

OEDIPUS REX (430 B.C.)

by Sophocles (496 B.C. – 406 A.D.)

Scene 4

(1) **Oedipus:** Sirs: though I do not now the man, I think I see him coming, this shepherd we want

(7) Tell me first, you from Corinth, is this the shepherd we were discussing?

Messenger: This is the very man.

Oedipus (to Shepherd): Come here. No, look at me. You must answer everything I ask. You belonged to Laios?

(16) Oedipus: Do you remember ever seeing this man out there?

Shepherd: What would he be doing there? This man?

(the shepherd doesn't immediately remember who the messenger is)

(27) Messenger: Well, then: do you remember, back in those days, that you gave me a baby boy to bring up as my own?

Shepherd: What if I did? What are you trying to say?

Messenger: King Oedipus was once that little child.

Shepherd: Damn you, hold your tongue!

Oedipus: No more of that! It is your tongue needs watching, not this man's.

Shepherd: My king, my master, what is it I have done wrong?

Oedipus: You have not answered his question about the boy.

Shepherd: He does not know... He is only making trouble...

Oedipus: Come, speak plainly, or it will go hard with you.

Shepherd: In God's name, do not torture an old man!

Oedipus: Come here, one of you; bind his arms behind him.

Shepherd: Unhappy king! What more do you wish to learn?

(43) Oedipus: You will die now unless you speak the truth.

Shepherd: Yet if I speak the truth I am worse than dead.

(49) Shepherd: For God's love, my King, do not ask me any more!

Oedipus: You are a dead man if I have to ask you again.

(56) Shepherd: They said it was Laios' child. But it is your wife who can tell you about that.

Oedipus: My wife – Did she give it to you?

Shepherd: My lord, she did.

Oedipus: Do you know why?

Shepherd: I was told to get rid of it.

Oedipus: Oh heartless mother!

Shepherd: But in dread of prophecies... [...] It was said that the boy would kill his own father.

Oedipus: Then why did you give him over to this old man?

Shepherd: I pitied the baby, my king. [...] If you are what this man says you are, no man living is more wretched than Oedipus.

Oedipus: Ah God! It was true! All the prophecies! Now, o Light, may I look on you for the last time! I Oedipus, Oedipus, damned in his birth, in his marriage damned, damned in the blood he shed with his own hand?

(page 61, 10) **Choragos:** Surely friend, we have grief enough already; what new sorrow do you mean?

2nd Messenger: The queen is dead.

Choragos: O miserable queen! But at whose hand?

2nd messenger: Her own. The full horror of what happened you can not know, for you did not see it; but I, who did, will tell you as clearly as I can how she met her death.

When she had left us [...], she ran to her apartment in the house, her hair clutched by the fingers of both hands. She closed the doors behind her; then, by that bed where long ago the fatal son was conceived –that son who should bring about his father’s death- we heard her call upon Laios, dead so many years, and heard her wail for the double fruit of her marriage, a husband by her husband, children by her child.

Exactly how she died I do not know: For Oedipus burst in moaning and would not let us keep vigil to the end; it was by him as he stormed about the room that our eyes were caught.

(p.62, 30) From one to another of us he went, begging a sword, hunting the wife who was not his wife [...]

(35) ... with a dreadful cry he hurled his weight, as though wrenched out of himself, at the twin doors: the bolts gave and he rushed in. And there we say her hanging, her body swaying from the cruel cord she had noosed about her neck. A great sob broke from him, heartbreaking to hear, as he loosed the rope and lowered her to the ground.

(42) I would blot out of my mind what happened next! For the king ripped from her gown the golden brooches that were her ornament, and raised them, and plunged them down straight into his own eyeballs, crying,

“No more, no more shall you look on the misery about me, the horrors of my own doing! Too long you have known the faces of those whom I should never have seen, too long been blind to those for whom I was searching! From this hour, go in darkness!”

And as he spoke, he struck at his eyes – not once, but many times; and the blood spattered his beard, bursting from his ruined sockets like red hail.

(61) **Choragos:** Is he in agony still? Is there no rest for him?

2nd messenger: He is asking for someone to open the doors wide so that all children of Kadmos may look upon his father's murderer, his mother's – no, I cannot say it! And then he will leave Thebes, self-exiled, in order that the curse which he himself pronounced may depart from the house.

(p. 63, 110) **Oedipus:** Apollo. Apollo. Dear children, the god was Apollo. He brought me sick, sick fate upon me. But the binding hand was my own! How could I bear to see when all my sight was horror everywhere?

(140) **Oedipus:** This punishment that I have laid upon myself is just. If I had eyes, I do not know how I could bear the sight of my father, when I came to the house of Death, or my mother: for I have sinned against them both so vilely that I could not make my peace by strangling my own life. Or do you think my children, born as they were born, would be sweet to my eyes?

(176) **Oedipus:** O marriage, marriage! The act that engendered me and again the act that performed by the son in the same bed – Ah, the net of incest, mingling fathers, brothers, sons, with brides, wives, mothers: the last evil that can be known by men: no tongue can say how evil! No. For the love of God, conceal me somewhere far from Thebes; or kill me; or hurl me into the sea, away from men's eyes for ever.

Kreon enters.

(192) **Kreon:** I have not come to mock you, Oedipus, or to reproach you, either.

(206) And what is that you turn to me begging for?

Oedipus: Drive me out of this country as quickly as may be to a place where no human voice can ever greet me.

(231) As for my sons, you need not care for them. They are men, they will find some way to live. But my poor daughters, who have shared my table, who never before have been parted from their father – take care of them, Kreon; do this for me.

(Antigone and Ismene enter)

(241) **Oedipus:** Ah, God! Is it my dearest children I hear weeping Has Kreon pitied me and sent my daughters?

Kreon: Yes, Oedipus: I knew that they were dear to you in the old days and how you must love them still.

(page 65, left column, beginning)

Oedipus: And I weep for you –having no strength to see you-, I weep for you when I think of the bitterness that men will visit upon you all your lives. What homes, what festivals can you attend without being forced to depart again in tears? And when you come to marriageable age, where is the man, my daughters, who would dare risk the bane that lies on all my children?

(265) Then, whom can you ever marry? There are no bridegrooms for you, and your lives must wither away in sterile dreaming.

(292) **Choragos:** Men of Thebes: look upon Oedipus. This is the king who solved the famous riddle and towered up, most powerful of men. No mortal eyes but looked on him with envy, yet in the end ruin swept over him.

Let every man in mankind's frailty consider his last day; and let none presume on his good fortune until he find life, at his death, a memory without pain.