The Promethean Library



The Oedipus Plays

Oedipus the King and Oedipus at Colonus, a Study Edition

Sophocles

Both plays complete, translated by Francis Storr

Study Editions · No. 1

The Oedipus Plays



A Study Edition

The Oedipus Plays

Oedipus the King and Oedipus at Colonus, a Study Edition

Oedipus the King and Oedipus at Colonus in the translation of Francis Storr

With headnotes, persons and scene guides, notes and a full study guide



The Promethean Library · Study Editions · No. 1
Transatlantic Press

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The readings. The readings are reproduced word for word from public domain translations. Each translator, edition and date is listed under Sources of the Texts, with what this edition leaves out.

How this edition was made. The introduction, headnotes, questions, reflections, practices, notes, glossary, chronology and reading list were drafted with the help of artificial intelligence and checked by hand against the readings and against published sources. Every quotation in them matches the readings printed in this book word for word, and every fact was checked against a published source before it was printed. The publisher keeps a record of the source checked for each fact. No quotation, fact or story was invented. The readings themselves are copied unchanged from the translations named under Sources of the Texts.

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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.

Sophocles, Oedipus the King, translated by Francis Storr

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Before You Begin

This book prints two plays by Sophocles, complete, in the English verse translation Francis Storr made for the Loeb Classical Library in 1912. *Oedipus the King* shows a ruler who sets out to find a murderer and finds himself. *Oedipus at Colonus* follows the same man, old, blind and banished, to the edge of Athens, where he comes to rest.

Nothing is cut. Every line of both plays appears here in order, divided into nine readings at natural breaks in the action. Each reading is short enough for one sitting, and each line carries a number so that a class or a book club can point to the same words.

You do not need to know Greek, or any Greek myth, to begin. The headnote before each play tells you where you are and what happened earlier. The Scene Guide maps every scene to its reading and lines. The Notes explain names, places and hard phrases in the order you meet them. A Study Guide at the end offers themes, key passages and questions for writing or talk.

Storr wrote in a deliberately old-fashioned English, with "thou" and "thee" and words like "methinks." It takes a page or two to settle in. Read the speeches aloud if you can; the verse moves more easily in the voice than on the page.

The third of Sophocles' plays about this family, *Antigone*, is not printed here. Storr's translation of it appears in an earlier book of this series.

Introduction

Two Plays from One Life

Sophocles wrote three plays about Oedipus and his children, but he did not write them as a set. They were composed many years apart for separate festivals and were never performed together in his lifetime. *Antigone* is generally thought to be early. *Oedipus the King* belongs to the middle of his career. *Oedipus at Colonus* was the last of the three to be written, shortly before his death.

So the two plays in this book are a pair only in their hero. The first is the work of a dramatist at the height of his powers in a city at war and under plague. The second is the work of a very old man looking back, near the end of that war, at the village where he was born. Reading them side by side lets you see one story told twice: once as a catastrophe, once as an ending.

Sophocles of Colonus

Sophocles was born around 497 or 496 BC in Colonus, a village just outside the walls of Athens, and he died in the winter of 406/405 BC at about ninety. He wrote more than 120 plays. Seven survive complete. In some thirty dramatic competitions he is said to have won about twenty-four first prizes and never to have placed lower than second. His first victory came in 468 BC, when he defeated Aeschylus.

He was also a public man. Ancient sources place him among the treasurers of the Athenian empire around 443 or 442 BC, among the ten generals around 441 or 440 (as a junior colleague of Pericles), and on a board of ten advisory commissioners in 413 or 411. The sources differ by a year

or two on each date. Aristotle credits him with adding a third speaking actor to tragedy; another ancient writer gives that step to Aeschylus.

A Festival Theater

Athenian tragedy was performed at the City Dionysia, a spring festival of the god Dionysus held in the month the Athenians called Elaphebolion (March to April). The plays were staged in the Theatre of Dionysus on the south slope of the Acropolis. Three playwrights were chosen each year, and each presented three tragedies and a satyr play. Judges chosen by lot awarded the prizes.

Never more than three actors spoke in a play. All were men, and all wore masks, which let one actor play several parts, women included. A chorus of twelve or fifteen, in matching masks, sang and danced in the orchestra, the "dancing place" in front of the stage building. Its leader could step into the action and speak for the group. When you see Storr's choral headings, "Strophe" and "Antistrophe," you are seeing the bones of these songs: a stanza and its matching answer, sung to the same pattern of meter.

The Story Behind the First Play

The first play opens long after the crucial events. Its audience knew the outline, and the play lets it come out piece by piece. Laius, king of Thebes, was warned by an oracle that his son would kill him. When a son was born, the baby's ankles were pinned together and he was given to a servant to be left on Mount Cithaeron. The servant pitied the child and handed him to a shepherd from Corinth, and the childless king and queen of Corinth raised him as their own.

Grown up and taunted at a banquet as no true son, Oedipus went to Apollo's oracle at Delphi and heard that he would kill his father and marry his mother. To escape that fate he never went back to Corinth. On the road he killed an old man at a place where three roads meet. At

Thebes he answered the riddle of the Sphinx, who held the city in her power, and was made king and given the widowed queen, Jocasta. The play never tells us the riddle. All of this happened years before the first line.

How Oedipus the King Works

The play is an investigation. A plague is destroying Thebes. Apollo says it will end when the killer of Laius is found. Oedipus, who once saved the city with his mind, promises to find him, and he curses the killer in public before anyone knows who it is.

Each new witness is called to help, and each brings him closer to himself. The prophet Teiresias tells him the truth in plain words and is dismissed as a fraud. Jocasta, trying to comfort him by proving that oracles fail, mentions the place where three roads meet. A messenger from Corinth, bringing good news, frees him from one fear and confirms the other. The old herdsman who once carried the baby to the mountain finishes the story.

The audience knows the answer from the start, and that knowledge is the source of the play's force. Again and again a character says more than he knows. When Oedipus calls himself, in his proclamation, the dead king's "blood-avenger" who will act "As though he were my sire" (1.264–1.265), every word is true in a way he cannot hear.

The play is often called *Oedipus Rex*. Its Greek title is *Oedipus Tyrannos*. In antiquity a tyrannos was a ruler with no legitimate claim to rule, and the word did not always carry the harsh sense of the English "tyrant." Oedipus believes he is exactly that: a gifted outsider who won a crown. The play's last turn is that he was the lawful heir all along.

The date of the first performance is uncertain. It is often placed around 429 BC, and some scholars connect the plague in the play with the plague that struck Athens in 430 BC, early in the war with Sparta. The production that included it is reported to have won second prize. First prize went to Philocles, a nephew of Aeschylus.

Aristotle's Model Tragedy

About a century later, in the *Poetics*, Aristotle returned to this play again and again to show how tragedy works. He points to the messenger from Corinth, who comes to cheer Oedipus and free him from fear, and by revealing who he is produces the opposite effect. That is Aristotle's model of a reversal. He calls the recognition in this play the best kind, because it arises from the events themselves rather than from tokens or signs, and because it comes at the same moment as the reversal.

Aristotle also says that the ideal tragic figure is neither a villain nor a saint but a man of great name and fortune who falls through some error, and he names Oedipus. His Greek word for that error, *hamartia*, means missing the mark. It is often translated "tragic flaw," but many readers think "error" closer to what Aristotle meant. Your own reading of the play will decide which fits Oedipus better.

The Last Play

Oedipus at Colonus was written near the end of Sophocles' life and first produced in 401 BC, after his death. Some sources say that his grandson, also named Sophocles, staged it; others, including the Standard Ebooks edition used for this book, say that his son Iophon presented it. This book does not choose between them.

Between the writing and the staging, Athens lost its long war with Sparta. The city surrendered in 404 BC and was ruled for a time by a narrow group known as the Thirty, overthrown in 403. The play is full of praise for Athens and for the poet's own village, and that praise was first heard by a city that had lost the war.

Colonus lay a short distance from the city gate, near Plato's Academy and the river Cephissus. It was known for its horses and had a sanctuary of Poseidon, god of horses and the sea. In local legend Oedipus was buried there. The play opens in a grove sacred to the goddesses of vengeance,

called by the Athenians by milder names, such as "The Gracious Ones" (5.42), because it was unwise to speak their true one.

The play has little of the first play's suspense. Its tension lies in a question the first play left open: what becomes of a man who has suffered so much, and what does he become? Oedipus arrives as a polluted beggar and leaves as a power the city will keep. Thebes now wants him back, and his sons want his blessing. He gives his gift to Athens instead, and to his sons he leaves only a curse.

Fate, Knowledge and Blame

Readers often ask whether Oedipus is guilty. The two plays give different answers, and both are worth hearing. In the first play he blinds himself and accepts the full weight of what he did. In the second he argues, at length and with force, that he acted in ignorance and in self-defense and that no just law could condemn him (7.269–7.302). Both plays keep the gods in the background. Apollo foretells, but no god compels Oedipus to ask his questions. His downfall comes from the very qualities that made him great: his speed, his confidence and his refusal to stop.

Storr's Translation

Francis Storr (1839–1919) was an English schoolmaster, educated at Trinity College, Cambridge, who taught at Marlborough College and later became Chief Master of Modern Subjects at Merchant Taylors'. He edited the *Journal of Education* and translated Heine as well as Sophocles. His Sophocles appeared in the Loeb Classical Library in 1912.

Storr translated the spoken scenes into blank verse and the choral songs into rhymed English stanzas of many shapes. His English is consciously antique. He uses "thou" and "ye," old words like "weird" (for fate) and "wot" (know), and he marks with a grave accent an *-ed* that should be sounded as a syllable, as in "world-renownèd" (1.8). Readers

today may find him stiff in places. In return he is close, clear and speakable, and his lyrics give the odes a shape you can hear.

Reading the Plays

The book follows the plays line by line, with nothing left out. Each play has a short headnote, a list of characters, a Scene Guide and its readings. *Oedipus the King* is Readings 1 to 4; *Oedipus at Colonus* is Readings 5 to 9.

Locators. Every line has a number in the form 3.276, which means Reading 3, line 276. Line numbers start again at 1 in each reading. They are this edition's own and do not match the line numbers of the Greek text or of other translations. The Notes, the Scene Guides and the Study Guide all use these locators.

Speakers and directions. Each speech is headed by its speaker's name. Stage directions appear in parentheses, as Storr printed them. Headings such as "Strophe 1" and "Antistrophe 1" mark the paired stanzas of the choral songs.

Gaps in the text. In a few places Storr prints a row of dots, because the Greek there is lost or because a speaker breaks off. These are noted where they occur.

How long it takes. *Oedipus the King* runs to about 12,100 words and *Oedipus at Colonus* to about 13,100. Read silently, either play fits an evening. Read aloud by a group, each takes roughly an hour and a half to two hours, depending on pace and on how much you stop to talk; that is an estimate, not a rule.

For a group. A book club can take one play per meeting, or one or two readings per meeting over a month. A class might begin with Reading 1 and Reading 3 of the first play, then go back for the rest. If you read aloud, give the chorus to two or three voices, sharing the stanzas, and let one reader take the leader's spoken lines.

Old words. Storr's English uses forms you may not know. "Thou," "thee" and "thy" are the familiar "you"; verbs that end in *-est* and *-eth* go with them. "Weird" in Storr usually means fate. "Sire" is father. Most other hard words are explained in the Notes or the Glossary.

First time through. Read for the story. On a second reading, watch how often characters say more than they know.

The Trilogy

Oedipus the King



Oedipus the King

Where and when. Before the royal palace at Thebes. Suppliants of all ages sit at the altars with olive branches wrapped in wool, led by a priest of Zeus. A plague has fallen on the city. Crops fail, cattle die, women lose their children in birth, and the dead lie unburied (1.25–1.34, 1.182–1.183).

What happened before. Years ago a stranger came to Thebes when the city was in the grip of the Sphinx, a monster the play calls the "fell songstress" (1.42) and the "vulture maid" (3.291). He answered her riddle and freed the city. The grateful Thebans made him king, and he married Jocasta, widow of their former king, Laius, who had been killed on a journey shortly before. That stranger is Oedipus, who believes himself the son of Polybus, king of Corinth, and of his queen, Merope. He and Jocasta have four children. Creon, Jocasta's brother, shares in the rule.

When the play begins, Oedipus has sent Creon to Apollo's oracle at Delphi to ask how to save the city. Everything else the audience needs to know comes out in the course of the play, as the characters themselves remember it.

What to listen for. This is a play about finding out. Count the witnesses: Creon with the oracle, the prophet Teiresias, Jocasta, the messenger from Corinth, the old herdsman. Each is called to help and each brings the truth closer. Listen for the language of sight and blindness, from the blind prophet who sees to the king who sees and does not. Notice how often Oedipus's own words, especially his curse on the unknown killer, come back to strike him.

The ending. The last scenes take place after the discovery. A messenger reports what happened inside the palace, and then Oedipus himself comes out. The play does not end with his death. He lives, asks to be sent away

and entrusts his daughters to Creon, and the Chorus warns us to call no one happy until life is over.

The Persons of the Play

- **Oedipus**, king of Thebes.
- **A Priest of Zeus**, spokesman of the suppliants.
- **Creon**, brother of Jocasta.
- **Chorus** of Theban elders.
- **Teiresias**, a blind prophet, led by a boy.
- **Jocasta**, queen, wife of Oedipus and widow of Laius.
- **A Messenger** from Corinth.
- **A Herdsman**, once a servant of Laius.
- **A Second Messenger**, from inside the palace.
- Silent: suppliants, attendants, the boy who leads Teiresias, and the two young daughters of Oedipus (not named in this play).

Scene Guide

- The suppliants and the Priest; Oedipus has sent to Delphi: Reading 1, 1.1–1.90.
- Creon brings the oracle: Reading 1, 1.91–1.155.
- The Chorus enters praying against the plague: Reading 1, 1.156–1.213.
- Oedipus's proclamation and curse: Reading 1, 1.214–1.304.
- Teiresias: Reading 1, 1.305–1.479.
- Ode on the hunted murderer: Reading 1, 1.480–1.511.
- Creon defends himself; Oedipus accuses him: Reading 2, 2.1–2.130.

- Jocasta makes peace; the sung exchange with the Chorus: Reading 2, 2.131–2.193.
- Jocasta's proof that oracles fail; the place where three roads meet: Reading 2, 2.194–2.276.
- Oedipus tells his own story: Reading 2, 2.277–2.369.
- Ode on the eternal laws and the pride of tyrants: Reading 2, 2.370–2.410.
- Jocasta prays to Apollo: Reading 3, 3.1–3.15.
- The messenger from Corinth: Polybus is dead: Reading 3, 3.16–3.76.
- The secret of the foundling; Jocasta leaves: Reading 3, 3.77–3.181.
- Song to Mount Cithaeron: Reading 3, 3.182–3.193.
- The Herdsman: Reading 3, 3.194–3.279.
- Ode on the races of mortal men: Reading 3, 3.280–3.311.
- The Second Messenger tells of Jocasta's death and the blinding: Reading 4, 4.1–4.81.
- Oedipus blinded; the lament with the Chorus: Reading 4, 4.82–4.188.
- Creon; Oedipus's requests; his daughters: Reading 4, 4.189–4.289.
- Oedipus led indoors; the Chorus's last words: Reading 4, 4.290–4.312.

Reading 1. *The Plague, the Curse and the Prophet. (1.1–1.511: the prologue, the Chorus's entry song, the proclamation, Teiresias, and the first choral ode.)*

❧

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-renownèd 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 wreathèd 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 succour, whether by a voice from heaven
Whispered, or haply known by human wit.
Tried counsellors, 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 saviour 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 fail.

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 harbour 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, whoe'er 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-traveller
To give some clue that might be followed up?

Creon

But one escaped, 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, *I* 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.

STROPHE 1

Chorus

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.

ANTISTROPHE 1

First on Athenè 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!

STROPHE 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 downstriken goes,
Swifter than the wind bird's flight,
Swifter than the Fire-God's might,
To the westering shores of Night.

ANTISTROPHE 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!

STROPHE 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 unharboured 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!

ANTISTROPHE 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 Evoē 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, harbour 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 travellers.

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-inspirèd 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 willst 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 willst,
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 empiry 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 tricksy 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 *I* came,
The simple Oedipus; *I* 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 fulfil 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 striken 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 knew 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.

STROPHE 1

Chorus

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.

ANTISTROPHE 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.

STROPHE 2

Sore perplexèd 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?

ANTISTROPHE 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 wingèd 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?

READING 2. *Creon and Jocasta. (2.1–2.410: Creon on trial, Jocasta's peace-making, the two stories of the road, and the second choral ode.)*

❧

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-facèd 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 agone.

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 striken, thus to voice
Your private injuries? Go in, my lord;
Go home, my brother, and forebear 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 practising
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.

STROPHE 1

Chorus

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!

STROPHE 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 striken 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.

ANTISTROPHE 1

Chorus

Lady, lead indoors thy consort; wherefore longer here delay?

Jocasta

Tell me first how rose the fray.

Chorus

Rumours bred unjust suspicions and injustice rankles sore.

Jocasta

Were both at fault then?

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.

ANTISTROPHE 2

Chorus

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 venomed 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.
Warned by the oracle I turned and fled—
And Corinth henceforth was to me unknown
Save as I knew its region by the stars;—
Whither, I cared not, so I never might
Behold my doom of infamy fulfilled.
And in my wanderings I reached the place
Where, as thy story runs, the king was slain.

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-abhorred?
Wretch whom no sojourner, no citizen
May harbour 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 mislikes.

Exeunt Oedipus and Jocasta.

STROPHE 1

Chorus

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.

ANTISTROPHE 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.

STROPHE 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?

ANTISTROPHE 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.

Reading 3. *The Messenger from Corinth and the Herdsman. (3.1–3.311: Jocasta's prayer, the news from Corinth, the Herdsman's confession, and the ode on mortal happiness.)*

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

From Corinth I. The message wherewithal
I stand entrusted thou shalt hear anon.
'Twill please thee surely, yet perchance offend.

Jocasta

Declare it and explain this double sense.

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 it 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 fantasies 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 dreadest 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 saviour in that hour, my son.

Oedipus
My saviour? 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.

Oedipus

What, did another find me, not thyself?

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 humour 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.

STROPHE

Chorus

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!

ANTISTROPHE

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 agèd messenger; besides
I seem to recognise 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 recognise 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 neighbouring 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 offence?

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.

STROPHE 1

Chorus

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.

ANTISTROPHE 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 saviour and the land's strong tower.

We hailed thee king and from that day adored
Of mighty Thebes the universal lord.

STROPHE 2

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

ANTISTROPHE 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.

Reading 4. *The Self-Blinded King. (4.1–4.312: the report from inside the palace, the blinded Oedipus, Creon, the daughters, and the end of the play.)*

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 apprehend.
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 wrenchèd 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.

STROPHE 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 agonising memory?

Chorus

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

ANTISTROPHE 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 recognise.

Chorus

O doer of dread deeds, how couldst thou mar
Thy vision thus? What demon goaded thee?

STROPHE 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!

ANTISTROPHE 2

Oedipus

My curse on him whoe'er unrived
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 harbour 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.

Creon

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 bee 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 behoved 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 reck 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 willst,
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.

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 jeopardise
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

So thou yieldest to my pleading?

Creon

When I speak I mean it so.

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.

The Trilogy

Oedipus at Colonus



Oedipus at Colonus

Where and when. Colonus, a village a short walk from Athens, years after the end of *Oedipus the King*. At the back is a grove sacred to the goddesses of vengeance, whom the local people call by gentler names (5.39–5.43). Nearby are an altar of Poseidon and a rocky seat. Oedipus, old and blind, enters on the arm of his daughter Antigone.

What happened before. The first play ended with Oedipus begging to be sent away. He tells us here that the city did not banish him at once. When his first grief was past and he wished to stay, Thebes drove him out, and his sons did nothing to help (6.118–6.130). Since then Antigone has led him from place to place, begging their bread, while his other daughter, Ismene, has carried news to him in secret (6.29–6.41).

Meanwhile his sons have quarreled over the throne. At first they meant to leave it to Creon. Then the younger drove out the elder, Polyneices, who went to Argos, married the king's daughter and raised an army of seven champions against Thebes (6.50–6.66; 8.196–8.229). A new oracle says that the side which holds Oedipus, living or dead, will prevail (6.74–6.77; 8.234–8.235). Long ago Apollo had promised Oedipus that he would end his life in a land sacred to these goddesses and bring a blessing to those who received him (5.86–5.95).

What to listen for. The play is built on visitors. After the Stranger and the elders of Colonus come Ismene, Theseus, Creon and Polyneices, and each wants something from the blind man on the rock. Listen for how Oedipus changes as the play goes on: from a beggar who asks only for a little, to a man who argues his own innocence, to one who leads the way himself. Listen too for the praise of Athens and of Colonus, and for the way the play links Oedipus's grave to the city's future.

The ending. Thunder announces his death. Oedipus, who has been led everywhere, leads Theseus and his daughters to the place where he must die. What happens there is reported by a messenger and seen by Theseus alone. The daughters' lament closes the play, and Antigone's last words turn toward Thebes and the quarrel of her brothers, the story that her own play will tell.

The Persons of the Play

- **Oedipus**, once king of Thebes, now blind and in exile.
- **Antigone**, his daughter, who guides him.
- **A Stranger**, a man of Colonus.
- **Chorus** of elders of Colonus.
- **Ismene**, his younger daughter.
- **Theseus**, king of Athens, son of Aegeus.
- **Creon**, sent from Thebes, Oedipus's kinsman.
- **Polyneices**, elder son of Oedipus.
- **A Messenger**.
- Silent: Ismene's servant, Creon's guards, Theseus's attendants.

Scene Guide

- Arrival at the grove: Reading 5, 5.1–5.32.
- The Stranger names the place: Reading 5, 5.33–5.80.
- Oedipus prays to the goddesses: Reading 5, 5.81–5.114.
- The elders search the grove; Oedipus reveals his name; Antigone pleads: Reading 5, 5.115–5.248.
- Oedipus appeals to Athens; the elders send for Theseus: Reading 5, 5.249–5.301.

- Ismene is seen approaching: Reading 5, 5.302–5.315.
- Ismene's news of the brothers and the new oracle: Reading 6, 6.1–6.144.
- The rite of atonement: Reading 6, 6.145–6.195.
- The elders question Oedipus about his past: Reading 6, 6.196–6.256.
- Theseus receives Oedipus: Reading 6, 6.257–6.379.
- Ode in praise of Colonus: Reading 6, 6.380–6.424.
- Creon is seen approaching: Reading 6, 6.425–6.431.
- Creon's appeal and Oedipus's answer: Reading 7, 7.1–7.93.
- The seizure of the daughters: Reading 7, 7.94–7.184.
- Theseus confronts Creon: Reading 7, 7.185–7.238.
- Creon's defense and Oedipus's reply: Reading 7, 7.239–7.318.
- Theseus takes Creon to find the girls: Reading 7, 7.319–7.345.
- Ode on the rescue: Reading 7, 7.346–7.406.
- The daughters return; Oedipus thanks Theseus: Reading 8, 8.1–8.58.
- A suppliant at Poseidon's altar; Antigone pleads for a hearing: Reading 8, 8.59–8.117.
- Ode on old age: Reading 8, 8.118–8.155.
- Polyneices: Reading 8, 8.156–8.248.
- Oedipus's curse: Reading 8, 8.249–8.299.
- Polyneices and Antigone part: Reading 8, 8.300–8.349.
- Thunder; Theseus is summoned: Reading 9, 9.1–9.48.
- Oedipus's last charge; he leads the way: Reading 9, 9.49–9.104.
- Prayer to the powers below: Reading 9, 9.105–9.124.
- The Messenger's report: Reading 9, 9.125–9.209.
- The daughters' lament: Reading 9, 9.210–9.299.

• Theseus's promise; the end: Reading 9, 9.300–9.330.

Reading 5. *The Grove at Colonus. (5.1–5.315: the arrival, the Stranger, the elders' entry song and Oedipus's appeal.)*

Enter the blind Oedipus led by his daughter, Antigone.

Oedipus

Child of an old blind sire, Antigone,
What region, say, whose city have we reached?
Who will provide today with scanted dole
This wanderer? 'Tis little that he craves,
And less obtains—that less enough for me;
For I am taught by suffering to endure,
And the long years that have grown old with me,
And last not least, by true nobility.
My daughter, if thou seest a resting place
On common ground or by some sacred grove,
Stay me and set me down. Let us discover
Where we have come, for strangers must inquire
Of denizens, and do as they are bid.

Antigone

Long-suffering father, Oedipus, the towers
That fence the city still are faint and far;
But where we stand is surely holy ground;
A wilderness of laurel, olive, vine;
Within a choir or songster nightingales
Are warbling. On this native seat of rock
Rest; for an old man thou hast travelled far.

Oedipus

Guide these dark steps and seat me there secure.

Antigone
If time can teach, I need not to be told.

Oedipus
Say, prithee, if thou knowest, where we are.

Antigone
Athens I recognise, but not the spot.

Oedipus
That much we heard from every wayfarer.

Antigone
Shall I go on and ask about the place?

Oedipus
Yes, daughter, if it be inhabited.

Antigone
Sure there are habitations; but no need
To leave thee; yonder is a man hard by.

Oedipus
What, moving hitherward and on his way?

Antigone
Say rather, here already. Ask him straight
The needful questions, for the man is here.

Enter Stranger.

Oedipus
O stranger, as I learn from her whose eyes
Must serve both her and me, that thou art here
Sent by some happy chance to serve our doubts—

Stranger
First quit that seat, then question me at large:
The spot thou treadest on is holy ground.

Oedipus
What is the site, to what god dedicate?

Stranger
Inviolable, untrod; goddesses,
Dread brood of Earth and Darkness, here abide.

Oedipus
Tell me the awful name I should invoke?

Stranger
The Gracious Ones, All-seeing, so our folk
Call them, but elsewhere other names are rife.

Oedipus
Then may they show their suppliant grace, for I
From this your sanctuary will ne'er depart.

Stranger
What word is this?

Oedipus
The watchword of my fate.

Stranger
Nay, 'tis not mine to bid thee hence without
Due warrant and instruction from the State.

Oedipus
Now in God's name, O stranger, scorn me not
As a wayfarer; tell me what I crave.

Stranger
Ask; your request shall not be scorned by me.

Oedipus
How call you then the place wherein we bide?

Stranger
Whate'er I know thou too shalt know; the place

Is all to great Poseidon consecrate.
Hard by, the Titan, he who bears the torch,
Prometheus, has his worship; but the spot
Thou treadest, the Brass-footed Threshold named,
Is Athens' bastion, and the neighbouring lands
Claim as their chief and patron yonder knight
Colonus, and in common bear his name.
Such, stranger, is the spot, to fame unknown,
But dear to us its native worshippers.

Oedipus

Thou sayest there are dwellers in these parts?

Stranger

Surely; they bear the name of yonder god.

Oedipus

Ruled by a king or by the general voice?

Stranger

The lord of Athens is our over-lord.

Oedipus

Who is this monarch, great in word and might?

Stranger

Theseus, the son of Aegeus our late king.

Oedipus

Might one be sent from you to summon him?

Stranger

Wherefore? To tell him aught or urge his coming?

Oedipus

Say a slight service may avail him much.

Stranger

How can he profit from a sightless man?

Oedipus

The blind man's words will be instinct with sight.

Stranger

Heed then; I fain would see thee out of harm;
For by the looks, marred though they be by fate,
I judge thee noble: tarry where thou art,
While I go seek the burghers—those at hand,
Not in the city. They will soon decide
Whether thou art to rest or go thy way.

Exit Stranger.

Oedipus

Tell me, my daughter, has the stranger gone?

Antigone

Yes, he has gone; now we are all alone,
And thou may'st speak, dear father, without fear.

Oedipus

Stern-visaged queens, since coming to this land
First in your sanctuary I bent the knee,
Frown not on me or Phoebus, who, when erst
He told me all my miseries to come,
Spake of this respite after many years,
Some haven in a far-off land, a rest
Vouchsafed at last by dread divinities.
"There," said he, "shalt thou round thy weary life,
A blessing to the land wherein thou dwell'st,
But to the land that cast thee forth, a curse."
And of my weird he promised signs should come,
Earthquake, or thunderclap, or lightning flash.
And now I recognise as yours the sign
That led my wanderings to this your grove;
Else had I never lighted on you first,
A wineless man on you loathe the grape,

Or set me on your seat of native rock.
O goddesses, fulfil Apollo's word,
Grant me some consummation of my life,
If haply I appear not all too vile,
A thrall to sorrow worse than any slave.
Hear, gentle daughters of primeval Night,
Hear, namesake of great Pallas; Athens, first
Of cities, pity this dishonoured shade,
The ghost of him who once was Oedipus.

Antigone

Hush! for I see some grey-beards on their way,
Their errand to spy out our resting-place.

Oedipus

I will be mute, and thou shalt guide my steps
Into the covert from the public road,
Till I have learned their drift. A prudent man
Will ever shape his course by what he learns.

Enter Chorus.

STROPHE 1

Chorus

Ha! Where is he? Look around!
Every nook and corner scan!
He the all-presumptuous man,
Whither vanished? search the ground!
A wayfarer, I ween,
A wayfarer, no countryman of ours,
That old man must have been;
Never had native dared to tempt the Powers,
Or enter their demesne,
The Maids in awe of whom each mortal cowers,
Whose name no voice betrays nor cry,
And as we pass them with averted eye,

We move hushed lips in reverent piety.
But now some godless man,
'Tis rumoured, here abides;
The precincts through I scan,
Yet wot not where he hides,
The wretch profane!
I search and search in vain.

Oedipus

I am that man; I know you near
Ears to the blind, they say, are eyes.

Chorus

O dread to see and dread to hear!

Oedipus

Oh sirs, I am no outlaw under ban.

Chorus

Who can he be—Zeus save us!—this old man?

Oedipus

No favourite of fate,
That ye should envy his estate,
O, Sirs, would any happy mortal, say,
Grope by the light of other eyes his way,
Or face the storm upon so frail a stay?

ANTISTROPHE 1

Chorus

Wast thou then sightless from thy birth?
Evil, methinks, and long
Thy pilgrimage on earth.
Yet add not curse to curse and wrong to wrong.
I warn thee, trespass not
Within this hallowed spot,
Lest thou shouldst find the silent grassy glade

Where offerings are laid,
Bowls of spring water mingled with sweet mead.
Thou must not stay,
Come, come away,
Tired wanderer, dost thou heed?
(We are far off, but sure our voice can reach.)
If aught thou would'st beseech,
Speak where 'tis right; till then refrain from speech.

Oedipus

Daughter, what counsel should we now pursue?

Antigone

We must obey and do as here they do.

Oedipus

Thy hand then!

Antigone

Here, O father, is my hand,

Oedipus

O Sirs, if I come forth at your command,
Let me not suffer for my confidence.

STROPHE 2

Chorus

Against thy will no man shall drive thee hence.

Oedipus

Shall I go further?

Chorus

Aye.

Oedipus

What further still?

Chorus

Lead maiden, thou canst guide him where we will.

Antigone

...

Oedipus

...

Antigone

...

Follow with blind steps, father, as I lead.

Oedipus

...

Chorus

In a strange land strange thou art;
To her will incline thy heart;
Honour whatso'er the State
Honours, all she frowns on hate.

Oedipus

Guide me child, where we may range
Safe within the paths of right;
Counsel freely may exchange
Nor with fate and fortune fight.

ANTISTROPHE 2

Chorus

Halt! Go no further than that rocky floor.

Oedipus

Stay where I now am?

Chorus

Yes, advance no more.

Oedipus

May I sit down?

Chorus

Move sideways towards the ledge,
And sit thee crouching on the scarped edge.

Antigone

This is my office, father, O incline—

Oedipus

Ah me! ah me!

Antigone

Thy steps to my steps, lean thine aged frame on mine.

Oedipus

Woe on my fate unblest!

Chorus

Wanderer, now thou art at rest,
Tell me of thy birth and home,
From what far country art thou come,
Led on thy weary way, declare!

Oedipus

Strangers, I have no country. O forbear—

Chorus

What is it, old man, that thou would'st conceal?

Oedipus

Forbear, nor urge me further to reveal—

Chorus

Why this reluctance?

Oedipus

Dread my lineage.

Chorus

Say!

Oedipus

What must I answer, child, ah welladay!

Chorus

Say of what stock thou comest, what man's son—

Oedipus

Ah me, my daughter, now we are undone!

Antigone

Speak, for thou standest on the slippery verge.

Oedipus

I will; no plea for silence can I urge.

Chorus

Will neither speak? Come, Sir, why dally thus!

Oedipus

Know'st one of Laius'—

Chorus

Ha! Who!

Oedipus

Seed of Labdacus—

Chorus

Oh Zeus!

Oedipus

The hapless Oedipus.

Chorus

Art he?

Oedipus

Whate'er I utter, have no fear of me.

Chorus

Begone!

Oedipus

O wretched me!

Chorus

Begone!

Oedipus

O daughter, what will hap anon?

Chorus

Forth from our borders speed ye both!

Oedipus

How keep you then your troth?

Chorus

Heaven's justice never smites
Him who ill with ill requites.
But if guile with guile contend,
Bane, not blessing, is the end.
Arise, begone and take thee hence straightway,
Lest on our land a heavier curse thou lay.

Antigone

O sirs! ye suffered not my father blind,
Albeit gracious and to ruth inclined,
Knowing the deeds he wrought, not innocent,
    But with no ill intent;
    Yet heed a maiden's moan
    Who pleads for him alone;
    My eyes, not reft of sight,
Plead with you as a daughter's might
You are our providence,
O make us not go hence!
O with a gracious nod

Grant us the nigh despaired-of boon we crave?
Hear us, O hear,
But all that ye hold dear,
Wife, children, homestead, hearth and God!
Where will you find one, search ye ne'er so well,
Who 'scapes perdition if a god impel!

Chorus

Surely we pity thee and him alike
Daughter of Oedipus, for your distress;
But as we reverence the decrees of Heaven
We cannot say aught other than we said.

Oedipus

O what avails renown or fair repute?
Are they not vanity? For, look you, now
Athens is held of States the most devout,
Athens alone gives hospitality
And shelters the vexed stranger, so men say.
Have I so found it? I whom ye dislodged
First from my seat of rock and now would drive
Forth from your land, dreading my name alone;
For me you surely dread not, nor my deeds,
Deeds of a man more sinned against than sinning
As I might well convince you, were it meet
To tell my mother's story and my sire's,
The cause of this your fear. Yet am I then
A villain born because in self-defence,
Striken, I struck the striker back again?
E'en had I known, no villainy 'twould prove:
But all unwitting whither I went, I went—
To ruin; my destroyers knew it well,
Wherefore, I pray you, sirs, in Heaven's name,
Even as ye bade me quit my seat, defend me.
O pay not a lip service to the gods

And wrong them of their dues. Bethink ye well,
The eye of Heaven beholds the just of men,
And the unjust, nor ever in this world
Has one sole godless sinner found escape.
Stand then on Heaven's side and never blot
Athens' fair scutcheon by abetting wrong.
I came to you a suppliant, and you pledged
Your honour; O preserve me to the end,
O let not this marred visage do me wrong!
A holy and god-fearing man is here
Whose coming purports comfort for your folk.
And when your chief arrives, whoe'er he be,
Then shall ye have my story and know all.
Meanwhile I pray you do me no despite.

Chorus

The plea thou urgest, needs must give us pause,
Set forth in weighty argument, but we
Must leave the issue with the ruling powers.

Oedipus

Where is he, strangers, he who sways the realm?

Chorus

In his ancestral seat; a messenger,
The same who sent us here, is gone for him.

Oedipus

And think you he will have such care or thought
For the blind stranger as to come himself?

Chorus

Ay, that he will, when once he learns thy name.

Oedipus

But who will bear him word!

Chorus

The way is long,
And many travellers pass to speed the news.
Be sure he'll hear and hasten, never fear;
So wide and far thy name is noised abroad,
That, were he ne'er so spent and loth to move,
He would bestir him when he hears of thee.

Oedipus

Well, may he come with blessing to his State
And me! Who serves his neighbour serves himself.

Antigone

Zeus! What is this? What can I say or think?

Oedipus

What now, Antigone?

Antigone

I see a woman
Riding upon a colt of Aetna's breed;
She wears for headgear a Thessalian hat
To shade her from the sun. Who can it be?
She or a stranger? Do I wake or dream?
'Tis she; 'tis not—I cannot tell, alack;
It is no other! Now her bright'ning glance
Greets me with recognition, yes, 'tis she,
Herself, Ismene!

Oedipus

Ha! what say ye, child?

Antigone

That I behold thy daughter and my sister,
And thou wilt know her straightway by her voice.

Reading 6. *Ismene and Theseus. (6.1–6.431: Ismene's news, the rite of atonement, the questioning, Theseus's welcome, and the ode on Colonus.)*

❧

Enter Ismene.

Ismene

Father and sister, names to me most sweet,
How hardly have I found you, hardly now
When found at last can see you through my tears!

Oedipus

Art come, my child?

Ismene

O father, sad thy plight!

Oedipus

Child, thou art here?

Ismene

Yes, 'twas a weary way.

Oedipus

Touch me, my child.

Ismene

I give a hand to both.

Oedipus

O children—sisters!

Ismene

O disastrous plight!

Oedipus

Her plight and mine?

Ismene

Ay, and my own no less.

Oedipus

What brought thee, daughter?

Ismene

Father, care for thee.

Oedipus

A daughter's yearning?

Ismene

Yes, and I had news
I would myself deliver, so I came
With the one thrall who yet is true to me.

Oedipus

Thy valiant brothers, where are they at need?

Ismene

They are—enough, 'tis now their darkest hour.

Oedipus

Out on the twain! The thoughts and actions all
Are framed and modelled on Egyptian ways.
For there the men sit at the loom indoors
While the wives slave abroad for daily bread.
So you, my children—those whom I behoved
To bear the burden, stay at home like girls,
While in their stead my daughters moil and drudge
Lightening their father's misery. The one
Since first she grew from girlish feebleness
To womanhood has been the old man's guide
And shared my weary wandering, roaming oft
Hungry and footsore through wild forest ways,
In drenching rains and under scorching suns,
Careless herself of home and ease, if so

Her sire might have her tender ministry.
And thou, my child, whilom thou wentest forth,
Eluding the Cadmeians' vigilance,
To bring thy father all the oracles
Concerning Oedipus, and didst make thyself
My faithful lieger, when they banished me.
And now what mission summons thee from home,
What news, Ismene, hast thou for thy father?
This much I know, thou com'st not empty-handed,
Without a warning of some new alarm.

Ismene

The toil and trouble, father, that I bore
To find thy lodging-place and how thou faredst,
I spare thee; surely 'twere a double pain
To suffer, first in act and then in telling;
'Tis the misfortune of thine ill-starred sons
I come to tell thee. At the first they willed
To leave the throne to Creon, minded well
Thus to remove the inveterate curse of old,
A canker that infected all thy race.
But now some god and an infatuate soul
Have stirred betwixt them a mad rivalry
To grasp at sovereignty and kingly power.
Today the hot-brained youth, the younger born,
Is keeping Polyneices from the throne,
His elder, and has thrust him from the land.
The banished brother (so all Thebes reports)
Fled to the vale of Argos, and by help
Of new alliance there and friends in arms,
Swears he will stablish Argos straight as lord
Of the Cadmeian land, or, if he fail,
Exalt the victor to the stars of heaven.
This is no empty tale, but deadly truth,

My father; and how long thy agony,
Ere the gods pity thee, I cannot tell.

Oedipus

Hast thou indeed then entertained a hope
The gods at last will turn and rescue me?

Ismene

Yea, so I read these latest oracles.

Oedipus

What oracles? What hath been uttered, child?

Ismene

Thy country (so it runs) shall yearn in time
To have thee for their weal alive or dead.

Oedipus

And who could gain by such a one as I?

Ismene

On thee, 'tis said, their sovereignty depends.

Oedipus

So, when I cease to be, my worth begins.

Ismene

The gods, who once abased, uplift thee now.

Oedipus

Poor help to raise an old man fallen in youth.

Ismene

Howe'er that be, 'tis for this cause alone
That Creon comes to thee—and comes anon.

Oedipus

With what intent, my daughter? Tell me plainly.

Ismene

To plant thee near the Theban land, and so
Keep thee within their grasp, yet now allow
Thy foot to pass beyond their boundaries.

Oedipus

What gain they, if I lie outside?

Oedipus

Thy tomb,
If disappointed, brings on them a curse.

Oedipus

It needs no god to tell what's plain to sense.

Ismene

Therefore they fain would have thee close at hand,
Not where thou would'st be master of thyself.

Oedipus

Mean they to shroud my bones in Theban dust?

Ismene

Nay, father, guilt of kinsman's blood forbids.

Oedipus

Then never shall they be my masters, never!

Ismene

Thebes, thou shalt rue this bitterly some day!

Oedipus

When what conjunction comes to pass, my child?

Ismene

Thy angry wraith, when at thy tomb they stand.

Oedipus

And who hath told thee what thou tell'st me, child?

Ismene

Envoys who visited the Delphic hearth.

Oedipus

Hath Phoebus spoken thus concerning me?

Ismene

So say the envoys who returned to Thebes.

Oedipus

And can a son of mine have heard of this?

Ismene

Yea, both alike, and know its import well.

Oedipus

They knew it, yet the ignoble greed of rule
Outweighed all longing for their sire's return.

Ismene

Grievous thy words, yet I must own them true.

Oedipus

Then may the gods ne'er quench their fatal feud,
And mine be the arbitrament of the fight,
For which they now are arming, spear to spear;
That neither he who holds the scepter now
May keep this throne, nor he who fled the realm
Return again. *They* never raised a hand,
When I their sire was thrust from hearth and home;
When I was banned and banished, what recked they?
Say you 'twas done at my desire, a grace
Which the State, yielding to my wish, allowed?
Not so; for, mark you, on that very day
When in the tempest of my soul I craved
Death, even death by stoning, none appeared
To further that wild longing, but anon,
When time had numbed my anguish and I felt

My wrath had all outrun those errors past,
Then, then it was the city went about
By force to oust me, respited for years;
And they my sons, who should as sons have helped,
Did nothing: and, one little word from them
Was all I needed, and they spoke no word,
But let me wander on forevermore,
A banished man, a beggar. These two maids
Their sisters, girls, gave all their sex could give,
Food and safe harbourage and filial care;
While their two brethren sacrificed their sire
For lust of power and sceptred sovereignty.
No! me they ne'er shall win for an ally,
Nor will this Theban kingship bring them gain;
That know I from this maiden's oracles,
And those old prophecies concerning me,
Which Phoebus now at length has brought to pass.
Come Creon then, come all the mightiest
In Thebes to seek me; for if ye my friends,
Championed by those dread Powers indigenous,
Espouse my cause; then for the State ye gain
A great deliverer, for my foemen bane.

Chorus

Our pity, Oedipus, thou needs must move,
Thou and these maidens; and the stronger plea
Thou urgest, as the saviour of our land,
Disposes me to counsel for thy weal.

Oedipus

Aid me, kind sirs; I will do all you bid.

Chorus

First make atonement to the deities,
Whose grove by trespass thou didst first profane.

Oedipus

After what manner, stranger? Teach me, pray.

Chorus

Make a libation first of water fetched
With undefilèd hands from living spring.

Oedipus

And after I have gotten this pure draught?

Chorus

Bowls thou wilt find, the carver's handiwork;
Crown thou the rims and both the handles crown—

Oedipus

With olive shoots or blocks of wool, or how?

Chorus

With wool from fleece of yearling freshly shorn.

Oedipus

What next? how must I end the ritual?

Chorus

Pour thy libation, turning to the dawn.

Oedipus

Pouring it from the urns whereof ye spake?

Chorus

Yea, in three streams; and be the last bowl drained
To the last drop.

Oedipus

And wherewith shall I fill it,
Ere in its place I set it? This too tell.

Chorus

With water and with honey; add no wine.

Oedipus

And when the embowered earth hath drunk thereof?

Chorus

Then lay upon it thrice nine olive sprays
With both thy hands, and offer up this prayer.

Oedipus

I fain would hear it; that imports the most.

Chorus

That, as we call them Gracious, they would deign
To grant the suppliant their saving grace.
So pray thyself or whoso pray for thee,
In whispered accents, not with lifted voice;
Then go and look not back. Do as I bid,
And I shall then be bold to stand thy friend;
Else, stranger, I should have my fears for thee.

Oedipus

Hear ye, my daughters, what these strangers say?

Antigone

We listened, and attend thy bidding, father.

Oedipus

I cannot go, disabled as I am
Doubly, by lack of strength and lack of sight;
But one of you may do it in my stead;
For one, I trow, may pay the sacrifice
Of thousands, if his heart be leal and true.
So to your work with speed, but leave me not
Untended; for this frame is all too weak
To move without the help of guiding hand.

Ismene

Then I will go perform these rites, but where

To find the spot, this have I yet to learn.

Chorus

Beyond this grove; if thou hast need of aught,
The guardian of the close will lend his aid.

Ismene

I go, and thou, Antigone, meanwhile
Must guard our father. In a parent's cause
Toil, if there be toil, is of no account.

Exit Ismene.

STROPHE 1

Chorus

Ill it is, stranger, to awake
Pain that long since has ceased to ache,
And yet I fain would hear—

Oedipus

What thing?

Chorus

Thy tale of cruel suffering
For which no cure was found,
The fate that held thee bound.

Oedipus

O bid me not (as guest I claim
This grace) expose my shame.

Chorus

The tale is bruited far and near,
And echoes still from ear to ear.
The truth, I fain would hear.

Oedipus

Ah me!

Chorus

I prithee yield.

Oedipus

Ah me!

Chorus

Grant my request, I granted all to thee.

ANTISTROPHE 1

Oedipus

Know then I suffered ills most vile, but none
(So help me Heaven!) from acts in malice done.

Chorus

Say how.

Oedipus

The State around
An all unwitting bridegroom bound
An impious marriage chain;
    That was my bane.

Chorus

Didst thou in sooth then share
A bed incestuous with her that bare—

Oedipus

It stabs me like a sword,
That two-edged word,
O stranger, but these maids—my own—

Chorus

Say on.

Oedipus

Two daughters, curses twain.

Chorus
Oh God!

Oedipus
Sprang from the wife and mother's travail-pain.

STROPHE 2

Chorus
What, then thy offspring are at once—

Oedipus
Too true.
Their father's very sister's too.

Chorus
Oh horror!

Oedipus
Horrors from the boundless deep
Back on my soul in refluent surges sweep.

Chorus
Thou hast endured—

Oedipus
Intolerable woe.

Chorus
And sinned—

Oedipus
I sinnèd not.

Chorus
How so?

Oedipus
I served the State; would I had never won
That graceless grace by which I was undone.

ANTISTROPHE 2

Chorus

And next, unhappy man, thou hast shed blood?

Oedipus

Must ye hear more?

Chorus

A father's?

Oedipus

Flood on flood
Whelms me; that word's a second mortal blow.

Chorus

Murderer!

Oedipus

Yes, a murderer, but know—

Chorus

What canst thou plead?

Oedipus

A plea of justice.

Chorus

How?

Oedipus

I slew who else would me have slain;
I slew without intent,
A wretch, but innocent
In the law's eye, I stand, without a stain.

Chorus

Behold our sovereign, Theseus, Aegeus' son,
Comes at thy summons to perform his part.

Enter Theseus.

Theseus

Oft had I heard of thee in times gone by—
The bloody mutilation of thine eyes—
And therefore know thee, son of Laius.
All that I lately gathered on the way
Made my conjecture doubly sure; and now
Thy garb and that marred visage prove to me
That thou art he. So pitying thine estate,
Most ill-starred Oedipus, I fain would know
What is the suit ye urge on me and Athens,
Thou and the helpless maiden at thy side.
Declare it; dire indeed must be the tale
Whereat *I* should recoil. I too was reared,
Like thee, in exile, and in foreign lands
Wrestled with many perils, no man more.
Wherefore no alien in adversity
Shall seek in vain my succour, nor shalt thou;
I know myself a mortal, and my share
In what the morrow brings no more than thine.

Oedipus

Theseus, thy words so apt, so generous
So comfortable, need no long reply.
Both who I am and of what lineage sprung,
And from what land I came, thou hast declared.
So without prologue I may utter now
My brief petition, and the tale is told.

Theseus

Say on, and tell me what I fain would learn.

Oedipus

I come to offer thee this woe-worn frame,
A gift not fair to look on; yet its worth

More precious far than any outward show.

Theseus

What profit dost thou proffer to have brought?

Oedipus

Hereafter thou shalt learn, not yet, methinks.

Theseus

When may we hope to reap the benefit?

Oedipus

When I am dead and thou hast buried me.

Theseus

Thou cravest life's last service; all before—
Is it forgotten or of no account?

Oedipus

Yea, the last boon is warrant for the rest.

Theseus

The grace thou cravest then is small indeed.

Oedipus

Nay, weigh it well; the issue is not slight.

Theseus

Thou meanest that betwixt thy sons and me?

Oedipus

Prince, they would fain convey me back to Thebes.

Theseus

If there be no compulsion, then methinks
To rest in banishment befits not thee.

Oedipus

Nay, when *I* wished it *they* would not consent.

Theseus

For shame! such temper misbecomes the fallen.

Oedipus

Chide if thou wilt, but first attend my plea.

Theseus

Say on, I wait full knowledge ere I judge.

Oedipus

O Theseus, I have suffered wrongs on wrongs.

Theseus

Would'st tell the old misfortune of thy race?

Oedipus

No, that has grown a byword throughout Greece.

Theseus

What then can be this more than mortal grief?

Oedipus

My case stands thus; by my own flesh and blood
I was expelled my country, and can ne'er
Thither return again, a parricide.

Theseus

Why fetch thee home if thou must dwell apart?

Oedipus

The god has spoken; they must needs obey.

Theseus

What are they threatened by the oracle?

Oedipus

Destruction that awaits them in this land.

Theseus

What can beget ill blood 'twixt them and me?

Oedipus

Dear son of Aegeus, to the gods alone
Is given immunity from eld and death;
But nothing else escapes all-ruinous time.
Earth's might decays, the might of men decays,
Honour grows cold, dishonour flourishes,
There is no constancy 'twixt friend and friend,
Or city and city; be it soon or late,
Sweet turns to bitter, hate once more to love.
If now 'tis sunshine betwixt Thebes and thee
And not a cloud, Time in his endless course
Gives birth to endless days and nights, wherein
The merest nothing shall suffice to cut
With serried spears your bonds of amity.
Then shall my slumbering and buried corpse
In its cold grave drink their warm life-blood up,
If Zeus be Zeus and Phoebus still speak true.
No more: 'tis ill to tear aside the veil
Of mysteries; let me cease as I began:
Enough if thou wilt keep thy plighted troth,
Then shalt thou ne'er complain that Oedipus
Proved an unprofitable and thankless guest,
Except the gods themselves shall play me false.

Chorus

The man, my lord, has from the very first
Declared his power to offer to our land
These and like benefits.

Theseus

Who could reject
The proffered amity of such a friend?
First, he can claim the hospitality
To which by mutual contract we stand pledged:
Next, coming here, a suppliant to the gods,

He pays full tribute to the State and me;
His favours therefore never will I spurn,
But grant him the full rights of citizen;
And, if it suits the stranger here to bide,
I place him in your charge, or if he please
Rather to come with me—choose, Oedipus,
Which of the two thou wilt. Thy choice is mine.

Oedipus

Zeus, may the blessing fall on men like these!

Theseus

What dost thou then decide—to come with me?

Oedipus

Yea, were it lawful—but 'tis rather here—

Theseus

What would'st thou here? I shall not thwart thy wish.

Oedipus

Here shall I vanquish those who cast me forth.

Theseus

Then were thy presence here a boon indeed.

Oedipus

Such shall it prove, if thou fulfil'st thy pledge.

Theseus

Fear not for me; I shall not play thee false.

Oedipus

No need to back thy promise with an oath.

Theseus

An oath would be no surer than my word.

Oedipus
How wilt thou act then?

Theseus
What is it thou fear'st?

Oedipus
My foes will come—

Theseus
Our friends will look to that.

Oedipus
But if thou leave me?

Theseus
Teach me not my duty.

Oedipus
'Tis fear constrains me.

Theseus
My soul knows no fear!

Oedipus
Thou knowest not what threats—

Theseus
I know that none
Shall hale thee hence in my despite. Such threats
Vented in anger oft, are blusterers,
An idle breath, forgot when sense returns.
And for thy foemen, though their words were brave,
Boasting to bring thee back, they are like to find
The seas between us wide and hard to sail.
Such my firm purpose, but in any case
Take heart, since Phoebus sent thee here. My name,
Though I be distant, warrants thee from harm.

STROPHE 1

Chorus

Thou hast come to a steed-famed land for rest,
O stranger worn with toil,
To a land of all lands the goodliest
Colonus' glistening soil.
'Tis the haunt of the clear-voiced nightingale,
Who hid in her bower, among
The wine-dark ivy that wreathes the vale,
Trilleth her ceaseless song;
And she loves, where the clustering berries nod
O'er a sunless, windless glade,
The spot by no mortal footstep trod,
The pleasance kept for the Bacchic god,
Where he holds each night his revels wild
With the nymphs who fostered the lusty child.

ANTISTROPHE 1

And fed each morn by the pearly dew
The starred narcissi shine,
And a wreath with the crocus' golden hue
For the Mother and Daughter twine.
And never the sleepless fountains cease
That feed Cephisus' stream,
But they swell earth's bosom with quick increase,
And their wave hath a crystal gleam.
And the Muses' choir will never disdain
To visit this heaven-favoured plain,
Nor the Cyprian queen of the golden rein.

STROPHE 2

And here there grows, unpruned, untamed,
Terror to foemen's spear,
A tree in Asian soil unnamed,

By Pelops' Dorian isle unclaimed,
Self-nurtured year by year;
'Tis the grey-leaved olive that feeds our boys;
Nor youth nor withering age destroys
The plant that the Olive Planter tends
And the Grey-eyed Goddess herself defends.

ANTISTROPHE 2

Yet another gift, of all gifts the most
Prized by our fatherland, we boast—
The might of the horse, the might of the sea;
Our fame, Poseidon, we owe to thee,
Son of Kronos, our king divine,
Who in these highways first didst fit
For the mouth of horses the iron bit;
Thou too hast taught us to fashion meet
For the arm of the rower the oar-blade fleet,
Swift as the Nereids' hundred feet
As they dance along the brine.

Antigone

O land extolled above all lands, 'tis now
For thee to make these glorious titles good.

Oedipus

Why this appeal, my daughter?

Antigone

Father, lo!
Creon approaches with his company.

Oedipus

Fear not, it shall be so; if we are old,
This country's vigour has no touch of age.

Reading 7. *Creon's Raid. (7.1–7.406: Creon's appeal, the seizure, Theseus's judgment, the two speeches on guilt, and the ode on the rescue.)*

❧

Enter Creon with attendants.

Creon

Burghers, my noble friends, ye take alarm
At my approach (I read it in your eyes),
Fear nothing and refrain from angry words.
I come with no ill purpose; I am old,
And know the city whither I am come,
Without a peer amongst the powers of Greece.
It was by reason of my years that I
Was chosen to persuade your guest and bring
Him back to Thebes; not the delegate
Of one man, but commissioned by the State,
Since of all Thebans I have most bewailed,
Being his kinsman, his most grievous woes.
O listen to me, luckless Oedipus,
Come home! The whole Cadmeian people claim
With right to have thee back, I most of all,
For most of all (else were I vile indeed)
I mourn for thy misfortunes, seeing thee
An aged outcast, wandering on and on,
A beggar with one handmaid for thy stay.
Ah! who had e'er imagined she could fall
To such a depth of misery as this,
To tend in penury thy stricken frame,
A virgin ripe for wedlock, but unwed,
A prey for any wanton ravisher?
Seems it not cruel this reproach I cast
On thee and on myself and all the race?
Aye, but an open shame cannot be hid.

Hide it, O hide it, Oedipus, thou canst.
O, by our fathers' gods, consent I pray;
Come back to Thebes, come to thy father's home,
Bid Athens, as is meet, a fond farewell;
Thebes thy old foster-mother claims thee first.

Oedipus

O front of brass, thy subtle tongue would twist
To thy advantage every plea of right
Why try thy arts on me, why spread again
Toils where 'twould gall me sorest to be snared?
In old days when by self-wrought woes distraught,
I yearned for exile as a glad release,
Thy will refused the favour then I craved.
But when my frenzied grief had spent its force,
And I was fain to taste the sweets of home,
Then thou would'st thrust me from my country, then
These ties of kindred were by thee ignored;
And now again when thou behold'st this State
And all its kindly people welcome me,
Thou seek'st to part us, wrapping in soft words
Hard thoughts. And yet what pleasure canst thou find
In forcing friendship on unwilling foes?
Suppose a man refused to grant some boon
When you importuned him, and afterwards
When you had got your heart's desire, consented,
Granting a grace from which all grace had fled,
Would not such favour seem an empty boon?
Yet such the boon thou profferest now to me,
Fair in appearance, but when tested false.
Yea, I will proved thee false, that these may hear;
Thou art come to take me, not to take me home,
But plant me on thy borders, that thy State
May so escape annoyance from this land.

That thou shalt never gain, but *this* instead—
My ghost to haunt thy country without end;
And for my sons, this heritage—no more—
Just room to die in. Have not I more skill
Than thou to draw the horoscope of Thebes?
Are not my teachers surer guides than thine—
Great Phoebus and the sire of Phoebus, Zeus?
Thou art a messenger suborned, thy tongue
Is sharper than a sword's edge, yet thy speech
Will bring thee more defeats than victories.
Howbeit, I know I waste my words—begone,
And leave me here; whate'er may be my lot,
He lives not ill who lives withal content.

Creon

Which loses in this parley, I o'erthrown
By thee, or thou who overthrow'st thyself?

Oedipus

I shall be well contented if thy suit
Fails with these strangers, as it has with me.

Creon

Unhappy man, will years ne'er make thee wise?
Must thou live on to cast a slur on age?

Oedipus

Thou hast a glib tongue, but no honest man,
Methinks, can argue well on any side.

Creon

'Tis one thing to speak much, another well.

Oedipus

Thy words, forsooth, are few and all well aimed!

Creon

Not for a man indeed with wits like thine.

Oedipus

Depart! I bid thee in these burghers' name,
And prowl no longer round me to blockade
My destined harbour.

Creon

I protest to these,
Not thee, and for thine answer to thy kin,
If e'er I take thee—

Oedipus

Who against their will
Could take me?

Creon

Though untaken thou shalt smart.

Oedipus

What power hast thou to execute this threat?

Creon

One of thy daughters is already seized,
The other I will carry off anon.

Oedipus

Woe, woe!

Creon

This is but prelude to thy woes.

Oedipus

Hast thou my child?

Creon

And soon shall have the other.

Oedipus

Ho, friends! ye will not surely play me false?
Chase this ungodly villain from your land.

Chorus

Hence, stranger, hence avaunt! Thou doest wrong
In this, and wrong in all that thou hast done.

To his guards.

Creon

'Tis time by force to carry off the girl,
If she refuse of her free will to go.

Antigone

Ah, woe is me! where shall I fly, where find
Succour from gods or men?

Chorus

What would'st thou, stranger?

Creon

I meddle not with him, but her who is mine.

Oedipus

O princes of the land!

Chorus

Sir, thou dost wrong.

Creon

Nay, right.

Chorus

How right?

Creon

I take but what is mine.

Oedipus

Help, Athens!

Chorus

What means this, sirrah? quick unhand her, or
We'll fight it out.

Creon

Back!

Chorus

Not till thou forbear.

Creon

'Tis war with Thebes if I am touched or harmed.

Oedipus

Did I not warn thee?

Chorus

Quick, unhand the maid!

Creon

Command your minions; I am not your slave.

Chorus

Desist, I bid thee.

To the guard.

Creon

And I bid thee march!

Chorus

To the rescue, one and all!
Rally, neighbours to my call!
See, the foe is at the gate!
Rally to defend the State.

Antigone

Ah, woe is me, they drag me hence, O friends.

Oedipus

Where art thou, daughter?

Antigone

Haled along by force.

Oedipus

Thy hands, my child!

Antigone

They will not let me, father.

Creon

Away with her!

Oedipus

Ah, woe is me, ah woe!

Creon

So those two crutches shall no longer serve thee
For further roaming. Since it pleaseth thee
To triumph o'er thy country and thy friends
Who mandate, though a prince, I here discharge,
Enjoy thy triumph; soon or late thou'lt find
Thou art an enemy to thyself, both now
And in time past, when in despite of friends
Thou gav'st the rein to passion, still thy bane.

Chorus

Hold there, sir stranger!

Creon

Hands off, have a care.

Chorus

Restore the maidens, else thou goest not.

Creon

Then Thebes will take a dearer surety soon;
I will lay hands on more than these two maids.

Chorus

What canst thou further?

Creon

Carry off this man.

Chorus

Brave words!

Creon

And deeds forthwith shall make them good.

Chorus

Unless perchance our sovereign intervene.

Oedipus

O shameless voice! Would'st lay an hand on me?

Creon

Silence, I bid thee!

Oedipus

Goddesses, allow
Thy suppliant to utter yet one curse!
Wretch, now my eyes are gone thou hast torn away
The helpless maiden who was eyes to me;
For this to thee and all thy cursèd race
May the great Sun, whose eye is everywhere,
Grant length of days and old age like to mine.

Creon

Listen, O men of Athens, mark ye this?

Oedipus

They mark us both and understand that I

Wronged by the deeds defend myself with words.

Creon

Nothing shall curb my will; though I be old
And single-handed, I will have this man.

Oedipus

O woe is me!

Chorus

Thou art a bold man, stranger, if thou think'st
To execute thy purpose.

Creon

So I do.

Chorus

Then shall I deem this State no more a State.

Creon

With a just quarrel weakness conquers might.

Oedipus

Ye hear his words?

Chorus

Aye words, but not yet deeds,
Zeus knoweth!

Creon

Zeus may haply know, not thou.

Chorus

Insolence!

Creon

Insolence that thou must bear.

Chorus

Haste ye princes, sound the alarm!

Men of Athens, arm ye, arm!
Quickly to the rescue come
Ere the robbers get them home.

Enter Theseus.

Theseus

Why this outcry? What is forward? wherefore was I called away
From the altar of Poseidon, lord of your Colonus? Say!
On what errand have I hurried hither without stop or stay.

Oedipus

Dear friend—those accents tell me who thou art,
Yon man but now hath done me a foul wrong.

Theseus

What is this wrong and who hath wrought it? Speak.

Oedipus

Creon who stands before thee. He it is
Hath robbed me of my all, my daughters twain.

Theseus

What means this?

Oedipus

Thou hast heard my tale of wrongs.

Theseus

Ho! hasten to the altars, one of you,
Command my liegemen leave the sacrifice
And hurry, foot and horse, with rein unchecked,
To where the paths that packmen use diverge,
Lest the two maidens slip away, and I
Become a mockery to this my guest,
As one despoiled by force. Quick, as I bid.
As for this stranger, had I let my rage,
Justly provoked, have play, he had not 'scaped

Scathless and uncorrected at my hands.
But now the laws to which himself appealed,
These and none other shall adjudicate.
Thou shalt not quit this land, till thou hast fetched
The maidens and produced them in my sight.
Thou hast offended both against myself
And thine own race and country. Having come
Unto a State that champions right and asks
For every action warranty of law,
Thou hast set aside the custom of the land,
And like some freebooter art carrying off
What plunder pleases thee, as if forsooth
Thou thoughtest this a city without men,
Or manned by slaves, and me a thing of naught.
Yet not from Thebes this villainy was learnt;
Thebes is not wont to breed unrighteous sons,
Nor would she praise thee, if she learnt that thou
Wert robbing me—aye and the gods to boot,
Haling by force their suppliants, poor maids.
Were I on Theban soil, to prosecute
The justest claim imaginable, I
Would never wrest by violence my own
Without the sanction of your State or King;
I should behave as fits an outlander
Living amongst a foreign folk, but thou
Shamest a city that deserves it not,
Even thine own, and plentitude of years
Have made of thee an old man and a fool.
Therefore again I charge thee as before,
See that the maidens are restored at once,
Unless thou would'st continue here by force
And not by choice a sojourner; so much
I tell thee home and what I say, I mean.

Chorus

Thy case is perilous; though by birth and race
Thou should'st be just, thou plainly doest wrong.

Creon

Not deeming this city void of men
Or counsel, son of Aegeus, as thou say'st
I did what I have done; rather I thought
Your people were not like to set such store
By kin of mine and keep them 'gainst my will.
Nor would they harbour, so I stood assured,
A godless parricide, a reprobate
Convicted of incestuous marriage ties.
For on her native hill of Ares here
(I knew your far-famed Areopagus)
Sits Justice, and permits not vagrant folk
To stay within your borders. In that faith
I hunted down my quarry; and e'en then
I had refrained but for the curses dire
Wherewith he banned my kinsfolk and myself:
Such wrong, methought, had warrant for my act.
Anger has no old age but only death;
The dead alone can feel no touch of spite.
So thou must work thy will; my cause is just
But weak without allies; yet will I try,
Old as I am, to answer deeds with deeds.

Oedipus

O shameless railer, think'st thou this abuse
Defames my grey hairs rather than thine own?
Murder and incest, deeds of horror, all
Thou blurtest forth against me, all I have borne,
No willing sinner; so it pleased the gods
Wrath haply with my sinful race of old,
Since thou could'st find no sin in me myself

For which in retribution I was doomed
To trespass thus against myself and mine.
Answer me now, if by some oracle
My sire was destined to a bloody end
By a son's hand, can this reflect on me,
Me then unborn, begotten by no sire,
Conceivèd in no mother's womb? And if
When born to misery, as born I was,
I met my sire, not knowing whom I met
Or what I did, and slew him, how canst thou
With justice blame the all-unconscious hand?
And for my mother, wretch, art not ashamed,
Seeing she was thy sister, to extort
From me the story of her marriage, such
A marriage as I straightway will proclaim.
For I will speak; thy lewd and impious speech
Has broken all the bonds of reticence.
She was, ah woe is me! she was my mother;
I knew it not, nor she; and she my mother
Bare children to the son whom she had borne,
A birth of shame. But this at least I know,
Wittingly thou aspersest her and me;
But I unwitting wed, unwilling speak.
Nay neither in this marriage or this deed
Which thou art ever casting in my teeth—
A murdered sire—shall I be held to blame.
Come, answer me one question, if thou canst:
If one should presently attempt thy life,
Would'st thou, O man of justice, first inquire
If the assassin was perchance thy sire,
Or turn upon him? As thou lov'st thy life,
On thy aggressor thou would'st turn, nor stay
Debating, if the law would bear thee out.
Such was my case, and such the pass whereto

The gods reduced me; and methinks my sire,
Could he come back to life, would not dissent.
Yet thou, for just thou art not, but a man
Who sticks at nothing, if it serve his plea,
Reproachest me with this before these men.
It serves thy turn to laud great Theseus' name,
And Athens as a wisely governed State;
Yet in thy flatteries one thing is to seek:
If any land knows how to pay the gods
Their proper rites, 'tis Athens most of all.
This is the land whence thou wast fain to steal
Their aged suppliant and hast carried off
My daughters. Therefore to yon goddesses,
I turn, adjure them and invoke their aid
To champion my cause, that thou mayest learn
What is the breed of men who guard this State.

Chorus

An honest man, my liege, one sore bestead
By fortune, and so worthy our support.

Theseus

Enough of words; the captors speed amain,
While we the victims stand debating here.

Creon

What would'st thou? What can I, a feeble man?

Theseus

Show us the trail, and I'll attend thee too,
That, if thou hast the maidens hereabouts,
Thou mayst thyself discover them to me;
But if thy guards outstrip us with their spoil,
We may draw rein; for others speed, from whom
They will not 'scape to thank the gods at home.
Lead on, I say, the captor's caught, and fate

Hath ta'en the fowler in the toils he spread;
So soon are lost gains gotten by deceit.
And look not for allies; I know indeed
Such height of insolence was never reached
Without abettors or accomplices;
Thou hast some backer in thy bold essay,
But I will search this matter home and see
One man doth not prevail against the State.
Dost take my drift, or seem these words as vain
As seemed our warnings when the plot was hatched?

Creon

Nothing thou sayest can I here dispute,
But once at home I too shall act my part.

Theseus

Threaten us and—begone! Thou, Oedipus,
Stay here assured that nothing save my death
Will stay my purpose to restore the maids.

Oedipus

Heaven bless thee, Theseus, for thy nobleness
And all thy loving care in my behalf.

Exeunt Theseus and Creon.

STROPHE 1

Chorus

O when the flying foe,
Turning at last to bay,
Soon will give blow for blow.
Might I behold the fray;
Hear the loud battle roar,
Swell, on the Pythian shore,
Or by the torch-lit bay,
Where the dread Queen and Maid

Cherish the mystic rites,
Rites they to none betray,
Ere on his lips is laid
Secrecy's golden key
By their own acolytes,
Priestly Eumolpidae.

There I might chance behold
Theseus our captain bold
Meet with the robber band,
Ere they have fled the land,
Rescue by might and main
Maidens, the captives twain.

ANTISTROPHE 1

Haply on swiftest steed,
Or in the flying car,
Now they approach the glen,
West of white Oea's scaur.
They will be vanquishèd:
Dread are our warriors, dread
Theseus our chieftain's men.
Flashes each bridle bright,
Charges each gallant knight,
All that our Queen adore,
Pallas their patron, or
Him whose wide floods enring
Earth, the great Ocean-king
Whom Rhea bore.

STROPHE 2

Fight they or now prepare
To fight? a vision rare
Tells me that soon again
I shall behold the twain

Maidens so ill bestead,
By their kin buffeted.
Today, today Zeus worketh some great thing
This day shall victory bring.

O for the wings, the wings of a dove,
To be borne with the speed of the gale,
Up and still upwards to sail
And gaze on the fray from the clouds above.

ANTISTROPHE 2

All-seeing Zeus, O lord of heaven,
To our guardian host be given
Might triumphant to surprise
Flying foes and win their prize.
Hear us, Zeus, and hear us, child
Of Zeus, Athenè undefiled,
Hear, Apollo, hunter, hear,
Huntress, sister of Apollo,
Who the dappled swift-foot deer
O'er the wooded glade dost follow;
Help with your two-fold power
Athens in danger's hour!

O wayfarer, thou wilt not have to tax
The friends who watch for thee with false presage,
For lo, an escort with the maids draws near.

Reading 8. *Polyneices. (8.1–8.349: the daughters restored, the ode on old age, Polyneices' plea and his father's curse.)*

❧

Enter Antigone and Ismene with Theseus.

Oedipus

Where, where? what sayest thou?

Antigone

O father, father,
Would that some god might grant thee eyes to see
This best of men who brings us back again.

Oedipus

My child! and are ye back indeed!

Antigone

Yes, saved
By Theseus and his gallant followers.

Oedipus

Come to your father's arms, O let me feel
A child's embrace I never hoped for more.

Antigone

Thou askest what is doubly sweet to give.

Oedipus

Where are ye then?

Antigone

We come together both.

Oedipus

My precious nurslings!

Antigone

Fathers aye were fond.

Oedipus

Props of my age!

Antigone

So sorrow sorrow props.

Oedipus

I have my darlings, and if death should come,
Death were not wholly bitter with you near.
Cling to me, press me close on either side,
There rest ye from your dreary wayfaring.
Now tell me of your ventures, but in brief;
Brief speech suffices for young maids like you.

Antigone

Here is our saviour; thou should'st hear the tale
From his own lips; so shall my part be brief.

Oedipus

I pray thee do not wonder if the sight
Of children, given o'er for lost, has made
My converse somewhat long and tedious.
Full well I know the joy I have of them
Is due to thee, to thee and no man else;
Thou wast their sole deliverer, none else.
The gods deal with thee after my desire,
With thee and with this land! for fear of heaven
I found above all peoples most with you,
And righteousness and lips that cannot lie.
I speak in gratitude of what I know,
For all I have I owe to thee alone.
Give me thy hand, O Prince, that I may touch it,
And if thou wilt permit me, kiss thy cheek.
What say I? Can I wish that thou should'st touch
One fallen like me to utter wretchedness,
Corrupt and tainted with a thousand ills?
Oh no, I would not let thee if thou would'st.
They only who have known calamity
Can share it. Let me greet thee where thou art,
And still befriend me as thou hast till now.

Theseus

I marvel not if thou hast dallied long
In converse with thy children and preferred
Their speech to mine; I feel no jealousy,
I would be famous more by deeds than words.
Of this, old friend, thou hast had proof; my oath
I have fulfilled and brought thee back the maids
Alive and nothing harmed for all those threats.
And how the fight was won, 'twere waste of words
To boast—thy daughters here will tell thee all.
But of a matter that has lately chanced
On my way hitherward, I fain would have
Thy counsel—slight 'twould seem, yet worthy thought.
A wise man heeds all matters great or small.

Oedipus

What is it, son of Aegeus? Let me hear.
Of what thou askest I myself know naught.

Theseus

'Tis said a man, no countryman of thine,
But of thy kin, hath taken sanctuary
Beside the altar of Poseidon, where
I was at sacrifice when called away.

Oedipus

What is his country? what the suitor's prayer?

Theseus

I know but one thing; he implores, I am told,
A word with thee—he will not trouble thee.

Oedipus

What seeks he? If a suppliant, something grave.

Theseus

He only waits, they say, to speak with thee,

And then unharmed to go upon his way.

Oedipus

I marvel who is this petitioner.

Theseus

Think if there be not any of thy kin
At Argos who might claim this boon of thee.

Oedipus

Dear friend, forbear, I pray.

Theseus

What ails thee now?

Oedipus

Ask it not of me.

Theseus

Ask not what? explain.

Oedipus

Thy words have told me who the suppliant is.

Theseus

Who can he be that I should frown on him?

Oedipus

My son, O king, my hateful son, whose words
Of all men's most would jar upon my ears.

Theseus

Thou sure mightest listen. If his suit offend,
No need to grant it. Why so loth to hear him?

Oedipus

That voice, O king, grates on a father's ears;
I have come to loathe it. Force me not to yield.

Theseus

But he hath found asylum. O beware,
And fail not in due reverence to the god.

Antigone

O heed me, father, though I am young in years.
Let the prince have his will and pay withal
What in his eyes is service to the god;
For our sake also let our brother come.
If what he urges tend not to thy good
He cannot surely wrest perforce thy will.
To hear him then, what harm? By open words
A scheme of villainy is soon bewrayed.
Thou art his father, therefore canst not pay
In kind a son's most impious outrages.
O listen to him; other men like thee
Have thankless children and are choleric,
But yielding to persuasion's gentle spell
They let their savage mood be exorcised.
Look thou to the past, forget the present, think
On all the woe thy sire and mother brought thee;
Thence wilt thou draw this lesson without fail,
Of evil passion evil is the end.
Thou hast, alas, to prick thy memory,
Stern monitors, these ever-sightless orbs.
O yield to us; just suitors should not need
To be importunate, nor he that takes
A favour lack the grace to make return.

Oedipus

Grievous to me, my child, the boon ye win
By pleading. Let it be then; have your way
Only if come he must, I beg thee, friend,
Let none have power to dispose of me.

Theseus

No need, Sir, to appeal a second time.
It likes me not to boast, but be assured
Thy life is safe while any god saves mine.

Exit Theseus.

STROPHE

Chorus

Who craves excess of days,
Scorning the common span
Of life, I judge that man
A giddy wight who walks in folly's ways.
For the long years heap up a grievous load,
Scant pleasures, heavier pains,
Till not one joy remains
For him who lingers on life's weary road
And come it slow or fast,
One doom of fate
Doth all await,
For dance and marriage bell,
The dirge and funeral knell.
Death the deliverer freeth all at last.

ANTISTROPHE

Not to be born at all
Is best, far best that can befall,
Next best, when born, with least delay
To trace the backward way.
For when youth passes with its giddy train,
Troubles on troubles follow, toils on toils,
Pain, pain for ever pain;
And none escapes life's coils.
Envy, sedition, strife,
Carnage and war, make up the tale of life.

Last comes the worst and most abhorred stage
Of unregarded age,
Joyless, companionless and slow,
Of woes the crowning woe.

EPODE

Such ills not I alone,
He too our guest hath known,
E'en as some headland on an iron-bound shore,
Lashed by the wintry blasts and surge's roar,
So is he buffeted on every side
By drear misfortune's whelming tide,
By every wind of heaven o'erborne
Some from the sunset, some from orient morn,
Some from the noonday glow.
Some from Rhipean gloom of everlasting snow.

Antigone

Father, methinks I see the stranger coming,
Alone he comes and weeping plenteous tears.

Oedipus

Who may he be?

Antigone

The same that we surmised.
From the outset—Polyneices. He is here.

Enter Polyneices.

Polyneices

Ah me, my sisters, shall I first lament
My own afflictions, or my aged sire's,
Whom here I find a castaway, with you,
In a strange land, an ancient beggar clad
In antic tatters, marring all his frame,
While o'er the sightless orbs his unkept locks

Float in the breeze; and, as it were to match,
He bears a wallet against hunger's pinch.
All this too late I learn, wretch that I am,
Alas! I own it, and am proved most vile
In my neglect of thee: I scorn myself.
But as almighty Zeus in all he doth
Hath Mercy for co-partner of this throne,
Let Mercy, father, also sit enthroned
In thy heart likewise. For transgressions past
May be amended, cannot be made worse.

Why silent? Father, speak, nor turn away,
Hast thou no word, wilt thou dismiss me then
In mute disdain, nor tell me why thou art wrath?
O ye his daughters, sisters mine, do ye
This sullen, obstinate silence try to move.
Let him not spurn, without a single word
Of answer, me the suppliant of the god.

Antigone

Tell him thyself, unhappy one, thine errand;
For large discourse may send a thrill of joy,
Or stir a chord of wrath or tenderness,
And to the tongue-tied somehow give a tongue.

Polyneices

Well dost thou counsel, and I will speak out.
First will I call in aid the god himself,
Poseidon, from whose altar I was raised,
With warrant from the monarch of this land,
To parley with you, and depart unscathed.
These pledges, strangers, I would see observed
By you and by my sisters and my sire.
Now, father, let me tell thee why I came.
I have been banished from my native land
Because by right of primogeniture

I claimed possession of thy sovereign throne
Wherefrom Etocles, my younger brother,
Ousted me, not by weight of precedent,
Nor by the last arbitrament of war,
But by his popular acts; and the prime cause
Of this I deem the curse that rests on thee.
So likewise hold the soothsayers, for when
I came to Argos in the Dorian land
And took the king Adrastus' child to wife,
Under my standard I enlisted all
The foremost captains of the Apian isle,
To levy with their aid that sevenfold host
Of spearmen against Thebes, determining
To oust my foes or die in a just cause.
Why then, thou askest, am I here today?
Father, I come a suppliant to thee
Both for myself and my allies who now
With squadrons seven beneath their seven spears
Beleaguer all the plain that circles Thebes.
Foremost the peerless warrior, peerless seer,
Amphiaraiis with his lightning lance;
Next an Aetolian, Tydeus, Oeneus' son;
Eteoclus of Argive birth the third;
The fourth Hippomedon, sent to the war
By his sire Talaos; Capaneus, the fifth,
Vaunts he will fire and raze the town; the sixth
Parthenopaeus, an Arcadian born
Named of that maid, longtime a maid and late
Espoused, Atalanta's true-born child;
Last I thy son, or thine at least in name,
If but the bastard of an evil fate,
Lead against Thebes the fearless Argive host.
Thus by thy children and thy life, my sire,
We all adjure thee to remit thy wrath

And favour one who seeks a just revenge
Against a brother who has banned and robbed him.
For victory, if oracles speak true,
Will fall to those who have thee for ally.
So, by our fountains and familiar gods
I pray thee, yield and hear; a beggar I
And exile, thou an exile likewise; both
Involved in one misfortune find a home
As pensioners, while he, the lord of Thebes,
O agony! makes a mock of thee and me.
I'll scatter with a breath the upstart's might,
And bring thee home again and stablish thee,
And stablish, having cast him out, myself.
This will thy goodwill I will undertake,
Without it I can scare return alive.

Chorus

For the king's sake who sent him, Oedipus,
Dismiss him not without a meet reply.

Oedipus

Nay, worthy seniors, but for Theseus' sake
Who sent him hither to have word of me.
Never again would he have heard my voice;
But now he shall obtain this parting grace,
An answer that will bring him little joy.
O villain, when thou hadst the sovereignty
That now thy brother holdeth in thy stead,
Didst thou not drive me, thine own father, out,
An exile, cityless, and make we wear
This beggar's garb thou weepest to behold,
Now thou art come thyself to my sad plight?
Nothing is here for tears; it must be borne
By *me* till death, and I shall think of thee
As of my murderer; thou didst thrust me out;

'Tis thou hast made me conversant with woe,
Through thee I beg my bread in a strange land;
And had not these my daughters tended me
I had been dead for aught of aid from thee.
They tend me, they preserve me, they are men
Not women in true service to their sire;
But ye are bastards, and no sons of mine.
Therefore just Heaven hath an eye on thee;
Howbeit not yet with aspect so austere
As thou shalt soon experience, if indeed
These banded hosts are moving against Thebes.
That city thou canst never storm, but first
Shall fall, thou and thy brother, blood-imbrued.
Such curse I lately launched against you twain,
Such curse I now invoke to fight for me,
That ye may learn to honour those who bear thee
Nor flout a sightless father who begat
Degenerate sons—these maidens did not so.
Therefore my curse is stronger than thy "throne,"
Thy "suppliance," if by right of laws eterne
Primeval Justice sits enthroned with Zeus.
Begone, abhorred, disowned, no son of mine,
Thou vilest of the vile! and take with thee
This curse I leave thee as my last bequest:—
Never to win by arms thy native land,
No, nor return to Argos in the Vale,
But by a kinsman's hand to die and slay
Him who expelled thee. So I pray and call
On the ancestral gloom of Tartarus
To snatch thee hence, on these dread goddesses
I call, and Ares who incensed you both
To mortal enmity. Go now proclaim
What thou hast heard to the Cadmeians all,
Thy staunch confederates—this the heritage

that Oedipus divideth to his sons.

Chorus

Thy errand, Polyneices, liked me not
From the beginning; now go back with speed.

Polyneices

Woe worth my journey and my baffled hopes!
Woe worth my comrades! What a desperate end
To that glad march from Argos! Woe is me!
I dare not whisper it to my allies
Or turn them back, but mute must meet my doom.
My sisters, ye his daughters, ye have heard
The prayers of our stern father, if his curse
Should come to pass and ye some day return
To Thebes, O then disown me not, I pray,
But grant me burial and due funeral rites.
So shall the praise your filial care now wins
Be doubled for the service wrought for me.

Antigone

One boon, O Polyneices, let me crave.

Polyneices

What would'st thou, sweet Antigone? Say on.

Antigone

Turn back thy host to Argos with all speed,
And ruin not thyself and Thebes as well.

Polyneices

That cannot be. How could I lead again
An army that had seen their leader quail?

Antigone

But, brother, why shouldst thou be wroth again?
What profit from thy country's ruin comes?

Polyneices

'Tis shame to live in exile, and shall I
The elder bear a younger brother's flouts?

Antigone

Wilt thou then bring to pass his prophecies
Who threatens mutual slaughter to you both?

Polyneices

Aye, so he wishes:—but I must not yield.

Antigone

O woe is me! but say, will any dare,
Hearing his prophecy, to follow thee?

Polyneices

I shall not tell it; a good general
Reports successes and conceals mishaps.

Antigone

Misguided youth, thy purpose then stands fast!

Polyneices

'Tis so, and stay me not. The road I choose,
Dogged by my sire and his avenging spirit,
Leads me to ruin; but for you may Zeus
Make your path bright if ye fulfill my hest
When dead; in life ye cannot serve me more.
Now let me go, farewell, a long farewell!
Ye ne'er shall see my living face again.

Antigone

Ah me!

Polyneices

Bewail me not.

Antigone

Who would not mourn

Thee, brother, hurrying to an open pit!

Polyneices

If I must die, I must.

Antigone

Nay, hear me plead.

Polyneices

It may not be; forbear.

Antigone

Then woe is me,
If I must lose thee.

Polyneices

Nay, that rests with fate,
Whether I live or die; but for you both
I pray to heaven ye may escape all ill;
For ye are blameless in the eyes of all.

Exit Polyneices.

Reading 9. *The Passing of Oedipus. (9.1–9.330: the thunder, the last charge to Theseus, the Messenger's report, the lament, and the end.)*

❧

STROPHE 1

Chorus

Ills on ills! no pause or rest!
Come they from our sightless guest?
Or haply now we see fulfilled
What fate long time hath willed?
For ne'er have I proved vain
Aught that the heavenly powers ordain.
Time with never sleeping eye

Watches what is writ on high,
Overthrowing now the great,
Raising now from low estate.
Hark! How the thunder rumbles! Zeus defend us!

Oedipus

Children, my children! will no messenger
Go summon hither Theseus my best friend?

Antigone

And wherefore, father, dost thou summon him?

Oedipus

This winged thunder of the god must bear me
Anon to Hades. Send and tarry not.

ANTISTROPHE 1

Chorus

Hark! with louder, nearer roar
The bolt of Zeus descends once more.
My spirit quails and cowers: my hair
Bristles for fear. Again that flare!
What doth the lightning-flash portend?
Ever it points to issues grave.
Dread powers of air! Save, Zeus, O save!

Oedipus

Daughters, upon me the predestined end
Has come; no turning from it any more.

Antigone

How knowest thou? What sign convinces thee?

Oedipus

I know full well. Let some one with all speed
Go summon hither the Athenian prince.

STROPHE 2

Chorus

Ha! once more the deafening sound
Peals yet louder all around
If thou darkenest our land,
Lightly, lightly lay thy hand;
Grace, not anger, let me win,
If upon a man of sin
I have looked with pitying eye,
Zeus, our king, to thee I cry!

Oedipus

Is the prince coming? Will he when he comes
Find me yet living and my senses clear!

Antigone

What solemn charge would'st thou impress on him?

Oedipus

For all his benefits I would perform
The promise made when I received them first.

ANTISTROPHE 2

Chorus

Hither haste, my son, arise,
Altar leave and sacrifice,
If haply to Poseidon now
In the far glade thou pay'st thy vow.
For our guest to thee would bring
And thy folk and offering,
Thy due guerdon. Haste, O King!

Enter Theseus.

Theseus

Wherefore again this general din? at once
My people call me and the stranger calls.

Is it a thunderbolt of Zeus or sleet
Of arrowy hail? a storm so fierce as this
Would warrant all surmises of mischance.

Oedipus

Thou com'st much wished for, Prince, and sure some god
Hath bid good luck attend thee on thy way.

Theseus

What, son of Laius, hath chanced of new?

Oedipus

My life hath turned the scale. I would do all
I promised thee and thine before I die.

Theseus

What sign assures thee that thine end is near?

Oedipus

The gods themselves are heralds of my fate;
Of their appointed warnings nothing fails.

Theseus

How sayest thou they signify their will?

Oedipus

This thunder, peal on peal, this lightning hurled
Flash upon flash, from the unconquered hand.

Theseus

I must believe thee, having found thee oft
A prophet true; then speak what must be done.

Oedipus

O son of Aegeus, for this state will I
Unfold a treasure age cannot corrupt.
Myself anon without a guiding hand
Will take thee to the spot where I must end.
This secret ne'er reveal to mortal man,

Neither the spot nor whereabouts it lies,
So shall it ever serve thee for defense
Better than native shields and near allies.
But those dread mysteries speech may not profane
Thyself shalt gather coming there alone;
Since not to any of thy subjects, nor
To my own children, though I love them dearly,
Can I reveal what thou must guard alone,
And whisper to thy chosen heir alone,
So to be handed down from heir to heir.
Thus shalt thou hold this land inviolate
From the dread Dragon's brood. The justest State
By countless wanton neighbours may be wronged,
For the gods, though they tarry, mark for doom
The godless sinner in his mad career.
Far from thee, son of Aegeus, be such fate!
Thou knowest, yet I would admonish thee.
But to the spot—the god within me goads—
Let us set forth no longer hesitate.
Follow me, daughters, this way. Strange that I
Whom ye have led so long should lead you now.
Oh, touch me not, but let me all alone
Find out the sepulcher that destiny
Appoints me in this land. Hither, this way,
For this way Hermes leads, the spirit guide,
And Persephassa, empress of the dead.
O light, no light to me, but mine erewhile,
Now the last time I feel thee palpable,
For I am drawing near the final gloom
Of Hades. Blessing on thee, dearest friend,
On thee and on thy land and followers!
Live prosperous and in your happy state
Still for your welfare think on me, the dead.

Exit Theseus followed by Antigone and Ismene.

STROPHE

Chorus

If mortal prayers are heard in hell,
Hear, Goddess dread, invisible!
Monarch of the regions drear,
Aidoneus, hear, O hear!
By a gentle, tearless doom
Speed this stranger to the gloom,
Let him enter without pain
The all-shrouding Stygian plain.
Wrongfully in life oppressed,
Be he now by Justice blessed.

ANTISTROPHE

Queen infernal, and thou fell
Watch-dog of the gates of hell,
Who, as legends tell, dost glare,
Gnarling in thy cavernous lair
At all comers, let him go
Scathless to the fields below.
For thy master orders thus,
The son of earth and Tartarus;
In his den the monster keep,
Giver of eternal sleep.

Enter Messenger.

Messenger

Friends, countrymen, my tidings are in sum
That Oedipus is gone, but the event
Was not so brief, nor can the tale be brief.

Chorus

What, has he gone, the unhappy man?

Messenger

Know well
That he has passed away from life to death.

Chorus

How? By a god-sent, painless doom, poor soul?

Messenger

Thy question hits the marvel of the tale.
How he moved hence, you saw him and must know;
Without a friend to lead the way, himself
Guiding us all. So having reached the abrupt
Earth-rooted Threshold with its brazen stairs,
He paused at one of the converging paths,
Hard by the rocky basin which records
The pact of Theseus and Peirithous.
Betwixt that rift and the Thorician rock,
The hollow pear-tree and the marble tomb,
Midway he sat and loosed his beggar's weeds;
Then calling to his daughters bade them fetch
Of running water, both to wash withal
And make libation; so they clomb the steep,
Demeter's hill, who waters the green shoots;
And in brief space brought what their father bade,
Then laved and dressed him with observance due.
But when he had his will in everything,
And no desire was left unsatisfied,
It thundered from the netherworld; the maids
Shivered, and crouching at their father's knees
Wept, beat their breast and uttered a long wail.
He, as he heard their sudden bitter cry,
Folded his arms about them both and said,
"My children, ye will lose your sire today,
For all of me has perished, and no more
Have ye to bear your long, long ministry;

A heavy load, I know, and yet one word
Wipes out all score of tribulations—*love*.
And love from me ye had—from no man more;
But now must live without me all your days."
So clinging to each other sobbed and wept
Father and daughters both, but when at last
Their mourning had an end and no wail rose,
A moment there was silence; suddenly
A voice that summoned him; with sudden dread
The hair of all stood up and all were 'mazed;
For the call came, now loud, now low, and oft.
"Oedipus, Oedipus, why tarry we?
Too long, too long thy passing is delayed."
But when he heard the summons of the god,
He prayed that Theseus might be brought, and when
The Prince came nearer: "O my friend," he cried,
"Pledge ye my daughters, giving thy right hand—
And, daughters, give him yours—and promise me
Thou never wilt forsake them, but do all
That time and friendship prompt in their behoof."
And he of his nobility repressed
His tears and swore to be their constant friend.
This promise given, Oedipus put forth
Blind hands and laid them on his children, saying,
"O children, prove your true nobility
And hence depart nor seek to witness sights
Unlawful or to hear unlawful words.
Nay, go with speed; let none but Theseus stay,
Our ruler, to behold what next shall hap."
So we all heard him speak, and weeping sore
We companied the maidens on their way.
After brief space we looked again, and lo
The man was gone, evanished from our eyes;
Only the king we saw with upraised hand

Shading his eyes as from some awful sight,
That no man might endure to look upon.
A moment later, and we saw him bend
In prayer to Earth and prayer to Heaven at once.
But by what doom the stranger met his end
No man save Theseus knoweth. For there fell
No fiery bold that reft him in that hour,
Nor whirlwind from the sea, but he was taken.
It was a messenger from heaven, or else
Some gentle, painless cleaving of earth's base;
For without wailing or disease or pain
He passed away—and end most marvellous.
And if to some my tale seems foolishness
I am content that such could count me fool.

Chorus

Where are the maids and their attendant friends?

Messenger

They cannot be far off; the approaching sound
Of lamentation tells they come this way.

Enter Antigone and Ismene.

STROPHE 1

Antigone

Woe, woe! on this sad day
We sisters of one blasted stock
Must bow beneath the shock,
Must weep and weep the curse that lay
On him our sire, for whom
In life, a life-long world of care
'Twas ours to bear,
In death must face the gloom
That wraps his tomb.
What tongue can tell

That sight ineffable?

Chorus

What mean ye, maidens?

Antigone

All is but surmise.

Chorus

Is he then gone?

Antigone

Gone as ye most might wish.
Not in battle or sea storm,
But reft from sight,
By hands invisible borne
To viewless fields of night.
Ah me! on us too night has come,
The night of mourning. Whither roam
O'er land or sea in our distress
Eating the bread of bitterness?

Ismene

I know not. O that Death
Might nip my breath,
And let me share my aged father's fate.
I cannot live a life thus desolate.

Chorus

Best of daughters, worthy pair,
What heaven brings ye needs must bear,
Fret no more 'gainst Heaven's will;
Fate hath dealt with you not ill.

ANTISTROPHE 1

Antigone

Love can turn past pain to bliss,

What seemed bitter now is sweet.
Ah me! that happy toil to miss,
The guidance of those dear blind feet.
Dear father, wrapt for aye in nether gloom,
E'en in the tomb
Never shalt thou lack of love repine,
Her love and mine.

Chorus

His fate—

Antigone

Is even as he planned.

Chorus

How so?

Antigone

He died, so willed he, in a foreign land.
Lapped in kind earth he sleeps his long last sleep,
And o'er his grave friends weep.
How great our lost these streaming eyes can tell,
This sorrow naught can quell.
Thou hadst thy wish 'mid strangers thus to die,
But I, ah me, not by.

Ismene

Alas, my sister, what new fate
...
...
Befalls us orphans desolate?

Chorus

His end was blessèd; therefore, children, stay
Your sorrow. Man is born to fate a prey.

STROPHE 2

Antigone

Sister, let us back again.

Ismene

Why return?

Antigone

My soul is fain—

Ismene

Is fain?

Antigone

To see the earthy bed.

Ismene

Sayest thou?

Antigone

Where our sire is laid.

Ismene

Nay, thou can'st not; dost not see—

Antigone

Sister, wherefore wroth with me?

Ismene

Know'st not—beside—

Antigone

More must I hear?

Ismene

Tombless he died, none near.

Antigone

Lead me thither; slay me there.

Ismene

How shall I unhappy fare,
Friendless, helpless, how drag on
A life of misery alone?

ANTISTROPHE 2

Chorus

Fear not, maids—

Antigone

Ah, whither flee?

Chorus

Refuge hath been found.

Antigone

For me?

Chorus

Where thou shalt be safe from harm.

Antigone

I know it.

Chorus

Why then this alarm?

Antigone

How again to get us home
I know not.

Chorus

Why then roam?

Antigone

Troubles whelm us—

Chorus

As of yore.

Antigone

Worse than what was worse before.

Chorus

Sure ye are driven on the breakers' surge.

Antigone

Alas! we are.

Chorus

Alas! 'tis so.

Antigone

Ah whither turn, O Zeus? No ray
Of hope to cheer the way
Whereon the fates our desperate voyage urge.

Enter Theseus.

Theseus

Dry your tears; when grace is shed
On the quick and on the dead
By dark Powers beneficent,
Over-grief they would resent.

Antigone

Aegeus' child, to thee we pray.

Theseus

What the boon, my children, say.

Antigone

With our own eyes we fain would see
Our father's tomb.

Theseus

That may not be.

Antigone

What say'st thou, King?

Theseus

My children, he
Charged me straitly that no mortal
Should approach the sacred portal,
Or greet with funeral litanies
The hidden tomb wherein he lies;
Saying, "If thou keep'st my hest
Thou shalt hold thy realm at rest."
The God of Oaths this promise heard,
And to Zeus I pledged my word.

Antigone

Well, if he would have it so,
We must yield. Then let us go
Back to Thebes, if yet we may
Heal this mortal feud and stay
The self-wrought doom
That drives our brothers to their tomb.

Theseus

Go in peace; nor will I spare
Ought of toil and zealous care,
But on all your needs attend,
Gladdening in his grave my friend.

Chorus

Wail no more, let sorrow rest,
All is ordered for the best.

Study Guide

Themes

Knowing and not knowing. *Oedipus the King* is built on the gap between what Oedipus knows and what is true. He is the city's great solver of riddles, and he solves this one too, but the answer is himself. Teiresias tells him the truth at once, and he cannot hear it. Jocasta knows before he does, and begs him to stop. The play asks whether it is better to know, and Oedipus's answer, even at the end, is yes.

Sight and blindness. The blind prophet sees; the king with clear eyes does not. In the second play the pattern turns again. The blind old man becomes a prophet himself, speaks of what Athens and Thebes will face, and at the last walks without a guide. Ask what each play means by "seeing."

Fate and freedom. Apollo foretold what Oedipus would do, but the plays never show a god forcing his hand. He chose to leave Corinth, chose to strike on the road, chose to press the herdsman. Does the prophecy make him less responsible, or does it only describe what a man like him would do? The plays leave room for both views.

Guilt and innocence. The first play's Oedipus accepts that he is polluted, whatever he intended. The second play's Oedipus insists that he is innocent "In the law's eye" (6.254) because he acted in ignorance and in self-defense. In both plays bloodshed is a stain that others fear to touch (1.238–1.241; 8.39–8.44), whatever the doer meant. The second play sets beside it a sense of blame that depends on what one knew.

Rulers and cities. Oedipus begins as a devoted ruler who feels the city's pain more than his own (1.66–1.70). He becomes suspicious and harsh with Creon and Teiresias. In the second play Theseus shows a

different kind of rule: calm, lawful, generous to strangers. Creon in both plays is worth a close look. He speaks well of reason and moderation, and in the second play he uses force.

Parents and children. The first play turns on the worst violation of family imaginable. The second is full of family loyalty and betrayal: the daughters who serve their father, the sons who abandoned him, the father who curses his son. Ask what each play suggests a parent and a child owe each other.

Suffering and endurance. The second play opens with Oedipus saying he has been taught by suffering to endure (5.6–5.8). The choral ode at 8.118–8.155 says that never to be born is best. Yet the play ends with an old man's death that the messenger calls painless and marvelous, and with his words about love. Decide for yourself whether the plays are bleak or something else.

Place and belonging. A stranger, an exile, a suppliant: Oedipus is always outside. In the first play he believes he is a foreigner in Thebes and is not. In the second he is a foreigner in Athens and is made a citizen (6.346). The plays ask what it means to belong to a city, and what a city owes to a stranger who asks for help.

Key Passages

- **1.246–1.251** · Oedipus curses the unknown killer and adds that if the killer shares his hearth the curse should fall on himself; the whole play is the fulfillment of this speech.
- **1.361–1.362** · Teiresias names Oedipus outright as the polluter of the land, so early that the rest of the play becomes a matter of the king's refusing to hear.
- **2.204–2.225** · Jocasta tries to prove that prophecy is worthless and, in passing, mentions the detail of the three roads that undoes her argument.

- **3.70–3.76** · Jocasta's advice to live by chance and ignore dreams is the play's clearest statement of a view the play goes on to test.
- **3.176–3.181** · Oedipus calls himself the child of Fortune, a proud and moving claim made minutes before the truth arrives.
- **3.276–3.279** · The moment of recognition, in four lines, where knowledge becomes the wish never to see light again.
- **4.111–4.116** · Oedipus divides the blame: Apollo brought these things to pass, but the hand that blinded him was his own.
- **4.307–4.312** · The Chorus's last words turn one man's story into a warning about all human happiness.
- **6.314–6.329** · Oedipus's speech on time, which changes all things except the gods, is the second play's great meditation on change and loyalty.
- **7.269–7.292** · Oedipus argues his innocence point by point, the strongest answer either play gives to the charge against him.
- **8.132–8.135** · The Chorus sings that it is best never to have been born, the darkest words in either play.
- **9.156–9.162** · In his last words to his daughters Oedipus says that one word, love, outweighs their years of labor.

Essay and Discussion Questions

1. Oedipus curses the killer of Laius before he knows who it is (1.236–1.251). What does this speech show about him as a ruler, and how does it shape everything that follows?
2. Teiresias tells the truth plainly at 1.361–1.362 and 1.464–1.476. Why does Oedipus not believe him? What would have had to be different for him to listen?

3. Creon argues that no sensible man would want to be king if he could have the same power without the fear (2.72–2.91). Is his argument convincing? Does the second play bear it out?
4. Jocasta tries twice to stop the search (2.204–2.225; 3.151–3.164). When do you think she understands the truth, and what does her behavior tell you about her?
5. The messenger from Corinth means only to help. Trace how his good news turns into the worst news possible (3.31–3.141).
6. Oedipus blinds himself rather than killing himself, and he explains why at 4.139–4.162. Do his reasons make sense to you?
7. At the end of the first play, the Chorus says no one should be called happy until he is dead (4.311–4.312). Do you agree? Does the second play change its meaning?
8. Compare Oedipus's account of his guilt in the first play (4.111–4.116, 4.139–4.157) with his defense in the second (6.212–6.254; 7.269–7.302). Has he changed his mind, or are these two different truths?
9. What kind of ruler is Theseus? Compare him with Oedipus in the first play and with Creon in the second.
10. Creon appears in both plays. Is he the same man? Look at 2.72–2.107, 4.189–4.204 and 7.1–7.32.
11. Why does Oedipus refuse to return to Thebes, and why does he give the gift of his grave to Athens? What does the play suggest about how cities treat outsiders?
12. Polyneices admits his neglect and asks for mercy (8.169–8.176). Is Oedipus's curse just (8.254–8.297)? How do Antigone's pleas complicate your answer?

13. The ode at 8.132–8.145 calls it best never to be born. How does this sit with the end of the play, where the messenger reports a painless and marvelous death (9.197–9.206)?
14. Oedipus at last leads those who once led him (9.91–9.92). What has he become by the end of the second play, and how did he get there?
15. Aristotle praised *Oedipus the King* as a model of reversal and recognition. Where exactly does the reversal happen, and why does it matter that the recognition comes at the same moment?
16. Choose one choral ode from either play. What does it add that the spoken scenes do not?

Notes on the Texts

1.1 Cadmus, ancestor of the Theban kings ("The house of Cadmus," 1.33). The Thebans are often called Cadmeians, as at 6.38. Storr notes that the "Dragon's brood" (9.83) are the Thebans, sprung from the dragon's teeth that Cadmus sowed.

1.8 "world-renownèd": the grave accent tells you to sound the *-ed* as a separate syllable, for the meter. Storr uses it throughout.

1.42 "the fell songstress": the Sphinx, named at 1.136, to whom Thebes paid a "tax" until Oedipus came. The play never tells us her riddle.

1.50–1.51 Storr's footnote, not printed here, says these lines are hard in the Greek, and gives another scholar's version, which speaks of the counsels of experienced men being compared and put to use.

1.75–1.77 Creon is the son of Menoeceus and brother of Jocasta. "Pythian Phoebus" is Apollo, whose oracle was at Delphi.

1.128–1.129 The single survivor said that robbers, not one robber, killed Laius. This detail becomes Oedipus's last hope at 2.349–2.354.

1.156 The Chorus's entry song. The headings "Strophe" and "Antistrophe" mark stanzas sung in pairs to the same meter.

1.163–1.168 The Chorus calls on Athena, Artemis and the archer god ("Lord of the death-winged dart"), the three whose "threefold aid" it asks.

1.220–1.221 "Was I enrolled a citizen of Thebes": Oedipus believes he came to Thebes as a foreigner. He was born there.

1.236–1.251 Oedipus's curse falls on the killer, on anyone who shelters him, and finally on himself if the killer shares his house. Each part will come home to him.

1.267–1.268 The royal line of Thebes: Laius, son of Labdacus, son of Polydorus (Storr's "Polydore"), son of Cadmus, son of Agenor.

1.332 The row of dots is Storr's. Teiresias breaks off rather than speak.

1.337 Storr notes that the Greek may also be taken to mean that Teiresias speaks so as not to reveal the king's miseries.

1.354 "Thou methinks thou art he": the doubled "thou" appears to be a misprint, left as printed.

1.361 "Thou art the man": the answer to the play's question, given before the play is a third over.

1.413 "the scapegoat": Oedipus means himself, the man the plotters would drive out. In the end he asks to be driven out.

1.422 Loxias is a name of Apollo, used often in both plays.

1.453 "This day shall be thy birth-day, and thy grave." Today he will learn who his parents are, and today he will be destroyed.

2.47–2.48 The rows of dots mark a question left hanging, as printed.

2.60 "What's mean'st thou?": appears to be a misprint for *What mean'st thou?*, left as printed.

2.63 "If so he thou knowest best": appears to be a misprint for *If so, thou knowest best*, left as printed.

2.118 Storr prints this line in brackets because, his note says, the Greek at this point is lost. The words are his own.

2.135 "forebear": appears to be a misprint for *forbear* (refrain), left as printed.

2.146–2.193 A sung exchange between the Chorus and the actors. The labels Strophe 1, Strophe 2, Antistrophe 1 and Antistrophe 2 stand where Storr printed them, between speeches.

2.147 "but not stubborn but relent": the first "but" appears to be a misprint, left as printed.

2.175 "Exeunt Creon," as printed, although Creon leaves alone.

2.233–2.234 The place is in Phocis, where the road from Delphi meets the road from Daulis.

2.236 "were thou wast proclaimed": appears to be a misprint for *ere* (before), left as printed.

2.244 "Mehtinks": a misprint for *Methinks*, left as printed.

2.275 "a higher claim that thou": appears to be a misprint for *than thou*, left as printed.

2.283 The drunken guest's taunt, "Thou art not true son of thy sire", started Oedipus on the road to Delphi.

2.349–2.354 ""one" with "many" cannot square": if the survivor still speaks of many robbers, Oedipus is clear. The Herdsman, when he comes, is never asked.

2.404 "be not bade plain": appears to be a misprint for *made plain*, left as printed.

3.11 Jocasta, who has just mocked oracles, now prays to Apollo. "Lycean" is one of his titles.

3.31 "The Isthmian commons": the people of Corinth, as 3.27 makes clear.

3.80 "lights out darkness much": appears to be a misprint for *lights our darkness*, left as printed.

3.91 "trove abroad": appears to be a misprint for *throve* (prospered), left as printed.

3.95–3.96 Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, uses this messenger as his example of a reversal: he comes to free Oedipus from fear and, by revealing who he is, does the opposite.

3.125–3.129 The pinned ankles that gave Oedipus his name, which is commonly taken to mean "swollen foot."

3.150 "Is the same of whom": a word ("he") appears to have dropped out, left as printed.

3.188 "sure thy sure": appears to be a misprint for *sure thy sire*, left as printed.

3.190 "Of did Loxias": appears to be a misprint for *Or did Loxias*, left as printed.

3.193 "he love to toy": appears to be a misprint for *he loves*, left as printed.

3.225 "Till rose Arcturus": the rising of the star marked the end of the shepherds' season together, as the next line shows.

3.229 "thou mast": appears to be a misprint for *thou must*, left as printed.

3.270 "What didst thou give it": appears to be a misprint for *Why didst thou give it*, left as printed.

3.291 "the vulture maid": the Sphinx.

4.51–4.53 The brooches that fastened Jocasta's robes. The blinding is reported by the Messenger, not shown.

4.81 "he who must abhorred": appears to be a misprint for *most abhorred*, left as printed.

4.111–4.116 Apollo brought these things to pass, Oedipus says, but the hand was his own.

4.194 "bee proved": a misprint for *been proved*, left as printed.

4.197–4.204 Creon's concern is pollution: the polluted man must not stand in the light of the Sun.

4.280 "With the it rests": a misprint for *With thee*, left as printed.

5.18 "a choir or songster nightingales": appears to be a misprint for *of songster nightingales*, left as printed.

5.39–5.43 The goddesses of the grove are the Erinyes, or Furies. The Athenians called them by milder names, such as the Gracious Ones (Eumenides) or the Venerable Ones.

5.55–5.61 The Stranger names the place's powers: Poseidon, Prometheus the fire-bringer, the Brass-footed Threshold, and the hero Colonus who gave the village its name.

5.91–5.95 Apollo's old promise, which Oedipus had not mentioned in the first play: rest, a blessing to those who receive him, and signs to mark the end.

5.99 "A wineless man on you loathe the grape": the line reads oddly and seems to have suffered in printing. The sense is that Oedipus, who

drinks no wine, came to goddesses who refuse it. Their offerings are made without wine (6.167).

5.115 The elders' entry song, which becomes a sung exchange with Oedipus and Antigone.

5.170–5.174 The rows of dots mark lines whose Greek is lost, as Storr's note explains.

5.214 "Art he?": appears to be a misprint for *Art thou he?*, left as printed.

5.241 "But all that ye hold dear": appears to be a misprint for *By all that ye hold dear*, left as printed.

5.301 Storr's note says that Oedipus falls back on a commonplace here so as not to reveal the blessing he brings, which is still a secret.

5.305–5.306 Ismene rides a colt "of Aetna's breed" and wears a Thessalian hat against the sun.

6.58–6.60 The younger brother, Eteocles, holds the throne; the elder, Polyneices, has been driven out.

6.87–6.89 The speaker heading "Oedipus" stands before both 6.87 and 6.88. The answer at 6.88–6.89 seems to belong to Ismene, who is answering her father's questions. Left as printed.

6.98 Storr's note explains Creon's plan: to bury Oedipus just outside the Theban border, so Thebes escapes the pollution but still keeps his tomb, because the oracle says Theban invaders will one day be routed near his grave.

6.150–6.178 The rite of atonement to the goddesses: water from a living spring, wool, honey without wine, olive sprays laid three times nine, and a whispered prayer.

6.346 Theseus grants Oedipus the rights of a citizen.

6.380–6.424 The ode in praise of Colonus: nightingales, ivy, narcissus and crocus, the river Cephisus, the olive, and Poseidon's gifts of the horse and the oar.

6.397 "the Mother and Daughter": probably Demeter and Persephone, the goddesses of the secret Mysteries at Eleusis (compare 7.353–7.359).

6.399 The Cephisus is the river that ran near Colonus.

7.56 "I will proved thee false": appears to be a misprint for *prove*, left as printed.

7.137 "those two crutches": Creon's cruel name for the daughters.

7.140 "Who mandate": appears to be a misprint for *Whose mandate*, left as printed.

7.186 Theseus was sacrificing at the altar of Poseidon, the patron of Colonus.

7.230 "plentitude": as printed, for *plenitude*.

7.247–7.249 The Areopagus, the Hill of Ares, was the seat of an ancient Athenian council that served mainly as a court for homicide. Creon claims he expected it to expel a man like Oedipus.

7.269–7.302 Oedipus's fullest defense: he was doomed before he was born, he did not know whom he killed or whom he married, and he struck in self-defense.

7.352–7.359 The "torch-lit bay" where "the dread Queen and Maid" keep their secret rites points to the Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone at Eleusis. The Eumolpidae were a priestly family of those rites.

8.82 "Thou sure mightest listen": as printed.

8.132–8.135 The heart of the ode: best not to be born, next best to die soon.

8.199 "Etocles": a misprint for Eteocles, the younger brother, left as printed.

8.209–8.229 The seven champions against Thebes. Aeschylus had told their attack in his *Seven Against Thebes* (467 BC), in which the brothers kill each other.

8.218 "Amphiaraiis": appears to be a misprint for Amphiaraüs (Amphiaraus), the warrior-prophet, left as printed.

8.245 "This will thy goodwill": appears to be a misprint for *With thy goodwill*, left as printed.

8.246 "scare return": a misprint for *scarce*, left as printed.

8.257 "make we wear": appears to be a misprint for *make me wear*, left as printed.

8.278 "those who bear thee": the sense calls for *those who bare you* (your parents); as printed.

8.287–8.290 The curse: Polyneices will not take Thebes, nor return to Argos, but kill and be killed by his brother.

8.297 The line begins with a small "that," as printed.

8.308–8.309 Polyneices asks his sisters to bury him. This request is the seed of Antigone's play.

9.83 Storr's note: the "Dragon's brood" are the Thebans (see 1.1).

9.96–9.97 Oedipus names his guides: Hermes, "the spirit guide," and Persephassa, "empress of the dead."

9.105–9.124 The Chorus prays to the powers of the dead for a gentle passage: their queen, their "Monarch" Aidoneus, and the watchdog at their gates.

9.136–9.141 The landmarks of the place where Oedipus stopped. The Messenger names them but not the exact spot, which stays secret.

9.146 "Demeter's hill": named for the goddess "who waters the green shoots."

9.160 The emphasis on *love* is Storr's.

9.199 "fiery bold": a misprint for *fiery bolt*, left as printed.

9.204 "and end most marvellous": appears to be a misprint for *an end*, left as printed.

9.255 "How great our lost": a misprint for *our loss*, left as printed.

9.260–9.261 Rows of dots again mark lines whose Greek is lost.

9.311–9.318 Theseus has sworn to keep the tomb hidden; on that secret depends the safety of Athens (9.71–9.82).

9.321–9.324 Antigone turns back toward Thebes and her brothers' quarrel, the story of *Antigone*.

Glossary

Antistrophe: the second stanza of a pair in a choral song, sung to the same meter as the strophe before it.

Areopagus: the Hill of Ares in Athens, seat of the court that judged cases of bloodshed.

Cadmeians: the Thebans, named for Cadmus; Storr notes they were said to spring from the dragon's teeth Cadmus sowed.

Catharsis: Aristotle's word for what tragedy does to pity and fear; it has been translated purgation, purification and clarification.

Chorus: the group of twelve or fifteen singers and dancers who comment on the action and take part in it. Its leader could speak alone.

Cithaeron: the mountain near Thebes where the infant Oedipus was left to die.

City Dionysia: the spring festival of Dionysus at Athens where tragedies competed for prizes.

Colonus: a village near Athens, birthplace of Sophocles, setting of the second play.

Commos: a lament sung by the chorus and actors together (Greek *kommos*).

Delphi: the site of Apollo's oracle, where Laius and Oedipus both received prophecies.

Episode: a spoken scene between two choral songs.

Epode: a closing stanza after a strophe and antistrophe, in a different meter.

Erinyes: the goddesses of vengeance, also called the Furies, the Eumenides ("Gracious Ones") or the Venerable Ones.

Exode: the last part of a tragedy, after the final choral song.

Hades: the world of the dead (9.16, 9.101), whose king the Chorus calls Aidoneus (9.108).

Hamartia: Aristotle's word for the error that brings down a tragic figure; literally a missing of the mark, sometimes translated "tragic flaw."

Loxias: a name of Apollo.

Oracle: a god's answer to a question, or the shrine where it was given.

Orchestra: the "dancing place," the circle where the chorus performed.

Parode: the chorus's entry song (Greek *parodos*).

Pollution: the stain of bloodshed or other wrong, which could cling to a person and spread to a whole city, as the plague does.

Prologue: the part of a tragedy before the chorus enters.

Recognition: Aristotle's term (Greek *anagnorisis*) for a change from ignorance to knowledge.

Reversal: Aristotle's term (Greek *peripeteia*) for a turn of the action into its opposite.

Sphinx: the monster that held Thebes in terror until Oedipus answered her riddle; Storr also calls her the songstress and the vulture maid.

Stasimon: a choral ode sung after the chorus has entered.

Strophe: the first stanza of a pair in a choral song; the word means a turn.

Suppliant: one who asks for help or protection under the gods, often by sitting at an altar.

Tyrannos: a ruler with no legitimate claim to rule; the word in the Greek title of *Oedipus the King*, not always harsh in meaning.

Weird: in Storr's English, fate or destiny.

Chronology

c. 497/496 BC · Sophocles is born at Colonus, near Athens.

468 BC · Sophocles wins his first victory, defeating Aeschylus.

467 BC · Aeschylus's *Seven Against Thebes* wins first prize.

443/442 BC · Sophocles serves as one of the treasurers of the Athenian empire (sources give either year).

441/440 BC · Sophocles serves as one of the ten generals, a colleague of Pericles (sources give either year).

431 BC · War between Athens and Sparta begins.

430 BC · Plague strikes Athens; it returns in 429 and 427/426.

429 BC · Pericles dies, according to Plutarch, of the plague.

c. 429 BC · *Oedipus the King* first performed (the date is highly uncertain).

415–413 BC · The Athenian expedition to Sicily ends in disaster.

413/411 BC · Sophocles serves as one of ten advisory commissioners (sources give either year).

411 BC · Oligarchs meet at the sanctuary of Poseidon at Colonus to frame a new constitution.

406/405 BC · Sophocles dies, aged about ninety, after writing *Oedipus at Colonus*.

404 BC · Athens surrenders to Sparta; the Thirty take power.

403 BC · The Thirty are overthrown and democracy restored.

401 BC · *Oedipus at Colonus* is produced after the poet's death.

c. 335 BC · Aristotle's *Poetics*, which treats *Oedipus the King* as a model tragedy.

AD 1839 · Francis Storr is born.

AD 1912 · Storr's translation appears in the Loeb Classical Library.

AD 1919 · Storr dies.

Further Reading

Bernard Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles' Tragic Hero and His Time*, 1957. A classic study of the first play in its Athenian setting.

Bernard M. W. Knox, *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy*, 1964. Lectures on the Sophoclean hero, including a reading of *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Cedric H. Whitman, *Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism*, 1951. An influential study of all seven plays.

Charles Segal, *Oedipus Tyrannus: Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge*, 1993. A clear guide for readers in English, with a close reading of the play.

H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy: A Literary Study*, 1939. A readable survey of the tragedians.

Oliver Taplin, *Greek Tragedy in Action*, 1978. How the plays work on stage.

Ivan M. Linforth, *Religion and Drama in Oedipus at Colonus*, 1951. A short study of the second play's religion.

Andreas Markantonatos, *Oedipus at Colonus: Sophocles, Athens, and the World*, 2007. A full-length study of the second play and its historical setting.

Adrian Kelly, *Sophocles: Oedipus at Colonus*, 2009. A short companion to the second play.

R. C. Jebb, *Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments*, 1883–1896. The great Victorian edition, with Greek text, prose translation and notes.

Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated by S. H. Butcher, 1895. The ancient theory of tragedy, with *Oedipus the King* as its chief example.

Sources of the Texts

- **Francis Storr (1839–1919):** Sophocles, *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, translated by F. Storr, in *Sophocles*, volume 1 (Loeb Classical Library 20; London: William Heinemann; New York: Macmillan, 1912). The text is taken from the Standard Ebooks editions of Storr's *Oedipus Rex* (first released December 10, 2024) and *Oedipus at Colonus* (dated January 7, 2025), which are based on the Project Gutenberg transcription (ebook 31) and on the Internet Archive scan of a 1916 printing of the Loeb volume. Readings 1 to 4 print the whole of *Oedipus the King*; Readings 5 to 9 print the whole of *Oedipus at Colonus*. This edition leaves out Storr's short Argument before each play, his footnotes and their markers (their substance is given in the Notes), the Greek text of the Loeb volume, and the Standard Ebooks front and back matter. The Standard Ebooks text was preferred to the Project Gutenberg text because it includes lines the Gutenberg text lacks (for example 2.299–2.305 and 3.27–3.30) and keeps Storr's British spelling and accents. Standard Ebooks applies its own modern typography and editorial standards, so small points of spelling, hyphenation and punctuation may differ from the 1912 page. Words, misprints included, are otherwise reproduced as they stand in that text; the stage directions are Storr's.

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