
Sophocles

Sophocles (c. 496–c. 406 B.C.) is the best known of the fifth-century B.C. dramatists. His numerous first prizes in the Greek drama competitions outnumber those of any other playwright, and he never came in less than second in any of the competitions. His first victory was against the grand old master Aeschylus in 468 B.C. Sophocles' last plays, which he wrote in his eighties, were among his greatest. We have fragments of some ninety plays or poems and seven complete tragedies, while records suggest that his output numbered something over a hundred twenty plays.

Sophocles lived in interesting times. In 480 B.C. the Persian empire invaded Athens with an immense navy in one of its repeated attempts to conquer the Greek states. Through a guileful strategy, Themistocles left Athens with a handful of defenders and then, after the city was burned, lured the Persians out to sea for a battle at Salamis that turned out to be a total Greek victory that was astonishing and decisive. When it was over, Athens held superiority in the Aegean.

Sophocles was sixteen when the battle at Salamis was fought. In the ceremonies celebrating the victory, he led one of the most important choral performances. He was later to serve as a general with Pericles in the Samian War (440–439 B.C.), although tradition suggests that Pericles declared him a better poet than a general. We do not know if this ancient rumor is correct, but it is clear that Sophocles was a man of action who was able to serve his nation in more ways than one.

When Sophocles began writing, he broke with an old tradition. From the time of Thespis (mid-sixth century B.C.), the playwright acted in his own plays. Aeschylus, from what we know, probably acted in his own plays, but it is on record that Sophocles' voice was not strong enough to permit him to take a part in his plays. He played the lyre well enough to appear onstage, and he played a game of ball in one of his plays, but he did not appear as an actor. He also introduced innovations in the structure of his plays by reducing the size of the chorus from fifty to fifteen and by adding painted scenery, more props, and a third actor to the usual two that Aeschylus and other tragedians had used. In another twist that has affected virtually all subsequent ages of drama Sophocles wrote some of his plays with specific actors in mind. Shakespeare, Molière, and many other first-rank playwrights have done the same.

Sophocles was a deep reader of the epics of Homer. Many of his plays derive from the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, although Sophocles always adapted the material of others to his own distinct purposes. His nickname

was the Attic Bee because he could investigate wonderful pieces of literature and always return with a useful idea. The approach he took to the structure of the play, measuring the effect of the rising action of complication and then ensuring that the moment of recognition occurred at the same time the falling action began, was thought, rightly, to demonstrate a skill of supreme elegance. Nowhere is this illustrated with more completeness than in *Oedipus Rex*.

The plays of Aeschylus, powerful though they are, do not have the same delicacy of construction as do Sophocles'. They are forceful but, in terms of structure, somewhat rude. The structure of the plays of Euripides, Sophocles' successor, was never as fully worked out, and when Aristotle came to discuss the nature of tragedy in his *Poetics*, it was to Sophocles he turned for a model, not to the other two master playwrights of the genre.

Besides the Oedipus trilogy, Sophocles' other surviving plays are *Philoctetes*, *Ajax*, *Trachiniae*, and *Elektra*.

OEDIPUS REX

Oedipus Rex is the first play in a group of three that are now linked because they treat the fate of Oedipus and his children. The plays were written over a period of thirty years: *Antigone* (first produced in 441 B.C.), *Oedipus Rex* (produced approximately fifteen years later, between 430 and 427 B.C.), and *Oedipus at Colonus* (produced in 401 B.C., after Sophocles' death). When these plays are produced together today, they are usually given in a different order — *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone* — almost like the trilogy that Athenian audiences viewed at the drama competitions. In fact, they were never a unified trilogy, and one of Sophocles' distinctions is that he presented as trilogies plays that were not always thematically related, as poets before him had done.

The original narratives of the Oedipus plays were known to Sophocles' audience — with the possible exception of the story of *Antigone* — and one of the special pleasures for the audience watching the action of *Oedipus Rex* was that they knew the outcome. They watched for the steps, the choices, that led Oedipus to his fate.

Oedipus Rex is the story of a noble man who seeks knowledge that in the end destroys him. His greatness is measured in part by the fact that the gods have prophesied his fate: The gods do not take interest

in insignificant men. Before the action of the play begins, Oedipus has set out to discover whether he was truly the son of Polybos and Merope, the people who have raised him. He learns from the oracle of Apollo at Delphi, the most powerful interpreter of the voice and the will of the gods, that he will kill his father and marry his mother. His response is overwhelmingly human: He has seen his *moira*, his fate, and he cannot accept it. His reaction is to do everything he can, including leaving his homeland as quickly as possible, to avoid the possibility of killing Polybos and marrying Merope.

Sophocles develops the drama in terms of IRONY — the disjunction between what seems to be true and what is true. Knowing the outcome of the action, the audience savors the ironic moments from the beginning of the play to the end. Oedipus flees his homeland to avoid fulfilling the prophecy, only to run headlong into the fate foretold by the oracle. He unwittingly returns to his original home, Thebes, and to his parents, murdering Laios, his true father, at a crossroads on the way and marrying Iokaste, his true mother, and becoming king of Thebes. The blind seer Teiresias warns Oedipus not to pursue the truth but, in human fashion, Oedipus refuses to heed Teiresias's warnings. When the complete truth becomes clear to Oedipus, he physically blinds himself in horror and expiation. Like the blind Teiresias, Oedipus must now look inward for the truth, without the distractions of surface experiences.

The belief that the moral health of the ruler reflected directly on the security of the *polis*, or city-state, was widespread in Athenian Greece. Indeed, the Athenians regarded their state as fragile — like a human being whose health, physical and moral, could change suddenly. Because of the concern of the Greeks for the well-being of their state, the *polis* often figures in the tragedies. The Sophoclean Oedipus trilogy is usually called the Theban Plays, a nomenclature that reminds us that the story of Oedipus can be read as the story of an individual or as the story of a state, depending on the political views of the reader.

Oedipus Rex examines the tension between and interdependence of the individual and the state. The agricultural and ritual basis of the Dionysian festivals — in which Greek drama developed — underscores the importance the Greeks attached to the individual's dependence on the state that feeds him and on the proper ways of doing things, whether planting and harvesting or worshiping the gods or living as part of a political entity.

The underlying conflict in the play is political. The political relationship of human beings to the gods, the arbiters of their fate, is dramatized in Oedipus's relationship with Teiresias. If he had his way, Oedipus might disregard Teiresias entirely. But Oedipus cannot command everything, even as ruler. His incomplete knowledge, despite his wisdom, is symptomatic of the limitations of every individual.

The contrast of Oedipus and Kreon, Iokaste's brother, is one of political style. Oedipus is a fully developed character who reveals himself

as sympathetic but willful. He acts on his misunderstanding of the prophecy without reconsulting the oracle. He marries Iokaste and blinds himself without reconsulting the oracle. Kreon, who is much less complicated, never acts without consulting the oracle and thoughtfully reflecting on the oracle's message. Oedipus sometimes behaves tyrannically, and he appears eager for power. Kreon would take power only if forced to do so.

The depth of Sophocles' character development was unmatched, except by his contemporary Euripides, for almost fifteen hundred years. Before him, tragedy depended on action and difficult situations for its power; but Sophocles' drama is one of psychological development. His audiences saw Oedipus as a model for human greatness but also as a model for the human capacity to fall from a great height. This tragedy, in line with Aristotle's analysis, excites both terror — because it can happen to us — and pity — because we sympathize with the horrible suffering of Oedipus. In one important sense the play is about the limits of human knowledge. It is also about the limits and frailty of human happiness.

Sophocles (c. 496–c. 406 B.C.)

OEDIPUS REX

c. 430 B.C.

TRANSLATED BY DUDLEY FITTS AND ROBERT FITZGERALD

Characters

OEDIPUS, King of Thebes, supposed son of Polybos and Merope, King and Queen of Corinth

IOKASTE, wife of Oedipus and widow of the late King Laios

KREON, brother of Iokaste, a prince of Thebes

TEIRESIAS, a blind seer who serves Apollo

PRIEST

MESSENGER, from Corinth

SHEPHERD, former servant of Laios

SECOND MESSENGER, from the palace

CHORUS OF THEBAN ELDERS

CHORAGOS, leader of the Chorus

ANTIGONE and ISMENE, young daughters of Oedipus and Iokaste. They appear in the Exodos but do not speak.

SUPPLIANTS, GUARDS, SERVANTS

The Scene: Before the palace of Oedipus, King of Thebes. A central door and two lateral doors open onto a platform which runs the length of the facade. On the platform, right and left, are altars; and three

steps lead down into the orchestra, or chorus-ground. At the beginning of the action these steps are crowded by suppliants who have brought branches and chaplets of olive leaves and who sit in various attitudes of despair. Oedipus enters.

PROLOGUE°

OEDIPUS: My children, generations of the living
In the line of Kadmos,° nursed at his ancient
hearth:

Why have you strewn yourselves before these
altars

In supplication, with your boughs and garlands?
The breath of incense rises from the city
With a sound of prayer and lamentation.

Children,
I would not have you speak through messengers,
And therefore I have come myself to hear you —
I, Oedipus, who bear the famous name.

Prologue: Portion of the play explaining the background and current action. 2. Kadmos: Founder of Thebes.

10 (To a Priest.) You, there, since you are eldest in
the company,
Speak for them all, tell me what preys upon you,
Whether you come in dread, or crave some
blessing:
Tell me, and never doubt that I will help you
In every way I can; I should be heartless
Were I not moved to find you suppliant here.
15 PRIEST: Great Oedipus, O powerful king of Thebes!
You see how all the ages of our people
Cling to your altar steps: here are boys
Who can barely stand alone, and here are priests
20 By weight of age, as I am a priest of God,
And young men chosen from those yet
unmarried;
As for the others, all that multitude,
They wait with olive chaplets in the squares,
At the two shrines of Pallas,²⁴ and where Apollo²⁵
Speaks in the glowing embers.
25 Your own eyes
Must tell you: Thebes is tossed on a murdering
sea
And can not lift her head from the death surge.
A rust consumes the buds and fruits of the
earth;
30 The herds are sick; children die unborn,
And labor is vain. The god of plague and pyre
Raids like detestable lightning through the city,
And all the house of Kadmos is laid waste,
All emptied, and all darkened: Death alone
Battens upon the misery of Thebes.
You are not one of the immortal gods, we
35 know;
Yet we have come to you to make our prayer
As to the man surest in mortal ways
And wisest in the ways of God. You saved us
From the Sphinx,³⁹ that flinty singer, and the
tribute
40 We paid to her so long; yet you were never
Better informed than we, nor could we teach
you:
A god's touch, it seems, enabled you to help us.
Therefore, O mighty power, we turn to you:
Find us our safety, find us a remedy,
45 Whether by counsel of the gods or of men.

24. Pallas: Pallas Athene, daughter of Zeus and goddess of wisdom; Apollo: Son of Zeus and god of the sun, of light and truth. 39. Sphinx: A winged monster with the body of a lion and the face of a woman, the Sphinx had tormented Thebes with her riddle, killing those who could not solve it. When Oedipus solved the riddle, the Sphinx killed herself.

A king of wisdom tested in the past
Can act in a time of troubles, and act well.
Noblest of men, restore
Life to your city! Think how all men call you
Liberator for your boldness long ago; 50
Ah, when your years of kingship are
remembered,
Let them not say *We rose, but later fell* —
Keep the State from going down in the storm!
Once, years ago, with happy augury,
You brought us fortune; be the same again! 55
No man questions your power to rule the land:
But rule over men, not over a dead city!
Ships are only hulls, high walls are nothing,
When no life moves in the empty passageways.
OEDIPUS: Poor children! You may be sure I know 60
All that you longed for in your coming here.
I know that you are deathly sick; and yet,
Sick as you are, not one is as sick as I.
Each of you suffers in himself alone
His anguish, not another's; but my spirit 65
Groans for the city, for myself, for you.
I was not sleeping, you are not waking me.
No, I have been in tears for a long while
And in my restless thought walked many ways.
In all my search I found one remedy, 70
And I have adopted it: I have sent Kreon,
Son of Menoikeus, brother of the queen,
To Delphi,⁷³ Apollo's place of revelation,
To learn there, if he can,
What act or pledge of mine may save the city. 75
I have counted the days, and now, this very day,
I am troubled, for he has overstayed his time.
What is he doing? He has been gone too long.
Yet whenever he comes back, I should do ill
Not to take any action the god orders. 80
PRIEST: It is a timely promise. At this instant
They tell me Kreon is here.
OEDIPUS: O Lord Apollo!
May his news be fair as his face is radiant!
PRIEST: Good news, I gather! he is crowned with
bay,
The chaplet is thick with berries.
OEDIPUS: We shall soon know; 85
He is near enough to hear us now. (*Enter
Kreon.*) O prince:
Brother: son of Menoikeus:
What answer do you bring us from the god?
KREON: A strong one. I can tell you, great
afflictions 90
Will turn out well, if they are taken well.

73. Delphi: Site of the oracle, source of religious authority and prophecy, under the protection of Apollo.

OEDIPUS: What was the oracle? These vague words
Leave me still hanging between hope and fear.

KREON: Is it your pleasure to hear me with all
these

Gathered around us? I am prepared to speak,
But should we not go in?

OEDIPUS: Speak to them all,
It is for them I suffer, more than for myself.

KREON: Then I will tell you what I heard at Delphi.
In plain words

The god commands us to expel from the land of
Thebes

An old defilement we are sheltering.
It is a deathly thing, beyond cure;

We must not let it feed upon us longer.

OEDIPUS: What defilement? How shall we rid
ourselves of it?

KREON: By exile or death, blood for blood. It was
Murder that brought the plague-wind on the
city.

OEDIPUS: Murder of whom? Surely the god has
named him?

KREON: My Lord: Laios once ruled this land,
Before you came to govern us.

OEDIPUS: I know;
I learned of him from others; I never saw him.

KREON: He was murdered; and Apollo commands
us now

To take revenge upon whoever killed him.

OEDIPUS: Upon whom? Where are they? Where
shall we find a clue

To solve that crime, after so many years?

KREON: Here in this land, he said. Search reveals
Things that escape an inattentive man.

OEDIPUS: Tell me: Was Laios murdered in his
house,

Or in the fields, or in some foreign country?

KREON: He said he planned to make a pilgrimage.
He did not come home again.

OEDIPUS: And was there no one,
No witness, no companion, to tell what

happened?

KREON: They were all killed but one, and he got
away

So frightened that he could remember one thing
only.

OEDIPUS: What was that one thing? One may be
the key

To everything, if we resolve to use it.

KREON: He said that a band of highwaymen
attacked them,

Outnumbered them, and overwhelmed the king.
OEDIPUS: Strange, that a highwayman should be so
daring—

Unless some faction here bribed him to do it.

KREON: We thought of that. But after Laios' death
New troubles arose and we had no avenger. 130

OEDIPUS: What troubles could prevent your hunting
down the killers?

KREON: The riddling Sphinx's song
Made us deaf to all mysteries but her own.

OEDIPUS: Then once more I must bring what is
dark to light.

It is most fitting that Apollo shows, 135

As you do, this compunction for the dead.

You shall see how I stand by you, as I should,

Avenging this country and the god as well,

And not as though it were for some distant

friend,

But for my own sake, to be rid of evil. 140

Whoever killed King Laios might — who

knows? —

Lay violent hands even on me — and soon.

I act for the murdered king in my own interest.

Come, then, my children: leave the altar steps,
Lift up your olive boughs!

One of you go 145

And summon the people of Kadmos to gather
here.

I will do all that I can; you may tell them that.

(Exit a Page.)

So, with the help of God,

We shall be saved — or else indeed we are lost.

PRIEST: Let us rise, children. It was for this we
came, 150

And now the king has promised it.

Phoibos^o has sent us an oracle; may he descend

Himself to save us and drive out the plague.

(*Exeunt*^o Oedipus and Kreon into the palace by the
central door. The Priest and the Suppliants disperse
right and left. After a short pause the Chorus enters
the orchestra.)

PARODOS^o • Strophe^o 1

CHORUS: What is God singing in his profound
Delphi of gold and shadow?

What oracle for Thebes, the Sunwhipped city?

Fear unjoins me, the roots of my heart tremble.

Now I remember, O Healer, your power, and 5

wonder:

Will you send doom like a sudden cloud, or
weave it

152. Phoibos: Apollo. Exeunt: Latin for "they go out."
Parodos: The song or ode chanted by the Chorus on their
entry. Strophe: Song sung by the Chorus as they danced
from stage right to stage left.

Like nightfall of the past?
 Speak to me, tell me, O
 Child of golden Hope, immortal Voice.

Antistrophe^o 1

10 Let me pray to Athene, the immortal daughter of
 Zeus,
 And to Artemis^o her sister
 Who keeps her famous throne in the market
 ring,
 15 And to Apollo, archer from distant heaven —
 O gods, descend! Like three streams leap against
 The fires of our grief, the fires of darkness;
 Be swift to bring us rest!
 As in the old time from the brilliant house
 Of air you stepped to save us, come again!

Strophe 2

20 Now our afflictions have no end,
 Now all our stricken host lies down
 And no man fights off death with his mind;
 The noble plowland bears no grain,
 And groaning mothers can not bear —
 25 See, how our lives like birds take wing,
 Like sparks that fly when a fire soars,
 To the shore of the god of evening.

Antistrophe 2

30 The plague burns on, it is pitiless,
 Though pallid children laden with death
 Lie unwept in the stony ways,
 And old gray women by every path
 Flock to the strand about the altars
 There to strike their breasts and cry
 Worship of Phoibos in wailing prayers:
 Be kind, God's golden child!

Strophe 3

35 There are no swords in this attack by fire,
 No shields, but we are ringed with cries.
 Send the besieger plunging from our homes
 Into the vast sea-room of the Atlantic
 Or into the waves that foam eastward of
 Thrace —
 40 For the day ravages what the night spares —
 Destroy our enemy, lord of the thunder!
 Let him be riven by lightning from heaven!

Antistrophe: Song sung by the Chorus following the Strophe,
 as they danced back from stage left to stage right. 11.
 Artemis: The huntress, daughter of Zeus, twin sister of Apollo.

Antistrophe 3

Phoibos Apollo, stretch the sun's bowstring,
 That golden cord, until it sing for us,
 Flashing arrows in heaven!

Artemis, Huntress, 45

Race with flaring lights upon our mountains!
 O scarlet god,^o O golden-banded brow,
 O Theban Bacchos in a storm of Maenads,^o

(Enter Oedipus, center.)

Whirl upon Death, that all the Undying hate!
 Come with blinding torches, come in joy! 50

SCENE 1

OEDIPUS: Is this your prayer? It may be answered.
 Come,
 Listen to me, act as the crisis demands,
 And you shall have relief from all these evils. 3

Until now I was a stranger to this tale,
 As I had been a stranger to the crime. 5
 Could I track down the murderer without a
 clue?

But now, friends,
 As one who became a citizen after the murder,
 I make this proclamation to all Thebans:
 If any man knows by whose hand Laios, son of
 Labdakos, 10
 Met his death, I direct that man to tell me
 everything,
 No matter what he fears for having so long
 withheld it.

Let it stand as promised that no further trouble
 Will come to him, but he may leave the land in
 safety.

Moreover: If anyone knows the murderer to be
 foreign, 15
 Let him not keep silent: he shall have his reward
 from me.

However, if he does conceal it; if any man
 Fearing for his friend or for himself disobeys this
 edict,
 Hear what I propose to do:

I solemnly forbid the people of this country, 20
 Where power and throne are mine, ever to
 receive that man

Or speak to him, no matter who he is, or let
 him

Join in sacrifice, lustration, or in prayer.

47. scarlet god: Bacchus, god of wine and revelry; also called
 Dionysus. 48. Maenads: Female worshippers of Bacchus
 (Dionysus).

25 I decree that he be driven from every house,
Being, as he is, corruption itself to us: the
Delphic
Voice of Apollo has pronounced this revelation.
Thus I associate myself with the oracle
And take the side of the murdered king.

30 As for the criminal, I pray to God —
Whether it be a lurking thief, or one of a
number —
I pray that that man's life be consumed in evil
and wretchedness.
And as for me, this curse applies no less
If it should turn out that the culprit is my guest
here,
Sharing my hearth.

35 You have heard the penalty.
I lay it on you now to attend to this
For my sake, for Apollo's, for the sick
Sterile city that heaven has abandoned.
Suppose the oracle had given you no command:
Should this defilement go uncleansed for ever?
40 You should have found the murderer: your king,
A noble king, had been destroyed!

Now I,
Having the power that he held before me,
Having his bed, begetting children there
Upon his wife, as he would have, had he
lived —
Their son would have been my children's
45 brother,
If Laios had had luck in fatherhood!
(And now his bad fortune has struck him
down) —
I say I take the son's part, just as though
I were his son, to press the fight for him
50 And see it won! I'll find the hand that brought
Death to Labdakos' and Polydoros' child,
Heir of Kadmos' and Agenor's line.^o
And as for those who fail me,
May the gods deny them the fruit of the earth,
55 Fruit of the womb, and may they rot utterly!
Let them be wretched as we are wretched, and
worse!

For you, for loyal Thebans, and for all
Who find my actions right, I pray the favor
Of justice, and of all the immortal gods.
60 CHORAGOS: Since I am under oath, my lord, I
swear
I did not do the murder, I can not name

The murderer. Phoibos ordained the search;
Why did he not say who the culprit was?
OEDIPUS: An honest question. But no man in the
world

Can make the gods do more than the gods will. 65
CHORAGOS: There is an alternative, I think —
OEDIPUS: Tell me.

Any or all, you must not fail to tell me.
CHORAGOS: A lord clairvoyant to the lord Apollo,
As we all know, is the skilled Teiresias.
One might learn much about this from him,
Oedipus. 70

OEDIPUS: I am not wasting time:
Kreon spoke of this, and I have sent for him —
Twice, in fact; it is strange that he is not here.

CHORAGOS: The other matter — that old report —
seems useless.

OEDIPUS: What was that? I am interested in all
reports. 75

CHORAGOS: The king was said to have been killed
by highwaymen.

OEDIPUS: I know. But we have no witnesses to that.

CHORAGOS: If the killer can feel a particle of dread,
Your curse will bring him out of hiding!

OEDIPUS: No.
The man who dared that act will fear no curse. 80

(Enter the blind seer Teiresias, led by a Page.)

CHORAGOS: But there is one man who may detect
the criminal.

This is Teiresias, this is the holy prophet
In whom, alone of all men, truth was born.
OEDIPUS: Teiresias: seer: student of mysteries,
Of all that's taught and all that no man tells, 85
Secrets of Heaven and secrets of the earth:
Blind though you are, you know the city lies
Sick with plague; and from this plague, my lord,
We find that you alone can guard or save us.

Possibly you did not hear the messengers? 90
Apollo, when we sent to him,
Sent us back word that this great pestilence
Would lift, but only if we established clearly
The identity of those who murdered Laios.
They must be killed or exiled.

Can you use 95
Birdflight^o or any art of divination
To purify yourself, and Thebes, and me
From this contagion? We are in your hands.
There is no fairer duty
Than that of helping others in distress. 100
TEIRESIAS: How dreadful knowledge of the truth
can be

51–52. Labdakos, Polydoros, Kadmos, and Agenor: Father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and great-great-grandfather of Laios.

96. Birdflight: Prophets used the flight of birds to predict the future.

- When there's no help in truth! I knew this well,
But did not act on it; else I should not have
come.
- OEDIPUS: What is troubling you? Why are your eyes
so cold?
- TEIRESIAS: Let me go home. Bear your own fate,
and I'll
105 Bear mine. It is better so: trust what I say.
OEDIPUS: What you say is ungracious and unhelpful
To your native country. Do not refuse to speak.
TEIRESIAS: When it comes to speech, your own is
neither temperate
110 Nor opportune. I wish to be more prudent.
OEDIPUS: In God's name, we all beg you —
TEIRESIAS: You are all ignorant.
No; I will never tell you what I know.
Now it is my misery; then, it would be yours.
OEDIPUS: What! You do know something, and will
not tell us?
115 You would betray us all and wreck the State?
TEIRESIAS: I do not intend to torture myself, or you.
Why persist in asking? You will not persuade
me.
OEDIPUS: What a wicked old man you are! You'd
try a stone's
Patience! Out with it! Have you no feeling at
all?
TEIRESIAS: You call me unfeeling. If you could only
120 see
The nature of your own feelings . . .
OEDIPUS: Why,
Who would not feel as I do? Who could endure
Your arrogance toward the city?
TEIRESIAS: What does it matter?
Whether I speak or not, it is bound to come.
OEDIPUS: Then, if "it" is bound to come, you are
125 bound to tell me.
TEIRESIAS: No, I will not go on. Rage as you please.
OEDIPUS: Rage? Why not!
And I'll tell you what I think:
You planned it, you had it done, you all but
Killed him with your own hands: if you had
eyes,
130 I'd say the crime was yours, and yours alone.
TEIRESIAS: So? I charge you, then,
Abide by the proclamation you have made:
From this day forth
Never speak again to these men or to me;
135 You yourself are the pollution of this country.
OEDIPUS: You dare say that! Can you possibly think
you have
Some way of going free, after such insolence?
TEIRESIAS: I have gone free. It is the truth sustains
me.
OEDIPUS: Who taught you shamelessness? It was not
your craft.
- TEIRESIAS: You did. You made me speak. I did not
want to. 140
- OEDIPUS: Speak what? Let me hear it again more
clearly.
- TEIRESIAS: Was it not clear before? Are you
tempting me?
- OEDIPUS: I did not understand it. Say it again.
- TEIRESIAS: I say that you are the murderer whom
you seek.
- OEDIPUS: Now twice you have spat out infamy.
You'll pay for it! 145
- TEIRESIAS: Would you care for more? Do you wish
to be really angry?
- OEDIPUS: Say what you will. Whatever you say is
worthless.
- TEIRESIAS: I say you live in hideous shame with
those
Most dear to you. You can not see the evil.
- OEDIPUS: Can you go on babbling like this for ever? 150
- TEIRESIAS: I can, if there is power in truth.
- OEDIPUS: There is:
But not for you, not for you,
You sightless, witless, senseless, mad old man!
- TEIRESIAS: You are the madman. There is no one
here
Who will not curse you soon, as you curse me. 155
- OEDIPUS: You child of total night! I would not
touch you;
Neither would any man who sees the sun.
- TEIRESIAS: True: it is not from you my fate will
come.
That lies within Apollo's competence,
As it is his concern.
- OEDIPUS: Tell me, who made 160
These fine discoveries? Kreon? or someone else?
- TEIRESIAS: Kreon is no threat. You weave your own
doom.
- OEDIPUS: Wealth, power, craft of statemanship!
Kingly position, everywhere admired!
165 What savage envy is stored up against these,
If Kreon, whom I trusted, Kreon my friend,
For this great office which the city once
Put in my hands unsought — if for this power
Kreon desires in secret to destroy me!
- He has bought this decrepit fortune-teller, this 170
Collector of dirty pennies, this prophet fraud —
Why, he is no more clairvoyant than I am!
- Tell us:
Has your mystic mummery ever approached the
truth?
When that hellcat the Sphinx was performing
here,
What help were you to these people? 175
Her magic was not for the first man who came
along:

- It demanded a real exorcist. Your birds —
 What good were they? or the gods, for the
 matter of that?
 But I came by,
 180 Oedipus, the simple man, who knows nothing —
 I thought it out for myself, no birds helped me!
 And this is the man you think you can destroy,
 That you may be close to Kreon when he's king!
 Well, you and your friend Kreon, it seems to
 me,
 185 Will suffer most. If you were not an old man,
 You would have paid already for your plot.
 CHORAGOS: We can not see that his words or yours
 Have been spoken except in anger, Oedipus,
 And of anger we have no need. How to
 accomplish
 The god's will best: that is what most concerns
 190 us.
 TEIRESIAS: You are a king. But where argument's
 concerned
 I am your man, as much a king as you.
 I am not your servant, but Apollo's.
 I have no need of Kreon or Kreon's name.
- 195 Listen to me. You mock my blindness, do you?
 But I say that you, with both your eyes, are
 blind:
 You can not see the wretchedness of your life,
 Nor in whose house you live, no, nor with
 whom.
 Who are your father and mother? Can you tell
 me?
 200 You do not even know the blind wrongs
 That you have done them, on earth and in the
 world below.
 But the double lash of your parents' curse will
 whip you
 Out of this land some day, with only night
 Upon your precious eyes.
 205 Your cries then — where will they not be heard?
 What fastness of Kithairon° will not echo them?
 And that bridal-descant of yours — you'll know
 it then,
 The song they sang when you came here to
 Thebes
 And found your misguided berthing.
 All this, and more, that you can not guess at
 now,
 210 Will bring you to yourself among your children.
- Be angry, then. Curse Kreon. Curse my words.
 I tell you, no man that walks upon the earth
 Shall be rooted out more horribly than you.
- OEDIPUS: Am I to bear this from him? —
 Damnation
 215 Take you! Out of this place! Out of my sight!
 TEIRESIAS: I would not have come at all if you had
 not asked me.
 OEDIPUS: Could I have told that you'd talk
 nonsense, that
 You'd come here to make a fool of yourself, and
 of me?
 TEIRESIAS: A fool? Your parents thought me sane
 enough.
 220 OEDIPUS: My parents again! — Wait: who were my
 parents?
 TEIRESIAS: This day will give you a father, and
 break your heart.
 OEDIPUS: Your infantile riddles! Your damned
 abracadabra!
 TEIRESIAS: You were a great man once at solving
 riddles.
 OEDIPUS: Mock me with that if you like; you will
 find it true.
 225 TEIRESIAS: It was true enough. It brought about
 your ruin.
 OEDIPUS: But if it saved this town?
 TEIRESIAS (*to the Page*): Boy, give me your hand.
 OEDIPUS: Yes, boy; lead him away.
 — While you are here
 We can do nothing. Go; leave us in peace.
 TEIRESIAS: I will go when I have said what I have
 to say.
 230 How can you hurt me? And I tell you again:
 The man you have been looking for all this time,
 The damned man, the murderer of Laios,
 That man is in Thebes. To your mind he is
 foreign-born,
 But it will soon be shown that he is a Theban,
 A revelation that will fail to please.
 235 A blind man,
 Who has his eyes now; a penniless man, who is
 rich now;
 And he will go tapping the strange earth with
 his staff.
 To the children with whom he lives now he will
 be
 Brother and father — the very same; to her
 240 Who bore him, son and husband — the very
 same
 Who came to his father's bed, wet with his
 father's blood.
 Enough. Go think that over.
 If later you find error in what I have said,
 You may say that I have no skill in prophecy.
 245

206. Kithairon: The mountain where Oedipus was abandoned as an infant.

(Exit Teiresias, led by his Page. Oedipus goes into the palace.)

ODE° 1 • Strophe 1

CHORUS: The Delphic stone of prophecies
 Remembers ancient regicide
 And a still bloody hand.
 That killer's hour of flight has come.
 5 He must be stronger than riderless
 Coursers of untiring wind,
 For the son of Zeus° armed with his father's
 thunder
 Leaps in lightning after him;
 And the Furies° hold his track, the sad Furies.

Antistrophe 1

10 Holy Parnassos° peak of snow
 Flashes and blinds that secret man,
 That all shall hunt him down:
 Though he may roam the forest shade
 Like a bull gone wild from pasture
 15 To rage through glooms of stone.
 Doom comes down on him; flight will not avail
 him;
 For the world's heart calls him desolate,
 And the immortal voices follow, for ever follow.

Strophe 2

But now a wilder thing is heard
 From the old man skilled at hearing Fate in the
 20 wing-beat of a bird.
 Bewildered as a blown bird, my soul hovers and
 can not find
 Foothold in this debate, or any reason or rest of
 mind.
 But no man ever brought — none can bring
 Proof of strife between Thebes' royal house,
 25 Labdakos' line, and the son of Polybos;°
 And never until now has any man brought word
 Of Laios' dark death staining Oedipus the King.

Antistrophe 2

Divine Zeus and Apollo hold
 Perfect intelligence alone of all tales ever told;
 And well though this diviner works, he works in
 30 his own night;
 No man can judge that rough unknown or trust
 in second sight,
 For wisdom changes hands among the wise.

Ode: Song sung by the Chorus. 7. son of Zeus: Apollo.
 9. Furies: Spirits called upon to avenge crimes, especially
 against kin. 10. Parnassos: Mountain sacred to Apollo.
 25. Polybos: King who adopted Oedipus.

Shall I believe my great lord criminal
 At a raging word that a blind old man let fall?
 I saw him, when the carrion woman° faced him
 of old,
 35 Prove his heroic mind. These evil words are lies.

SCENE 2

KREON: Men of Thebes:

I am told that heavy accusations
 Have been brought against me by King Oedipus.

I am not the kind of man to bear this tamely.

If in these present difficulties
 5 He holds me accountable for any harm to him
 Through anything I have said or done — why,
 then,

I do not value life in this dishonor.
 It is not as though this rumor touched upon
 Some private indiscretion. The matter is grave.
 10 The fact is that I am being called disloyal
 To the State, to my fellow citizens, to my
 friends.

CHORAGOS: He may have spoken in anger, not
 from his mind.

KREON: But did you not hear him say I was the
 one

Who seduced the old prophet into lying? 15

CHORAGOS: The thing was said; I do not know
 how seriously.

KREON: But you were watching him! Were his eyes
 steady?

Did he look like a man in his right mind?

CHORAGOS: I do not know.

I can not judge the behavior of great men.

But here is the king himself.

(Enter Oedipus.)

OEDIPUS: So you dared come back. 20
 Why? How brazen of you to come to my house,
 You murderer!

Do you think I do not know
 That you plotted to kill me, plotted to steal my
 throne?

Tell me, in God's name: am I coward, a fool,
 That you should dream you could accomplish
 this? 25

A fool who could not see your slippery game?
 A coward, not to fight back when I saw it?
 You are the fool, Kreon, are you not? hoping
 Without support or friends to get a throne?

35. woman: The Sphinx.

- Thrones may be won or bought: you could do
neither.
- 30 KREON: Now listen to me. You have talked; let me
talk, too.
You can not judge unless you know the facts.
OEDIPUS: You speak well: there is one fact; but I
find it hard
To learn from the deadliest enemy I have.
- 35 KREON: That above all I must dispute with you.
OEDIPUS: That above all I will not hear you deny.
KREON: If you think there is anything good in
being stubborn
Against all reason, then I say you are wrong.
OEDIPUS: If you think a man can sin against his
own kind
40 And not be punished for it, I say you are mad.
KREON: I agree. But tell me: what have I done to
you?
OEDIPUS: You advised me to send for that wizard,
did you not?
KREON: I did. I should do it again.
OEDIPUS: Very well. Now tell me:
How long has it been since Laios —
KREON: What of Laios?
OEDIPUS: Since he vanished in that onset by the
45 road?
KREON: It was long ago, a long time.
OEDIPUS: And this prophet,
Was he practicing here then?
KREON: He was; and with honor, as now.
OEDIPUS: Did he speak of me at that time?
KREON: He never did,
At least, not when I was present;
OEDIPUS: But . . . the enquiry?
I suppose you held one?
50 KREON: We did, but we learned nothing.
OEDIPUS: Why did the prophet not speak against
me then?
KREON: I do not know; and I am the kind of man
Who holds his tongue when he has no facts to
go on.
OEDIPUS: There's one fact that you know, and you
could tell it.
KREON: What fact is that? If I know it, you shall
55 have it.
OEDIPUS: If he were not involved with you, he
could not say
That it was I who murdered Laios.
KREON: If he says that, you are the one that knows
it! —
But now it is my turn to question you.
60 OEDIPUS: Put your questions. I am no murderer.
KREON: First, then: You married my sister?
OEDIPUS: I married your sister.
KREON: And you rule the kingdom equally with her?
- OEDIPUS: Everything that she wants she has from
me.
- KREON: And I am the third, equal to both of you?
OEDIPUS: That is why I call you a bad friend. 65
KREON: No. Reason it out, as I have done.
Think of this first: would any sane man prefer
Power, with all a king's anxieties,
To that same power and the grace of sleep?
Certainly not I. 70
I have never longed for the king's power — only
his rights.
Would any wise man differ from me in this?
As matters stand, I have my way in everything
With your consent, and no responsibilities.
If I were king, I should be a slave to policy. 75
How could I desire a scepter more
Than what is now mine — untroubled influence?
No, I have not gone mad; I need no honors,
Except those with the perquisites I have now.
I am welcome everywhere; every man salutes me, 80
And those who want your favor seek my ear,
Since I know how to manage what they ask.
Should I exchange this ease for that anxiety?
Besides, no sober mind is treasonable.
I hate anarchy 85
And never would deal with any man who
likes it.
- Test what I have said. Go to the priestess
At Delphi, ask if I quoted her correctly.
And as for this other thing: if I am found
Guilty of treason with Teiresias, 90
Then sentence me to death. You have my word
It is a sentence I should cast my vote for —
But not without evidence!
You do wrong
When you take good men for bad, bad men for
good.
A true friend thrown aside — why, life itself 95
Is not more precious!
In time you will know this well:
For time, and time alone, will show the just
man,
Though scoundrels are discovered in a day.
CHORAGOS: This is well said, and a prudent man
would ponder it.
Judgments too quickly formed are dangerous. 100
OEDIPUS: But is he not quick in his duplicity?
And shall I not be quick to parry him?
Would you have me stand still, hold my peace,
and let
This man win everything, through my inaction?
KREON: And you want — what is it, then? To
banish me? 105
OEDIPUS: No, not exile. It is your death I want,

So that all the world may see what treason means.

KREON: You will persist, then? You will not believe me?

OEDIPUS: How can I believe you?

KREON: Then you are a fool.

OEDIPUS: To save myself?

110 KREON: In justice, think of me.

OEDIPUS: You are evil incarnate.

KREON: But suppose that you are wrong?

OEDIPUS: Still I must rule.

KREON: But not if you rule badly.

OEDIPUS: O city, city!

KREON: It is my city, too!

CHORAGOS: Now, my lords, be still. I see the queen,

115 Iokaste, coming from her palace chambers;
And it is time she came, for the sake of you both.

This dreadful quarrel can be resolved through her.

(Enter Iokaste.)

IOKASTE: Poor foolish men, what wicked din is this?

With Thebes sick to death, is it not shameful

120 That you should rake some private quarrel up?

(To Oedipus.) Come into the house.

— And you, Kreon, go now:

Let us have no more of this tumult over nothing.

KREON: Nothing? No, sister: what your husband plans for me

Is one of two great evils: exile or death.

OEDIPUS: He is right.

125 Why, woman I have caught him squarely
Plotting against my life.

KREON: No! Let me die

Accurst if ever I have wished you harm!

IOKASTE: Ah, believe it, Oedipus!

In the name of the gods, respect this oath of his

130 For my sake, for the sake of these people here!

Strophe 1

CHORAGOS: Open your mind to her, my lord. Be ruled by her, I beg you!

OEDIPUS: What would you have me do?

CHORAGOS: Respect Kreon's word. He has never spoken like a fool,

And now he has sworn an oath.

OEDIPUS: You know what you ask?

CHORAGOS: I do.

OEDIPUS: Speak on, then.

CHORAGOS: A friend so sworn should not be baited

135 so,
In blind malice, and without final proof.

OEDIPUS: You are aware, I hope, that what you say Means death for me, or exile at the least.

Strophe 2

CHORAGOS: No, I swear by Helios, first in heaven!

May I die friendless and accurst,

The worst of deaths, if ever I meant that!

It is the withering fields

That hurt my sick heart:

Must we bear all these ills,

And now your bad blood as well?

OEDIPUS: Then let him go. And let me die, if I must,

Or be driven by him in shame from the land of Thebes.

It is your unhappiness, and not his talk,
That touches me.

As for him —

Wherever he goes, hatred will follow him.

KREON: Ugly in yielding, as you were ugly in rage!

Natures like yours chiefly torment themselves.

OEDIPUS: Can you not go? Can you not leave me?

KREON: I can.

You do not know me; but the city knows me,

And in its eyes I am just, if not in yours.

(Exit Kreon.)

Antistrophe 1

CHORAGOS: Lady Iokaste, did you not ask the King to go to his chambers?

IOKASTE: First tell me what has happened.

CHORAGOS: There was suspicion without evidence; yet it rankled

As even false charges will.

IOKASTE: On both sides?

CHORAGOS: On both.

IOKASTE: But what was said? 160

CHORAGOS: Oh let it rest, let it be done with!

Have we not suffered enough?

OEDIPUS: You see to what your decency has brought you:

You have made difficulties where my heart saw none.

Antistrophe 2

CHORAGOS: Oedipus, it is not once only I have told you —

You must know I should count myself unwise

To the point of madness, should I now forsake you —

You, under whose hand,

In the storm of another time,

Our dear land sailed out free.

But now stand fast at the helm!

IOKASTE: In God's name, Oedipus, inform your wife
as well:

Why are you so set in this hard anger?

OEDIPUS: I will tell you, for none of these men
deserves

My confidence as you do. It is Kreon's work,
His treachery, his plotting against me.

IOKASTE: Go on, if you can make this clear to me.

OEDIPUS: He charges me with the murder of Laios.

IOKASTE: Has he some knowledge? Or does he
speak from hearsay?

OEDIPUS: He would not commit himself to such a
charge,

But he has brought in that damnable soothsayer
To tell his story.

IOKASTE: Set your mind at rest.

If it is a question of soothsayers, I tell you
That you will find no man whose craft gives
knowledge

Of the unknowable.

Here is my proof:

An oracle was reported to Laios once
(I will not say from Phoibos himself, but from
His appointed ministers, at any rate)
That his doom would be death at the hands of
his own son —

His son, born of his flesh and of mine!

Now, you remember the story: Laios was killed
By marauding strangers where three highways
meet;

But his child had not been three days in this
world

Before the king had pierced the baby's ankles
And left him to die on a lonely mountainside.

Thus, Apollo never caused that child
To kill his father, and it was not Laios' fate
To die at the hands of his son, as he had feared.
This is what prophets and prophecies are worth!
Have no dread of them.

It is God himself

Who can show us what he wills, in his own
way.

OEDIPUS: How strange a shadowy memory crossed
my mind,

Just now while you were speaking; it chilled my
heart.

IOKASTE: What do you mean? What memory do
you speak of?

OEDIPUS: If I understand you, Laios was killed
At a place where three roads meet.

IOKASTE: So it was said;
We have no later story.

OEDIPUS: Where did it happen?

IOKASTE: Phokis, it is called: at a place where the
Theban Way

Divides into the roads toward Delphi and
Daulia.

OEDIPUS: When?

IOKASTE: We had the news not long before
you came

And proved the right to your succession here.

OEDIPUS: Ah; what net has God been weaving for
me?

IOKASTE: Oedipus! Why does this trouble you?

OEDIPUS: Do not ask me yet.

First, tell me how Laios looked, and tell me
How old he was.

IOKASTE: He was tall, his hair just touched
With white; his form was not unlike your own.

OEDIPUS: I think that I myself may be accurst
By my own ignorant edict.

IOKASTE: You speak strangely.

It makes me tremble to look at you, my king.

OEDIPUS: I am not sure that the blind man can not
see.

But I should know better if you were to tell
me —

IOKASTE: Anything — though I dread to hear you
ask it.

OEDIPUS: Was the king lightly escorted, or did he
ride

With a large company, as a ruler should?

IOKASTE: There were five men with him in all: one
was a herald;

And a single chariot, which he was driving.

OEDIPUS: Alas, that makes it plain enough!

But who —

Who told you how it happened?

IOKASTE: A household servant,
The only one to escape.

OEDIPUS: And is he still
A servant of ours?

IOKASTE: No; for when he came back at last
And found you enthroned in the place of the
dead king,

He came to me, touched my hand with his, and
begged

That I would send him away to the frontier
district

Where only the shepherds go —

As far away from the city as I could send him.

I granted his prayer; for although the man was a
slave,

He had earned more than this favor at my
hands.

OEDIPUS: Can he be called back quickly?

IOKASTE: Easily.

But why?

OEDIPUS: I have taken too much upon myself
Without enquiry; therefore I wish to consult
him.

240 IOKASTE: Then he shall come.

But am I not one also
To whom you might confide these fears of
yours?

OEDIPUS: That is your right; it will not be denied
you,

245 Now least of all; for I have reached a pitch
Of wild foreboding. Is there anyone
To whom I should sooner speak?

Polybos of Corinth is my father.
My mother is a Dorian: Merope.
I grew up chief among the men of Corinth
250 Until a strange thing happened —
Not worth my passion, it may be, but strange.
At a feast, a drunken man maundering in his
cups
Cries out that I am not my father's son!

255 I contained myself that night, though I felt anger
And a sinking heart. The next day I visited
My father and mother, and questioned them.

They stormed,
Calling it all the slanderous rant of a fool;
And this relieved me. Yet the suspicion
260 Remained always aching in my mind;
I knew there was talk; I could not rest;
And finally, saying nothing to my parents,
I went to the shrine at Delphi.

The god dismissed my question without reply;
He spoke of other things.

265 Some were clear,
Full of wretchedness, dreadful, unbearable:
As, that I should lie with my own mother, breed
Children from whom all men would turn their
eyes;
And that I should be my father's murderer.

270 I heard all this, and fled. And from that day
Corinth to me was only in the stars
Descending in that quarter of the sky,
As I wandered farther and farther on my way
To a land where I should never see the evil
Sung by the oracle. And I came to this country
275 Where, so you say, King Laios was killed.

I will tell you all that happened there, my lady.

There were three highways
Coming together at a place I passed;
And there a herald came towards me, and a
chariot

Drawn by horses, with a man such as you
describe 280

Seated in it. The groom leading the horses
Forced me off the road at his lord's command;
But as this charioteer lurched over towards me
I struck him in my rage. The old man saw me
And brought his double goad down upon my
head 285

As I came abreast.

He was paid back, and more!
Swinging my club in this right hand I knocked
him
Out of his car, and he rolled on the ground.
I killed him.

I killed them all.

290 Now if that stranger and Laios were — kin,
Where is a man more miserable than I?
More hated by the gods? Citizen and alien alike
Must never shelter me or speak to me —
I must be shunned by all.

And I myself
Pronounced this malediction upon myself! 295

Think of it: I have touched you with these
hands,
These hands that killed your husband. What
defilement!

Am I all evil, then? It must be so,
Since I must flee from Thebes, yet never again
See my own countrymen, my own country,
300 For fear of joining my mother in marriage
And killing Polybos, my father.

Ah,
If I was created so, born to this fate,
Who could deny the savagery of God?

O holy majesty of heavenly powers!
305 May I never see that day! Never!

Rather let me vanish from the race of men
Than know the abomination destined me!
CHORAGOS: We too, my lord, have felt dismay at
this.

But there is hope: you have yet to hear the
shepherd. 310

OEDIPUS: Indeed, I fear no other hope is left me.
IOKASTE: What do you hope from him when he
comes?

OEDIPUS: This much:

If his account of the murder tallies with yours,
Then I am cleared.

IOKASTE: What was it that I said ;
Of such importance?

315 OEDIPUS: Why, "mafauers," you said,
Killed the king, according to this man's story.
If he maintains that still, if there were several,
Clearly the guilt is not mine: I was alone.
But if he says one man, singlehanded, did it,

320 Then the evidence all points to me.
IOKASTE: You may be sure that he said there were
several;

And can he call back that story now? He can not.
The whole city heard it as plainly as I.
But suppose he alters some detail of it:

325 He can not ever show that Laios' death
Fulfilled the oracle: for Apollo said
My child was doomed to kill him; and my
child —
Poor baby! — it was my child that died first.

No. From now on, where oracles are concerned,
330 I would not waste a second thought on any.
OEDIPUS: You may be right.

But come: let someone go
For the shepherd at once. This matter must be
settled.

IOKASTE: I will send for him.
I would not wish to cross you in anything,
And surely not in this. — Let us go in.
(*Exeunt into the palace.*)

ODE 2 • Strophe 1

CHORUS: Let me be reverent in the ways of right,
Lowly the paths I journey on;
Let all my words and actions keep
The laws of the pure universe
5 From highest Heaven handed down.
For Heaven is their bright nurse,
Those generations of the realms of light;
Ah, never of mortal kind were they begot,
Nor are they slaves of memory, lost in sleep:
10 Their Father is greater than Time, and ages not.

Antistrophe 1

The tyrant is a child of Pride
Who drinks from his great sickening cup
Recklessness and vanity,
Until from his high crest headlong
15 He plummets to the dust of hope.
That strong man is not strong.
But let no fair ambition be denied;

May God protect the wrestler for the State
In government, in comely policy,
Who will fear God, and on his ordinance wait. 20

Strophe 2

Haughtiness and the high hand of disdain
Tempt and outrage God's holy law;
And any mortal who dares hold
No immortal Power in awe
Will be caught up in a net of pain: 25
The price for which his levity is sold.
Let each man take due earnings, then,
And keep his hands from holy things,
And from blasphemy stand apart —
Else the crackling blast of heaven 30
Blows on his head, and on his desperate heart.
Though fools will honor impious men,
In their cities no tragic poet sings.

Antistrophe 2

Shall we lose faith in Delphi's obscurities,
We who have heard the world's core 35
Discredited, and the sacred wood
Of Zeus at Elis praised no more?
The deeds and the strange prophecies
Must make a pattern yet to be understood.
Zeus, if indeed you are lord of all, 40
Throned in light over night and day,
Mirror this in your endless mind:
Our masters call the oracle
Words on the wind, and the Delphic vision
blind!
Their hearts no longer know-Apollo, 45
And reverence for the gods has died away.

SCENE 3

(*Enter Iokaste.*)

IOKASTE: Princes of Thebes, it has occurred to me
To visit the altars of the gods, bearing
These branches as a suppliant, and this incense.
Our king is not himself: his noble soul
Is overwrought with fantasies of dread, 5
Else he would consider
The new prophecies in the light of the old.
He will listen to any voice that speaks disaster,
And my advice goes for nothing. (*She
approaches the altar, right.*)

To you, then, Apollo,
Lycean lord, since you are nearest, I turn in
prayer 10

Receive these offerings, and grant us deliverance
From defilement. Our hearts are heavy with fear
When we see our leader distracted, as helpless
sailors

Are terrified by the confusion of their helmsman.

(Enter Messenger.)

15 MESSENGER: Friends, no doubt you can direct me:
Where shall I find the house of Oedipus,
Or, better still, where is the king himself?

CHORAGOS: It is this very place, stranger; he is
inside.

This is his wife and mother of his children.

20 MESSENGER: I wish her happiness in a happy house,
Blest in all the fulfillment of her marriage.

IOKASTE: I wish as much for you: your courtesy
Deserves a like good fortune. But now, tell me:
Why have you come? What have you to say to
us?

MESSENGER: Good news, my lady, for your house
and your husband.

IOKASTE: What news? Who sent you here?

MESSENGER: I am from Corinth.

The news I bring ought to mean joy for you,
Though it may be you will find some grief in it.

IOKASTE: What is it? How can it touch us in both
ways?

MESSENGER: The word is that the people of the
30 Isthmus

Intend to call Oedipus to be their king.

IOKASTE: But old King Polybos — is he not reigning
still?

MESSENGER: No. Death holds him in his sepulchre.

IOKASTE: What are you saying? Polybos is dead?

MESSENGER: If I am not telling the truth, may I die
35 myself.

IOKASTE (to a Maid-servant): Go in, go quickly; tell
this to your master.

O riddlers of God's will, where are you now!

This was the man whom Oedipus, long ago,
Feared so, fled so, in dread of destroying him —

40 But it was another fate by which he died.

(Enter Oedipus, center.)

OEDIPUS: Dearest Iokaste, why have you sent for
me?

IOKASTE: Listen to what this man says, and then tell
me

What has become of the solemn prophecies.

OEDIPUS: Who is this man? What is his news for
me?

IOKASTE: He has come from Corinth to announce
your father's death!

45 OEDIPUS: Is it true, stranger? Tell me in your own
words.

MESSENGER: I can not say it more clearly: the king
is dead.

OEDIPUS: Was it by treason? Or by an attack of
illness?

MESSENGER: A little thing brings old men to their
rest.

OEDIPUS: It was sickness, then?

MESSENGER: Yes, and his many years. 50

OEDIPUS: Ah!

Why should a man respect the Pythian hearth,^o
or

Give heed to the birds that jangle above his
head?

They prophesied that I should kill Polybos,
Kill my own father; but he is dead and buried, 55

And I am here — I never touched him, never,
Unless he died of grief for my departure,
And thus, in a sense, through me. No. Polybos
Has packed the oracles off with him
underground.

They are empty words.

IOKASTE: Had I not told you so? 60

OEDIPUS: You had; it was my faint heart that
betrayed me.

IOKASTE: From now on never think of those things
again.

OEDIPUS: And yet — must I not fear my mother's
bed?

IOKASTE: Why should anyone in this world be
afraid,

Since Fate rules us and nothing can be foreseen? 65
A man should live only for the present day.

Have no more fear of sleeping with your
mother:

How many men, in dreams, have lain with their
mothers!

No reasonable man is troubled by such things.

OEDIPUS: That is true; only — 70

If only my mother were not still alive!

But she is alive. I can not help my dread.

IOKASTE: Yet this news of your father's death is
wonderful.

OEDIPUS: Wonderful. But I fear the living woman.

MESSENGER: Tell me, who is this woman that you
fear? 75

OEDIPUS: It is Merope, man; the wife of King
Polybos.

MESSENGER: Merope? Why should you be afraid of
her?

OEDIPUS: An oracle of the gods, a dreadful saying.

MESSENGER: Can you tell me about it or are you
sworn to silence?

52. Pythian hearth: Delphi.

- 80 OEDIPUS: I can tell you, and I will.
 Apollo said through his prophet that I was the
 man
 Who should marry his own mother, shed his
 father's blood
 With his own hands. And so, for all these years
 I have kept clear of Corinth, and no harm has
 come —
 Though it would have been sweet to see my
 parents again.
- 85 MESSENGER: And is this the fear that drove you out
 of Corinth?
 OEDIPUS: Would you have me kill my father?
 MESSENGER: As for that
 You must be reassured by the news I gave you.
 OEDIPUS: If you could reassure me, I would reward
 you.
 MESSENGER: I had that in mind, I will confess: I
 thought
 I could count on you when you returned to
 Corinth.
- 90 OEDIPUS: No: I will never go near my parents
 again.
 MESSENGER: Ah, son, you still do not know what
 you are doing —
 OEDIPUS: What do you mean? In the name of God
 tell me!
 MESSENGER: — If these are your reasons for not
 going home.
- 95 OEDIPUS: I tell you, I fear the oracle may come
 true.
 MESSENGER: And guilt may come upon you through
 your parents?
 OEDIPUS: That is the dread that is always in my
 heart.
 MESSENGER: Can you not see that all your fears are
 groundless?
- 100 OEDIPUS: Groundless? Am I not my parents' son?
 MESSENGER: Polybos was not your father.
 OEDIPUS: Not my father?
 MESSENGER: No more your father than the man
 speaking to you.
 OEDIPUS: But you are nothing to me!
 MESSENGER: Neither was he.
 OEDIPUS: Then why did he call me son?
 MESSENGER: I will tell you:
 Long ago he had you from my hands, as a gift.
- 105 OEDIPUS: Then how could he love me so, if I was
 not his?
 MESSENGER: He had no children, and his heart
 turned to you.
 OEDIPUS: What of you? Did you buy me? Did you
 find me by chance?
 MESSENGER: I came upon you in the woody vales
 of Kithairon.
- OEDIPUS: And what were you doing there?
 MESSENGER: Tending my flocks. 110
 OEDIPUS: A wandering shepherd?
 MESSENGER: But your savior, son, that day.
 OEDIPUS: From what did you save me?
 MESSENGER: Your ankles should tell you that.
 OEDIPUS: Ah, stranger, why do you speak of that
 childhood pain?
 MESSENGER: I pulled the skewer that pinned your
 feet together.
 OEDIPUS: I have had the mark as long as I can
 remember. 115
 MESSENGER: That was why you were given the
 name you bear.
 OEDIPUS: God! Was it my father or my mother who
 did it?
 Tell me!
 MESSENGER: I do not know. The man who
 gave you to me
 Can tell you better than I.
 OEDIPUS: It was not you that found me, but
 another? 120
 MESSENGER: It was another shepherd gave you to
 me.
 OEDIPUS: Who was he? Can you tell me who he
 was?
 MESSENGER: I think he was said to be one of Laios'
 people.
 OEDIPUS: You mean the Laios who was king here
 years ago?
 MESSENGER: Yes; King Laios; and the man was one
 of his herdsmen. 125
 OEDIPUS: Is he still alive? Can I see him?
 MESSENGER: These men here
 Know best about such things.
 OEDIPUS: Does anyone here
 Know this shepherd that he is talking about?
 Have you seen him in the fields, or in the town?
 If you have, tell me. It is time things were made
 plain. 130
 CHORAGOS: I think the man he means is that same
 shepherd
 You have already asked to see. Iokaste perhaps
 Could tell you something.
 OEDIPUS: Do you know anything
 About him, Lady? Is he the man we have
 summoned?
 Is that the man this shepherd means?
 IOKASTE: Why think of him? 135
 Forget this herdsman. Forget it all.
 This talk is a waste of time.
 OEDIPUS: How can you say that,
 When the clues to my true birth are in my hands?
 IOKASTE: For God's love, let us have no more
 questioning!

140 Is your life nothing to you?
My own is pain enough for me to bear.
OEDIPUS: You need not worry. Suppose my mother
a slave,

And born of slaves: no baseness can touch you.
IOKASTE: Listen to me, I beg you: do not do this
thing!

OEDIPUS: I will not listen; the truth must be made
known.

145 IOKASTE: Everything that I say is for your own
good!

OEDIPUS: My own good
Snaps my patience, then; I want none of it.

IOKASTE: You are fatally wrong! May you never
learn who you are!

OEDIPUS: Go, one of you, and bring the shepherd
here.

150 Let us leave this woman to brag of her royal
name.

IOKASTE: Ah, miserable!
That is the only word I have for you now.
That is the only word I can ever have.

(Exit into the palace.)
CHORAGOS: Why has she left us, Oedipus? Why has
she gone

155 In such a passion of sorrow? I fear this silence:
Something dreadful may come of it.

OEDIPUS: Let it come!

160 However base my birth, I must know about it.
The Queen, like a woman, is perhaps ashamed
To think of my low origin. But I
Am a child of Luck; I can not be dishonored.
Luck is my mother; the passing months, my
brothers,
Have seen me rich and poor.

If this is so,
How could I wish that I were someone else?
How could I not be glad to know my birth?

ODE 3 • Strophe

5 CHORUS: If ever the coming time were known
To my heart's pondering,
Kithairon, now by Heaven I see the torches
At the festival of the next full moon,
And see the dance, and hear the choir sing
A grace to your gentle shade:
Mountain where Oedipus was found,
O mountain guard of a noble race!
10 May the god⁹ who heals us lend his aid,
And let that glory come to pass
For our king's cradling-ground.

9. god: Apollo.

Antistrophe

15 Of the nymphs that flower beyond the years,
Who bore you,⁹ royal child,
To Pan⁹ of the hills or the timberline Apollo,
Cold in delight where the upland clears,
Or Hermes⁹ for whom Kyllene's⁹ heights are
piled?

Or flushed as evening cloud,
Great Dionysos,⁹ roamer of mountains,
He — was it he who found you there,
20 And caught you up in his own proud
Arms from the sweet god-ravisher
Who laughed by the Muses'⁹ fountains?

SCENE 4

OEDIPUS: Sirs: though I do not know the man,
I think I see him coming, this shepherd we want:
He is old, like our friend here, and the men
Bringing him seem to be servants of my house.
5 But you can tell, if you have ever seen him.

(Enter Shepherd escorted by Servants.)

CHORAGOS: I know him, he was Laios' man. You
can trust him.

OEDIPUS: Tell me first, you from Corinth: is this the
shepherd
We were discussing?

10 MESSENGER: This is the very man.

OEDIPUS (to Shepherd): Come here. No, look at me.
You must answer

15 Everything I ask. — You belonged to Laios?
SHEPHERD: Yes: born his slave, brought up in his
house.

OEDIPUS: Tell me: what kind of work did you do
for him?

SHEPHERD: I was a shepherd of his, most of my life.

OEDIPUS: Where mainly did you go for pasturage?

SHEPHERD: Sometimes Kithairon, sometimes the hills
near-by.

15 OEDIPUS: Do you remember ever seeing this man
out there?

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

13. Who bore you: The Chorus is asking if Oedipus is the son of an immortal nymph and a god: Pan, Apollo, Hermes, or Dionysus. 14. Pan: God of nature, forests, flocks, and shepherds, depicted as half-man and half-goat. 16. Hermes: Son of Zeus, messenger of the gods. Kyllene: Mountain reputed to be the birthplace of Hermes; also the center of a cult to Hermes. 18. Dionysos: (Dionysus) God of wine around whom wild, orgiastic rituals developed; also called Bacchus. 22. Muses: Nine sister goddesses who presided over poetry and music, art and sciences.

- OEDIPUS: This man standing here. Have you ever seen him before?
- SHEPHERD: No. At least, not to my recollection.
- 20 MESSENGER: And that is not strange, my lord. But I'll refresh
His memory: he must remember when we two Spent three whole seasons together, March to September,
On Kithairon or thereabouts. He had two flocks; I had one. Each autumn I'd drive mine home
25 And he would go back with his to Laios' sheepfold. —
Is this not true, just as I have described it?
- SHEPHERD: True, yes; but it was all so long ago.
- MESSENGER: Well, then: do you remember, back in those days,
That you gave me a baby boy to bring up as my own?
- 30 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
35 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.
- 40 SHEPHERD: Unhappy king! What more do you wish to learn?
- OEDIPUS: Did you give this man the child he speaks of?
- SHEPHERD: I did.
And I would to God I had died that very day.
- OEDIPUS: You will die now unless you speak the truth.
- SHEPHERD: Yet if I speak the truth, I am worse than dead.
- OEDIPUS (to Attendant): He intends to draw it out, apparently —
- 45 SHEPHERD: No! I have told you already that I gave him the boy.
- OEDIPUS: Where did you get him? From your house? From somewhere else?
- SHEPHERD: Not from mine, no. A man gave him to me.
- OEDIPUS: Is that man here? Whose house did he belong to?
- SHEPHERD: For God's love, my king, do not ask me any more!
- 50 OEDIPUS: You are a dead man if I have to ask you again.
- SHEPHERD: Then . . . Then the child was from the palace of Laios.
- OEDIPUS: A slave child? or a child of his own line?
- SHEPHERD: Ah, I am on the brink of dreadful speech!
- OEDIPUS: And I of dreadful hearing. Yet I must hear.
- 55 SHEPHERD: If you must be told, then . . .
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 . . . 60
- OEDIPUS: Tell me.
- SHEPHERD: 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,
And I thought that this man would take him far away
To his own country.
He saved him — but for what a fate! 65
For 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,
70 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!
- (He rushes into the palace.)
- ODE 4 • Strophe 1 _____
- CHORUS: Alas for the seed of men.
What measure shall I give these generations
That breathe on the void and are void
And exist and do not exist?
Who bears more weight of joy
5 Than mass of sunlight shifting in images,



The Shepherd (Oliver Cliff) tells Oedipus (Kenneth Welsh) the truth about his birth in the Guthrie Theater Company's 1973 production directed by Michael Langham.

Or who shall make his thought stay on
That down time drifts away?
Your splendor is all fallen.
10 O naked brow of wrath and tears,
O change of Oedipus!
I who saw your days call no man blest —
Your great days like ghosts gone.

Antistrophe 1

That mind was a strong bow.
15 Deep, how deep you drew it then, hard archer,
At a dim fearful range,
And brought dear glory down!
You overcame the stranger^o —
The virgin with her hooking lion claws —
20 And though death sang, stood like a tower
To make pale Thebes take heart.
Fortress against our sorrow!
True king, giver of laws,
Majestic Oedipus!
25 No prince in Thebes had ever such renown,
No prince won such grace of power.

Strophe 2

And now of all men ever known
Most pitiful is this man's story:
His fortunes are most changed; his state
30 Fallen to a low slave's
Ground under bitter fate.
O Oedipus, most royal one!
The great door^o that expelled you to the light
Gave at night — ah, gave night to your glory:
35 As to the father, to the fathering son.
All understood too late.
How could that queen whom Laios won,
The garden that he harrowed at his height,
Be silent when that act was done?

Antistrophe 2

40 But all eyes fail before time's eye,
All actions come to justice there.
Though never willed, though far down the deep
past,
Your bed, your dread sirings,
Are brought to book at last.
45 Child by Laios doomed to die,
Then doomed to lose that fortunate little death,
Would God you never took breath in this air
That with my wailing lips I take to cry:
For I weep the world's outcast.
50 I was blind, and now I can tell why:

18. stranger: The Sphinx. 33. door: Iokaste's womb.

Asleep, for you had given ease of breath
To Thebes, while the false years went by.

EXODOS^o

(Enter, from the palace, Second Messenger.)

SECOND MESSENGER: Elders of Thebes, most
honored in this land,
What horrors are yours to see and hear, what
weight
Of sorrow to be endured, if, true to your birth,
You venerate the line of Labdakos!
I think neither Istros nor Phasis, those great
5 rivers,
Could purify this place of all the evil
It shelters now, or soon must bring to light —
Evil not done unconsciously, but willed.

The greatest griefs are those we cause ourselves.
CHORAGOS: Surely, friend, we have grief enough
already;

What new sorrow do you mean?

SECOND MESSENGER: The queen is dead.

CHORAGOS: O miserable queen! But at whose
hand?

SECOND 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. 15

When she had left us,
In passionate silence, passing through the court,
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 20

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. 25

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.

Exodos: Final scene.

From one to another of us he went, begging a sword,
 Hunting the wife who was not his wife, the mother
 Whose womb had carried his own children and himself.
 I do not know: it was none of us aided him,
 But surely one of the gods was in control!
 For 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 saw 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.

I would blot out from 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.

So from the unhappiness of two this evil has sprung,
 A curse on the man and woman alike. The old
 Happiness of the house of Labdakos
 Was happiness enough: where is it today?
 It is all wailing and ruin, disgrace, death — all
 The misery of mankind that has a name —
 And it is wholly and for ever theirs.

CHORAGOS: Is he in agony still? Is there no rest for him?
 SECOND MESSENGER: He is calling for someone to open the doors wide

So that all the children of Kadmos may look upon
 His father's murderer, his mother's — no,
 I can not say it!
 And then he will leave Thebes, 65
 Self-exiled, in order that the curse
 Which he himself pronounced may depart from the house.
 He is weak, and there is none to lead him,
 So terrible is his suffering.
 But you will see:
 Look, the doors are opening; in a moment 70
 You will see a thing that would crush a heart of stone.

(The central door is opened; Oedipus, blinded, is led in.)

CHORAGOS: Dreadful indeed for men to see.
 Never have my own eyes
 Looked on a sight so full of fear.

Oedipus! 75
 What madness came upon you, what demon
 Leaped on your life with heavier
 Punishment than a mortal man can bear?
 No: I can not even
 Look at you, poor ruined one. 80
 And I would speak, question, ponder,
 If I were able. No.
 You make me shudder.

OEDIPUS: God. God. 85
 Is there a sorrow greater?
 Where shall I find harbor in this world?
 My voice is hurled far on a dark wind.
 What has God done to me?
 CHORAGOS: Too terrible to think of, or to see.

Strophe 1

OEDIPUS: O cloud of night, 90
 Never to be turned away: night coming on,
 I can not tell how: night like a shroud!
 My fair winds brought me here.

O God. Again
 The pain of the spikes where I had sight,
 The flooding pain 95
 Of memory, never to be gouged out.

CHORAGOS: This is not strange.
 You suffer it all twice over, remorse in pain,
 Pain in remorse.

Antistrophe 1

OEDIPUS: Ah dear friend 100
 Are you faithful even yet, you alone?

Are you still standing near me, will you stay
here,
Patient, to care for the blind?

The blind man!

105 Yet even blind I know who it is attends me,
By the voice's tone —
Though my new darkness hide the comforter.

CHORAGOS: Oh fearful act!

What god was it drove you to rake black
Night across your eyes?

Strophe 2

110 OEDIPUS: Apollo. Apollo. Dear
Children, the god was Apollo.
He brought my sick, sick fate upon me.
But the blinding hand was my own!
How could I bear to see

115 When all my sight was horror everywhere?

CHORAGOS: Everywhere; that is true.

OEDIPUS: And now what is left?

Images? Love? A greeting even,
Sweet to the senses? Is there anything?

120 Ah, no, friends: lead me away.
Lead me away from Thebes.

Lead the great wreck

And hell of Oedipus, whom the gods hate.

CHORAGOS: Your misery, you are not blind to that.

Would God you had never found it out! —

Antistrophe 2

125 OEDIPUS: Death take the man who unbound
My feet on that hillside
And delivered me from death to life! What life?
If only I had died,
This weight of monstrous doom
Could not have dragged me and my darlings
130 down.

CHORAGOS: I would have wished the same.

OEDIPUS: Oh never to have come here
With my father's blood upon me! Never
To have been the man they call his mother's
husband!

135 Oh accurst! Oh child of evil,
To have entered that wretched bed —
the selfsame one!

More primal than sin itself, this fell to me.

CHORAGOS: I do not know what words to offer
you.

You were better dead than alive and blind.

140 OEDIPUS: Do not counsel me any more. 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

145 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?

Ah never, never! Nor this town with its high
walls,

Nor the holy images of the gods.

For I,

150 Thrice miserable! — Oedipus, noblest of all the
line

Of Kadmos, have condemned myself to enjoy
These things no more, by my own malediction

Expelling that man whom the gods declared
To be a defilement in the house of Laios.

155 After exposing the rankness of my own guilt,
How could I look men frankly in the eyes?

No, I swear it,

If I could have stifled my hearing at its source,
I would have done it and made all this body

160 A tight cell of misery, blank to light and sound:
So I should have been safe in my dark mind
Beyond external evil.

Ah Kithairon!

Why did you shelter me? When I was cast upon
you,

165 Why did I not die? Then I should never
Have shown the world my execrable birth.

Ah Polybos! Corinth, city that I believed
The ancient seat of my ancestors: how fair
I seemed, your child! And all the while this evil
Was cancerous within me!

For I am sick

170 In my own being, sick in my origin.

O three roads, dark ravine, woodland and way
Where three roads met; you, drinking my
father's blood,

My own blood, spilled by my own hand: can
you remember

The unspeakable things I did there, and the
things

175 I went on from there to do?

O marriage, marriage!

The act that engendered me, and again the act
Performed by the son in the same bed —

Ah, the net

Of incest, mingling fathers, brothers, sons,
With brides, wives, mothers: the last evil

180

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.

185 Come, lead me. You need not fear to touch me.
Of all men, I alone can bear this guilt.

(Enter Kreon.)

CHORAGOS: Kreon is here now. As to what you
ask,

He may decide the course to take. He only
Is left to protect the city in your place.

OEDIPUS: Alas, how can I speak to him? What right
190 have I
To beg his courtesy whom I have deeply
wronged?

KREON: I have not come to mock you, Oedipus,
Or to reproach you, either.

(To Attendants.) — You, standing there:

195 If you have lost all respect for man's dignity,
At least respect the flame of Lord Helios:
Do not allow this pollution to show itself
Openly here, an affront to the earth
And Heaven's rain and the light of day. No,
take him

200 Into the house as quickly as you can.
For it is proper
That only the close kindred see his grief.

OEDIPUS: I pray you in God's name, since your
courtesy

205 Ignores my dark expectation, visiting
With mercy this man of all men most execrable:
Give me what I ask — for your good, not for
mine.

KREON: And what is it 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.

KREON: I should have done that before now —
only,

210 God's will had not been wholly revealed to me.

OEDIPUS: But his command is plain: the parricide
Must be destroyed. I am that evil man.

KREON: That is the sense of it, yes; but as things
are,

We had best discover clearly what is to be done.

OEDIPUS: You would learn more about a man like
me?

215 KREON: You are ready now to listen to the god.

OEDIPUS: I will listen. But it is to you
That I must turn for help. I beg you, hear me.

The woman is there —

Give her whatever funeral you think proper: 220
She is your sister.

— But let me go, Kreon!

Let me purge my father's Thebes of the pollution
Of my living here, and go out to the wild hills,
To Kithairon, that has won such fame with me,
The tomb my mother and father appointed for
me, 225

And let me die there, as they willed I should.

And yet I know

Death will not ever come to me through sickness
Or in any natural way: I have been preserved
For some unthinkable fate. But let that be. 230

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. 235

And will you let me touch them with my hands
A last time, and let us weep together?

Be kind, my lord,

Great prince, be kind!

Could I but touch them,
They would be mine again, as when I had my
eyes. 240

(Enter Antigone and Ismene, attended.)

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 know you must love them
still. 245

OEDIPUS: May God bless you for this — and be a
friendlier

Guardian to you than he has been to me!

Children, where are you?

Come quickly to my hands: they are your
brother's —

Hands that have brought your father's once clear
eyes 250

To this way of seeing —

Ah dearest ones,
I had neither sight nor knowledge then, your
father

By the woman who was the source of his own
life!

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?
Is there any evil wanting? Your father killed
His father; sowed the womb of her who bore
him;

Engendered you at the fount of his own
existence!

That is what they will say of you.

Then, whom
Can you ever marry? There are no bridegrooms
for you,
And your lives must wither away in sterile
dreaming.

O Kreon, son of Menoikeus!
You are the only father my daughters have,
Since we, their parents, are both of us gone for-
ever.

They are your own blood: you will not let them
Fall into beggary and loneliness;
You will keep them from the miseries that are
mine!

Take pity on them; see, they are only children,
Friendless except for you. Promise me this,
Great prince, and give me your hand in token
of it.

(Kreon clasps his right hand.)

Children:

I could say much, if you could understand me,
But as it is, I have only this prayer for you:
Live where you can, be as happy as you can —
Happier, please God, than God has made your
father. 280

KREON: Enough. You have wept enough. Now go
within.

OEDIPUS: I must; but it is hard.

KREON: Time eases all things.

OEDIPUS: You know my mind, then?

KREON: Say what you desire.

OEDIPUS: Send me from Thebes!

KREON: God grant that I may! 285

OEDIPUS: But since God hates me . . .

KREON: No, he will grant your wish.

OEDIPUS: You promise?

KREON: I can not speak beyond my knowledge.

OEDIPUS: Then lead me in.

KREON: Come now, and leave your children.

OEDIPUS: No! Do not take them from me!

KREON: Think no longer

That you are in command here, but rather think
How, when you were, you served your own
destruction. 290

*(Exeunt into the house all but the Chorus; the Choragos
chants directly to the audience.)*

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, 295
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. 300