

Oedipus Rex Main Text

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Oedipus Rex or Oedipus the King

[Suppliants of all ages are seated round the altar at the palace doors, at their head a PRIEST OF ZEUS. To them enter OEDIPUS.]

OEDIPUS My children, latest born to Cadmus old, Why sit ye here as suppliants, in your hands Branches of olive filleted with wool? What means this reek of incense everywhere, And everywhere laments and litanies? Children, it were not meet that I should learn From others, and am hither come, myself, I Oedipus, your world-renowned king. Ho! aged sire, whose venerable locks Proclaim thee spokesman of this company, Explain your mood and purport. Is it dread Of ill that moves you or a boon ye crave? My zeal in your behalf ye cannot doubt; Ruthless indeed were I and obdurate If such petitioners as you I spurned.

PRIEST Yea, Oedipus, my sovereign lord and king, Thou seest how both extremes of age besiege Thy palace altars--fledglings hardly winged, and greybeards bowed with years; priests, as am I of Zeus, and these the flower of our youth. Meanwhile, the common folk, with wreathed boughs Crowd our two market-places, or before Both shrines of Pallas congregate, or where Ismenus gives his oracles by fire. For, as thou seest thyself, our ship of State, Sore buffeted, can no more lift her head, Foundered beneath a weltering surge of blood. A blight is on our harvest in the ear, A blight upon the grazing flocks and herds, A blight on wives in travail; and withal Armed with his blazing torch the God of Plague Hath swooped upon our city emptying The house of Cadmus, and the murky realm Of Pluto is full fed with groans and tears. Therefore, O King, here at thy hearth we sit, I and these children; not as deeming thee A new divinity, but the first of men; First in the common accidents of life, And first in visitations of the Gods. Art thou not he who coming to the town of Cadmus freed us from the tax we paid To the fell songstress? Nor hadst thou received Prompting from us or been by others schooled; No, by a god inspired (so all men deem, And testify) didst thou renew our life. And now, O Oedipus, our peerless king, All we thy votaries beseech thee, find Some succor, whether by a voice from heaven Whispered, or haply known by human wit. Tried counselors, methinks, are aptest found To furnish for the future pregnant rede. Upraise, O chief of men, upraise our State! Look to thy laurels! for thy zeal of yore Our country's savior thou art justly hailed: O never may we thus record thy reign:-- "He raised us up only to cast us down." Uplift us, build our city on a rock.

Thy happy star ascendant brought us luck, O let it not decline! If thou wouldst rule This land, as now thou reignest, better sure To rule a peopled than a desert realm. Nor battlements nor galleys aught avail, If men to man and guards to guard them tail.

OEDIPUS Ah! my poor children, known, ah, known too well, The quest that brings you hither and your need. Ye sicken all, well wot I, yet my pain, How great soever yours, outtops it all. Your sorrow touches each man severally, Him and none other, but I grieve at once Both for the general and myself and you. Therefore ye rouse no sluggard from day-dreams. Many, my children, are the tears I've wept, And threaded many a maze of weary thought. Thus pondering one clue of hope I caught, And tracked it up; I have sent Menoeceus' son, Creon, my consort's brother, to inquire Of Pythian Phoebus at his Delphic shrine, How I might save the State by act or word. And now I reckon up the tale of days Since he set forth, and marvel how he fares. 'Tis strange, this endless tarrying, passing strange. But when he comes, then I were base indeed, If I perform not all the god declares.

PRIEST Thy words are well timed; even as thou speakest That shouting tells me Creon is at hand.

OEDIPUS O King Apollo! may his joyous looks Be presage of the joyous news he brings!

PRIEST As I surmise, 'tis welcome; else his head Had scarce been crowned with berry-laden bays.

OEDIPUS We soon shall know; he's now in earshot range.

[Enter CREON]

My royal cousin, say, Menoeceus' child, What message hast thou brought us from the god?

CREON Good news, for e'en intolerable ills, Finding right issue, tend to naught but good.

OEDIPUS How runs the oracle? thus far thy words Give me no ground for confidence or fear.

CREON If thou wouldst hear my message publicly, I'll tell thee straight, or with thee pass within.

OEDIPUS Speak before all; the burden that I bear Is more for these my subjects than myself.

CREON Let me report then all the god declared. King Phoebus bids us straitly extirpate A fell pollution that infests the land, And no more harbor an inveterate sore.

OEDIPUS What expiation means he? What's amiss?

CREON Banishment, or the shedding blood for blood. This stain of blood makes shipwreck of our state.

OEDIPUS Whom can he mean, the miscreant thus denounced?

CREON Before thou didst assume the helm of State, The sovereign of this land was Laius.

OEDIPUS I heard as much, but never saw the man.

CREON He fell; and now the god's command is plain: Punish his takers-off, whoever they be.

OEDIPUS Where are they? Where in the wide world to find The far, faint traces of a bygone crime?

CREON In this land, said the god; "who seeks shall find; Who sits with folded hands or sleeps is blind."

OEDIPUS Was he within his palace, or afield, Or traveling, when Laius met his fate?

CREON Abroad; he started, so he told us, bound For Delphi, but he never thence returned.

OEDIPUS Came there no news, no fellow-traveler To give some clue that might be followed up?

CREON But one escape, who flying for dear life, Could tell of all he saw but one thing sure.

OEDIPUS And what was that? One clue might lead us far, With but a spark of hope to guide our quest.

CREON Robbers, he told us, not one bandit but A troop of knaves, attacked and murdered him.

OEDIPUS Did any bandit dare so bold a stroke, Unless indeed he were suborned from Thebes?

CREON So 'twas surmised, but none was found to avenge His murder mid the trouble that ensued.

OEDIPUS What trouble can have hindered a full quest, When royalty had fallen thus miserably?

CREON The riddling Sphinx compelled us to let slide The dim past and attend to instant needs.

OEDIPUS Well, / will start afresh and once again Make dark things clear. Right worthy the concern Of Phoebus, worthy thine too, for the dead; I also, as is meet, will lend my aid To avenge this wrong to Thebes and to the god. Not for some far-off kinsman, but myself, Shall I expel this poison in the blood; For whoso slew that king might have a mind To strike me too with his assassin hand. Therefore in righting him I serve myself. Up, children, haste ye, quit these altar stairs, Take hence your suppliant wands, go summon hither The Theban commons. With the god's good help Success is sure; 'tis ruin if we fail.

[Exeunt OEDIPUS and CREON]

PRIEST Come, children, let us hence; these gracious words Forestall the very purpose of our suit. And may the god who sent this oracle Save us withal and rid us of this pest.

[Exeunt PRIEST and SUPPLIANTS]

CHORUS (Str. 1) Sweet-voiced daughter of Zeus from thy gold-paved Pythian shrine Wafted to Thebes divine, What dost thou bring me? My soul is racked and shivers with fear. (Healer of Delos, hear!) Hast thou some pain unknown before, Or with the circling years renewest a penance of yore? Offspring of golden Hope, thou voice immortal, O tell me.

(Ant. 1) First on Athene I call; O Zeus-born goddess, defend! Goddess and sister, befriend, Artemis, Lady of Thebes, high-throned in the midst of our mart! Lord of the death-winged dart! Your threefold aid I crave From death and ruin our city to save. If in the days of old when we nigh had perished, ye drave From our land the fiery plague, be near us now and defend us!

(Str. 2) Ah me, what countless woes are mine! All our host is in decline; Weaponless my spirit lies. Earth her gracious fruits denies; Women wail in barren throes; Life on life downstricken goes, Swifter than the wind bird's flight, Swifter than the Fire-God's might, To the westering shores of Night.

(Ant. 2) Wasted thus by death on death All our city perisheth. Corpses spread infection round;
None to tend or mourn is found. Wailing on the altar stair Wives and grandams rend the air--
Long-drawn moans and piercing cries Blent with prayers and litanies. Golden child of Zeus, O
hear Let thine angel face appear!

(Str. 3) And grant that Ares whose hot breath I feel, Though without targe or steel He stalks,
whose voice is as the battle shout, May turn in sudden rout, To the unharbored Thracian waters
sped, Or Amphitrite's bed. For what night leaves undone, Smit by the morrow's sun Perisheth.
Father Zeus, whose hand Doth wield the lightning brand, Slay him beneath thy levin bold, we
pray, Slay him, O slay!

(Ant. 3) O that thine arrows too, Lycean King, From that taut bow's gold string, Might fly
abroad, the champions of our rights; Yea, and the flashing lights Of Artemis, wherewith the
huntress sweeps Across the Lycian steeps. Thee too I call with golden-snooded hair, Whose
name our land doth bear, Bacchus to whom thy Maenads Evoe shout; Come with thy bright
torch, rout, Blithe god whom we adore, The god whom gods abhor.

[Enter OEDIPUS.]

OEDIPUS Ye pray; 'tis well, but would ye hear my words And heed them and apply the remedy,
Ye might perchance find comfort and relief. Mind you, I speak as one who comes a stranger To
this report, no less than to the crime; For how unaided could I track it far Without a clue? Which
lacking (for too late Was I enrolled a citizen of Thebes) This proclamation I address to all:--
Thebans, if any knows the man by whom Laius, son of Labdacus, was slain, I summon him to
make clean shrift to me. And if he shrinks, let him reflect that thus Confessing he shall 'scape
the capital charge; For the worst penalty that shall befall him Is banishment--unscathed he
shall depart. But if an alien from a foreign land Be known to any as the murderer, Let him who
knows speak out, and he shall have Due recompense from me and thanks to boot. But if ye still
keep silence, if through fear For self or friends ye disregard my hest, Hear what I then resolve; I
lay my ban On the assassin whosoe'er he be. Let no man in this land, whereof I hold The
sovereign rule, harbor or speak to him; Give him no part in prayer or sacrifice Or lustral rites,
but hound him from your homes. For this is our defilement, so the god Hath lately shown to
me by oracles. Thus as their champion I maintain the cause Both of the god and of the
murdered King. And on the murderer this curse I lay (On him and all the partners in his guilt):--
Wretch, may he pine in utter wretchedness! And for myself, if with my privity He gain
admittance to my hearth, I pray The curse I laid on others fall on me. See that ye give effect to
all my hest, For my sake and the god's and for our land, A desert blasted by the wrath of

heaven. For, let alone the god's express command, It were a scandal ye should leave unpurged
The murder of a great man and your king, Nor track it home. And now that I am lord, Successor
to his throne, his bed, his wife, (And had he not been frustrate in the hope Of issue, common
children of one womb Had forced a closer bond twixt him and me, But Fate swooped down
upon him), therefore I His blood-avenger will maintain his cause As though he were my sire,
and leave no stone Unturned to track the assassin or avenge The son of Labdacus, of Polydore,
Of Cadmus, and Agenor first of the race. And for the disobedient thus I pray: May the gods
send them neither timely fruits Of earth, nor teeming increase of the womb, But may they
waste and pine, as now they waste, Aye and worse stricken; but to all of you, My loyal subjects
who approve my acts, May Justice, our ally, and all the gods Be gracious and attend you
evermore.

CHORUS The oath thou profferest, sire, I take and swear. I slew him not myself, nor can I name
The slayer. For the quest, 'twere well, methinks That Phoebus, who proposed the riddle, himself
Should give the answer--who the murderer was.

OEDIPUS Well argued; but no living man can hope To force the gods to speak against their
will.

CHORUS May I then say what seems next best to me?

OEDIPUS Aye, if there be a third best, tell it too.

CHORUS My liege, if any man sees eye to eye With our lord Phoebus, 'tis our prophet, lord
Teiresias; he of all men best might guide A searcher of this matter to the light.

OEDIPUS Here too my zeal has nothing lagged, for twice At Creon's instance have I sent to
fetch him, And long I marvel why he is not here.

CHORUS I mind me too of rumors long ago-- Mere gossip.

OEDIPUS Tell them, I would fain know all.

CHORUS 'Twas said he fell by travelers.

OEDIPUS So I heard, But none has seen the man who saw him fall.

CHORUS Well, if he knows what fear is, he will quail And flee before the terror of thy curse.

OEDIPUS Words scare not him who blenches not at deeds.

CHORUS But here is one to arraign him. Lo, at length They bring the god-inspired seer in whom Above all other men is truth inborn.

[Enter TEIRESIAS, led by a boy.]

OEDIPUS Teiresias, seer who comprehendest all, Lore of the wise and hidden mysteries, High things of heaven and low things of the earth, Thou knowest, though thy blinded eyes see naught, What plague infects our city; and we turn To thee, O seer, our one defense and shield. The purport of the answer that the God Returned to us who sought his oracle, The messengers have doubtless told thee--how One course alone could rid us of the pest, To find the murderers of Laius, And slay them or expel them from the land. Therefore begrudging neither augury Nor other divination that is thine, O save thyself, thy country, and thy king, Save all from this defilement of blood shed. On thee we rest. This is man's highest end, To others' service all his powers to lend.

TEIRESIAS Alas, alas, what misery to be wise When wisdom profits nothing! This old lore I had forgotten; else I were not here.

OEDIPUS What ails thee? Why this melancholy mood?

TEIRESIAS Let me go home; prevent me not; 'twere best That thou shouldst bear thy burden and I mine.

OEDIPUS For shame! no true-born Theban patriot Would thus withhold the word of prophecy.

TEIRESIAS Thy words, O king, are wide of the mark, and I For fear lest I too trip like thee...

OEDIPUS Oh speak, Withhold not, I adjure thee, if thou know'st, Thy knowledge. We are all thy suppliants.

TEIRESIAS Aye, for ye all are witless, but my voice Will ne'er reveal my miseries--or thine.

OEDIPUS What then, thou knowest, and yet wilt not speak! Wouldst thou betray us and destroy the State?

TEIRESIAS I will not vex myself nor thee. Why ask Thus idly what from me thou shalt not learn?

OEDIPUS Monster! thy silence would incense a flint. Will nothing loose thy tongue? Can nothing melt thee, Or shake thy dogged taciturnity?

TEIRESIAS Thou blam'st my mood and seest not thine own Wherewith thou art mated; no, thou taxest me.

OEDIPUS And who could stay his choler when he heard How insolently thou dost flout the State?

TEIRESIAS Well, it will come what will, though I be mute.

OEDIPUS Since come it must, thy duty is to tell me.

TEIRESIAS I have no more to say; storm as thou wilt, And give the rein to all thy pent-up rage.

OEDIPUS Yea, I am wroth, and will not stint my words, But speak my whole mind. Thou methinks thou art he, Who planned the crime, aye, and performed it too, All save the assassination; and if thou Hadst not been blind, I had been sworn to boot That thou alone didst do the bloody deed.

TEIRESIAS Is it so? Then I charge thee to abide By thine own proclamation; from this day Speak not to these or me. Thou art the man, Thou the accursed polluter of this land.

OEDIPUS Vile slanderer, thou blurtest forth these taunts, And think'st forsooth as seer to go scot free.

TEIRESIAS Yea, I am free, strong in the strength of truth.

OEDIPUS Who was thy teacher? not methinks thy art.

TEIRESIAS Thou, goading me against my will to speak.

OEDIPUS What speech? repeat it and resolve my doubt.

TEIRESIAS Didst miss my sense wouldst thou goad me on?

OEDIPUS I but half caught thy meaning; say it again.

TEIRESIAS I say thou art the murderer of the man Whose murderer thou pursuest.

OEDIPUS Thou shalt rue it Twice to repeat so gross a calumny.

TEIRESIAS Must I say more to aggravate thy rage?

OEDIPUS Say all thou wilt; it will be but waste of breath.

TEIRESIAS I say thou livest with thy nearest kin In infamy, unwitting in thy shame.

OEDIPUS Think'st thou for aye unscathed to wag thy tongue?

TEIRESIAS Yea, if the might of truth can aught prevail.

OEDIPUS With other men, but not with thee, for thou In ear, wit, eye, in everything art blind.

TEIRESIAS Poor fool to utter gibes at me which all Here present will cast back on thee ere long.

OEDIPUS Offspring of endless Night, thou hast no power O'er me or any man who sees the sun.

TEIRESIAS No, for thy weird is not to fall by me. I leave to Apollo what concerns the god.

OEDIPUS Is this a plot of Creon, or thine own?

TEIRESIAS Not Creon, thou thyself art thine own bane.

OEDIPUS O wealth and empery and skill by skill Outwitted in the battlefield of life, What spite and envy follow in your train! See, for this crown the State conferred on me. A gift, a thing I sought not, for this crown The trusty Creon, my familiar friend, Hath lain in wait to oust me and suborned This mountebank, this juggling charlatan, This tricky beggar-priest, for gain alone Keen-eyed, but in his proper art stone-blind. Say, sirrah, hast thou ever proved thyself A prophet? When the riddling Sphinx was here Why hadst thou no deliverance for this folk? And yet the riddle was not to be solved By guess-work but required the prophet's art; Wherein thou

wast found lacking; neither birds Nor sign from heaven helped thee, but / came, The simple Oedipus; / stopped her mouth By mother wit, untaught of auguries. This is the man whom thou wouldst undermine, In hope to reign with Creon in my stead. Methinks that thou and thine abettor soon Will rue your plot to drive the scapegoat out. Thank thy grey hairs that thou hast still to learn What chastisement such arrogance deserves.

CHORUS To us it seems that both the seer and thou, O Oedipus, have spoken angry words. This is no time to wrangle but consult How best we may fulfill the oracle.

TEIRESIAS King as thou art, free speech at least is mine To make reply; in this I am thy peer. I own no lord but Loxias; him I serve And ne'er can stand enrolled as Creon's man. Thus then I answer: since thou hast not spared To twit me with my blindness--thou hast eyes, Yet see'st not in what misery thou art fallen, Nor where thou dwellest nor with whom for mate. Dost know thy lineage? Nay, thou know'st it not, And all unwitting art a double foe To thine own kin, the living and the dead; Aye and the dogging curse of mother and sire One day shall drive thee, like a two-edged sword, Beyond our borders, and the eyes that now See clear shall henceforward endless night. Ah whither shall thy bitter cry not reach, What crag in all Cithaeron but shall then Reverberate thy wail, when thou hast found With what a hymeneal thou wast borne Home, but to no fair haven, on the gale! Aye, and a flood of ills thou guessest not Shall set thyself and children in one line. Flout then both Creon and my words, for none Of mortals shall be stricken worse than thou.

OEDIPUS Must I endure this fellow's insolence? A murrain on thee! Get thee hence! Begone Avaunt! and never cross my threshold more.

TEIRESIAS I ne'er had come hadst thou not bidden me.

OEDIPUS I know not thou wouldst utter folly, else Long hadst thou waited to be summoned here.

TEIRESIAS Such am I--as it seems to thee a fool, But to the parents who begat thee, wise.

OEDIPUS What sayest thou--"parents"? Who begat me, speak?

TEIRESIAS This day shall be thy birth-day, and thy grave.

OEDIPUS Thou lov'st to speak in riddles and dark words.

TEIRESIAS In reading riddles who so skilled as thou?

OEDIPUS Twit me with that wherein my greatness lies.

TEIRESIAS And yet this very greatness proved thy bane.

OEDIPUS No matter if I saved the commonwealth.

TEIRESIAS 'Tis time I left thee. Come, boy, take me home.

OEDIPUS Aye, take him quickly, for his presence irks And lets me; gone, thou canst not plague me more.

TEIRESIAS I go, but first will tell thee why I came. Thy frown I dread not, for thou canst not harm me. Hear then: this man whom thou hast sought to arrest With threats and warrants this long while, the wretch Who murdered Laius--that man is here. He passes for an alien in the land But soon shall prove a Theban, native born. And yet his fortune brings him little joy; For blind of seeing, clad in beggar's weeds, For purple robes, and leaning on his staff, To a strange land he soon shall grope his way. And of the children, inmates of his home, He shall be proved the brother and the sire, Of her who bare him son and husband both, Co-partner, and assassin of his sire. Go in and ponder this, and if thou find That I have missed the mark, henceforth declare I have no wit nor skill in prophecy.

[Exeunt TEIRESIAS and OEDIPUS]

CHORUS (Str. 1) Who is he by voice immortal named from Pythia's rocky cell, Doer of foul deeds of bloodshed, horrors that no tongue can tell? A foot for flight he needs Fleeter than storm-swift steeds, For on his heels doth follow, Armed with the lightnings of his Sire, Apollo. Like sleuth-hounds too The Fates pursue.

(Ant. 1) Yea, but now flashed forth the summons from Parnassus' snowy peak, "Near and far the undiscovered doer of this murder seek!" Now like a sullen bull he roves Through forest brakes and upland groves, And vainly seeks to fly The doom that ever nigh Flits o'er his head, Still by the avenging Phoebus sped, The voice divine, From Earth's mid shrine.

(Str. 2) Sore perplexed am I by the words of the master seer. Are they true, are they false? I know not and bridle my tongue for fear, Fluttered with vague surmise; nor present nor future is clear. Quarrel of ancient date or in days still near know I none Twixt the Labdacidan house and

our ruler, Polybus' son. Proof is there none: how then can I challenge our King's good name,
How in a blood-feud join for an untracked deed of shame?

(Ant. 2) All wise are Zeus and Apollo, and nothing is hid from their ken; They are gods; and in
wits a man may surpass his fellow men; But that a mortal seer knows more than I know--where
Hath this been proven? Or how without sign assured, can I blame Him who saved our State
when the winged songstress came, Tested and tried in the light of us all, like gold assayed?
How can I now assent when a crime is on Oedipus laid?

CREON Friends, countrymen, I learn King Oedipus Hath laid against me a most grievous
charge, And come to you protesting. If he deems That I have harmed or injured him in aught By
word or deed in this our present trouble, I care not to prolong the span of life, Thus ill-reputed;
for the calumny Hits not a single blot, but blasts my name, If by the general voice I am
denounced False to the State and false by you my friends.

CHORUS This taunt, it well may be, was blurted out In petulance, not spoken advisedly.

CREON Did any dare pretend that it was I Prompted the seer to utter a forged charge?

CHORUS Such things were said; with what intent I know not.

CREON Were not his wits and vision all astray When upon me he fixed this monstrous charge?

CHORUS I know not; to my sovereign's acts I am blind. But lo, he comes to answer for himself.

[Enter OEDIPUS.]

OEDIPUS Sirrah, what mak'st thou here? Dost thou presume To approach my doors, thou
brazen-faced rogue, My murderer and the filcher of my crown? Come, answer this, didst thou
detect in me Some touch of cowardice or witlessness, That made thee undertake this
enterprise? I seemed forsooth too simple to perceive The serpent stealing on me in the dark, Or
else too weak to scotch it when I saw. This *thou* art witless seeking to possess Without a
following or friends the crown, A prize that followers and wealth must win.

CREON Attend me. Thou hast spoken, 'tis my turn To make reply. Then having heard me,
judge.

OEDIPUS Thou art glib of tongue, but I am slow to learn Of thee; I know too well thy venomous hate.

CREON First I would argue out this very point.

OEDIPUS O argue not that thou art not a rogue.

CREON If thou dost count a virtue stubbornness, Unschooled by reason, thou art much astray.

OEDIPUS If thou dost hold a kinsman may be wronged, And no pains follow, thou art much to seek.

CREON Therein thou judgest rightly, but this wrong That thou allegest--tell me what it is.

OEDIPUS Didst thou or didst thou not advise that I Should call the priest?

CREON Yes, and I stand to it.

OEDIPUS Tell me how long is it since Laius...

CREON Since Laius...? I follow not thy drift.

OEDIPUS By violent hands was spirited away.

CREON In the dim past, a many years ago.

OEDIPUS Did the same prophet then pursue his craft?

CREON Yes, skilled as now and in no less repute.

OEDIPUS Did he at that time ever glance at me?

CREON Not to my knowledge, not when I was by.

OEDIPUS But was no search and inquisition made?

CREON Surely full quest was made, but nothing learnt.

OEDIPUS Why failed the seer to tell his story *then*?

CREON I know not, and not knowing hold my tongue.

OEDIPUS This much thou knowest and canst surely tell.

CREON What's mean'st thou? All I know I will declare.

OEDIPUS But for thy prompting never had the seer Ascribed to me the death of Laius.

CREON If so he thou knowest best; but I Would put thee to the question in my turn.

OEDIPUS Question and prove me murderer if thou canst.

CREON Then let me ask thee, didst thou wed my sister?

OEDIPUS A fact so plain I cannot well deny.

CREON And as thy consort queen she shares the throne?

OEDIPUS I grant her freely all her heart desires.

CREON And with you twain I share the triple rule?

OEDIPUS Yea, and it is that proves thee a false friend.

CREON Not so, if thou wouldst reason with thyself, As I with myself. First, I bid thee think, Would any mortal choose a troubled reign Of terrors rather than secure repose, If the same power were given him? As for me, I have no natural craving for the name Of king, preferring to do kingly deeds, And so thinks every sober-minded man. Now all my needs are satisfied through thee, And I have naught to fear; but were I king, My acts would oft run counter to my will. How could a title then have charms for me Above the sweets of boundless influence? I am not so infatuate as to grasp The shadow when I hold the substance fast. Now all men cry me Godspeed! wish me well, And every suitor seeks to gain my ear, If he would hope to win a grace from thee. Why should I leave the better, choose the worse? That were sheer madness, and I am not mad. No such ambition ever tempted me, Nor would I have a share in such intrigue. And if thou doubt me, first to Delphi go, There ascertain if my report was true Of the god's answer; next investigate If with the seer I plotted or conspired, And if it prove so, sentence me to death, Not by thy voice alone, but mine and thine. But O condemn me not, without appeal, On bare suspicion. 'Tis not right to adjudge Bad men at random good, or good

men bad. I would as lief a man should cast away The thing he counts most precious, his own life, As spurn a true friend. Thou wilt learn in time The truth, for time alone reveals the just; A villain is detected in a day.

CHORUS To one who walketh warily his words Commend themselves; swift counsels are not sure.

OEDIPUS When with swift strides the stealthy plotter stalks I must be quick too with my counterplot. To wait his onset passively, for him Is sure success, for me assured defeat.

CREON What then's thy will? To banish me the land?

OEDIPUS I would not have thee banished, no, but dead, That men may mark the wages envy reaps.

CREON I see thou wilt not yield, nor credit me.

OEDIPUS None but a fool would credit such as thou.

CREON Thou art not wise.

OEDIPUS Wise for myself at least.

CREON Why not for me too?

OEDIPUS Why for such a knave?

CREON Suppose thou lackest sense.

OEDIPUS Yet kings must rule.

CREON Not if they rule ill.

OEDIPUS Oh my Thebans, hear him!

CREON Thy Thebans? am not I a Theban too?

CHORUS Cease, princes; lo there comes, and none too soon, Jocasta from the palace. Who so fit As peacemaker to reconcile your feud?

[Enter JOCASTA.]

JOCASTA Misguided princes, why have ye upraised This wordy wrangle? Are ye not ashamed, While the whole land lies stricken, thus to voice Your private injuries? Go in, my lord; Go home, my brother, and forbear to make A public scandal of a petty grief.

CREON My royal sister, Oedipus, thy lord, Hath bid me choose (O dread alternative!) An outlaw's exile or a felon's death.

OEDIPUS Yes, lady; I have caught him practicing Against my royal person his vile arts.

CREON May I ne'er speed but die accursed, if I In any way am guilty of this charge.

JOCASTA Believe him, I adjure thee, Oedipus, First for his solemn oath's sake, then for mine, And for thine elders' sake who wait on thee.

CHORUS (Str. 1) Hearken, King, reflect, we pray thee, but not stubborn but relent.

OEDIPUS Say to what should I consent?

CHORUS Respect a man whose probity and troth Are known to all and now confirmed by oath.

OEDIPUS Dost know what grace thou cravest?

CHORUS Yea, I know.

OEDIPUS Declare it then and make thy meaning plain.

CHORUS Brand not a friend whom babbling tongues assail; Let not suspicion 'gainst his oath prevail.

OEDIPUS Bethink you that in seeking this ye seek In very sooth my death or banishment?

CHORUS No, by the leader of the host divine!

(Str. 2) Witness, thou Sun, such thought was never mine, Unblest, unfriended may I perish, If ever I such wish did cherish! But O my heart is desolate Musing on our stricken State, Doubly fall'n should discord grow Twixt you twain, to crown our woe.

OEDIPUS Well, let him go, no matter what it cost me, Or certain death or shameful banishment, For your sake I relent, not his; and him, Where'er he be, my heart shall still abhor.

CREON Thou art as sullen in thy yielding mood As in thine anger thou wast truculent. Such tempers justly plague themselves the most.

OEDIPUS Leave me in peace and get thee gone.

CREON I go, By thee misjudged, but justified by these.

[Exeunt CREON]

CHORUS (Ant. 1) Lady, lead indoors thy consort; wherefore longer here delay?

JOCASTA Tell me first how rose the fray.

CHORUS Rumors bred unjust suspicious and injustice rankles sore.

JOCASTA Were both at fault?

CHORUS Both.

JOCASTA What was the tale?

CHORUS Ask me no more. The land is sore distressed; 'Twere better sleeping ills to leave at rest.

OEDIPUS Strange counsel, friend! I know thou mean'st me well, And yet would'st mitigate and blunt my zeal.

CHORUS (Ant. 2) King, I say it once again, Witless were I proved, insane, If I lightly put away Thee my country's prop and stay, Pilot who, in danger sought, To a quiet haven brought Our distracted State; and now Who can guide us right but thou?

JOCASTA Let me too, I adjure thee, know, O king, What cause has stirred this unrelenting wrath.

OEDIPUS I will, for thou art more to me than these. Lady, the cause is Creon and his plots.

JOCASTA But what provoked the quarrel? make this clear.

OEDIPUS He points me out as Laius' murderer.

JOCASTA Of his own knowledge or upon report?

OEDIPUS He is too cunning to commit himself, And makes a mouthpiece of a knavish seer.

JOCASTA Then thou mayest ease thy conscience on that score. Listen and I'll convince thee that no man Hath scot or lot in the prophetic art. Here is the proof in brief. An oracle Once came to Laius (I will not say 'Twas from the Delphic god himself, but from His ministers) declaring he was doomed To perish by the hand of his own son, A child that should be born to him by me. Now Laius--so at least report affirmed-- Was murdered on a day by highwaymen, No natives, at a spot where three roads meet. As for the child, it was but three days old, When Laius, its ankles pierced and pinned Together, gave it to be cast away By others on the trackless mountain side. So then Apollo brought it not to pass The child should be his father's murderer, Or the dread terror find accomplishment, And Laius be slain by his own son. Such was the prophet's horoscope. O king, Regard it not. Whate'er the god deems fit To search, himself unaided will reveal.

OEDIPUS What memories, what wild tumult of the soul Came o'er me, lady, as I heard thee speak!

JOCASTA What mean'st thou? What has shocked and startled thee?

OEDIPUS Methought I heard thee say that Laius Was murdered at the meeting of three roads.

JOCASTA So ran the story that is current still.

OEDIPUS Where did this happen? Dost thou know the place?

JOCASTA Phocis the land is called; the spot is where Branch roads from Delphi and from Daulis meet.

OEDIPUS And how long is it since these things befell?

JOCASTA 'Twas but a brief while were thou wast proclaimed Our country's ruler that the news was brought.

OEDIPUS O Zeus, what hast thou willed to do with me!

JOCASTA What is it, Oedipus, that moves thee so?

OEDIPUS Ask me not yet; tell me the build and height Of Laius? Was he still in manhood's prime?

JOCASTA Tall was he, and his hair was lightly strewn With silver; and not unlike thee in form.

OEDIPUS O woe is me! Mehtinks unwittingly I laid but now a dread curse on myself.

JOCASTA What say'st thou? When I look upon thee, my king, I tremble.

OEDIPUS 'Tis a dread presentiment That in the end the seer will prove not blind. One further question to resolve my doubt.

JOCASTA I quail; but ask, and I will answer all.

OEDIPUS Had he but few attendants or a train Of armed retainers with him, like a prince?

JOCASTA They were but five in all, and one of them A herald; Laius in a mule-car rode.

OEDIPUS Alas! 'tis clear as noonday now. But say, Lady, who carried this report to Thebes?

JOCASTA A serf, the sole survivor who returned.

OEDIPUS Haply he is at hand or in the house?

JOCASTA No, for as soon as he returned and found Thee reigning in the stead of Laius slain, He clasped my hand and supplicated me To send him to the alps and pastures, where He might be farthest from the sight of Thebes. And so I sent him. 'Twas an honest slave And well deserved some better recompense.

OEDIPUS Fetch him at once. I fain would see the man.

JOCASTA He shall be brought; but wherefore summon him?

OEDIPUS Lady, I fear my tongue has overrun Discretion; therefore I would question him.

JOCASTA Well, he shall come, but may not I too claim To share the burden of thy heart, my king?

OEDIPUS And thou shalt not be frustrate of thy wish. Now my imaginings have gone so far. Who has a higher claim that thou to hear My tale of dire adventures? Listen then. My sire was Polybus of Corinth, and My mother Merope, a Dorian; And I was held the foremost citizen, Till a strange thing befell me, strange indeed, Yet scarce deserving all the heat it stirred. A roisterer at some banquet, flown with wine, Shouted "Thou art not true son of thy sire." It irked me, but I stomached for the nonce The insult; on the morrow I sought out My mother and my sire and questioned them. They were indignant at the random slur Cast on my parentage and did their best To comfort me, but still the venom'd barb Rankled, for still the scandal spread and grew. So privily without their leave I went To Delphi, and Apollo sent me back Baulked of the knowledge that I came to seek. But other grievous things he prophesied, Woes, lamentations, mourning, portents dire; To wit I should defile my mother's bed And raise up seed too loathsome to behold, And slay the father from whose loins I sprang. Then, lady,--thou shalt hear the very truth-- As I drew near the triple-branching roads, A herald met me and a man who sat In a car drawn by colts--as in thy tale-- The man in front and the old man himself Threatened to thrust me rudely from the path, Then jostled by the charioteer in wrath I struck him, and the old man, seeing this, Watched till I passed and from his car brought down Full on my head the double-pointed goad. Yet was I quits with him and more; one stroke Of my good staff sufficed to fling him clean Out of the chariot seat and laid him prone. And so I slew them every one. But if Betwixt this stranger there was aught in common With Laius, who more miserable than I, What mortal could you find more god-aborred? Wretch whom no sojourner, no citizen May harbor or address, whom all are bound To harry from their homes. And this same curse Was laid on me, and laid by none but me. Yea with these hands all gory I pollute The bed of him I slew. Say, am I vile? Am I not utterly unclean, a wretch Doomed to be banished, and in banishment Forgo the sight of all my dearest ones, And never tread again my native earth; Or else to wed my mother and slay my sire, Polybus, who begat me and upreared? If one should say, this is the handiwork Of some inhuman power, who could blame His judgment? But, ye pure and awful gods, Forbid, forbid that I should see that day! May I be blotted out from living men Ere such a plague spot set on me its brand!

CHORUS We too, O king, are troubled; but till thou Hast questioned the survivor, still hope on.

OEDIPUS My hope is faint, but still enough survives To bid me bide the coming of this herd.

JOCASTA Suppose him here, what wouldst thou learn of him?

OEDIPUS I'll tell thee, lady; if his tale agrees With thine, I shall have 'scaped calamity.

JOCASTA And what of special import did I say?

OEDIPUS In thy report of what the herdsman said Laius was slain by robbers; now if he Still speaks of robbers, not a robber, I Slew him not; "one" with "many" cannot square. But if he says one lonely wayfarer, The last link wanting to my guilt is forged.

JOCASTA Well, rest assured, his tale ran thus at first, Nor can he now retract what then he said; Not I alone but all our townsfolk heard it. E'en should he vary somewhat in his story, He cannot make the death of Laius In any wise jump with the oracle. For Loxias said expressly he was doomed To die by my child's hand, but he, poor babe, He shed no blood, but perished first himself. So much for divination. Henceforth I Will look for signs neither to right nor left.

OEDIPUS Thou reasonest well. Still I would have thee send And fetch the bondsman hither. See to it.

JOCASTA That will I straightway. Come, let us within. I would do nothing that my lord dislikes.

[Exeunt OEDIPUS and JOCASTA]

CHORUS (Str. 1) My lot be still to lead The life of innocence and fly Irreverence in word or deed, To follow still those laws ordained on high Whose birthplace is the bright ethereal sky No mortal birth they own, Olympus their progenitor alone: Ne'er shall they slumber in oblivion cold, The god in them is strong and grows not old.

(Ant. 1) Of insolence is bred The tyrant; insolence full blown, With empty riches surfeited, Scales the precipitous height and grasps the throne. Then topples o'er and lies in ruin prone; No foothold on that dizzy steep. But O may Heaven the true patriot keep Who burns with emulous zeal to serve the State. God is my help and hope, on him I wait.

(Str. 2) But the proud sinner, or in word or deed, That will not Justice heed, Nor reverence the shrine Of images divine, Perdition seize his vain imaginings, If, urged by greed profane, He grasps at ill-got gain, And lays an impious hand on holiest things. Who when such deeds are done Can hope heaven's bolts to shun? If sin like this to honor can aspire, Why dance I still and lead the sacred choir?

(Ant. 2) No more I'll seek earth's central oracle, Or Abae's hallowed cell, Nor to Olympia bring My votive offering. If before all God's truth be not bade plain. O Zeus, reveal thy might, King, if thou'rt named aright Omnipotent, all-seeing, as of old; For Laius is forgot; His weird, men heed it not; Apollo is forsook and faith grows cold.

[Enter JOCASTA.]

JOCASTA My lords, ye look amazed to see your queen With wreaths and gifts of incense in her hands. I had a mind to visit the high shrines, For Oedipus is overwrought, alarmed With terrors manifold. He will not use His past experience, like a man of sense, To judge the present need, but lends an ear To any croaker if he augurs ill. Since then my counsels naught avail, I turn To thee, our present help in time of trouble, Apollo, Lord Lycean, and to thee My prayers and supplications here I bring. Lighten us, lord, and cleanse us from this curse! For now we all are cowed like mariners Who see their helmsman dumbstruck in the storm.

[Enter Corinthian MESSENGER.]

MESSENGER My masters, tell me where the palace is Of Oedipus; or better, where's the king.

CHORUS Here is the palace and he bides within; This is his queen the mother of his children.

MESSENGER All happiness attend her and the house, Blessed is her husband and her marriage-bed.

JOCASTA My greetings to thee, stranger; thy fair words Deserve a like response. But tell me why Thou comest--what thy need or what thy news.

MESSENGER Good for thy consort and the royal house.

JOCASTA What may it be? Whose messenger art thou?

MESSENGER The Isthmian commons have resolved to make Thy husband king--so 'twas reported there.

JOCASTA What! is not aged Polybus still king?

MESSENGER No, verily; he's dead and in his grave.

JOCASTA What! is he dead, the sire of Oedipus?

MESSENGER If I speak falsely, may I die myself.

JOCASTA Quick, maiden, bear these tidings to my lord. Ye god-sent oracles, where stand ye now! This is the man whom Oedipus long shunned, In dread to prove his murderer; and now He dies in nature's course, not by his hand.

[Enter OEDIPUS.]

OEDIPUS My wife, my queen, Jocasta, why hast thou Summoned me from my palace?

JOCASTA Hear this man, And as thou hearest judge what has become Of all those awe-inspiring oracles.

OEDIPUS Who is this man, and what his news for me?

JOCASTA He comes from Corinth and his message this: Thy father Polybus hath passed away.

OEDIPUS What? let me have it, stranger, from thy mouth.

MESSENGER If I must first make plain beyond a doubt My message, know that Polybus is dead.

OEDIPUS By treachery, or by sickness visited?

MESSENGER One touch will send an old man to his rest.

OEDIPUS So of some malady he died, poor man.

MESSENGER Yes, having measured the full span of years.

OEDIPUS Out on it, lady! why should one regard The Pythian hearth or birds that scream i' the air? Did they not point at me as doomed to slay My father? but he's dead and in his grave And

here am I who ne'er unsheathed a sword; Unless the longing for his absent son Killed him and so I slew him in a sense. But, as they stand, the oracles are dead-- Dust, ashes, nothing, dead as Polybus.

JOCASTA Say, did not I foretell this long ago?

OEDIPUS Thou didst: but I was misled by my fear.

JOCASTA Then let I no more weigh upon thy soul.

OEDIPUS Must I not fear my mother's marriage bed.

JOCASTA Why should a mortal man, the sport of chance, With no assured foreknowledge, be afraid? Best live a careless life from hand to mouth. This wedlock with thy mother fear not thou. How oft it chances that in dreams a man Has wed his mother! He who least regards Such brainsick phantasies lives most at ease.

OEDIPUS I should have shared in full thy confidence, Were not my mother living; since she lives Though half convinced I still must live in dread.

JOCASTA And yet thy sire's death lights out darkness much.

OEDIPUS Much, but my fear is touching her who lives.

MESSENGER Who may this woman be whom thus you fear?

OEDIPUS Merope, stranger, wife of Polybus.

MESSENGER And what of her can cause you any fear?

OEDIPUS A heaven-sent oracle of dread import.

MESSENGER A mystery, or may a stranger hear it?

OEDIPUS Aye, 'tis no secret. Loxias once foretold That I should mate with mine own mother, and shed With my own hands the blood of my own sire. Hence Corinth was for many a year to me A home distant; and I trove abroad, But missed the sweetest sight, my parents' face.

MESSENGER Was this the fear that exiled thee from home?

OEDIPUS Yea, and the dread of slaying my own sire.

MESSENGER Why, since I came to give thee pleasure, King, Have I not rid thee of this second fear?

OEDIPUS Well, thou shalt have due guerdon for thy pains.

MESSENGER Well, I confess what chiefly made me come Was hope to profit by thy coming home.

OEDIPUS Nay, I will ne'er go near my parents more.

MESSENGER My son, 'tis plain, thou know'st not what thou doest.

OEDIPUS How so, old man? For heaven's sake tell me all.

MESSENGER If this is why thou darest to return.

OEDIPUS Yea, lest the god's word be fulfilled in me.

MESSENGER Lest through thy parents thou shouldst be accursed?

OEDIPUS This and none other is my constant dread.

MESSENGER Dost thou not know thy fears are baseless all?

OEDIPUS How baseless, if I am their very son?

MESSENGER Since Polybus was naught to thee in blood.

OEDIPUS What say'st thou? was not Polybus my sire?

MESSENGER As much thy sire as I am, and no more.

OEDIPUS My sire no more to me than one who is naught?

MESSENGER Since I begat thee not, no more did he.

OEDIPUS What reason had he then to call me son?

MESSENGER Know that he took thee from my hands, a gift.

OEDIPUS Yet, if no child of his, he loved me well.

MESSENGER A childless man till then, he warmed to thee.

OEDIPUS A foundling or a purchased slave, this child?

MESSENGER I found thee in Cithaeron's wooded glens.

OEDIPUS What led thee to explore those upland glades?

MESSENGER My business was to tend the mountain flocks.

OEDIPUS A vagrant shepherd journeying for hire?

MESSENGER True, but thy savior in that hour, my son.

OEDIPUS My savior? from what harm? what ailed me then?

MESSENGER Those ankle joints are evidence enow.

OEDIPUS Ah, why remind me of that ancient sore?

MESSENGER I loosed the pin that riveted thy feet.

OEDIPUS Yes, from my cradle that dread brand I bore.

MESSENGER Whence thou deriv'st the name that still is thine.

OEDIPUS Who did it? I adjure thee, tell me who Say, was it father, mother?

MESSENGER I know not. The man from whom I had thee may know more.

MESSENGER Not I; another shepherd gave thee me.

OEDIPUS Who was he? Would'st thou know again the man?

MESSENGER He passed indeed for one of Laius' house.

OEDIPUS The king who ruled the country long ago?

MESSENGER The same: he was a herdsman of the king.

OEDIPUS And is he living still for me to see him?

MESSENGER His fellow-countrymen should best know that.

OEDIPUS Doth any bystander among you know The herd he speaks of, or by seeing him Afield or in the city? answer straight! The hour hath come to clear this business up.

CHORUS Methinks he means none other than the hind Whom thou anon wert fain to see; but that Our queen Jocasta best of all could tell.

OEDIPUS Madam, dost know the man we sent to fetch? Is the same of whom the stranger speaks?

JOCASTA Who is the man? What matter? Let it be. 'Twere waste of thought to weigh such idle words.

OEDIPUS No, with such guiding clues I cannot fail To bring to light the secret of my birth.

JOCASTA Oh, as thou carest for thy life, give o'er This quest. Enough the anguish I endure.

OEDIPUS Be of good cheer; though I be proved the son Of a bondwoman, aye, through three descents Triply a slave, thy honor is unsmirched.

JOCASTA Yet humor me, I pray thee; do not this.

OEDIPUS I cannot; I must probe this matter home.

JOCASTA 'Tis for thy sake I advise thee for the best.

OEDIPUS I grow impatient of this best advice.

JOCASTA Ah mayst thou ne'er discover who thou art!

OEDIPUS Go, fetch me here the herd, and leave yon woman To glory in her pride of ancestry.

JOCASTA O woe is thee, poor wretch! With that last word I leave thee, henceforth silent evermore.

[Exit JOCASTA]

CHORUS Why, Oedipus, why stung with passionate grief Hath the queen thus departed? Much I fear From this dead calm will burst a storm of woes.

OEDIPUS Let the storm burst, my fixed resolve still holds, To learn my lineage, be it ne'er so low. It may be she with all a woman's pride Thinks scorn of my base parentage. But I Who rank myself as Fortune's favorite child, The giver of good gifts, shall not be shamed. She is my mother and the changing moons My brethren, and with them I wax and wane. Thus sprung why should I fear to trace my birth? Nothing can make me other than I am.

CHORUS (Str.) If my soul prophetic err not, if my wisdom aught avail, Thee, Cithaeron, I shall hail, As the nurse and foster-mother of our Oedipus shall greet Ere tomorrow's full moon rises, and exalt thee as is meet. Dance and song shall hymn thy praises, lover of our royal race. Phoebus, may my words find grace!

(Ant.) Child, who bare thee, nymph or goddess? sure thy sure was more than man, Haply the hill-roamer Pan. Of did Loxias beget thee, for he haunts the upland wold; Or Cyllene's lord, or Bacchus, dweller on the hilltops cold? Did some Heliconian Oread give him thee, a new-born joy? Nymphs with whom he love to toy?

OEDIPUS Elders, if I, who never yet before Have met the man, may make a guess, methinks I see the herdsman who we long have sought; His time-worn aspect matches with the years Of yonder aged messenger; besides I seem to recognize the men who bring him As servants of my own. But you, perchance, Having in past days known or seen the herd, May better by sure knowledge my surmise.

CHORUS I recognize him; one of Laius' house; A simple hind, but true as any man.

[Enter HERDSMAN.]

OEDIPUS Corinthian, stranger, I address thee first, Is this the man thou meanest!

MESSENGER This is he.

OEDIPUS And now old man, look up and answer all I ask thee. Wast thou once of Laius' house?

HERDSMAN I was, a thrall, not purchased but home-bred.

OEDIPUS What was thy business? how wast thou employed?

HERDSMAN The best part of my life I tended sheep.

OEDIPUS What were the pastures thou didst most frequent?

HERDSMAN Cithaeron and the neighboring alps.

OEDIPUS Then there Thou must have known yon man, at least by fame?

HERDSMAN Yon man? in what way? what man dost thou mean?

OEDIPUS The man here, having met him in past times...

HERDSMAN Off-hand I cannot call him well to mind.

MESSENGER No wonder, master. But I will revive His blunted memories. Sure he can recall
What time together both we drove our flocks, He two, I one, on the Cithaeron range, For three
long summers; I his mate from spring Till rose Arcturus; then in winter time I led mine home, he
his to Laius' folds. Did these things happen as I say, or no?

HERDSMAN 'Tis long ago, but all thou say'st is true.

MESSENGER Well, thou mast then remember giving me A child to rear as my own foster-son?

HERDSMAN Why dost thou ask this question? What of that?

MESSENGER Friend, he that stands before thee was that child.

HERDSMAN A plague upon thee! Hold thy wanton tongue!

OEDIPUS Softly, old man, rebuke him not; thy words Are more deserving chastisement than his.

HERDSMAN O best of masters, what is my offense?

OEDIPUS Not answering what he asks about the child.

HERDSMAN He speaks at random, babbles like a fool.

OEDIPUS If thou lack'st grace to speak, I'll loose thy tongue.

HERDSMAN For mercy's sake abuse not an old man.

OEDIPUS Arrest the villain, seize and pinion him!

HERDSMAN Alack, alack! What have I done? what wouldst thou further learn?

OEDIPUS Didst give this man the child of whom he asks?

HERDSMAN I did; and would that I had died that day!

OEDIPUS And die thou shalt unless thou tell the truth.

HERDSMAN But, if I tell it, I am doubly lost.

OEDIPUS The knave methinks will still prevaricate.

HERDSMAN Nay, I confessed I gave it long ago.

OEDIPUS Whence came it? was it thine, or given to thee?

HERDSMAN I had it from another, 'twas not mine.

OEDIPUS From whom of these our townsmen, and what house?

HERDSMAN Forbear for God's sake, master, ask no more.

OEDIPUS If I must question thee again, thou'rt lost.

HERDSMAN Well then--it was a child of Laius' house.

OEDIPUS Slave-born or one of Laius' own race?

HERDSMAN Ah me! I stand upon the perilous edge of speech.

OEDIPUS And I of hearing, but I still must hear.

HERDSMAN Know then the child was by repute his own, But she within, thy consort best could tell.

OEDIPUS What! she, she gave it thee?

HERDSMAN 'Tis so, my king.

OEDIPUS With what intent?

HERDSMAN To make away with it.

OEDIPUS What, she its mother.

HERDSMAN Fearing a dread weird.

OEDIPUS What weird?

HERDSMAN 'Twas told that he should slay his sire.

OEDIPUS What didst thou give it then to this old man?

HERDSMAN Through pity, master, for the babe. I thought He'd take it to the country whence he came; But he preserved it for the worst of woes. For if thou art in sooth what this man saith, God pity thee! thou wast to misery born.

OEDIPUS Ah me! ah me! all brought to pass, all true! O light, may I behold thee nevermore! I stand a wretch, in birth, in wedlock cursed, A parricide, incestuously, triply cursed!

[Exit OEDIPUS]

CHORUS (Str. 1) Races of mortal man Whose life is but a span, I count ye but the shadow of a shade! For he who most doth know Of bliss, hath but the show; A moment, and the visions pale and fade. Thy fall, O Oedipus, thy piteous fall Warns me none born of women blest to call.

(Ant. 1) For he of marksmen best, O Zeus, outshot the rest, And won the prize supreme of wealth and power. By him the vulture maid Was quelled, her witchery laid; He rose our savior and the land's strong tower. We hailed thee king and from that day adored Of mighty Thebes the universal lord.

(Str. 2) O heavy hand of fate! Who now more desolate, Whose tale more sad than thine, whose lot more dire? O Oedipus, discrowned head, Thy cradle was thy marriage bed; One harborage sufficed for son and sire. How could the soil thy father eared so long Endure to bear in silence such a wrong?

(Ant. 2) All-seeing Time hath caught Guilt, and to justice brought The son and sire commingled in one bed. O child of Laius' ill-starred race Would I had ne'er beheld thy face; I raise for thee a dirge as o'er the dead. Yet, sooth to say, through thee I drew new breath, And now through thee I feel a second death.

[Enter SECOND MESSENGER.]

SECOND MESSENGER Most grave and reverend senators of Thebes, What Deeds ye soon must hear, what sights behold How will ye mourn, if, true-born patriots, Ye reverence still the race of Labdacus! Not Ister nor all Phasis' flood, I ween, Could wash away the blood-stains from this house, The ills it shrouds or soon will bring to light, Ills wrought of malice, not unwittingly. The worst to bear are self-inflicted wounds.

CHORUS Grievous enough for all our tears and groans Our past calamities; what canst thou add?

SECOND MESSENGER My tale is quickly told and quickly heard. Our sovereign lady queen Jocasta's dead.

CHORUS Alas, poor queen! how came she by her death?

SECOND MESSENGER By her own hand. And all the horror of it, Not having seen, yet cannot comprehend. Nathless, as far as my poor memory serves, I will relate the unhappy lady's woe. When in her frenzy she had passed inside The vestibule, she hurried straight to win The bridal-

chamber, clutching at her hair With both her hands, and, once within the room, She shut the doors behind her with a crash. "Laius," she cried, and called her husband dead Long, long ago; her thought was of that child By him begot, the son by whom the sire Was murdered and the mother left to breed With her own seed, a monstrous progeny. Then she bewailed the marriage bed whereon Poor wretch, she had conceived a double brood, Husband by husband, children by her child. What happened after that I cannot tell, Nor how the end befell, for with a shriek Burst on us Oedipus; all eyes were fixed On Oedipus, as up and down he strode, Nor could we mark her agony to the end. For stalking to and fro "A sword!" he cried, "Where is the wife, no wife, the teeming womb That bore a double harvest, me and mine?" And in his frenzy some supernal power (No mortal, surely, none of us who watched him) Guided his footsteps; with a terrible shriek, As though one beckoned him, he crashed against The folding doors, and from their staples forced The wrenched bolts and hurled himself within. Then we beheld the woman hanging there, A running noose entwined about her neck. But when he saw her, with a maddened roar He loosed the cord; and when her wretched corpse Lay stretched on earth, what followed--O 'twas dread! He tore the golden brooches that upheld Her queenly robes, upraised them high and smote Full on his eye-balls, uttering words like these: "No more shall ye behold such sights of woe, Deeds I have suffered and myself have wrought; Henceforward quenched in darkness shall ye see Those ye should ne'er have seen; now blind to those Whom, when I saw, I vainly yearned to know." Such was the burden of his moan, whereto, Not once but oft, he struck with his hand uplift His eyes, and at each stroke the ensanguined orbs Bedewed his beard, not oozing drop by drop, But one black gory downpour, thick as hail. Such evils, issuing from the double source, Have whelmed them both, confounding man and wife. Till now the storied fortune of this house Was fortunate indeed; but from this day Woe, lamentation, ruin, death, disgrace, All ills that can be named, all, all are theirs.

CHORUS But hath he still no respite from his pain?

SECOND MESSENGER He cries, "Unbar the doors and let all Thebes Behold the slayer of his sire, his mother's--" That shameful word my lips may not repeat. He vows to fly self-banished from the land, Nor stay to bring upon his house the curse Himself had uttered; but he has no strength Nor one to guide him, and his torture's more Than man can suffer, as yourselves will see. For lo, the palace portals are unbarred, And soon ye shall behold a sight so sad That he who must abhorred would pity it.

[Enter OEDIPUS blinded.]

CHORUS Woeful sight! more woeful none These sad eyes have looked upon. Whence this madness? None can tell Who did cast on thee his spell, prowling all thy life around, Leaping

with a demon bound. Hapless wretch! how can I brook On thy misery to look? Though to gaze on thee I yearn, Much to question, much to learn, Horror-struck away I turn.

OEDIPUS Ah me! ah woe is me! Ah whither am I borne! How like a ghost forlorn My voice flits from me on the air! On, on the demon goads. The end, ah where?

CHORUS An end too dread to tell, too dark to see. (Str. 1)

OEDIPUS Dark, dark! The horror of darkness, like a shroud, Wraps me and bears me on through mist and cloud. Ah me, ah me! What spasms athwart me shoot, What pangs of agonizing memory?

CHORUS No marvel if in such a plight thou feel'st The double weight of past and present woes. (Ant. 1)

OEDIPUS Ah friend, still loyal, constant still and kind, Thou carest for the blind. I know thee near, and though bereft of eyes, Thy voice I recognize.

CHORUS O doer of dread deeds, how couldst thou mar Thy vision thus? What demon goaded thee? (Str. 2)

OEDIPUS Apollo, friend, Apollo, he it was That brought these ills to pass; But the right hand that dealt the blow Was mine, none other. How, How, could I longer see when sight Brought no delight?

CHORUS Alas! 'tis as thou sayest.

OEDIPUS Say, friends, can any look or voice Or touch of love henceforth my heart rejoice? Haste, friends, no fond delay, Take the twice cursed away Far from all ken, The man abhorred of gods, accursed of men.

CHORUS O thy despair well suits thy desperate case. Would I had never looked upon thy face! (Ant. 2)

OEDIPUS My curse on him whoe'er unriv'd The waif's fell fetters and my life revived! He meant me well, yet had he left me there, He had saved my friends and me a world of care.

CHORUS I too had wished it so.

OEDIPUS Then had I never come to shed My father's blood nor climbed my mother's bed; The monstrous offspring of a womb defiled, Co-mate of him who gendered me, and child. Was ever man before afflicted thus, Like Oedipus.

CHORUS I cannot say that thou hast counseled well, For thou wert better dead than living blind.

OEDIPUS What's done was well done. Thou canst never shake My firm belief. A truce to argument. For, had I sight, I know not with what eyes I could have met my father in the shades, Or my poor mother, since against the twain I sinned, a sin no gallows could atone. Aye, but, ye say, the sight of children joys A parent's eyes. What, born as mine were born? No, such a sight could never bring me joy; Nor this fair city with its battlements, Its temples and the statues of its gods, Sights from which I, now wretchedst of all, Once ranked the foremost Theban in all Thebes, By my own sentence am cut off, condemned By my own proclamation 'gainst the wretch, The miscreant by heaven itself declared Unclean--and of the race of Laius. Thus branded as a felon by myself, How had I dared to look you in the face? Nay, had I known a way to choke the springs Of hearing, I had never shrunk to make A dungeon of this miserable frame, Cut off from sight and hearing; for 'tis bliss to bide in regions sorrow cannot reach. Why didst thou harbor me, Cithaeron, why Didst thou not take and slay me? Then I never Had shown to men the secret of my birth. O Polybus, O Corinth, O my home, Home of my ancestors (so wast thou called) How fair a nursling then I seemed, how foul The canker that lay festering in the bud! Now is the blight revealed of root and fruit. Ye triple high-roads, and thou hidden glen, Coppice, and pass where meet the three-branched ways, Ye drank my blood, the life-blood these hands spilt, My father's; do ye call to mind perchance Those deeds of mine ye witnessed and the work I wrought thereafter when I came to Thebes? O fatal wedlock, thou didst give me birth, And, having borne me, sowed again my seed, Mingling the blood of fathers, brothers, children, Brides, wives and mothers, an incestuous brood, All horrors that are wrought beneath the sun, Horrors so foul to name them were unmeet. O, I adjure you, hide me anywhere Far from this land, or slay me straight, or cast me Down to the depths of ocean out of sight. Come hither, deign to touch an abject wretch; Draw near and fear not; I myself must bear The load of guilt that none but I can share.

[Enter CREON.]

CHORUS Lo, here is Creon, the one man to grant Thy prayer by action or advice, for he is left the State's sole guardian in thy stead.

OEDIPUS Ah me! what words to accost him can I find? What cause has he to trust me? In the past I have been proved his rancorous enemy.

CREON Not in derision, Oedipus, I come Nor to upbraid thee with thy past misdeeds. (To BYSTANDERS) But shame upon you! if ye feel no sense Of human decencies, at least revere The Sun whose light beholds and nurtures all. Leave not thus nakedly for all to gaze at A horror neither earth nor rain from heaven Nor light will suffer. Lead him straight within, For it is seemly that a kinsman's woes Be heard by kin and seen by kin alone.

OEDIPUS O listen, since thy presence comes to me A shock of glad surprise--so noble thou, And I so vile--O grant me one small boon. I ask it not on my behalf, but thine.

CREON And what the favor thou wouldst crave of me?

OEDIPUS Forth from thy borders thrust me with all speed; Set me within some vasty desert where No mortal voice shall greet me any more.

CREON This had I done already, but I deemed It first behooved me to consult the god.

OEDIPUS His will was set forth fully--to destroy The parricide, the scoundrel; and I am he.

CREON Yea, so he spake, but in our present plight 'Twere better to consult the god anew.

OEDIPUS Dare ye inquire concerning such a wretch?

CREON Yea, for thyself wouldst credit now his word.

OEDIPUS Aye, and on thee in all humility I lay this charge: let her who lies within Receive such burial as thou shalt ordain; Such rites 'tis thine, as brother, to perform. But for myself, O never let my Thebes, The city of my sires, be doomed to bear The burden of my presence while I live. No, let me be a dweller on the hills, On yonder mount Cithaeron, famed as mine, My tomb predestined for me by my sire And mother, while they lived, that I may die Slain as they sought to slay me, when alive. This much I know full surely, nor disease Shall end my days, nor any common chance; For I had ne'er been snatched from death, unless I was predestined to some awful doom. So be it. I reckon not how Fate deals with me But my unhappy children--for my sons Be not concerned, O Creon, they are men, And for themselves, where'er they be, can fend. But for my daughters twain, poor innocent maids, Who ever sat beside me at the board Sharing my viands, drinking of my cup, For them, I pray thee, care, and, if thou wilt, O might I feel their

touch and make my moan. Hear me, O prince, my noble-hearted prince! Could I but blindly touch them with my hands I'd think they still were mine, as when I saw.

[ANTIGONE and ISMENE are led in.]

What say I? can it be my pretty ones Whose sobs I hear? Has Creon pitied me And sent me my two darlings? Can this be?

CREON 'Tis true; 'twas I procured thee this delight, Knowing the joy they were to thee of old.

OEDIPUS God speed thee! and as meed for bringing them May Providence deal with thee kindlier Than it has dealt with me! O children mine, Where are ye? Let me clasp you with these hands, A brother's hands, a father's; hands that made Lack-luster sockets of his once bright eyes; Hands of a man who blindly, recklessly, Became your sire by her from whom he sprang. Though I cannot behold you, I must weep In thinking of the evil days to come, The slights and wrongs that men will put upon you. Where'er ye go to feast or festival, No merrymaking will it prove for you, But oft abashed in tears ye will return. And when ye come to marriageable years, Where's the bold wooers who will jeopardize To take unto himself such disrepute As to my children's children still must cling, For what of infamy is lacking here? "Their father slew his father, sowed the seed Where he himself was gendered, and begat These maidens at the source wherefrom he sprang." Such are the gibes that men will cast at you. Who then will wed you? None, I ween, but ye Must pine, poor maids, in single barrenness. O Prince, Menoeceus' son, to thee, I turn, With the it rests to father them, for we Their natural parents, both of us, are lost. O leave them not to wander poor, unwed, Thy kin, nor let them share my low estate. O pity them so young, and but for thee All destitute. Thy hand upon it, Prince. To you, my children I had much to say, Were ye but ripe to hear. Let this suffice: Pray ye may find some home and live content, And may your lot prove happier than your sire's.

CREON Thou hast had enough of weeping; pass within.

OEDIPUS I must obey, Though 'tis grievous.

CREON Weep not, everything must have its day.

OEDIPUS Well I go, but on conditions.

CREON What thy terms for going, say.

OEDIPUS Send me from the land an exile.

CREON Ask this of the gods, not me.

OEDIPUS But I am the gods' abhorrence.

CREON Then they soon will grant thy plea.

OEDIPUS Lead me hence, then, I am willing.

CREON Come, but let thy children go.

OEDIPUS Rob me not of these my children!

CREON Crave not mastery in all, For the mastery that raised thee was thy bane and wrought thy fall.

CHORUS Look ye, countrymen and Thebans, this is Oedipus the great, He who knew the Sphinx's riddle and was mightiest in our state. Who of all our townsmen gazed not on his fame with envious eyes? Now, in what a sea of troubles sunk and overwhelmed he lies! Therefore wait to see life's ending ere thou count one mortal blest; Wait till free from pain and sorrow he has gained his final rest.