THE GREEK PLAYS

Sixteen Plays by
Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides

New translations edited by
Mary Lefkowitz and James Romm

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Aristotle refers to the play simply as *Oedipus*, which was probably its original title. I have based this translation on the Greek text of the play edited by Hugh Lloyd-Jones and N. G. Wilson, *Sophocles Fabulae* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, 1992). Occasionally, I refer to the same two authors' *Sophoclean: Studies on the Text of Sophocles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); to R. C. Jebb, *Oedipus Tyrannus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1893); and to R. D. Dawe, *Sophocles: Oedipus Rex* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). In a few instances, I have preferred readings by other scholars, noted where they occur. Passages considered as interpolations by Lloyd-Jones and Wilson are omitted from the text of the translation but are included in the notes.

**CAST OF CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)**

Oedipus, son of Laius and Jocasta; king of Thebes

Priest of Zeus

Chorus of Theban elders, with their Leader

Creon, brother of Jocasta

Tiresias, a blind Theban prophet

Jocasta, wife and mother of Oedipus

Messenger from Corinth

Shepherd

Messenger from within the palace

Antigone and Ismene, young daughters of Oedipus and Jocasta

(nonspeaking parts)

Guards and Attendants of the main characters (nonspeaking parts)
Setting: The play takes place in front of the royal palace of Thebes. The palace has a central door and two doors, one on either side. There is an altar in front of the central door and two smaller altars, one in front of each side door. A group of citizens of all ages led by an elderly priest is seated on the steps of the altars in the garb and attitude of suppliants. The central door of the palace opens and Oedipus emerges.

OEDIPUS: Children, latest in the line of ancient Cadmus,* what is the meaning of your sitting here? Why these suppliant branches, why these garlands? The city is full of the smoke of incense, prayers to the healing god,† lamentations, all at once. I didn’t think it right, children, to hear of it at second hand, from messengers, but came myself—I, Oedipus, renowned in the eyes of all.

(to the priest) Speak up, then, you whose age makes you the one to speak for these: Why are you here—is it something you’re afraid of, something you want? I’ll do all I can, for I’d be hard of heart if this appeal did not move me to pity.

PRIEST: Oedipus, ruler of my country, you see us, and you see our different ages as we take our seats at your altars—some not yet strong enough to fly far, others heavy with years. I am priest of Zeus, and these are the flower of our unmarried young; the rest of the people sit in the market places, garlanded, some at the twin temples of Pallas;‡ others near Ismenus’ mantic ash.§

* Cadmus was the son of Agenor and the legendary founder of Thebes. “Children” is a term of endearment here and in line 6.
† Apollo.
‡ Athena, often called Pallas Athena or, as here, simply Pallas.
§ Ismenus is a river at Thebes, on the banks of which stood a temple of the oracular god Apollo. The phrase “mantic ash” refers to an altar in the temple holding the ashes of sacrificial animals. Seers could foretell the future by observing the sacrifices conducted there.
For the city, as you see yourself, is pitched
and tossed beyond endurance. It can no longer
lift its head from the depths, the surge of blood.
There's death in the fruit-enfolding buds of earth,
death among the pasturing flocks, death in the barren
pangs of our women. A fiery god swoops down
and drives the city headlong—the hateful plague
by which the house of Cadmus is emptied
and black Hades made rich with cries and groans.

I wouldn't liken you to a god, Oedipus,
nor would these children sitting here as suppliants.
No, we consider you foremost among men
in the hazards of life, and when we have to deal
with powers more than human. It was you that came
to the town of Cadmus and freed us of the tax
we paid the cruel Sphinx.† No one taught you to do that,
we did not help you. Guided by a god—
they say and we believe—you lifted up our lives!

But now, Oedipus, mightiest in the eyes of all,
we turn to you, in prayer: Find us help
in any way you can—from a god's utterance,
or a man's, anything you've heard and know.‡
Advice from men tested, like you, in action,
will not miss the mark. Come, then, best of mortals,
restore our city. Come, think of yourself.
We call you savior now because you sped
to our defense before. May we never
look back on your reign as the time
we stood up, only to fall down again later!
No—raise this city on a sure foundation.
The auspices§ were good back then, when you secured

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† The plague afflicting the city is personified as the god who sends it.
‡ The Sphinx was sent by Hera to afflict the Thebans for neglecting to punish their king, Laius, for the rape of Chrysippus, son of Pelops. As a result of that sexual crime, Laius was warned by Apollo that if he had a son, that son would kill him. The Sphinx devoured any Theban who could not solve the riddle she posed. When Oedipus succeeded in solving it, she leaped to her death.
§ Line 43 of the Greek text ends with the two words oisla pou ("you somehow know"); evoking Oedipus' name, Oidipous. One popular etymology of the name derives its first syllable from oida, meaning "I know."
§ Metaphorical: Oedipus' success in dealing with the Sphinx boded well for the future of his rule in Thebes.
our luck for us; be the same once more!
For if you mean to go on ruling the land,
better to rule it full of men than empty.
For what are city walls or ships without
men alive in them? Nothing, nothing at all.

**OEDIPUS:** Children, you have my sympathy. Known
and not unknown to me are the needs
that brought you here, for well I know
you are all sick, yet none so sick as I.
The pain you feel comes to each of you
alone, apart from others, but my heart
groans for city and self and you alike.
You haven't roused me, then, as if from sleep.
No, often—I tell you—I have wept
and traveled many a road, wandered in thought.
I've looked long and hard, and found
a single remedy: I've sent Creon,
my brother-in-law, to the Pythian' house,
the oracle of Phoebus† at Delphi, to learn
what I must do or say to guard this city.
And now, when I reckon the time he's been away,
I worry how he is, for he's been gone
too long, well beyond what you'd expect.
When he returns, I'd be of no account
if I didn't do everything the god prescribes.

**PRIEST:** Your words are well timed—just now these men
signal to me that Creon is approaching.

**OEDIPUS:** O lord Apollo! May his coming be a stroke
of luck, salvation shining like a light!

**PRIEST:** My guess is, he brings good news. Otherwise
he wouldn't be coming crowned in radiant laurel.

**OEDIPUS:** We'll know soon. He's within hearing now.

*(calling offstage)* Lord, son of Menoeceus, my kinsman,‡
what news do you bring us from the god?

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* A constant epithet of Apollo and of his oracle at Delphi, which was also known as Pytho, from the
serpent Python, slain by Apollo when he took possession of the site.
† The most familiar epithet of Apollo, often standing for the god himself. It means "radiant" or "bright."
‡ The Greek word here translated "kinsman" (kēdēma) denotes relation by marriage only, not by blood.
But the audience knows that the relation between Oedipus and Creon is closer than that.
CREON: The news is good, on the whole, for even hardships, if they come out right, are fortunate.

OEDIPUS: But what did the god say? What you've hinted so far leaves me neither encouraged nor alarmed.

CREON: I'm prepared to speak, if you want to hear while these are present (indicating the Chorus), or would you rather go inside?

OEDIPUS: Speak out for all to hear. The suffering of these, my people, means more than my own life.

CREON: Well, then, what I heard from the god was this:

Phoebus orders us, my lord, to expel a pollution nurtured in this land of ours and not still nurture it till it's past cure.

OEDIPUS: How rid ourselves of it? What's the remedy?

CREON: Exile, or killing in return for killing since it is blood that engulfs the city now.

OEDIPUS: Whose blood? Who met this fate? Does the god say?

CREON: We had a leader, my lord—Laius, who ruled this land before you took the city's helm.

OEDIPUS: I know of him, by hearsay—never saw him.

CREON: Well, he died, and the god commands us now to punish his murderers, whoever they are.

OEDIPUS: But where are they? The track of this old crime, so faded now—where will it be found?

CREON: Here, he said, in this land. “The thing pursued is catchable; the thing ignored escapes.”

OEDIPUS: Did Laius meet his death in Thebes, at home or out of doors, or was he traveling?

CREON: He went to consult the oracle, as he said at the time. He never came home again.

OEDIPUS: Was there no one to report, no fellow traveler who saw, whose testimony might have helped?

CREON: They all died, all but one who fled in terror and couldn't say what he saw, but for one thing.

OEDIPUS: What was it? Knowing one thing, you may learn many, if you are eager, and start searching right away.†

* Perhaps in deference to Oedipus, Creon does not call Laius what he was, and Oedipus (as far as he knows) is not the hereditary king of Thebes.
† I render the emendation suggested in Sophocles (82-83) and printed by Lloyd-Jones in his Loeb edition.
CREON: Bandits, he said, met and killed him. The strength of many, not just one, brought him down.

OEDIPUS: How could this "bandit" dare go so far, unless he acted with support—money from here?

CREON: We thought so, too. But once Laius was killed no one emerged to help us in our troubles.

OEDIPUS: The tyranny brought down the way it was, what "troubles" could keep you from looking into it?

CREON: The riddle-chanting Sphinx kept our eyes on things at hand. Those out of sight we left alone.

OEDIPUS: I'll bring them back to light, from the beginning! Phoebus is right, and so are you, Creon, to show concern for the man who was killed. And now you'll see me also take his side, as I should, supporting land and god together. It's not for the sake of a distant friend that I'll dispel this pollution, but for my own. For the man who killed him may well want to turn on me with the same violence. By taking up his cause, I help myself.

Rise up now, children, from these steps. Hurry, and take your suppliant branches with you. Let someone else gather the people here, and leave the rest to me. For either we fare well with the god's help, or we fall.

(Oedipus exits into the palace; Creon exits offstage.)

PRIEST: Let us rise, children. What we came to hear we have heard proclaimed just now. And may Phoebus, who sent these prophecies, come, save, and deliver us from plague!

* Oedipus already suspects that more than banditry was involved. The switch from plural to singular is also significant: Laius was in fact killed by a lone individual, Oedipus himself, not by a band of robbers.

† Oedipus uses the Greek word tyrannus, whose English equivalent "tyranny" has a pejorative sense not always felt in Greek and felt here, if at all, in a way very different from the way it is felt in English. Laius was a legitimate king who had inherited his power; Oedipus is a "tyrant" who has won his. His reference to the rule of Laius as a "tyranny" does not imply that there was anything "tyrannical" (in our sense of the word) about his reign; it is a way of putting himself on a par with his predecessor, a hint at his own insecurity. See the preface to this play.

‡ Athenian law required that a murdered man's closest kin prosecute his killer. Oedipus, unaware of his relationship to Laius, gives other reasons for his involvement in the case.
Sophocles

(Priest and suppliants leave. The Chorus of elders, representing "the people of Cadmus" referred to by Oedipus in line 144, enter the orchestra, singing the parodos or entry song.)

**strophe 1**

Oracle of Zeus, coming from Pytho' steeped in gold to radiant Thebes, what, what do you mean by this welcome message? I am prostrate with dread, my fearful heart beating—O Delian Paean!—in awe of you. What is the debt you will exact of me? Is it new, or come back again with the seasons coming round? Answer me, O child of golden Hope, immortal Voice!

**antistrophe 1**

Calling first on you, immortal Athena, daughter of Zeus, and on your sister Artemis, our land's guardian, throned in glory in the market place, and on Apollo who strikes from afar: appear to me now, O triple averters of doom! If ever before, when ruin towered above our city, you put the flame of pain to flight, come to us now!

**strophe 2**

Ah, numberless are the pains I bear—my people sick, sick to the core, and in my mind I find no sword to ward it off. The glorious earth puts forth no fruit, the pangs of women do not end in birth. You may see now one, now another, like a bird on the wing, faster than resistless fire, speed to the shore of the western god.†

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* Delphi. See note to line 70.
† A healing god, often identified, as here, with Apollo, called "Delian" because he was born on the island of Delos.
‡ Hades. The darkness of the west, into which the sun disappears at evening, is conflated with the darkness of the Underworld.
antistrophe 2

The city, perishing, loses count
of her dead—her sons, unpitied,
no one to lament them,
strew the ground
to breed yet still more death. Here
and there young wives and gray-haired
mothers huddle at the altars,
groaning, crying to be freed of pain.
The paean blazes to the sound of voices
keening. O against all this, golden
daughter of Zeus, send us protection!

strophe 3

And may savage Ares
armed in no armor but with cries
clashing around him, charging,
scorching me—turn in retreat and run
far from my country, sped
on the breeze, off to the great
chamber of Amphitrite
or the waves of Thrace
that brook no anchorings,
for what the night fails to kill
falls by his hand next day.
Him, O father Zeus, master
of fiery lightning, destroy
with your thunderbolt!

antistrophe 3

How gladly would I see shot
from your bow strung with gold,
Lycian lord, arrows invincible
in our defense, and the fiery
torches of Artemis with which she scours

* Not, as often, a joyful hymn, but here an appeal to the healing god Paean.
† God of war, personifying the plague afflicting Thebes.
‡ A sea nymph, wife of Poseidon, god of the sea. The epithet "great" indicates that the Atlantic is meant.
§ The "waves of Thrace" are the Black Sea, known for its storminess and the savagery of the peoples living near it.
¶ Apollo. His weapon is the bow.
the mountains of Lycia, and I call on the god who binds
his hair in gold and gives his name to our land,'
Bacchus, to whom they cry euoi†
when, wreathed in clusters, he leads
the maenads‡ come, ablaze
with torches of pine, against
the god who has no honor among the gods.§

(Enter Oedipus from the palace.)

OEDIPUS: You've made your prayer, and what you pray for,
protection, relief from these ills, you will obtain
if you listen to me and so give the disease
the care it requires. I speak to you as stranger
to the tale and stranger to the deed. For I
could not get far on the track of it without
a clue. But as it is, and since I became
your fellow citizen after the crime, I say
to all the people of Cadmus: whoever knows
by whose hand Laius, Labdacus' son, was killed,
I order him to tell me everything.
And if he is afraid that, by freeing <others>¶
of the charge, <he will bring his own death
down> on himself, he needn't fear; he'll suffer
no worse than exile, and go away unhurt.
But if anyone knows that some other Theban
or foreigner is the killer, let him speak;
I'll make it worth his while, and show thanks, too.
But if you hold back, and any of you, afraid
for a friend or himself, spurns this command,
hear from me now what I'll do next: I forbid
anyone in this land—the land whose power

* Dionysus, also known as Bacchus, was born in Thebes. The city, in consequence of the god's birth there, is called Bacchic Thebes.
† A cry of joy, linguistically meaningless, uttered by the worshippers of Bacchus.
‡ Frenzied female attendants of Dionysus, also called Bacchae or Bacchants.
§ Ares.
¶ A line seems to be missing between lines 227 and 228. The words between angle brackets translate the supplement proposed by Lloyd-Jones. The phrase "by freeing <others> of the charge" is a euphemism for "by admitting that he is the killer."
and throne I possess—either to welcome or talk to him, whoever he is, or join him in prayers to the gods, or share with him in sacrifice, or in the lustral water. No, but all must drive him from their houses—he's our pollution, as the oracle of the god in Delphi has just now disclosed to me. This, then, is the role I take upon myself—ally of the god and the man who died. All this I charge you to accomplish, for my sake and Apollo's, and this land so blighted—barren and hated by the gods. For even if the god weren't forcing this on you you shouldn't leave it festering so, and this the case of a noble man, your murdered king. No, you'd have to search it out! But now, since I enjoy the power that was his, and have his bed and the woman he embraced in it, who would have borne him children, siblings to my own, had not his hopes of offspring founndered and bad luck swooped upon him—for all these reasons, I will fight for him as for my own father, go to every length in my determination to catch the killer of the son of Labdacus, son of Polydorus, son of Cadmus before and of ancient Agenor.

For those who do not do as I command, I pray the gods send them no harvest from the earth, no children from their wives. Let them be destroyed.

* Water played an important part in sacrificial ritual. All sacrifices began with the washing of hands by priest and participants. To be denied access to this "holy water" was to be denied membership in the community.
† Lines 246-51 are interpolated. They read:
   And I pray that he who did it, whether he's escaped detection alone or with others, wear out his life in doom, evil in evil. I pray, too, that if I shelter him in my own house, and do it knowingly, I feel the curses I have just pronounced.
‡ Oedipus here calls Laius by his legitimate title, that of king, though he had referred to his rule as a "tyranny" before (line 128). He reverts to calling him a "tyrant" at lines 799 and 1043.
by the very fate upon us now, and by one
twice still. But all you other Thebans, to whom
my commands are welcome, may Justice fight
for you, and the gods favor you forever!

**CHORUS LEADER:** Since you've put me on oath, so, lord, I'll speak:
I did not kill, nor can I reveal the killer.
It lies with Phoebus, who launched this search,
to say who did the deed, so long ago.

**OEDIPUS:** Right, but to compel the gods to act
against their will—that no one can do.

**CHORUS LEADER:** May I suggest, then, what seems second best?

**OEDIPUS:** And third best, too: leave nothing out.

**CHORUS LEADER:** The lord Tiresias, I know, sees with the eyes
of Phoebus, his lord: from him, my lord, would a man
tracking all this learn of it most clearly.

**OEDIPUS:** Here, too, I haven't been remiss. I've sent, twice now,
at Creon's suggestion, escorts to bring him here.
I've long been wondering why he hasn't come yet.

**CHORUS LEADER:** Apart from him, all we have is ancient gossip.

**OEDIPUS:** Gossip? What sort? I'll leave no stone unturned.

**CHORUS LEADER:** They say it was some highwaymen that killed him.

**OEDIPUS:** I've heard that, too, but no one sees the doer.

**CHORUS LEADER:** If he has a trace of dread in him, he won't
stay hidden—such are the curses you have uttered.

**OEDIPUS:** A man not afraid to strike won't fear a threat.

**CHORUS LEADER:** (glancing offstage) No matter; here's the one who will
convict him.
For here I see them, bringing the godlike prophet;
in him, alone among men, truth is inborn.

*(Enter Tiresias, a blind prophet, accompanied by Oedipus' attendants. A boy guides his steps.)*

**OEDIPUS:** Tiresias, master of all that can or can't
be taught or said, in heaven, or treading the earth—
you know, though you don't see, what sort of disease

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* Again, as at line 124, Oedipus answers his interlocutor's plural ("highwaymen") with a singular ("the
doer"). The manuscripts have "the one who saw" (ton d'idont) as object of the verb here. I've translated the
text of Lloyd-Jones and Wilson, which prints the anonymous eighteenth-century emendation ton de
dront, "the one doing," i.e. the killer. The three lines immediately following this one, especially 296, make it
 certain that the reference here is to the killer, not the witness.
feeds on our city; against it, lord, we find
no champion, no savior but you alone!
For Phoebus—if you haven’t heard already—
has given us an answer to our question:
deliverance from this plague will come to us
only if we kill the killers of Laius
or banish them, once we know who they are.
Do not, then, begrudge us what you know
by augury, or other mantic means.
Save yourself, save the city, and save me—
drive out all taint that comes from that dead man!
We are in your hands. To help, with all you have
and all you can do, is the noblest task.

Tiresias: There’s nothing to be said for understanding
if you have it and gain nothing. I knew that well,
and forgot it. Else I wouldn’t be here now.

Oedipus: What’s wrong? You’ve just arrived, and yet so downcast!

Tiresias: Send me home. You’ll bear your part most easily
and I will mine, if you take my advice.

Oedipus: What you say is surprising, without regard for the city
that reared you. Don’t deny us this response.

Tiresias: I see that what you say is off the mark.
That’s why, so as not to err like you—

Oedipus: By the gods! If you know, don’t turn away.
We beg you, all of us, as suppliants.

Tiresias: Yes, for all of you don’t know! But I will never
reveal my troubles—not to speak of yours.

Oedipus: What are you saying? You know, and will not speak?

Will you betray us, and destroy the city?

Tiresias: I’ll vex neither myself nor you. Why probe
these things in vain? You won’t find out from me.

Oedipus: No? You traitor! Or worse: you’d move
a stone to rage! So you’ll never speak out,
just stay stubborn, and avoid the point?

Tiresias: You fault my temper but refuse to see
the temper in yourself. No, you blame me.

* The word has a formal, religious meaning here: what Tiresias says in answer to the question asked indirectly at lines 308–10 would have the authority of an oracle.
OEDIPUS: Who wouldn't be enraged when he hears words like yours, that show this city no respect?

TIRESIAS: Things will out, whether I speak or not.

OEDIPUS: Shouldn't you tell me, then, just what will out?

TIRESIAS: I'll say no more. Rage at that, if you want to, with all the anger, all the savagery you can.

OEDIPUS: Anger, you say? Yes, I'll let fly, I'll lay out all I see going on here. It's plain to me you hatched the scheme and did the deed, just short of killing him yourself, with your own hands. And if you weren't blind I'd say you did that, too, unaided!

TIRESIAS: Is that so? Then I insist that you abide by your own proclamation, and from this day speak neither to these men here nor to me. For you are the unholy polluter of our land.

OEDIPUS: So shameless, to stir up a tale like that? Where can you run to, where find an escape?

TIRESIAS: I have escaped. The truth within me is my strength.

OEDIPUS: Who taught this "truth" to you? Not your art!

TIRESIAS: It came from you—you made me speak.

OEDIPUS: Made you speak what? Repeat it, make it clearer.

TIRESIAS: You didn't understand it the first time? [ .. .]

OEDIPUS: Not so as to be sure. Say it again.

TIRESIAS: You are the killer you are looking for.

OEDIPUS: You'll live to regret saying that—twice now.

TIRESIAS: Shall I say more, to make you even madder?

OEDIPUS: Yes, all you like. Your words will come to nothing.

TIRESIAS: You don't know that you live in deepest shame with those most near to you!—you're sunk in evils you don't see.

OEDIPUS: You think you'll go on like this, and get away?

TIRESIAS: Yes, if there's any power in the truth.

OEDIPUS: There is, but not in your case. For you it fails, because you're blind—in ears and mind and eyes.

* The end of this line is corrupt. It is clear from the remains of it that Tiresias asks a second question, but what it was cannot be made out. Oedipus, in response, answers only the first one.

† The Greek word here rendered "live... with" may also have the meaning "live in intimacy with," "be married to." Likewise, "those most near to you" may refer simply to the members of the family but is more likely to be an allusive plural, a euphemism for Jocasta alone.
TIRESIAS: What a sad case you are, taunting me
as all these here will soon be taunting you!
OEDIPUS: Wrapped as you are in endless dark, you can’t
hurt me or anyone who sees the light.
TIRESIAS: True—I’m not the one to cause your fall.
Apollo, who wants to see it, will suffice.
OEDIPUS: Whose revelations are these? Creon’s?
TIRESIAS: Creon’s not your problem. It’s you yourself.
OEDIPUS: O wealth and tyranny* and skill
surpassing skill in the ambitious life!
How great is the envy you have in store
if, for this power, that the city handed to me—
a gift, a thing I never asked to have—
Creon, my confidant, my friend from the start,
sneaks up on me and wants to cast me out;
he bribes this fortune-teller, this conniver,
a slick impostor with an eye for gain
but blind when it comes to prophecy!
(to Tiresias) So, tell us now: what makes you a real prophet?
Why, when that rhapsodic hound† was here,
did you say nothing to save these people?
Yet hers was a riddle‡ not just anyone
might solve. It required skill in mantic art,
skill you didn’t seem to have, from birds
or from the gods. And then I came along,
Oedipus the know-nothing.§ I stopped her,
using my brains, not what the birds told me—
and I’m the one you’re forcing out? You think
one day you’ll stand by Creon’s throne. Well, I think

* See note to line 128. The word, again, is not pejorative. Oedipus is thinking of supreme power in the
city as a prize to be gained by ambition. He has that power, but he goes on to insist that he didn’t aim to
achieve it.
† Alluding to the Sphinx, called “rhapsodic” because her riddle was posed in dactylic hexameter, the
meter of the Homeric poems, which were recited by professional “rhapsodes.”
‡ The first of two direct references to the riddle in the play (the other occurs at line 1515). It is preserved
in its most complete form as follows: “There is upon earth a thing two-footed and four-footed and three-
footed, which has one voice, and which, alone of things that make their way on earth or up in the sky or
down in the sea, changes its nature, and when it goes supported on most feet, then is the speed of its
limbs most feeble.” The answer is “man,” who crawls on all fours in infancy, walks on two feet in maturity,
and needs the support of a staff, a third foot, in old age.
§ Alluding again (see note to line 43) to the popular etymology of Oedipus’ name.
that you and he will rue the day you plotted
to purify this land! If you didn’t look so old,
you’d know by now what plans like yours deserve.

CHORUS LEADER: It seems to me, Oedipus, his words before
and yours just now have been said in anger.
We don’t need that, but rather to consider
how best to unravel the god’s prophecies.

TIRESIAS: Though you are tyrant here, others still have
the right to answer you at equal length.
I claim it, too, for I’m no slave of yours
but of Loxias— he’s my sponsor here, not Creon.
And since you mock my blindness, I say
you see all right, but not the evil you’re in,
or where you live, or whom you live with. Do you know
your origins? You don’t even know that you
are loathsome to your kin, both those beneath
and those upon the earth. Your mother’s and father’s
double curse will hound you from this land
one day, in terror—sighted now, but seeing
darkness then. What refuge for your cries?
What Cithaeron† will not echo them,
when you’ve seen it for what it was—that wedding
in the palace, that port no port at all, into which
you sailed so smoothly! Nor do you see
what evils will make you equal to yourself
and to your children.§ Go on, then, trample Creon
and my predictions in the mud. No mortal man
will ever be crushed more cruelly than you!

OEDIPUS: (to the Chorus) Must I hear all this from hime?
(rounding on Tiresias) To hell with you! Show us your back—
hurry, leave this house, be gone!

* An epithet of Apollo, from loxos, “slanted, crooked,” presumably because his oracles were obscure, indirect.

† Curses uttered by parents against children who have offended or harmed them were carried out by the
Erinyes, or Furies, often imagined as hounds in pursuit of prey.

‡ Mount Cithaeron, south of Thebes, where the infant Oedipus was put out to die. Here Tiresias makes
it stand for any mountain that will echo to the cries of the man Oedipus as Cithaeron had echoed to
those of the baby. Oedipus knows nothing of this as yet.

§ I retain the reading of the manuscripts and take the line as Jebb takes it: “you” is Oedipus as he sees
himself now; “yourself” is Oedipus as he really is. He will be “equal to” his children when he realizes
that he is their brother as well as their father.
TIRESIAS: I wouldn't have come if you hadn't called me.
OEDIPUS: Had I any idea you'd utter such drivel,
    I'd never have summoned you to my house.
TIRESIAS: A driveller I seem to you, but your parents,
    the ones who gave you life, thought I made sense.
OEDIPUS: What parents? Wait! Who brought me forth?
TIRESIAS: This day will bring you forth, and will destroy you.
OEDIPUS: More of the same—words too puzzling, too dark.
TIRESIAS: Aren't you our champion riddle solver?
OEDIPUS: That's right—revile me where you'll find me great.
TIRESIAS: And yet success in this has been your ruin.
OEDIPUS: I don't care, if I've saved this city by it.
TIRESIAS: I'm going now. Boy, help me on my way.
OEDIPUS: Yes, go, get out! You're nothing here
    but trouble: leave, and cease to cause me pain.
TIRESIAS: I'll go. I've said what I came here to say,
    no fear of you—for you cannot destroy me.
        And I tell you: this man, the one you've long
    been looking for, with threats and proclamations
    about the death of Laius—he's here, a guest
    from abroad, so they say, but soon to emerge
    a native Theban, though he'll take no pleasure
    in that discovery! Blind instead of seeing,
    beggar instead of rich, he'll make his way
    to a foreign land, feeling the ground with a stick.
    And he'll be found to be both brother and father
    to his children, son and husband to
    his mother—breeding where his father bred,
    having spilled his father's blood! Now go inside
    and think that over. If you catch me lying,
    then say I have no skill in prophecy!
(Tiresias exits to the side. Oedipus watches him leave for a
    moment, then turns abruptly and goes back into the palace.)

STROPHE 1

CHORUS: Who is the man the oracle-echoing rock of Delphi
    sings of, who did unspeakable deeds with bloody hands?
    Time for him to set his foot
    in flight faster than horses
with storm in their hooves!
For the son of Zeus,* armed
with fiery lightning leaps upon him
and the dread avenging Spirits of Death!
join in pursuit and will not lose the trail.

antistrophe 1
Just now flamed the command from snow-capped
Parnassus: all must hunt him down, the man unseen.
For under the wild wood,
in caves, among rocks
he roams, like the bull bereft
of his herd, hampered, with hampered foots
trying to outrun the prophecies
from earth's center,§ that hover
around him, ever on target, ever alive.

strophe 2
Terribly, terribly now the wise
prophet has shaken me—
I neither agree nor deny—
I don't know what to say,
I flutter with hopes, unable to see
here, or into the future.
Not now or before have I ever heard
that in the past there was strife
between the Labdacids**
and the son of Polybus,††
nothing <I could rely on>‡‡
to put to the test, or cause me

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* Apollo, speaking through his oracle at Delphi.
† Kerë, often identified with the Erinyes, or Furies.
‡ A mountain of the Pindus range, north of the Corinthian Gulf. The oracle of Delphi is located on its southern slope.
§ A hint, perhaps, at Oedipus' lameness, referred to later in the play (lines 1031-36).
¶ Delphi, seat of Apollo's oracle, here, as often, thought to be the center of the earth.
** Descendants of Labdacus, who was father of Laius and (unbeknownst to the Chorus) grandfather of Oedipus.
†† Polybus was king of Corinth and supposed father of Oedipus, having reared him after Laius had put him out to die.
‡‡ The meter indicates that a word is missing from line 494. The words enclosed in angle brackets translate the supplement of G. Wolff as reported by Lloyd-Jones.
to doubt the glory of Oedipus
and come to the aid
of the Labdacids, for a murder sunk in darkness.

antistrophe 2
Zeus and Apollo are wise, and know
the ways of men. But whether among men
a seer counts more than I do,
there is no way of knowing,
for one man's wisdom
may surpass another's. But I would not,
before I've seen what's said is true,
add my consent
to those who condemn Oedipus.
For once, in sight of all, the winged girl
swept against him
and he showed himself wise
in the contest, a joy to my city.
So in my thoughts
he could not be guilty of a crime.

(Enter Creon.)

CREON: Citizens, I'm here because I've heard
news that I can't bear to hear—
that Oedipus the tyrant is accusing me!
For if in times like these he thinks that he's
been hurt by me, by what I've said or done—
if that's what he says, I tell you I don't want
to go on living. It's no little thing,
the damage done to me by such a charge.
It's huge, to be called a traitor by my city—
a traitor, by you and by my friends!

CHORUS LEADER: The charge did pass his lips, but it could be
that anger more than judgment forced it out.

* The prosecutor of a murderer acted in defense of the victim.
† The Greek Sphinx, unlike the Egyptian, had wings.
‡ Perhaps the phrase (repeated at line 925) that suggested the title given to the play in the manuscript tradition, Oedipus the Tyrant, the Latin translation of which, Oedipus Rex, gives us Oedipus the King. Creon uses the word as if it is the normal way of referring to Oedipus, but the latter's suspicion of his closest associate is typical of a tyrant. The nuance may have been picked up by the audience, if not by the characters onstage.
CREON: But didn’t he say that it was my idea
to make the prophet utter falsehoods?
CHORUS LEADER: He did, but I know he didn’t think it through.
CREON: Was he seeing straight, was he thinking straight
when he made this accusation?
CHORUS LEADER: I don’t know. Power acts beyond my ken.*

(Enter Oedipus, from the palace.)

OEDIPUS: You! What are you doing here? Where do you get
the nerve, the gall to come to my house—you,
my killer plain as day, the thief with clear
designs upon my throne? Speak up, by the gods!
Was it cowardice or feeble-mindedness
you saw in me, that you could hatch this scheme?
Or did you think I wouldn’t see who set
the plot in motion, and not defend myself?
Isn’t it foolish, this attempt of yours,
to seek a tyranny,† without wealth and friends?
For that you need popular support and money.‡
CREON: You know what’s called for now? Quit talking,
listen, and then judge, when you’ve heard me out.
OEDIPUS: You speak well, but I won’t learn well
for I have found a deadly enemy in you.
CREON: First listen to what I have to say.
OEDIPUS: Just don’t “say” that you’re not treacherous!
CREON: If you think stubbornness, without knowledge,
worth having, you aren’t thinking straight.
OEDIPUS: If you think you won’t pay for abusing
a kinsman,§ you haven’t thought it through.
CREON: I agree. There’s justice in what you say.
But what is it, this “abuse” you’ve suffered?
OEDIPUS: Did you, or did you not, persuade me
that I should send for that pompous seer?

* The next line (530) is probably interpolated:
   But here he is, come from the house just now.
† See note to line 380.
‡ Historical tyrants (Pisistratus in Athens, for example) seized and maintained power by using their
   wealth to curry favor with the people.
§ The word used here (suggenes) may mean “of the same blood” as well as “of the same family” (e.g. an
   in-law). Oedipus has the latter in mind, but the audience, knowing that Creon is in fact his uncle, may
   think of the former, too.
CREON: I did, and I'd advise the same again.
OEDIPUS: How long is it now since Laius—
CREON: Did what? I don't know what you're driving at.
OEDIPUS: —vanished, a victim of deadly violence?
CREON: It would be years now—a long time ago.
OEDIPUS: At that time, then, was this seer in practice?
CREON: He was—wise then as now, and just as honored.
OEDIPUS: Did he say anything about me then?
CREON: Not when I was around. I'm sure of that.
OEDIPUS: And didn't you try to find the killer?
CREON: We did—how could we not?—but we heard nothing.
OEDIPUS: What kept our wise man from speaking up?
CREON: I don't know. When I don't know, I don't speak.
OEDIPUS: This much you know and, if you're wise, you'll say—
CREON: What? If I can, I won't refuse to answer.
OEDIPUS: —that if he hadn't been suborned by you
he'd never have said that I killed Laius.
CREON: You know if he said that. But I've the right
to ask as much from you as you from me.
OEDIPUS: Ask on. You won't convict me of the murder.
CREON: To begin, then: you're husband to my sister?
OEDIPUS: Indeed I am—there's no need to deny it.
CREON: And rule the land, hand in hand with her?
OEDIPUS: She gets, from me, everything she wants.
CREON: And am I not third, equal to you two?
OEDIPUS: Yes, and a bad friend, for that very reason!
CREON: No, not if you can look at it my way.
Consider first, whether you think anyone
would choose to rule in fear rather than sleep
safe in his bed at night, yet have the same power.
Just so, I would not prefer to be
tyrant myself, but to do what a tyrant does,
and so would anyone who had any sense.
Now, I gain all this from you, without the fear,
but if I were in charge, there'd be plenty to do
not to my liking. How then would tyranny
look better to me than power without pain?
I'm not so deluded that I crave
anything that isn't noble and enjoyable.
As it is, all greet me, all welcome me,
and those in need of you confide in me;
that way they get everything they wish for.
Why give up all of that, just for this? 599
I've never hankered after thoughts like those
nor would I work with anyone who did.
For proof, go to Pytho, check the oracle,
see if it tallies with the one I brought;
and then, if you find that I've conspired
with the seer, seize and kill me, not by a single
but a double vote, mine and yours together—but
don't accuse me at a whim, a guess!
For, without evidence, it is unjust
to think bad men are good or good men bad.†
But you'll know all of this for sure, in time,
for time alone reveals the man who's just
while you can know a bad one in a day.

CHORUS LEADER: (to Oedipus) A careful man would say he argues well.
A choice too quickly made is soon regretted.

OEDIPUS: When anyone who plots in secret against me
moves fast, I must be fast to counter him.
If I let down my guard and bide my time,
he will achieve his aims, mine come to nothing.

CREON: What, then, do you want? To send me into exile?

OEDIPUS: Not at all. I want you dead, not banished.
Let the whole world know what envy comes to.†

CREON: You mean you won't relent, you won't believe me? 625
OEDIPUS: <No. I'm not sure you ought to be believed.>§
CREON: Nor am I, that you make sense! OED.: I do—in my eyes. 626
CREON: You should, in mine, too. OED.: Not when you're a traitor.
CREON: And if you're wrong? OED.: I still must rule this land.
CREON: Not when you rule it badly. OED.: O city, city!

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* I.e. to supplant Oedipus as "tyrant" in Thebes. Lines 587–99 refute the charge made at 540–42. The next line (600) is interpolated:
A man of sense won't make a bad choice.
† The next 2 lines (611–12) are interpolated:
And a good friend, the man whom one loves most,
just like one's life, must not be thrown away.
‡ I follow Jebb here, assigning this line, as slightly emended by Jebb, to Oedipus.
§ Something has dropped out between lines 625 and 626. I translate Jebb's supplement, which bridges the gap.
CREON: This is my city, too, not yours alone.

CHORUS LEADER: Enough, my lords! I see Jocasta coming from the palace, just in time. With her help, you need to bring this quarrel to an end.

(Enter Jocasta.)

JOCASTA: Why this senseless storm of words?
Is this the time to stir up private ills, when the country's sick? Aren't you ashamed?
(to Oedipus) You, go inside! And you to your house, Creon; don't make so much of nothing!

CREON: Sister, Oedipus your husband has just passed a dire sentence. He's weighing only whether to banish me, or seize and have me killed.

OEDIPUS: Just so—for I have caught him plotting against my person with his evil wiles.

CREON: May I not prosper, but die accursed if I did anything you say I've done!

JOCASTA: By the gods, Oedipus, believe his words!
Respect, above all else, the oath he's sworn; respect me, too, and these men here before you.

(The Chorus and Oedipus now sing together.)

CHORUS: Be persuaded, lord, in mind and heart, I pray.

OEDIPUS: Persuaded of what? What do you want from me?

CHORUS: That you respect one who's been no fool before and stands strong now by the oath he's sworn.

OEDIPUS: Do you know what you're asking?

CHORUS: Yes.

OEDIPUS: Say it, then!

CHORUS: Don't cast aside, without clear proof, a friend bound by oath. Don't scorn his plea.

* A lyrical passage shared between actor and Chorus is called a kommos (literally, "a striking, beating of the head and breast in lamentation"); hence, "a dirge, a lament"). This is the first such passage in the play (lines 649–97); another occurs later (1312–66). Here Sophocles varies the kommos in several ways, first by having different voices in the strophe (Oedipus and Chorus) and antistrophe (Jocasta joins in), then by inserting spoken dialogue (Oedipus and Creon) between the two sung portions (669–77).

† This one line, broken into three parts, is in iambic trimeter, the regular meter of spoken verse, suggesting that it was either spoken rather than sung, or delivered in a kind of recitative. The same thing happens in the corresponding line of the antistrophe (681).
OEDIPUS: Make no mistake: in asking this, you’re asking death for me, or exile from this land.

CHORUS: No, by the Sun, god at the head of all the gods! May I perish in the worst way, godless, friendless, if I have such thoughts! It is the land withering away that tears my heart, ill-fated as I am, if the two of you add your own troubles to the ones we have.

OEDIPUS: All right then, let him go, even if it means that I must die or be driven out of here in violence and disgrace! Your words, not his, have moved me. Wherever he is, he'll still be hated.

CREON: You cling to hate even in yielding, so far gone are you in wrath. People like you deserve to be their own worst enemies.

OEDIPUS: Will you not leave me, and be gone? CRE.: I'm on my way, no thanks to you. (indicating the Chorus) It's their good sense that saves me. (Exit Creon.)

antistroph

CHORUS: (to Jocasta) Woman, what are you waiting for? Take him into the house!

JOCASTA: I will, when I've learned what the matter is.

CHORUS: A difference of opinion—it lacks proof, but unfair suggestions also have a sting.

JOCASTA: Did it come from both men?

CHORUS: Yes. JOCASTA: And what was it?

CHORUS: Enough! It seems to me, for the city's sake, that it should stop right there, where it left off.

OEDIPUS: See what it comes to! You and your good judgment end by scanting my cause and blunting my resolve.

CHORUS: My lord, I've said not only once and I assure you again, that I would seem out of my mind, unable to think, if ever I turn my back on you. It was you who set my beloved country, distracted with pain, on her way again. Now be her guide once more!
JOCASTA: By the gods, my lord, let me, too, know
why such anger has come over you.

OEDIPUS: I shall; you mean more to me than they do.

It's Creon—and the plots he made against me.

JOCASTA: Go on, if you can clearly place the blame.

OEDIPUS: He says that I'm the one who murdered Laius.

JOCASTA: Does he know this himself, or from another?

OEDIPUS: He's had a prophet do the dirty work—
to guard himself, to keep his own lips clean.

JOCASTA: In that case, you can call yourself acquitted!
Listen to me and know no mortal man
has any share in arts of prophecy.
I'll prove it to you, and at no great length.

An oracle came to Laius once—I won’t say
from Phoebus himself, but from his underlings—
that his fate was to be killed by his own child,
the son that would be born to him and me.'

Now as for Laius, the rumor is that strangers,
bandits, killed him one day where three roads meet.
As for the child, not three days past his birth
Laius bound his feet together and had him
thrown out onto a pathless mountainside.
And so Apollo didn't cause the child
to be his father's killer or make Laius
meet the fate he feared at that child's hand.

Such were the prophecies, all laid down clearly.
None need trouble you, for what a god
desires, he'll easily reveal to us.

OEDIPUS: My wife, when you spoke just now,
my spirit wandered, my mind was in turmoil!

JOCASTA: What's the matter? Why this sudden, anxious turn?

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

JOCASTA: That's what was said, and has always been said.

OEDIPUS: Where is the place, where did it happen?

JOCASTA: The land's called Phocis, and the road splits there—
one branch to Delphi, the other to Daulis.

OEDIPUS: And how much time has gone by since then?

* See note to line 37.
JOCASTA: The message reached the city just before you emerged as the ruler of this land.

OEDIPUS: O Zeus, what have you planned to do with me?

JOCASTA: What is it, Oedipus, that so troubles you?

OEDIPUS: Don’t ask me yet. But tell me about Laius—what did he look like, how old was he?

JOCASTA: His hair was dark, just breaking into gray; in looks, he didn’t differ much from you.

OEDIPUS: (cries in distress) oimoi! It seems I didn’t know I cast myself under a deadly curse just now.

JOCASTA: What is it? I fear to look at you, my lord.

OEDIPUS: I’m full of dread. Maybe the seer did see! But shed more light, tell me one thing more.

JOCASTA: Though I’m afraid, I’ll answer if I can.

OEDIPUS: Was Laius travelling light, or with many guards, as you’d expect of one who is a king?

JOCASTA: They were five in all, counting the herald, and a single wagon. Laius rode in that.

OEDIPUS: aiai! It’s coming clear now! Who was it—who was the man who told you this story?

JOCASTA: A slave, the one who came back, sole survivor.

OEDIPUS: Does this man happen to be in the house?

JOCASTA: No. The moment he returned and saw that you were on the throne and Laius dead, he touched my hand and begged that I send him off to the fields, to pasture flocks and be as far from sight of the city as he could. And I sent him. He was a good man, for a slave, and worthy of more recompense than that.

OEDIPUS: Can we get him to come back here, right now?

JOCASTA: We can. But why do you insist on this?

OEDIPUS: I’m afraid, for myself, wife: I may have said too much; that is why I wish to see him.

JOCASTA: Well, he’ll come. But I, too, have a right to know, my lord, the cause of your distress.

OEDIPUS: I won’t keep it from you, I’ve gone so far in my forebodings! In whom if not in you may I confide when fate takes such a turn? My father was Polybus of Corinth, my mother...
Merope, a Dorian. Among the people there
I was held in most esteem, until
something happened, remarkable enough
though not enough, you’d think, to worry me.

A man who’d had his fill of wine at dinner
baited me, saying I was not my father’s son.
I was troubled, but held it in that day.
On the next day I went to my parents
and questioned them. They were annoyed
both at the insult and the man who’d made it.
I was pleased on their account, but all the same
it kept bothering me, for word of it got out.
I went then, unbeknownst to my parents,
to Pytho, and Phoebus sent me away
without what I’d come for, but to my sorrow
he gave me terrifying, miserable prophecies:
that I’d lie with my mother, and bring to light
a brood intolerable for men to see,
and be the killer of the father who sired me!

When I heard this, I shunned the land of Corinth,
determined, from now on, to let the stars
guide me away, to where I’d never see
the disgrace of my evil oracles fulfilled.
And on my way I reached the very place
where you have said this tyrant’s met his death.
To you, my wife, I’ll tell the truth.
On my way to the crossing, I met a herald
and another man riding in a wagon
drawn by colts; he was just as you describe.
The man in front, and the older man as well,
both tried to force me off the road.
The driver, who was pushing me, I struck
in anger; the older man, when he saw that,
watched till I was passing, then came down
on my head with his double-pointed goad.
But he paid the price for that, and more:
I hit him with my staff and sent him tumbling,
head first, straight from the middle of the wagon. I killed them all. But if there’s some connection between that stranger on the road and Laius,* who now would be more wretched than I, what man could be more hated by the gods? No foreigner or citizen could bring him into his home, no one could talk to him: they’d drive him from their houses. And I’m the one who placed these curses on myself! And with the very hands by which he perished I have defiled his bed. Am I not vile? Unholy to the core?—if I must be exiled and in my exile never see my own, never set foot on native land, or else lie with my mother and kill my father, Polybus, who gave me life and brought me up? Whoever took all this to be the work of a savage god would speak the truth! May I never, never, pure and holy gods, see that day! Let me vanish instead from the sight of men before I see the stain of such disaster come upon me!

CHORUS LEADER: All this, my lord, is alarming, but until you’ve heard from the one who saw, be hopeful.

OEDIPUS: Yes, that’s what my hopes amount to now—nothing to do but wait for him, the shepherd!

JOCASTA: And when he has appeared, what then?

OEDIPUS: I’ll tell you “what then.” If he turns out to say the same as you, then I escape, I’m free.

JOCASTA: What did I say that meant so much?

OEDIPUS: You said that he reported it was bandits who cut him down. If then he still says the same number, I am not the killer, for one cannot be the same as many; but if he speaks of one traveler alone, then the balance turns against me.

JOCASTA: Well, rest assured he said it that way then and can’t unsay it now, for the whole city

* Oedipus is speaking euphemistically; “some connection between” means “identical with.”
heard him, not just I alone. And even if he tells it somewhat differently now, he'll never make the murder of Laius square with Loxias' prediction, which said the son he had by me must kill him. And yet that poor creature never killed him, but died himself before. As for prophecy, then, I wouldn't look to the right or to the left, *not after this!*

OEDIPUS: Your point's well taken, but all the same, send someone to fetch the slave, and make sure you do it.

JOCASTA: I will, at once. Meanwhile, let's go inside—
        I'll do as you desire, and nothing else.

(Exit Oedipus and Jocasta into the palace. The Chorus now sing their second ode.)

strope 1

May it be my lot to go on throughout my life with holy reverence in all my words and deeds, reverence whose laws are made to stride on high, sired in the heavenly ether, Olympus alone their father—the mortal nature of men had no share in their birth, nor shall oblivion ever put them to sleep. Great is the god in them, and he grows not old.

antistrope 1

Arrogance † breeds the tyrant—arrogance, when it is fed, glutted on a plenty neither right nor fitting,

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* An apparent allusion to the augural practice of judging the meaning of a bird's appearance—propitious, if on the right; unpropitious, if on the left. Jocasta is saying she will not pay any attention to such omens.

† The Greek here is *hubris* (in English, "hubris"), a word notoriously difficult to translate. "Arrogance" is but one of its several meanings. "Violence," "insolence," "outrage," even "rape" are others. The Chorus itself, not yet knowing who killed Laius, would not have "violence" in mind at this point, but it is in fact through an act of violence that "Oedipus the tyrant" has made his way to the throne. The audience, along with Sophocles, knows that, and they might take the word in that sense as well as the one meant by the Chorus, for whom the *hubris* or "arrogance" of Oedipus has shown itself so far in his attacks on Tiresias and Creon.
clambers up to the topmost cornice
and rushes to the edge
of the abyss, where its feet
have no use. But I beseech the god
never to abolish the strife
that benefits the city,
the god I will never cease to hold as my protector.

**strophe 2**

But if a man goes his way with disdain
in his hands or on his lips, having no
fear of justice, no
reverence for the shrines of the gods,
may an evil fate lay hold of him
for his recklessness, doomed to misery
if he reaps his gains unjustly
or does not run from the unholy,
or if in folly he touches the untouchable.
How can a man so steeped in crimes still find
strength to guard his life from the gods' bolts?
If deeds like his meet with honor,
why celebrate the gods in dance?

**antistrophe 2**

No longer will I go in reverence
to the untouchable navel of earth,
or to the temple at Abai,
or to Olympia,
if these prophecies do not come true
for all men to recognize.
But O god of power, Zeus, lord
of all—if that is what you are—let none of this
escape you and your rule, deathless forever.
For they are wiping them out,

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*I translate line 892 as emended by Hermann ("gods") and 893 as emended by Enger ("find strength").
† Almost all Greek choruses, dramatic and otherwise, sang and danced in honor of the gods. The literal Greek here ("Why should I dance?") implies "Why should I worship the gods?" The antistrophe ends on a similar note of religious uneasiness.
‡ The oracle of Apollo at Delphi.
§ A town in Phocis, where there was another oracle of Apollo, less famous than the one at Delphi.
¶ Site of the ancient Olympic Games, held in honor of Zeus, who had an oracle there.
the oracles of Laius wither away
and nowhere does Apollo shine in honor.
Religion has perished.

(Enter, from the palace, Jocasta, carrying garlands and incense
to offer at Apollo's statue. She is attended by one or two maid-
servants.)

JOCASTA: Lords of the land, my thought is now to go
to the temples of the gods, bringing in my arms
offerings of wreaths and incense. For Oedipus
is in the grip of feelings running too high, whipped
by pains of every sort; he does not read
new in light of old, and judge sensibly,
but whoever speaks of terror has his ear.
Since, then, I've made no progress with advice,
to you, Apollo—for you are nearest—
I've come with these offerings, to seek
deliverance from our impurity.
For now we all shudder to see him,
the pilot of our ship, hurled overboard.

(Enter a messenger.)

MESSENGER: Can any of you strangers tell me where
Oedipus the tyrant lives? Is it here?
Or better yet, is he himself here?

CHORUS LEADER: This is his house, and he himself's inside;
and here's his wife and mother of his children.

MESSENGER: Well, blessed and ever with the blessed
may she live, as she's a perfect wife to him.
JOCASTA: Blessings on you, stranger, in return for these compliments. But tell me why you've come.

What do you seek? What do you want to tell us?

MESSENGER: Blessings, my lady, to house and husband both.

JOCASTA: What blessings? And from where have you arrived?

MESSENGER: From Corinth. And the news I have, perhaps you'll be gladdened—or maybe saddened—by it.

JOCASTA: What is it? How might it cut both ways?

MESSENGER: The people who live in the Isthmian land† will make him tyrant†—that was the talk there.

JOCASTA: But why? Is old Polybus no longer in power?

MESSENGER: No, for Death has him in his house.

JOCASTA: What did you say? Is Oedipus' father dead?

MESSENGER: If I don't speak the truth, I deserve to die.

JOCASTA: (to a servant) You! Quick, take this message to your master!

(Exit servant into the palace, to fetch Oedipus)

0, oracles of the gods, where are you? This is the man Oedipus avoided for so long, dreading to kill him; now he's died by chance, and Oedipus has had no hand in it!

(Enter Oedipus)

OEDIPUS: Jocasta, dearest, my beloved wife, why have you had me summoned from the house?

JOCASTA: Listen to this man, and when you've heard him see what the god's dread oracles have come to!

OEDIPUS: Who is he, and what has he to tell me?

JOCASTA: He's from Corinth, and he says your father Polybus is no more. No, he is dead!

OEDIPUS: What do you say, stranger? Tell me yourself!

MESSENGER: If that's what you insist I tell you first, you can be sure of it; he's dead and gone.

* Le. Corinth, located on the Isthmus, a narrow neck of land connecting the Peloponnese with the rest of Greece.
† Two interpretations are possible. One, that the Messenger uses the word “tyrant” as if it were the equivalent of “king” or “ruler.” The other, that he uses it more precisely. He knows that Oedipus was not the son of the late king of Corinth (1016–18) and so would not be called “king” there. He would be “tyrant” instead, as he has been at Thebes until now. In the latter case, the implication—that “the people” of Corinth know more about Oedipus’ paternity than he does—would be an example of Sophoclean irony.
OEDIPUS: Was it through treachery, or falling ill?

MESSENGER: A slight tilt puts an old body to sleep.

OEDIPUS: The poor man perished, then, from illness.

MESSENGER: That, and the length of time he'd measured out.

OEDIPUS: Ah, there it is, my wife! Why should one look
to Pytho's prophetic hearth, or the birds
shrieking above, on whose showing I
would one day kill my father? But he's dead
and lies beneath the earth, and I am here.
and never touched a weapon, unless he died
from missing me; then one could say I dealt
the blow. But these oracles—Polybus packed them up
and lies with them in his grave. They mean nothing!

JOCASTA: And did I not say so all along?

OEDIPUS: You did, but I was led astray by fear.

JOCASTA: Take none of it to heart any longer now.

OEDIPUS: None of it? Not fear my mother's bed?

JOCASTA: Why should a human being live in fear?

Chance rules his life, and nothing is foreknown.
It's best to live at random, as one can.
You, too—why dread marrying your mother?
Many before, in dreams as well,' have lain
with their mothers. It's the man to whom all this
means nothing who gets along most easily.

OEDIPUS: I wouldn't fault anything you've said
if my mother weren't alive. As it is,
no matter what you say, I am afraid.

JOCASTA: Still, your father's death is a bright light.

OEDIPUS: Bright, yes, but while she lives, the fear is there.

MESSENGER: What woman is the cause of all this dread?

OEDIPUS: Merope, old man—the wife of Polybus.

MESSENGER: What is there about her that makes you afraid?

OEDIPUS: A fearful oracle, sent by the god.

MESSENGER: Can it be spoken? May others hear it?

OEDIPUS: Yes, it can. Loxias once declared it was
my fate, to lie with my mother and take
the blood of my own father on my hands.

* Jocasta means "in dreams as well as in such prophecies as the ones given to you."
That’s why I’ve lived far from Corinth
all these years—a good thing, too, although
the eyes of parents are the sweetest sight.

MESSENGER: *That’s* what kept you far from Corinth?

OEDIPUS: Yes. I didn’t want to kill my father.

MESSENGER: Why don’t I free you of this fear, my lord,
since I have come here with kind intentions?

OEDIPUS: You’d have the thanks from me that you deserve.

MESSENGER: The very reason why I came! I hoped
to earn a favor, when you came back home.

OEDIPUS: But I’ll never go near where my parents are!

MESSENGER: Son, you clearly don’t know what you’re doing—

OEDIPUS: How, old man? By the gods, instruct me.

MESSENGER: —if those are your reasons for not going home.

OEDIPUS: They are—I feared that Phoebus would keep his word.

MESSENGER: And that you’d be defiled through your parents?

OEDIPUS: That very fear, old man. I feel it, always.

MESSENGER: But don’t you know your fear’s not justified?

OEDIPUS: How so, if I’m the child of these parents?

MESSENGER: Because Polybus was no kin of yours.

OEDIPUS: What do you mean? Wasn’t he my father?

MESSENGER: No more than I am, but only just as much.

OEDIPUS: As much as one who’s nothing to me? How?

MESSENGER: Since neither he nor I produced you.

OEDIPUS: Why, then, did he call me his son?

MESSENGER: You were a gift—he took you from my hands.

OEDIPUS: And loved so much what came from another?

MESSENGER: He was childless up till then—that’s what moved him.

OEDIPUS: Had I been bought or found, when you gave me?

MESSENGER: Found, in the wilds of Mount Cithaeron.†

OEDIPUS: What were you doing, going to those regions?

MESSENGER: I was in charge there, of mountain flocks.

OEDIPUS: A shepherd, then, a wanderer for hire?

MESSENGER: Your savior, too, my child, at that time.

OEDIPUS: What pain was I in, when you took me up?

MESSENGER: Your ankles ought to testify to that.

* Literally, “that you’d acquire *miasma*”—the taint of guilt, often of homicide but here for the commission of unnatural crimes, parricide and incest.
† See note to line 421.
OEDIPUS: *oimoi,* why have you brought up that old wound?
MESSENGER: I freed you, undid the pins piercing your feet.
OEDIPUS: Horrible disgrace, mine from the cradle!
MESSENGER: From it you got your name; who you are today.
OEDIPUS: Was it my mother's or my father's doing? Tell me!
MESSENGER: I don't know. The one who gave you to me knows more.
OEDIPUS: You didn't find, but got me from another?
MESSENGER: Yes. Another shepherd gave you to me.
OEDIPUS: Who was he? Do you know him? Can you tell me?
MESSENGER: I think he was called one of Laius' men.
OEDIPUS: The tyrant of this land once, long ago?
MESSENGER: Yes, the very same. He was his shepherd.
OEDIPUS: Is he still alive, so I may see him?
MESSENGER: You people, who live here, would know that best.
OEDIPUS: Does any of you who are standing here
know of the shepherd whom he mentions?
Have you seen him in the fields, or here?
Speak up! It's time these matters were found out.
CHORUS LEADER: I think he is no other than the one
you were seeking before, from the fields. But
Jocasta here might best tell us that.
OEDIPUS: My wife, you know the man we sent for
a moment ago: is he the one he means?
JOCASTA: What if he is? Ignore it. All this talk,
all to no purpose, don't even think of it!
OEDIPUS: No, it will never happen, that I—
with clues like these—not discover my birth!
JOCASTA: By the gods, if you care for your own life,
don't look into this. My sorrows are enough.
OEDIPUS: Don't worry; even if I'm found out a slave
three generations back, you'll not be found low-born.
JOCASTA: Still, listen to me, I beg you: don't do this!
OEDIPUS: You won't dissuade me from finding out!
JOCASTA: I'm saying what's best for you. I'm on your side.
OEDIPUS: That "best for you" is getting on my nerves.
JOCASTA: Doomed man! May you never know who you are!

* A second popular etymology (for the first, see note to line 43) of the name Oidipous derived it from
oidos, "swelling," and pous, "foot." Hence Shelley's coinage, Swellfoot the Tyrant.
OEDIPUS: Will someone bring that shepherd here to me?  
As for her—let her rejoice in her royal blood!

JOCASTA: iou, iou! Unhappy: that's all you'll hear  
from me—no other word in time to come.

(Exit Jocasta into the palace.)

CHORUS LEADER: Oedipus, why has your wife rushed off  
in a fit of savage sorrow? I fear  
evils will break out of this silence.

OEDIPUS: Break out what will! I'll still insist  
on seeing my origin, even if it's low.  
As for her (be gestures toward the palace), maybe she'd be ashamed of that.  
She's a woman, she has a woman's pride.  
But I will not be dishonored. I'm the child  
of Chance, Giver of Good. She's  
my mother, and the months, my brothers,  
have marked me out, now small, now great.  
Being what I am, I will never prove to be  
other than myself, and not learn my birth!

(Oedipus remains onstage while the Chorus sing their third ode.)

strope

CHORUS: If I am a prophet  
and keen in judgment,  
by Olympus you shall not fail,  
O Cithaeron, to see tomorrow's full moon†  
exalt you as home of Oedipus,  
his nurse, his mother,  
celebrated in our dancing

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* As in lines 1062–63, Oedipus assumes Jocasta is troubled only because she fears he will discover that he came from humble roots.
† The Chorus address him at line 1098, which suggests he's still onstage. While the Chorus in a Greek tragedy may address an absent person, that is not likely to be the case here. Until now, Oedipus has been either onstage or in the palace. If he exits now, it can only be into the palace, and he is unlikely to go in so soon after Jocasta, whose actions, described by the Messenger at 1241–50, occur immediately after she leaves the stage. She could hardly do what the Messenger says she does with Oedipus only a few steps behind her.
‡ The meaning is “the next full moon.” The Athenian festival of the Pandia, celebrated at full moon in April, followed immediately upon the Great Dionysia, at which the tragedies were produced. According to Jebb, the Chorus are saying that they will visit the temples at the next full moon in an all-night festival celebrating the discovery that Oedipus is of Theban birth, and that Mount Cithaeron will be a theme of their song.
for the favors you have bestowed
on my lord.
Phoebus, invoked in our cries,
may you find this pleasing!

antistrophe

Who, child, was your mother?
One of the long-lived nymphs
embraced by mountain-pacing Pan—
who'd be your father, then? Or a bed-mate
of Loxias, lover of all the pasturing plains?
Or maybe Cyllene's Lord†
or the Bacchic god‡
who haunts the mountain summits took you,
a foundling, from one
of the dark-eyed Nymphs with whom
he loves to dally.

OEDIPUS: (to the Chorus) If I, too, may guess, though I've never
had any dealings with him, I think I see
the shepherd we're expecting. He's advanced
in years—as many as the man you've mentioned.
I recognize, too, as my own servants
the ones who bring him here. But you would know
better than I, having seen the man before.

CHORUS LEADER: Yes, it's him. He was a man whom Laius
trusted as much as any, though a shepherd.

(Enter the shepherd, accompanied by Oedipus' servants.)

OEDIPUS: I ask you first, Corinthian stranger: is this
the man you mean?  MESS.: Yes, him, the one you're looking at.

OEDIPUS: You there, old man, look here and tell me
what I ask. Were you once Laius' man?

SHEPHERD: I was, a slave not bought but reared in the house.

OEDIPUS: What task, what way of life, did you work at?

SHEPHERD: I tended flocks for almost all my life.

OEDIPUS: What places would you frequent, most of all?

SHEPHERD: It was Cithaeron, and the lands around it.

* Oedipus, still onstage; "child," again (as in line 1), is a term of endearment.
† Hermes, born on Mount Cyllene in Arcadia.
‡ Dionysus.
OEDIPUS: Do you recall, then, meeting this man there?
SHEPHERD: Doing what? And what man do you mean?
OEDIPUS: This one. Have you had anything to do with him?
SHEPHERD: Not that I can say offhand, from memory.
MESSENGER: And that's no wonder, master! But I'll remind him
though he does not know me now. He'll know
that when <the two of us were in> the region
of Cithaeron, he with two herds and I with one,
I kept him company for three stretches lasting
six months each—from spring until Arcturus† rose;
and then, when winter came, I drove my flocks
to their barns, and he drove his to those of Laius.
Does this ring true, or did it never happen?
SHEPHERD: You speak the truth, though a long time has passed.
MESSENGER: Come, then, tell me whether you remember
that you gave me a child, to raise as my own?
SHEPHERD: What's this? What are you getting at?
MESSENGER: Here he is, my friend: the man who was that child!
SHEPHERD: A curse on you! Will you not hold your tongue?
OEDIPUS: Don't chastise him, old man. It's your words,
not his, that stand in need of chastisement!
SHEPHERD: But how, O best of masters, am I at fault?
OEDIPUS: You won't discuss the child he asks about.
SHEPHERD: He doesn't know what he says, and wastes his breath.
OEDIPUS: If you won't talk to please me, you'll talk in pain!
SHEPHERD: No! By the gods, don't torture an old man.
OEDIPUS: Someone tie his hands behind his back!
SHEPHERD: No, no—for what? What more do you want to know?
OEDIPUS: Did you give this man the child in question?
SHEPHERD: I did. Would I had perished when I did!
OEDIPUS: You'll come to that, if you don't tell the truth.
SHEPHERD: But if I do I'll perish all the more.
OEDIPUS: (to his attendants) This man, it seems, is bent on wasting time.
SHEPHERD: I'm not! I've just told you I gave the child.
OEDIPUS: Whose child? Was it your own, or someone else's?

* Lloyd-Jones and others notice that a line is missing between 1135 and 1136. The words between angle
  brackets translate Lloyd-Jones's Greek, offered as an example of what Sophocles may have written here.
† Arcturus rises in the autumn.
SHEPHERD: No, not my own. I got it ... from someone.

OEDIPUS: From which of these citizens here? Which house?

SHEPHERD: By the gods, master, look no further!

OEDIPUS: You’re a dead man, if I ask this again.

SHEPHERD: He was ... somebody from the house of Laius.

OEDIPUS: A slave, or born into his family?

SHEPHERD: I’m close to saying what I dread to say!

OEDIPUS: And I to hearing it, but hear I must!

SHEPHERD: His, yes, the child was his. But she within,
your wife, would best speak of it, how it was.

OED.: Was she the one who gave him? SHEPHERD: Yes, my lord.

OED.: For what purpose? SHEPHERD: To do away with him.


OED.: Why, then, did you give him to this old man?

SHEPHERD: Out of pity, master. I thought he’d take him
away, where he himself was from. But he
has saved him for the worst of fates. For if
you’re who he says you are, you were born doomed.

OEDIPUS: iou, iou! It’s all come out too clear. Light,
may I never look on you again! I’m the one
born to those I shouldn’t have come from, living with those
I shouldn’t live with, killing those’ I ought not have killed.

(Exit Oedipus into the palace. The Messenger and the Shepherd
exit to the side.)

strophe 1

CHORUS: ió, generations of mortals,
how I reckon your lives
equal to nothing!
For what, what man
wins more of happiness
than to seem and, having seemed,
to seem no more?
With your fortune, yours

* The three occurrences of “those” in as many lines are meant to evoke the horror of the situation. The first one refers to Laius and Jocasta, the second to Jocasta alone, the third to Laius alone. In the second one, the phrase “living with” recalls 366–67. See note to line 367.
in mind, yours,
unhappy Oedipus, I can call
no mortal blest.

antistrophe 1
You aimed your shaft
beyond all others, and hit
success not happy
in every way, when (O Zeus!)
you killed the hook-taloned,
oracle-chanting maiden, and stood
a bulwark against my city's dying.
Since then you are called
my king! and have met
with highest honors,
ruled in mighty Thebes.

strophe 2
But now whose tale is more painful to hear?
Who dwells with disasters, with pangs
more savage than yours in a shifting life?
io, glorious Oedipus!
For you the same wide
harbor lay open
as son and husband
fathering children—how,
how could the furrow
sown by your father;
bear you in silence so long?

antistrophe 2
All-seeing Time has found you out against your will,
long ago condemned the unlawful marriage,
the marriage that bred children
for you and offspring

* The Sphinx. The conflation of her riddle with an oracle is due to its being posed in dactylic hexameter, as were the oracles of Apollo, and to its enigmatic character: Apollo's oracles were also enigmatic and hard to interpret.

† The Chorus speak as if Oedipus has been called king all along, but in fact this is the first and only time in the play that the actual word is used of him. Until this moment he has been "tyrant," "lord," or "master," never "king." Whatever the Chorus mean, Sophocles himself has delayed the bestowal of the title "king" upon him until now, timing it to coincide with his fall and not reverting to it later.

‡ A man's wife is, metaphorically, the furrow he sows; later, at lines 1256-57, the field he plows.
of its own. Io, son of Laius,
if only, if only I
had never known you!
How I grieve for you above all, the dirge
pouring from my lips! In truth,
you gave me the breath of life,
then closed my eyes in death.

(Enter a messenger from the palace.)

MESSENGER: Men most honored in this land of ours,
what deeds you'll hear of, what deeds you'll look upon,
what pain you'll feel, if you are still nobly
devoted to the house of Labdacus!
For neither the river Ister nor the Phasis
could wash away the stain upon these walls,
the evils that hide within, and those that soon
will burst into the light—willed, not unwilled,
self-chosen pains, which hurt the most to see.

CHORUS LEADER: What we knew before was cruel enough.
What sorrows can you add to these?

MESSENGER: The swiftest word to say and understand:
she's dead, Jocasta's dead, who was our queen.

CHORUS LEADER: The queen, dead! But how? How did she die?

MESSENGER: By her own hand. But the worst part of it
is missing, for you can't see what happened.
All the same, to the extent I can describe it,
you'll learn what that unhappy woman suffered.

When in a frenzy she had passed inside,
straight to her bridal bed she hurled herself,
tearing at her hair with both her hands.
Once there, she shut the doors and called
on Laius long since dead, reminding him
of the seed sown so long ago, the son
who killed him, and then begot with her
children cursed in their begetting. And then

* Lloyd-Jones and Wilson interpret this as a vague reference to "evil things, disasters" (Sophoelea, 108).
† Now called the Danube.
‡ Now called the Rioni, a river in Colchis, east of the Black Sea, into which it empties.
she mourned her bed, on which she bore a husband from her husband, children from her child. But how she died I can't say, for Oedipus broke in with a cry, preventing us from seeing her agony to the end. Our eyes were fixed on him instead, as he rushed here and there, calling for a sword, asking where she was, that wife no wife but a field that had brought forth two harvests—him and his children. And as he raved, some god—for it was none of us close by—showed him the way. As if guided to them, with a fearful scream, he sprang at the double doors, burst them inward from their jambs, and fell into the room. And there we saw the woman hanging, swinging in the air, entangled in a twisted noose. And when he saw her, in his grief he cried out a dreadful groan, then loosed the hanging halter. And when the poor woman lay upon the ground, it was dreadful to see, what happened next. He tore from her the golden brooches that pinned her clothes, raised them up and dashed them against his eyes, crying out that from now on those eyes would not see him or the evils he had done and suffered, but see in darkness those whom he should not have seen, and not know those he had wanted to know. With such imprecations, again and again he raised the brooches and struck his eyes. The bleeding eyeballs soaked his cheeks and did not cease to shed not oozy drops of gore, but all at once a hail-like rain of black blood streaming down.∗

These evils broke forth not from one, but both, not separate but mixed together, man and wife. The happiness of old was truly happiness back then, but now, and on this day lamentation, disaster, death, shame—of all the evils with a name, not one is missing.

∗ Lloyd-Jones and Wilson, following West, bracket lines 1278–79 as an interpolation.
† I render the text as emended by Wilamowitz and printed by Dawe.
CHORUS LEADER: Has the poor man any respite, now, from pain?

MESSENGER: He shouts for them to open the doors and show all the Cadmeans the killer of his father, his mother’s—unholy words, I can’t repeat them. He says he’d hurl himself from the land, not remain at home, cursed by his own curses. All the same, he needs help, a hand to guide him—his sickness is too strong to bear. But you shall see as well, for just now the doors are opening, and soon you’ll look upon a sight even one who hated him would pity.

(Oedipus emerges from the palace, blinded.)

CHORUS: O suffering terrible for men to see, O most terrible of all that I have yet encountered! What was the madness that leaped beyond all leaps upon your unhappy fate? and, and, unfortunate! I can’t look at you, I want to ask so many questions, so much to hear about, so much to see. Such is the horror you arouse in me.

OEDIPUS: aiai, aiai! Where on earth am I swept in sorrow? Where is my voice flying, borne on the wind? iò, my destiny, where, where have you sprung!

CHORUS LEADER: Into dread—not to be heard or looked on.†

(Oedipus and the Chorus now engage in a second kommos.)

strophe 1

OEDIPUS: iò, cloud of darkness, mine—repulsive, unspeakable, invincible onset, blown on an evil wind!

aimoi!

There it is, again! The sting,

* The Chorus now speak in regular anapestic measures for ten lines, answered by Oedipus in lyric anapests for four more.
† The Greek word here is daimon, repeated by Oedipus himself in line 131. It can also mean "god" or "fate."
‡ This line is in iambic trimeter, the regular meter for spoken verse, suggesting it was spoken not by the whole Chorus but by its leader alone.
the goad piercing through me
with the memory of these evils.

CHORUS: No wonder if, in the midst of pain like this,
your grief is doubled, and doubled your laments!

antistrophe 1

OEDIPUS: io, my friend—
you alone are still beside me,
still you remain and care for me, the blind.

pheu, pheu,
I am not mistaken but know it well,
though I'm in darkness—I know your voice.

CHORUS: What horrors you have done! How could you bring yourself
to quench your sight like this? What god drove you?

strope 2

OEDIPUS: This was Apollo, my friends; Apollo
brought these evils to pass, my evils,
these my sufferings.
But no hand struck my eyes, none
but mine, mine alone!
For why should I go on seeing, I
who had, when seeing, nothing sweet to see?

CHORUS: All this was, just as you say.

OEDIPUS: And what now is left for me to see
or to love, what greeting
to hear with any joy, my friends?
Take me away, out of the country
at once—away, my friends,
with the ruin of me, cursed
three times over, and more—
the mortal man most hated by the gods.

CHORUS: O ruined, ruined in mind and fortunes equally—
how I wish I had never known you!

antistrophe 2

OEDIPUS: Perish the man, whoever he was, the shepherd
who freed me from the cruel fetters on my feet,
rescued me from death
and saved me, and did
me no favor!
For had I died then, I would not have been
so great a sorrow to my friends or to myself.
CHORUS: I, too, would have wished it so.

OEDIPUS: I would not have come as my father's killer
or be called by men
husband to those that gave me birth.
But as it is, I am
god-forsaken, son
of those I defiled
and father of children
with those from whom I sprang.
And if there is an evil yet more than evil,
it is mine, the lot of Oedipus.

CHORUS: I don't see how I'd say you've chosen well,
for you'd be better off dead than living blind.

OEDIPUS: Don't lecture me that any of this is not
for the best, or give me any more advice.
For I do not know with what sort of eyes
I'd see my father when I came to Hades,
or my wretched mother—against them both
I have committed crimes too huge for hanging.

Or do you think the sight of my children
would be a joy to look at, born as they were?
No, never, not to these eyes of mine!
Nor would the city, nor its towers and statues
and temples. I've deprived myself of these,
I, the all-daring, the one raised best in Thebes
for I commanded all to drive away
the sacrilege, the man the gods have now
shown to be unholy and the son of Laius.

Once I brought to light such a stain as mine,
could I look with steady eyes on all of this?
No! And if there were a way to plug my ears
and clog the springs of hearing, I'd not refrain
from sealing up this wretched corpse of mine,

* The plural, again, is allusive. Jocasta is meant.
† Jocasta, defiled by her incestuous union with him.
‡ Laius, whom he joins as the father of children by the same woman.
§ The kommos ends here. Dialogue resumes.
¶ In the fifth-century imagination, the dead in Hades remained as they were when last alive. Oedipus
will take his blindness with him into the Underworld.
blind and deaf to everything. It would be sweet for thought to dwell where evils have no entry.  
O Cithaeron, why take me in, and then not kill me outright, so I could not have shown myself to men? Such was my origin!
O Polybus and Corinth, home I called my native land, what a fine thing you nurtured, lovely, with evils festering beneath its skin! For now I'm found out—evil, and born of evil.
O threefold road and hidden glen and thicket and narrow pathway where the three roads met—from these hands of mine you drank my own, my father's blood. Do you still remember me, remember what I did for you, what I went on to do when I came here? O marriage, marriage that brought me forth and having brought me forth sent the same seed up again, and showed the world fathers who were brothers, sons their fathers' killers, brides who were wives and mothers, and whatever else would bring most shame to humankind!
But since what's best not done is best not said, by the gods I beg you, quick as you can hide me somewhere, or kill me, or hurl me into the sea, never to be seen again.
Come, do not hesitate to touch me, in my sorrow.
Trust me, and have no fear; these ills of mine no mortal man, none but I alone, can bear.

(Enter Creon from the side.)

CHORUS LEADER: Here, now, is Creon, coming just in time to act on your requests, or weigh them, for he alone is left in charge, as you once were.

OEDIPUS: Creon! oimoi, what shall I say to him? What trust can I expect, when it's been proved I was wrong to him in every way before?

CREON: I haven't come to mock you, Oedipus, nor scold you for the wrongs you've done. (to the Chorus) But you here, if you aren't ashamed in the sight of men, be ashamed, at least, before the sun that nurtures all—ashamed to display, like this, unhidden, such pollution, which neither earth
nor sacred rain nor light of day will bear.
But quickly as you can, bring him inside.
Only one's kin can decently look on
or listen to the evils done by kin.

OEDIPUS: By the gods, since you've put my fears to flight,
coming as best of men to me, the worst,
grant me a wish, not for my sake, but yours.

CREON: What do you have in mind, to ask me like this?

OEDIPUS: Hurl me from the land, right now. Send me
where no man will ever speak to me.

CREON: I would have done so, but first it was my wish
to ask the god what action must be taken.

OEDIPUS: But what he has declared is clear enough:
away with me, the father-killer, the unholy one!

CREON: So it was said, but in this crisis,
it's better to inquire what must be done.

OEDIPUS: So you'll ask the god about a wreck like me?

CREON: Maybe this time even you will heed his answer.

OEDIPUS: But it's you I am entreating now, you
I ask to bury the woman who's in there
as you see fit—take care, rightly, of your own kin.
As for me, may this, my father's city,
ever be forced to shelter me in life
but let me roam the mountains, the one they call
my own, Cithaeron, which my parents made
a living tomb for me, so I may finally
die at the hands of those who meant to kill me.

And yet this much I know: sickness couldn't
have killed me then, or anything. I wouldn't have been saved
from dying except to meet with some great evil.†
But let fate proceed wherever it will take me.

As for my children,‡ Creon, you needn't worry

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* By sending him there as an infant to be exposed to the elements to die.
† Namely, to grow up and become his father's killer, his mother's husband.
‡ Oedipus and Jocasta had four children, two sons (Eteocles and Polynices) and two daughters (Antigone and Ismene). The two daughters are still children in this play; the two sons, though Oedipus here calls them "men," are evidently not yet of age, as neither lays claim to the throne of Thebes. Instead, Creon seems to have become the ruler, at least for the time being (lines 1417–18 suggest a kind of regency). Later, the sons will attempt to share sovereignty and end by killing each other in the struggle for power. Sophocles had dealt with these developments in the earlier play Antigone and will deal with them again in his final work, Oedipus at Colonus.
about my sons. They’re men, they’ll never lack
the means of life, wherever they may be;
but my pair of girls, unhappy, pitiful,
who never dined at a table set
apart from mine, but had
their share of everything I touched’—
them you must care for and, most of all,
let me touch them, let me lament my sorrows.
Come, my lord,†
come, as you are nobly born. If I held them
I’d seem to have them, as when I could see.

(Enter, from the palace, Antigone and Ismene, daughters of
Oedipus)
What am I saying?
Surely, by the gods, it isn’t my two daughters
that I hear weeping? Has Creon, out of pity,
sent for the dearest of my children?
Am I right?
CREON: Yes, I’m the one who arranged for this, knowing
the pleasure they’d give you now, and gave you then.
OEDIPUS: May you prosper, then, and have the luck to find,
in return, a better god† than mine to guard you.
Children, where are you? Come here, here
to these hands of mine, your brother’s hands
that have made your father’s eyes see as they see—
your father’s eyes that once were bright;
your father, children, who, without seeing or knowing
fathered you where I myself was sown.§
And I weep—I can’t see, but I can weep
for you—the bitterness of the days ahead,
how people will treat you from now on.
What public gatherings will you go to,

* The phrasing in lines 1463–64 is strange, and the emphasis on eating at the same table with his daughters is puzzling at this point. There may be an allusion, by contrast, to the epic tradition, according to which he had cursed his sons because they had placed before him, at table, the wine cups used by Laius.
† A single bacchic metron, here and again at lines 1471 and 1475, interrupts the iambic trimeters of spoken verse, a sign of intense emotion.
‡ Daimôn here has the sense of a divine power that oversees a man’s life, for good or ill.
§ See note to line 1213.
what festivals from which you won't come home in tears, unable to take part?
And when you've come to the threshold of marriage, who will he be, who will dare, my children, to take upon himself such taunts, disgraces heaped on your parents and on you as well?
What horrors do we lack? "Your father killed his father, plowed the same mother from whom he himself was spawned, and from the same womb whence he himself was born, got you."
That's what they'll say. And then, who'll marry you?
No one, my children, but clearly you are bound to perish barren and unmarried.
Son of Menoeceus, since you alone are left a father to these girls—for we, their parents, are both in ruins—do not just look on while they wander, beggared, husbandless—your kin! Don't let their sorrows be as great as mine.
Take pity on them, seeing them, so young, bereft of all, unless you take their part.
Show that you agree, with a touch of your hand!
And to you, my children, if you could understand, I'd offer much advice. But pray for this:
to live where opportunity allows, and have a better life than the father who begot you.
CREON: Enough of tears for now! Inside with you.$
OED.: I must obey, however little I like it. CRE.: All's well when its time has come.
OED.: Do you know my terms for going? CRE.: I'll know them when I've heard them.
OED.: Send me away, into exile. CRE.: You ask of me what is the god's to give.

* The transmitted text ("for my parents and for you") makes no sense here. I render Herwerden's conjecture, said by Dawe to give "the expected sense" (199) and described in Sophoclea as "the most plausible suggestion so far" (113).
† I render the text as emended by Dawes in 1781.
‡ Unable to see a nod of assent to his appeal, Oedipus asks Creon to touch his hand instead.
§ Creon switches from iambic trimeter to trochaic tetrameter, in which the dialogue continues to the end. The switch is indicative, perhaps, of a quickening in pace.
OED.: But the gods despise me! CRE.: Then you won't have long to wait.
OED.: So you agree? CRE.: I don't waste time saying what I don't mean.
OED.: Lead me away, now. It's time. CRE.: Proceed, then, and let the children go.
OED.: No, don't take them from me! CRE.: Cease to desire power in everything; the power you had in life has not stayed with you to the end.

(The children are escorted away from Oedipus, joining Creon and his attendants. Exit Oedipus, led by attendants, into the palace. Creon and the children exit to the side. While all these are leaving, the Chorus Leader addresses the citizens of Thebes, represented by the rest of the Chorus.)

CHORUS LEADER: Dwellers in our native Thebes, behold! Here is Oedipus, who solved the famous riddle and rose to power (what citizen did not look upon his life with envy?)—see what he's come to, what a wave of grim disaster washed over him, a warning to us all: bide the coming of that final day, counting no man happy till he has crossed life's boundary free of pain.