni)

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

OEDIPUS: Teiresias, you are versed in everything,
 things teachable and things not to be spoken,
 things of the heaven and earth-creeping things.
 325 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.
 Perhaps you have not heard the messengers,
 330 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.
 Do not begrudge us messages from birds,
 335 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
 340 labor

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.
- 345 OEDIPUS: What is this?
How gloomy you are now you've come!
- TEIRESIAS: Let me
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
350 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
miss the mark; therefore I must fear for mine.
- 355 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.
- 360 OEDIPUS: What do you mean?
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
365 you question me and waste your labor? I
will tell you nothing.
- OEDIPUS: You would provoke a stone! Tell us, you
villain,
tell us, and do not stand there quietly
unmoved, unhelpful, set on doing nothing.
- 370 TEIRESIAS: You blame my temper but you do not see
your own that lives within you; so you chide
me instead.
- OEDIPUS: Who would not feel his temper rise
at words like these with which you shame our city?
- TEIRESIAS: Of themselves things will come, although
375 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
380 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
385 I would have said alone you murdered him.
- TEIRESIAS: 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! 390
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. 395
- OEDIPUS: Speak what? Tell me again that I may learn
it better.
- TEIRESIAS: 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 400
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: As much as you wish; it will be said in vain.
- TEIRESIAS: I say that, unknowing, with those you love 405
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. 410
- OEDIPUS: 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. 415
- OEDIPUS: Your life is one long night so that you
cannot
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 420
or Creon's?
- TEIRESIAS: Creon is no hurt to you.
but you are to yourself.
- OEDIPUS: Wealth, kingly rule, and skill outmatching
skill
for the contrivance of an envied life!
How great a store of jealousy you are hoarding, 425
if, for the sake of the office which I hold,
given me by the city, not sought by me,
my friend Creon, friend from the first and loyal,
thus secretly attacks me, secretly
desires to drive me out and secretly 430
suborns this juggling, trick-devising quack,

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

435 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?

440 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
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.

445 Mine was no knowledge got from birds. And now
you would expel me,
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
450 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,

455 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.

460 Of that much I am master. I am no slave
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.

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

470 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
a place will not be harbor to your cries,
a corner of Cithaeron will not ring

475 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
480 establishing a grim equality
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
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: 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: 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: 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.

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

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

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
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°
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,
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
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
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,
neither in the past nor now,
that I might bring as proof
in attacking the popular fame
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
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
till I should see the word
proved right beyond doubt. For once
in visible form the Sphinx

530. Pegasus: Flying horse, sired by Poseidon. 535. Parnassus:
Mountain home to Apollo and the muses.

came against him, and all of us
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
accuses me. I cannot take that from him. 575
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 580
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. 585

CREON: 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? 590

CHORUS LEADER: 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 595
the murderer of that man, and though you tried,
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? 600

Did you imagine I should not observe
your crafty scheme that stole upon me or
seeing it, take no means to counter it?
Was it not stupid of you to make the attempt,
to try to hunt down royal power without 605
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? 610

OEDIPUS: 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.

- 615 CREON: If you think obstinacy without wisdom
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—
620 but tell me, then, of what offense I'm guilty.
OEDIPUS: Did you or did you not urge me to send
to this prophetic mumblor?
CREON: I did indeed,
and I shall stand by what I told you.
625 OEDIPUS: How long ago is it since Laius . . .
CREON: What about Laius? I don't understand.
OEDIPUS: 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
630 as highly as he is today.
OEDIPUS: At that time did he say a word about me?
CREON: 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
635 then?
CREON: I don't know; and when I know nothing, I
usually hold my tongue.
OEDIPUS: 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
640 Laius
had he not met with you first.
CREON: You know yourself
whether he said this, but I demand that I
should hear as much from you as you from me.
645 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?
650 OEDIPUS: Yes, everything she wants
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.
655 Consider, first, if you think anyone
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
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
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?
My mind would not be traitor if it's wise,
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,
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
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,
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.
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: 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: 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

710 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?

Are you not ashamed to air your private
troubles when the country's sick? Go inside,
Oedipus,

715 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
terrible wrongs to me—he is choosing
between either banishing or killing me.

720 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
of any of the charges you bring against me!

725 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,
we beg of you.*

730 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?

735 CHORUS: Yes.

OEDIPUS: 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

740 really requests my death or banishment.

CHORUS: May the sun god, king of gods, forbid!
*May I die without god's blessing, without friends'
help,*

if I had any such thought.

*But my spirit is broken by my unhappiness for my
wasting country;*

*and this would but add troubles amongst
ourselves to the other troubles.*

745

OEDIPUS: Well, let him go then—if I must die ten
times for it,

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 750
when you are out of temper; natures like yours
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. 755

(Exit Creon, to the side.)

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

ANTISTROPHE

Won't you take him inside, lady?

JOCASTA: 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.*

760

JOCASTA: So, on both sides?

CHORUS: Yes.

JOCASTA: What was the story?

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

765

OEDIPUS: You see where you have ended, straight of
judgment

although you are, by softening my anger.

CHORUS: *Sir, I have said before and I say again—
be sure that I would have been proved a madman,
bankrupt in sane council,*

770

*if I should put you away, you who steered the
country I love safely
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: Yes, I will tell you. 775

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? 780

OEDIPUS: 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.

785

Of that I'll show you a short proof.

790 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,
the king, was killed by foreign highway robbers
at a place where three roads meet—so goes the
story;

795 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
failed to fulfill his oracle to the son,
800 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;
805 what the god discovers need of, easily
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?

810 OEDIPUS: I thought I heard you say
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
815 Delphi,
another comes from Daulia.

OEDIPUS: 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?

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

JOCASTA: What is the thought that troubles your
heart?

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

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

OEDIPUS: 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: 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: 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
840 and saw that you were king and Laius dead,
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
845 sent him away. He was an honest man,
as slaves go, and was worthy of far more
than what he asked of me.

OEDIPUS: So could he quickly now be brought back
here?

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

850 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
to know what is it that disquiets you.

855 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,
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,
860 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
of being bastard. I was furious
but held my temper under for that day.

870 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
was comforted with regard to the two of them;
but still this thing rankled with me, for the story
875 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
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
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.
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
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.
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,
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,
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,
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?
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

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
the same as yours, I will be clear of guilt. 935

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. 940
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
in the city heard it—not just I alone. 945
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 950
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: Your opinion's sound. But yet, send
someone for 955
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 960
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,
no forgetfulness shall lull them to sleep; 965
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,
climbs to the rooftop and plunges
sheer down to the ruin that must be, 970
and there its feet are no service.

*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

975 *If a man walks with haughtiness
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!—*
980 *if he reaps gains without justice
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?*
985 *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
to worship, nor to Abae*
990 *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,*
995 *let this not escape you nor your ever-living power!
The oracles concerning Laius
are old and dim and men regard them not.
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

1000 *to the gods' temples, bringing in my hand
garlands and gifts of incense, as you see.
For Oedipus excites himself too much
with all kinds of worries, not conjecturing,
like a man of sense, what will be from what was,*
1005 *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
to you, Lycian Apollo, who are nearest.
These are the symbols of my prayer and this*
1010 *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.)

MESSANGER: 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.

MESSANGER: God bless you, lady! God bless your
household too!

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?

MESSANGER: Good news, lady.

Good for your house and also for your husband.

JOCASTA: What is your news? And who sent you
to us?

MESSANGER: 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?

MESSANGER: The people of the Isthmus will choose
Oedipus

to be their king. That is the rumor there.

JOCASTA: But isn't their king still aged Polybus?

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

JOCASTA: Is that the truth? Is Oedipus' father dead?

MESSANGER: May I die myself if it be otherwise!

JOCASTA (To a servant): 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: 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: 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.

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

OEDIPUS: Was it by treachery, or from sickness?

MESSANGER: A small thing will put old bodies asleep.

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

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

OEDIPUS: Ah! Ah! O dear Jocasta, why should one
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,

1055 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,
and thus I am his murderer. But they,
the oracles, as they stand—he's taken them
1060 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: 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
1065 in all
for him, and he can clearly foreknow nothing?
Best to live lightly, as one can, unthinkingly.
As to your mother's marriage bed—do not
feel fear about this: before now, many a man
1070 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
if she were dead; but since she lives I must
1075 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: Merope, old man, Polybus' wife.
MESSENGER: What about her frightens the queen and
1080 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
1085 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: This was the fear that drove you out of
1090 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: Why, it was just for this I brought the
1095 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: If your homecoming is checked by fears
like these. 1100
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,
if they are father and mother and I their son? 1105
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: Neither he nor I 1110
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: Was I a child you bought or found when I 1115
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: Yes, but at least at that time 1120
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;
the tendons of your feet were pierced and fettered— 1125
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. 1130

1116. Cithaeron's: Cithaeron was the mountain where
Oedipus was abandoned after birth. 1127. your present
name: Oedipus means "swollen foot."

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

MESSSENGER: Yes, from another shepherd.

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

MESSSENGER: He was called one of Laius' men.

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

MESSSENGER: Yes, he was that man's shepherd.

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

MESSSENGER: 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 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 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: 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: 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;

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 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. 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, 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!—
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,
for rendering service to our king.
Apollo, to whom we cry, find these things pleasing!

ANTISTROPHE

Who was it bore you, child? One of
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
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: 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

1195. Pan: God of nature, half man and half goat.

1205 with the other's. And besides, the men who bring him
I recognize as my own servants. But you
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

1210 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?

MESSANGER: 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?

1215 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: Most of my life was spent among the
flocks.

OEDIPUS: In what part of the country did you live?

1220 HERDSMAN: Cithaeron and the places near to it.

OEDIPUS: And somewhere there perhaps you knew
this man?

HERDSMAN: What was he doing? What man?

OEDIPUS: This man here,
have you had any dealings with him?

HERDSMAN: No—
not such that I can quickly call to mind.

MESSANGER: That is no wonder, master, But I'll help
him

1225 remember what he does not know. For I know
that he knows well the country of Cithaeron,
how he with two flocks, I with one, together
kept company for three years—six months each
year—

1230 from spring till autumn time. When winter came
I drove my flocks back to our fold, back home,
while this man, he drove his to Laius' steadings.
Am I right or not in what I say we did?

HERDSMAN: You're right—although it's a long time
ago.

1235 MESSENGER: Do you remember giving me a baby
to bring up as my foster child?

HERDSMAN: What's this?
Why do you ask this question?

MESSANGER: Look old man,
here he is—here's the man who was that child!

HERDSMAN: 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
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. 1245

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

OEDIPUS (*To the servants*): Here, one of you,
twist his hands behind him.

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

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

HERDSMAN: I did. 1250
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: This fellow
is bent on more delays, as it would seem.

HERDSMAN: O no, no! I have told you that I gave it. 1255

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: O master, please—I beg you, master, please 1260
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: And I of frightful hearing. But I must hear. 1265

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: She was so hard—its mother?

HERDSMAN: Aye, through fear 1270
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,

1275 I pitied it, and thought that I could send it
off to another country: and this man
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,

1280 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
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

1285 O generations of men, how I
count you as equal with those who live
not at all!
What man, what man on earth wins more
of happiness than a seeming
1290 and after that falling away?
Oedipus, you are my pattern of this,
Oedipus, you and your fate!
Luckless Oedipus, as I look at you,
I count nothing in human affairs happy.

ANTISTROPHE A

1295 Inasmuch as you shot your bolt
beyond the others and won the prize
of happiness complete—
O Zeus—and killed and reduced to naught
the hooked taloned maid of the riddling speech,
1300 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

1305 But now whose tale is more miserable?
Who is there lives with a savager fate?
Whose troubles so reverse his life as his?
O Oedipus, the famous prince
for whom the same great harbor
1310 the same both for father and son
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
1315 against your will; judges your marriage accursed,
begetter and begotten at one in it,
O child of Laius,
would I had never seen you.
I weep for you and cry
1320 a dirge of lamentation.
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
1325 our country,
what deeds you'll hear of and what horrors see,
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
1330 it hides, such evils shortly will bring forth
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
1335 fall short

of bitter groaning; now what's more to tell?

SECOND MESSENGER: Shortest to hear and say—our
glorious queen
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.
1340 Yet insofar as I remember it
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
1345 doors

behind her shut, crying upon Laius
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?"
1350 And then she groaned and cursed the bed in which
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—
1355 for Oedipus distracted us from seeing.
He burst upon us shouting and we looked
to him as he paced frantically around,

1360 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.

1365 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.

1370 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—

1375 away from her and lifting them up high
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

1380 those whom you long for"—with such imprecations
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.

1385 So it has broken—and not on one head alone
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
not one is missing.

CHORUS LEADER: Is he now in any ease from pain?

1390 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,
it is unholy—for he'll cast himself,
1395 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;

1400 his sickness is too great to hear. You, too,
will be shown that. The bolts are opening.
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!

1405 I never encountered a worse horror!
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
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
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!
Horror of darkness enfolding, resistless, unspeakable
visitant sped
by an ill wind in haste!
Madness and stabbing pain and memory
of my evils!

CHORUS LEADER: In such misfortunes it's no wonder
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.
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,
that brought this bitter bitterness, my sorrows to
completion.

But the hand that struck me
was none but my own.

Why should I see

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?
Take me away, and haste—to a place out of the way!
Take me away, my friends, the greatly miserable,
the most accursed, whom the gods too hate
above all men on earth!



A rehearsal for a production of *Oedipus the King* at the Roman Colosseum in 2000. (REUTERS/Alamy)

CHORUS LEADER: Unhappy in your mind and your
misfortune,
would I had never known you!
OEDIPUS:

ANTISTROPHE B

1450 *Curse on the man who took
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,
I would not be so burdensome to friends or to
myself.*
CHORUS: I, too, could have wished it had been so.
1455 OEDIPUS: *Then I would not have come
to kill my father and marry my mother infamously.
Now I am godless and child of impurity,
begetter in the same seed that created my wretched
self.
If there is any ill worse than ill,
1460 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
otherwise, do not give me further counsel.
I do not know with what eyes I could look 1465
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
of children, bred as mine are, gladden me? 1470
No, not these eyes, never. And my city,
its towers and sacred places of the gods,
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, 1475
the criminal since proved by the gods impure
and of the race of Laius.
To this guilt I bore witness against myself—
with what eyes was I to look upon my people?
No. If there were a means to choke the fountain 1480

of hearing I would not have stayed my hand
from locking up my miserable carcass,
seeing and hearing nothing; it is sweet
to keep our thoughts out of the range of hurt.

1485 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,
the old house that I used to call my father's—
what fairness you were nurse to, and what
1490 foulness

festered beneath! Now I am found to be
evil and a son of evil. Crossroads,
and hidden glade, oak and the narrow way
at the crossroads that drank my father's blood—
1495 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
you produced the same seed again and displayed
to men

1500 fathers, brothers, children, an incestuous brood,
brides, wives, and mothers, all the foulest deeds
that can be in this world of ours.

1505 Come—it's unfit to say what is unfit
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.
No man but I can bear my evil doom.

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

1510 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?
How can I justly hope that he will trust me?
1515 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
1520 have no more shame before the face of men,
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
1525 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: 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.

OEDIPUS: But his word
has been quite clear to let the parricide,
the sinner, die.

CREON: Yes, that indeed was said.
But in the present need we had best discover
what we should do.

OEDIPUS: And will you ask about
a man so wretched?

CREON: Now even you will trust
the god.

OEDIPUS: So. I command you—and will beseech
you—

to her that lies inside that house give burial
as you would have it; she is yours and rightly
you will perform the rites for her. For me—
1545 never let this my father's city have me
living a dweller in it. Leave me live
in the mountains where Cithaeron is that's called
my mountain, which my mother and my father
while they were living would have made my tomb. 1550
So I may die by their decree who sought
indeed to kill me. Yet I know this much:
no sickness and no other thing will kill me.
I would not have been saved from death if not
for some strange evil fate. Well, let my fate
1555 go where it will.

Creon, you need not care
about my sons; they're men and so wherever
they are, they will not lack a livelihood.
But my two girls—so sad and pitiful—
whose table never stood apart from mine,
1560 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
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?

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,

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,
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
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
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."
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
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.
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: 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, 1615
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: 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. 1620

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: You that live in my ancestral Thebes, behold
this Oedipus—

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

he has passed the final limit of his life secure from
pain. 1625