

**SENECA'S OEDIPUS: A Translation in Alliterative Verse**

by

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**CHARACTERS:**

OEDIPUS: ruler of Thebes

JOCASTA: queen of Thebes

A CHORUS of Theban citizens

CREON: Jocasta's brother

TIRESIAS: blind seer of Thebes

MANTO: seer; daughter of Tiresias

An OLD MAN OF CORINTH

PHORBAS: a shepherd and slave of the former king, Laius

A MESSENGER

Assorted royal servants, soldiers and spear-carriers (non-speaking)

**SCENE:**

Thebes, before the King's palace.

[*OEDIPUS enters alone.*]

**OEDIPUS:** Now, with night gone, the uncertain sun returns  
a grim brightness rises from the filthy fog.

That bleak flame, bringing a dark light,  
stares down on a city devastated by disease;

the day will show what damage the night has done.

God, who'd be glad for a crown? You lying gift,  
how much suffering your pleasant appearance conceals!

Steep cliffs always catch the storm;

and the broad sea breaks on the rocks of shore

(even when the waves whisper quietly).

10

Just so, supreme power stands subject to chance.

How right I was to run from the court of Corinth!

Free from worries, a reckless traveller, I stumbled  
into the throne of Thebes. (Gods, witness my words!)

I fear unspeakable sins: destroying my father...

The Pythia, Apollo's priestess, prophesied this  
and foretold a sin more terrible still.

Is any crime more perverse than killing a parent?

For pity's sake— it shames me to say what the prophet said—

Phoebus claimed a marriage couch would be defiled,                   20  
that a son would ascend where his father had sown him.

This fear expelled me from my father's state;

for this I ran as a refugee from my household gods.

Fear of myself, Nature, made me fulfill your commands.

When you dread disasters as I have done

even the impossible seems possible in dark dreams.

I'm afraid of everything, with no faith even in myself.

Now, now the fates unfold some new horror for me.

What should I think, since an epidemic is destroying Thebes,  
spreading death, decimating citizens,   30

leaving me alone. What suffering am I being saved for?

In the shell of the city, with fresh funerals every day  
stained with tears, among the sufferings of the people,

I stand safe— self-evidently damned by the Sun.

Could you hope to acquire with horrible crimes  
a healthy kingdom? I've corrupted the heavens:

the breeze can't caress, with cool breath,  
 hearts gasping with heat; no west wind blows.  
 The Sun stokes the fires of summer-bright Sirius,  
 hot on the heels of Hercules' lion.†

40

The rivers are bereft of water, the grass of green;  
 Dirce is dry; Ismenos is almost empty\*  
 and stains the stream-bed with a shallow wave.  
 Selene, the Sun's sister, glides gloomy through the sky  
 and a murky world wanes behind a strange mist.  
 No star shines in the still nights:

a fog, full and dark, drifts over the earth;  
 it hides the citadels of the sky, the gods' houses,  
 with an infernal face. Grown wheat yields no grain;  
 golden it glitters in raised ranks

50

but the seed is dead on the seared stalk.  
 Nor is anyone untouched by the agony:  
 every age and both sexes are buried.  
 The plague has yoked children to parents, youth to age;  
 a single spark kindles their common pyre,  
 griefs go without grieving, untouched by tears.  
 Instead, the persistent slaughter of the plague  
 has dried the eyes (as it usually does in disasters).

Weeping is wasted. A dying adult

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† The Sun is rising in Leo, while Sirius (the Dog Star) is also aloft during the day. This situation  
 \* Dirce is a stream in, and Ismenos a river near, Thebes.

drags one dead child to the final fire, raving, 60

and struggles to pile another on the selfsame pyre.

Fresh sorrow rises from sorrow:

mourners fall dead among the dirges

and strangers are incinerated in a single flame.

There is no decency for the downfallen: fire itself is stolen.

Bones left behind aren't buried: it's enough they're burned.

Where in the earth could the ashes be interred?

The ground lacks room for graves, the forests fuel for fires.

No prayers, no prescriptions relieve the afflicted:

the physicians fall dead, and only disease brings ease. 70

I reach out with praying hands to the altars,

pleading for prompt death, so I can flee before

my sinking city, so that I won't stay to be

the last death in my dead land.

You harsh gods, you Fates filled with hatred!

Death, wandering at will in the nation, is denied

to one, to me.

So, with wasting hand, shove away

the tainted land; leave the tears, the burials,

the corrupting sins of the sky that you carry with you.

Unfortunate stranger, flee swiftly at last, 80

even to your parents—

*[Sometime during the previous speech, JOCASTA has entered, and now she speaks.]*

**JOCASTA:** What point is there in weeping, Oedipus?

Why make it worse? This is the role of a ruler:

to take hold in hard times; when the state is unsafe  
and the weight of failing power wavers, about to fall,  
to stand, just then, strong against the juggernaut.  
A man who's a man won't flee from misfortune.

**OEDIPUS:** I deny that: no one calls me coward;  
shameful fear doesn't stain my soul.

If weapons of war were drawn, bristling with death,  
rushing upon me, or hateful monsters, I'd raise my hand 90  
and strike whoever stood as my open enemy.

I didn't flee from the Sphinx, weaving a noose of words  
with lightless melodies; I stood before the bloody smile  
of the beastly singer, on ground gleaming with bare bone.  
On the steep cliff, shadowing its prey, it stood,  
using its wings as whips, lashing its tail like a lion,  
it was danger incarnate. Yet I demanded the dark question.  
It howled, hair-raisingly, on the rock above;  
the wings whistled in the air; the claws clutched the stone,  
dreaming of gripping deep in my guts. 100

But I resolved the grim riddle, released

the noose of words knotted by the winged beast.

[*JOCASTA exits*]

[*to himself*] You damned fool, why delay the rites of death?

There's no crime in dying. This kingdom, and this crown of fame  
are goods given as a fee for the slain Sphinx.

The accursed corpse of that cunning monster  
wages war against us; even dead that pest destroys  
Thebes still. There's only one way to avert the threat:  
if a path to safety is shown by Apollo.

**CHORUS OF THEBANS:**

Descendants of kingly Cadmus: you're dying, 110

the entire state. You watch the widowed  
land mourn the men who've left.

Dionysus, your soldier is snatched by death—

your friend as far as the utter East,  
daring to ride the road to the Dawn,  
to fix your ensign at the Ocean's flood.

Cinnamon he saw in sweet woods  
and bows of marksmen on horseback,  
the murderous retreat of the tricky Medes.

He stood on the shore, red with sunrise, 120  
 where sunlight first flows over the sea,  
 and Phoebus opens the east, with flame  
     scorching southerners, naked through the night.

We die: a nation who knew no defeat;  
 a savage fate fiercely seizes us;  
     each day displays a new parade of ruin:  
 an endless column coursing to the End,  
 a progress of the grieving. The gloomy press  
     stops— the seven gates of the city don't suffice

to send forth the flood of tomb-seekers; 130  
 the mourners stand, stalled, and many more  
     jostle after, jamming the city streets.

The sickness first struck the sluggish sheep,  
 pasturing on the green grass poorly.

The rite-leader, ready to sacrifice, stood  
 selecting the location for a killing blow.

The bull, gleaming with gold on its brow,  
     lazily collapsed, enduring the death-stroke  
 that split the thick throat apart.

But bile speckled the steel, not blood, 140  
     foul fluid bursting forth from the blow.

The steed, trudging down the track, stumbled  
 shoulder first, falling as it swung  
     through its turn, betraying the rider to ruin.

Flocks without shepherds sleep in the fields;

the ox is enfeebled, the flock is failing;

with his lessened herd the herdsman lies ,

killed by the pest with his putrid calves.

Deer do not dread the wasting of wolves.

The lion's roar of wrath leaves off.

150

The shaggy bear abandons its savagery.

Disease has destroyed the concealed snake:

parched, it dies with dried-up poison.

The forest, no longer lovely with foliage,

sends shadows toward murky mountains.

The fields do not glow green with fertile earth;

The branches of the vine are vacant of Bacchus,

uncurved by clusters of the glad god.

Everything has felt the force of our evil.

The secret recesses of Erebus have been shattered

160

by a riot of revenging spirits with Tartarean torches;

Phlegethon, bursting from its banks has flooded,

threading Styx into the streams of Thebes.

Dark death gapes its greedy jaws

and widely expands its shadowy wings.

And the watchman who keeps the chaotic water,

shuttling the spirits in his broad boat,

the ferryman, ancient but unyielding in force,

is scarcely able to bring back his arm,

wearied by work and the droves of the dead. 170

Cerberus has broken his bonds of steel  
(so Rumor insists) and strays through our realm;  
the earth has uttered a moan of lament.  
Wandering from their graves, ghosts in the wood  
appear, mightier than men in power.

Two times snow has been shaken  
as the trees in the clearing of Cadmus trembled;  
the river of Thebes twice has thickly run  
with bright blood; in the noiseless night  
banshees, the hounds of the hero, bay.

Dire face of foul death 180

more dreadful than death itself: a sluggish languor  
chaining the body; burning on the cheek  
of the sick: a bright blush of scarlet;  
pocks speckle the smooth skin;  
the stronghold of the body is blazing with heat—  
a fire that corrodes, reddening the flesh;  
the eyes: empty; an echoing in the ears;  
black from the nostrils a snivel of blood  
streams and overfull arteries tear open.

Shrill and unceasing, groans arise 190  
shaking the guts and the gore inside.

The accursed fire feeds on the carcass.

The rocks grow tired as the stricken

cling to the stones for their soothing cool.

Some, whose guardian is gone, seek

fountains, fleeing the house with no householder.

But thirst only whets on the waters in the throat.\*

The people, collapsing at length on the plains,

desire death as a gift of the gods

and death is the only gift the gods do not deny.

200

Some take to the temples— not that sacrifice

may appease the powers and ward off their will,

but it is pleasant to glut the gods with prayers.

Who hurries past, seeking the palace with swift steps?

Creon, renowned for his kin and accomplishments, returns,

or do sick souls take false for true?

Creon, cried for by every tongue, returns.

[*CREON joins OEDIPUS on the stage.*]

**OEDIPUS:** I tremble with dread, terrified by imminent ruin,

yet still my mind shakes with split emotions.

When glad things, mixed with grim, lie wrapped in a riddle

210

the soul fears to understand, though it longs to learn.

Brother of my queen, if you bring to the careworn

any assistance, speak with swift words!

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\* The disease described by the chorus seems to be smallpox.

CREON: The tricky replies are entwined with an uncertain oracle.

OEDIPUS: Safety without certainty is no gift to give to the sick. 215

CREON: It's the habit of Apollo to hide his prophecies  
with twisted words.

OEDIPUS: Speak the words, however uncertain.

I alone am allowed to unravel riddles.

CREON: The king's killing must be atoned by exile;  
the divine command: Laius' murder must be avenged. 220  
Or light-drenched day will never run, shining in the sky,  
nor grant safe breaths from unstained air.

OEDIPUS: And who was the killer of the high-hearted king?  
Cry out the criminal Apollo accused, so he may pay the penalty.

CREON: Gods: grant me to safely say things grim to see and hear. 225

A weight is on my limbs; my blood runs wintry cold.  
As I stepped into the sacred fane of Phoebus Apollo  
and, addressing the deity, held my hands high,  
the snow-capped peaks of Parnassus gave a savage cry;  
the low-hanging laurel tree trembled and shook the house 230

and, suddenly, the sacred Castalian spring stood still.

Apollo's priestess began to shake her streaming hair

and, goaded, to accept the god. She hadn't yet come to the cave

when a sound louder than human shouting leapt forth from her:

"Serene stars will come back, shining on Cadmean Thebes 235

if the guest has gone as an exile from Ismene and Dirce,

the one guilty of killing the king, whom the god knew long ago.

The delights of blood-letting won't long remain for you.

Wars you'll carry away; wars you'll leave as a legacy,

criminal who crept back where his mother bore him. "

**OEDIPUS:** I am minded to follow the commands of Phoebus; 240

this gift is fitting to give a fallen king,

lest anyone seize a scepter stained with treachery.

A king's safety should be greatly guarded by kings:

no one seeks to slay, who fears for his own safety.

**CREON:** A greater fear foregoes concern for the slain. 245

**OEDIPUS:** Can any fear forbid us to do our duty?

**CREON:** The grim threats of unspeakable songs forbid it.

**OEDIPUS:** By the command of the powers, the crime will be now be punished!

Whatever gods who regard our kingdom with kindness—  
 you in whose possession stands the power of the sky,  
 and you, oh greatest glory of the cloudless universe, 250  
 who conduct the day through twelve signs on a twisting course,  
 who spin the slow centuries away with a swift wheel,  
 and Phoebe, roaming the night, ever facing your bright brother,  
 and you, ruling over the winds, riding over the whitecaps,  
 driving your dark blue chariot over the deep, 255  
 and you, ruler of the realms lacking light,  
 all enforce this oath. May he whose hand killed the king  
 rest under no quiet roof, give thanks to no household god;  
 let no kindly city accept the outcast;  
 may he suffer from a shameful marriage, from savage offspring; 260  
 may he fell his father with his own hand;  
 may he carry out (what crueller curse can I call down?)  
 all that I escaped. There will be no place for pardon.  
 I swear by the realms I rule (both those I govern as a guest  
 and the birthplace I abandoned), and by my household gods, 265  
 and you, Poseidon, who wash with swift waves  
 the soil of my state on either side.  
 And, Cynthian,\* stand as witness to my words,  
 you who prompt the prophetic lips of the Sibyl to speech.

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\* Apollo

As my father may fulfill a long old age, 270  
and, safe on his high seat, meet his last moment,  
and as Merope may only know the marriage bed of Polybus,  
so no grace will rescue the guilty man from me.

Tell me: what place was stained by the unspeakable crime?  
Did he die in open war, or was he wounded in ambush? 275

CREON: Seeking the leafy cloister of the Castalian shrine  
he walked a way thick with thorn-bushes,  
a triple road, scattering itself towards different countries.  
One branch splits the soil of Phocis, beloved of Bacchus,  
where it leaves the plowed land, seeking the sky, 280  
twin-peaked Parnassus, through sweetly sculpted hills.  
Another way turns toward the twin-seas of Sisyphus' city;  
the last twists away into Olenian lands,  
where it touches with its hollow trail wandering waters  
and divides the shallows of the shivering Evenus. 285  
Here a crew of robbers attacked him, trusting in peace;  
they carried out the secret crime with steel.

Now Tiresias, roused (in the nick of time)  
by Apollo's prophecy, hastens his trembling steps;  
Manto is minding him, leading the one bereft of light. 290

[*The blind seer TIRESIAS enters, with his daughter MANTO guiding him.*]

**OEDIPUS:** Hallowed by the high gods, greatest in prophecy after Apollo,  
unleash your answers; say who deserves to suffer.

**TIRESIAS:** My tongue is slow to speak; it tries to delay.

It scarcely suits you, majesty, to marvel at it.

A vast stretch of truth is open to one empty of vision. 295

But when my country, when Phoebus calls me, I will follow.

Let the truth be torn open. If my blood were bright  
and hot, I would hold the god in my own heart.

Summon the ox, ice-pale in its pelt, to the sacrifice;

also: a heifer whose back never held the burden of a yoke. 300

Daughter: direct your parent, impoverished of light.

Tell the signs shown by the truthspeaking rite.

**MANTO:** The beast without blemish stands before the sacred altar.

**TIRESIAS:** Appeal to the gods, with a priestly voice, to appear in these devotions.

Heap the altar high with an offering of incense. 305

**MANTO:** I have scattered frankincense in the sacred fireplaces.

**TIRESIAS:** What of the flame? Does it flow around the blessed banquet?

**MANTO:** The light blazes forth suddenly, and suddenly fades.

**TIRESIAS:** Does the blaze stand bright and shining  
and lift straight aloft an unstained crown, 310  
unfolding its flaming hair on high in the air?  
Or, uncertain of its way, does it slither on its sides,  
and, dense with billowing fumes, fall down?

**MANTO:** The flickering flame has shown no single face.  
The way rain-bringing Iris weaves 315  
a spectrum to surround herself, arching across the sky,  
declaring the cloudburst with bright colors  
(and who can say what shades aren't seen there?),  
so the blue fire blundered about, flickering with golden gleams,  
and, bloody, fell back, finally dispersing in shadows. 320

But, look! The flame, fighting, splits in two parts;  
the angry embers of a single sacrifice  
separate themselves— father, I shudder at what I see!

The libation of Bacchus\* has become blood!  
A cloud of smoke surrounds the king's head. 325  
The fumes float thick before his face;  
they block the dirty light with a dark cloud.

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\* Bacchus here = "wine"— the name of the god replacing the common noun of the thing he governs, a common ploy in Latin poetry.

Tell me what it means, Tiresias.

**TIRESIAS:** What am I able to tell,  
adrift in a riot of thunderstruck thoughts?

So what should I say? The fates are fearful, harmful on high. 330

Divine wrath reveals itself, as a rule, by sure signs.

What on earth is it that they strive to say,  
and, on the other hand, hate to utter, concealing their cruel anger?

Something has shamed the gods... Hurry over here.

Cast salted spelt on the necks of the cattle. 335

Do they calmly bear the killing blow, the approach of priestly hands?

**MANTO:** The bull, lifting his brow aloft,  
driven to face the dawn, was afraid of the day.  
Trembling he turned his face and fled its rays.

**TIRESIAS:** Do they fall to the ground together, felled by a single stroke? 340

**MANTO:** The heifer held herself against the gleaming blade  
and dropped down dead from a single stroke.  
The bull endured a double blow and stumbled uncertainly;  
he breathed his last breath scarcely struggling.

**TIRESIAS:** Does the blood burst swiftly from a narrow notch 345  
or does it linger, watering the wounds before it leaves?

**MANTO:** This one's life floods through the hole opened in her heart.

The grave wounds of the other give only a weak rain,

but a great gush of blood drains back,

befouling the face of the beast and blinding the eyes. 350

**TIRESIAS:** These ill-omened rites will bring great evils.

But tell me now the truth-speaking signs of the entrails.

**MANTO:** Father, what am I finding? Not shaking slightly (as usual),

do the intestines tremble when touched; they cause my hands to quake

and fresh blood leaps forth from the veins of the beast. 355

The heart hides itself, utterly wasted away.

The blood-vessels are blue. A great part of the vitals have gone.

The gluey liver bubbles with black gall,

and (always an evil omen for a kingdom where one commands)

it breaks in two branches, each with the same span. 360

A translucent membrane overlays either branch,

refusing concealments to secrets of the flesh.

The hostile part\* springs high with unimpaired strength.

Seven veins stick out; a fissure divides the flesh,

slanting across the liver, keeping them from coming back. 365

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\* In extispicy (reading the future or the gods' will through examination the innards of a sacrificial animal) the front (or anterior) side of the organ was considered favorable to the person or state sponsoring the sacrifice; the back (or posterior) side was considered favorable to the enemy (personal or national).

The arrangement of organs is disrupted; nothing sits where it should.

The whole of it has been hurled back; unable to breathe,

the lungs, burdened with blood, lie on the right side;

the left lobe of the heart is lost; no elastic layer

of caul covers with fleshy folds the internal organs. 370

Nature is twisted; the womb knows nothing of law.

Let's look for the root of this tension in the entrails...

What horror is here? Offspring in an unmated heifer!

It lies misplaced in the mother, not according to custom,

where something else ought to be. The members move with a moan; 375

the feeble limbs flicker with a trembling chill.

Leaden blood dyes the organs dark.

The dreadful cadavers try to take steps—

now a corpse has climbed up and tries to kill the priest,

stabs at the holy servants with its horn; the organs escape my hand. 380

The sound that struck you was not the cry of cattle;

frightened flocks are not lowing in fear.

The sacred blaze bells in the shrine; the holy hearth is shaking.

**OEDIPUS:** Tell me what those terrifying signs foretoken.

pour your prophecies into my ear; I'm unafraid. 385

The worst evils cast worry away.

**TIRESIAS:** You'll envy of the agonies of those you hope to help.

**OEDIPUS:** Say the secret the sky-dwellers wish to know:  
who polluted his hands with Laius' blood?

**TIRESIAS:** Neither those who fly aloft, cutting the sky with their feathers, 390  
nor flesh torn from living chests

can name the name. We must try another road.

His spirit must be summoned from the place of perpetual night,  
sent forth from the shadows to name his slayer.

The earth must be opened, the pitiless power of Dis 395

must be prayed for mercy. The people of underworld Acheron  
must be dragged forth. Tell who you trust to do the deed:

it is wrong for you, who hold the highest power in the realm,  
to consult the shadows.

**OEDIPUS:** This quest calls for you, Creon.

My kingdom has always counted you as second to myself. 400

**TIRESIAS:** While we release the gates of the river of ghosts  
let the people sing a song in praise of Bacchus.

*[TIRESIAS, MANTO and CREON leave the stage.]*

**CHORUS OF THEBANS:**

Your waterfall of hair is woven with twisting flowers;  
you walk, weaponed with thyrsi on your weak arms .

Blazing glory of the sky: stand with us! 405

View with favor the vows

pledged by your virtuous people,

held in their pleading hands. \*

Move your maidenly head toward us, nodding in benevolence

scattering the fog with your starry face, scattering

the awful threats of the underworld, 410

the fierce greed of fate.

It's fitting for you to fill your hair with spring flowers;

to put a purple headdress on your head

or bind your gentle brow

with evergreen berry-bringing ivy; 415

to scatter your lawless unshorn locks,

or call them back to be bound in a club,

like when, afraid of Juno's fury,

as a boy you bore a false body,

playing the part of young woman with yellow hair, 420

a golden belt binding your gown.

Ever since, a womanly wardrobe delights you,

the loose folds, the flowing clothes.

Couched in your golden cart, gowned

with a long dress, you directed the reins of the lions. 425

All the eastern lands looked up at you, then:

those who gulp the warm water of the Ganges  
 and those who drive through ice on the Araxes to drink.  
 Old Silenus pursues you, astride a disgusting donkey,  
 his distended temples bound with a braid of vine branches; 430  
 sportive priests conduct your crowd of revellers.  
 The band of raving Bassarids, travelling with you,  
     now have stamped upon the soil  
         of Edonian Pangaeus in a dance,  
 now the peak of Thracian Pindus; 435  
 now among the Cadmeian mothers  
     the mad maenad \*  
 comrade of Boeotian Bacchus came  
 her body belted with sacred deerskin.  
 The mothers, moved with you in their whole hearts,  
     unleashed their locks; 440  
 the Theban women waved the thyrsus  
     held in their bloody hands; \*  
 soon, after King Pentheus' carcass was scattered,  
 the Maenads, dismissed from their madness, looked on the members  
 as an unspeakable crime, strange to them.  
 Bright Bacchus' aunt rules in the ocean: 445  
 Cadmus' daughter, Ino, dwelling in the chorus of Oceanids.  
 a boyish guest has great power in the boundless sea,  
 Dionysus cousin, a numen not to be despised: Palaemon.  
 Tuscan pirates took you, Bacchus, as their prey;

the swelling sea was settled by Nereus; 450

he made the wild blue waters like a meadow

where the plane tree flourishes with green leaves

and the laurel, loved by Apollo, is planted in groves.

Singing birds sound through the branching yardarms;

living ivy clings to the oars; 455

the topmost sail trails grapevines.

A Trojan lion roars on the prow;

a striped tiger sits on the stern.

Then the panicking pirates plunge in the sea

and a strange shape overtakes them as they sink. 460

First, the arms fall away from the armed man;

the breast, beaten down, joins with the belly;

vestigial hands hang from his sides

and he soars under the surface with a bent back;

a sickle-moon tail strikes the sea. 465

In pursuit of the receding sails:

                  a twisted dolphin swims. \*

You glided on the wealthy waters of the Lydian Pactolus,

drawing golden streams from the burning bank;

The Massagetan, mixing his milky cup with blood,

unbent his conquered bow for you, his Scythian shafts; 470

the kingdom of Lycurgus the axe-bearer felt Bacchus;

the savage zone of the Zalaces\* sees his power;  
 and those nearest the North's knifelike winds,  
 wanderers in the world, and those men Lake Maeotis  
 washes with its cruelly cold waves; 475

and those watched from the top of the turning world  
 by the twin wagons, by the Arcadian constellations.\*

His glory subdued the scattered Geloni;  
 he dragged the cruel armor from the Amazons:

the hordes from the Hot River 480

pressed their panting mouths submissive to the earth;  
 setting aside at last their swift arrows,

they are made into Maenads.

Sacred Mount Cithaeron flowed with blood,

is soaked from a royal slaughter. 485

The daughters of Proetus are driven weeping to the woods  
 and all Argos, with Juno joining in, greets Bacchus as a god.

Naxos, narrowly bound by the bright Aegean,  
 offered up Ariadne, abandoned on a bridal bed,

replenishing her loss with a better bridegroom. 490

Pouring from dry pumice,

the liquor of dark Dionysus flowed;

sweetly speaking streams ran through the grass;

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\* There's a serious problem with the Latin text here.

\* i.e. the Great and Little Bear, a.k.a the Big and Little Dipper— or, as the Romans called them, the Wagons (in Latin: plaustra).

the deep earth drank the sweet juice down;  
there were shining springs of snowy milk, 495  
and wells of Aeolian wine, with the tang of thyme.

Your holy bride is married in high Heaven:

Phoebus sings a festive song,

unbound locks flowing down his back.

and twin Cupids wave 500

torches in the wedding train. \*

Jupiter lets go his flaming javelin

and buries the thunderbolt when Bacchus comes.

As long as the shining stars of the year-filled universe run,

as long as the world is ringed by the arc of Ocean's waves,

as long as the Moon refills herself with missing fire, 505

as long as the Morning Star foretells the morning,

as long as the Dipper never drops into the dark sea

we will bless the glorious face of Bacchus the Liberator!

[*CREON returns to the stage alone.*]

**OEDIPUS:** Although the tracks of tears are betrayed by your face,

let me know whose guilty life can placate the gods. 510

CREON: You force me to speak; my fear would prefer silence.

OEDIPUS: If the thought of Thebes in danger doesn't drive you to speak,  
the idea of your family falling from power should drive you.

CREON: What now you long to know, you'll wish you hadn't learned.

OEDIPUS: Ignorance is a fruitless remedy for evil. 515

Will you hide the clue that leads to the people's health?

CREON: When the remedy is gruesome, we hate to be healed.

OEDIPUS: Say what you've heard, or you'll suffer whatever harm  
the weapons of an angry king are able to work.

CREON: Kings hate to hear what they command us to say. 520

OEDIPUS: You'll be sent to Hell, a small price for the health of everyone,  
unless you say the secrets that the sacred voice has spoken.

CREON: I'd prefer to stay silent. Was a slighter favor  
ever requested from a king?

OEDIPUS: An unspeaking independence  
imperils kings and kingdoms more than a speaking tongue. 525

CREON: When we're not allowed to be silent, what is anyone allowed to do?

OEDIPUS: You stay silent though ordered to speak, undermining my command.

CREON: I beg you to receive what I say without blaming me.

OEDIPUS: Who was ever punished when he was compelled to speak?

CREON: Far into the fields stands a bower, black with holm-oaks, 530

in a dell wet with the water of Dirce.

Cypresses, stretching forth their heads from the high forest,

ring the grove around with their trunks, ever green.

Aged oaks extend their branches, bent

and corrupt in the core. Old age 535

has split the side of this one; that one, tired out, totters

from its roots, resting against the trunk of another tree.

There are laurels with their bitter berries, smooth-barked lindens,

Cyprian myrtle and— certain to move through the measureless sea —

ash-trees, good for oars, and pines, opposing the sun-god 540

and setting their smooth sides against the west wind.

In the center stands a great tree; its grim shadow

weighs down the lesser woods; its web of limbs

marks it as the unmatched guardian of the grove.

Sad beneath it, never knowing light or sun, 545

the stream grows still, icy in the endless cold,  
a muddy marsh surrounds the sluggish spring.

When the senior priest had pushed his steps to this place  
he didn't at all delay: the place appeared like midnight.

The ground was graven with a pit; torches were tossed on top, 550  
snatched from funeral fires. The seer shrouded himself;  
he covered his body with a cloak and trembling took a branch.  
Dressed in dark clothes, the old man moved mournfully along;  
the sad shroud extended as far as his feet.

A garland of deadly yew girded his gray hair. 555  
Black beasts, sheep and cows, were brought,  
flung into the pit; flame greedily feeds on the gods' meal  
and the still-living flock flickers with fierce fire.

Tiresias cried out to the ghosts, and the god who rules them  
and he who guards the gates of the lake of Lethe. 560

He spun a magic spell; in his senseless mouth  
the awful old man intoned whatever might content  
or compel floating spirits; he poured blood on the flames  
and burned the beasts to cinders; he spattered the pit  
with great quantities of gore; he spilled also the snowy 565  
fluid of milk, and let wine flow from his left hand.

He sings again and, staring at the ground,  
invokes the ghosts with a grimmer, more savage voice.

The hounds of Hecate were howling; the hollow valleys  
groaned three times; the ground was battered from below; 570

all the earth was shaken. The seer said, "I am heard!

I poured out the proper words. Blind Chaos breaks forth  
and the dark nations of the dead return to the upper air."

The whole forest huddled down; the leaves flutter with horror.

Great cracks gape in trunks; the entire grove 575

is gripped with fear. The ground fell in on itself;

deep within, it moaned: either Acheron dared not endure  
with patience the exposure of its hidden hells;

or the ground itself spoke, giving way to the summoned ghosts

by splitting its seams; or, insane with anger, 580

triple-headed Cerberus shook his heavy chains.

Suddenly the land split and, in a boundless abyss,

the gates of the ground lay open. I saw pale gods

among the shades; I saw the lifeless lakes

and knew true night. Bitter as ice, my blood stopped, 585

froze in my veins. A fierce legion leapt forth;

the entire snaky tribe stood under arms:

the troops sown from the teeth of Dirce's dragon.

Then a savage Fury screamed, and sightless Rage, 590

and Terror, and whatever demons eternal darkness

creates and conceals: Grief, ripping out its hair;

Sickness, hardly sustaining its weary head;

Old Age, a punishment to itself; and impending Fear;  
and that evil eagerly eating up the Theban people: Plague. 589

Bravery abandoned us; even Manto, familiar 595  
with her father's magic, was amazed. Fearless, Tiresias  
boldly called together the bloodless crowd  
of heartless Hell. Straight there, like floating clouds,  
they drifted and drew breaths of free air.

Mount Eryx doesn't send so many leaves to earth in autumn, 600  
Mount Hybla doesn't make so many petals in spring  
when the swarms of bees wander in close companies,  
so many waves do not shatter in the western sea,  
nor do so many birds, fleeing the storms of bitter Strymon\*,  
wander in winter and, streaking across the sky, 605  
weigh down the warm Nile like winter snows,  
as the dead nations the singing seer drew from the earth.

The shuddering spirits seek places to hide  
in the gloomy grove. The first to fly from the ground  
holds a harsh bull by the horns with his right hand: 610  
bold Zethus. Next, his brother Amphion, holding a harp  
in his left hand, who led stones with his sweet song.  
Then: Tantalus' daughter\* among her dead children  
bears her head high, finally free to brag,

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\* Strymon (or the Struma) is a river in Thrace.

\* Niobe.

and keeps count of her ghosts. A grislier mother is next: 615  
 mad Agave, who governed the Maenads  
 and gave birth to Pentheus. Butchered but still fierce, he follows,  
 threatening war against the Theban women.

At long last the spirit summoned so often raises  
 its shame-filled face, far from all the others 620  
 and conceals itself. It stops; the priest redoubles  
 the Acheronian prayers until it brings into the open  
 its cloaked face. It is Laius— I shudder to say so.

He stands spattered with blood on his limbs,  
 smeared with stinking dirt in his bedraggled hair, 625  
 and cries out, raving: “Oh cruel house of Cadmus,  
 always delighting in blood bled from your own kin,  
 hurl your thyrsi; with an enthusiastic hand

savage your sons, rather than... The greatest guilt in Thebes  
 is the love of a mother. Oh fatherland, you are not clenched 630  
 in the grip of angry gods, but by a criminal. No breeze blown  
 by the sorrow-laden South Wind, no drought drying  
 the arid earth with its hot breath harms you.

Your bloodstained tyrant keeps the crown of a savage crime  
 and mounts the blasphemed marriage bed of his father. 635  
 Poisonous as a son, he is more perverse still as a parent,  
 a terrible weight returning to his mother's womb.

He brought himself back to the place where he began

and burdened her womb again with wicked births.

Do even animals act this way? His wife bore his brothers. 640

An intricate evil, a monster stranger than his own Sphinx.

You! You who hold the bloodstained scepter in your hand!

I, your unavenged father, will attack you and your entire city.

I'll bring Megaera, Matron of Dishonor for your blushing bride,  
and the whips of the wailing one; I'll uproot 645

the filthy family and grind its gods to dust with wicked war.

And so, Thebans: quickly throw the king from your kingdom;

let him leave the land for any place at all,

drawing death away with him. The green earth will grow  
grass in a spring full of flowers; the breeze will bring 650

the breath of life, and beauty will be reborn in the woods.

Destruction, Disease, Death, Suffering, Corruption, Sorrow—  
councillors befitting such a king —will follow him away.

Let him run with rapid steps to escape our realm;

I will hobble his feet with heavy fetters and hold him; 655

Never knowing his way, let the king creep along

tapping out his troubled road with the stick of old age.

Subjects: you seize his lands. I, his father, will steal his sky."

**OEDIPUS:** A freezing tremor grips my flesh and bones.

He claims I did the crimes I dreaded I might do. 660

But Merope, my mother, faithful to my father Polybus,

discredits the crime. The fact that my father is safe

absolves my hands of sin. Either parent proves me  
innocent of parricide or incest. What place is left for blame?

Cadmus' city wept for the loss of King Laius long before  
my steps touched the borders of Boeotia. 665  
Is the graybeard false, or is some god against the city?

Now, now we see the comrades of the clever conspiracy!  
The seer lied, slipping the gods like a mask on his slander,  
and he promises to pass my power on to you. 670

**CREON:** Why would I want my sister expelled from the palace?  
If the holy claims of kinship didn't hold me  
trustworthy in my entrusted rank, still  
the afflictions of fortune would always frighten me.  
May it be permitted you to put aside without peril 675  
the load you carry; may it not crush you as you let it go.  
It will be safer for you to stand in a lower place.

**OEDIPUS:** Are you actually asking me to surrender the rule  
of a realm at such risk?

**CREON:** I would counsel this course  
even to a man free to follow his own mind. 680  
There is no other option for you but to endure your destiny.

**OEDIPUS:** The straightest path to power, if one seeks it,  
is to praise moderation and murmur of peace and sleep.  
Contentment tends to be pretended by discontent.

**CREON:** Doesn't my long loyalty acquit me of crimes? 685

**OEDIPUS:** Loyalty gives the disloyal the leeway to do harm.

**CREON:** Freed from the royal burden, I keep kingly rewards  
and my house stands high in the assembly of citizens.

As every day dawns, as the seasons swing by,  
the gifts given by the king, my kinsman, 690  
gush over my family gods: fine clothes, fine food  
and the mercy you showed to many when I sought it.  
With a life so blessed, what else is lacking?

**OEDIPUS:** What you lack. A fortunate life feels no limits.

**CREON:** Must I go to a guilty man's grave without knowing why? 695

**OEDIPUS:** What proof was applied to condemn your king?  
Do you remember Tiresias pleading like a lawyer for me?  
Still, we're condemned to death. You go first; I'll follow after.

**CREON:** And if I am innocent?



**CHORUS OF THEBANS:**

King Oedipus: you did not create this ruin,  
nor is it your doom destroying the Labdacidae; 710

it is the old anger  
of the gods. The Castalian grove  
gave shade to the guest from Sidon  
and Dirce let the Tyrian traveller drink  
as the oldest offspring of great Agenor, 715

wearied from trailing Jove's robbery through the world,  
stopped, trembling, under our trees,  
honoring his own offering  
and Apollo's prophecy,  
which commanded him to accompany a cow as it roamed,  
which had pulled no plow 720

nor the curved yoke of a cart.  
So he abandoned his banishment and gave his nation a name  
from the bovine omen, Boeotia.

Forever after that time, strange terrors  
lived in the land. 725

First a snake, sent forth from the dim dells,  
hissing as it ringed the hulks of trees,  
pushing up over the pines,

far above the Chaonian forest  
his dark head drew up,  
as he lay with most of his length in coils below. 730  
Then: the land in labor gave a guilty birth,  
growing armies from the ground.  
The call to battle cried from a bent horn;  
the shrill songs came from the clarion,  
with its crooked brass. \*

But first the fierce soldiers standing from the earth 735  
tested their tongues and throats with a savage shout,  
a sound with no sense.

Fraternal troops have taken the land—  
a family befitting the seed that was sown.  
Their lives were laid out in a lone day: 740  
born after the bright ascent of the Morning Star,  
their life is lost before Hesperus is high.  
The stranger is shocked by such strange wonders;  
he fears the fighting of people fresh from the earth,  
until the savage soldiery sinks down 745  
and the mother watches the men she made  
drawn back down to the depths of her womb.  
The civil wars started with that struggle;  
from those days Herculean Thebes has endured  
the battles of brothers. 750

And consider the ruin of Cadmus' grandson  
when the horns of a stag spread out from his head,  
strange branches shadowing his face,  
and his own dogs drove him like a deer.

Actaeon, with an agile foot, fled 755  
wildly through the woods and high hills, and  
still swifter through the mountain meadows and stones,  
learned to fear feathers lifted by the West Wind  
and shunned the places where he'd spread his nets,  
until he saw, on the smooth surface of a pond, 760  
his bestial image and the branching antlers,  
where the Huntress had cleansed her holy limbs,  
the Maiden mantled in savage modesty.

[*OEDIPUS and JOCASTA enter the stage from the palace.*]

**OEDIPUS:** [*to himself*] I keep holding cares in my heart, returning to terrors.  
Heaven and Hell both claim that King Laius 765  
was killed by my crime. But my innocent soul  
denies it (knowing itself better than the Numina do).  
But my memory travels back over a murky trail...  
a man I met on the road did die, stuck by my staff,  
and went down to the underworld. The arrogant graybeard 770

had wounded me with his chariot wheels. It was far away  
from Thebes, where three roads divide in Phocis.

[*to Jocasta*] True-hearted mate, untangle my mistakes:

how long had Laius lived when he was lost?

Was he green in youth or gray with old age?

775

JOCASTA: Middle-aged, but more old than young.

OEDIPUS: Did many men accompany the king on the road?

JOCASTA: Travelling on a tricky way had worn away many:

a faithful few followed his chariot at last.

OEDIPUS: Did anyone fall, a companion to the king's fate?

780

JOCASTA: Courage and loyalty left him a single comrade.

OEDIPUS: I know the guilty man, the number and place agree—

but tell me the time it happened.

JOCASTA: Ten harvests have returned since.

[*enter an OLD MAN OF CORINTH;*

*at some point, now or in the following dialogue, JOCASTA exits*]

**OLD MAN:** The Corinthian people call you to your paternal kingdom.

King Polybus has acquired endless peace. 785

**OEDIPUS:** Merciless Fortune mocks me on all sides.

Don't be mealy-mouthed: by what fate did my father fall?

**OLD MAN:** Sweet sleep released his old soul from suffering.

**OEDIPUS:** My father has fallen, murdered by no man.

I stand as witness: now I can hold my hands to the sky, 790

unstained and dreading no sinful deeds.

But the more fearful part of my fate remains...

**OLD MAN:** The kingdom of your father will keep you from all fear.

**OEDIPUS:** I would claim my father's kingdom, but I fear my mother.

**OLD MAN:** You tremble at a parent who pleads for your return, 795

drowning in worries?

**OEDIPUS:** Decency drives me away.

**OLD MAN:** She's a widow. Would you leave her alone?

**OEDIPUS:** I wonder if I would.

**OLD MAN:** Tell me what terror tears your heart in secret.  
I've been accustomed to keep secret the counsels of kings.

**OEDIPUS:** Apollo prophesied I would marry my mother. 800

**OLD MAN:** Shake off these senseless fears and send away  
your monstrous terrors. Merope is not your true mother.

**OEDIPUS:** What's the point of claiming a counterfeit parenthood?

**OLD MAN:** Sons strengthen trust in a royal house.

**OEDIPUS:** Tell the whole tale, since you've let the secret slip. 805

**OLD MAN:** These old hands held you, before I yielded you to your mother.

**OEDIPUS:** You yielded me to her; who yielded me to you?

**OLD MAN:** A shepherd, under the snowy peak of Cithaeron.

**OEDIPUS:** What mischance guided a man like you into that grove?

**OLD MAN:** I guarded a herd of goats among those hills. 810

**OEDIPUS:** Now show me the signs on my body that make you sure.

**OLD MAN:** A steel spike pierced your poor feet;

They called you "Oedipus" on account of the swelling wound.\*

**OEDIPUS:** I demand to know what man gave as a gift  
my living flesh?

**OLD MAN:** He kept the king's flocks. 815

He led a string of lesser shepherds.

**OEDIPUS:** Name his name.

**OLD MAN:** The memory of old men  
slips away, weary with long labor.

**OEDIPUS:** If you met the man, would you remember his face?

**OLD MAN:** I might recognize him. A trivial mark will often retrieve 820  
a lost recollection from the place it was buried.

**OEDIPUS:** The leaders follow their flocks, forced

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\* From Greek οἶδος "swelling, tumor" and πούς "foot."

to sacrifice and slaughter. [*to his servants:*] Go quickly and gather here  
the shepherd who stands as leader of the flocks.

[*The SERVANTS exit.*]

**OLD MAN:** Some plan, or simply luck has kept these things concealed. 825

Let what had been hidden for so long lie hidden still:

Truth, thrown open, often harms the man who makes it known.

**OEDIPUS:** What harm can be feared, more fearful than this holocaust?

**OLD MAN:** Know that the knowledge you seek looms large:

the safety of the king clashes with the safety of the city. 830

Each is equal in importance. Hold your hand back:

lest you harm something you hold dear. Let Fate unfold itself.

**OEDIPUS:** There is no point in troubling a state at peace,

but when disaster strikes everything may asked be in safety.

**OLD MAN:** Are you hoping for a kinship higher than a king's? 835

Beware: it may wound you to find your father at last.

**OEDIPUS:** But I will root out the truth of my shameful descent:

the truth must be told.

[*enter PHORBAS*]

Look, an old man of great age:

Phorbas. Under his rule the royal flocks roam.

Corinthian, do you recognize the name, or know the aged face? 840

**OLD MAN:** The man raises a smile in my mind;

Neither do I know the face enough nor do I not know it at all.

**OEDIPUS** [*to PHORBAS*]: When King Laius ruled the kingdom did you drive rich flocks to feast in the region of Mount Cithaeron?

**PHORBAS:** Blessed Cithaeron always surrenders its bounty 845  
of fresh food in summer fields to feed our flocks.

**OLD MAN:** Do you remember me?

**PHORBAS:** My hobbled memory hesitates.

**OEDIPUS:** Tell me: at any time, did you ever give an infant to him?

What are you waiting for? Why do your cheeks change color?

What are you struggling to speak? Truth loathes delay. 850

**PHORBAS:** You bring up things buried in a long stretch of time.

**OEDIPUS:** Tell me, or pain will compel you to speak the truth.

**PHORBAS:** I gave the useless gift of an infant to that man there.  
It can't have lingered long in the light of day.

**OLD MAN:** The blessed gods forbid. He lives; long may he live. 855

**OEDIPUS:** Why do you claim the boy you abandoned couldn't live?

**PHORBAS:** A steel stake, stabbed through both feet,  
bound his legs. Swelling was born from the wounds;  
the boy's body was on fire with a bitter fever.

**OEDIPUS** [*to himself*]: What are you waiting for? Your doom draws near. 860  
[*to Phorbias*] Inform us now whose foundling that was.

**PHORBAS:** I can't betray my trust.

**OEDIPUS:** Fire! Fetch fire, someone! Flame will teach him to talk.

**PHORBAS:** Will you track down the truth in a trail of wounds?  
Spare me, please!

**OEDIPUS:** If my face seems fierce to you  
and full of hate, I hold the hope of freedom in my hand. 865

Tell the truth. Who was the foundling? Who was his father?  
What woman gave him birth?

**PHORBAS:** The queen, your wife.

**OEDIPUS:** Earth, split open! And you, emperor of shadows,  
god of ghosts, drag down to deepest Hell  
this perverted jumble of parent and child. 870

Citizens, heap stones on my sinful head.

Fill me with spears. Let fathers and sons attack me with steel.

Let wives and brothers take weapons to band against me.

Let the plague-struck people seize torches from pyres  
and hurl them on my head. I walk as an insult to the world, 875  
the hatred of the gods, the havoc of holy law.

On the day I first drew the breath of life in my lungs

I already deserved death. [*to himself*] Show now the strength for the task;  
strive for something that will suit your sins.

Go now, go— run to palace at a racer's speed. 880

Thank your mother for blessing Thebes with a boy.

**CHORUS OF THEBANS:**

If the gods allowed me the gift  
of making a fate for myself

I would set my sails  
by the West's light winds 885  
lest the crosstrees tremble, born down by the blast.

Let a balmy and gentle breeze,  
not bending the ship on its boards,  
escort my fearless craft.  
Let life safely lead me, 890  
running a moderate path in the middle of the road.

A madman, afraid of Minos,  
sought to reach the stars.  
Confident in strange skills,  
flying with false feathers 895  
he tried to triumph over true birds.

The schoolboy, commanding his ascent,  
stole the name of a sea.  
Devious old Daedalus  
wisely took his way , 900  
making a middle course under the clouds.

As a thrush—when a hawk threatens—  
flees and then collects its fledgelings  
scattered by fear of the killer,

he waits for his son's wings, 905  
until, with hobbled hands, the boy struggles in the sea.

Whoever would travel, as Icarus' twin,  
on the road of arrogance, remember  
what hurtles over the median will hang  
from the crumbling edge of a cliff. 910

*[The doors of the palace open; the MESSENGER enters the stage.]*

What now? The doors of the palace are driven open.  
A slave of the royal service  
is shaking his head sadly  
*[to the MESSENGER]* Let us know the news you bring.

**THE MESSENGER:** After Oedipus understood what the fates had foretold 915  
and the blasphemy of his blood, he convicted himself of the crime.  
Accursed, he fled to the king's high house,  
running in haste under the hated roof  
like a lion raging in the red sands of Libya,  
shaking back his bright mane with a menacing stare. 920  
His face was wild with fury, his eyes inhuman;  
he raised a deep groan; a chilly sweat  
flooded his limbs; he foamed at the mouth,

thundering threats as his buried pain poured out of him.

He readied some strange cruelty against himself, 925  
the reflection of his fate.

“Why put off the punishment?”

he screamed. “Either a sword should stab this unholy heart,  
or someone should teach it a lesson with blazing fire and stones.

What tigress, what cruel carrion bird will tear  
my flesh to shreds? You who are full of sins, 930  
damned Cithaeron, send deadly beasts

or rabid dogs from your dreaded timberland to attack me.

Send Agave herself... Soul, do you grieve to die?

Only death can snatch the sinless from their doom.”

Then he put his unholy hand on the pommel 935  
and unsheathed his sword.

“Wait. Such great wickedness

can't be paid for with fleeting pain. One swift stroke  
and you'll atone for all your trespasses? Death: you deserve it  
for murdering your father. You also made your mother foul.

You sent forth under the sky the children of incest. 940

You poisoned your people with plague. What price will you pay now?

You've passed what anyone could pay. The world twisted  
established laws for Oedipus alone, setting in motion

strange offspring. Let it reshape itself  
 for my tormenting. Make me live again and lie 945  
 down in death again, reliving my life forever  
 so that I can pay eternal penalties of untested torment...  
 Forget that, fool. If the penalty can't be repeated, let it be long.  
 Drag out a slow death; pursue a path  
 where you'll wander, wandering among the dead by deserted 950  
 by the living. Leave your life when you're older than Laius.  
 Do you hesitate, my soul? Does a heavy storm of tears  
 weigh down your face and water your cheeks with weeping?  
 As if weeping were worth anything. No longer will this feeble fluid  
 pour from my eyes. Let them be pulled from their places, 955  
 falling like tears. Now I tear from my face  
 a husband's eyes."

Then he howled with anger:

his blood-dark face burned with the fires of shame;  
 his staring eyes hardly stayed in their sockets.  
 His face was reckless, insane, fierce with rage 960  
 as if he were already ripping his eyes out. Screaming a curse,  
 he turned his fingers to attack his face. His eyes, insane,  
 stood forth, struggling to be torn out by his hand;  
 they fled forward to meet their fate.  
 With hooked hands he greedily groped at his eyes, 965  
 ripping them up from the root, breaking the eyeballs

out of their orbits. He kept clutching  
at the hollow sockets with his hands, sinking  
his fingernails deep to gouge the unfilled gaps.

He vents his wrath in vain and rages more than he must, 970

so deep is the danger of light. He lifts his head  
scanning the areas of the sky with empty circles,  
trying out the night. He rips away the nerves  
that trail from his torn-out eyes and, triumphant,

he summons all the gods together: "Please spare my country, 975

now that I've done what's right and paid the proper debt.

I know at last a night worthy of my wedding couch."

A foul rain ran down his face; his ruined head  
belched forth blood, streaming from torn veins.

**CHORUS OF THEBANS:**

The Fates rule us; surrender to the Fates. 980

The worries grieving the world  
can't change the threads of their predestined spinning.

The deeds that mortal men endure,

and the deeds we mortals do  
are decreed by the gods, guided by the distaff.

Held in cruel Lachesis' hand, 985

from the first day until the final one,  
the path the world walks is planned.

Not even a god can untie the strings going  
from cause to effect. No cry  
can move the whirling world to mercy. 990

The hearts of many men are harmed  
by fear of man's fate;  
many are forced by fear to meet  
the fate they struggled to flee.

The gates groan: leaderless, though orphaned of light 995  
Thebes' master is at the threshold,  
walking into the world.

*[OEDIPUS enters haltingly, blinded and bloodstained.]*

**OEDIPUS:** The deed is done, and well done. I've paid the debt to my father.  
The darkness is agreeable to me. What god at last is drenching  
my brow with comfort from a black cloud? 1000  
Who forgives my misdeeds? I've escaped the guilty day.  
Kinslayer, pay no further penalty for your crimes:  
light has fled from you. This face is fitting for Oedipus.

*[JOCASTA runs onstage.]*

**CHORUS:** See: running with swift steps from the palace

crazed Jocasta comes, as wild and bewildered 1005  
as Agave when, gripping the severed head of her son,  
she understood her sin. She hesitates to speak to Oedipus—  
she yearns to speak; she is afraid; her shame yields to his suffering,  
but her croaking words cling to her lips.

**JOCASTA:** What do I call you?

Son? Do you doubt it? You are my son; as my son you are shamed. 1010  
Speak, in spite of yourself, son! Where are you turning  
your face, full of holes?

**OEDIPUS:** Who forbids me to bask in shadows?

Who forces my eyes back in my face? The voice of my mother, my mother!  
My work has been wasted.

[*to JOCASTA*] It's wicked for criminals like us

to meet any more. Let the measureless sea separate us, 1015  
let the wide world be a wall between us; may whatever land hides  
on the opposite side of the earth (seeing strange stars  
and a deserted sun) keep us from coming together.

**JOCASTA:** It's Fate's damn fault. Everyone's innocent of their Fate.

**OEDIPUS:** Don't waste your words, mother, or wound my ears. 1020  
I beg you by the remnant of my ruined body,

by the unblessed bond of my own blood,  
by all our family is, sacred and obscene.

**JOCASTA:** Why so slow, my soul? You, too, committed these crimes.

Won't you pay the penalty? Every holy thing of human law 1025  
dies in disgrace, due to you, you whore.

Die now. Drive your damned life away with a sword

Not if the god guiding high heaven

shot me with inhuman arrows sent from his shining hand

would I be cleansed from the crimes I committed as a mother. 1030

Death delights me, I'm looking for a way to die.

[*to OEDIPUS*] Come on, now: make your hands kill your mother,  
if you're a kinslayer. This last deed remains to be done.

[*to herself*] Seize his sword. My husband bled from that blade...

No, tell the truth: Laius was my father-in-law. 1035

Should I stab my unholy heart with this steel?

Shall I draw it like a dagger over my naked neck?

What door should I open for Death? Strike here! Strike here!

At the womb that gaped wide for spouse and son.

[*JOCASTA stabs herself in the stomach and dies.*]

**CHORUS:** She lies, bereft of life. Her hand died as it drove 1040

in the blade, and now bloodflow is forcing it back.

**OEDIPUS:** You, god of prophecy, you, guardian of truth!

I call you to court. The fates only forced me to kill my father.

My guilt is even greater than I feared: kinslaying a second time

I killed my mother; she was consumed by my crime. 1045

Apollo, you perjurer! I've surpassed the sins you foretold

*[OEDIPUS begins to grope his way offstage.]*

Pursue the tricky road with trembling steps;

pausing as you place each halting footprint,

let your right hand direct a road through the darkness.

No, run recklessly, risking steps that might slip: set out, 1050

get moving, go! No, stop! Don't stumble on your mother.

You citizens, weary in body and weighed by sickness,

dragging half-dead hearts: look! I'm leaving.

The burden is off your backs. A gentler state of the sky

will follow after I flee. Whoever fails, hardly keeping 1055

breath in their body, let them drink deep

of healthy air. *[to the CHORUS]* Go, help those given up for dead.

I will drag the death-bearing evils of the earth away with me.

Bloody Fates, and the bristling fever of Plague,

Famine and grim Disease and furious Grief: 1060

Go with me, with me. Lead me, and I'll gladly go.

