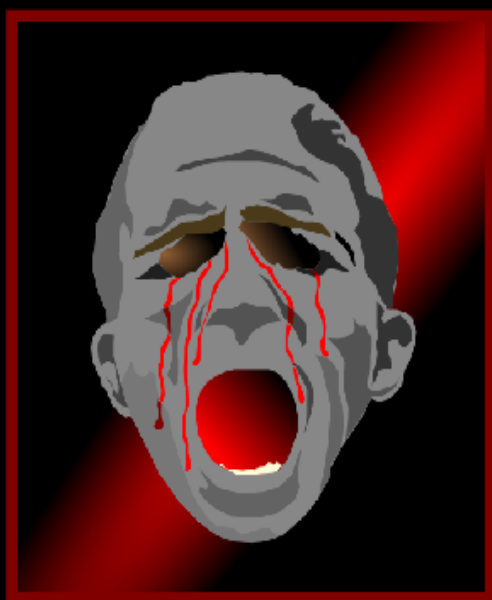


Sophocles
Oedipus the King



Translated by
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Oedipus the King

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Translator's Note

In the following text the numbers in square brackets refer to the Greek text; the numbers without brackets refer to the English text. In the line numbering for the translated text a short indented line is normally included with the short line above it.

The translator would like to acknowledge the valuable help provided by Sir Richard Jebb's translation and commentary.

Background Note

Sophocles (495 BC-405 BC) was a famous and successful Athenian writer of tragedies in his own lifetime. Of his 120 plays, only 7 have survived. *Oedipus the King*, also called *Oedipus Tyrannos* or *Oedipus Rex*, written around 420 BC, has long been regarded not only as his finest play but also as the purest and most powerful expression of Greek tragic drama.

Oedipus, a stranger to Thebes, became king of the city after the murder of king Laius, about fifteen or sixteen years before the start of the play. He was offered the throne because he was successful in saving the city from the Sphinx, an event referred to repeatedly in the text of the play. He married Laius' widow, Jocasta, and had four children with her, two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, and two daughters, Antigone and Ismene.

Oedipus the King

Dramatis Personae

OEDIPUS: king of Thebes

PRIEST: the high priest of Thebes

CREON: Oedipus' brother-in-law

CHORUS of Theban elders

TEIRESIAS: an old blind prophet

BOY: attendant on Teiresias

JOCASTA: wife of Oedipus, sister of Creon

MESSENGER: an old man

SERVANT: an old shepherd

SECOND MESSENGER: a servant of Oedipus

ANTIGONE: daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta, a child

ISMENE: daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta, a child

SERVANTS and ATTENDANTS on Oedipus and Jocasta

[The action takes place in Thebes in front of the royal palace. The main doors are directly facing the audience. There are altars beside the doors. A crowd of citizens carrying branches decorated with laurel garlands and wool and led by the PRIEST has gathered in front of the altars, with some people sitting on the altar steps.]

[OEDIPUS enters through the palace doors]

OEDIPUS

My children, latest generation born from Cadmus,¹
why are you sitting here with wreathed sticks
in supplication to me, while the city
fills with incense, chants, and cries of pain?

¹Cadmus: legendary founder of Thebes. Hence, the citizens of Thebes were often called children of Cadmus or Cadmeians.

Children, it would not be appropriate for me
to learn of this from any other source,
so I have come in person—I, Oedipus,
whose fame all men acknowledge. But you there,
old man, tell me—you seem to be the one
who ought to speak for those assembled here. 10 [10]
What feeling brings you to me—fear or desire?
You can be confident that I will help.
I shall assist you willingly in every way.
I would be a hard-hearted man indeed,
if I did not pity suppliants like these.

PRIEST

Oedipus, ruler of my native land,
you see how people here of every age
are crouching down around your altars,
some fledglings barely strong enough to fly
and others bent by age, with priests as well— 20
for I'm priest of Zeus—and these ones here,
the pick of all our youth. The other groups
sit in the market place with suppliant sticks
or else in front of Pallas' two shrines, [20]
or where Ismenus prophesies with fire.¹
For our city, as you yourself can see,
is badly shaken—she cannot raise her head
above the depths of so much surging death.
Disease infects fruit blossoms in our land,
disease infects our herds of grazing cattle, 30
makes women in labour lose their children.
And deadly pestilence, that fiery god,
swoops down to blast the city, emptying
the House of Cadmus, and fills black Hades [30]
with groans and howls. These children and myself
now sit here by your home, not because we think
you're equal to the gods. No. We judge you
the first of men in what happens in this life
and in our interactions with the gods.

¹ *Pallas*: Pallas Athena. There were two shrines to her in Thebes. *Ismenus*: A temple to Apollo Ismenios where burnt offerings were the basis for the priest's divination.

For you came here, to our Cadmeian city, 40
 and freed us from the tribute we were paying
 to that cruel singer—and yet you knew
 no more than we did and had not been taught.¹
 In their stories, the people testify
 how, with gods' help, you gave us back our lives.
 So now, Oedipus, our king, most powerful [40]
 in all men's eyes, we're here as suppliants,
 all begging you to find some help for us,
 either by listening to a heavenly voice,
 or learning from some other human being. 50
 For, in my view, men of experience
 provide advice which gives the best results.
 So now, you best of men, raise up our state.
 Act to consolidate your fame, for now,
 thanks to your eagerness in earlier days,
 the city celebrates you as its saviour.
 Don't let our memory of your ruling here [50]
 declare that we were first set right again,
 and later fell. No. Restore our city,
 so that it stands secure. In those times past 60
 you brought us joy—and with good omens, too.
 Be that same man today. If you're to rule
 as you are doing now, it's better to be king
 in a land of men than in a desert.
 An empty ship or city wall is nothing
 if no men share your life together there.

OEDIPUS

My poor children, I know why you have come—
 I am not ignorant of what you yearn for.
 For I well know that you are ill, and yet, [60]

¹ . . . *cruel singer*: a reference to the Sphinx, a monster with the body of a lion, wings, and the head and torso of a woman. After the death of king Laius, the Sphinx tyrannized Thebes by not letting anyone into or out of the city, unless the person could answer the following riddle: "What walks on four legs in the morning, on two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening?" Those who could not answer were killed and eaten. Oedipus provided the answer (a human being), and thus saved the city. The Sphinx then committed suicide.

sick as you are, there is not one of you
whose illness equals mine. Your agony
comes to each one of you as his alone,
a special pain for him and no one else.
But the soul inside me sorrows for myself,
and for the city, and for you—all together.
You are not rousing me from a deep sleep.
You must know I've been shedding many tears
and, in my wandering thoughts, exploring
many pathways. After a careful search
I followed up the one thing I could find
and acted on it. So I have sent away
my brother-in-law, son of Menoeceus,
Creon, to Pythian Apollo's shrine,
to learn from him what I might do or say
to save our city. But when I count the days—
the time he's been away—I now worry
what he's doing. For he's been gone too long,
well past the time he should have taken.
But when he comes, I'll be a wicked man
if I do not act on all the god reveals.

70

80

[70]

90

PRIEST

What you have said is most appropriate,
for these men here have just informed me
that Creon is approaching.

OEDIPUS

Lord Apollo,
as he returns may fine shining fortune,
bright as his countenance, attend on him.

[80]

PRIEST

It seems the news he brings is good—if not,
he would not wear that wreath around his head,
a laurel thickly packed with berries.¹

¹ . . . *berries*: a suppliant to Apollo's shrine characteristically wore such a garland if he received favourable news.

OEDIPUS

We'll know soon enough—he's within earshot.

[Enter CREON. OEDIPUS calls to him as he approaches]

My royal kinsman, child of Menoeceus, 100
what message from the god do you bring us?

CREON

Good news. I tell you even troubles
difficult to bear will all end happily
if events lead to the right conclusion.

OEDIPUS

What is the oracle? So far your words
inspire in me no confidence or fear. [90]

CREON

If you wish to hear the news in public,
I'm prepared to speak. Or we could step inside.

OEDIPUS

Speak out to everyone. The grief I feel
for these citizens is even greater 110
than any pain I feel for my own life.

CREON

Then let me report what I heard from the god.
Lord Phoebus clearly orders us to drive away
the polluting stain this land has harboured—
which will not be healed if we keep nursing it.

OEDIPUS

What sort of cleansing? And this disaster—
how did it happen?

CREON

By banishment— [100]
or atone for murder by shedding blood again.
This blood brings on the storm which blasts our state.

OEDIPUS

And the one whose fate the god revealed— 120
what sort of man is he?

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CREON

Before you came, my lord,
to steer our ship of state, Laius ruled this land.

OEDIPUS

I have heard that, but I never saw the man.

CREON

Laius was killed. And now the god is clear:
those murderers, he tells us, must be punished,
whoever they may be.

OEDIPUS

And where are they?
In what country? Where am I to find a trace
of this ancient crime? It will be hard to track.

CREON

Here in Thebes, so said the god. What is sought
is found, but what is overlooked escapes.

130 [110]

OEDIPUS

When Laius fell in bloody death, where was he—
at home, or in his fields, or in another land?

CREON

He was abroad, on his way to Delphi—
that's what he told us. He began the trip,
but did not return.

OEDIPUS

Was there no messenger—
no companion who made the journey with him
and witnessed what took place—a person
who might provide some knowledge men could use?

CREON

They all died—except for one who was afraid
and ran away. There was only one thing
he could inform us of with confidence
about the things he saw.

140

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OEDIPUS

What was that?

We might get somewhere if we had one fact—
we could find many things, if we possessed
some slender hope to get us going. [120]

CREON

He told us it was robbers who attacked them—
not just a single man, a gang of them—
they came on with force and killed him.

OEDIPUS

How would a thief have dared to do this,
unless he had financial help from Thebes? 150

CREON

That's what we guessed. But once Laius was dead
we were in trouble, so no one sought revenge.

OEDIPUS

When the ruling king had fallen in this way,
what bad trouble blocked your path, preventing you
from looking into it?

CREON

It was the Sphinx—
she sang her enigmatic song and thus forced us
to put aside something we found obscure
to look into the urgent problem we now faced. [130]

OEDIPUS

Then I will start afresh, and once again
shed light on darkness. It is most fitting
that Apollo demonstrates his care
for the dead man, and worthy of you, too. 160
And so, as is right, you will see how I
work with you, seeking vengeance for this land,
as well as for the god. This polluting stain
I will remove, not for some distant friend,
but for myself. For whoever killed this man
may soon enough desire to turn his hand
in the same way against me, too, and kill me. [140]

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Thus, in avenging Laius, I serve myself. 170
But now, my children, as quickly as you can
stand up from these altar steps and take
your suppliant branches. Someone must call
the Theban people to assemble here.
I'll do everything I can. With the god's help
this will all come to light successfully,
or else it will prove our common ruin.

[OEDIPUS and CREON go into the palace]

PRIEST

Let us get up, children. For this man
has willingly declared just what we came for.
And may Phoebus, who sent this oracle, 180
come as our saviour and end our sickness. [150]

[The PRIEST and the CITIZENS leave. Enter the CHORUS OF THEBAN ELDERS]

CHORUS

Oh sweet speaking voice of Zeus,
you have come to glorious Thebes from golden Pytho—
but what is your intent?
My fearful heart twists on the rack and shakes with fear.
O Delian healer, for whom we cry aloud
in holy awe, what obligation
will you demand from me, a thing unknown
or now renewed with the revolving years?
Immortal voice, O child of golden Hope, 190
speak to me!

First I call on you, Athena the immortal,
daughter of Zeus, and on your sister, too, [160]
Artemis, who guards our land and sits
on her glorious round throne in our market place,
and on Phoebus, who shoots from far away.
O you three guardians against death,
appear to me!
If before now you have ever driven off
a fiery plague to keep away disaster 200

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from the city and have banished it,
then come to us this time as well!

Alas, the pains I bear are numberless—
my people now all sick with plague,
our minds can find no weapons [170]
to serve as our defence. Now the offspring
of our splendid earth no longer grow,
nor do our women crying out in labour
get their relief from a living new-born child.
As you can see—one by one they swoop away, 210
off to the shores of the evening god, like birds
faster than fire which no one can resist.

Our city dies—we've lost count of all the dead.
Her sons lie in the dirt unpitied, unlamented. [180]
Corpses spread the pestilence, while youthful wives
and grey-haired mothers on the altar steps
wail everywhere and cry in supplication,
seeking to relieve their agonizing pain.
Their solemn chants ring out—
they mingle with the voices of lament. 220
O Zeus' golden daughter,
send your support and strength,
your lovely countenance!

And that ravenous Ares, god of killing,
who now consumes me as he charges on
with no bronze shield but howling battle cries,
let him turn his back and quickly leave this land,
with a fair following wind to carry him
to the great chambers of Amphitrite
or inhospitable waves of Thrace.¹ 230
For if destruction does not come at night,
then day arrives to see it does its work.
O you who wield that mighty flash of fire, [200]
O father Zeus, with your lighting blast
let Ares be destroyed!

¹ *Ares*, god of war and killing, was often disapproved of by the major Olympian deities.
Amphitrite was a goddess of the sea, married to Poseidon.

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O Lyceian lord, how I wish those arrows
from the golden string of your bent bow
with their all-conquering force would wing out
to champion us against our enemy,
and the blazing fires of Artemis, as well, 240
with which she races through the Lycian hills.¹
I call the god who binds his hair with gold,
the one whose name our country shares, [210]
the one to whom the Maenads shout their cries,
Dionysus with his radiant face—
may he come to us with his flaming torchlight,
our ally against Ares,
a god dishonoured among gods.¹

[Enter OEDIPUS from the palace]

OEDIPUS

You pray. But if you listen now to me,
you'll get your wish. Hear what I have to say 250
and treat your own disease—then you may hope
to find relief from your distress. I shall speak
as one who is a stranger to the story,
a stranger to the crime. If I alone
were tracking down this act, I'd not get far [220]
without a single clue. That being the case,
for it was after the event that I became
a citizen of Thebes, I now proclaim
the following to all of you Cadmeians:
Whoever among you knows the man it was 260
who murdered Laius, son of Labdacus,
I order him to reveal it all to me.
And if the murderer's afraid, I tell him
to avoid the danger of the major charge
by speaking out against himself. If so,
he will be sent out from this land unhurt—
and undergo no further punishment.
If someone knows the killer is a stranger, [230]

² *Lyceian lord*: This is a reference to Apollo.

from some other state, let him not stay mute.
 As well as a reward, he'll earn my thanks. 270
 But if he remains quiet, if anyone,
 through fear, hides himself or a friend of his
 against my orders, here's what I shall do—
 so listen to my words. For I decree
 that no one in this land, in which I rule
 as your own king, shall give that killer shelter
 or talk to him, whoever he may be,
 or act in concert with him during prayers,
 or sacrifice, or sharing lustral water.¹ [240]
 Ban him from your homes, every one of you, 280
 for he is our pollution, as the Pythian god
 has just revealed to me. In doing this,
 I'm acting as an ally of the god
 and of dead Laius, too. And I pray
 whoever the man is who did this crime,
 one unknown person acting on his own
 or with companions, the worst of agonies
 will wear out his wretched life. I pray, too,
 that, if he should become a honoured guest
 in my own home and with my knowledge, 290 [250]
 I may suffer all those things I've just called down
 upon the killers. And I urge you now
 to make sure all these orders take effect,
 for my sake, for the sake of the god,
 and for our barren, godless, ruined land.
 For in this matter, even if a god
 were not prompting us, it would not be right
 for you to simply leave things as they are,
 and not to purify the murder of a man
 who was so noble and who was your king. 300
 You should have looked into it. But now I
 possess the ruling power which Laius held
 in earlier days. I have his bed and wife— [260]
 she would have borne his children, if his hopes
 to have a son had not been disappointed.

¹ *lustral water*: water purified in a communal religious ritual.

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Children from a common mother might have linked
Laius and myself. But as it turned out,
fate swooped down onto his head. So now I
will fight on his behalf, as if this matter
concerned my father, and I will strive 310
to do everything I can to find him,
the man who spilled his blood, and thus avenge
the son of Labdacus and Polydorus,
of Cadmus and Agenor from old times.¹
As for those who do not follow what I urge,
I pray the gods send them no fertile land,
no, nor any children in their women's wombs— [270]
may they all perish in our present fate
or one more hateful still. To you others,
you Cadmeians who support my efforts, 320
may Justice, our ally, and all the gods
attend on us with kindness always.

CHORUS LEADER

My lord, since you extend your oath to me,
I will say this. I am not the murderer,
nor can I tell you who the killer is.
As for what you're seeking, it's for Apollo,
who launched this search, to state who did it.

OEDIPUS

That is well said. But no man has power [280]
to force the gods to speak against their will.

CHORUS LEADER

May I then suggest what seems to me 330
the next best course of action?

OEDIPUS

You may indeed,
and if there is a third course, too, don't hesitate
to let me know.

¹*Agenor*: founder of the Theban royal family; his son Cadmus moved from Sidon in Asia Minor to Greece and founded Thebes. Polydorus: son of Cadmus, father of Labdacus, and hence grandfather of Laius.

CHORUS LEADER

Our lord Teiresias, I know,
can see into things, like lord Apollo.
From him, my king, a man investigating this
might well find out the details of the crime.

OEDIPUS

I've taken care of that—it's not something
I could overlook. At Creon's urging,
I have dispatched two messengers to him
and have been wondering for some time now
why he has not come.

340

CHORUS LEADER

Apart from that,
there are rumours—but inconclusive ones
from a long time ago.

[290]

OEDIPUS

What kind of rumours?
I'm looking into every story.

CHORUS LEADER

It was said
that Laius was killed by certain travellers.

OEDIPUS

Yes, I heard as much. But no one has seen
the one who did it.

CHORUS LEADER

Well, if the killer
has any fears, once he hears your curses on him,
he will not hold back, for they are serious.

OEDIPUS

When a man has no fear of doing the act,
he's not afraid of words.

350

CHORUS LEADER

No, not in the case
where no one stands there to convict him.
But at last Teiresias is being guided here,

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our god-like prophet, in whom the truth resides
more so than in all other men.

[Enter TEIRESIAS led by a small BOY]

OEDIPUS

Teiresias, [300]
you who understand all things—what can be taught
and what cannot be spoken of, what goes on
in heaven and here on the earth—you know,
although you cannot see, how sick our state is.
And so we find in you alone, great seer, 360
our shield and saviour. For Phoebus Apollo,
in case you have not heard the news, has sent us
an answer to our question: the only cure
for this infecting pestilence is to find
the men who murdered Laius and kill them
or else expel them from this land as exiles.
So do not withhold from us your prophecies [310]
in voices of the birds or by some other means.
Save this city and yourself. Rescue me.
Deliver us from this pollution by the dead. 370
We are in your hands. For a mortal man
the finest labour he can do is help
with all his power other human beings.

TEIRESIAS

Alas, alas! How dreadful it can be
to have wisdom when it brings no benefit
to the man possessing it. This I knew,
but it had slipped my mind. Otherwise,
I would not have journeyed here.

OEDIPUS

What's wrong? You've come, but seem so sad.

TEIRESIAS

Let me go home. You must bear your burden 380 [320]
to the very end, and I will carry mine,
if you'll agree with me.

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OEDIPUS

What you are saying
is not customary and shows little love
toward the city state which nurtured you,
if you deny us your prophetic voice.

TEIRESIAS

I see your words are also out of place.
I do not speak for fear of doing the same.

OEDIPUS

If you know something, then, by heaven,
do not turn away. We are your suppliants—
all of us—we bend our knees to you.

390

TEIRESIAS

You are all ignorant. I will not reveal
the troubling things inside me, which I can call
your grief as well.

OEDIPUS

What are you saying?
Do you know and will not say? Do you intend
to betray me and destroy the city?

[330]

TEIRESIAS

I will cause neither me nor you distress.
Why do you vainly question me like this?
You will not learn a thing from me.

OEDIPUS

You most disgraceful of disgraceful men!
You'd move something made of stone to rage!
Will you not speak out? Will your stubbornness
never have an end?

400

TEIRESIAS

You blame my temper,
but do not see the one which lives within you.
Instead, you are finding fault with me.

OEDIPUS

What man who listened to these words of yours

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would not be enraged—you insult the city!

[340]

TEIRESIAS

Yet events will still unfold, for all my silence.

OEDIPUS

Since they will come, you must inform me.

TEIRESIAS

I will say nothing more. Fume on about it,
if you wish, as fiercely as you can.

410

OEDIPUS

I will. In my anger I will not conceal
just what I make of this. You should know
I get the feeling you conspired in the act,
and played your part, as much as you could do,
short of killing him with your own hands.
If you could use your eyes, I would have said
that you had done this work all by yourself.

TEIRESIAS

Is that so? Then I would ask you to stand by
the very words which you yourself proclaimed
and from now on not speak to me or these men.
For the accursed polluter of this land is you.

[350]

420

OEDIPUS

You dare to utter shameful words like this?
Do you think you can get away with it?

TEIRESIAS

I am getting away with it. The truth
within me makes me strong.

OEDIPUS

Who taught you this?
It could not have been your craft.

TEIRESIAS

You did.
I did not want to speak, but you incited me.

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OEDIPUS

What do you mean? Speak it again,
so I can understand you more precisely.

TEIRESIAS

Did you not grasp my words before,
or are you trying to test me with your question?

430

[360]

OEDIPUS

I did not fully understand your words.
Tell me again.

TEIRESIAS

I say that you yourself
are the very man you're looking for.

OEDIPUS

That's twice you've stated that disgraceful lie—
something you'll regret.

TEIRESIAS

Shall I tell you more,
so you can grow even more enraged?

OEDIPUS

As much as you desire. It will be useless.

TEIRESIAS

I say that with your dearest family,
unknown to you, you are living in disgrace.
You have no idea how bad things are.

440

OEDIPUS

Do you really think you can just speak out,
say things like this, and still remain unpunished?

TEIRESIAS

Yes, I can, if the truth has any strength.

OEDIPUS

It does, but not for you. Truth is not in you—
for your ears, your mind, your eyes are blind!

[370]

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TEIRESIAS

You are a wretched fool to use harsh words
which all men soon enough will use to curse you.

OEDIPUS

You live in endless darkness of the night,
so you can never injure me or any man
who can glimpse daylight. 450

TEIRESIAS

It is not your fate
to fall because of me. It's up to Apollo
to make that happen. He will be enough.

OEDIPUS

Is this something Creon has devised,
or is it your invention?

TEIRESIAS

Creon is no threat.
You have made this trouble on your own.

OEDIPUS

O riches, ruling power, skill after skill [380]
surpassing all in this life's rivalries,
how much envy you must carry with you,
if, for this kingly office, which the city
gave me, for I did not seek it out, 460
Creon, my old trusted family friend,
has secretly conspired to overthrow me
and paid off a double-dealing quack like this,
a crafty bogus priest, who can only see
his own advantage, who in his special art
is absolutely blind. Come on, tell me [390]
how you have ever given evidence
of your wise prophecy. When the Sphinx,
that singing bitch, was here, you said nothing 470
to set the people free. Why not? Her riddle
was not something the first man to stroll along
could solve—a prophet was required. And there
the people saw your knowledge was no use—

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nothing from birds or picked up from the gods.
But then I came, Oedipus, who knew nothing.
Yet I finished her off, using my wits
rather than relying on birds. That's the man
you want to overthrow, hoping, no doubt,
to stand up there with Creon, once he's king. 480 [400]
But I think you and your conspirator in this
will regret trying to usurp the state.
If you did not look so old, you'd find
the punishment your arrogance deserves.

CHORUS LEADER

To us it sounds as if Teiresias
has spoken in anger, and, Oedipus,
you have done so, too. That's not what we need.
Instead we should be looking into this:
How can we best carry out the god's decree?

TEIRESIAS

You may be king, but I have the right 490
to answer you—and I control that right,
for I am not your slave. I serve Apollo, [410]
and thus will never stand with Creon,
signed up as his man. So I say this to you,
since you have chosen to insult my blindness—
you have your eyesight, and you do not see
how miserable you are, or where you live,
or who it is who shares your household.
Do you know the family you come from?
Without your knowledge you've become 500
the enemy of your own kindred,
those in the world below and those up here,
and the dreadful feet of that two-edged curse
from father and mother both will drive you
from this land in exile. Those eyes of yours,
which now can see so clearly, will be dark.
What harbour will not echo with your cries? [420]
Where on Cithaeron will they not soon be heard,
once you have learned the truth about the wedding
by which you sailed into this royal house— 510

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a lovely voyage, but the harbour's doomed?¹
You've no idea of the quantity
of other troubles which will render you
and your own children equals. So go on—
keep insulting Creon and my prophecies,
for among all living mortals no one
will be destroyed more wretchedly than you.

OEDIPUS

Must I tolerate this insolence from him?
Get out, and may the plague get rid of you!
Off with you! Now! Turn your back and go!
And don't come back here to my home again.

520

[430]

TEIRESIAS

I would not have come, but you summoned me.

OEDIPUS

I did not know you would speak so stupidly.
If I had, you would have waited a long time
before I called you here.

TEIRESIAS

I was born like this.
You think I am a fool, but to your parents,
the ones who made you, I was wise enough.

OEDIPUS

Wait! My parents? Who was my father?

TEIRESIAS

This day will reveal that and destroy you.

OEDIPUS

Everything you speak is all so cryptic—
like a riddle.

530

TEIRESIAS

Well, in solving riddles,
are you not the best there is?

[440]

¹*Cithaeron*: the sacred mountain outside Thebes.

OEDIPUS

Mock my excellence,
but you will find out I am truly great.

TEIRESIAS

That quality of yours now ruins you.

OEDIPUS

I do not care, if I have saved the city.

TEIRESIAS

I will go now. Boy, lead me away.

OEDIPUS

Yes, let him guide you back. You're in the way.
If you stay, you'll just provoke me. Once you're gone,
you won't annoy me further.

TEIRESIAS

I'm going.

But first I shall tell you why I came. 540

I do not fear the face of your displeasure—
there is no way you can destroy me. I tell you,
the man you have been seeking all this time,
while proclaiming threats and issuing orders [450]
about the one who murdered Laius—
that man is here. According to reports,
he is a stranger who lives here in Thebes.

But he will prove to be a native Theban.
From that change he will derive no pleasure.

He will be blind, although he now can see. 550

He will be a poor, although he now is rich.

He will set off for a foreign country,
groping the ground before him with a stick.

And he will turn out to be the brother
of the children in his house—their father, too,

both at once, and the husband and the son
of the very woman who gave birth to them.

He sowed the same womb as his father
and murdered him. Go in and think on this. [460]

If you discover I have spoken falsely, 560

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you can say I lack all skill in prophecy.

[Exit TEIRESIAS led off by the BOY. OEDIPUS turns and goes back into the palace]

CHORUS

Speaking from the Delphic rock
the oracular voice intoned a name.

But who is the man, the one
who with his blood-red hands
has done unspeakable brutality?
The time has come for him to flee—
to move his powerful foot
more swiftly than those hooves
on horses riding on the storm.

570

Against him Zeus' son now springs,
armed with lightning fire and leading on
the inexorable and terrifying Furies.¹

[470]

From the snowy peaks of Mount Parnassus²
the message has just flashed, ordering all
to seek the one whom no one knows.

Like a wild bull he wanders now,
hidden in the untamed wood,
through rocks and caves, alone
with his despair on joyless feet,
keeping his distance from that doom
uttered at earth's central naval stone.

580

But that fatal oracle still lives,
hovering above his head forever.

[480]

That wise interpreter of prophecies
stirs up my fears, unsettling dread.

I cannot approve of what he said
and I cannot deny it.

I am confused. What shall I say?
My hopes flutter here and there,

¹*Zeus' son*: a reference to Apollo. The Furies are the goddesses of blood revenge.

²*Parnassus*: a famous mountain some distance from Thebes, but visible from the city.

with no clear glimpse of past or future. 590
I have never heard of any quarrelling,
past or present, between those two,
the house of Labdacus and Polybus' son,¹
which could give me evidence enough
to undermine the fame of Oedipus,
as he seeks vengeance for the unsolved murder
for the family of Labdacus.

Apollo and Zeus are truly wise—
they understand what humans do.
But there is no sure way to ascertain 600
if human prophets grasp things any more
than I do, although in wisdom one man [500]
may leave another far behind.
But until I see the words confirmed,
I will not approve of any man
who censures Oedipus, for it was clear
when that winged Sphinx went after him
he was a wise man then. We witnessed it.
He passed the test and endeared himself
to all the city. So in my thinking now 610 [510]
he never will be guilty of a crime.

[Enter CREON]

CREON

You citizens, I have just discovered
that Oedipus, our king, has levelled charges
against me, disturbing allegations.
That I cannot bear, so I have come here.
In these present troubles, if he believes
that he has suffered any injury from me,
in word or deed, then I have no desire
to continue living into ripe old age
still bearing his reproach. For me 620
the injury produced by this report
is no single isolated matter— [520]

¹ *Polybus*: ruler of Corinth, who raised Oedipus and is thus believed to be his father.
The house of Labdacus is the Theban royal family (i.e., Laius, Jocasta, and Creon).

no, it has the greatest scope of all,
if I end up being called a wicked man
here in the city, a bad citizen,
by you and by my friends.

CHORUS LEADER

Perhaps he charged you
spurred on by the rash power of his rage,
rather than his mind's true judgment.

CREON

Was it publicized that my opinions
convinced Teiresias to utter lies?

630

CHORUS LEADER

That's what was said. I have no idea
just what that meant.

CREON

Did he accuse me
and announce the charges with a steady gaze,
in a normal state of mind?

CHORUS LEADER

I do not know.
What those in power do I do not see.
But he's approaching from the palace—
here he comes in person.

[530]

[Enter OEDIPUS from the palace]

OEDIPUS

You! How did you get here?
Has your face grown so bold you now come
to my own home—you who are obviously
the murderer of the man whose house it was,
a thief who clearly wants to steal my throne?
Come, in the name of all the gods, tell me this—
did you plan to do it because you thought
I was a coward or a fool? Or did you think
I would not learn about your actions
as they crept up on me with such deceit—

640

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or that, if I knew, I could not deflect them?
This attempt of yours, is it not madness— [540]
to chase after the king's place without friends,
without a horde of men, to seek a goal 650
which only gold or factions could attain?

CREON

Will you listen to me? It's your turn now
to hear me make a suitable response.
Once you know, then judge me for yourself.

OEDIPUS

You are a clever talker. But from you
I will learn nothing. I know you now—
a troublemaker, an enemy of mine.

CREON

At least first listen to what I have to say.

OEDIPUS

There's one thing you do not have to tell me—
you have betrayed me.

CREON

If you think being stubborn 660
and forgetting common sense is wise,
then you're not thinking as you should. [550]

OEDIPUS

And if you think you can act to injure
a man who is a relative of yours
and escape without a penalty
then you're not thinking as you should.

CREON

I agree. What you've just said makes sense.
So tell me the nature of the damage
you claim you're suffering because of me.

OEDIPUS

Did you or did you not persuade me 670
to send for Teiresias, that prophet?

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CREON

Yes. And I'd still give you the same advice.

OEDIPUS

How long is it since Laius . . . [*pauses*]

CREON

Did what?

What's Laius got to do with anything?

OEDIPUS

. . . since Laius was carried off and disappeared,
since he was killed so brutally?

[560]

CREON

That was long ago—
many years have passed since then.

OEDIPUS

At that time,
was Teiresias as skilled in prophecy?

CREON

Then, as now, he was honoured for his wisdom.

OEDIPUS

And back then did he ever mention me?

680

CREON

No, never—not while I was with him.

OEDIPUS

Did you not investigate the killing?

CREON

Yes, of course we did. But we found nothing.

OEDIPUS

Why did this man, this wise man, not speak up?

CREON

I do not know. And when I don't know something,
I like to keep my mouth shut.

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A Note on the Translator

Ian Johnston was born in Valparaiso, Chile, and educated in England and Canada. He has a BSc from McGill (Geology and Chemistry), a BA from Bristol (English and Greek), and an MA from Toronto (English). For many years he taught literature (English, Classics, and Liberal Studies) in the British Columbia college and university-college system, mostly at Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, before retiring in 2004. He is the author of *The Ironies of War: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad* (1988). He now lives in Nanaimo, British Columbia. His numerous translations from German, French, and Greek are available on his web site at the following address: <http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/index.htm>, and his translations of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have recently been published in the United States by Richer Resources Publications.

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Sophocles
Oedipus the King

Translated by Ian Johnston

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About the Translator



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