

JOCASTA: You foolish men, why are you arguing  
in such a silly way? With our land so sick,  
are you not ashamed to start a private fight?  
You, Oedipus, go in the house, and you,  
Creon, return to yours. Why blow up  
a trivial matter into something huge? 770

CREON: Sister, your husband Oedipus intends  
to punish me in one of two dreadful ways— [640]  
to banish me from my fathers' country  
or arrest me and then have me killed.

OEDIPUS: That's right.  
Lady, I caught him committing treason,  
conspiring against my royal authority. 780

CREON: Let me not prosper but die a man accursed,  
if I have done what you accuse me of.

JOCASTA: Oedipus,  
for the sake of the gods, trust him in this.  
Respect that oath he made before all heaven—  
do it for my sake and for those around you.

CHORUS LEADER: I beg you, my lord, consent to this—  
agree with her. [650]

OEDIPUS: What is it then  
you're asking me to do?

CHORUS LEADER: Pay Creon due respect.  
He has not been foolish in the past, and now  
that oath he's sworn has power. 790

OEDIPUS: Are you aware  
just what you're asking?

CHORUS LEADER: Yes. I understand.

OEDIPUS: Then tell me exactly what you're saying.

CHORUS LEADER: You should not accuse a friend of yours  
and thus dishonour him with a mere story  
which may not be true, when he's sworn an oath  
and therefore could be subject to a curse.

OEDIPUS: By this point you should clearly understand,  
when you request this, what you are doing—  
seeking to exile me from Thebes or kill me. 800

CHORUS LEADER: No, no, by sacred Helios, the god [660]  
who stands pre-eminent before the rest,  
may I die the most miserable of deaths,  
abandoned by the gods and by my friends,  
if I have ever harboured such a thought!  
But the destruction of our land wears down

the troubled heart within me—and so does this,  
if you two add new problems to the ones  
which have for so long been afflicting us.

OEDIPUS: Let him go, then, even though it's clear 810  
I must be killed or sent from here in exile,  
forced out in disgrace. I have been moved [670]  
to act compassionately by what you said,  
not by Creon's words. But if he stays here,  
he will be hateful to me.

CREON: You are obstinate—  
obviously unhappy to concede,  
and when you lose your temper, you go too far.  
But men like that find it most difficult  
to tolerate themselves. In that there's justice.

OEDIPUS: Why not go—just leave me alone?

CREON: I'll leave— 820  
since I see you do not understand me.  
But these men here know I'm a reasonable man.

*[Exit CREON away from the palace, leaving OEDIPUS and JOCASTA and the CHORUS on stage]*

CHORUS LEADER: Lady, will you escort our king inside?

JOCASTA: Yes, once I have learned what happened here. [680]

CHORUS LEADER: They talked—  
their words gave rise to uninformed suspicions,  
an all-consuming lack of proper justice.

JOCASTA: From both of them?

CHORUS LEADER: Yes.

JOCASTA: What caused it?

CHORUS LEADER: With our country already in distress,  
it is enough, it seems to me, enough  
to leave things as they are.

OEDIPUS: Now do you see 830  
the point you've reached thanks to your noble wish  
to dissolve and dull my firmer purpose?

CHORUS LEADER: My lord, I have declared it more than once, [690]  
so you must know it would have been quite mad  
if I abandoned you, who, when this land,  
my cherished Thebes, was in great trouble,  
set it right again and who, in these harsh times  
which now consume us, should prove a trusty guide.

JOCASTA: By all the gods, my king, let me know  
why in this present crisis you now feel 840  
such unremitting rage.

OEDIPUS: To you I'll speak, lady, [700]

since I respect you more than I do these men.  
 It's Creon's fault. He conspired against me.  
 JOCASTA: In this quarrel what was said? Tell me.  
 OEDIPUS: Creon claims that I'm the murderer—  
 that I killed Laius.  
 JOCASTA: Does he know this first hand,  
 or has he picked it up from someone else?  
 OEDIPUS: No. He set up that treasonous prophet.  
 What he says himself sounds innocent.  
 JOCASTA: All right, forget about those things you've said. 850  
 Listen to me, and ease your mind with this—  
 no human being has skill in prophecy.  
 I'll show you why with this example. [710]  
 King Laius once received a prophecy.  
 I won't say it came straight from Apollo,  
 but it was from those who do assist the god.  
 It said Laius was fated to be killed  
 by a child conceived by him and me.  
 Now, at least according to the story,  
 one day Laius was killed by foreigners, 860  
 by robbers, at a place where three roads meet.  
 Besides, before our child was three days old,  
 Laius fused his ankles tight together  
 and ordered other men to throw him out  
 on a mountain rock where no one ever goes.  
 And so Apollo's plan that he'd become [720]  
 the one who killed his father didn't work,  
 and Laius never suffered what he feared,  
 that his own son would be his murderer,  
 although that's what the oracle had claimed. 870  
 So don't concern yourself with prophecies.  
 Whatever gods intend to bring about  
 they themselves make known quite easily.  
 OEDIPUS: Lady, as I listen to these words of yours,  
 my soul is shaken, my mind confused . . .  
 JOCASTA: Why do you say that? What's worrying you?  
 OEDIPUS: I thought I heard you say that Laius  
 was murdered at a place where three roads meet. [730]  
 JOCASTA: That's what was said and people still believe.  
 OEDIPUS: Where is this place? Where did it happen? 880  
 JOCASTA: In a land called Phocis. Two roads lead there—  
 one from Delphi and one from Daulia.  
 OEDIPUS: How long is it since these events took place?

JOCASTA: The story was reported in the city  
just before you took over royal power  
here in Thebes.

OEDIPUS: Oh Zeus, what have you done?  
What have you planned for me?

JOCASTA: What is it,  
Oedipus? Why is your spirit so troubled?

OEDIPUS: Not yet, [740]  
no questions yet. Tell me this—Laius,  
how tall was he? How old a man? 890

JOCASTA: He was big—his hair was turning white.  
In shape he was not all that unlike you.

OEDIPUS: The worse for me! I may have just set myself  
under a dreadful curse without my knowledge!

JOCASTA: What do you mean? As I look at you, my king,  
I start to tremble.

OEDIPUS: I am afraid,  
full of terrible fears the prophet sees.  
But you can reveal this better if you now  
will tell me one thing more.

JOCASTA: I'm shaking,  
but if you ask me, I will answer you. 900

OEDIPUS: Did Laius have a small escort with him [750]  
or a troop of soldiers, like a royal king?

JOCASTA: Five men, including a herald, went with him.  
A carriage carried Laius.

OEDIPUS: Alas! Alas!  
It's all too clear! Lady, who told you this?

JOCASTA: A servant—the only one who got away.  
He came back here.

OEDIPUS: Is there any chance  
he's in our household now?

JOCASTA: No.  
Once he returned and understood that you  
had now assumed the power of slaughtered Laius, 910  
he clasped my hands, begged me to send him off [760]  
to where our animals graze out in the fields,  
so he could be as far away as possible  
from the sight of town. And so I sent him.  
He was a slave but he'd earned my gratitude.  
He deserved an even greater favour.

OEDIPUS: I'd like him to return back here to us,  
and quickly, too.

JOCASTA:                               That can be arranged—  
                   but why's that something you would want to do?

OEDIPUS: Lady, I'm afraid I may have said too much.                               920  
                   That's why I want to see him here in front of me.

JOCASTA: Then he will be here. But now, my lord,  
                   I deserve to learn why you are so distressed.                               [770]

OEDIPUS: My forebodings now have grown so great  
                   I will not keep them from you, for who is there  
                   I should confide in rather than in you  
                   about such a twisted turn of fortune.  
                   My father was Polybus of Corinth,  
                   my mother Merope, a Dorian.  
                   There I was regarded as the finest man                               930  
                   in all the city, until, as chance would have it,  
                   something really astonishing took place,  
                   though it was not worth what it caused me to do.  
                   At a dinner there a man who was quite drunk  
                   from too much wine began to shout at me,  
                   claiming I was not my father's real son.                               [780]  
                   That troubled me, but for a day at least  
                   I said nothing, though it was difficult.  
                   The next day I went to ask my parents,  
                   my father and my mother. They were angry                               940  
                   at the man who had insulted them this way,  
                   so I was reassured. But nonetheless,  
                   the accusation always troubled me—  
                   the story had become well known all over.  
                   And so I went in secret off to Delphi.  
                   I didn't tell my mother or my father.  
                   Apollo sent me back without an answer,  
                   so I didn't learn what I had come to find.  
                   But when he spoke he uttered monstrous things,                               [790]  
                   strange terrors and horrific miseries—                               950  
                   it was my fate to defile my mother's bed,  
                   to bring forth to men a human family  
                   that people could not bear to look upon,  
                   to murder the father who engendered me.  
                   When I heard that, I ran away from Corinth.  
                   From then on I thought of it just as a place  
                   beneath the stars. I went to other lands,  
                   so I would never see that prophecy fulfilled,  
                   the abomination of my evil fate.  
                   In my travelling I came across that place                               960

in which you say your king was murdered.

And now, lady, I will tell you the truth.

[800]

As I was on the move, I passed close by  
a spot where three roads meet, and in that place  
I met a herald and a horse-drawn carriage.

Inside there was a man like you described.

The guide there tried to force me off the road—  
and the old man, too, got personally involved.

In my rage, I lashed out at the driver,

who was shoving me aside. The old man,

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seeing me walking past him in the carriage,  
kept his eye on me, and with his double whip  
struck me on my head, right here on top.

Well, I retaliated in good measure—

[810]

I hit him a quick blow with the staff I held  
and knocked him from his carriage to the road.

He lay there on his back. Then I killed them all.

If that stranger was somehow linked to Laius,  
who is now more unfortunate than me?

What man could be more hateful to the gods?

980

No stranger and no citizen can welcome him  
into their lives or speak to him. Instead,  
they must keep him from their doors, a curse  
I laid upon myself. With these hands of mine,  
these killer's hands, I now contaminate  
the dead man's bed. Am I not depraved?

[820]

Am I not utterly abhorrent?

Now I must fly into exile and there,

a fugitive, never see my people,

never set foot in my native land again—

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or else I must get married to my mother

and kill my father, Polybus, who raised me,

the man who gave me life. If anyone

claimed this came from some malevolent god,

would he not be right? O you gods,

you pure, blessed gods, may I not see that day!

[830]

Let me rather vanish from the sight of men,

before I see a fate like that roll over me.

CHORUS LEADER: My lord, to us these things are ominous.

But you must sustain your hope until you hear

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the servant who was present at the time.

OEDIPUS: I do have some hope left, at least enough

to wait for the man we've summoned from the fields.

JOCASTA: Once he comes, what do you hope to hear?

OEDIPUS: I'll tell you. If we discover what he says  
matches what you say, then I'll escape disaster.

[840]

JOCASTA: What was so remarkable in what I said?

OEDIPUS: You said that in his story the man claimed

Laius was murdered by a band of thieves.

If he still says that there were several men,

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then I was not the killer, since one man

could never be mistaken for a crowd.

But if he says it was a single man,

then I'm the one responsible for this.

JOCASTA: Well, that's certainly what he reported then.

He cannot now withdraw what he once said.

The whole city heard him, not just me alone.

[850]

But even if he changes that old news,

he cannot ever demonstrate, my lord,

that Laius' murder fits the prophecy.

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For Apollo clearly said the man would die

at the hands of an infant born from me.

Now, how did that unhappy son of ours

kill Laius, when he'd perished long before?

So as far as these oracular sayings go,

I would not look for confirmation anywhere.

OEDIPUS: You're right in what you say. But nonetheless,  
send for that peasant. Don't fail to do that.

[860]

JOCASTA: I'll call him here as quickly as I can.

Let's go inside. I'll not do anything

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which does not meet with your approval.

*[OEDIPUS and JOCASTA go into the palace together]*

CHORUS: I pray fate still finds me worthy,

demonstrating piety and reverence

in all I say and do—in everything

our loftiest traditions consecrate,

those laws engendered in the heavenly skies,

whose only father is Olympus.

They were not born from mortal men,

nor will they sleep and be forgotten.

[870]

In them lives an ageless mighty god.

1040

Insolence gives birth to tyranny—

that insolence which vainly crams itself

and overflows with so much stuff

beyond what's right or beneficial,

that once it's climbed the highest rooftop,

it's hurled down by force—such a quick fall  
there's no safe landing on one's feet.

But I pray the god never will abolish  
the rivalry so beneficial to our state.

[880]

That god I will hold on to always,  
the one who stands as our protector.\*

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But if a man conducts himself  
disdainfully in what he says and does,  
and manifests no fear of righteousness,  
no reverence for the statues of the gods,  
may miserable fate seize such a man  
for his disastrous arrogance,

if he does not behave with justice

[890]

when he strives to benefit himself,  
appropriates all things impiously,  
and, like a fool, profanes the sacred.

1060

What man is there who does such things  
who can still claim he will ward off  
the arrow of the gods aimed at his heart?

If such actions are considered worthy,  
why should we dance to honour god?

No longer will I go in reverence  
to the sacred stone, earth's very centre,  
or to the temple at Abae or Olympia,  
if these prophecies fail to be fulfilled  
and manifest themselves to mortal men.

[900]

1070

But you, all-conquering, all-ruling Zeus,  
if by right those names belong to you,  
let this not evade you and your ageless might.

For ancient oracles which dealt with Laius  
are withering—men now set them aside.

Nowhere is Apollo honoured publicly,  
and our religious faith is dying away.

[910]

*[JOCASTA enters from the palace and moves to an altar to Apollo which stands outside the palace doors. She is accompanied by one or two SERVANTS]*

JOCASTA: You leading men of Thebes, I think

it is appropriate for me to visit  
our god's sacred shrine, bearing in my hands  
this garland and an offering of incense.

1080

For Oedipus has let excessive pain  
seize on his heart and does not understand  
what's happening now by thinking of the past,  
like a man with sense. Instead he listens to

whoever speaks to him of dreadful things.

I can do nothing more for him with my advice,

and so, Lycean Apollo, I come to you,

who stand here beside us, a suppliant,

1090 [920]

with offerings and prayers for you to find

some way of cleansing what corrupts us.

For now we are afraid, just like those

who on a ship see their helmsman terrified.

*[JOCASTA sets her offerings on the altar. A MESSENGER enters, an older man]*

MESSENGER: Strangers, can you tell me where I find

the house of Oedipus, your king? Better yet,

if you know, can you tell me where he is?

CHORUS LEADER: His home is here, stranger, and he's inside.

This lady is the mother of his children.

MESSENGER: May her happy home always be blessed,

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for she is his queen, true mistress of his house.

[930]

JOCASTA: I wish the same for you, stranger. Your fine words

make you deserve as much. But tell us now

why you have come. Do you seek information,

or do you wish to give us some report?