

You will need multiple burials... Meanwhile, burn these parts.
 Open the house: it stinks of death. Let all the land
 of Attica ring loud with piercing funeral cries.
 You, make ready the flame for the royal pyre,
 and you, go out and seek the missing parts of the body
 scattered in the country. And as for that woman—bury her,
 and may the heavy earth crush down her wicked head.

1280

OEDIPUS

Oedipus was the son of Laius and Jocasta, king and queen of Thebes. Since Laius had heard from an oracle that his son would kill him, he gave the baby to his shepherd, to expose on Mount Cithaeron. But the shepherd instead gave the baby to a herdsman working for King Polybus of Corinth. Oedipus was raised as the son of Polybus and his wife, Merope. But the oracle of Apollo at Delphi foretold that Oedipus would marry his mother and kill his father. So Oedipus ran away from Corinth. On his travels he met an old man—Laius. He got into an argument with him and killed him. He reached Thebes, and managed to solve the riddle of the Sphinx—a female monster who was oppressing the country. She asked, 'What walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening?' Oedipus answered, correctly: 'Man.' As a reward for saving the country Oedipus was given in marriage to the widowed Jocasta, and ruled as king in Thebes for many years; the couple had two sons and two daughters. But then a plague was sent to oppress the city. Oedipus sends his wife's brother, Creon, to find out what he can do to save Thebes.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

OEDIPUS, king of Thebes
JOCASTA, his wife
CREON, Jocasta's brother
TIRESIAS, a blind prophet
MANTO, Tiresias' daughter
OLD CORINTHIAN MAN
PHORBAS, a herdsman
MESSENGER
CHORUS

ACT ONE

OEDIPUS Now night has been driven to exile, the hesitant Sun
reappears,
and gloomy brightness dawns from beneath a murky cloud.
With melancholy light, with flames of grief,
day looks out on these homes, wasted by greedy plague,
revealing all the devastation night has made.

Do you think being king is fun? What a fraud, this so-called
good!

What terrible suffering lies beneath your smile!
Just as the breezes always buffet the highest crags,
and cliffs whose rocks jut out over the vast ocean
are beaten by the waves even when the sea is calm:
so high power is vulnerable to Fortune.

How happy I was to be free from my father Polybus' throne!
An exile, released from anxiety, wandering without fear,
I happened on a kingdom. May gods and heaven bear witness!
I am afraid of unspeakable things: my father's death
at my own hands. The oracle warned me of this,
and says I will commit another, even greater crime.
Is any sin more terrible than killing one's own father?
As a loyal son, I blush to speak about my fate.

Phoebus threatens me with a parent's bed, a terrible marriage, 20
an indecent, incestuous, wicked union for a child.
Fear of this oracle exiled me from my father's kingdom,
for this reason I ran away from home and my household gods.
Doubting myself, I wanted to keep the laws
which Nature ordained. When your fears are great and terrible
you start to shudder even at things you think impossible.
I am afraid of everything, I do not trust myself.
Here, now, at every minute, the fates are plotting against me.
Why should I think that horrible curse on the race of Cadmus,*
whose dreadful carnage spread through all our family, 30
would pity me alone? What pain did they keep me alive for?
Among the rubble of the city and all these deaths, which demand
a constant flow of fresh tears, among the piles of corpses,

and all the city too. Look now, the land
 is empty of inhabitants, poor Thebes.
 Bacchus, death has harvested your friends,
 troops that you led from far-off India;
 they dared to ride over the eastern plains,
 and fix their flags at the horizon of the world.
 They saw the Arabs and their fertile groves
 of cinnamon; they saw the Parthians,
 fearful tricksters, firing arrows as they fly.*
 They marched across the shores of the Indian Ocean,
 where Phoebus brings forth dawn and opens day;
 his flame approaches and makes dark the skin
 of the naked natives.

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Sons of an unconquered race, we now lie dying.
 A swift and savage fate has levelled us.
 At every moment more march on to Death.
 A long, grieving procession makes its way
 to bury the dead, while other mourners halt:
 even seven gates* cannot let through
 the mass of those who want to reach the tombs.
 Ruin weighs on ruin, death is joined
 closely to death.

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Infection first took hold of the stumbling sheep;
 the rich grass could not help the woolly flocks.
 A priest stands by the neck of a sturdy bull,
 as his skilful hands get ready for the stroke,
 the animal, horns glittering with gold,
 sinks to the ground. They hack at him with an axe,
 to open the creature's massive throat.
 No blood comes out; black gore
 is gushing from the wound, which taints the sword,
 and pours to the ground. The galloping horse
 grows slow in the middle of a race, and fails its jockey,
 falling on the track, as its flanks collapse.
 The cattle hunker down, abandoned in the fields.
 The herd is dying and the bull grows weak.
 The master cannot help the few still left alive;
 he dies amid his plague-sick animals.
 The deer have now no fear of ravening wolves;

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the onslaught of the raging lion is gone;
 the shaggy bears have now no wildness left;
 the slinky snake has lost its power to harm:
 its poison shrivels up, and parched, it dies.

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The wood has lost its lovely trailing hair
 which poured the shadows on the shady hills.
 The countryside has lost its mossy green,
 the vines no longer curl, their branches full
 of their own grape-crop.

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Everything is sharing in our suffering.
 The gates of deepest Hell have broken open,
 out burst the sister Furies, waving fire,
 Phlegethon has overflowed its banks,
 the flood of Styx flows to Sidonia.
 Black Death reveals its greedy gaping mouth,
 unfurling all its terrible dark wings.
 The hale old ferryman, * who rows the hoards,
 in a roomy boat across the swollen river
 can scarcely lift his arms to raise the pole,
 too tired with the constant punting,
 always bringing new throngs.

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Indeed, they say the Dog* burst through his chains
 of hellish iron, and wandered up
 into the human world; the earth rumbled;
 they say that ghosts were walking through the woods,
 larger than lifesize; and the Theban trees
 twice shook the snow from their leaves.
 Twice the stream of Dirce welled with blood;
 the hounds of Amphion howled
 in the silent night.

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Oh terrible new form of death, much worse
 than death itself!
 Numbness binds the languid limbs,
 sick faces flush.
 A rash of tiny spots covers the skin,
 and liquid flame burns up the citadel
 of the body's core.
 The cheeks are swollen with blood,
 the eyes are stark, the ears are ringing,

the nostrils flare and black blood drops from them,
bursting the bloated veins. Often
their bowels begin to groan and whine;
and Holy Fire* begins to eat their limbs.
Now in their weariness they clutch cold stones.
If their watchman dies and sets them free, they rush outside
to gulp back fresh spring water. Now all of them flop down
flat on their faces in front of the altars,
and pray to die. This single wish alone
the gods provide. The people throng to the shrines,
not hoping that the gods may be appeased
with gifts from us,
but wanting to glut even their heavenly hunger.

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ACT TWO

CHORUS Who is this hurrying towards the palace?

Is Creon, noble and heroic, here,

or does my sick soul take falsehood for truth?

No, it is Creon, the answer to all our prayers.

OEDIPUS I shudder, fearful where the fates may turn,
my trembling heart is toppling with two fears:
where happiness is doubtful, mixed with pain,
the mind feels fear although it longs to know.

Brother-in-law, if you bring any help

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for all our weariness, come tell us what it is!

CREON The answer lies under a doubtful fate.

OEDIPUS Giving uncertain help to the wretched is giving none.

CREON The custom is for the oracle at Delphi
to hide its secrets in enigmas.

OEDIPUS Tell the puzzle!

I, Oedipus, am the expert at solving tricky riddles.

CREON The god tells us to banish the killer of the king,
and to avenge the death of murdered Laius.

Only then will day run brightly through the sky,
giving pure, fresh, healthy gusts of air.

OEDIPUS And who was the killer of the famous king?

Tell us who Phoebus named, so we may punish him.

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CREON Things horrible to hear and see—may I speak safely!
My body is besieged by numbness, blood runs cold.
I entered the holy precinct of Apollo, like a pilgrim,
and praying to the god, reverently raised my hands.
The double peak of snowy Mount Parnassus roared;
the laurel tree of Phoebus quivered, moved its leaves,
and all at once, the holy Castalian spring stood still.
Then the priestess began to shake her bristling hair:
she let Phoebus take her. As she moved to the cave,
an inhuman sound burst from her with a crash.

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'Gentle stars will come again to Thebes,
if you, the Stranger, Exile, Guest, depart.
Polluted with a royal murder, Apollo knew you as a baby.
You will have short enjoyment of your wicked murder:
You will bring war with you and leave it to your sons.
You have returned—disgusting!—to your mother's womb.'

OEDIPUS I will now prepare to do, on heaven's orders,
what ought to have been done to honour the dead king's ashes,
to ward off treachery against the holy throne.
Kings are the ones who need to care for kings.

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Nobody protects a dead man whose life commanded fear.

CREON Our care for the dead was set aside by a greater fear.

OEDIPUS Can any fear prevent a man from duty?

CREON Yes! The Sphinx, and the threats of her terrible riddle.

OEDIPUS Well now, at heaven's command, we must make
amends.—

Whichever god looks down on our kingdom and smiles:

you, who regulate the revolutions of the sky,

and you, * O greatest glory of the unclouded sky,

ruling the Zodiac in your changing chariot's course,

whose speedy wheel rolls round the dawdling years,

and you, his sister, always ready to meet your brother,

Diana, wanderer of the night, and you, lord of the winds,
driving your dark-blue horses over the depths of the sea;

and you who make new homes in darkness, without light;

come here! May the man who murdered old King Laius

find no quiet home, no household gods' protection;
may he be exiled and find no sanctuary.

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May his marriage shame him and his children shock him.
 May he even kill his father by his own hand,
 and do—what could be worse?—the dreadful thing
 I ran from. There will be no pardon. I swear it,
 by this kingdom that welcomed me Guest-King,
 and by the land I left and by the household gods,
 and by you, Father Neptune, whose soft waves
 wash against the Isthmus of my native land;
 and you come now as witness to my words,
 Apollo, inspiration to the truthful oracle;
 so may my father live to comfortable old age,
 ending his days by natural means on his high throne;
 and may Merope know no bed but that of Polybus,
 so, I swear, the guilty one will not escape my hands.
 But tell me, where was the awful crime committed?
 Was it in public on the battlefield? Or was he ambushed?
 CARON He was going to the leafy groves of holy Castalia.
 The road he trod was overgrown with thorns,
 till he came to a three-fork crossroad, branching to the plain.
 One path cuts through Phocis, country loved by Bacchus,
 where Mount Parnassus rises high, abandoning the fields
 to seek the sky, in a gentle slope up to twin peaks.
 Another path leads off to Sisyphus' double seas;*
 the third, a curving road, winds round to the Oleanian fields,
 touching the wandering waters till it crosses
 the icy waters of the river Elis.
 As he approached, believing himself safe,
 a band of robbers pounced with swords, in secret.
 But right on time, here comes Tiresias,
 roused up by Phoebus' oracle. He staggers on slow legs,
 and Manto comes with him, leading the blind man.
 OEDIPUS Holy man, the nearest human to Apollo,
 explain the oracle! Tell us what fate wants.
 TIRESIAS Great-hearted Oedipus, you should not wonder
 that my tongue hesitates to speak, wants to delay.
 Much of the truth lies hidden to the blind.
 But I will follow where my country calls, and god.
 Let us dig out the fates; if my old blood
 were fresh and hot, I would let the god possess me.*

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Instead, cut open a snow-white bull on the altars,
 and a heifer whose neck has never borne a yoke.
 Daughter, guide your blind and lightless father,
 tell me what the prophetic rite reveals.
 MANTO A perfect victim stands at the holy altars.
 TIRESIAS Call upon the gods with reverent voices,
 heap the altars with incense, gift of the East.
 MANTO Now I have heaped up incense on the holy hearth of the
 gods.
 TIRESIAS What about the flame? Is it feasting yet?
 MANTO It suddenly flashed with light but then died down.
 TIRESIAS Was the flame bright and shiny, did it stand
 raising itself clear and pure up tall to the sky,
 unfolding its very tip up into the air?
 Or did it creep out sideways, unsure where to go,
 and sink down in confusion, drowned in smoke?
 MANTO The flame kept changing, it was not just one way.
 As when Iris* brings the rain and twines
 multiple colours into herself, she curves right over
 the arch of the sky and her colourful bow foretells the storm.
 So you could hardly tell the colour of the flame:
 it hovered, mixing dark blue with yellow spots,
 then turned blood-red again, and finally to black.
 But look, the fire fights back, divides in two,
 the embers of the holy rite are arguing and split.
 Father, I shudder as I look at it! The gift
 of wine we poured there changes now to blood,
 and thick smoke circles round the head of the king.
 Even denser fog descends upon his face;
 the light is dirty, hidden in thick cloud.
 Tell us, father: what does it mean?
 TIRESIAS What can I say?
 My mind is so astounded, in an uproar.
 What can I say? These are mysterious horrors;
 usually the gods reveal their anger plainly.
 What is it that they want to have revealed,
 but also do not want to show? Why do they hide their rage?
 The gods themselves are somehow feeling shame. Quick, here,
 scatter the salted meal* on the cattle's necks.

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Do they submit to it with calm expressions?

MANTO The bull tossed high his head, and shuddering,
he was terrified to face the rising dawn:

trembling he shrank away from the rays of the sun.

TRESIAS Did they fall down to the earth at a single blow?

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MANTO The heifer threw herself upon the knife,
and died with just one blow. But the bull, struck twice,
lumbered this way and that, dazed and confused,
until he was worn out, had no resistance left.

TRESIAS Did the blood spurt out quickly from a narrow cut,
or was it slower, gushing from deep wounds?

MANTO The heifer's blood flowed out through the pathway in her
breast,

like a river. But the bull, though badly wounded,
was stained with little blood. It flowed perversely,
out in a rush through his mouth and through his eyes.

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TRESIAS Such unlucky signs should make us fear.

But tell me now the sure-fire marks of the entrails.
MANTO Father, what is this? The entrails do not quiver
just gently, as they usually do; no, my whole hand
is shaken when I touch them. New blood jumps from the veins.

The heart is weak and sick and lies deep down,
the veins are dark. A large part of the entrails is not here,
the rotten liver oozes with black gall,
and—always a bad omen for a monarch—
look, there are two heads, equally bulbous.

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Only a delicate membrane covers both these heads,
there is no hiding-place for these dark secrets.

The bad side* rises up, sturdy and strong,
with seven veins, but a sideways path cuts through,
stopping any of these veins from turning back.

Anatomy is altered, nothing is in its place,
everything is wrong; on the right, the lungs
can hold no air, for they are clogged with blood.
The left side has no heart; the stomach does not stretch
its soft folds out over the winding bowels.

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Nature is perverted. The womb does not follow the rules.
Let us dissect and see why the entrails seem so stiff.
What horror is this? A virgin heifer pregnant!

But the focus is in the wrong place, filling its mother
somewhere it ought not to be. It moans and twitches,
shaking its spindly body in stiff spasms.

Dark blood stains the innards of the beast.

The mangled body-parts attempt to move,
the hollow body rises up and lowers its horns
to threaten the priests. My hands cannot hold the spleen.
You hear that rumbling sound? It is not from the cattle.
No frightened animal is lowing here.

380

The altar fires are lowing, the hearth is terrified.

OEDIPUS What do all these awful portents mean?
Reveal it! I am not afraid to drink the truth.
The worst disasters make people feel calm.

TRESIAS You will look back with envy at your present troubles.

OEDIPUS Just tell me what the gods want me to know:
whose hands are tainted by the old king's murder?

TRESIAS Neither the birds who plunge in the depths of the sky
on their light wings, nor the entrails torn from living bellies
can tell the name. We must try another method.
We must call up the king himself from Erebus,*
the land of eternal night, to point out his own killer.

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Earth must be unlocked, we must implore
the pitiless power of Dis, we must drag out
the people of infernal Styx. Who will you send
to go on this quest? As king, you must not see the ghosts.

OEDIPUS Creon, as my second-in-command,
the task is yours.

400

TRESIAS While we unloose the latches of deep Hell,
let people sing their hymns in praise of Bacchus.

CHORUS Bind up your flowing hair with nodding ivy,
carry the thyrsis in your soft white arms.

Glory of the shining day,
come receive the prayers we offer,
we raise our hands to greet you,

come to famous Thebes, your city,
Bacchus. Turn your girlish face to bless us,
shake the clouds from the starlight of your eyes,
expel the threatening scowls of Hell
and greedy fate.

410

If suits you well to wear spring flowers in your hair,
to bind your head up in a Tyrian turban,
or put a wreath of ivy mixed with olive
on your gentle brow.

Let your hair tumble anyhow,
then tie it back again in a ponytail;
as when you feared the anger of your stepmother,
and grew yourself false limbs,
pretending to be a blonde-haired teenage girl,*
with a yellow sash around your dress.

Later in life as well, you like soft dresses,
falling in loose folds with a long train.

All the vast territory of the East
saw you sitting on your golden chariot,
wearing a trailing robe, driving your lions,
from the Ganges to the snowy ice
of Araxes.

Old Silenus follows with you on his peasant donkey,
wearing ivy on his bulging head;
your sexy priests perform the hidden mysteries.

The troop of Bassarids accompany you,
beating the ground in their Edonian dance,
and now they come to Mount Pangaeus, now
the peak of Thracian Pindus. Here comes a Maenad,
a shocking figure among the Theban matrons,
companion to Ogygian Bacchus,
hips tied up with holy fawn-skins,
waving a slender thyrsus in her hand.

Now even the mothers' hearts are shaken by you,
they let their hair fall loose, but after mangling Pentheus,*
the Maenads find their bodies freed from madness,
and are surprised to see what they have done.

Ino,* foster-mother of glorious Bacchus,
rules the sea, surrounded by the dancing Nereids.

A stranger boy has come to rule the waves of the deep:
cousin to Bacchus, the well-known god Palamon.*

Once, dear boy, a group of barbarian pirates*
captured you, and Neptune calmed the swelling seas;
he changed the dark-blue ocean into grass.

The plane-tree sprouted green with springtime leaves,
and a whole grove of laurel, dear to Phoebus;
the chattering birds were singing in the trees.
The oars were caught in the tendrils of the ivy,
the masthead got entwined with all the vines.

On the prow a Trojan lion roared,
a tiger from the Ganges crouches at the stern.

Then the frightened pirates swim off in the sea,
and as they plunge, their bodies change their shape;
first the robbers' arms are falling off,
their chests nudge up and join on to their bellies,
a little tiny hand hangs from one side,
as with curved backs they sink into the waves,
cutting through the sea with crescent tails;
now they pursue the fleeing sails
as rounded dolphins.

The wealthy stream of Lydian Pactolus
carried you with the gold of its burning banks;
the Massagetan who drinks milk mixed with blood
gave up his conquered bow, abandoned shooting;
Bacchus is recognized in the lands of Lycurgus with his axe.

The wild country of the Zalaces,
the nomads who suffer the blast of Boreas,
know Bacchus' power,
and the nations washed by the cold stream
of the Maeotis,
and the Amazons under the Arcadian stars,
the double plough.

He has mastered the scattered Gelonians,
seized the arms of those rough girls,
the herds of Thermodonia have bowed their heads before him:
abandoning at last their little arrows
they turn to Maenads.

Holy Cithaeron flowed with blood
and Pentheus dead.

The daughters of Proetus* fled to the woods and Argos
worshipped Bacchus, even in front of his stepmother.
Naxos surrounded by the Aegean
handed over the girl,* abandoned

by her husband. She was compensated
with a better one.

490

Wine flowed out

from dry punice rock;

chattering streams cut through the grass,

the earth drank deeply the sweet juice,

white streams of snowy milk

and Lesbian wine mixed with fragrant thyme.

The new bride* is led right up to heaven;

Phoebus sings the hymn, hair pouring over his shoulders,

while twin Cupids shake the torches;

Jupiter puts down his fiery bolt

and hates the thunder,* when Bacchus is coming.

As long as the bright stars run through the ancient years,

as long as Ocean keeps the world surrounded by his waves,

as long as Moon grows full and gathers her lost fires,

as long as Lucifer predicts the early dawn,

as long as the high Bears stay far from the deep blue sea,

so long we will worship the beautiful face of Bacchus.

500

ACT THREE

OEDIPUS Although your face looks marked by tears,

tell us whose life must pay to satisfy the gods.

510

CREON You order me to say what my fear bids me hide.

OEDIPUS If all the ruin of Thebes is not enough,

at least the fall of your royal family should persuade you.

CREON You will long not to know what you try too hard to find.

OEDIPUS Ignorance is no cure for suffering.

Would you hide evidence that could help the public?

CREON If the cure is bad, better to be sick.

OEDIPUS Tell us what you heard, or I will break you,

and you will learn what violence an angry king can do.

CREON Kings hate to hear the things they order spoken.

OEDIPUS I will send you to Hell! One small life pays for all—

520

unless you tell the secrets from the holy rites.

CREON I wish I could keep quiet. Can one hope

for freedom from a king?

OEDIPUS Often silent freedom
hurts kings and kingdoms even more than speech.

CREON Where silence is forbidden, what freedom can there be?

OEDIPUS If you are silent when ordered to speak, you are a traitor.

CREON You forced me speak, so listen calmly, please.

OEDIPUS Did anyone ever get punished for speaking under orders?

CREON Far from the city there is a grove, shaded with

holm-oaks,

next to the moist ground by Dirce's spring.

A cypress tree lifts up its head above the lofty wood,

binding the other trees with its constant foliage.

An ancient oak tree stretches out gnarled branches,

rotten with neglect. Devouring age has torn

the side of its trunk away; the root is ripped apart;

the falling tree is propped against another.

Laurel with its bitter berries, slender lime,

Paphian myrtle, alder trees which rush

through the vast ocean,* and pine, whose smooth trunk

rises high to meet the sun, and can withstand the winds.

540

In the very middle stands a mighty tree,

shadowing over the smaller trees, defending

the whole grove together with its enormous girth.

Under it overflows a stream that knows no light,

stiff and frozen with perpetual cold;

a muddy swamp surrounds the stagnant pool.

When the old priest began to enter here,

at once the place provided him with night.

The ditch was dug, and fire from funeral pyres

was thrown on top. Tiresias was wearing

his funeral outfit, as he waved his leaves.

The old man came in dirty, shabby clothes,

his mourning cloak poured down to cover his feet,

and deadly yew wreathed round his whitened hair.

Black-fleeced sheep and black heifers were dragged

backwards to the fire. The flames devoured them,

and their living hearts were shaking as they burnt.

He cried out to the dead, and you, Lord of the Dead,

and you, the Guardian of the Lake of Lethe,*

Reciting the magic spell, his mouth possessed, he sang

560

all charms to please the flitting ghosts, or force them.
He pours blood on the hearth, and burns whole bodies
of animals, and soaks the ditch with blood.

He pours on top a stream of snow-white milk,
and also pours in wine with his left hand,
and chants again, and looking at the earth
he calls the spirits with a deeper, wilder voice.

The hounds of Hecate are barking loud; three times
the valley

rumbles in grief, and earth, struck from below,
is shaken. 'Now they hear me!' cried the priest.

'My prayers are answered; the black gulf is broken,
there is a path for the dead to the upper air.'

The whole forest shrank back, its leaves now stood on end,
the oaks were cracked, and all the grove was struck
with terror. Earth drew back and groaned within.

Either Hell was upset to feel its hidden depths
plumbed, or it was Earth herself, who burst her links,
with a moan, to give a way up out of there for the dead.

Or else the three-headed dog, Cerberus, in a rage,
shook himself and clattered his heavy chains.

All of a sudden the earth gaped open; a chasm
split, enormous. I saw with my own eyes the stagnant lakes,
the spirits, the pale-faced gods, and that true night.

My blood ran cold, it froze still in my veins.
Out jumped a wild, ferocious troop, and stopped
full-armed before us, all the snaky sons,

the soldier brothers born from the dragon's teeth.*
Then the fierce Fury screamed, and blind, mad Passion,
Terror, and all together, the secret children
of eternal darkness: Grief, tearing her hair,

Sickness, hardly holding up his weary head,
Old Age burdened with itself, and looming Fear,
and Plague, greedy to eat the Theban people.

Our hearts sank. Even the girl, who knew
her father's art and ritual, was aghast.

Her father, bold in blindness, bravely summoned
the bloodless folk of cruel King Dis. At once
like clouds they fly and rob the clear skies of their air.

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590

More numerous than the falling leaves of Eryx,
or all the flowers of Hybla in the spring,
when the dense swarm weaves round them in a ball,
or all the crashing waves of the Ionian Sea;

or all the birds who migrate from the winter
in icy Thrace, cut through the sky and swap
the Arctic snows for the warm Egyptian Nile—
more than all these were the ghosts the prophet's magic called.

The trembling spirits were eager to seek out
hiding places in the shady wood. The first to rise
up from the ground was Zethus, his right hand holding
the horn of a wild bull; and Amphion,* whose left hand
holds the sweet-voiced cithara that leads the rocks.

Niobe, rejoined at last to her dear children,
carries her head high up with pride, and counts
her ghosts.* Here comes a much worse mother, Agave,
still crazy.* With her comes that group of women
who tore the king apart, and mangled Pentheus
follows the maenads, still furiously threatening them.

The priest keeps calling to a single ghost; at last,
embarrassed, he lifts his head, keeping his distance,
and tries to hide himself; the priest redoubles
his Stygian prayers, until his face is out
into the open—Ianus! I shudder to tell it.

He looked terrible, his whole body covered with blood,
his matted dirty hair covered up his eyes.

His voice was desperate: 'Savage house of Cadmus,
always happy with your family's blood,
shake the thyrsus, tear your children up
with hands possessed. The greatest crime in Thebes
is mother-love. Land of my fathers, you are ruined
not by the anger of gods but by your crimes.'

The plague wind did not blast you, your destruction
was not from lack of rain to cause a drought;
it was a blood-stained king, who took the throne
as a reward for murder, and—abomination!—
seized his father's bed. Horrible child! But the mother
is even worse, her cursed womb pregnant again.
He pushed into the place from which he came, and got

630

cursed children by his mother, doing what
even the wild beasts shun—he fathered his own brothers. 640
He is a tangled web of evil, a monster worse than the Sphinx.
It is you, you, who hold the bloodied scepter!

I, your father unavenged, seek you and your whole city,
and I bring with me the Fury, bridesmaid of your marriage,
whipping her lash. I will overturn your house,
polluted by wicked sex and wicked murder.

So you must drive the king in exile from this land
immediately; curse upon him! Let him go anywhere.

Just let him leave. The country will grow green
and flower again, the air will be made clean 650
and healthy; beauty will return to all the trees.
Ruin, Destruction, Death, Pain, Grief, and Rotteness

are fit companions for him, let them go with him.
He himself will want to run away

to leave my kingdom, but I will hang weights
upon his feet to keep him here; he will wander, lost,
resting the ground before him with an old man's stick.

You make him lose the earth and I will make him lose the sky?

OEDIPUS Cold shuddering shakes my body and my bones.

I am accused of having done all that I feared to do. 660

But Merope is still married to her husband! Proof
that this cannot be true. And Polybus' life

proves my innocence. Both parents can bear witness

I did not do these crimes. What room for guilt can there be?

Thebes was in mourning for Laius before I even came,
before I set my foot on Boeotian soil.

Is the priest lying? Is some god against us?

Now! You! I have got the cunning conspirators:

Tiresias invented it, using the gods

as cover for his trick. He promised my throne to you.

CREON Why would I want to drive my sister out? 670

Even if holy loyalty to family

did not restrain me to my proper station,

I would be too scared of fortune itself,

which always brings anxiety. I only wish you too

could safely put this weight aside, not let it hurt

as you leave it behind. A humbler place is safer.

OEDIPUS Are you advising me to resign the cares of state
of my own free will?

CREON I would advise that plan

to one who had a choice whether to stay or go.

You have no choice now. You must bear your lot. 680

OEDIPUS The surest way for those who want to rule
is praising moderation, talking of peace and quiet.

Restless people often pretend to be calm.

CREON Does my long loyalty mean nothing to you?

OEDIPUS Loyalty gives traitors opportunity.

CREON Freed from the burdens of kingship, I enjoy

the benefits of royalty, my home throngs with visitors,

and every day that dawns from night, I get

plenty of presents from my royal kin.

Rich clothes, and luxurious gourmet food, 690
and safety—I can give these to my friends.

What could I think missing from such happiness?

OEDIPUS The thing you do not have: Luck knows no limits.

CREON Will you condemn me without hearing me?

OEDIPUS Did you provide a defence speech for my life?

Did Tiresias hear my case? No! But you think

I am guilty. You set the example. I follow.

CREON What if I am innocent?

OEDIPUS Kings usually fear

possibilities as much as truth.

CREON Those with false fears 700
deserve real ones.

OEDIPUS When guilty men go free

they feel resentful. No more doubts for me.

CREON The perfect way to hatred.

OEDIPUS A man who shrinks from hatred

does not know how to rule. Kingdoms stay safe through fear.

CREON The rule of tyrants and of savages

depends on mutual fear. But fear comes back to haunt you.

OEDIPUS Shut up this guilty man in a stone dungeon.

I will myself return to the royal palace.

CHORUS You were not the start of all this trouble.

The curse which haunts the House of Labdacus

is nothing new; the anger of the gods 710

against you started long ago. Cadmus came from Sidon*
 took refuge in Castalian woods, and Dirce's waters*
 washed clean the Tyrians,* and they settled there.
 The mighty hero, tired from searching all the world
 to find his sister,* raped by Jupiter,
 frightened, rested here beneath our tree,
 and prayed to that same god* who stole the girl.
 An oracle* from Phoebus told him: 'Follow the wandering cow,
 who never bends beneath the wagon yoke,
 or pulls the plough.' His journey ended here.
 He named our land, 'Oxonia', Boeotia,*
 after that cow—an inauspicious name.

720

From that time on, this country keeps producing
 more and more monstrous prodigies. A dragon
 springs from the earth, his mighty body reaching
 from the low ground to up above the pines,
 snaking his body round an aged oak.
 He lifted up his sky-dark head beyond
 the tall Chaonian treetops,* while he lay
 still resting most of his body on the ground.*
 Then the land got pregnant and gave birth
 to terrible children: troops in battle-gear.
 The signal sounded as the horn was blown,
 the curved bronze trumpet gave a piercing shriek.
 The newborn men had never learned to speak;
 the battle-cry was the first thing they said.
 Armies of brothers line in the battlefield,
 the sons you would expect from dragon's teeth,
 born to live out a lifetime in a day,
 they rose when Lucifer* was risen, and
 died when the Hesperides were not yet up.
 The traveller, Cadmus, shudders at these omens,
 watching in terror as they fight it out,
 until those wild young men at last are dead.
 Their mother earth sees them returned to her,
 back to the womb from which they just emerged.
 May we escape from dreadful civil war!
 Hercules' city, Thebes, is well aware,
 how brothers fight with brothers.

740

750

And what about what happened to the hunter,*
 Cadmus's grandson, when his brow was wreathed
 with fresh new sprouts—the antlers of a stag—
 and when the hounds ran after their own master?
 Headlong he fled the forests and the hills,
 swift Actaeon. He moves more nimbly now,
 rushing over rocks and through ravines.
 Even a feather moving in the wind
 can startle him. He runs from his own nets.
 Eventually he comes to a still pool,
 and in the water sees the antlers, sees
 the face of the wild animal. It was the very pool
 where that cruelly-modest goddess* washed.

760

ACT FOUR

OEDIPUS My mind turns over worries, finds new things to fear.

The gods of sky and underworld declare
 that I am Laius' murderer. But my own heart
 protests its innocence, and says I better know myself.

My memory retraces the faint path of the past.
 Yes, the man died—he blocked my way—my stick struck him.
 He went to Hades. He was a proud old man

770

and I was young—he had tried to run me down.

It was far from Thebes, in Phocis, where the road divides into three.

My darling, can you please resolve my doubts?

How old was Laius when he died? Was he
 a vigorous young man, or was he old?

JOCASTA He was in middle-age, more old than young.

OEDIPUS And did he take a lot of servants with him?

JOCASTA Most of them got lost. Only a few
 faithful ones still followed by his chariot.

OEDIPUS Did any of them die beside their king?

780

JOCASTA A single loyal servant died with him.

OEDIPUS I know who did it. The number and the place
 all fit. But when was this?

JOCASTA Ten harvest-times ago.

CORINTHIAN OLD MAN The men of Corinth call you to inherit

your father's royal throne: Polybus is dead.

OEDIPUS How cruel Fate attacks me on all sides!

Well, come then, tell me how my father died.

OLD MAN The old man passed away in gentle sleep.

OEDIPUS My father is dead and no one murdered him.

Proof! I now can hold clean hands to heaven,

I need not be afraid of my own actions.

790

But wait—the worst part of the oracle remains.

OLD MAN Your father's royal power keeps you immune.

OEDIPUS I will inherit my father's throne—but I still fear my mother.

OLD MAN Why should you be afraid of a parent, who only wants

you home again?

OEDIPUS My duty as a son makes me run from her.

OLD MAN You abandon her now she is widowed?

OEDIPUS That is what I am

scared of.

OLD MAN Tell me what fear lies buried in your mind.

I am used to keeping royal secrets hidden.

OEDIPUS I shudder at marriage to Mother, foretold by Delphi. 800

OLD MAN That is no reason for fear! You need not worry:

Merope was not really your true mother.

OEDIPUS Why would she raise a child that was not hers?

OLD MAN Royal lines need heirs to keep them safe.

OEDIPUS Tell me, how did you hear their family secret?

OLD MAN I gave you as a baby to your mother.

OEDIPUS You gave me to her, but who gave me to you?

OLD MAN A shepherd on Cithaeron's snowy ridge.

OEDIPUS How did you happen to be in that place?

OLD MAN I used to tend my long-horned sheep up there.

OEDIPUS Now for the proof. How is my body marked?

OLD MAN Your feet were scarred by being pierced with iron.

You got your name from your swollen, damaged feet.*

OEDIPUS Who gave my body to you as a gift?

OLD MAN He was chief shepherd of the royal flock.

He had many shepherds under him.

OEDIPUS Tell me his name.

OLD MAN I cannot. Old folks' minds

get tired and the memory grows dull.

810

OEDIPUS Well, could you recognize him if you saw him?

OLD MAN Perhaps I could. Frequently, even now, 820

a trivial detail calls old memories back.

OEDIPUS Let shepherds bring their whole flock to the altars.

Servants! Go, hurry up and fetch the man

who is in charge of all the royal herd.

JOCASTA* No! The truth was hidden—on purpose or by chance;

in either case, let ancient secrets stay concealed forever.

Truth often harms the one who digs it up.

OEDIPUS What is there to be scared of? What could be

worse than this?

JOCASTA You need to understand, this quest is something big:

the country's health and that of the royal house. 830

are in the balance. Stop, do not go on:

you need not make the moves; fate will reveal itself.

OEDIPUS In times of happiness, no point in shaking things up.

But in a time of crisis, the safest thing is change.

JOCASTA Do you want a grander father than a king?

Be careful not to find one you regret.

OEDIPUS I need certainty, even if I regret

the family I find.—Look, here is Phorbias, the old shepherd man

who used to have control of the royal sheep.

Old man, do you remember his name or face? 840

OLD MAN His face smiles to my mind... I am not sure.

His appearance seems familiar, but I do not know.

OEDIPUS Did you serve Laius, when he was the king,

driving his rich flocks under Mount Cithaeron?

PHORBAS Yes, Mount Cithaeron always had good grazing.

In summertime our flocks fed in those meadows.

OLD MAN Do you know me?

PHORBAS My memory hesitates.

OEDIPUS Did you once give a baby to this man?

Speak! Do you hesitate? Why are you pale?

Why search about for words? Truth hates delay. 850

PHORBAS These things are hidden by long lapse of time.

OEDIPUS Speak! Or let torture force you to the truth.

PHORBAS I gave the child to him, a useless gift:

that baby could not live to enjoy the light.

OLD MAN Hush! He is alive and will, I hope, live long.

OEDIPUS Why do you say that baby must have died?
 PHORBAS An iron pin had been driven through his feet
 to bind his legs up, and the wound was swollen;
 foul pus infected the child's little body.

OEDIPUS What more do you want? Now fate is drawing near— 860
 Who was the baby?

PHORBAS Loyalty forbids—

OEDIPUS Servants! Bring fire. Burning will change his mind.

PHORBAS Is truth discovered by the path of blood?

Master, have mercy.

OEDIPUS If you think me cruel
 and violent, the cure is near at hand:
 tell me the truth. Who was the baby? Who were
 its parents?

PHORBAS The mother of the child was your own wife.

OEDIPUS Gape open, earth! Lord of the Underworld,
 master of shadows, seize and return me to lowest Hell,
 reverse my birth and let me be unborn.

Thebans! Heap stones on my accursed head,
 slaughter me; let fathers, sons, and wives,
 and brothers take up arms against me,
 let this sick people take fire-brands from funeral pyres,
 and hurl the flames at me. The guilt of my times is mine:

I wander hateful to the gods, a blasphemy.
 The day I first breathed unformed infant breath,
 already I deserved to die. Now, match your sins,
 dare an achievement worthy of your crimes.

Go on, make haste into the royal house:
 congratulate your mother on her children!

CHORUS If I had the power
 to shape Fate to my will,

I would let the gentle breezes
 guide my sails, and my yardarms
 would never shudder under whirlwind blasts:

May soft and gentle winds
 guide my fearless boat;
 never turn it from its course.

May life carry me on
 down the middle path.

Frightened of the Cretan king
 the mad boy* sought the stars,
 trusting new technology
 competing with real birds
 and hoping to control
 wings all too false.

He robbed the sea of its name.
 But the clever old man
 Daedalus, kept a middle course,
 and stopped in the middle of the clouds,
 waiting for his winged child
 (as a bird flees from the threat
 of the hawk, then gathers together
 her brood, scattered by fear)

until the boy, in the sea,
 waved his drowning arms
 tangled by the ropes of his bold flight.
 All excess hangs
 in doubt.

ACT FIVE

CHORUS But what is this? The gates are creaking;
 look, a servant of the king
 is beating his head in mourning.
 Tell us the news you bring!

MESSENGER When Oedipus understood the words of fate
 and realized his awful heritage, he cursed himself:
 'Guilty!' he cried, and thinking of death, he rushed
 into his hated home, fast as he could.

Just as the Libyan lion rages in the fields,
 shaking its yellow mane and threatening;
 his face is dark with anger, his eyes wild,
 he roars and groans, cold sweat runs over his body,
 he froths at the mouth and hurls out threats,
 and his enormous buried pain spills out.
 He was full of wild imaginings and plans
 to fit his fate. 'Why' put off punishment?

Bring swords and drive them through my guilty heart,
or burn me with hot fire, stone me to death.
Is there a tigress or a bird of prey

to tear my chest apart? Cithaeron, you contain
such wickedness already: set against me
beasts from the forest or bloodthirsty hounds—
or send again Agave. My soul, why fear death?
Only death can save me from my guilt!

He set his tainted hand upon the hilt
and drew his sword. 'But no! Can you absolve
such evil with so short a punishment,
a single blow? Death can pay for your father—
But your mother? What about the children,
disgustingly conceived? How can you atone
for your country, mourning and ruined by your crimes?
You cannot be redeemed! In Oedipus alone
the laws of Nature are perverted, even birth
is strange. Then let my punishment be novel too.
May I live and die, and live and die,
constantly reborn, to feel again
new punishments. Use your head, poor fool:
suffer for many years unprecedented pain.
Have a long death. I must think of a way
to wander, distant from the dead and from the living.

I want to die, but must not meet my father.
Why do I hesitate? Look now, a sudden stream
gushes down his face, his cheeks are wet with tears.
'But is it enough to weep? Do my eyes pour
only this thin liquid? Drive them from their homes,
to follow their own tears. Are you satisfied yet,
gods of marriage? Gouge them from their sockets!
He raged, his cheeks showed a ferocious fire,
his eyes could scarcely stay inside his head;
his face was wild and full of feeling, angry, savage,
as if he had gone mad. He lets out a terrible scream,
and plunges his hands at his face. But his goggling eyes
pop out, trying to meet his thrust of their own accord.
They want to meet the source of their destruction.
Greedy his nails dig into his eyeballs,

ripping and tearing out the jelly from the roots.
His hands stay stuck in the empty spaces, glued there,
and buried deep inside, he scrabbles with his nails
at the deep, empty caverns where his eyes once were.
He rages more and more, too-much, achieving nothing.

There is no danger now of light; he lifts his head,
scanning the vault of heaven with empty sockets,
testing his new night. Fragments still hang
from his clumsily excavated eyes. He rips them off,
and cries in triumph to the gods: 'Now spare my homeland,
I implore you! Now I have done right, I have accepted
my proper punishment. I found at last a night
appropriate for my marriage.' A horrible dripping
covers his mangled face, bloody with ripped veins.

CHORUS Fate is driving us: give in to fate.
No amount of worrying can change
the threads of fate's fixed spindle.
All that human beings suffer,
all we do, comes from on high.
The decrees determined by the spindle
of Lachesis* will never be reversed.
The path of everything is always fixed,
our first day tells our last.
Even God cannot turn back
the things which rush by in the web of cause.
No prayer can change the swift-revolving pattern
fixed for each life. Many people find
fear itself can harm; while they fear fate,
they find themselves encountering their fate.

EPILOGUE*

CHORUS Listen! The gates! He struggles to approach,
blind and with no guide to help him walk,
on his dark way.
OEDIPUS Good! It is done. I have paid my debt to my father.
I am happy with the darkness. What god blesses me,
pouring this dark cloud upon my head?

Who forgave my sins? I escaped day's knowing eyes.
Father-killer, you owe nothing to your hands.

The light ran from you. This face suits Oedipus.

CHORUS Look, Jocasta skitters out, leaping and wild,
a madwoman, like Agave, frenzied mother,
who grabbed her own son's head, but then at last
realized what she had done. Seeing poor Oedipus
she hesitates: she wants him and she fears him.
Shame gives way to grief, but her words get stuck.

JOCASTA What can I call you? Son? No? But you are my son. 1010
Ashamed? Talk to me, son! No? Why do you turn away
hiding your empty eyes?

OEDIPUS Who wants to spoil my darkness?
Who gives back my eyes? It is my mother's voice.

My work is wasted. Such monsters as we are
must never meet again. Let the seas divide us,
and lands far distant, and if under here
there hangs another earth, with other stars
and another, exiled sun—let one of us go there.

JOCASTA It is the fault of fate; fate cannot make one guilty.

OEDIPUS Do not speak to me, I will not listen. 1020
I beg you, by the remnants of my body,
by the unlucky children of my blood,
by all the good and evil names we share.

JOCASTA Why are you numb, my soul? And why resist
sharing his punishment? You ruined woman,
through you all human laws are muddled and confused.
Die by the sword, release your wicked life.

Even if the father of the gods, shaking the world,
should hurl his curving thunderbolts at me,
I could never pay for all my sins.

Evil mother! I want death. I need to find
a way to die.—Come, use your hands to help
your mother, if you killed your father; this is your last job.

No, I ought to grab his sword; my husband died
by this same blade.—Why not call him the right name?
He is my father-in-law. Should I use this weapon
to pierce my heart, or push it deep into my naked throat?
Where should I strike? How can I not know? Of course!

1030

Strike my all-too-fertile womb, which bore a husband-child.

CHORUS She falls down dead. She died by her own hand, 1040
the sword is driven out by so much blood.

OEDIPUS Prophet, guardian, god of truth, *J'accuse*.

I only owed the fates my father's death;
now I am a double parent-killer, worse than I feared:
I killed my mother. She died for my crime.

Apollo, you lied! My sins outdid my fate.

Totter along your darkened path, and use
your hands to feel the way for your faltering feet,
the trembling kings of your nocturnal life:

Hurry! though your footsteps slip, go, rush away! 1050
But stop! Be careful, do not fall upon your mother.

People weary with disease, heavy with plague,
half-dead already, look, I am leaving you.

Lift up your heads. Now gentler skies are yours,
after I go. Those who are dying, whose lives
are wandering below, may now breathe in
the breath of life. Go on now, help the dying;

I take the deadly plague away with me.

Harmful Fate and dreadful spasms of Disease,
Black Plague, Wasting and Ravening Pain,
come with me! Come! I am glad to have such guides. 1060