

Oedipus Rex

by: Sophocles

CHARACTER LIST

OEDIPUS: king of Thebes

PRIEST: the high priest of Thebes

CREON: Oedipus' brother-in-law

CHORUS of Theban elders

TEIRESIAS: an old blind prophet

BOY: attendant on Teiresias

JOCASTA: wife of Oedipus, sister of Creon

MESSENGER: an old man

SERVANT: an old shepherd

SECOND MESSENGER: a servant of Oedipus

ANTIGONE: daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta, a child

ISMENE: daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta, a child

SERVANTS and ATTENDANTS on Oedipus and Jocasta

[The action takes place in Thebes in front of the royal palace. The main doors are directly facing the audience. There are altars beside the doors. A crowd of citizens carrying branches decorated with laurel garlands and wool and led by the PRIEST has gathered in front of the altars, with some people sitting on the altar steps. OEDIPUS enters through the palace doors]

OEDIPUS: My children, latest generation born from Cadmus,
why are you sitting here with wreathed sticks
in supplication to me, while the city
fills with incense, chants, and cries of pain?*

Children, it would not be appropriate for me
to learn of this from any other source,
so I have come in person—I, Oedipus,
whose fame all men acknowledge. But you there,
old man, tell me—you seem to be the one
who ought to speak for those assembled here.
What feeling brings you to me—fear or desire?
You can be confident that I will help.
I shall assist you willingly in every way.
I would be a hard-hearted man indeed,
if I did not pity suppliants like these.

PRIEST: Oedipus, ruler of my native land,
you see how people here of every age
are crouching down around your altars,
some fledglings barely strong enough to fly
and others bent by age, with priests as well—
for I'm priest of Zeus—and these ones here,
the pick of all our youth. The other groups
sit in the market place with suppliant sticks

or else in front of Pallas' two shrines,
or where Ismenus prophesies with fire.*
For our city, as you yourself can see,
is badly shaken—she cannot raise her head
above the depths of so much surging death.
Disease infects fruit blossoms in our land,
disease infects our herds of grazing cattle,
makes women in labour lose their children.
And deadly pestilence, that fiery god,
swoops down to blast the city, emptying
the House of Cadmus, and fills black Hades
with groans and howls. These children and myself
now sit here by your home, not because we think
you're equal to the gods. No. We judge you
the first of men in what happens in this life
and in our interactions with the gods.
For you came here, to our Cadmeian city,
and freed us from the tribute we were paying
to that cruel singer—and yet you knew
no more than we did and had not been taught.*
In their stories, the people testify
how, with gods' help, you gave us back our lives.
So now, Oedipus, our king, most powerful
in all men's eyes, we're here as suppliants
all begging you to find some help for us,
either by listening to a heavenly voice,
or learning from some other human being.
For, in my view, men of experience
provide advice which gives the best results.
So now, you best of men, raise up our state.
Act to consolidate your fame, for now,
thanks to your eagerness in earlier days,
the city celebrates you as its saviour.
Don't let our memory of your ruling here
declare that we were first set right again,
and later fell. No. Restore our city,
so that it stands secure. In those times past
you brought us joy—and with good omens, too.
Be that same man today. If you're to rule
as you are doing now, it's better to be king
in a land of men than in a desert.
An empty ship or city wall is nothing
if no men share your life together there.

OEDIPUS: My poor children, I know why you have come—
I am not ignorant of what you yearn for.
For I well know that you are ill, and yet,
sick as you are, there is not one of you

whose illness equals mine. Your agony comes to each one of you as his alone, a special pain for him and no one else. But the soul inside me sorrows for myself, and for the city, and for you—all together. You are not rousing me from a deep sleep. You must know I've been shedding many tears and, in my wandering thoughts, exploring many pathways. After a careful search I followed up the one thing I could find and acted on it. So I have sent away my brother-in-law, son of Menoecus, Creon, to Pythian Apollo's shrine, to learn from him what I might do or say to save our city. But when I count the days—the time he's been away—I now worry what he's doing. For he's been gone too long, well past the time he should have taken. But when he comes, I'll be a wicked man if I do not act on all the god reveals.

PRIEST: What you have said is most appropriate, for these men here have just informed me that Creon is approaching.

OEDIPUS: Lord Apollo, as he returns may fine shining fortune, bright as his countenance, attend on him.

PRIEST: It seems the news he brings is good—if not, he would not wear that wreath around his head, a laurel thickly packed with berries.*

OEDIPUS: We'll know soon enough—he's within earshot.

[Enter CREON. OEDIPUS calls to him as he approaches]

My royal kinsman, child of Menoecus, what message from the god do you bring us?

CREON: Good news. I tell you even troubles difficult to bear will all end happily if events lead to the right conclusion.

OEDIPUS: What is the oracle? So far your words inspire in me no confidence or fear.

CREON: If you wish to hear the news in public,

or else it will prove our common ruin.

[OEDIPUS and CREON go into the palace]

PRIEST: Let us get up, children. For this man
has willingly declared just what we came for.
And may Phoebus, who sent this oracle,
come as our saviour and end our sickness.

[Enter OEDIPUS from the palace]

OEDIPUS: You pray. But if you listen now to me,
you'll get your wish. Hear what I have to say
and treat your own disease—then you may hope
to find relief from your distress. I shall speak
as one who is a stranger to the story,
a stranger to the crime. If I alone
were tracking down this act, I'd not get far
without a single clue. That being the case,
for it was after the event that I became
a citizen of Thebes, I now proclaim
the following to all of you Cadmeians:
Whoever among you knows the man it was
who murdered Laius, son of Labdacus,
I order him to reveal it all to me.
And if the murderer's afraid, I tell him
to avoid the danger of the major charge
by speaking out against himself. If so,
he will be sent out from this land unhurt—
and undergo no further punishment.
If someone knows the killer is a stranger,
from some other state, let him not stay mute.
As well as a reward, he'll earn my thanks.
But if he remains quiet, if anyone,
through fear, hides himself or a friend of his
against my orders, here's what I shall do—
so listen to my words. For I decree
that no one in this land, in which I rule
as your own king, shall give that killer shelter
or talk to him, whoever he may be,
or act in concert with him during prayers,
or sacrifice, or sharing lustral water.*
Ban him from your homes, every one of you,
for he is our pollution, as the Pythian god
has just revealed to me. In doing this,
I'm acting as an ally of the god
and of dead Laius, too. And I pray
whoever the man is who did this crime,

one unknown person acting on his own
or with companions, the worst of agonies
will wear out his wretched life. I pray, too,
that, if he should become a honoured guest
in my own home and with my knowledge,
I may suffer all those things I've just called down
upon the killers. And I urge you now
to make sure all these orders take effect,
for my sake, for the sake of the god,
and for our barren, godless, ruined land.
For in this matter, even if a god
were not prompting us, it would not be right
for you to simply leave things as they are,
and not to purify the murder of a man
who was so noble and who was your king.
You should have looked into it. But now I
possess the ruling power which Laius held
in earlier days. I have his bed and wife—
she would have borne his children, if his hopes
to have a son had not been disappointed.
Children from a common mother might have linked
Laius and myself. But as it turned out,
fate swooped down onto his head. So now I
will fight on his behalf, as if this matter
concerned my father, and I will strive
to do everything I can to find him,
the man who spilled his blood, and thus avenge
the son of Labdacus and Polydorus,
of Cadmus and Agenor from old times.*
As for those who do not follow what I urge,
I pray the gods send them no fertile land,
no, nor any children in their women's wombs—
may they all perish in our present fate
or one more hateful still. To you others,
you Cadmeians who support my efforts,
may Justice, our ally, and all the gods
attend on us with kindness always.

CHORUS LEADER: My lord, since you extend your oath to me,
I will say this. I am not the murderer,
nor can I tell you who the killer is.
As for what you're seeking, it's for Apollo,
who launched this search, to state who did it.

OEDIPUS: That is well said. But no man has power
to force the gods to speak against their will.

CHORUS LEADER: May I then suggest what seems to me

OEDIPUS: What do you mean? Speak it again,
so I can understand you more precisely.

TEIRESIAS: Did you not grasp my words before,
or are you trying to test me with your question?

OEDIPUS: I did not fully understand your words.
Tell me again.

TEIRESIAS: I say that you yourself
are the very man you're looking for.

OEDIPUS: That's twice you've stated that disgraceful lie—
something you'll regret.

TEIRESIAS: Shall I tell you more,
so you can grow even more enraged?

OEDIPUS: As much as you desire. It will be useless.

TEIRESIAS: I say that with your dearest family,
unknown to you, you are living in disgrace.
You have no idea how bad things are.

OEDIPUS: Do you really think you can just speak out,
say things like this, and still remain unpunished?

TEIRESIAS: Yes, I can, if the truth has any strength.

OEDIPUS: It does, but not for you. Truth is not in you—
for your ears, your mind, your eyes are blind!

TEIRESIAS: You are a wretched fool to use harsh words
which all men soon enough will use to curse you.

OEDIPUS: You live in endless darkness of the night,
so you can never injure me or any man
who can glimpse daylight.

TEIRESIAS: It is not your fate
to fall because of me. It's up to Apollo
to make that happen. He will be enough.

OEDIPUS: Is this something Creon has devised,
or is it your invention?

TEIRESIAS: Creon is no threat.

You have made this trouble on your own.

OEDIPUS: O riches, ruling power, skill after skill
surpassing all in this life's rivalries,
how much envy you must carry with you,
if, for this kingly office, which the city
gave me, for I did not seek it out.
Creon, my old trusted family friend,
has secretly conspired to overthrow me
and paid off a double-dealing quack like this,
a crafty bogus priest, who can only see
his own advantage, who in his special art
is absolutely blind. Come on, tell me
how you have ever given evidence
of your wise prophecy. When the Sphinx,
that singing bitch, was here, you said nothing
to set the people free. Why not? Her riddle
was not something the first man to stroll along
could solve—a prophet was required. And there
the people saw your knowledge was no use—
nothing from birds or picked up from the gods.
But then I came, Oedipus, who knew nothing.
Yet I finished her off, using my wits
rather than relying on birds. That's the man
you want to overthrow, hoping, no doubt,
to stand up there with Creon, once he's king.
But I think you and your conspirator in this
will regret trying to usurp the state.
If you did not look so old, you'd find
the punishment your arrogance deserves.

CHORUS LEADER: To us it sounds as if Teiresias
has spoken in anger, and, Oedipus,
you have done so, too. That's not what we need.
Instead we should be looking into this:
How can we best carry out the god's decree?

TEIRESIAS: You may be king, but I have the right
to answer you—and I control that right,
for I am not your slave. I serve Apollo,
and thus will never stand with Creon,
signed up as his man. So I say this to you,
since you have chosen to insult my blindness—
you have your eyesight, and you do not see
how miserable you are, or where you live,
or who it is who shares your household.
Do you know the family you come from?
Without your knowledge you've become

the enemy of your own kindred,
those in the world below and those up here,
and the dreadful feet of that two-edged curse
from father and mother both will drive you
from this land in exile. Those eyes of yours,
which now can see so clearly, will be dark.
What harbour will not echo with your cries?
Where on Cithaeron* will they not soon be heard,
once you have learned the truth about the wedding
by which you sailed into this royal house—
a lovely voyage, but the harbour's doomed?
You've no idea of the quantity
of other troubles which will render you
and your own children equals. So go on—
keep insulting Creon and my prophecies,
for among all living mortals no one
will be destroyed more wretchedly than you.

OEDIPUS: Must I tolerate this insolence from him?
Get out, and may the plague get rid of you!
Off with you! Now! Turn your back and go!
And don't come back here to my home again.

TEIRESIAS: I would not have come, but you summoned me.

OEDIPUS: I did not know you would speak so stupidly.
If I had, you would have waited a long time
before I called you here.

TEIRESIAS: I was born like this.
You think I am a fool, but to your parents,
the ones who made you, I was wise enough.

OEDIPUS: Wait! My parents? Who was my father?

TEIRESIAS: This day will reveal that and destroy you.

OEDIPUS: Everything you speak is all so cryptic—
like a riddle.

TEIRESIAS: Well, in solving riddles,
are you not the best there is?

OEDIPUS: Mock my excellence,
but you will find out I am truly great.

TEIRESIAS: That quality of yours now ruins you.

OEDIPUS: I do not care, if I have saved the city.

TEIRESIAS: I will go now. Boy, lead me away.

OEDIPUS: Yes, let him guide you back. You're in the way.
If you stay, you'll just provoke me. Once you're gone,
you won't annoy me further.

TEIRESIAS: I'm going.

But first I shall tell you why I came.
I do not fear the face of your displeasure—
there is no way you can destroy me. I tell you,
the man you have been seeking all this time,
while proclaiming threats and issuing orders
about the one who murdered Laius—
that man is here. According to reports,
he is a stranger who lives here in Thebes.
But he will prove to be a native Theban.
From that change he will derive no pleasure.
He will be blind, although he now can see.
He will be a poor, although he now is rich.
He will set off for a foreign country,
groping the ground before him with a stick.
And he will turn out to be the brother
of the children in his house—their father, too,
both at once, and the husband and the son
of the very woman who gave birth to them.
He sowed the same womb as his father
and murdered him. Go in and think on this.
If you discover I have spoken falsely,
you can say I lack all skill in prophecy.

[Exit TEIRESIAS led off by the BOY. OEDIPUS turns and goes back into the palace]

[Enter CREON]

CREON: You citizens, I have just discovered
that Oedipus, our king, has levelled charges
against me, disturbing allegations.
That I cannot bear, so I have come here.
In these present troubles, if he believes
that he has suffered any injury from me,
in word or deed, then I have no desire
to continue living into ripe old age
still bearing his reproach. For me
the injury produced by this report
is no single isolated matter—
no, it has the greatest scope of all,

if I end up being called a wicked man
here in the city, a bad citizen,
by you and by my friends.

CHORUS LEADER: Perhaps he charged you
spurred on by the rash power of his rage,
rather than his mind's true judgment.

CREON: Was it publicized that my opinions
convinced Teiresias to utter lies?

CHORUS LEADER: That's what was said. I have no idea
just what that meant.

CREON: Did he accuse me
and announce the charges with a steady gaze,
in a normal state of mind?

CHORUS LEADER: I do not know.
What those in power do I do not see.
But he's approaching from the palace—
here he comes in person.

[Enter OEDIPUS from the palace]

OEDIPUS: You! How did you get here?
Has your face grown so bold you now come
to my own home—you who are obviously
the murderer of the man whose house it was,
a thief who clearly wants to steal my throne?
Come, in the name of all the gods, tell me this—
did you plan to do it because you thought
I was a coward or a fool? Or did you think
I would not learn about your actions
as they crept up on me with such deceit—
or that, if I knew, I could not deflect them?
This attempt of yours, is it not madness—
to chase after the king's place without friends,
without a horde of men, to seek a goal
which only gold or factions could attain?

CREON: Will you listen to me? It's your turn now
to hear me make a suitable response.
Once you know, then judge me for yourself.

OEDIPUS: You are a clever talker. But from you
I will learn nothing. I know you now—
a troublemaker, an enemy of mine.

So how can being a king be sweeter to me
than royal power without anxiety?
I am not yet so mistaken in my mind
that I want things which bring no benefits.
Now I greet all men, and they all welcome me.
Those who wish to get something from you
now flatter me, since I'm the one who brings
success in what they want. So why would I
give up such benefits for something else?
A mind that's wise will not turn treacherous.
It's not my nature to love such policies.
And if another man pursued such things,
I'd not work with him. I couldn't bear to.
If you want proof of this, then go to Delphi.
Ask the prophet if I brought back to you
exactly what was said. At that point,
if you discover I have planned something,
that I've conspired with Teiresias,
then arrest me and have me put to death,
not just on your own authority,
but on mine as well, a double judgment.
Do not condemn me on an unproved charge.
It's not fair to judge these things by guesswork,
to assume bad men are good or good men bad.
In my view, to throw away a noble friend
is like a man who parts with his own life,
the thing most dear to him. Give it some time.
Then you'll see clearly, since only time
can fully validate a man who's true.
A bad man is exposed in just one day.

CHORUS LEADER: For a man concerned about being killed,
my lord, he has spoken eloquently.
Those who are unreliable give rash advice.

OEDIPUS: If some conspirator moves against me,
in secret and with speed, I must be quiet
to make my counter plans. If I just rest
and wait for him to act, then he'll succeed
in what he wants to do, and I'll be finished.

CREON: What do you want—to exile me from here?

OEDIPUS: No. I want you to die, not just run off—
so I can demonstrate what envy means.

CREON: You are determined not to change your mind
or listen to me?

OEDIPUS: You'll not convince me,
for there's no way that I can trust you.

CREON: I can see that you've become unbalanced.*

OEDIPUS: I'm sane enough to defend my interests.

CREON: You should be protecting mine as well.

OEDIPUS: But you're a treacherous man. It's your nature.

CREON: What if you are wrong?

OEDIPUS: I still have to govern.

CREON: Not if you do it badly.

OEDIPUS: Oh Thebes—
my city!

CREON: I have some rights in Thebes as well—
it is not yours alone.

[The palace doors open]

CHORUS LEADER: My lords, an end to this.
I see Jocasta coming from the palace,
and just in time. With her assistance
you should bring this quarrel to a close.

[Enter JOCASTA from the palace]

JOCASTA: You foolish men, why are you arguing
in such a silly way? With our land so sick,
are you not ashamed to start a private fight?
You, Oedipus, go in the house, and you,
Creon, return to yours. Why blow up
a trivial matter into something huge?

CREON: Sister, your husband Oedipus intends
to punish me in one of two dreadful ways—
to banish me from my fathers' country
or arrest me and then have me killed.

OEDIPUS: That's right.
Lady, I caught him committing treason,
conspiring against my royal authority.

CREON: Let me not prosper but die a man accursed,
if I have done what you accuse me of.

JOCASTA: Oedipus,
for the sake of the gods, trust him in this.
Respect that oath he made before all heaven—
do it for my sake and for those around you.

CHORUS LEADER: I beg you, my lord, consent to this—
agree with her.

OEDIPUS: What is it then
you're asking me to do?

CHORUS LEADER: Pay Creon due respect.
He has not been foolish in the past, and now
that oath he's sworn has power.

OEDIPUS: Are you aware
just what you're asking?

CHORUS LEADER: Yes. I understand.

OEDIPUS: Then tell me exactly what you're saying.

CHORUS LEADER: You should not accuse a friend of yours
and thus dishonour him with a mere story
which may not be true, when he's sworn an oath
and therefore could be subject to a curse.

OEDIPUS: By this point you should clearly understand,
when you request this, what you are doing—
seeking to exile me from Thebes or kill me.

CHORUS LEADER: No, no, by sacred Helios, the god
whose stands pre-eminent before the rest,
may I die the most miserable of deaths,
abandoned by the gods and by my friends,
if I have ever harboured such a thought!
But the destruction of our land wears down
the troubled heart within me—and so does this,
if you two add new problems to the ones
which have for so long been afflicting us.

OEDIPUS: Let him go, then, even though it's clear
I must be killed or sent from here in exile,
forced out in disgrace. I have been moved

why in this present crisis you now feel
such unremitting rage.

OEDIPUS: To you I'll speak, lady,
since I respect you more than I do these men.
It's Creon's fault. He conspired against me.

JOCASTA: In this quarrel what was said? Tell me.

OEDIPUS: Creon claims that I'm the murderer—
that I killed Laius.

JOCASTA: Does he know this first hand,
or has he picked it up from someone else?

OEDIPUS: No. He set up that treasonous prophet.
What he says himself sounds innocent.

JOCASTA: All right, forget about those things you've said.
Listen to me, and ease your mind with this—
no human being has skill in prophecy.
I'll show you why with this example.
King Laius once received a prophecy.
I won't say it came straight from Apollo,
but it was from those who do assist the god.
It said Laius was fated to be killed
by a child conceived by him and me.
Now, at least according to the story,
one day Laius was killed by foreigners,
by robbers, at a place where three roads meet.
Besides, before our child was three days old,
Laius fused his ankles tight together
and ordered other men to throw him out
on a mountain rock where no one ever goes.
And so Apollo's plan that he'd become
the one who killed his father didn't work,
and Laius never suffered what he feared,
that his own son would be his murderer,
although that's what the oracle had claimed.
So don't concern yourself with prophecies.
Whatever gods intend to bring about
they themselves make known quite easily.

OEDIPUS: Lady, as I listen to these words of yours,
my soul is shaken, my mind confused . . .

JOCASTA: Why do you say that? What's worrying you?

OEDIPUS: I thought I heard you say that Laius
was murdered at a place where three roads meet.

JOCASTA: That's what was said and people still believe.

OEDIPUS: Where is this place? Where did it happen?

JOCASTA: In a land called Phocis. Two roads lead there—
one from Delphi and one from Daulia.

OEDIPUS: How long is it since these events took place?

JOCASTA: The story was reported in the city
just before you took over royal power
here in Thebes.

OEDIPUS: Oh Zeus, what have you done?
What have you planned for me?

JOCASTA: What is it,
Oedipus? Why is your spirit so troubled?

OEDIPUS: Not yet,
no questions yet. Tell me this—Laius,
how tall was he? How old a man?

JOCASTA: He was big—his hair was turning white.
In shape he was not all that unlike you.

OEDIPUS: The worse for me! I may have just set myself
under a dreadful curse without my knowledge!

JOCASTA: What do you mean? As I look at you, my king,
I start to tremble.

OEDIPUS: I am afraid,
full of terrible fears the prophet sees.
But you can reveal this better if you now
will tell me one thing more.

JOCASTA: I'm shaking,
but if you ask me, I will answer you.

OEDIPUS: Did Laius have a small escort with him
or a troop of soldiers, like a royal king?

JOCASTA: Five men, including a herald, went with him.
A carriage carried Laius.

OEDIPUS: Alas! Alas!
It's all too clear! Lady, who told you this?

JOCASTA: A servant—the only one who got away.
He came back here.

OEDIPUS: Is there any chance
he's in our household now?

JOCASTA: No.
Once he returned and understood that you
had now assumed the power of slaughtered Laius,
he clasped my hands, begged me to send him off
to where our animals graze out in the fields,
so he could be as far away as possible
from the sight of town. And so I sent him.
He was a slave but he'd earned my gratitude.
He deserved an even greater favour.

OEDIPUS: I'd like him to return back here to us,
and quickly, too.

JOCASTA: That can be arranged—
but why's that something you would want to do?

OEDIPUS: Lady, I'm afraid I may have said too much.
That's why I want to see him here in front of me.

JOCASTA: Then he will be here. But now, my lord,
I deserve to learn why you are so distressed.

OEDIPUS: My forebodings now have grown so great
I will not keep them from you, for who is there
I should confide in rather than in you
about such a twisted turn of fortune.
My father was Polybus of Corinth,
my mother Merope, a Dorian.
There I was regarded as the finest man
in all the city, until, as chance would have it,
something really astonishing took place,
though it was not worth what it caused me to do.
At a dinner there a man who was quite drunk
from too much wine began to shout at me,
claiming I was not my father's real son.
That troubled me, but for a day at least
I said nothing, though it was difficult.
The next day I went to ask my parents,

my father and my mother. They were angry
at the man who had insulted them this way,
so I was reassured. But nonetheless,
the accusation always troubled me—
the story had become well known all over.
And so I went in secret off to Delphi.
I didn't tell my mother or my father.
Apollo sent me back without an answer,
so I didn't learn what I had come to find.
But when he spoke he uttered monstrous things,
strange terrors and horrific miseries—
it was my fate to defile my mother's bed,
to bring forth to men a human family
that people could not bear to look upon,
to murder the father who engendered me.
When I heard that, I ran away from Corinth.
From then on I thought of it just as a place
beneath the stars. I went to other lands,
so I would never see that prophecy fulfilled,
the abomination of my evil fate.
In my travelling I came across that place
in which you say your king was murdered.
And now, lady, I will tell you the truth.
As I was on the move, I passed close by
a spot where three roads meet, and in that place
I met a herald and a horse-drawn carriage.
Inside there was a man like you described.
The guide there tried to force me off the road—
and the old man, too, got personally involved.
In my rage, I lashed out at the driver,
who was shoving me aside. The old man,
seeing me walking past him in the carriage,
kept his eye on me, and with his double whip
struck me on my head, right here on top.
Well, I retaliated in good measure—
I hit him a quick blow with the staff I held
and knocked him from his carriage to the road.
He lay there on his back. Then I killed them all.
If that stranger was somehow linked to Laius,
who is now more unfortunate than me?
What man could be more hateful to the gods?
No stranger and no citizen can welcome him
into their lives or speak to him. Instead,
they must keep him from their doors, a curse
I laid upon myself. With these hands of mine,
these killer's hands, I now contaminate
the dead man's bed. Am I not depraved?
Am I not utterly abhorrent?

Now I must fly into exile and there,
a fugitive, never see my people,
never set foot in my native land again—
or else I must get married to my mother
and kill my father, Polybus, who raised me,
the man who gave me life. If anyone
claimed this came from some malevolent god,
would he not be right? O you gods,
you pure, blessed gods, may I not see that day!
Let me rather vanish from the sight of men,
before I see a fate like that roll over me.

CHORUS LEADER: My lord, to us these things are ominous.
But you must sustain your hope until you hear
the servant who was present at the time.

OEDIPUS: I do have some hope left, at least enough
to wait for the man we've summoned from the fields.

JOCASTA: Once he comes, what do you hope to hear?

OEDIPUS: I'll tell you. If we discover what he says
matches what you say, then I'll escape disaster.

JOCASTA: What was so remarkable in what I said?

OEDIPUS: You said that in his story the man claimed
Laius was murdered by a band of thieves.
If he still says that there were several men,
then I was not the killer, since one man
could never be mistaken for a crowd.
But if he says it was a single man,
then I'm the one responsible for this.

JOCASTA: Well, that's certainly what he reported then.
He cannot now withdraw what he once said.
The whole city heard him, not just me alone.
But even if he changes that old news,
he cannot ever demonstrate, my lord,
that Laius' murder fits the prophecy.
For Apollo clearly said the man would die
at the hands of an infant born from me.
Now, how did that unhappy son of ours
kill Laius, when he'd perished long before?
So as far as these oracular sayings go,
I would not look for confirmation anywhere.

OEDIPUS: You're right in what you say. But nonetheless,

send for that peasant. Don't fail to do that.

JOCASTA: I'll call him here as quickly as I can.
Let's go inside. I'll not do anything
which does not meet with your approval.

[OEDIPUS and JOCASTA go into the palace together]

[JOCASTA enters from the palace and moves to an altar to Apollo which stands outside the palace doors. She is accompanied by one or two SERVANTS]

JOCASTA: You leading men of Thebes, I think
it is appropriate for me to visit
our god's sacred shrine, bearing in my hands
this garland and an offering of incense.
For Oedipus has let excessive pain
seize on his heart and does not understand
what's happening now by thinking of the past,
like a man with sense. Instead he listens to
whoever speaks to him of dreadful things.
I can do nothing more for him with my advice,
and so, Lycean Apollo, I come to you,
who stand here beside us, a suppliant,
with offerings and prayers for you to find
some way of cleansing what corrupts us.
For now we are afraid, just like those
who on a ship see their helmsman terrified.

[JOCASTA sets her offerings on the altar. A MESSENGER enters, an older man]

MESSENGER: Strangers, can you tell me where I find
the house of Oedipus, your king? Better yet,
if you know, can you tell me where he is?

CHORUS LEADER: His home is here, stranger, and he's inside.
This lady is the mother of his children.

MESSENGER: May her happy home always be blessed,
for she is his queen, true mistress of his house.

JOCASTA: I wish the same for you, stranger. Your fine words
make you deserve as much. But tell us now
why you have come. Do you seek information,
or do you wish to give us some report?

MESSENGER: Lady, I have good news for your whole house—
and for your husband, too.

OEDIPUS: Who is this man? What report
 does he have for me?

JOCASTA: He comes from Corinth,
 bringing news that Polybus, your father,
 no longer is alive. He's dead.

OEDIPUS: What?
 Stranger, let me hear from you in person.

MESSENGER: If I must first report my news quite plainly,
 then I should let you know that Polybus
 has passed away. He's gone.

OEDIPUS: By treachery,
 or was it the result of some disease?

MESSENGER: With old bodies a slight weight on the scales
 brings final peace.

OEDIPUS: Apparently his death
 was from an illness?

MESSENGER: Yes, and from old age.

OEDIPUS: Alas! Indeed, lady, why should any man
 pay due reverence to Apollo's shrine,
 where his prophet lives, or to those birds
 which scream out overhead? For they foretold
 that I was going to murder my own father.
 But now he's dead and lies beneath the earth,
 and I am here. I never touched my spear.
 Perhaps he died from a desire to see me—
 so in that sense I brought about his death.
 But as for those prophetic oracles,
 they're worthless. Polybus has taken them
 to Hades, where he lies.

JOCASTA: Was I not the one
 who predicted this some time ago?

OEDIPUS: You did,
 but then I was misguided by my fears.

JOCASTA: You must not keep on filling up your heart
 with all these things.

some concern for your own life, then stop!
Do not keep investigating this.
I will suffer—that will be enough.

OEDIPUS: Be brave. Even if I should turn out to be
born from a shameful mother, whose family
for three generations have been slaves,
you will still have your noble lineage.

JOCASTA: Listen to me, I beg you. Do not do this.

OEDIPUS: I will not be convinced I should not learn
the whole truth of what these facts amount to.

JOCASTA: But I care about your own well being—
what I tell you is for your benefit.

OEDIPUS: What you're telling me for my own good
just brings me more distress.

JOCASTA: Oh, you unhappy man!
May you never find out who you really are!

OEDIPUS: [to Chorus] Go, one of you, and bring that shepherd here.
Leave the lady to enjoy her noble family.

JOCASTA: Alas, you poor miserable man!
There's nothing more that I can say to you.
And now I'll never speak again.

[JOCASTA runs into the palace]

CHORUS LEADER: Why has the queen rushed off, Oedipus,
so full of grief? I fear a disastrous storm
will soon break through her silence.

OEDIPUS: Then let it break,
whatever it is. As for myself,
no matter how base born my family,
I wish to know the seed from where I came.
Perhaps my queen is now ashamed of me
and of my insignificant origin—
she likes to play the noble lady.
But I will never feel myself dishonoured.
I see myself as a child of fortune—
and she is generous, that mother of mine
from whom I spring, and the months, my siblings,
have seen me by turns both small and great.

That's how I was born. I cannot change
to someone else, nor can I ever cease
from seeking out the facts of my own birth.

OEDIPUS: [looking out away from the palace]
You elders, although I've never seen the man
we've been looking for a long time now,
if I had to guess, I think I see him.
He's coming here. He looks very old—
as is appropriate, if he's the one.
And I know the people coming with him,
servants of mine. But if you've seen him before,
you'll recognize him better than I will.

CHORUS LEADER: Yes, I recognize the man. There's no doubt.
He worked for Laius—a trusty shepherd.

[Enter SERVANT, an old shepherd]

OEDIPUS: Stranger from Corinth, let me first ask you—
is this the man you mentioned?

MESSENGER: Yes, he is—
he's the man you see in front of you.

OEDIPUS: You, old man, over here. Look at me.
Now answer what I ask. Some time ago
did you work for Laius?

SERVANT: Yes, as a slave.
But I was not bought. I grew up in his house.

OEDIPUS: How did you live? What was the work you did?

SERVANT: Most of my life I've spent looking after sheep.

OEDIPUS: Where? In what particular areas?

SERVANT: On Cithaeron or the neighbouring lands.

OEDIPUS: Do you know if you came across this man
anywhere up there?

SERVANT: Doing what?
What man do you mean?

OEDIPUS: The man over here—
this one. Have you ever run into him?

SERVANT: Right now I can't say I remember him.

MESSENGER: My lord, that's surely not surprising.

Let me refresh his failing memory.

I think he will remember all too well
the time we spent around Cithaeron.

He had two flocks of sheep and I had one.

I was with him there for six months at a stretch,
from early spring until the autumn season.

In winter I'd drive my sheep down to my folds,
and he'd take his to pens that Laius owned.

Isn't that what happened—what I've just said?

SERVANT: You spoke the truth. But it was long ago.

MESSENGER: All right, then. Now, tell me if you recall

how you gave me a child, an infant boy,
for me to raise as my own foster son.

SERVANT: What? Why ask about that?

MESSENGER: This man here, my friend,
was that young child back then.

SERVANT: Damn you!
Can't you keep quiet about it!

OEDIPUS: Hold on, old man.
Don't criticize him. What you have said
is more objectionable than his account.

SERVANT: My noble master, what have I done wrong?

OEDIPUS: You did not tell us of that infant boy,
the one he asked about.

SERVANT: That's what he says,
but he knows nothing—a useless busybody.

OEDIPUS: If you won't tell us of your own free will,
once we start to hurt you, you will talk.

SERVANT: By all the gods, don't torture an old man!

OEDIPUS: One of you there, tie up this fellow's hands.

SERVANT: Why are you doing this? It's too much for me!

What is it you want to know?

OEDIPUS: That child he mentioned—
did you give it to him?

SERVANT: I did. How I wish
I'd died that day!

OEDIPUS: Well, you're going to die
if you don't speak the truth.

SERVANT: And if I do,
there's an even greater chance that I'll be killed.

OEDIPUS: It seems to me the man is trying to stall.

SERVANT: No, no, I'm not. I've already told you—
I did give him the child.

OEDIPUS: Where did you get it?
Did it come from your home or somewhere else?

SERVANT: It was not mine—I got it from someone.

OEDIPUS: Which of our citizens? Whose home was it?

SERVANT: In the name of the gods, my lord, don't ask!
Please, no more questions!

OEDIPUS: If I have to ask again,
then you will die.

SERVANT: The child was born in Laius' house.

OEDIPUS: From a slave or from some relative of his?

SERVANT: Alas, what I'm about to say now . . .
it's horrible.

OEDIPUS: And I'm about to hear it.
But nonetheless I have to know this.

SERVANT: If you must know, they said the child was his.
But your wife inside the palace is the one
who could best tell you what was going on.

OEDIPUS: You mean she gave the child to you?

SERVANT: Yes, my lord.

OEDIPUS: Why did she do that?

SERVANT: So I would kill it.

OEDIPUS: That wretched woman was the mother?

SERVANT: Yes.
She was afraid of dreadful prophecies.

OEDIPUS: What sort of prophecies?

SERVANT: The story went
that he would kill his father.

OEDIPUS: If that was true,
why did you give the child to this old man?

SERVANT: I pitied the boy, master, and I thought
he'd take the child off to a foreign land
where he was from. But he rescued him,
only to save him for the greatest grief of all.
For if you're the one this man says you are
you know your birth carried an awful fate.

OEDIPUS: Ah, so it all came true. It's so clear now.
O light, let me look at you one final time,
a man who stands revealed as cursed by birth,
cursed by my own family, and cursed
by murder where I should not kill.

[OEDIPUS moves into the palace]

CHORUS: O generations of mortal men,
how I count your life as scarcely living.
What man is there, what human being,
who attains a greater happiness
than mere appearances, a joy
which seems to fade away to nothing?
Poor wretched Oedipus, your fate
stands here to demonstrate for me
how no mortal man is ever blessed.

Here was a man who fired his arrows well—
his skill was matchless—and he won
the highest happiness in everything.
For, Zeus, he slaughtered the hook-taloned Sphinx

and stilled her cryptic song. For our state,
he stood there like a tower against death,
and from that moment, Oedipus,
we have called you our king
and honoured you above all other men,
the one who rules in mighty Thebes.

But now who is there whose story
is more terrible to hear? Whose life
has been so changed by trouble,
by such ferocious agonies?
Alas, for celebrated Oedipus,
the same spacious place of refuge
served you both as child and father,
the place you entered as a new bridegroom.
How could the furrow where your father planted,
poor wretched man, have tolerated you
in such silence for so long?

Time, which watches everything
and uncovered you against your will,
now sits in judgment of that fatal marriage,
where child and parent have been joined so long.
O child of Laius, how I wish
I'd never seen you—now I wail
like one whose mouth pours forth laments. [
To tell it right, it was through you
I found my life and breathed again,
and then through you my eyesight failed.

[The Second Messenger enters from the palace]

SECOND MESSENGER: O you most honoured citizens of Thebes,
what actions you will hear about and see,
what sorrows you will bear, if, as natives here,
you are still loyal to the house of Labdacus!
I do not think the Ister or the Phasis rivers
could cleanse this house. It conceals too much
and soon will bring to light the vilest things,
brought on by choice and not by accident.
What we do to ourselves brings us most pain.

CHORUS LEADER: The calamities we knew about before
were hard enough to bear. What can you say
to make them worse?

SECOND MESSENGER: I'll waste no words—
know this—noble Jocasta, our queen, is dead.

CHORUS LEADER: That poor unhappy lady! How did she die?

SECOND MESSENGER: She killed herself. You did not see it,
so you'll be spared the worst of what went on.
But from what I recall of what I saw
you'll learn how that poor woman suffered.
She left here frantic and rushed inside,
fingers on both hands clenched in her hair.
She ran through the hall straight to her marriage bed.
She went in, slamming both doors shut behind her
and crying out to Laius, who's been a corpse
a long time now. She was remembering
that child of theirs born many years ago—
the one who killed his father, who left her
to conceive cursed children with that son.
She lay moaning by the bed, where she,
poor woman, had given birth twice over—
a husband from a husband, children from a child.
How she died after that I don't fully know.
With a scream Oedipus came bursting in.
He would not let us see her suffering,
her final pain. We watched him charge around,
back and forth. As he moved, he kept asking us
to give him a sword, as he tried to find
that wife who was no wife—whose mother's womb
had given birth to him and to his children.
As he raved, some immortal power led him on—
no human in the room came close to him.
With a dreadful howl, as if someone
had pushed him, he leapt at the double doors,
bent the bolts by force out of their sockets,
and burst into the room. Then we saw her.
She was hanging there, swaying, with twisted cords
roped round her neck. When Oedipus saw her,
with a dreadful groan he took her body
out of the noose in which she hung, and then,
when the poor woman was lying on the ground—
what happened next was a horrific sight—
from her clothes he ripped the golden brooches
she wore as ornaments, raised them high,
and drove them deep into his eyeballs,
crying as he did so: "You will no longer see
all those atrocious things I suffered,
the dreadful things I did! No. You have seen
those you never should have looked upon,
and those I wished to know you did not see.
So now and for all future time be dark!"

With these words he raised his hand and struck,
not once, but many times, right in the sockets.
With every blow blood spurted from his eyes
down on his beard, and not in single drops,
but showers of dark blood spattered like hail.
So what these two have done has overwhelmed
not one alone—this disaster swallows up
a man and wife together. That old happiness
they had before in their rich ancestry
was truly joy, but now lament and ruin,
death and shame, and all calamities
which men can name are theirs to keep.

CHORUS LEADER: And has that suffering man found some relief
to ease his pain?

SECOND MESSENGER: He shouts at everyone
to open up the gates and thus reveal
to all Cadmeians his father's killer,
his mother's . . . but I must not say those words.
He wants them to cast him out of Thebes,
so the curse he laid will not come on this house
if he still lives inside. But he is weak
and needs someone to lead him on his way.
His agony is more than he can bear—
as he will show you—for on the palace doors
the bolts are being pulled back. Soon you will see
a sight which even a man filled with disgust
would have to pity.

[OEDIPUS enters through the palace doors]

CHORUS LEADER: An awful fate for human eyes to witness,
an appalling sight—the worst I've ever seen.
O you poor man, what madness came on you?
What eternal force pounced on your life
and, springing further than the longest leap,
brought you this awful doom? Alas! Alas!
You unhappy man! I cannot look at you.
I want to ask you many things—there's much
I wish to learn. You fill me with such horror,
yet there is so much I must see.

OEDIPUS: Aaaiiii, aaaiii . . . Alas! Alas!
How miserable I am . . . such wretchedness . . .
Where do I go? How can the wings of air
sweep up my voice? Oh my destiny,
how far you have sprung now!

It was a thankless act. Had I perished then,
I would not have brought such agony
to myself or to my friends.

CHORUS LEADER: I agree—
I would have preferred your death, as well.

OEDIPUS: I would not have come to kill my father,
and men would not see in me the husband
of the woman who gave birth to me.
Now I am abandoned by the gods,
the son of a corrupted mother,
conceiving children with the woman
who gave me my own miserable life.
If there is some suffering more serious
than all the rest, then it too belongs
in the fate of Oedipus.

CHORUS LEADER: I do not believe
what you did to yourself is for the best.
Better to be dead than alive and blind.

OEDIPUS: Don't tell me what I've done is not the best.
And from now on spare me your advice.
If I could see, I don't know how my eyes
could look at my own father when I come
to Hades or could see my wretched mother.
Against those two I have committed acts
so vile that even if I hanged myself
that would not be sufficient punishment.
Perhaps you think the sight of my own children
might give me joy? No! Look how they were born!
They could never bring delight to eyes of mine.
Nor could the city or its massive walls,
or the sacred images of its gods.
I am the most abhorred of men, I,
the finest one of all those bred in Thebes,
I have condemned myself, telling everyone
they had to banish for impiety
the man the gods have now exposed
as sacrilegious—a son of Laius, too.
With such polluting stains upon me,
could I set eyes on you and hold your gaze?
No. And if I could somehow block my ears
and kill my hearing, I would not hold back.
I'd make a dungeon of this wretched body,
so I would never see or hear again.
For there is joy in isolated thought,

sealed off from a world of sorrow.
O Cithaeron, why did you shelter me?
Why, when I was handed over to you,
did you not do away with me at once,
so I would never then reveal to men
the nature of my birth? Ah Polybus,
and Corinth, the place men called my home,
my father's ancient house, you raised me well—
so fine to look at, so corrupt inside!
Now I've been exposed as something bad,
contaminated in my origins.
Oh you three roads and hidden forest grove,
you thicket and defile where three paths meet,
you who swallowed down my father's blood
from my own hands, do you remember me,
what I did there in front of you and then
what else I did when I came here to Thebes?
Ah, you marriage rites—you gave birth to me,
and then when I was born, you gave birth again,
children from the child of that same womb,
creating an incestuous blood family
of fathers, brothers, children, brides,
wives and mothers—the most atrocious act
that human beings commit! But it is wrong
to talk about what it is wrong to do,
so in the name of all the gods, act quickly—
hide me somewhere outside the land of Thebes,
or slaughter me, or hurl me in the sea,
where you will never gaze on me again.
Come, allow yourself to touch a wretched man.
Listen to me, and do not be afraid—
for this disease infects no one but me.

CHORUS LEADER: Creon is coming. He is just in time
to plan and carry out what you propose.
With you gone he's the only one who's left
to act as guardian of Thebes.

OEDIPUS: Alas,
how will I talk to him? How can I ask him
to put his trust in me? Not long ago
I treated him with such contempt.

[Enter Creon]

CREON: Oedipus, I have not come here to mock
or blame you for disasters in the past.
But if you can no longer value human beings,

at least respect our lord the sun, whose light
makes all things grow, and do not put on show
pollution of this kind in such a public way,
for neither earth nor light nor sacred rain
can welcome such a sight.

[Creon speaks to the attending servants]

Take him inside the house
as quickly as you can. The kindest thing
would be for members of his family
to be the only ones to see and hear him.

OEDIPUS: By all the gods, since you are acting now
so differently from what I would expect
and have come here to treat me graciously,
the very worst of men, do what I ask.
I will speak for your own benefit, not mine.

CREON: What are you so keen to get from me?

OEDIPUS: Cast me out as quickly as you can,
away from Thebes, to a place where no one,
no living human being, will cross my path.

CREON: That is something I could do, of course,
but first I wish to know what the god says
about what I should do.

OEDIPUS: But what he said
was all so clear—the man who killed his father
must be destroyed. And that corrupted man
is me.

CREON: Yes, that is what was said. But now,
with things the way they are, the wisest thing
is to ascertain quite clearly what to do.

OEDIPUS: Will you then be making a request
on my behalf when I am so depraved?

CREON: I will. For even you must now trust in the gods.

OEDIPUS: Yes, I do. And I have a task for you
as I make this plea—that woman in the house,
please bury her as you see fit. You are the one
to give your own the proper funeral rites.
But never let my father's city be condemned

to have me living here while I still live.
Let me make my home up in the mountains
by Cithaeron, whose fame is now my own.
When my father and mother were alive,
they chose it as my special burying place—
and thus, when I die, I'll be following
the orders of the ones who tried to kill me.
And yet I know this much—no disease
nor any other suffering can kill me—
for I would never have been saved from death
unless I was to suffer a strange destiny.
But wherever my fate leads, just let it go.
As for my two sons, Creon, there's no need
for you to care for them on my behalf—
they are men—thus, no matter where they are,
they'll always have enough to live on.*
But my two poor daughters have never known
my dining table placed away from them
or lacked their father's presence. They shared
everything I touched—that's how it's always been.
So take care of them for me. But first let me
feel them with my hands and then I'll grieve.
Oh my lord, you noble heart, let me do that—
if my hands could touch them it would seem
as if I were with them when I still could see.

[Some SERVANTS lead ANTIGONE and ISMENE out of the palace]

What's this? By all the gods I hear something—
is it my two dear children crying . . . ?
Has Creon taken pity on me
and sent out the children, my dear treasures?
Is that what's happening?

CREON: Yes. I sent for them.
I know the joy they've always given you—
the joy which you feel now.

OEDIPUS: I wish you well.
And for this act, may the god watch over you
and treat you better than he treated me.
Ah, my children, where are you? Come here,
come into my arms—you are my sisters now—
feel these hands which turned your father's eyes,
once so bright, into what you see now,
these empty sockets. He was a man, who,
seeing nothing, knowing nothing, fathered you
with the woman who had given birth to him.

OEDIPUS: Send me away to live outside of Thebes.

CREON: Only the god can give you what you ask.

OEDIPUS: But I've become abhorrent to the gods.

CREON: Then you should quickly get what you desire.

OEDIPUS: So you agree?

CREON: I don't like to speak
thoughtlessly and say what I don't mean.

OEDIPUS: Come then, lead me off.

CREON: All right,
but let go of the children.

OEDIPUS: No, no!
Do not take them away from me.

CREON: Don't try to be in charge of everything.
Your life has lost the power you once had.

[CREON, OEDIPUS, ANTIGONE, ISMENE, and ATTENDANTS all enter the palace]

CHORUS: You residents of Thebes, our native land,
look on this man, this Oedipus, the one
who understood that celebrated riddle.
He was the most powerful of men.
All citizens who witnessed this man's wealth
were envious. Now what a surging tide
of terrible disaster sweeps around him.
So while we wait to see that final day,
we cannot call a mortal being happy
before he's passed beyond life free from pain.