

**SOPHOCLES’
“OEDIPUS REX”**

First performed around 429BCE

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Dramatis Personae

OEDIPUS

(King of Thebes)

ATTENDANTS TO OEDIPUS

(Later to Creon)

JOCASTA

(Queen of Thebes)

VARIOUS ATTENDANTS TO HER

CREON

(Jocasta’s brother)

TEIRESIAS

(A blind prophet)

A YOUNG BOY

(Teiresias’ guide, Silent)

PRIEST

HERALD

SHEPHERD

CHORUS OF THEBAN ELDERS

ANTIGONE

ISMENE

(Antigone and Ismene are daughters and sisters to Oedipus)

ACT ONE

In front of King Oedipus’ palace, in Thebes.

The palace stands three or four steps above the rest of the stage and on either side of it there is a small but obvious altar. The altar at SL is dedicated to Apollo (Jocasta will make use of this) and that on SR to Zeus (used by the Chorus)

While stage is dark, we hear the soft but ominous sounds of ancient drums and a flute, mingled with the many loud groans of hunger and pain as well as calls for Oedipus’ help:

Voices: In supplication

Oedipus! Oedipus our Lord, help us! Help your people!

The calls overwhelm the drums and for a moment the drums are heard only faintly.

Small pause before the stage is overwhelmingly lit, symbolising a land ravaged by drought and heat and the assertive and brutal presence of the god Apollo.

Apart from the palace props and the altars at the back, the stage is empty. The sound of the ancient drums rises again. No voices.

Small pause.

The lights are switched on again, and again at an overwhelming intensity.

This group of Thebans comprise all ages and both sexes. They show suffering and exhaustion under the intense heat.

Standing in front of them, is the Priest. He is holding a priest’s staff, which, like the seer’s has a thick rope of cotton wrapped around its upper end.

Chorus:

Oedipus! Oedipus our Lord, help us! Help your people!

The centre door of the palace opens and Oedipus enters. He wears the golden garland and staff of a king. He is a proud but benevolent, kindly king and is recognised as such by his subjects.

Oedipus:

What is it, my children? You, my children, are the youngest generation of the ancient house of Cadmus. What is causing all these cries of anguish, all this waving of prayer branches? Their scent has filled the air of our city! All this lamentation, these deep sighs of misfortune. What are they about? Well? Here I am! You have me here in person and I have come to you so that I can find out what it is that gives you this pain, directly from you, from your own mouths, rather than risk any mistakes that might be made by a third person.

Speak, sons and daughters of old Cadmus, you are talking to me, Oedipus! You all know me!

To the priest

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You, old priest, your advanced years well qualify you to represent this youth. Tell me then, what has brought you all here? Is there something you are afraid of? Is there something you need from me? Tell me and it will certainly be granted! Otherwise what sort of a man would I be if I had not enough compassion to help you, you, my very own folk, with all my heart?

Priest:

King of our Thebes, Oedipus!

Look at us! We are all here, gathered around your altars, praying. See? All the ages of men are here: the youth, whose wings have yet to spread wide enough for flying far and the old men whose head and back are bent with years – like me, Oedipus, me, Zeus' priest!

And look there! Look at our youth! The best stock of men in the world! We are all gathered here. Here and in the city, too, around both the temples of our Goddess Athena, and by the fires inside Apollo's temple, and by the altars of Ismenos whose oracles emerge from ashes. There is plenty of kneeling and lamenting and deep sighing going on there as well, my lord! There, too, Oedipus, the laurels are waved in supplication.

But, you, too, Oedipus, with your own eyes, you can see how the whole of Thebes is in the grips of a battering sea storm of troubles and how she cannot raise her head from its murderous waves! You too, can see that our trees let drop their best flowers to the ground just before they become fruit; that our herds drop dead as they graze and our women have all become barren.

A despicable pestilence, my lord, has taken our Thebes within its murderous grip!

As if some fire-carrying god has swooped upon our land, hollowing out our homes while at the same time, cluttering the house of Black Hades with our moans and our cries of despair.

We are not saying, Oedipus, that you are equal to the gods but we have come to you and have gathered around your altars, because, out of all the men we know, we think you are the best in working out the meaning of these hardships that have been tossed upon us, by life and by the gods.

It was you, Oedipus, who came here, to our Thebes, to the land of Cadmus and who has saved us from the grips of that witch, that Sphinx, who held us all inside here, within the walls of the city, in dreadful fear.

You did not do this with our help, Oedipus but with the help of some divine intervention. With your act, you've let us live proper lives again.

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And now, great Oedipus! We fall before you in prayer and ask you to find, if you can, some remedy for our pains, either from some man's wisdom or some god's voice because I can see that the thoughts of experienced men are always the wisest.

Come then, our Lord and King! Come, first among all mortals! Make our Thebes live again!

Remember, my Lord, this city calls you "saviour" because of your past act of generosity. Let us not ever in the future think that "by Oedipus' generosity we were saved but by Oedipus lack of action we died." Let us instead say, "Oedipus raised us to our feet yet again!"

You were driven here to our aid by a bright omen many years ago, so let it drive you to us once again! Because, Oedipus, if you wish to rule this city, and I know you do, then it is far better to rule it when it is filled with men rather than when it is scraped hollow of them. No tower, no ship is worth anything if it is bereft of men.

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Oedipus:

My poor children!

I know you well, all of you and I know well your pain. I know very well that you are all gripped by despair. Yet no one is in greater pain than I am because your pain affects only you, each one of you,

alone, whereas I ache for the whole city and for all of you. So have no fear, I'm not asleep. I am wade awake to your misfortune. My soul cries for us all. I have lost many tears and have travelled many paths of thought to find a way out of this until, finally, I have decided to put into action the only possible solution that came to my mind: I have sent Creon, my wife's brother, Menoikeos' son, to Apollo's oracle to ask what we should do to save our city; to find out what deed or what word should we do or say to save our country.

In fact, Creon should have returned by now and I'm beginning to worry. Let him come and tell us what needs to be done. Then I would indeed be a terrible man if I did not do all that the god asks!

They all look into the distance and see Creon approaching.

Priest:

You judge time well, Oedipus. There he is! *The chorus points towards Creon in the distance.*

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Oedipus:

By Apollo! His face looks happy enough! Perhaps he is carrying good news! News that will save our city.

Priest:

He certainly looks happy, otherwise he wouldn't be wearing such a splendid garland of Laurel!

Oedipus:

We'll know soon enough. He's close enough to hear us now.

Enter Creon wearing a laurel garland with berries. They shake hands

My royal brother! What news from Apollo?

Creon:

Good news! That is to say, I think that even the worst events could bring good fortune if fortune wills it!

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Oedipus:

You're not making yourself clear, brother. What did the oracle say?

Creon:

Shall I speak out here, in front of all these people, or shall we go inside? I don't mind either way.

Oedipus:

Speak here, in front of them. I mourn for their lives more than I do for my own.

Creon:

Then I'll tell you what the god said and it is this: There's a wound that eats at the very heart of our city's soul. A wound that has been allowed to grow and fester inside Thebes. Apollo commands us to purge the city of it before it becomes incurable.

Oedipus:

A wound? What sort of wound is this and how can we purge the city of it?

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Creon:

By banishing that murderer or by washing away the blood of that murder with the blood of another murder. It is this blood that tortures Thebes.

Oedipus:

And which man is the god talking about?

Who is it who has been murdered?

Creon:

Once we had a king called Laius...

Oedipus:

I know of him though I never saw him.

Creon:

He was murdered and it is those murderers whom Apollo now demands to have punished.

Oedipus:

And where are these men? How can one find the clues to such an old crime?

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Creon:

Here, inside Thebes, Apollo said!

In Thebes one can find whatever one looks for but that which he neglects, escapes him.

Oedipus:

Where then has Laius fallen? Within the palace walls? In the fields? Or upon the soil of some other land? Where was his murder committed?

Creon:

He said he was going to the oracle himself but he never managed to return.

Oedipus:

Has no one else managed to bring news of his death or does none of his attendants have any light to shed upon this dreadful deed?

Creon:

All but one of them fled and he could only say one thing.

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Oedipus:

One thing? Such as what? Tell us! From that one single thing we might be able to learn a great deal. It might well be the beginning of some hint of hope! Tell us!

Creon:

Well, that man said Laius was murdered by the hands of many thieves.

Oedipus:

Thieves? How could thieves be so daring? Unless they were paid by some traitor from in here?

Creon:

That's what we were wondering also but since Laius' disappearance no one came to help us in this great misfortune.

Oedipus:

What could have stopped you? What fear stopped you from finding out how your king was murdered?

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Creon:

The Sphinx, Oedipus! She has twisted our minds with her puzzle songs and made us stop searching. We could only see the obvious and could never look for any hidden clues.

Oedipus:

Then I shall start from the beginning again and bring everything to the light. You've done well, you and Apollo, to take up the cause again. It is fair then that I should be your partner in this cause, to help Thebes and Apollo at the same time.

This wound, this wound hurts me as well as my friends and so I need to heal it. Because the hand of Laius' murderer could murder me as well and so, by avenging his death, I gain also.

Come then, my children! Stand up from these steps. Gather all the branches and pray no more. Let someone gather all our folks here and I will do everything in my power to heal this murderous wound. With Apollo's help, either we win or we die.

Priest:

Come, stand up my children. We've got what we have come for. Apollo, who has sent his oracle will save us and will heal our city's awful wound.

Exit Oedipus, Creon and the citizens.

Stage becomes dark again, long enough for the chorus of elders to come and stand around the altars.

They are dressed in black, except for their leader who is dressed in white.

Light now normal.

Flute more prominent than the drum and more placatory.

Small pause before the chorus speaks. It is addressing Zeus at his altar.

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Chorus:

Sweet voice of Zeus that came to us through Apollo's golden temple: What are you saying to the people of our glorious Thebes?

Chorus:

Shudders run through my heart with fear and my mind is unclear.

Chorus:

Apollo, god of healing, god from Delos, I dread the message you bring to us.

Chorus:

What past deed must we pay for now? What do we owe to the past?

Chorus:

Tell us, child of Golden Hope, of the love that is as wide as the sky!

Chorus:

Immortal Athena! Zeus' daughter! I call on you first!

Chorus:

And to your sister, who is our protector, the goddess Artemis, whose throne is the magnificent earth and in whose temples we Thebans pray.

Chorus:

And you, too, Apollo whose arrows never miss!

Chorus:

Come, all three of you. You've come to our aid before and you have swept aside the flames of our catastrophe.

Come again now!

Chorus:

Save us, gods!

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Chorus:

Countless are my sufferings. The whole nation is suffering from this wound, from this murderous plague and we see no way to be rid of it.

Chorus:

No crops on the land, no children follow the women's birth-pains.

Chorus:

And our souls, hasten to beat one another, like fast birds, in their race to get, like a wild fire, to Dark Hades.

Chorus:

The city is dying from her countless pains, gods!

Chorus:

There the children die and left upon the earth unburied, uncried for, uncleansed, polluting our city.

Chorus:

Women, young and old, fully grey, are spread in deep prayer upon the steps of altars.

Chorus:

They pray with deep sighs for their bitter sufferings.

Chorus:

The laments fill the air, the loud cries of pain, full of loss – against all this, worthy daughter of Zeus, send us your sweet aid.

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Chorus:

And Zeus! Make Ares the winged god of war turn his back and leave this land!

Chorus:

Here he is before us all, no bronze shields but still he runs wild in the clamour and the hurt! Make him run away! Make this god of war and all his destruction leave our Thebes!

Chorus:

Send him away either to the vast watery chambers of Amphitriti or to the storm-eaten, hostile shores of Thrace because here, what the night leaves untouched, the day destroys.

Chorus:

Send your burning bolt to him, Zeus. Burn him, master of the thunderbolts.

Chorus:

You, too, Apollo! I ask you to give us aid and protection. Let your untamed arrows leave their golden bow and you, too Artemis come with your burning torches. Leave your Lycian hills and come to us!

Chorus:

And bright-eyed Bacchus, master of the maenads. Let him come also with a burning torch, to send away the most odious of all gods.

Enter Oedipus.

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Oedipus:

You've asked me to come and help you. So speak and whatever it is you need you shall have. My words and your help will give us strength enough to heal this despicable wound. I speak to you as a stranger to this place and, as I am told, to the evil deed. Alone and with divine sign, I'd have no hope of finding any clues that have to do with this crime.

Now that I've become one of you, though, I shall talk to you all.

If anyone knows anything about whose hand it was that had murdered Labdakus' son, Laius, I order him to reveal everything. Even if it were his own hand, let him speak because no harm will come to him save for exile. Let him not be afraid. He will leave our land untouched.

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Also, if someone knows that the murderer is from another country, let him not be silent also because not only will I give him a reward but his help will be remembered.

If, however, either due to fear for a friend or for himself someone does not disclose the murderer, hear

me! This is what I will do:

No matter who this man is, I forbid everyone here, in Thebes where I have my throne, to receive him as a guest to his home, or to talk with him or to pray with him or conduct any sacrifices with him, to any god! And I also forbid him to offer him sacred ablutions.

Let everyone of you send him away from your house because, as Apollo's oracle has declared, he is this wound which is spreading inside the very soul of our city.

Such an ally I am to Apollo and to Laius.

As for the evil doer, I curse him and whether it was he alone, or with the help of others that he has caused our wound, let him live a wretched life.

Even if he were someone in my own household, among my own folks and even if I happen to know who it is, then let me suffer all that my curse has delivered upon the murderer.

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This then I command you to do for me and for Apollo and for Thebes.

Unfortunate Thebes! Barren land, godless land, a land too much wasted.

Thebans, if the god does not make clear who this murderer is, it's not proper that you should keep it hidden in the dark. Find the murderer! He is the murderer of your glorious King. Search for him everywhere. Everywhere! I am here with you and I am sitting upon his throne. I am sharing his bed and his wife. I have the children he would have had if he were alive and the father of an heir. I share his brothers.

His Fate has dealt him a heavy blow, yet I shall try to do my best for him.

I shall try everything for his sake, as if he were my own father.

I shall try everything to catch his murderer, the murderer of Laius, son of Polydorus and of Labdacus and of ancient Aginorus.

For those who don't like what I have just said, curses to you. Let no god make your soil or your women fertile. Let all your belongings go the way of disaster. To you, real Cadmian souls, you, real Thebans, who heeded my words, holy Justice and the rest of the gods will be your allies.

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Chorus:

Oedipus, all these curses of yours force me to speak. I, myself, have neither killed old Laius nor do I know who did. All this is Apollo's business and one day he'll disclose for us the evil hand.

Oedipus:

Quite right, old man; but no mortal can force a god's mouth.

Chorus:

Then I have another thought for you.

Oedipus:

That one and another still, if you have any more. By all means, speak!

Chorus:

My Lord, I know a mortal who sees as excellently as Apollo. Teiresias, the seer who would know the answers to all these things if one were only to ask him.

Oedipus:

Yes, yes, I know of him and I have not neglected that action either. By Creon's suggestion I've sent two men to fetch him. He should well and truly be here by now!

Chorus:

There are other things to consider also but they are old and meaningless.

Oedipus:

Other things? What are these other things? Tell me because I weigh every word!

Chorus:

It is said that Laius was killed by travellers.

Oedipus:

I've heard that too. Yet no one saw the murderer with his own eyes.

Chorus:

Still, once he hears your curses, fear might get the better of him and come forth.

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Oedipus:

Men who are not afraid of the deed are not afraid of the word.

Enter the blind seer, Teiresias, holding the staff which distinguishes him as a seer, ie, it has a thin rope of cotton wool wrapped around its top end. He is also guided by the hand of a young boy and by the two men whom Oedipus has sent to fetch him.

The two men bow to Oedipus and exit.

Chorus:

Here he is, king. He will point out the murderer to you. They've brought him here for you because he, alone, knows the truth.

Oedipus:

Blessed seer! You see and judge all things, those that are known and those that have not been explained; those of the heavens and those of the earth. Teiresias, you might not be able to see but you can certainly sense how ill our land is. You, holy man, are the only one who, we think, can be her protector and saviour.

If you have not heard already, Apollo has commanded us to find Laius' murderers and either kill them or send them far from Thebes. That is the only way this wound in our city will heal.

Yet, if you have some knowledge, from some sign from the birds or from some other medium of visions, don't hold it from us. Save us, save Thebes, save the Thebans, save me and save yourself. Rid this shame born by the murdered king. We are your servants. To help Thebes, by whichever means one can, is a virtuous effort.

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Teiresias: *Shouts in pain*

Oh, how brutal! How hideous it is! How loathsome is knowledge when it does not help its possessor! Horrible! I knew this well! I knew the cause of your invitation, yet I've made the mistake of obeying your order! I should not have come.

Oedipus:

What is it old man? What's wrong? Why such hostility?

Teiresias:

Let me go home, Oedipus! For your sake and mine, let me go home.

Oedipus:

Come now, Teiresias! You are being unfair and unkind to the city that has raised you. Don't hold back your vision.

Teiresias:

And I do so because I can see well where your ill-timed words will take you and I do not want to be your companion in that journey.

Oedipus:

No! No Teiresias! Don't leave! If you know something about our pain tell us. With great respect, we beg you!

Teiresias:

You! All of you! You know nothing! You... you know nothing!

No, I will not speak. Ever! I will not speak! I do not want you to know what sufferings you will have to carry!

330

Oedipus:

What? You know something and yet you remain silent? Do you want to send us and our country to absolute destruction?

Teiresias:

Me? I have no need to hurt neither you nor me. Ask me nothing more. You'll learn nothing from me.

Oedipus:

So you won't speak? Not ever? Wretched man!

You would raise the anger inside a heartless stone, you would, Teiresias! Is this how you will take your heart to your grave? A stone without remorse?

Teiresias:

You scorn and point at my own anger, yet yours – your anger, King, your anger, which lives in there, in your own heart, that anger you do not see. So do not send curses upon me, my lord!

Do not insult me!

Oedipus:

Who would not? Who would not curse you for saying the things you do against our city?

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Teiresias:

Those... "things" will emerge of their own will, even if I stay silent.

Oedipus:

So, speak then! Tell us what things will emerge.

Teiresias:

Enough! Enough! No more! Churn up all the wrath you want. All the wrath you want!

Oedipus:

Well then! Alright! I will leave nothing unsaid in my wrath. And I say to you then, old man, that in my mind I have you as one of those who has helped in Laius' murder! Yes, old man! You have worked with them. Perhaps even you, yourself, have committed the deed! Indeed, if you had eyes that could see I would have said you did the deed all alone!

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Teiresias:

Really! Are these the thoughts inside your wrath?

So! I ask you then to continue with your proclamation but there is no need for you speak to me nor to them (*indicating the chorus*) from now on, because... because the wound that has ravaged this city, is you! You are the wound itself! You are what has polluted this city! You are the wound and you are the murderer!

Oedipus:

Look with what blunt effrontery he uttered these words!

Stupid man! Where do you think you will hide their consequence?

Teiresias:

I have already hidden them. I have hidden them inside the power of truth! Truth, which I love and which I nurture.

Oedipus:

And who taught you to utter these words? Surely you did not learn all this from your practice as a prophet?

Teiresias:

Who? Why, it was you who taught them to me. It was you who has forced me to utter them.

Oedipus:

What were the words again? Say them so that I know them even better.

360

Teiresias:

Did you not understand them before or are you joking with me?

Oedipus:

No, no! Truly, say them again. I want to understand them well. Repeat the words!

Teiresias:

Let me tell you then, plainly and with no equivocation.

The murderer you seek, Oedipus, is you!

Oedipus:

Oh! You will not insult me twice without punishment!

Teiresias:

Shall I utter yet something else? Something to raise your ire even more?

365

Oedipus:

Utter all you want. It will be in vain.

Teiresias:

Well then, I utter these words: In your ignorance, you conduct the vilest acts with those closest to you. Vile acts of which you are ignorant and which you cannot see.

Oedipus:

Do you think you will always be happy uttering words like these?

Teiresias:

Sure, if truth has some power.

370

Oedipus:

Truth does. Truth has a great deal of power but not for you. Because you are blind not only in the eyes but in the ears and in your mind as well.

Teiresias:

And you? You curse me, you wretched man but very soon these men will be cursing you!

Oedipus:

You can hurt no one, old man. You can hurt neither me nor anyone else who has eyes and can see.

Your food bowl, old man, is the never-ending darkness!

Teiresias: *Making as if to leave*

Your Fate does not have you falling by my hand, Oedipus. No, Apollo will take care of that. He will take care of your fall.

Oedipus: *As if he just discovered something*

Hold! Are these, these revelations you have just uttered – have they come out of your own head or out of Creon's?

Teiresias:

The fault is your own, Oedipus, not Creon's.

380

Oedipus:

Oh, yes! It is Creon's all right!

Wealth! Royalty! To be a king one needs skill! Skill that surpasses all other skills. To be a king is a much envied life. How much hatred is hidden within this work!

I've been given all this without my asking it, yet *Indicating the palace* Creon, once my first and trusted friend, now seeks to take it all from me, sliding and hiding behind this scheming seer, this charlatan, this deviser of magic traps, who has eyes for a profit but not for his art.

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Come then, my seer! Tell us: of what consists your qualification? Where were you when the Great Bitch, that Sphinx who sang her deadly puzzles outside this city and who needed the art of a genuine seer to answer those puzzles, where were you then? Why did you not save the city then? Where were your gods then? Where were your birds?

It was I! Yes I, Oedipus, who knew nothing of such things who shut that monster's mouth; not by magic or by signs of birds but by my own brain.

400

So! Here you are, now! Intending to send me away from here, hoping to hang around Creon's throne! For this outrage, Teiresias, you shall pay with tears; you, Teiresias and he, the chief plotter. And were it not for your advanced years, hard pain would be your teacher.

Chorus:

I think, King that both of you spoke in anger. This is no time for such talk. Rather, we shall try and work out Apollo's oracle.

Teiresias:

King or not, if I am to answer your questions, I need to be your equal. In fact it is my right to claim this equality because I am not your servant but the servant of Apollo and I have no need for Creon's patronage.

You berate me for being blind, yet I tell you that even though you have eyes, you cannot see in what evil circumstance you live, nor do you know where you live or even with whom you live.

Ha! Do you even know whose son you are? Do you know, Oedipus that you are the enemy of your people, both, here on Earth as well as below in Hades? The doubly sharp curse of mother and father will come one day with an angry foot and chase you away, outside this city, with your eyes bereft of light and clogged with darkness.

What place on earth will not have heard your groans of pain then?

And once you find out to what harbour of misery your wedding has brought you that fine day, well then, what spot in the whole of Kitheron will not hear the echo of your groans?

And with your children! You have no idea the multitude of troubles that will crash upon you once you find out about your children!

Go ahead! Insult Creon now if you want, and insult my mouth also because no one in the world will be destroyed in a worse way than you!

429

Oedipus: *lunges at him angrily*

How much more of this can anyone hear?

Leave! Go on, leave! Still here?

Go home! I order you! And stay well away from me! Well away! Do you hear?

Teiresias:

Had you not called for me, Oedipus I would not be here in the first place.

Oedipus:

Nor would I have called you here had I known you would be talking sheer, stupid nonsense!

435

Teiresias:

For you, Oedipus, we are stupid but for those who gave birth to you, we were wise. Knowledgeable!
Makes to leave

Oedipus:

Gave birth to me? Who are you taking about? Stay! Tell me this, then, who was it who gave birth to me? And when?

Teiresias:

It is today! Today will be both, the day of your birth and of your death.

Oedipus:

How dark and puzzling your words are, old man!

Teiresias:

Did you not say you are great at solving puzzles?

Oedipus:

You insulted me for every one of my qualities.

Teiresias:

It is your very Fate who has declared your destruction. A Fate that gave you success will now give you pain.

Oedipus:

If I have saved this city I am content.

Teiresias:

Let me leave then. Come boy, give me your hand.

445

Oedipus:

Boy, guide him! You are a hindrance to me here.

Leave so that you won't cause me any more grief.

Teiresias:

I will leave after I say the things I came to say. I do not fear your angry face. My Fate has not declared that I shall die by your hand.

Let me say this to you then: The man whom you are hunting with curses and threats for Laius' murder is right here. In here!

He is thought of as a foreigner, an alien but he will be found to be a true Theban. Born right here! And this discovery will not make him happy. Because from someone who now has eyes, he will soon be wandering blindly, in utter poverty and studying the ground with a blind man's stick.

Ah, and his children!

To his children he will discover that he is both brother and father.

To the woman who gave birth to him he is son and husband and to his father, both, a sharer of his bed and his murderer.

Go into your palace then, king Oedipus and think about these things and if you find me a liar then you can truly say I know nothing of prophesies.

Exit Oedipus into the palace.

Teiresias with his guide also exit towards the city.

462

Chorus:

I wonder whose murderous hand it is that Delphi's prophetic rock said committed this most incredible of all incredible deeds?

Chorus:

Time for him now to flee this place, flee faster than flying mares, faster than the wind.

Chorus:

I see Apollo, the son of Zeus, armed with flames and lightning, hard behind him, pursuing him fiercely!

Chorus:

Look! He is followed by the awesome, unfailing Furies!

Chorus:

Only a minute ago the command came from the snowy tips of Parnassus to hunt down the hiding murderer. There, the man, deserted, wanders like a wild bull from cave to cave, from rock to rock, far from the paths of men, far from earth's heart, where the curses, where the Erinyes, will not find him. But they, fully alive, constantly speed their wings around him.

483

Chorus:

Yet, the wise seer troubles me! Should I believe him? Should I not? I have no idea what to think of this and my brain flies this way and that without being able to see neither ahead of me or behind.

Chorus:

What conflict I wonder brought Labdakus' generation against Polybos' son? Thebes against Corinth! Why? I never knew the answer to this question before, nor do I know it now. Who murdered Laius?

Chorus:

Who knows? I know nothing! Nothing with which I may condemn our current king and thus avenge Laius' death.

Chorus:

Men's deeds are known only by Zeus and by his son, Apollo! Only the gods are privy to our deeds! To say a seer knows more than I do is false. Men are each other's better in only one thing: wisdom. As for the murder, myself, I'll only believe the proven word and nothing less.

Chorus:

We saw it all! Out there, the winged Sphinx had asked him all her riddles and his answers proved him wise and so, justly then, he was proclaimed our city's loving friend.

No! My mind will not declare him evil!

Enter Creon

512

Creon:

Men of Thebes! I've heard that Oedipus has besmirched my name with heavy accusations. This I will not tolerate! If he thinks that all these troubles our city is suffering right now are caused by some evil word of mine or some deed, well then, let me tell you that, no, I'd rather be dead—cut my life's string short then do such a thing. Because such accusations cause enormous harm to a citizen if the whole city, including his friends believes them.

Chorus:

Creon, perhaps this condemnation was uttered in the heat of anger rather than from the thinking mind.

Creon:

He says the seer uttered false predictions and that these predictions were advised by me.

Chorus:

Yes, I don't know why Oedipus said that.

Creon:

And did he honestly believe these accusations of his?

530

Chorus:

I have no idea. I can never tell what thoughts run through the minds of leaders.

Enter Oedipus

Ah, here's the man himself!

Oedipus: *to Creon*

You!

The audacity of the man! You dare live in the chambers of my palace and you dare work plots against my throne, against my very life, and you do all this in the bright light of day, obvious to all who have eyes to see! By Apollo! Tell me, is it because you thought I was a weakling or a fool that you have put such ideas into your head? Or did you think that I would never discover this sinister plot of yours or that I would be too weak to escape it?

Let me teach you something, my brother-in-law, Creon:

Such plots, plots to overthrow a king need the strength of people and purse; Only stupid men don't know this!

Creon:

Give me my turn, Oedipus! Give me my turn to answer your speech and then you may judge. This you must do!

545

Oedipus:

You have the audacity to speak but I! I've not the stomach for the words of a murderer!

Creon:

Murderer! Well, then let me first speak on the matter before you judge me one!

Oedipus:

And on this very matter, don't tell me that you are innocent!

Creon:

Oedipus! Oedipus you are wrong to think that this mindless obstinacy of yours is some sort of virtue!

551

Oedipus:

And you are wrong to think that a man can murder a relative and get away with it!

Creon:

On that I agree!

Oedipus, I do agree with you on that! Tell me then, Oedipus, what is it that I've done against you?

Oedipus:

Was it not you who's persuaded me to send for the *sarcastically* reverend seer?

Creon:

But why not?

Oedipus:

Now, tell me also, how long has it been since Laius –

Creon: *Interrupts him*

Laius? What has he got to do with anything? I don't follow.

560

Oedipus: *losing patience*

When was Laius murdered?

Creon:

Many years ago. Why?

Oedipus:

And was this "reverent" seer plying his trade at the time?

Creon:

Yes. Just as wisely then and just as much revered by the people as he is now.

Oedipus:

Did he say anything about me at the time?

Creon:

No, at least not near my ears.

Oedipus:

Did you not search for your murdered king's corpse?

Creon:

But of course we did but we found nothing.

Oedipus:

How is it then that this wise seer of yours did not make all these revelations about me back then?

Creon:

I have no idea about such things, Oedipus and when it comes to things I know nothing about, I prefer to keep my mouth shut.

570

Oedipus:

And yet you do know everything about this matter! You certainly know enough to confess!

Creon:

Which matter, Oedipus? I will make confessions about things I know.

Oedipus:

This matter: that, had the seer not conspired with you, he would not be calling me a murderer!

Creon:

I had no idea he did this. Let me then ask you a question, also.

Oedipus:

Go ahead! Ask all you want. Ask and learn that I am not a murderer!

Creon:

Tell me then Oedipus. Is not my sister, Jocasta, your wife?

Oedipus:

She is, indeed!

Creon:

And tell me also, are you two not equal rulers of Thebes?

Oedipus:

I begrudge Jocasta nothing. What is mine is hers.

Creon:

And I? Am I not your equal also?

Oedipus:

Aha! This! This is the very point upon which my anger rests! You have failed to be a faithful relative!

Creon:

No, Oedipus, not if you think through all this the way I do.

Look: Which do you think is preferable? To rule in fear or to sleep in peace, having, in any case, equal access to power as his king and his sister? I know of no one who would chose the former and nor do I. Me? I want neither the throne nor the chores that accompany it.

Because of you, Oedipus, I have everything I need without the fear. Were I to be a king the chores

would choke me. Throne and tears on one side, everything I need without the tears on the other. Believe me I'm not so foolish as to chose things which bear no benefit.

596

All the folks respect me now. They greet me with a smile, they come to me whenever they need something from you because they know they can depend on me. Why then should I give all this up for the sake of your throne? Would it not be thoroughly unwise of me? In any case, Oedipus, believe me: murder is not in my nature – alone or with others!

Go ahead, go to Delphi, Oedipus! Check me out. Ask the oracle if I am not telling the truth; and if you find out that Teiresias and I have conspired against you, then kill me. In that I will give you a hand but judge me with certain, with positive proof. Judging a good friend as evil without reason is bad work because sending away a good friend is like losing your own life and your own life is the most loved life of all.

Time, Oedipus, Time will show you the truth in this matter. Innocence takes time to be revealed; guilt can be announced far too quickly.

616

Chorus:

He spoke well, my king. Those who hurry to judge, judge badly.

Oedipus:

If the schemer rushes with his scheme I, too must rush with my decisions, otherwise his schemes win over my decisions.

Creon:

So what is it you want, Oedipus? To send me away from here?

Oedipus:

Send you away? Absolutely not! I want you dead! Dead here, before me rather than alive elsewhere.

Creon:

Tell me first. What exactly are you afraid that I will do to you?

Oedipus:

Are you disobeying me?

Creon:

No, Oedipus. I can see that your reasoning is bad, Oedipus!

Oedipus:

My reasoning is perfect.

Creon:

But your reasoning should be made perfect in my mind also.

Oedipus:

Firstly, you cannot be trusted.

Creon:

But what if you are wrong?

Oedipus:

You are still obliged to obey!

Creon:

Obey? An unjust command? Why should I?

Oedipus: *Exasperated*

O, Thebes, Thebes!

630

Creon:

Thebes is mine just much as she is yours!

Enter Jocasta

Jocasta:

What is all this? What is all this silly squabbling? Are you not ashamed? The whole country is suffering the pains of a horrendous pestilence and you two –here you are, in front of the palace for all the people to see, arguing about your petty little affairs. Get back inside both of you, before you turn these little affairs into a something major.

These petty squabbles of yours can bring about large and bitter consequences.

Creon:

Darling sister!

Your husband here is threatening, most seriously, to either send me away from the land of my birth or to have me executed!

Oedipus:

But of course I do. I caught him plotting against me, Jocasta. An evil mind, working evil webs.

Creon:

Ah! If this is true then let me not enjoy a moment more of my life!
Let me wander around the world, a cursed soul wherever I go!

646

Jocasta:

By all the gods, Oedipus! Have some faith in him! At least have some faith in the gods by whom he swears; and then in me and in all these folk who stand before you!

Chorus:

I beg you king, listen and think! Think well!

Oedipus:

And compromise upon what?

Chorus:

Trust Creon. He has never been untrustworthy before and now, you see, your faith in him is made all the more secure by his oaths.

Oedipus:

Are you aware of what it is you are saying?

Chorus:

I do, my king!

Oedipus:

Then tell me!

656

Chorus:

I am saying that you should never condemn a friend without absolute proof.

Oedipus:

Know this well, old man: that if this is what you really want then you must also want my destruction or my exile from this land.

Chorus:

By Helios, the Sun, the first of all the gods! May I be cast asunder without gods or friends by my side if I desire such a thing! My poor, unfortunate heart, though, is hurt with these new sufferings of Thebes and all the more if upon them are added your own sufferings, my king.

Oedipus:

Well, then, all right! Let him be exiled and not killed – even though, I know, it means my own death or my own exile in disgrace. It is your mouth that has gained my sympathy, not his. I shall hate him wherever he might be.

Creon:

So much hatred in your compromise! Yet, when your anger subsides a little how you will suffer! Souls like yours are their own worst enemy! Quite rightly, too!

676

Oedipus:

Leave! Get out!

Creon:

I shall. A foreigner to you, a friend to them.

Exit Creon

Chorus:

Queen, why don't you take your husband inside?

Jocasta:

First I need to know what is going on.

Chorus:

Hollow suspicions from words, my Lady.

Chorus:

Still, even the unjust word has a strong bite.

Jocasta:

Hollow words from both?

Chorus:

Yes, madam.

Jocasta:

But why?

Chorus:

Enough, my Lady, enough! Thebes is suffering enough. Let them end it where they have just stopped.

Oedipus: *To the Chorus*

You see? An intelligent man like you, yet you see what you have done with my part of justice! You spat upon it with cold and uncaring heart!

Chorus:

But, my king, I have told you many times before: I would be mad to disobey you. You, Oedipus who, when this land was tortured by misfortune, you came and healed her well.

Chorus:

Heal her again, my king, Heal her!

Jocasta:

By the gods, Oedipus! Tell me, as well, what raised your anger so much?

700

Oedipus:

Your brother says I am Laius' murderer!

Jocasta:

Who told him that? Or was it his own thinking?

Oedipus:

He has sent that evil seer to me to tell me while he kept his own mouth free of such utterances.

Jocasta:

Well, then! Oedipus, my king! Forget everything and listen to me. No mortal knows the will of the gods. Let me show you proof of this. Once, an oracle came to Laius –I am not saying from Apollo, directly, but from his servants- that it was his Fate, Laius' Fate, to die by the hand of his son – his and my son! However, word has it that Laius was killed by strangers, thieves, at a three-way cross road.

As for the boy, three days after he was born, the king has his ankles pinned and then handed him to someone to take him to some forest where no human ever went. And so, neither the child was allowed by Apollo to kill his father, nor did Laius suffer murder in the hands of his own son.

That was god's real intention, not what some seer said would happen. If the god wants something done he will tell us himself.

726

Oedipus: *highly disturbed by some new thought*

Ah, what a fear! What a trembling, what a cold panic has overtaken me, wife! Something from what you have just said...

Jocasta:

What fear, my king? Tell me!

Oedipus:

I think... I think I have heard you say that Laius was killed at a tree-way crossing.

Jocasta:

That is what they said then and that is what they are still saying now.

Oedipus:

And where is this cross road exactly?

Jocasta:

The city is called Phokis. A divided road which splits all the way to the Delphi on one side and to Daulia on the other.

735

Oedipus:

How long ago did the murder happen?

Jocasta:

It was announced just a little before you arrived here and became king.

Oedipus:

Oh, Zeus! Zeus! What do you have in store for me next?

Jocasta:

What is it, Oedipus? What memory disturbs your mind?

Oedipus:

Ask me no more, wife, just tell me: What height what age was Laius then?

Jocasta:

Tall... his hair was just turning grey... looked quite like you do now.

Oedipus:

O, what a wretched man I am! I think I have cast hateful curses upon myself without my knowing!

Jocasta:

My king! What are you saying? What fear floods your face?

Oedipus:

A dire fear, wife! I fear that that blind priest, that seer, is truly Apollo's eye! You will show me proof of this if you can tell me one more thing.

Jocasta:

Ask, Oedipus! How frightened I am. Ask and I shall tell you.

750

Oedipus:

When Laius went away, was he accompanied by a few or by many armed men?

Jocasta:

Five, including a herald. Laius was in a carriage.

Oedipus:

Ah! So many clear signs, wife. Wife, who told you all this?

Jocasta:

A servant. He was the only survivor. He came and told me.

Oedipus:

Does he still live with us?

Jocasta:

No. As soon as he came and saw you upon Laius' throne he disappeared. He begged me at the time to send him to the grazing lands, to be as far away from the city as possible. So I sent him. He was a good man and worthy of even greater reward so I granted him his wish.

Oedipus:

Could we bring him here in a hurry?

Jocasta:

Of course, but why?

Oedipus:

I am afraid for myself, wife. I am afraid that I have said too much against myself and I want to see him.

770

Jocasta:

Of course he will come but I think I have the right to know what is going on.

Oedipus:

Since I have come so far into the depths of fear, Jocasta, I won't keep you in the dark. I will tell you everything. To who else could I possibly disclose such a Fate?

My father was the Corinthian Polybus, my mother, the Dorian Meropi. There, in Corinth, I was loved by all, until one day when something odd happened. Odd and not worthy of the attention I gave it at the time.

A drunk, during a banquet said that I was not my father's son, that I was a false son, an adopted son. I held my temper that day but the next day I asked my parents and they, too, were highly insulted by what that drunk had said.

I loved those two. Still, some thought at the back of my head was eating at me, at my very soul. One day then, I went secretly to Apollo's shrine and asked him about it but the god gave me no answer to any of the questions I had ask him but... he did tell me all sorts of other horrible, dreadful prophesies, prophesies like, one day I would become my mother's husband, or that I would give birth to a generation hated by all mankind, or that I would murder my father! At that I let the stars guide my path and left Corinth behind me. I walked away from there so that I wouldn't give the slightest chance for these awful prophesies to come true.

I walked and walked until I came upon that forked road where you said Laius was murdered.

800

Let me tell you the truth, wife. As I got to that spot, I came across a herald and a man on a horse-drawn carriage. Both, man and herald came and tried to push me out of the way. In a very rough manner. I got so angry that, in the fight, I hit the driver of the carriage. The old man saw this and as I walked past the carriage he picked up the double goad and hit me over the head with it. Let me tell you, wife, for that little act, he paid a double price. I lifted my own staff and hit him back. He rolled to the ground from the carriage, flat on his back. Then, as I fought on, I killed all the rest of them.

But if this stranger now has some light to shine upon that incident -

Oh, wife! Who would be more unfortunate than me? More hated? By man and by gods?

Neither a stranger nor a citizen could ever let me into his home nor even speak with me but he would send me on my cursed way. And it was I who announced this curse upon me, no one else.

820

These hands! With these very hands I had gripped at the man whose wife I hold now. Am I not then

an evil man? Am I not a vile sacrilege? If I must leave, I will neither be able to see my family nor go back to my own country, Corinth. Or else, the prophesy says, if I go back to Corinth, I shall marry my mother and kill Polybus, my father, the man loved me and gave me life and raised me. Would it not be true if someone said of me that a cruel god is pursuing me?

Gods! Pure gods! Revered Gods! Never, never let me see such a terrible day! I would rather be lost from the eyes of men than see myself branded by such malignant shame!

Chorus:

All this, my king, is dreadful for all of us. But have courage.

Chorus:

Let's see what the witness has to tell us first.

Oedipus:

True. There is this slender hope. Let me wait for the shepherd.

Jocasta:

And what then? What will you make of his words?

840

Oedipus:

If his words agree with yours then I am doomed.

Jocasta:

What do you mean? What words have I told you?

Oedipus:

You said that this shepherd told you that a group of thieves killed Laius. If he still says that it was a "group" then I'm clearly not the murderer. A group is not a single man. But if he says it was only one traveller, then it would be all too clear: the deed falls on me!

Jocasta:

I shall do whatever pleases you, Oedipus. I shall send for the shepherd now. In the meantime, let's go inside.

Exit Oedipus and Jocasta into the palace.

Chorus:

If only! If only I was lucky enough to be able to fully understand the wise and pure words, the laws of the heavenly gods, laws that were fathered by Olympus, and not merely those of some mortal whose memory can fail!

Chorus:

Great and ageless are the Gods within those laws.

Chorus:

Arrogance overfed with vanity and bloated with unearned riches, will turn a man into a tyrant. Yet even from the highest peak he will fall into the deepest abyss from where there is no escape.

Chorus:

Turning to the altar of Apollo

I pray to you, Apollo!

Do not stop the good fight for the city. Be my protector always.

883

Chorus:

If by his tongue or by his hands a man becomes too proud, if he neglects his duty to Justice or to the altars of the gods, let that man's Fate be harsh, as harsh as is his unearned pride.

Chorus:

If by unjust deeds he seeks to make his profits, or if he does not hold back the madness of his hand from touching the untouchable shrines, who could help him?

Chorus:

Who could remove the arrows sent into his heart by the angry gods? For if such things are thought of as honourable, what purpose would my prayers to the gods have?

Chorus:

Why dance the holy dances?

How could I ever again go in reverence to pray at Apollo's shrine – Earth's sacred heart – or to the shrine of Abas or to Olympia, if all these things do not clear up for all the mortals to see and feel?

Chorus: Turning to Zeus' altar

Zeus! If you are truly worthy of being called "Almighty" then let not all this injustice escape you or your eternal power!

Chorus:

Gone are the oracles addressed to Laius – no one believes them any more and nowhere the people believe in Apollo!

Chorus:

Gone is the love for the gods!

Enter Jocasta with her attendant, holding garlands and burning incense.

911

Jocasta:

Elders of Thebes, I thought I should come to the shrines with these wreaths of supplication and incense because Oedipus' mind has taken wings due to all sorts of sorrows. He cannot think like other men of logic do, men who can separate the old prophesies from the new but prefers to pay heed only to those men whose prophesies are the more dreadful.

Turning to Apollo's altar

Since I do nothing without first being advised by you Apollo, you, our closest ally, I come to you in prayer with these offerings.

Heal all our wounds, Apollo. We all tremble in fear when we see the captain of our ship so shaken with dread.

She places the wreaths and the incense on the altar. The incense will stay smouldering for the duration of the play.

Pause

Enter the Herald. He is holding a rough, shepherd's crook.

Herald:

Strangers, can you please tell me where Oedipus' palace is?

Chorus:

That there is his palace, stranger and this here is the mother of his children.

Herald:

Abundant happiness to you and to your husband, good Lady!

931

Jocasta:

And to you, too, stranger. Tell me what brings you here. What news do you have for us?

Herald:

Good news, madam – for you and for your husband.

Jocasta:

Yes? What is it? Who has sent you?

Herald:

I have come from Corinth, my Lady and my message will definitely give you joy... but then again sadness, too... I think.

Jocasta:

What is this message? How can it have such double strength?

Herald:

The Corinthians have invited Oedipus to be their king.

Jocasta:

But why? Is not old Polybus still alive?

Herald:

No, madam. Death has him in his grave grip.

Jocasta:

What? Have I heard right? Is Oedipus' father dead?

Herald:

I swear it, my Lady. By my own life! He is indeed dead.

Jocasta: *To her attendant*

Girl, go quickly and tell your master the news!

Exit the attendant into the palace

Well now, what of all the prophesies of the gods?

Oedipus left his beloved home in trembling fear lest he kills this man, his father, yet this man, Polybus died a natural death! Oedipus' hand has committed no murder!

What then of the prophesies?

Enter Oedipus with two of his own attendants and with Jocasta's attendant

950

Oedipus:

You called for me dear wife. What is it?

Jocasta:

Oedipus, listen to this man here first and then see how well god's solemn prophesies are accomplished.

Oedipus:

Yes? Who is this man and what does he have to say to me?

Jocasta:

He has just arrived from Corinth to tell us that your father, Polybus is dead.

Oedipus:

Stranger is this true? Tell me yourself.

Herald:

If this is what you want me to announce first, then let me tell you truly that Polybus is dead.

Oedipus:

By murder or by sickness?

Herald:

Old bodies need no great cause to fall, my Lord.

Oedipus:

And so, it seems, the poor old man has fallen by illness.

Herald:

And of his lengthy years, of course.

Oedipus:

What do you think now, wife? How can one give credence to Delphi's oracle, or to the birds that sing above us when all these have prophesied that I would be my father's murderer? There he is now, beneath the earth and here I am, no sword in my hand!

Still, perhaps I am a murderer nonetheless, if I have caused him unbearable grief and if grief was the cause of his death. But that would be my only contribution to his death. And he took with him down to Hades all these useless oracles, worthless for anything at all!

Jocasta:

Had I not often told you as much?

Oedipus:

Yes, wife, you did but still, dread overtook me.

975

Jocasta:

Forget all this nonsense then. Cast it out of your mind.

Oedipus:

But how can I forget the marriage to my mother? She is still alive.

Jocasta:

But of course you would be afraid if, instead of thinking, you leave everything to Fate and oracles!

Come now, best for you to live as much as you can while you can. As for your mother, many have gone to bed with their mothers –in their dreams!

Give no further thought to such things and live an easier life.

Oedipus:

These would be good words if my mother were not alive but alive she is and so it is natural for me to be afraid.

Jocasta:

But surely, your father's tomb is undeniable truth – a shining light – that the oracles are all wrong!

Oedipus:

I know. A shining light. Yet the woman is alive and so the dread is still real.

Herald:

Excuse me, sir, which woman frightens you so much?

Oedipus:

Meropi, old man. The woman with whom old Polybus lived.

Herald:

Why are you afraid of her?

Oedipus:

Because of a dreadful oracle from Apollo, stranger.

Herald:

Can you speak of it or is it one of those that must stay unspoken?

Oedipus:

Yes, I can speak of it. Apollo told me once that I would be my mother's husband and my father's murderer, so I left Corinth a long time ago. I am happy here, of course, but it is a sweet thing to be able to see your parents' eyes.

1000

Herald:

Goodness! Is this true? Is THAT what you were afraid of? Is that what sent you away from us?

Oedipus:

I had no wish to be my father's murderer, old man.

Herald:

But have I not eased your fear, my Lord with what I have just told you?

Oedipus:

Of course you have, old man and for that you will be rewarded handsomely.

Herald:

But of course. That is exactly why I have come, sir, so that I will have something of yours when you return back to your home.

Oedipus:

I will never go back to live with my parents.

Herald:

My child. It is most obvious you don't know what you are doing.

Oedipus:

What do you mean, old man? For God's sake explain what you mean!

Herald:

Well, if this is the only reason that you are afraid to come back to your own palaces –

Oedipus:

I fear the accomplishment of Apollo's oracles.

Herald:

Afraid you might commit sacrilege with your parents?

Oedipus:

Exactly that, old man. Always that!

Herald:

So you don't know that you have no reason at all to be afraid of that?

Oedipus:

What do you mean? They gave me my life.

Herald:

Polybus is not of your family. No relation at all!

Oedipus:

What? Was Polybus not my father?

Herald:

He was as much your father as I was.

Oedipus:

But how can a stranger be equal to a parent?

1020

Herald:

Because neither he nor I had anything to do with your birth.

Oedipus:

Why then did he always call me his "child?"

Herald:

Learn this, my king. Old Polybus received you as a gift from my hands.

Oedipus:

Why then, having received me from a stranger's hand, did he love me so much?

Herald:

Not having a child of his own taught him to do that, my Lord.

Oedipus:

And you, old man. Did you buy me from someone or found me somewhere?

Herald:

I found you in the crags of Kitheron.

Oedipus:

What were you doing there?

Herald:

I took highland herds to graze up there.

Oedipus:

So you were a hired shepherd then.

Herald:

And, at the same time, your saviour, my boy!

Oedipus:

What state was I in then, when you found me?

Herald:

Look at your ankles. There lies the evidence of your state.

Oedipus:

Ah! What an old and evil piece of memory you threw into my mind!

Herald:

I undid your feet, let loose the chains from the holes in your ankles, my Lord.

1035

Oedipus:

A great shame that I have carried from my cradle days.

Herald:

It's that shame that gave you your name.

Oedipus:

By Apollo! Tell me old shepherd who gave me this shame? My mother or my father?

Herald:

I don't know. Only he who gave it to you would know that.

Oedipus:

So, did someone else hand me to you or did you find me yourself?

Herald:

Another shepherd like me handed you to me.

Oedipus:

Who is it? Can you tell me who it is?

Herald:

He said he was one of Laius' servants.

Oedipus:

Laius, the man who was once the king of this country?

Herald:

That's right. That shepherd was that king's servant.

1045

Oedipus:

Is he still alive, this shepherd? Can I see him?

Herald:

The locals here would know better about that.

Oedipus: *To the chorus*

Is there anyone among you who knows this shepherd? Could he be in the fields or somewhere around here? Speak! It is time for all things to be revealed!

Chorus:

I think it is the same man you were asking to see earlier. Your kind wife, Jocasta, would know better though.

Oedipus:

Wife, do you remember the man we were earlier asking to come here? Is this the man this herald is talking about?

Jocasta: *Anxious. Dismissive*

Who cares what man he is talking about? Forget him and forget all that has been said. You're worried for nothing!

Oedipus:

Forget it? How can it be possible for one to carry such marks as these *indicating the wounds on his ankles* and not try to find his parents.

1060

Jocasta:

For God's sake, Oedipus! If you love your life, search no further! I have suffered enough for both of us.

Oedipus:

Courage, my dear wife. Courage!

Even if by this search I discover that I was a third generation slave, it will not affect your standing in our city.

Jocasta:
Oedipus, I beg you, stop! Search no further! Stop!
Oedipus:
No! Not until I discover the whole truth!
Jocasta:
Oedipus! It is for your own good I am giving you this advice!
Oedipus:
It is this "good" of mine which gives me so much pain for so long.
Jocasta:
Poor, unfortunate man! I hope you never live to learn who you are.

1070

Oedipus:
Will no one bring me this shepherd! Let this wealthy woman enjoy her high birth. Bring me the shepherd!
Jocasta: *Despondent-she has now discovered the truth herself*
You are a poor, poor man, Oedipus! A wretched man! That is all I can say to you! I have no more words for you.
Jocasta leaves in anger

ACT TWO

Chorus:
Such a harsh sadness took her inside, Oedipus. I wonder if, perhaps, some new disaster will emerge from that silence of hers.
Oedipus:
Let emerge what will!
I need to know the womb that carried me, even if it is that of a slave. Perhaps Jocasta's pride is touched by shame because of my lowly birth.
She would be wrong, for I consider myself the son of wide-armed Fate, so why should I feel any shame? I am Fate's son and Fate has given me both, the pains of being poor and the comfort of being rich. So, I will have no other birth, no other unknown birth-womb.

1086

Chorus:
If I were a seer myself and if my brain would be at all wise, Kitheron, I would bet by Olympus, that by tomorrow's full moon, we will make you our great friend!
Chorus:
Kitheron, who lived upon the same land as Oedipus, his father and his mother.
Chorus:
We will dance to your honour, Kitheron because you bring such joy to our kings.
Chorus:
Apollo, our saviour, may our prayers suffice!

1098

Chorus:
Who gave birth to you, Oedipus, my son? Which of the eternal nymphs had coupled with Pan of the mountains? Or was it some daughter of Apollo, the god who loves the widely spread grazing lands?
Chorus:
Perhaps it was Kyllini's protector, Bacchus, who is often seen on the mountain peaks?
Chorus:
Or, perhaps you were given to him as a gift by some nymph from Elikon. He loved to play with them.

1110

Oedipus: *Looking into the distance*
Ah! I have never seen him before but if I am right, I think I can see the shepherd we are after! His age is similar to this man here... yes, my servants are with him also. You would know better than me, though. You have seen him before.
Chorus:
Yes, I know him well. He is the one. He was one of Laius' most trustworthy shepherds.

Herald:

Ah, yes, he's the one all right!
Enter Shepherd with two of Oedipus' servants. He too has a rough shepherd's crook, just like his friend. As soon as he sees everyone, particularly the other shepherd and Oedipus, he snarls and tries to withdraw but the king's servants stop him. The other shepherd greets him with a smile.
This is the only scene possible in the play where some humour might be injected. This should be done

via the two shepherds who, at least at one point, they may come to stick-blows.
This new shepherd answers all the questions reluctantly and thoughtfully, trying to escape the deadly revelation.

Oedipus: *To the Shepherd*

Come old man, come here and tell us. Were you ever Laius' servant?

Shepherd:

Yes, born and bred in the palace, not bought into it.

Oedipus:

And you were doing what exactly? How did you earn your living in this palace?

Shepherd:

I usually guided the palace's herds.

Oedipus:

Taking them to which fields?

Shepherd:

Around Mount Kitheron and all the grazing spots around it.

Oedipus: *Indicating the Herald*

Look at this man here. Have you ever seen him before? Met him anywhere around there?

Shepherd: *Feigning ignorance*

What? Which man?

1130

Oedipus:

This one here. Have you ever seen this man before?

Shepherd:

No. At least... no... I can't remember him... not right now, I can't!

Herald: *enthusiastically*

Nothing odd about that, my Lord.

Wait, I'll remind him of some past events. I know full well that he'll remember that he and I would get together for three six monthly periods, from Spring till the star Arctouros would appear, in Autumn. He, with two herds and I with one. Then, in Winter, I'd return to my Winter stables and he to Laius'. *To the shepherd* Am I right or am I not?

Shepherd:

Yes, you're right!

But, my Lord, all this happened a very, very long time ago!

Herald:

Well, then, tell me. Can you remember handing a baby to me, to raise as if it were my own baby?

Shepherd: *Angrily*

What is going on here? Why are you asking me such crazy things?

1145

Herald: *Indicating Oedipus*

Because, old man, this is that boy! This man here, my old friend, is that little boy! Look closely. It's king Oedipus!

Shepherd: *Waves his crook angrily at the herald*

Get out of it, you... you stupid man! And shut your mouth!

Oedipus: *To the Shepherd, angrily*

Don't get angry with him, old man. It is he who has that right, not you!

Shepherd:

What have I done, my great Lord?

Oedipus:

Answer him! Tell him about the child.

Shepherd:

He doesn't know what he's talking about, my Lord. It's all hot air! Hot head, hot air!

Oedipus: *Angrily*

Shepherd, I have been polite with you so far and you have still not answered any of my questions. Not even one! Perhaps your own tears will make you talk, ey?

Shepherd:

No, no! By the Gods, my Lord, don't hurt me!

Oedipus:

Someone please tie his hands behind his back!

Oedipus' servants move threateningly towards the Shepherd.

From now on the lighting will intensify slowly until line 1181 so that when Oedipus speaks in line 1182

*his "O light..." his speech carries greater poignancy.
The light relief is henceforth progressively receding, as Oedipus' culpability descends upon him and as he becomes more and more aware of the dimensions of his offence.*

1155

Shepherd:

Damn my luck! What is it, my Lord? What is it you wish to know?

Oedipus:

Did you give the child to this man?

Shepherd:

Yes. I wish I had died that day!

Oedipus:

You will certainly die today if you don't tell the truth!

Shepherd:

It'll be even worse for me if I do tell the truth!

Oedipus: *To the Chorus*

Looks to me as if this old shepherd wants to escape us with lies.

Shepherd:

No, really, my Lord, I did say it. I gave that child to him. But it was a very long time ago.

Oedipus:

Where did you get the child from? Was it yours or was it someone else's?

Shepherd:

Mine? O, no! No, no, no. I mean, no, my Lord. Not mine. Someone else gave it to me.

Oedipus:

Who gave it to you? From whose house did it come?

1165

Shepherd:

No, my Lord! By the gods, no more! Ask me no more, please!

Oedipus:

Don't let me ask you again, old man!

Shepherd: *Indicating the palace*

It was from in there, my Lord. From within Laius' palace.

Oedipus:

Was he the son of a slave or one of his own children?

Shepherd:

Damn this luck of mine! Here comes the worst of it!

Oedipus:

For me, too, old man but I need to hear it!

Shepherd:

They said it was his own child but... your own wife would be able to tell you better about this.

Oedipus:

So, was it she then who gave you the child?

Shepherd:

Yes, my king.

Oedipus:

And why did she do that?

Shepherd:

To make it disappear.

Oedipus:

Its very own mother asked you to do this?

Shepherd:

Yes, from fear of some bad oracle or other.

Oedipus:

Oracle? Which oracle?

Shepherd:

One which said he'd kill his parents.

Oedipus:

So, why did you leave the child with this man?

Shepherd:

I felt pity for the little boy, my Lord. I thought, well, he'd be taken to another land, one far away from his father's and so he'd be free of that oracle. No problems that I could see. Unfortunately though, my

Lord, it looks like that was a bad decision, saving the child, I mean, because, well, because if that child is you, then, by Zeus, I fear gravely for you, too, my Lord.

Oedipus:

O, how gruesomely clearly it has all unravelled! O light! Let me enjoy you for one last time. One last time from the time I was born, for I was born from the wrong parents, I was bonded with the wrong people and I have killed those I should have never killed!

Exit Oedipus into the palace

Exit Shepherd and Herald.

Light now dims considerably

1186

Chorus:

Wretched mortals! Your lives are of no consequence. What man can ever feel that his joy is any more than a dream, since all it does is to appear and then disappear almost straight away?

Chorus:

I look at your life, luckless Oedipus, and take it as an example.

Chorus:

How can I look at your Fate and praise the Fate of any other human?

Oedipus: *From within, shouts of despair.*

Ohhhhhhhh!

Chorus: *Responding to Oedipus' voice*

This man, Zeus! This man has aimed high and highly he has achieved.

Chorus:

He has escaped Apollo's sharp-taloned oracle and has gained great joy.

Chorus:

He stood like a great tower, protecting our city from the many deaths.

Chorus:

Since then, my Lord I can think of no other man more honourable than you in our great Thebes.

Chorus:

Yet now! Who can be called more unfortunate than you, Oedipus?

Chorus:

One twist of Fate, Oedipus and now no one can be called more wretched. A twist that brought you into the midst of wild sadness and dreadful pain.

Chorus:

Both of you, Oedipus -father and son- how did the same awful harbour manage to receive you both?

Chorus:

How did your father's bed manage to keep you there, in such silence and for so long?

Chorus:

Then the years came and found you, my King and now they condemn this unholy marriage from which you were born and in which you gave birth.

Oedipus: *within*

Oh!

Oh!

Oh!

Chorus:

Poor child of Laius! I wish I had never met you because my heart cries bitter tears for you.

Chorus:

Yet, the fact is Oedipus, it is you who has given me some comfort when you came to Thebes, enough comfort for me to be able to sleep at night.

Enter a very distressed, male attendant.

1223

Attendant:

O, dear elders! What horrible things you'll hear and see, what grief you'll suffer if you still care at all for this here palace. Neither of the huge rivers, Istros or Phasis could wash away the evil things going on under its roofs, nor what will be revealed soon under the light. Evil things done both, willingly and not.

The bitterest suffering, elders, comes by the aid of our very own hand!

Chorus:

We suffer enough from what we know already. What more is there for you to tell us?

Attendant:

I'll use the quickest possible manner of speech: Jocasta is dead!

Chorus:

Gentle Jocasta is dead? So poor in fortune? How? What happened?

Attendant:

She died by her own hand –but there’s more to tell. I’ll tell you all that I can manage.

When she crossed this threshold here, leaving you with that anger in her soul, she rushed to her bridal bed and began immediately to tear at her own hair. Behind shut doors she cried the loss of old Laius, her true husband, wailing and calling the memories of their wedding, lamenting his death that had left her to deal with his son and bring up a new generation.

1250

She mourned the bed upon which from one husband another husband and from one son another son were born...

After that, I have no idea what happened because just then Oedipus rushed in. He was groaning dreadfully with pain, so no one could look at Jocasta’s pain any more but they were forced to turn to him. He kept calling out for a sword and for his wife – alternating between the words “wife” and “mother,” a double seed, as well as for his children; and someone, surely a god, for no mortal would have dared speak to him when he was in the grips of such an anger, showed him the double doors of Jocasta’s room. He screamed wildly and banged hard at the doors till the latches broke asunder. Then he rushed into the room.

That’s when we all saw the poor woman hanging by a thick, platted rope.

1265

Oedipus, thoroughly overwhelmed by sadness now, cuts the rope and lets the woman down onto the floor.

Dreadful! The things we saw just then were dreadful!

He took out the golden brooches that held her dress and plunged them deep into the sockets of his own eyes so that they’ll never again see what evil things he’s done nor any of those deeds he might do in the future. In darkness they’d always be and therein they’d receive those things he’d want to receive and not receive those he wouldn’t want to receive.

1275

Again and again he hit hard at his eyes, plunging the brooches until the blood began to flow like black rain and like black hail and the clods and the gore rolled all over his great beard.

This evil sprouted from both of them –man and woman equally- and upon both, this evil broke. Equal and similar to both.

The happiness they’ve enjoyed earlier was true happiness but now, this day, we see only deep sadness, curses, death and shame.

Name what evil word you want and it won’t be missing from this scene.

Chorus:

Poor man!

Chorus:

How is he now, the poor, unfortunate man?

Attendant:

He groans with anger, calling us to open the doors so he can show all the Cadmians the real father killer, the real murderer of his father and of his mother – O, how hard it is for these words to be told! He says he’ll throw himself out of his land, that he’ll be an exile; and that he won’t remain here while he’s fallen in the grips of his own curses.

But he needs someone to guide him, someone who’ll help him. Suffering like this is just too hard for anyone to endure alone.

From within we hear Oedipus’ loud groans of pain and anger.

He bangs at the door from within with his staff until the door opens.

See for yourselves. He’s coming out now. A sight even an enemy will feel sorrow for.

ACT THREE

Enter Oedipus. Blood is still dripping from his eyes and beard. His eyes are gouged out. He is bare footed, his hair is long, sparse and almost white and he is holding an old, shepherd’s crook instead of his golden staff. His clothes are no more than tattered hessian rags.

1297

Chorus:

Ah!

Ah!

Ah!

What a hideous sight! More frightening than all the sights I’ve ever seen before.

Chorus:

What frenzy took hold of you poor, luckless man? What evil creature jumped so gruesomely upon your sad Fate? Ahhhh! Poor man!

Chorus:

Poor Man! How insufferable must be your pain. I have so many questions to ask you, so much I need to know, yet I just can't look at you.

Oedipus: *In agony*

Oh!

Oh! What pain! What loathsome Fate! What appalling Fate! Into what land will my madness cast me now? Where are my feet taking me? Where is my voice being cast? Black Fate! Black Fate, Black Fate, in what dark abyss have you thrown me now?

Chorus:

In dreadful misery, Oedipus. Dreadful, unheard of, never-seen-before, misery.

Oedipus:

Ah! What an unbearable pall of darkness! How secretly, how wildly you fell upon me! How swiftly the wind carried you about me! How this wound of memory hurts both the mind and the flesh! Ah!

Chorus:

Such circumstances bring about double suffering, double pain and double burdens!

1321

Oedipus: *softly*

You! You! You are still my trusted friend! The only one! You still stand by me, me, a blind man, and still you try to help me. Even in darkness, my friend, I can still recognise your voice!

Chorus:

What brutal courage you must have, Oedipus, to erase the light from your own eyes! What God has made you do it?

Oedipus:

Apollo did this my friends! Apollo! He is the one who is sending me these foul pains. As for my eyes, no one else has struck them. No one else but me. What is the good of them now when I saw no good with them before?

Chorus:

True, my Lord. Things are as you say they are.

Oedipus:

What is there left for me to see, to love, to speak with and to listen to, with joy? Come friends, take me out of here, as quickly as possible. Take me, the utter wretch, the worst cursed, the most hated of all mortals.

1347

Chorus:

Ill-Fated man! Ill-Fated in mind and in flesh. How I wish I had never met you!

Oedipus:

Curses to the man whoever it was, that man who had saved me from the wild hooks on my feet, who had saved me from the wilderness, from those grazing lands, from death, only to give me this detestable end. Had I died then, I would be no burden of melancholy, now, neither to me nor to my friends.

Chorus:

Yes, that would have been far better.

Oedipus:

I would not be my father's killer then, nor would those who gave birth to me would call me their son. So! Here I am, without a god, a son of sacrilege, sharing the nuptial bed of my very own parents. If there existed anything else, even more evil than this, it, too, would strike Oedipus!

Chorus:

Yet, I can't say what you did was wise, Oedipus. Better to be dead, I should think, than to be alive and blind.

1370

Oedipus:

No, old man! Do not preach me all that. Do not tell me that what I did was wrong!

If I still had my eyes, old man, how could I face Hades in the underworld? How could I face my parents after what I had done to them both? For such atrocious acts, suicide is too small a price to pay. And my children. Could I still have the yearning to see my children, born as they have, in such an unholy marriage?

No, such things are not for my eyes, old man. No! I cannot face the city nor its high towers, the sacred

shrines of our gods –not even them did I leave out of my curse, I the glorious king, the king of Thebes, most repugnant of all mortals!

Let the gods send this arrogant man away. They have discovered him, this foul son of Laius' generation.

1385

After all this, after all this vile discovery which I, myself brought out to the brutal light of truth, how can I stand before them and look at them with clear eyes?

I cannot!

Even my ears! If there were some way by which I could stop my ears, stop the wound which sounds loud in my ears, I would not hesitate to do it.

Stop the ears! Stop the eyes! How sweet it would be to shut them both from thoughts of disaster.

Sweet mountain, Kitheron! Why did you accept me? Why not kill me at once? Why make me show the world the womb from which I came?

Polybus! Corinth! Ancient palaces that would be mine –what brilliant beauty!

Brilliant beauty but scarred by hidden wounds beneath them. You raised me only to show me in the end what a monstrous being I am!

That three-way crossing, where I spilled my father's blood –my blood, with my own hands; young trees, you, whose thirst I quenched with that blood, do you still remember what vile act I had done back then? Do you also remember what other vile acts I have done when I arrived here?

1405

One marriage after another! What marriage gives forth a birth and out of that birth and inside the same womb you sow another seed that brings out into the light, fathers, brothers, children, mixed blood, brides –wives and mothers all at once, all the repulsive, shameful acts that shameful humans can commit. One marriage, one bed brings out all these odious deeds.

Still, one must not talk of things too foul for the ear or for the hand.

Shouts and waves his hands about, hoping to touch one of the men in the chorus. The Chorus moves back in horror.

Come, then! For gods' sake, take me out of this city, take me, kill me, drown me, so you won't ever see me again.

Come!

Again he shouts and waves his hands about but the chorus moves back.

Come, I ask you! Take my hand. Let this miserable man hold onto one of you! Listen to me! Don't be afraid to touch me! No other man on earth can carry the burdens I have carried.

Enter Creon. He is dressed in the same manner as was Oedipus when he had first appeared on the stage. Golden crown, golden staff and regal manner.

1416

Chorus:

Here comes Creon. He is the only guard of our city now and he'll advise you on all your wishes.

Oedipus:

Creon? What words should I utter to him? How could I justly demand his trust? I have done nothing but act abominably towards him.

Creon:

I am not here to either condemn you, Oedipus, nor search into your past errors.

To the chorus

You, men, even if you feel no shame for things that humans do, respect the flame of the Sun God who gives life to all things! Such pollution cannot remain uncovered because neither the earth nor the holy rain, nor the light will tolerate it. Quickly, take him inside the palace. Let his relatives and the relatives of them, see and hear his suffering. That is their burden.

Oedipus:

By the gods, Creon, now that you have lessened my fear and behaved so kindly towards me, me, a most detestable man, please listen to me. I shall speak for your own good, not mine.

1435

Creon:

Speak, Oedipus. Tell me your wish.

Oedipus:

Throw me out of this land quickly so that the eyes of no other Theban will fall on me.

Creon:

I would have done so, let me tell you but I find it necessary to seek the God's advice on this matter.

Oedipus:

But his oracle is very clear, Creon. He said, “get rid of the wound!” Get rid of me! Me, the father-killer! Me, the pestilence. Me the polluter!

Creon:

That is true but the need is now for me to find out what I should do.

Oedipus:

So you will go to the god even for the sake of such a miserable man?

Creon:

Surely you, too, must trust him now!

1446

Oedipus:

And I need to trust you to do one more thing for me.

You take charge of the burial of the body inside. She is your sister and it is proper that you should do so in the manner you wish. As for me, let me not stay in my father’s land now or ever while I am still alive. Let me, instead, go and live on the hills of Mount Kitheron, my own, true burial ground where my parents left me where my parents wanted me to die.

I know this well: I won’t be dying from some illness or any other such thing. No, Fate wishes me to die a horrible death somewhere.

Well then, let it be so. Let the Fate of my generation take me where it will.

1460

And my boys, Creon. There is no need for you to be concerned about them. They are men now and they will be able to look after themselves. My daughters, though! My little virgins. Poor little things, they have never sat at the table without my being there. My plate was always theirs. My mouthful was theirs. They are truly worthy of compassion. Show that compassion to them, Creon. Bring them to me now that I may hold them and cry!

Come, Creon, please bring them to me!

Creon waves at an attendant to open the side door from which, very soon, two young girls come out, guided by a female attendant. They are Antigone and Ismene and they are sobbing softly.

Come now, kind Lord! I know that if my hands touch them it will feel as if I can see them – as if I still had eyes!

Ah! What is this I hear? Creon, are these my darlings I hear sobbing? My Antigone and my Ismene? Did you feel sorry for me, Creon? Sweet children, is this true?

1476

Creon:

It is they. I knew they would bring you joy, just as they always did.

Oedipus:

May Apollo reward you for this good deed, Creon! May he look after you, guard you, better than he did me.

Where are you my darlings? Come, come, my dears! Come into these hands –your brother’s hands now. The brother who tore your father’s eyes out. Your father who knew nothing of what he was doing, nothing about his own birth or about his marriage or about your birth.

The children approach Oedipus and hold onto his clothes.

I can’t see you and I mourn for you because I know the bitter treatment the world will give you. I know what sort of public gatherings, what sort of celebrations you will attend, only to return home with tears rather than joy! And then, when you are at the right age for marriage, what man will be brave enough to take upon himself the dangers that come with such a shame and such a curse as that of my generation?

What is missing in all this shame? Nothing! Your father killed his father, married the woman who gave birth to him and from that same woman he brought about your birth! All this will be in the mouths of all the people. Who then will marry you? No one, my darlings and so, you will stay unmarried and without children.

Creon, I beg you, their true parents are lost and you are their only relative. Don’t let them suffer the agony of the lost. Poor and unmarried, wandering the world. Don’t let them suffer because of me. Feel pity for them! Apart from you they have no one.

Come, kind sir, accept them. Give me your hand on it.

Creon shakes hands with Oedipus.

To you, my children, if you were a little older I would have a great many more words of explanation for you but as it is, I can only give you my blessings.

Let Fate determine your life but let your life be better than your father’s.

1515

Creon:

Enough tears now, come! Go back into the palace, Oedipus!

Oedipus:

I obey, though with great sadness.

Creon:

What needs to be done must be done at the right time.

Oedipus:

But I will agree on this, on one condition only and... do you know what that is?

Creon:

Tell me and I will know.

Oedipus:

You must send me out of the city!

Creon:

Your wishes can only be granted by Apollo.

Oedipus:

But the gods hate me!

Creon:

In that case, your wish will soon be granted.

Oedipus:

Is this true?

Creon:

I never speak idle words.

1520

Oedipus:

Take me away from here then.

Creon:

Walk ahead.

Oedipus moves and guides the girls with him but Creon stops him

No, no! Leave the children here!

Oedipus:

No, don't take them from me! Not for a moment!

Creon:

Enough now. Don't ask for anything more. What you've been given so far has been a big enough burden to you.

Exit all except the chorus.

Chorus:

Citizens of my beloved Thebes! See now your great Oedipus!

That famous man who knew the answers of great riddles. That man whose good fortune every man in Thebes envied! See now in what monstrous storm of misfortune he has fallen.

Chorus:*Indicating the stage and the play that was just run*

What says all this, then?

Chorus:

Let's not praise a man for his good Fate unless he has arrived at his final day having escaped bad Fate.

Exit all

END OF SOPHOCLES'

"OEDIPUS REX"

Note: Readers might wish to also read Seneca's "Oedipus" Translated by F.J. Miller.