The action of Oedipus Rex may be described as a search for the truth. As you read, pay attention to the role each character plays in either fulfilling or further complicating this search.

**CHARACTERS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Role or Status</th>
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<td>King of Thebes</td>
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<tr>
<td>A Priest</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Creon (krē’än’)</td>
<td>brother of Jocasta</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teiresias (ti-rē’sē-ä’z)</td>
<td>a blind seer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jocasta (jō-kas’tä)</td>
<td>wife of Oedipus and widow of Laius (lā’ïz), former King of Thebes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Messenger, from Corinth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shepherd of Laius</td>
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<tr>
<td>Second Messenger, from the palace</td>
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<td>Chorus of Theban Elders</td>
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<tr>
<td>Choragos (kō-rā’gōz)</td>
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<td>Antigone (an-tig’ə-nē)</td>
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<td>Ismene (is-mē’nē)</td>
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**SCENE**

Before the palace of OEDIPUS, King of Thebes. A central door and two lateral doors open onto a platform which runs the length of the facade. On the platform, right and left, are altars; and three steps lead down into the “orchestra,” or chorus-ground. At the beginning of the action these steps are crowded by suppliants who have brought branches and chaplets of olive leaves and who lie in various attitudes of despair. OEDIPUS enters.
PROLOGUE

Oedipus.

My children, generations of the living
In the line of Cadmus,\(^9\) nursed at his ancient hearth:
Why have you strewn yourselves before these altars
In supplication, with your boughs and garlands?
The breath of incense rises from the city
With a sound of prayer and lamentation.

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

(to a PRIEST) You, there, since you are eldest in the
company,
Speak for them all, tell me what preys upon you,
Whether you come in dread, or crave some blessing:
Tell me, and never doubt that I will help you
In every way I can; I should be heartless

2. Cadmus (kad'məs): in Greek
mythology, a prince who
killed a dragon and sowed
its teeth, which turned into
an army of men who fought
one another; with the five
survivors of the battle, Cad-
mus founded Thebes.

6 ♀ Try to visualize the despair-
ifying postures of the supple-
ants as Oedipus addresses the
people. Together with the
details of the incense and the
sounds of lamentation, what
mood does the scene suggest at
the opening of the play?

9 ♀ Do you think Oedipus is
boasting here? Or is he
merely being objective about
his own status as the King of
Thebes?
Were I not moved to find you suppliant here.

Priest.

Great Oedipus, O powerful King of Thebes!
You see how all the ages of our people
Cling to your altar steps: here are boys
Who can barely stand alone, and here are priests
By weight of age, as I am a priest of God,
And young men chosen from those yet unmarried;
As for the others, all that multitude,
They wait with olive chaplets in the squares,
At the two shrines of Pallas, and where Apollo
Speaks in the glowing embers.

Your own eyes
Must tell you: Thebes is tossed on a murdering sea
And cannot lift her head from the death surge.
A rust consumes the buds and fruits of the earth;
The herds are sick; children die unborn,
And labor is vain. The god of plague and pyre
Raids like detestable lightning through the city,
And all the house of Cadmus is laid waste,
All emptied, and all darkened: Death alone
Battens upon the misery of Thebes.

You are not one of the immortal gods, we know;
Yet we have come to you to make our prayer
As to the man surest in mortal ways
And wisest in the ways of God. You saved us
From the Sphinx, that flinty singer, and the tribute
We paid to her so long; yet you were never
Better informed than we, nor could we teach you:
It was some god breathed in you to set us free.

Therefore, O mighty King, we turn to you:
Find us our safety, find us a remedy.
Whether by counsel of the gods or men.
A king of wisdom tested in the past
Can act in a time of troubles, and act well.
Noblest of men, restore
Life to your city! Think how all men call you
Liberator for your triumph long ago;
Ah, when your years of kingship are remembered,
Let them not say We rose, but later fell—
Keep the State from going down in the storm!
Once, years ago, with happy augury,
You brought us fortune; be the same again!
No man questions your power to rule the land:
But rule over men, not over a dead city!
Ships are only hulls, citadels are nothing,
When no life moves in the empty passageways.

Oedipus.

Poor children! You may be sure I know
All that you longed for in your coming here.
I know that you are deathly sick; and yet,
Sick as you are, not one is as sick as I.
Each of you suffers in himself alone

His anguish, not another's; but my spirit
Groans for the city, for myself, for you.

I was not sleeping, you are not waking me.
No, I have been in tears for a long while
And in my restless thought walked many ways.
In all my search, I found one helpful course,
And that I have taken: I have sent Creon,
Son of Menoeceus,\( ^\circ \) brother of the Queen,
To Delphi, Apollo's place of revelation,\( ^\circ \)
To learn there, if he can,

What act or pledge of mine may save the city.
I have counted the days, and now, this very day,
I am troubled, for he has overstayed his time.
What is he doing? He has been gone too long.
Yet whenever he comes back, I should do ill
To scant whatever duty God reveals.

Priest.

It is a timely promise. At this instant
They tell me Creon is here.

Oedipus.

O Lord Apollo!
May his news be fair as his face is radiant!

Priest.

It could not be otherwise: he is crowned with bay,
The chaplet is thick with berries.

Oedipus.

We shall soon know;
He is near enough to hear us now.

[Enter CREON.]

O Prince:

Brother: son of Menoeceus:
What answer do you bring us from the god?
Creon.
A strong one. I can tell you, great affections
Will turn out well, if they are taken well.

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

Creon.
Is it your pleasure to hear me with all these
Gathered around us? I am prepared to speak,
But should we not go in?

Oedipus. Let them all hear it.
It is for them I suffer, more than for myself.

Creon.
Then I will tell you what I heard at Delphi.
In plain words
The god commands us to expel from the land of Thebes
An old defilement we are sheltering.
It is a deathly thing, beyond cure;
We must not let it feed upon us longer.

Oedipus.
What defilement? How shall we rid ourselves of it?

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

Oedipus.
Murder of whom? Surely the god has named him?

Creon.
My lord: long ago Laius was our king,
Before you came to govern us.

Oedipus. I know;
I learned of him from others; I never saw him.

Creon.
He was murdered; and Apollo commands us now
To take revenge upon whoever killed him.

Oedipus.
Upon whom? Where are they? Where shall we
find a clue
To solve that crime, after so many years?

Creon.
Here in this land, he said.
If we make enquiry,
We may touch things that otherwise escape us.

Oedipus.
Tell me: Was Laius murdered in his house,
Or in the fields, or in some foreign country?

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

Oedipus. And was there no one,
No witness, no companion, to tell what happened?

Creon.
They were all killed but one, and he got away
So frightened that he could remember one thing only.

Oedipus.
What was that one thing? One may be the key
To everything, if we resolve to use it.

Creon.
He said that a band of highwaymen attacked them,
Outnumbered them, and overwhelmed the King.

Oedipus.
Strange, that a highwayman should be so daring—
Unless some faction here bribed him to do it.

Creon.
We thought of that. But after Laius' death
New troubles arose and we had no avenger.

Oedipus.
What troubles could prevent your hunting down
the killers?

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

Oedipus.
Then once more I must bring what is dark to light.
It is most fitting that Apollo shows,
As you do, this compunction for the dead.
You shall see how I stand by you, as I should,
To avenge the city and the city's god,
And not as though it were for some distant friend,
But for my own sake, to be rid of evil.
Whoever killed King Laius might—who knows?—
Decide at any moment to kill me as well.
By avenging the murdered king I protect myself.

Greek and Roman Literatures
Come, then, my children: leave the altar steps,
Lift up your olive boughs!
One of you go
And summon the people of Cadmus to gather here.
I will do all that I can; you may tell them that.

[Exit a PAGE.]

So, with the help of God,
We shall be saved—or else indeed we are lost.

Priest.

Let us rise, children. It was for this we came,
And now the King has promised it himself.
Phoebus\(^o\) has sent us an oracle; may he descend
Himself to save us and drive out the plague.

[Exeunt OEDIPUS and CREON into the palace by
the central door. The PRIEST and the SUPPLIANTS
disperse right and left. After a short pause the CHOR-
RUS enters the orchestra.]

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**Parados**

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**Strophe 1**

Chorus.

What is God singing in his profound
Delphi of gold and shadow?
What oracle for Thebes, the sunwhipped city?
Fear unjoints me, the roots of my heart tremble.
Now I remember, O Healer,\(^o\) your power, and wonder:
Will you send doom like a sudden cloud, or
weave it
Like nightfall of the past?
Speak, speak to us, issue of holy sound:
Dearest to our expectancy: be tender!

**Antistrophe 1**

Let me pray to Athena, the immortal daughter of Zeus,
And to Artemis her sister
Who keeps her famous throne in the market ring.
And to Apollo, bowman at the far butts of heaven—
O gods, descend! Like three streams leap against
The fires of our grief, the fires of darkness;
Be swift to bring us rest!

As in the old time from the brilliant house
Of air you stepped to save us, come again!

**Strophe 2**

Now our affections have no end,
Now all our stricken host lies down
And no man fights off death with his mind;

The noble plowland bears no grain,
And groaning mothers cannot bear—
See, how our lives like birds take wing,
Like sparks that fly when a fire soars,
To the shore of the god of evening.

**Antistrophe 2**

The plague burns on, it is pitiless,
Though pallid children laden with death
Lie unwept in the stony ways,

And old gray women by every path
Flock to the strand about the altars

There to strike their breasts and cry
Worship of Phoebus in wailing prayers:
Be kind, God’s golden child!

**Strophe 3**

There are no swords in this attack by fire,
No shields, but we are ringed with cries.

Send the besieger plunging from our homes
Into the vast sea room of the Atlantic
Or into the waves that foam eastward of Thrace—

For the day ravages what the night spares—
Destroy our enemy, lord of the thunder!

Let him be riven by lightning from heaven!

**Antistrophe 3**

Phoebus Apollo, stretch the sun’s bowstring,
That golden cord, until it sing for us.
Flashing arrows in heaven! Artemis, Huntress.
Race with flaring lights upon our mountains!
O scarlet god, O golden-banded brow,
O Theban Bacchus in a storm of Maenads.

[Enter OEDIPUS, center.]
Whirl upon Death, that all the Undying hate!
Come with blinding torches, come in joy!

---

201. **Theban Bacchus** (bak’əs): Bacchus, also known as Dionysus, was the god of revelry and of brutality. He came to Thebes accompanied by women who sang and danced wildly. When Pentheus, the king of Thebes, mocked the god and his followers, he was punished by being torn limb from limb. **Maenads** (mē’nadz): priestesses of Bacchus.
SCENE 1

Oedipus.

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

Until now I was a stranger to this tale,
As I had been a stranger to the crime.
Could I track down the murderer without a clue?
210 But now, friends,
As one who became a citizen after the murder,
I make this proclamation to all Thebans:
If any man knows by whose hand Laius, son
of Labdacus,
Met his death, I direct that man to tell me everything.
215 No matter what he fears for having so long withheld it.
Let it stand as promised that no further trouble
Will come to him, but he may leave the land
in safety.

Moreover: If anyone knows the murderer to
be foreign,
Let him not keep silent: he shall have his
reward from me.
220 However, if he does conceal it; if any man
Fearing for his friend or for himself disobeys this edict,
Hear what I propose to do:
I solemnly forbid the people of this country,
Where power and throne are mine, ever to
receive that man
225 Or speak to him, no matter who he is, or let him
Join in sacrifice, lustration, or in prayer.
I decree that he be driven from every house,
Being, as he is, corruption itself to us: the Delphic
Voice of Zeus has pronounced this revelation.
230 Thus I associate myself with the oracle
And take the side of the murdered king.

As for the criminal, I pray to God—
Whether it be a lurking thief, or one of a number—
I pray that that man’s life be consumed in evil
and wretchedness.
235 And as for me, this curse applies no less
If it should turn out that the culprit is my guest here,
Sharing my hearth.
You have heard the penalty.
I lay it on you now to attend to this
For my sake, for Apollo's, for the sick
Sterile city that heaven has abandoned.
Suppose the oracle had given you no command:
Should this defilement go uncleaned forever?
You should have found the murderer: your king,
A noble king, had been destroyed!

Now I,

Having the power that he held before me,
Having his bed, begetting children there
Upon his wife, as he would have, had he lived—
Their son would have been my children's brother,
If Laius had had luck in fatherhood!

(But surely ill luck rushed upon his reign)—
I say I take the son's part, just as though
I were his son, to press the fight for him
And see it won! I'll find the hand that brought
Death to Labdacus' and Polydorus' child,

Heir of Cadmus' and Agenor's line.
And as for those who fail me,
May the gods deny them the fruit of the earth,
Fruit of the womb, and may they rot utterly!
Let them be wretched as we are wretched, and
worse!

For you, for loyal Thebans, and for all
Who find my actions right, I pray the favor
Of justice, and of all the immortal gods.

Choragos.
Since I am under oath, my lord, I swear
I did not do the murder, I cannot name

The murderer. Might not the oracle
That has ordained the search tell where to find him?

Oedipus.
An honest question. But no man in the world
Can make the gods do more than the gods will.

Choragos.
There is one last expedient—

Oedipus.
Tell me what it is.

Though it seem slight, you must not hold it back.
Choragos.
A lord clairvoyant to the lord Apollo,
As we all know, is the skilled Teiresias.
One might learn much about this from him, Oedipus.

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

Choragos.
The other matter—that old report—seems useless.

Oedipus.
Tell me. I am interested in all reports.

Choragos.
The King was said to have been killed by highwaymen.

Oedipus.
I know. But we have no witnesses to that.

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

Oedipus. No.
The man who dared that act will fear no curse.

[Enter the blind seer TEIRESIAS, led by a PAGE.]

Choragos.
But there is one man who may detect the criminal.
This is Teiresias, this is the holy prophet
In whom, alone of all men, truth was born.

Oedipus.
Teiresias: seer: student of mysteries,
Of all that’s taught and all that no man tells,
Secrets of Heaven and secrets of the earth:
Blind though you are, you know the city lies
Sick with plague; and from this plague, my lord,
We find that you alone can guard or save us.
Possibly you did not hear the messengers?
Apollo, when we sent to him.

Sent us back word that this great pestilence
Would lift, but only if we established clearly
The identity of those who murdered Laius.
They must be killed or exiled.

Can you use
Birdflight or any art of divination?

clairvoyant (klar-voy'uhnt): capable of perceiving through intuition things that cannot be seen.

Compare Oedipus’s statement here with lines 76-80. How does this passage resemble his earlier speech?
To purify yourself, and Thebes, and me
From this contagion? We are in your hands.
There is no fairer duty
Than that of helping others in distress.

Teiresias.
How dreadful knowledge of the truth can be
When there's no help in truth! I knew this well,
But made myself forget. I should not have come.

Oedipus.
What is troubling you? Why are your eyes so cold?

Teiresias.
Let me go home. Bear your own fate, and I'll
Bear mine. It is better so: trust what I say.

Oedipus.
What you say is ungracious and unhelpful
To your native country. Do not refuse to speak.

Teiresias.
When it comes to speech, your own is neither
temperate
Nor opportune. I wish to be more prudent.

Oedipus.
In God's name, we all beg you—

Teiresias. You are all ignorant.

No; I will never tell you what I know.
Now it is my misery; then, it would be yours.

Oedipus.
What! You do know something, and will not tell us?
You would betray us all and wreck the State?

Teiresias.
I do not intend to torture myself, or you.

Why persist in asking? You will not persuade me.

Oedipus.
What a wicked old man you are! You'd try a stone's
Patience! Out with it! Have you no feeling at all?

Teiresias.
You call me unfeeling. If you could only see
The nature of your own feelings . . .

Oedipus. Why,

Who would not feel as I do? Who could endure
Your arrogance toward the city?

Teiresias. What does it matter!
Whether I speak or not, it is bound to come.

**Oedipus.**

Then, if "it" is bound to come, you are bound to
tell me.

**Teiresias.**

No, I will not go on. Rage as you please.

**Oedipus.**

Rage? Why not!
And I'll tell you what I think:
You planned it, you had it done, you all but
Killed him with your own hands: if you had eyes,
I'd say the crime was yours, and yours alone.

**Teiresias.**

So? I charge you, then,

Abide by the proclamation you have made:

From this day forth

Never speak again to these men or to me;

You yourself are the pollution of this country.

**Oedipus.**

You dare say that! Can you possibly think you have
Some way of going free, after such insolence?

**Teiresias.**

I have gone free. It is the truth sustains me.

**Oedipus.**

Who taught you shamelessness? It was not your craft.

**Teiresias.**

You did. You made me speak. I did not want to.

**Oedipus.**

Speak what? Let me hear it again more clearly.

**Teiresias.**

Was it not clear before? Are you tempting me?

**Oedipus.**

I did not understand it. Say it again.

**Teiresias.**

I say that you are the murderer whom you seek.

**Oedipus.**

Now twice you have spat out infamy. You'll pay
for it!

**Teiresias.**

Would you care for more? Do you wish to be
really angry?
Oedipus.
350 Say what you will. Whatever you say is worthless.

Teiresias.
I say you live in hideous shame with those
Most dear to you. You cannot see the evil.

Oedipus.
It seems you can go on mouthing like this forever.

Teiresias.
I can, if there is power in truth.

Oedipus. There is:
355 But not for you, not for you,
You sightless, witless, senseless, mad old man!

Teiresias.
You are the madman. There is no one here
Who will not curse you soon, as you curse me.

Oedipus.
You child of endless night! You cannot hurt me
360 Or any other man who sees the sun.

Teiresias.
True: it is not from me your fate will come.
That lies within Apollo’s competence,
As it is his concern.

Oedipus. Tell me:
Are you speaking for Creon, or for yourself?

Teiresias.
365 Creon is no threat. You weave your own doom.

Oedipus.
Wealth, power, craft of statesmanship!
Kingly position, everywhere admired!
What savage envy is stored up against these,
If Creon, whom I trusted, Creon my friend,
370 For this great office which the city once
Put in my hands unsought—if for this power
Creon desires in secret to destroy me!

He has bought this decrepit fortuneteller, this
Collector of dirty pennies, this prophet fraud—
Why, he is no more clairvoyant than I am!
375 Tell us:
Has your mystic mummary  ever approached the
truth?
When that hellcat the Sphinx was performing here,

364 Why should Oedipus suddenly connect Creon
with Teiresias here? Look
back to see if line 275 gives
you a clue.

376 mummary: pretentious or
hypocritical rites.
What help were you to these people?
Her magic was not for the first man who came along:
380 It demanded a real exorcist. Your birds—
What good were they? or the gods, for the matter of that?
But I came by,
Oedipus, the simple man, who knows nothing—
I thought it out for myself, no birds helped me!
385 And this is the man you think you can destroy,
That you may be close to Creon when he's king!
Well, you and your friend Creon, it seems to me,
Will suffer most. If you were not an old man,
You would have paid already for your plot.

Choragos.
390 We cannot see that his words or yours
Have been spoken except in anger, Oedipus,
And of anger we have no need. How can God's will
Be accomplished best? That is what most
concerns us.

Teiresias.
You are a king. But where argument's concerned
395 I am your man, as much a king as you.
I am not your servant, but Apollo's.
I have no need of Creon to speak for me.

Listen to me. You mock my blindness, do you?
But I say that you, with both your eyes, are blind:
400 You cannot see the wretchedness of your life,
Nor in whose house you live, no, nor with whom.
Who are your father and mother? Can you tell me?
You do not even know the blind wrongs
That you have done them, on earth and in the
world below.
405 But the double lash of your parents' curse will whip you
Out of this land some day, with only night
Upon your precious eyes.
Your cries then—where will they not be heard?
What fastness of Cithaeron² will not echo them?
410 And that bridal-descant⁵ of yours—you'll know it
then,
The song they sang when you came here to Thebes
And found your misguided berthing.
All this, and more, that you cannot guess at now,
Will bring you to yourself among your children.

[Cithaeron (sî-thē' rān): a mountain in Boeotia
(bō-ō'shē), where Oedipus
as an infant was left to die.
 descant (des' kant'): melody.

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Be angry, then. Curse Creon. Curse my words.
I tell you, no man that walks upon the earth
Shall be rooted out more horribly than you.

Oedipus.
Am I to bear this from him?—Damnation
Take you! Out of this place! Out of my sight!

Teiresias.
I would not have come at all if you had not asked me.

Oedipus.
Could I have told that you’d talk nonsense, that
You’d come here to make a fool of yourself, and of me?

Teiresias.
A fool? Your parents thought me sane enough.

Oedipus.
My parents again!—Wait: who were my parents?

Teiresias.
This day will give you a father, and break your heart.

Oedipus.
Your infantile riddles! Your damned abracadabra!

Teiresias.
You were a great man once at solving riddles.

Oedipus.
Mock me with that if you like; you will find it true.

Teiresias.
It was true enough. It brought about your ruin.

Oedipus.
But if it saved this town?

Teiresias (to the PAGE). Boy, give me your hand.

Oedipus.
Yes, boy; lead him away.

—While you are here

We can do nothing. Go; leave us in peace.

Teiresias.
I will go when I have said what I have to say.
How can you hurt me? And I tell you again:

The man you have been looking for all this time,
The damned man, the murderer of Laius,
That man is in Thebes. To your mind he is foreign-born.
But it will soon be shown that he is a Theban,
A revelation that will fail to please.

A blind man.
Who has his eyes now: a penniless man, who is
rich now;
And he will go tapping the strange earth with his staff
To the children with whom he lives now he will be
Brother and father—the very same; to her
Who bore him, son and husband—the very same
Who came to his father's bed, wet with his father's blood.

Enough. Go think that over.
If later you find error in what I have said,
You may say that I have no skill in prophecy.

[Exit TEIRESIAS, led by his PAGE. OEDIPUS
goes into the palace.]

ODE 1

Strophe 1

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

Antistrophe 1

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

Strophe 2

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

Antistrophe 2
Divine Zeus and Apollo hold Perfect intelligence alone of all tales ever told; And well though this diviner works, he works in his own night;
No man can judge that rough unknown or trust in second sight.
For wisdom changes hands among the wise.  
Shall I believe my great lord criminal  
At a raging word that a blind old man let fall?  
I saw him, when the carrion woman" faced him of  
old.  
Prove his heroic mind! These evil words are lies.

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**Scene 2**

***Creon.***

Men of Thebes:  
I am told that heavy accusations  
Have been brought against me by King Oedipus.  
I am not the kind of man to bear this tamely.  
If in these present difficulties  
He holds me accountable for any harm to him  
Through anything I have said or done—why, then,  
I do not value life in this dishonor.  
It is not as though this rumor touched upon  
Some private indiscretion. The matter is grave.  
The fact is that I am being called disloyal  
To the State, to my fellow citizens, to my friends.

***Choragos.***

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

***Creon.***

But did you not hear him say I was the one  
Who seduced the old prophet into lying?

***Choragos.***

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

***Creon.***

But you were watching him! Were his eyes steady?  
Did he look like a man in his right mind?

***Choragos.***

I do not know.  
I cannot judge the behavior of great men.  
But here is the King himself.

[Enter OEDIPUS.]

***Oedipus.***

So you dared come back.  
Why? How brazen of you to come to my house.

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You murderer!
Do you think I do not know
That you plotted to kill me, plotted to steal my throne?
Tell me, in God's name: am I a coward, a fool.
That you should dream you could accomplish this?
A fool who could not see your slippery game?
A coward, not to fight back when I saw it?
You are the fool, Creon, are you not? hoping
Without support or friends to get a throne?
Thrones may be won or bought: you could do neither.

Creon.
Now listen to me. You have talked; let me talk, too.
You cannot judge unless you know the facts.

Oedipus.
You speak well: there is one fact; but I find it hard
To learn from the deadliest enemy I have.

Creon.
That above all I must dispute with you.

Oedipus.
That above all I will not hear you deny.

Creon.
If you think there is anything good in being stubborn
Against all reason, then I say you are wrong.

Oedipus.
If you think a man can sin against his own kind
And not be punished for it, I say you are mad.

Creon.
I agree. But tell me: what have I done to you?

Oedipus.
You advised me to send for that wizard, did you not?

Creon.
I did. I should do it again.

Oedipus. Very well. Now tell me:
How long has it been since Laius—

Creon. What of Laius?

Oedipus.
Since he vanished in that onset by the road?

Creon.
It was long ago, a long time.

Oedipus. And this prophet,
Was he practicing here then?
Creon. He was; and with honor, as now.
Oedipus. Did he speak of me at that time?
Creon. He never did; At least, not when I was present.
Oedipus. But . . . the inquiry? I suppose you held one?
Creon. We did, but we learned nothing.
Oedipus. Why did the prophet not speak against me then?
Creon. I do not know; and I am the kind of man Who holds his tongue when he has no facts to go on.
Oedipus. There's one fact that you know, and you could tell it.
Creon. What fact is that? If I know it, you shall have it.
Oedipus. If he were not involved with you, he could not say That it was I who murdered Laius.
Creon. If he says that, you are the one that knows it!— But now it is my turn to question you.
Oedipus. Put your questions. I am no murderer.
Creon. First, then: You married my sister?
Oedipus. I married your sister.
Creon. And you rule the kingdom equally with her?
Oedipus. Everything that she wants she has from me.
Creon. And I am the third, equal to both of you?
Oedipus. That is why I call you a bad friend.
Creon. No. Reason it out, as I have done. Think of this first: Would any sane man prefer Power, with all a king's anxieties,
To that same power and the grace of sleep?
Certainly not I.
I have never longed for the king's power—only his rights.
Would any wise man differ from me in this?
As matters stand, I have my way in everything
With your consent, and no responsibilities.
If I were king, I should be a slave to policy.

560 How could I desire a scepter more
Than what is now mine—untroubled influence?
No, I have not gone mad; I need no honors,
Except those with the perquisites I have now.
I am welcome everywhere; every man salutes me,
And those who want your favor seek my ear,
Since I know how to manage what they ask.
Should I exchange this ease for that anxiety?
Besides, no sober mind is treasonable.
I hate anarchy
And never would deal with any man who likes it.

Test what I have said. Go to the priestess
At Delphi, ask if I quoted her correctly.
And as for this other thing: if I am found
Guilty of treason with Teiresias,
Then sentence me to death! You have my word
It is a sentence I should cast my vote for—
But not without evidence!
You do wrong
When you take good men for bad, bad men for good.
A true friend thrown aside—why, life itself
Is not more precious!

In time you will know this well:
For time, and time alone, will show the just man,
Though scoundrels are discovered in a day.

Choragos.
This is well said, and a prudent man would ponder it.
Judgments too quickly formed are dangerous.

Oedipus.
585 But is he not quick in his duplicity?
And shall I not be quick to parry him?
Would you have me stand still, hold my peace,
and let
This man win everything, through my inaction?

560 What do you think of Creon's reasoning in these lines? Is his argument convincing, or is it sophist—
that is, fair-seeming, but logically faulty?

582 Explain the contrast that Creon draws between just men and scoundrels in these lines.

587 Whom does Oedipus address in these lines?
Creon.
And you want—what is it, then? To banish me?

Oedipus.
No, not exile. It is your death I want,
So that all the world may see what treason means.

Creon.
You will persist, then? You will not believe me?

Oedipus.
How can I believe you?

Creon.
Then you are a fool.

Oedipus.
To save myself?

Creon.
In justice, think of me.

Oedipus.
You are evil incarnate.

Creon.
But suppose that you are wrong?

Oedipus.
Still I must rule.

Creon.
But not if you rule badly.

Oedipus.
O city, city!

Creon.
It is my city, too!

Choragos.
Now my lords, be still. I see the Queen,
Jocasta, coming from her palace chambers:
And it is time she came, for the sake of you both.
This dreadful quarrel can be resolved through her.

[Enter JOCASTA.]

Jocasta.
Poor foolish men, what wicked din is this?
With Thebes sick to death, is it not shameful
That you should rake some private quarrel up?

(to OEDIPUS) Come into the house.
—And you, Creon, go now:
Let us have no more of this tumult over nothing.

Creon.
Nothing? No, sister: what your husband plans for me
Is one of two great evils: exile or death.

Oedipus.
He is right.
Why, woman, I have caught him squarely
Plotting against my life.

Creon. No! Let me die
Accursed if ever I have wished you harm!

Jocasta.
Ah, believe it, Oedipus!
In the name of the gods, respect this oath of his
For my sake, for the sake of these people here!

Strophe 1

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

Oedipus.
What would you have me do?

Choragos.
Respect Creon's word. He has never spoken like a fool,
And now he has sworn an oath.

Oedipus. You know what you ask?

Choragos. I do.

Oedipus. Speak on, then.

Choragos.
A friend so sworn should not be baited so,
In blind malice, and without final proof.

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

Strophe 2

Choragos.
No, I swear by Helios, a first in Heaven!
May I die friendless and accursed,
The worst of deaths, if ever I meant that!
It is the withering fields
That hurt my sick heart:
Must we bear all these ills,
And now your bad blood as well?

Oedipus.
Then let him go. And let me die, if I must,
Or be driven by him in shame from the land of
Thebes.

623. Helios (hēˈliː-əs′): one of the Titans; sun god often confused with Apollo. He was associated with the truth.
It is your unhappiness, and not his talk. That touches me.

As for him—
Wherever he goes, hatred will follow him.

Creon.

Ugly in yielding, as you were ugly in rage!
Natures like yours chiefly torment themselves.

Oedipus.

Can you not go? Can you not leave me?

Creon.

I can.

You do not know me; but the city knows me,
And in its eyes I am just, if not in yours.

[Exit CREON.]

Antistrophe 1

Choragos.

Lady Jocasta, did you not ask the King to go to
his chambers?

Jocasta.

First tell me what has happened.

Choragos.

There was suspicion without evidence; yet it rankled
As even false charges will.

Jocasta.

On both sides?

Choragos.

On both.

Jocasta.

But what was said?

Choragos.

Oh let it rest, let it be done with!

Have we not suffered enough?

Oedipus.

You see to what your decency has brought you:
You have made difficulties where my heart saw none.

Antistrophe 2

Choragos.

Oedipus, it is not once only I have told you—
You must know I should count myself unwise

To the point of madness, should I now forsake you—
You, under whose hand,
In the storm of another time,
Our dear land sailed out free.
But now stand fast at the helm!

Jocasta.
In God's name, Oedipus, inform your wife as well:
Why are you so set in this hard anger?

Oedipus.
I will tell you, for none of these men deserves
My confidence as you do. It is Creon's work,
His treachery, his plotting against me.

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

Oedipus.
He charges me with the murder of Laius.
Jocasta.
Has he some knowledge? Or does he speak from
hearsay?

Oedipus.
He would not commit himself to such a charge,
But he has brought in that damnable soothsayer
To tell his story.

Jocasta. Set your mind at rest.
If it is a question of soothsayers, I tell you
That you will find no man whose craft gives knowledge
Of the unknowable.

Here is my proof:

An oracle was reported to Laius once
(I will not say from Phoebus himself, but from
His appointed ministers, at any rate)
That his doom would be death at the hands of his
own son—
His son, born of his flesh and of mine!

Now, you remember the story: Laius was killed
By marauding strangers where three highways meet;
But his child had not been three days in this world
Before the King had pierced the baby's ankles
And left him to die on a lonely mountainside.

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

It is God himself
Who can show us what he wills, in his own way.

Oedipus.
How strange a shadowy memory crossed my mind,
Just now while you were speaking; it chilled my heart.

Jocasta.
What do you mean? What memory do you speak of?

Oedipus.
If I understand you, Laius was killed
At a place where three roads meet.

Jocasta. So it was said:

We have no later story.
Oedipus. Where did it happen?
Jocasta.
Phocis, it is called; at a place where the Theban Way
Divides into the roads toward Delphi and Daulis.
Oedipus.
When?
Jocasta. We had the news not long before you
came
And proved the right to your succession here.
Oedipus.
Ah, what net has God been weaving for me?
Jocasta.
Oedipus! Why does this trouble you?
Oedipus. Do not ask me yet.
First, tell me how Laius looked, and tell me
How old he was.
Jocasta. He was tall, his hair just touched
With white, his form was not unlike your own.
Oedipus.
I think that I myself may be accursed
By my own ignorant edit.
Jocasta. You speak strangely.
It makes me tremble to look at you, my King.
Oedipus.
I am not sure that the blind man cannot see.
But I should know better if you were to tell me—
Jocasta.
Anything—though I dread to hear you ask it.
Oedipus.
Was the King lightly escorted, or did he ride
With a large company, as a ruler should?
Jocasta.
There were five men with him in all: one was a herald,
And a single chariot, which he was driving.
Oedipus.
Alas, that makes it plain enough!
But who—
Who told you how it happened?
Jocasta. A household servant,
The only one to escape.
Oedipus. And is he still

691. Phocis (fōˈsis): country in
which Mount Parnassus was
located.
692. Daulis (dōˈlis): in Phocis,
east of Delphi.
692 Try to visualize the place
where the "three roads"
meet, and then draw a
diagram.
695 What sudden change of
tone might Oedipus use in
this line?
703 As Oedipus starts to
question Jocasta more
carefully, what might he begin
to suspect?
A servant of ours?

Jocasta. No; for when he came back at last
And found you enthroned in the place of the dead king,
He came to me, touched my hand with his, and begged
That I would send him away to the frontier district
Where only the shepherds go—
As far away from the city as I could send him.
I granted his prayer; for although the man was a slave,
He had earned more than this favor at my hands.

Oedipus.
Can he be called back quickly?

Jocasta. Easily.

But why?

Oedipus. I have taken too much upon myself
Without inquiry; therefore I wish to consult him.

Jocasta.
Then he shall come.

But am I not one also

To whom you might confide these fears of yours?

Oedipus.
That is your right; it will not be denied you,
Now least of all; for I have reached a pitch
Of wild foreboding. Is there anyone
To whom I should sooner speak?

Polybus of Corinth is my father.
My mother is a Dorian: Merope.
I grew up chief among the men of Corinth
Until a strange thing happened—
Not worth my passion, it may be, but strange.

At a feast, a drunken man mauldering in his cups
Cries out that I am not my father's son!

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

Calling it all the slanderous rant of a fool:
And this relieved me. Yet the suspicion
Remained always aching in my mind;
I knew there was talk; I could not rest;
And finally, saying nothing to my parents,
I went to the shrine at Delphi.
The god dismissed my question without reply;
He spoke of other things.

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

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

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

There were three highways
Coming together at a place I passed;
And there a herald came towards me, and a chariot
Drawn by horses, with a man such as you describe

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

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

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

    And I myself
Pronounced this malediction upon myself!

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

Why do you think Oedipus hesitates before the word
kin in this line?
Am I all evil, then? It must be so.
Since I must flee from Thebes, yet never again
See my own countrymen, my own country,
For fear of joining my mother in marriage
And killing Polybus, my father.

Ah.
If I was created so, born to this fate,
Who could deny the savagery of God?
Oh holy majesty of heavenly powers!
May I never see that day! Never!
Rather let me vanish from the race of men
Than know the abomination destined me!

**Choragos.**
We too, my lord, have felt dismay at this.
But there is hope: you have yet to hear the shepherd.

**Oedipus.**
Indeed, I fear no other hope is left me.

**Jocasta.**
What do you hope from him when he comes?

**Oedipus.**
This much:
If his account of the murder tallies with yours,
Then I am cleared.

**Jocasta.**
What was it that I said
Of such importance?

**Oedipus.**
Why, "marauders," you said,
Killed the King, according to this man's story.
If he maintains that still, if there were several,
Clearly the guilt is not mine: I was alone.
But if he says one man, single-handed, did it,
Then the evidence all points to me.

**Jocasta.**
You may be sure that he said there were several;
And can he call back that story now? He cannot.
The whole city heard it as plainly as I.
But suppose he alters some detail of it:
He cannot ever show that Laius' death
Fulfilled the oracle: for Apollo said
My child was doomed to kill him; and my child—
Poor baby!—it was my child that died first.

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

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

Jocasta.
I will send for him.
I would not wish to cross you in anything,
And surely not in this.—Let us go in.

[Exeunt into the palace.]

ODE 2

Strophe 1

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

Antistrophe 1

The tyrant is a child of Pride
Who drinks from his great sickening cup
Recklessness and vanity,
Until from his high crest headlong
He plummets to the dust of hope.
That strong man is not strong.
But let no fair ambition be denied;
May God protect the wrestler for the State
In government, in comely policy,
Who will fear God, and on His ordinance waits.

838. ordinance (ôrd′n-ons): decree or command.

Strophe 2

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

Antistrophe 2
Shall we lose faith in Delphi's obscurities,
We who have heard the world's core
Discredited, and the sacred wood
Of Zeus at Elis° praised no more?
The deeds and the strange prophecies
Must make a pattern yet to be understood.
Zeus, if indeed you are lord of all,
Throned in light over night and day,
Mirror this in your endless mind:
Our masters call the oracle
Words on the wind, and the Delphic vision blind!
Their hearts no longer know Apollo,
And reverence for the gods has died away.