

## **AI-Generated Graded Readers**

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### **About This Edition**

This book is a simplified English adaptation created for extensive reading practice. The text was generated using ChatGPT and prepared for intermediate English learners as part of an educational project.

Target reading level: CEFR A2-B1

This edition aims to support fluency development through accessible vocabulary, expanded narration, and improved readability while preserving the original story structure.

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Sophocles, *Oedipus the King* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified by ChatGPT)

## Part 1

### Dramatis Personae

OEDIPUS, King of Thebes.

PRIEST OF ZEUS.

CREON, brother of the Queen.

CHORUS OF THEBAN ELDERS.

TIRESIAS, a blind prophet.

JOCASTA, Queen of Thebes.

A CORINTHIAN MESSENGER.

A THEBAN SHEPHERD.

A MESSENGER.

ANTIGONE and ISMENE also appear later.

Scene: Before the royal palace of Thebes.

[A group of men, women, and children sit or kneel before the palace. Some hold branches used by suppliants. The city is suffering from plague, death, and fear. Oedipus comes out from the palace and looks at them with concern.]

OEDIPUS. Children of Thebes, why are you here before my house like this? Why do you sit at my doors with holy branches in your hands, while smoke rises from the city and prayers mix with cries of pain? I did not wish to hear of your trouble from servants or strangers. That is why I myself have come out to you, I, Oedipus, whom all men know. Old sir, you seem fit to speak for the rest, so tell me what you want and what you fear.

PRIEST. Great king, you see people of every age before you here. Some are still very young, some are old, and some are priests like me, serving the gods for the city. Many others are now sitting in the market and before the temples, because sorrow has filled all Thebes. The fields give no food, the cattle die, women lose their children before birth, and a terrible plague moves through the city. Death is everywhere, and every house is full of crying.

PRIEST. We do not place you among the gods, but we know that among men you are the greatest in power and wisdom. Once before, when the Sphinx brought death to this land, you saved us and broke that dark power. You did not need our help then, and people believed the gods had given you that wise mind. So now we come again and ask you to save us, whether by human wisdom or by some message from heaven. Do not let men say that your rule began in glory and ended in ruin.

PRIEST. Raise us up again, lord. Be the same savior now that you were in the past. A city with no people is nothing, and walls and ships are nothing if men die inside them. If you still wish to rule this land, then rule living men and not an empty place. That is why we kneel to you now. Help us.

OEDIPUS. Your words move me deeply, and do not think I fail to feel your pain. I know that each of you suffers in his own life, but I suffer for all of you together, for the city, for you, and for myself as well. You have not woken me from easy sleep. I have been awake for a long time, weeping and thinking of every path that might save Thebes.

OEDIPUS. I have already acted. I sent Creon, the brother of my wife, to the house of Apollo at Delphi, so that he might ask what I must do or say to save this city. I have been counting the days and wondering why he has not yet returned. His delay troubles me. But when he comes, you will see that I will not fail to obey the god.

PRIEST. Then your care has already gone before our request, and that gives us hope. But look, king, those standing near me are making signs. Creon is coming now. His head is crowned with laurel, so perhaps he brings good news from Apollo. May it be so for the whole city. We pray that he has not come in vain.

OEDIPUS. Apollo grant that his news is as bright as his face. If he comes with healing for this land, he will be welcome indeed. We shall know the truth at once, for he is close enough to hear us now. Let him speak before all these people. Their sorrow matters to me more than any private fear.

[Creon enters, wearing a laurel wreath. He has come straight from Delphi.]

OEDIPUS. Creon, brother of the queen, what answer do you bring from the god? Speak clearly, and do not hide anything. If the message is hard, we must still hear it. If it offers hope, we need that hope at once.

CREON. I bring a good message, even if the path through it is painful. Our suffering can end, if we act rightly. Apollo has spoken plainly. He says that this land is stained by blood, and that the stain has been allowed to remain too long.

OEDIPUS. Tell us what that means. What is this stain, and how can it be removed? Speak so that all can hear and understand. I am ready for whatever must be done. No price is too great if it saves Thebes.

CREON. The god commands us to drive out the pollution from this land. He says it must be cast away, not allowed to stay until it grows beyond cure. The blood of a murdered man still cries out against us. That blood must be answered either by exile or by blood in return. Until that is done, the plague will not leave us.

OEDIPUS. Whose murder does the god mean? Which dead man still lies unavenged before heaven? Tell me his name, and tell me all that is known. I will not let the matter rest.

CREON. Before you became king, Laius ruled this land. You never saw him, but you have heard of him, and all here remember him. Apollo now commands us to punish the men who killed him. They are the source of this sickness in Thebes. Until they are found, the city will suffer.

OEDIPUS. Then we must find them. But where did this killing happen, and who saw it? Was Laius murdered in the city, or on some road, or in a foreign place? Surely someone knew something at the time. A crime does not vanish simply because men stop speaking of it.

CREON. He had gone out, saying that he was traveling to Delphi, but he never came back. Only one man escaped and returned alive. He said the king had been attacked on the road by robbers. In those days we were under another terror, the Sphinx, and the city gave its strength to that present danger instead of searching the old crime to the end.

OEDIPUS. Then that failure ends today. I will bring this hidden evil into the light and search out the truth from its first cause. In helping Laius, I help this land, the god, and myself as well, because the man who killed a king may one day dare to strike another. Children, rise now from the altar and take away your branches. Let all the people of Cadmus be called together. With the help of the god, this day will either save us or break us.

[The suppliants rise slowly. Some leave with new hope, though fear still hangs over the city. The Chorus of Theban elders enters as the stage begins to fill with the voice of public prayer.]

CHORUS. Voice of Apollo, what do you bring to Thebes today? We tremble as we wait, fearing new pain but still hoping for help. Athena, Artemis, and Apollo, look down on this dying city and defend it again as you did before. Fire, plague, and death have fallen on us, and our hearts are tired. Come, healing gods, and turn this misery away.

## Part 2

CHORUS. Ares, the god of war, now fights against us without shield or spear, and yet he kills more surely than an army. Turn him away, gods, and drive him far from Thebes, either across the great sea or into some empty place where no man lives. What night leaves standing, day destroys, and what day spares, night takes away again. Zeus, lord of thunder, strike down this enemy with your fire.

CHORUS. Apollo, send your arrows from your golden bow. Artemis, come running over the hills with your bright torch. Dionysus, friend of Thebes, show your shining face and bring your holy fire against this dark plague. Come with your wild joy and save the city that gave you birth. We are tired of death, tired of crying, and tired of fear.

[Oedipus comes forward again before the Chorus. He has listened to their prayer and now answers them in the hearing of the elders and the city.]

OEDIPUS. You pray to the gods, and that is right, but you must also hear me and do what I ask. If you obey me and follow the god's command, there may still be healing for this land. I will not speak as a stranger to this trouble, because the sorrow of Thebes is now my own sorrow also. Listen closely, and let no man say later that he did not hear my words.

OEDIPUS. I speak to all of you as men who know the city and its old griefs

better than I do, for I came here after Laius was dead. Still, I am now king in his place, and so I take his cause into my hands as if he were my own father. Whoever killed him may one day lift the same hand against me, and that is another reason why I must act. I will search for the truth with all my strength.

OEDIPUS. If any man among you knows who killed Laius, let him speak now, and he will suffer no great harm from me. He may leave this land in safety, and no further punishment will touch him. If another man knows the killer, whether that man is from Thebes or from another place, let him speak without fear. I will reward the one who helps us, and he will have my thanks as well as the thanks of the city.

OEDIPUS. But if any man keeps silent, whether from fear for himself or fear for a friend, then he must hear what I command. No one in this land, over which I hold rule, shall receive that man into his house or speak to him, eat with him, or pray with him. Let him be shut out from all holy things and from all human company. The god has shown that he is a stain upon us, and we must push him away from the city.

OEDIPUS. I also lay this curse upon the murderer, whether he acted alone or with others. Let him live in misery, cut off from joy, and let his life become thin and bitter. And if, without my knowing it, he is under my own roof or sits at my own table, then may the same curse fall on me as well. I do not draw back from my own words.

OEDIPUS. All of you must help in this matter, for the god, for the dead king, and for this ruined land. Long ago the crime should have been searched out, even if no oracle had spoken. But now the command has come from Apollo, and there can be no delay. For Laius, for Thebes, and for justice, I will not stop until this thing is brought to light.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS. My lord, I stand beneath your command and beneath your curse, and so I will answer plainly. I did not kill Laius, and I cannot point to the man who did. It would be best if the god who gave this order would also name the guilty man. That would end doubt and fear at once.

OEDIPUS. What you say is fair, but men cannot force the gods to speak more than they wish. We must work with what has been given to us. If there is another path toward the truth, tell me now. I will leave nothing untested.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS. There is one man whose mind sees far into hidden things, as far as any mortal can see. I mean Tiresias, the holy prophet. If anyone can guide us in this search, it is he. Truth lives close to him, and many times before his words have proved true.

OEDIPUS. I have not forgotten him. By Creon's advice I already sent men to bring him here, and I have wondered why he has not yet come. There is also an old report that Laius died at the hands of wandering robbers, but the story is weak and dark, and I do not trust it fully. A rumor is not enough in a matter like this.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS. Even so, if the murderer has any fear in his heart, your curse may shake him. A guilty man cannot always stand firm when a king speaks in the name of the gods. Fear may loosen a silent tongue. Sometimes terror reveals what kindness cannot.

OEDIPUS. Perhaps, but words alone do not frighten every wicked man. Some men dare anything and hope to escape. Still, if there is fear in him, let that fear grow. We must use every tool that justice allows.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS. Then look, lord. The prophet comes at last. Those who lead him know that he is blind in body, but men say no one sees more clearly in spirit. If truth can still save us, perhaps it enters now with him.

[Tiresias enters, led by attendants. He is old, grave, and unwilling. Oedipus turns toward him with urgency and respect, though strain is already in his voice.]

OEDIPUS. Tiresias, you know the things of heaven and earth, the hidden and the open, the seen and the unseen. Though your eyes do not look on the day, your mind sees what destroys this city. Thebes leans upon you now, and so do I. Speak, and save us if you can.

OEDIPUS. Apollo has sent us a clear command. We must find the murderers of Laius and either kill them or drive them into exile. Until that is done, this plague will remain among us. So I ask you, do not hold back any sign, any word of prophecy, or any knowledge that lives in your mind. Save the city, save yourself, and save me.

TIRESIAS. Knowledge can be a fearful thing when it brings no profit to the man who knows it. I understood that long ago, but for a moment I forgot it, and that is why I came. Now I wish I had stayed away. You ask for help, but what I know brings pain.

OEDIPUS. Why do you speak so darkly? This is no time for hidden meanings and half-spoken fears. If you know anything, you must say it. The city is dying while you hesitate.

TIRESIAS. Let me go home. That would be best for you and for me. You have your burden to carry, and I have mine, and they are heavy enough already. Nothing good will come from forcing this moment.

OEDIPUS. What are you saying? You would turn away and leave your own city to suffer? Thebes raised and honored you, and now, when the people need you most, you refuse them your voice. That is not loyalty. That is a hard thing to do.

TIRESIAS. You do not understand your own words, and I do not wish to be caught in the same blindness. I will say nothing. My silence is kinder than speech. Let me leave while there is still time.

OEDIPUS. No, not if you know the truth. All these people ask you with me. You cannot hide what may save the land. If you refuse to speak, you begin to look like a man who serves the crime rather than justice.

TIRESIAS. You are all blind, though you have eyes. I will never willingly speak the sorrow that is mine and yours together. Do not press me further. What you seek is nearer than you think.

OEDIPUS. Then you do know something, and still you keep it back. Is that not the act of a traitor? Will you betray this city and let it perish rather than open your mouth? Even a heart of stone would be moved by these cries.

TIRESIAS. Your anger will not help you. You blame me because you do not know yourself. The truth will come whether I speak or remain silent. But if you force me, then you may hear words you do not wish to hear.

[Oedipus steps closer, no longer calm. The elders look from one man to the other, feeling that a dangerous struggle has begun.]

OEDIPUS. Then speak. I will hear all of it. Whatever you know, say it now before the people of Thebes. Do not think that dark hints and proud silence will protect you any longer.

Part 3

TIRESIAS. Then hear it. You ask for the murderer, and you stand before him now. You search for the stain upon this land, but the stain is in your own life. You do not know what house you live in, or what terrible bond ties you to those closest to you. The truth is already around you, though you still speak like a man who walks in bright day.

OEDIPUS. You dare to say that to me again? You throw out wicked words and think your age and holy name will protect you. Speak on, then, if you wish, but every word only shows your malice more clearly. A blind man may still do harm with his tongue.

TIRESIAS. My blindness is no shame to me, but yours will soon become shame to you before all men. You have eyes, yet you do not see the pit into which you have fallen. You hear, yet you do not understand the cries already rising around your life. No blow from me is needed, for the god himself is enough to bring you down.

OEDIPUS. So that is your game. You speak in riddles, and then you step back and let fear do the rest. Tell me plainly, then: was this trick invented by you, or by Creon? I do not think you found such poison alone. There is another mind behind this.

TIRESIAS. Creon is not your ruin. You are your own ruin. You are the enemy you seek, and no friend of yours has done this thing to you. The hand that will cast you down is already your own.

OEDIPUS. Power, wisdom, fame, success before the eyes of men—how much envy follows them wherever they go. I took this kingship only when the city gave it to me freely, after I saved it by my own thought. Yet now the man I trusted most, the brother of my queen, creeps against me in secret and sends this false prophet

to strike at my crown. It is an old story: weak men cannot rise by merit, so they try to pull down the man standing above them.

OEDIPUS. Tell me, prophet, where was your great wisdom when the Sphinx stood outside our gates and destroyed the people? She sang her dark riddle to the city, and no bird sign, no holy sound, no deep art from heaven came from you to save us. I came as a stranger, knowing nothing of Thebes, and I broke her power with my own mind. Yet now you and your masters wish to cast me out, as if I were nothing but a fool raised too high.

CHORUS. My lord, and you, Tiresias, let anger rest. Hard words do not heal a suffering city. We need not more pain, but light. The god has spoken, and we must understand that word with calm hearts if we can.

TIRESIAS. Calm is not in him now, and it will be less in him later. Still, I will speak once more, not for his sake, but because truth must stand. You mock my blindness, but the day is coming when your own clear eyes will look on nothing. You will leave this land in darkness, driven by cries from father and mother alike, and every place that hears your voice will shudder.

TIRESIAS. You do not know from whom you came, and you do not know whom you live beside. The man who stands before us as king will be found to be both stranger and citizen, rich and poor, blessed and cursed, all in one life. He will be seen as brother and father to the same children, son and husband to the same woman, and killer of the man whose place he took. That is the truth you demand from me.

OEDIPUS. Filth! Is there no end to your shameless tongue? You throw one horror after another into the air and think that noise is prophecy. Why should any man endure this from you? If you were not old, you would already have paid for these lies.

TIRESIAS. You call them lies because you still think strength is truth. But this same day that now lifts you high will one day mark your fall. The day will reveal you fully, then cast you down. I leave you with that, and I do not fear your threats.

OEDIPUS. Go, then. You have said enough to show your hatred and your emptiness. Take your darkness with you, and keep your riddles for those who frighten easily. I have more trust in reason than in the muttering of men who live by fear.

TIRESIAS. Reason without self-knowledge is a dangerous thing. Still, I have no more to say here. Let your palace teach you, let time teach you, and let the truth grow in silence until you can no longer escape it. When the hour comes, remember that I did not refuse to warn you.

[Tiresias turns and goes out, led away by his attendants. Oedipus watches him with burning anger, but the Chorus stands uneasy and shaken, as if the air itself has become heavier.]

CHORUS. The prophet's words have struck my heart with fear, yet I cannot wholly believe them. My mind moves between two roads and cannot choose either one. I know the god sees clearly, and I know Tiresias has long been honored among men, but I also know what Oedipus once did for this city. It is hard to turn against the man who saved us.

CHORUS. Apollo's voice from Delphi commands us to hunt down the hidden killer, and that command must be obeyed. Somewhere there is a man who carries secret blood upon him, and the god's anger follows him wherever he runs. Perhaps even now he hides in wild places, or in some house where no one suspects him, while fear hunts him like hounds behind his back. No man escapes forever from heaven.

CHORUS. And yet I cannot quickly condemn the king. When the Sphinx came in open terror, it was Oedipus who stood against her while others failed. His wisdom then was no empty show, and the whole city saw it with their own eyes. Until I see stronger proof, my heart still refuses to call him guilty.

[The Chorus falls silent. Oedipus, still breathing hard from anger, begins to gather his thoughts, and his fury turns more sharply toward Creon.]

OEDIPUS. Do you hear what has been done to me? A prophet is brought before the city, and instead of helping he pours poison into every ear. Such boldness does not grow from nowhere. No, there is a hand behind him, and I know whose hand it is.

OEDIPUS. Creon sent for Tiresias. Creon stood beside me when the question of Laius' death was raised. Creon has the place of a prince, the ear of the queen, the trust of the people, and yet no kingly burden on his shoulders. That is the safest place for an ambitious man: near the throne, but not on it, free to watch, to plan, and to strike when another man grows weak. I see the shape of this now more clearly than before.

OEDIPUS. He thinks I will not notice because he smiles and speaks softly. He thinks I will sit still while he sends others to stain my name and loosen the city's trust in me. But I was not made king because I was blind to danger. If he is plotting for my place, he will learn that I do not yield it to whispers and tricks.

CHORUS. Lord, do not move too fast in anger. Strong words once spoken cannot be easily called back. Tiresias has gone, and Creon has not yet answered for himself. It would be best to hear all sides before judgment falls.

OEDIPUS. I will hear him, yes, but not as a friend hears a friend. I will hear him

as a king hears the man who has moved against him in secret. Let him come and deny it if he can. I will test every word he speaks.

[As if called by that anger, Creon enters before the palace. He comes openly, but Oedipus' face hardens at once when he sees him.]

CREON. Citizens of Thebes, I have heard the charge laid against me, and I have come to answer it before all. If the king believes that I have harmed him by deed or word in this troubled hour, I do not wish to live under such disgrace. I have come to speak plainly and defend myself.

[Oedipus steps forward to meet him, and the Chorus senses that a new and dangerous quarrel is about to begin.]

#### Part 4

OEDIPUS. So you have come at last, and you stand here before my house as if you were an honest man. Yet I see you as the one who has moved against me in secret. Tell me, did you think I was such a fool that I would not notice your plan? Or did you think I was so weak that I would notice it and still be unable to stop it? You chose a dark road, Creon, and now you must answer for it.

CREON. Then hear me fully before you judge me. You have spoken much, but now it is my turn, and after that you may decide as you wish. If I am guilty, I will not ask for mercy. But if I am innocent, it is shameful that I should be crushed by a false charge.

OEDIPUS. I know your skill with words, and that is exactly why I do not trust you. A man who means harm often speaks most calmly. I have found you not a

true friend, but a hidden enemy. So speak if you wish, but do not expect me to be easily led.

CREON. You make one mistake before all others. You think that your own stubborn will is the same as wisdom, and it is not. A man who will not listen because he is angry judges badly. If you call me false, then show the false act, not only your fear. Even a king should not strike at a man with no proof.

OEDIPUS. Proof? I will give you proof enough. Did you advise me to send for Tiresias? Did you or did you not bring that prophet into this matter? Answer that one thing plainly, and we will begin there.

CREON. Yes, I advised it, and I still say the advice was sound. If a city suffers and a prophet is known in it, of course he should be asked. That is no crime. If he later spoke evil, that is his act, not mine.

OEDIPUS. Then answer me this as well. How long has it been since Laius was killed? Was Tiresias honored in those days too, as he is now? And when the city asked about the dead king then, did this prophet ever point toward me?

CREON. It was many years ago, and yes, Tiresias was respected then as now. But I did not hear him speak your name, and I cannot tell what he knew or did not know. The city did search for the truth, and little came of it. In that I know no more than others knew.

OEDIPUS. Yet now, suddenly, when I sit on the throne, the prophet finds his voice. He did not speak when Laius died, but he speaks now, after your urging, and speaks against me. Do you think I cannot see the shape of that? It is too neat, too useful for you, and too late to be innocent.

CREON. You see danger where there is none because your mind is hot with fear.

Ask yourself one plain question. Why would I wish to be king, when I already enjoy the power and honor of a prince without the fear and pain that follow a crown? Men greet me gladly now, and I may go where I please. Those who need something from you often come first to me, and I lose nothing by that.

CREON. A king must worry every hour, must guard against enemies, must carry the whole city's weight, and must often do what he hates. I have the good part already without that burden. Why should I throw away a life of ease for a place full of danger and sleepless fear? No man in his right mind trades peace for fear when he already has honor enough.

CREON. If you still doubt me, go again to Delphi and ask whether I brought back Apollo's message honestly. Ask whether I changed the god's words. Ask whether I and Tiresias worked together. If I am found false, then kill me, and let my death be judged fair. But do not destroy a good name on the strength of a dark guess.

CHORUS. Lord, he speaks with sense, and a careful mind hears such words before it strikes. Quick anger is not always strong judgment. A man may fall badly when he moves too fast. In a city already wounded, it is dangerous when its rulers wound one another too.

OEDIPUS. And what should I do, then? Sit still while he moves against me? Wait until his plan is finished and my own power is gone? A man who sees danger coming and delays his defense is already half defeated. I will not protect myself too late.

CREON. Then say openly what you want. Do you wish to send me into exile? Do you wish to cast me out from my own country as if I were polluted? If that is your will, speak it before these men and let them hear. I will know at least how far your anger has gone.

OEDIPUS. Not exile. Death would be more fitting. Men must see what envy does and what comes of silent plots against a king. A quick death for the traitor would be safer for all than a far road and a chance to return. I would not leave such danger alive behind me.

CREON. You are a hard man when your mind once closes. You do not wish to understand; you wish only to win. Yet I tell you again that you wrong me. If you cannot trust reason, then nothing I say will move you.

OEDIPUS. I do not need your lessons. You are a villain, and that is enough. Authority must stand firm, or every hidden enemy grows bold. A king who cannot punish treachery is no king at all. I will not let Thebes learn that its ruler can be struck without reply.

CREON. Authority is not great when it turns itself toward injustice. You speak of rule, but rule without truth becomes violence. I too belong to this city, and I too have a claim upon it. You are not the only man in Thebes whose life matters. If you destroy me without proof, you strike not only a man but justice itself.

[The quarrel grows louder, and the elders look anxiously toward the palace. At that moment Jocasta comes out, alarmed by the voices and the disorder before the doors.]

JOCASTA. What is this noise? Are you not ashamed to fight in words while the city groans under plague and death? Will you add private anger to public suffering? Oedipus, go inside. Creon, you too must stop. Do not make a mountain out of a fear that may be nothing at all.

CREON. Sister, hear what your husband says. He has given me only two choices, death or exile, because he believes I have plotted against him. I came here openly

to answer the charge, but his anger was waiting for me before I spoke. If this is justice, then justice has become a fearful thing.

OEDIPUS. And I say again that I caught him moving against me by hidden means. He brought in the prophet, and the prophet threw filth upon me before the city. What should I think, if not that the two stand together? I am not making wild fears from empty air. I follow the line of what has happened.

JOCASTA. Yet even now, listen before you go too far. Creon has sworn by the gods, and that is not a light matter. I ask this not only for his sake, but for mine and for the city's. We have enough pain already without sending brothers against each other. Let this anger bend before it breaks something that cannot be repaired.

CHORUS. Yes, my king, hear us in this. The land is already weak, and we need peace among those who lead us. Creon's oath should weigh something with you, even if your fear remains. We do not ask you to call him innocent at once, but do not destroy him now. The city will not be healed by haste.

OEDIPUS. Very well, I bend, though it cuts against my heart. Let him go where he wishes, but let none think I trust him. I yield to your voices, not to his defense. Wherever he lives, my hatred will follow him. I do this for you and for the city, not because he has cleared himself before me.

CREON. Your yielding is bitter and proud, and you suffer even while you let go. Men like you are hardest on themselves, because they cannot leave anger behind even after the quarrel ends. Still, I will go. These elders know I am not stained, though you remain blind to that. Time will speak more truly than rage.

[Creon goes out. Jocasta watches him leave, then turns back to Oedipus, who is still shaken and restless. She sees that the quarrel has not ended his fear but only changed its shape.]

JOCASTA. Tell me now what has driven you into this state. I heard enough to know that Tiresias accused you of Laius' death, but I do not yet know how your mind came to take that fear so deeply. Speak to me plainly. I am your wife, and I should not be left outside your pain.

OEDIPUS. I will tell you, because I trust you more than all those standing here. Creon's words do not quiet me, but neither can I rest after what the prophet said. Something in your account of Laius has struck my heart. There is a sound in it that matches something buried in my own past, and that thought has begun to trouble me.

JOCASTA. Then hear me carefully and let your mind grow calmer if it can. Men put too much trust in prophecies and fear too much from them. I will give you one clear example. Once a message came to Laius saying that he would die by the hand of his own son, the son born to him and me.

JOCASTA. But that did not happen as the prophecy said. Laius, as men reported, was killed by foreign robbers at a place where three roads met. And as for the child, he was still very small when his feet were pinned together and he was left on the wild mountain to die. So the son did not kill the father, and the father did not fall to the son. That is how much trust I place in such things.

OEDIPUS. Three roads met there, you say? And Laius was struck at such a place? Tell me exactly where this was, and do not leave out any detail. There is no peace in me now. What you say pulls at my mind like a hand.

JOCASTA. The place was in Phocis, where the roads from Delphi and Daulia join together. That is what was told here, and that is what has long been said. Why does that move you so strongly? Your face has changed again, and I do not like to see it.

OEDIPUS. Because fear has risen in me all at once. Tell me one thing more. What sort of man was Laius? Was he tall or small, young or already turning old? Did he look in any way like me?

JOCASTA. He was tall, with dark hair just touched by grey. In build and bearing, yes, he was not unlike you. Now tell me what this means. You frighten me more by your silence than by any hard word you could say.

## Part 5

OEDIPUS. I will tell you, though the telling burns me. My father, as I believed then, was Polybus of Corinth, and my mother was Merope, a woman of Dorian blood. I was raised in honor there, and men looked on me as a prince. Then one night at a feast, when wine had made a man reckless, he cried out that I was not my father's true son. I was deeply troubled by that word, though I tried to hide it.

OEDIPUS. The next day I went to Polybus and Merope and asked them about it. They were angry at the man who had spoken and laughed his words away, and for a time their answer calmed me. Yet the thought did not leave me. It stayed in my mind like a thorn under the skin. I could not rest until I had sought some greater certainty than their comfort gave me.

OEDIPUS. So I went in secret to Delphi, hoping that Apollo would tell me the truth of my birth. But the god gave me no answer to that question. Instead he sent me away in terror. He said that I was fated to lie with my own mother and bring into the light a race too terrible for men to bear, and that I would kill the father from whom I was born.

OEDIPUS. When I heard that, horror entered my heart, and from that hour I

resolved never to return to Corinth. I thought that by staying away I could protect the two people whom I believed to be my parents. I wandered on the roads, choosing exile over that unclean fate. I judged that distance was my only safety and theirs. If I did not see them again, then perhaps the god's word would fail.

OEDIPUS. As I traveled, I came at last to the place where three roads meet, the very place you named just now. There a herald came toward me, and after him a wagon carrying a man like a king. The driver ordered me roughly to move aside from the road. When I did not move fast enough for his pride, the old man in the wagon struck me.

OEDIPUS. I was young, hot with anger, and full of the wild strength of youth. I struck back at the man who pushed me from the road, and when the old man who rode in the wagon hit me again, I struck him too. I hit him with all my force, and he fell backward from the car. Then I fought the others, and I killed them, all but one who escaped. It was a savage deed, done in sudden rage.

JOCASTA. Poor man, no wonder your heart is shaken if this memory has returned so sharply. But listen also to what does not fit. The report given here was that Laius was killed by robbers, not by one single traveler. If many men attacked him, then your fear may still be only fear and not the truth itself. Do not crush yourself too soon.

OEDIPUS. That one difference is the only thread by which I still hang above despair. If the servant who escaped said that many men killed Laius, then I am not the man, for I was alone. But if he changes his story now and speaks of one traveler, then I am lost. I shall be proved accursed in the very search that I began with such confidence. My own curse will fall back on my own head.

OEDIPUS. Think what that would mean. I would be the killer of the king whose bed I now share and whose place I took. I would be the man who polluted the land

and then called down exile and shame upon himself before all the people. I would be both stranger and stain, ruler and ruin, all in one body. No man could bear a more terrible discovery.

JOCASTA. Do not go farther into fear than the facts require. The man who saw the murder still lives, and he can be brought here. We do not need to drown in guesses while a witness remains. If his words agree with the old report, your mind may yet find peace. Until then, hold yourself steady as best you can.

OEDIPUS. Bring him here at once, then, and lose no time. The moment I heard your story, I knew that everything now rests on that shepherd's tongue. If he says "robbers," if he says "many," then I can still breathe. But if he says "one man," then there is no refuge left for me. Send for him quickly, before my fear grows larger than I can bear.

JOCASTA. He shall be called. Yet before we part, answer me one thing more. What does it matter now who your parents truly were, if the prophecy about Corinth has already failed? Polybus did not die by your hand, and that should lighten your heart. Why let one shadow remain when another has already passed away?

OEDIPUS. Because one shadow still stands living before me. Polybus may be dead by time and sickness, but Merope still lives, or at least I must think so until I hear otherwise, and while she lives the other part of the prophecy still threatens me. Even if I am cleared of Laius' death, fear may still stand waiting in another form. My life has become a place where every road seems dark.

JOCASTA. Men are too eager to live in fear of what has not happened. No one can see his fate clearly before it comes, and many things that seem certain never happen at all. It is better to live as lightly as one can. Dreams have led many men into strange shame, yet no wise person lets a dream rule his waking life. Put such

thoughts aside until truth itself forces them on you.

OEDIPUS. Your words are kind, and I know they are meant to soothe me. But a mind once struck by fear does not easily return to rest. I will wait for the shepherd, because now only his witness can help or destroy me. If I am innocent, I shall thank the gods. If I am guilty, then I have already walked farther into horror than I knew.

JOCASTA. Then let us wait for him, and until he comes, do not speak your doom too quickly. The truth has not yet fully shown its face. I will send at once to the pastures where he asked long ago to be placed far from Thebes. May he come quickly, and may his words prove kinder than your thoughts. I would not willingly see you suffer more than you already do.

[Jocasta turns and sends an attendant away with the order. Oedipus remains before the palace, shaken and restless, while the Chorus watches him in troubled silence. The bright confidence with which he began the search has now fallen away from him, and in its place stands doubt. He looks like a man who has begun to hear his own life speaking back to him in a voice he does not wish to know.]

## Part 6

CHORUS. If justice still rules in heaven, then proud and lawless men will not stand forever. Pride grows when men speak and act as if no god can touch them, and when that pride ripens, it falls. A man who climbs too high on reckless strength finds no firm place for his feet. We pray that the gods keep holy order alive in this land, for without reverence no city can stand long.

CHORUS. The man who fears nothing, who dishonors temples and holy law, who takes what he wants and calls it greatness, will in the end be struck down.

We ask the gods never to let such shameless boldness win. If such men rise and the just fall, then why should anyone dance in worship or go in prayer to sacred shrines? The world would become dark if heaven's order failed.

CHORUS. And yet we do not speak against Apollo. We wait, though our hearts are shaken. The old prophecies still stand before us, and if the truth in them is real, then Zeus sees what men do not see. If the words once spoken over Laius are now treated as nothing, if divine warnings fade into smoke, then faith itself will seem weak. May that never happen in Thebes.

[Jocasta comes out from the palace holding offerings. She has seen that Oedipus' fear has grown stronger, and she wishes to seek comfort from Apollo.]

JOCASTA. Lords of Thebes, I have come with gifts for the god because my husband's mind is deeply troubled. He listens to every fearful voice and turns pale at each new word, as a man in storm turns at every sound of wind. He no longer judges calmly, but receives terror into himself from others. I hope that prayer may bring him some peace where reason has failed.

JOCASTA. Take these offerings to the temple of Apollo, and ask him to free us from this fear. We are all afraid now, because the man who once guided others stands shaken himself. A ship is not safe when its pilot loses strength, and a city is not calm when its king is full of dread. Let the god bring light into this confusion. Let him show some path out of sorrow.

[As she speaks, a stranger approaches. He is an older man, dusty from travel but respectful in manner.]

MESSENGER. Lady, can you tell me where I may find the house of King Oedipus? Better still, can you tell me where the king himself is? I have come from Corinth and bring news that should be told to him at once. I do not wish to speak

it to the wrong ears.

JOCASTA. You have come to the right place. This is his house, and I am his wife. Tell me your news first, and if it is fit for him to hear, he will hear it soon enough. Your face does not look like that of a man bringing war or ruin. Perhaps your words will be kinder than most that reach this palace now.

MESSENGER. Then hear it gladly. The people of Corinth have chosen Oedipus to be their king. Polybus, who ruled there before him, is dead. The old man did not fall by violence or any secret plot. He died from age and sickness, and the city now waits for the son it believes to be his to return and take the crown.

JOCASTA. O bright gods, how strange your ways are. You hear that, elders? This is the end of one great fear. Oedipus trembled for years lest he should kill Polybus by his own hand, yet Polybus has died far away by natural weakness. Many times I said that men give too much weight to prophecies, and now the event itself has proved it. Let someone call the king out at once.

[An attendant goes into the palace. A moment later Oedipus comes out quickly, drawn by the call and by Jocasta's changed voice.]

OEDIPUS. Jocasta, why have you sent for me in such haste? Your face is altered, and I do not know whether to expect relief or some new blow. Speak plainly. I have lived too long among shadows.

JOCASTA. Hear this man and judge for yourself how much trust should be given to dark prophecies. He has come from Corinth and says that Polybus, whom you feared to kill, is dead. He did not die by your hand, but by sickness and old age. There is your answer from life itself.

OEDIPUS. Stranger, say it again with your own mouth, so that I may hear it

clearly and know there is no mistake. Is Polybus truly dead? Speak carefully, for this touches the deepest fear of my life. Do not give me hope only to take it away again.

MESSENGER. He is dead, and there is no doubt at all. If words are not enough, I can give you the whole account. He grew weak under the weight of years, and in that weakness he died. No sword struck him, no son attacked him, and no hidden crime brought him down.

OEDIPUS. Then one part of the oracle is broken at last. Apollo once said I should kill my father, yet Polybus has gone into the earth untouched by me. It seems that prophecy can threaten loudly and still fail in the end. And yet, Jocasta, I cannot wholly rejoice. One fear still remains alive.

JOCASTA. Your mother. Yes, I know. But even now I say to you that no wise man should live as the servant of such fears. A great number of men have seen strange things in dreams and then woken with nothing changed. It is better to live as lightly as one can and not give one's heart to shadows. Let this news at least free half your mind.

OEDIPUS. I would gladly be free of all of it, but I cannot forget Merope so easily while she still lives. If I return to Corinth and the other part of the prophecy waits for me there, then my danger is not ended. I stand on safer ground than before, yes, but not on ground that feels fully clean. Fear has been my companion too long to leave me in one hour.

MESSENGER. Why should the life of Merope trouble you so deeply? Forgive me if I speak too boldly, but your words sound strange to a man from Corinth. If fear of your mother has kept you away so long, then perhaps you have suffered for nothing. I do not yet understand all, but I believe I can ease your mind more than you think.

OEDIPUS. You may hear it, since it is no longer a secret worth hiding. Apollo once told me that I would lie with my own mother and shed my father's blood. That is why I fled Corinth long ago. I thought distance would protect Polybus and Merope from me, and protect me from the horror of becoming what the god had named. So if you can truly lessen that fear, do so now.

MESSENGER. Then I can indeed give you comfort, because Polybus was not your true father, nor was Merope your true mother. They raised you, yes, and loved you, yes, but you were not born from their blood. I know this because I myself placed you in Polybus' hands when you were still an infant. If your fear has rested on them as your true parents, then your fear has rested on an error.

OEDIPUS. What are you saying? Take care, old man. That is no small thing to throw before me. If Polybus was not my father, then whose son am I? How did I come into his house? Speak with full truth, because now you have opened another door of fear instead of closing one.

MESSENGER. I found you long ago on Cithaeron, and I saved you there. Your ankles had been pierced and tied together, and that is how you got the name by which men know you. I did not beget you, nor did Polybus. Another shepherd gave you to me, a man who served the house of Laius here in Thebes. I carried you away in pity and gave you to the childless king and queen of Corinth. That is the truth as far as I know it.

[Oedipus stands still, shaken in a new way. The old fear of prophecy has not vanished; it has changed shape again. Jocasta too is troubled now, though she tries not to show it. The Chorus watches the king as hope and dread begin once more to struggle within him.]

## Part 7

OEDIPUS. This is now the most important thing in my life. Tell me at once about that shepherd. Was he truly a servant of Laius? Did he live in the royal house, or only in the country with the flocks? Leave nothing unclear. I have reached a place where every small fact matters.

MESSENGER. He was said to belong to Laius' house, yes. I knew him long ago by sight, because we met on the mountain when we were both tending flocks. He was one of your people, while I served the fields of Corinth. We spent whole seasons near each other on Cithaeron, from spring until the cold months drove us down. That is how I came to know him.

OEDIPUS. Then he must be the very man we have already sent for. If so, the truth is coming toward us from both sides at once. Jocasta, do you hear? The same servant may answer both the old murder and the old child. We shall soon know whether fear has lied to me or whether my life has been horror from the beginning.

JOCASTA. For the love of heaven, ask no more. If you care at all for your own life, stop where you are. What you know already is enough for sorrow, and you need not dig deeper into it. I beg you, do not send your mind farther down this road. Some truths do not save the man who finds them.

OEDIPUS. Why should I stop? Because the truth frightens you? Even if I am found to have come from the lowest birth, even if I am the son of slaves three times over, I still must know who I am. You are proud, and perhaps you fear shame if your husband proves baseborn, but that touches me less than ignorance does. I will not turn away now.

JOCASTA. You do not understand what you say. I wish only never to know your life more clearly than this. I do not fear low birth for you. I fear something far

worse. Unhappy man, may you never learn who you are. That is the kindest prayer left to me.

OEDIPUS. Take heart. Even if your mother's line were poor, even if I were born from some common woman, you would still remain queen, and I would still be what I have become by my own acts. Fortune has always seemed my mother in life, raising me high and throwing me low by turns. I am not ashamed to be the child of chance if that is what I am. But I will not live in darkness by choice.

JOCASTA. No more. I can say no more and still bear it. Since you will not listen, I leave you to the knowledge you so fiercely desire. May it not destroy you when it comes. My words are wasted on a man already being pulled forward by fate.

[Jocasta turns away in anguish and goes into the palace. The Chorus watches her with growing dread, and Oedipus stares after her, puzzled rather than persuaded.]

CHORUS. Why has the queen gone in such a storm of grief? Her face was full of terror, not pride, and her words fell like the last warning before disaster. I fear that silence inside the house more than open crying. A mind that has seen too much often speaks just so before it breaks.

OEDIPUS. Let her go. Whatever noble shame troubles her, I must still know the truth. No fear, no tears, and no change of face will stop me now. If I am low-born, then I will know that and endure it. If I am something worse, then I will know that too. Knowledge is hard, but darkness is harder.

CHORUS. Yet your heart should take warning when another's terror rises so sharply at the very edge of truth. A man may pursue knowledge as if it were victory and then find ruin waiting in its place. Still, what must come will come. We can only stand and watch.

OEDIPUS. Then stand and watch. I have lived too long under shadows and half-answers. Let the witness come, and let him speak under fear if not under goodwill. I will force the truth from this day if the truth must be dragged out by pain. Nothing remains but the final word.

[An attendant enters with the old Theban Shepherd. He is slow, frightened, and unwilling. The Corinthian Messenger studies him closely, then nods as if he knows the face.]

MESSENGER. Yes, this is the man. Though he is older now, I know him well enough. We watched flocks together many years ago on Cithaeron, and I received a child from his hands. He may wish to deny it, but time has not erased him from my memory. He is the one.

SHEPHERD. Why am I called here before the king? What does this stranger want of me after so many years? I am an old man, and old men are often dragged back into pains they had hoped were buried. Let me answer only what is necessary and then go.

OEDIPUS. That will depend on how truly you speak. Look at this man. Do you know him from former days? Answer plainly. The matter is too serious for delay or tricks.

SHEPHERD. I do not know what to say at once. Perhaps I have seen him, perhaps not. Many men worked on the hills in those years, and memory grows weak with age. I would not claim more than I can clearly recall.

MESSENGER. Your memory is strong enough when it serves you. We spent seasons together on the slopes of Cithaeron, you with two flocks from Laius' side and I with one from Corinth. At the end of that time you placed a baby in my hands. Have you forgotten that too?

SHEPHERD. Why do you speak of old things that should have slept forever? What good comes from digging into that? I was a servant then, and servants do what they are told and try to forget. Let the dead remain covered.

OEDIPUS. Not now. This is the center of all my fear. Did you give this man a child, yes or no? If you refuse to answer, I will force you to speak. Your age will not protect you if you cling to silence while my whole life hangs on your tongue.

SHEPHERD. I gave him a child, yes. But I wish with all my heart that I had died before that day came. No good has ever grown from it. My old hands should have dropped from me before they touched that infant. That is all I have to say.

OEDIPUS. It is not all. Where did the child come from? Was it your own? Or did it belong to another house? You are close now to the point where truth begins. Do not stop there and think to save yourself.

SHEPHERD. It was not mine. I received it from another house. I should have let the thing be. I should have done what I was ordered and ended the life at once. But pity entered me, and pity has led us all to this hour.

OEDIPUS. From what house, then? Name it. Was it from the servants, or from the king's line itself? Speak before fear makes your silence into another crime. My patience has no room left in it.

SHEPHERD. It was said to be the child of Laius. I cannot say more gently than that. The queen herself could tell you the rest more clearly than I can. Ask no more of me. Let me leave with the little life I still have.

OEDIPUS. No. If the child was Laius', then whose womb bore it? There is only one answer left. Was it Jocasta's child? Was that infant the son born in this house

long ago? I command you, old man, give me the whole truth now.

SHEPHERD. Yes. It was her child. The king and queen feared an oracle which said the boy would kill his father. So they gave him to me, with his ankles pinned, and told me to leave him on the mountain to die. I could not do it. I gave him instead to this Corinthian, hoping he would carry him far away where the prophecy could not find him.

OEDIPUS. And that child was I.

MESSENGER. Yes, lord. The child I carried from Cithaeron to Corinth was you. Polybus and Merope raised you as their own because they had no son. They loved you, but they did not beget you. The life you feared in Corinth was never yours to fear there.

SHEPHERD. I tried to bury this forever. I begged long ago to be sent far from Thebes because I knew what might happen if the child lived and returned. But the gods did not let the thing die. The child was spared, and the day has now come. There is nothing left to hide.

OEDIPUS. Horrible truth, now clear as daylight. Then all is fulfilled. I was born from those I should not have been born from, I have lived with those I should never have touched, and I have killed the man whom I should have called father. Every step of my life has moved inside the curse while I thought myself free. O light, let me look on you once more, for I have been revealed at last as accursed in birth, in marriage, and in blood.

[Oedipus rushes into the palace. The old Shepherd sinks under the weight of his confession, while the Chorus stands frozen, as if the very air of Thebes has changed around them.]

CHORUS. O generations of mortal men, how thin your happiness is. Who can be called fortunate to the end? Oedipus rose higher than all in wisdom and power, and all men blessed his name. Yet in one day that greatness has become a lesson in misery. We must never call a man happy until his life is finished and he has crossed the last boundary without sorrow.

## Part 8

CHORUS. O house of Laius, how completely you have fallen. The truth has come at last, and it has not brought healing but ruin. Once we looked on Oedipus as the man most blessed among mortals, a king wise in judgment and strong in action. Now his life stands before us like a warning that no human greatness is safe.

CHORUS. He rose by skill, defeated the dark riddle, saved our city, and won a place of honor above other men. Yet the same man has now discovered that his own life was woven with horror from the first. He has become son and husband in the same house, father and brother in the same blood, and killer of the king whose place he took. Time has uncovered all, and what time uncovers cannot be hidden again.

[A Messenger comes hurriedly from inside the palace. His face is full of fear and pity, as if he has seen something too dreadful to speak easily.]

MESSENGER. Elders of Thebes, if you still feel any loyalty toward the house that once ruled you, prepare yourselves for a new grief. What is hidden in that palace is so terrible that no river in the world could wash its stain away. The horror already known to us was enough, yet more has followed from it, and that later misery was chosen by the sufferers themselves. There are wounds that men receive from fate, but those they lay upon themselves are heaviest of all.

CHORUS. What further evil can there be after what we have already heard? The truth of Oedipus' birth and marriage seemed to fill the whole measure of pain. Do not keep us long in suspense, though your words already make the heart shrink. Speak plainly and tell us the worst. A city that has heard so much can still hear more.

MESSENGER. Then hear the shortest and hardest part first. Jocasta is dead by her own hand. Her death did not come from sickness or from another's violence, but from the despair that rose within her when truth stood clear before her. She is gone, and no prayer can bring her back. The queen's life ended in the very chamber that had once seemed the center of royal joy.

CHORUS. Poor queen, what drove her to such an end? Even after all we learned, it is still terrible to hear it spoken. Tell us how it happened, though pity almost makes us afraid to know. A death like that does not come without a storm of passion before it. Let us hear it from one who saw.

MESSENGER. I did not see the exact final moment, for Oedipus burst in and drew every eye to himself before her last breath was known. But I saw enough to tell the shape of it truly. When she fled into the house after the revelation, she rushed straight toward the bridal chamber, tearing her hair with both hands as she ran. Once inside, she shut the doors and cried aloud to Laius, remembering the birth by which he died and the marriage by which she bore a brood too dreadful to name.

MESSENGER. She called on the dead husband whom she had wronged without knowing, and she cried over the bed where one union had given birth to another. The marriage-bed itself seemed to accuse her, for there she had first become a mother and later a wife to the child born from that first union. Her voice rose again and again in grief and shame until the sound itself seemed more than human ears

could bear. Then the chamber fell silent for a moment, and before we could act, Oedipus came raging through the halls.

MESSENGER. He rushed like a man driven by a power greater than his own mind. He shouted for a sword and demanded to know where he could find the woman who was no longer wife in his mouth, but mother and destroyer of his house. His words came broken and fierce, and he called the room itself a field that had borne him twice, first as son and then as father. None of us dared to go near him, because grief had turned him into a force almost beyond reason.

MESSENGER. Then, as if some god himself guided the madness of that moment, Oedipus struck at the closed doors of the bridal chamber. He tore them open with a great cry, breaking the fastenings and driving the panels inward. There we saw Jocasta hanging high, suspended by twisted cords. When he saw her, he gave a cry so bitter that every heart present seemed to break with it.

MESSENGER. He lifted her down at once and laid her upon the floor, but what followed was more dreadful still. He looked on her dress and tore away the golden brooches that held it together. Then he raised them in his hands and drove the sharp points into his own eyes. He cried that those eyes should never again look on the evil he had done or the evil that had given him birth.

MESSENGER. Again and again he struck himself, not once in a single blind blow, but many times, as if he wished to bury light itself forever. The blood poured down over his face and beard in dark streams, not in drops, but like a storm of red rain. Thus the ruin of man and wife, joined in one house and one crime, overflowed together at last. The old joy that once seemed to bless this palace now stands exposed as only the beginning of its misery.

CHORUS. Is there any pause in his suffering now, or does the storm still move in him without rest? A man may cry for death in such a condition, or he may fall

silent from exhaustion. Tell us what he now desires, if any desire remains in him at all. Has grief broken his strength, or only changed its form? We fear both silence and speech in such a man.

MESSENGER. He is not still. He demands that the palace doors be opened wide, so that all Thebes may see the man who killed his father and lay with his mother. He says the city must look upon the thing it once called king. He wishes to be cast out at once, driven from the land under the same curse he himself once spoke. Yet he also needs a guide, because no man under such a burden can stand alone for long.

[The palace doors open. Oedipus appears, blinded, his face marked with blood, moving without help and yet with desperate force. The sight is terrible, but the elders cannot turn away.]

CHORUS. O horror beyond words, what suffering has come upon you! No human eye can bear your sight without pain, yet pity compels us to look. What madness, what blow from heaven, has leapt upon your life with such savage force? You were once the clearest-seeing among men, and now you stand before us in darkness. We tremble both at the sight itself and at what it means.

OEDIPUS. Ah, misery! Where am I carried now? Into what darkness of sound and air have I fallen? My cries seem to float without direction, and the world itself has become uncertain around me. O ruthless fate, how far your violence has reached. You have not struck a part of my life only, but all of it at once.

CHORUS. Your suffering is too great for thought to follow and too terrible for the heart to hold. We knew sorrow before, but this exceeds what men can easily endure. Yet even now, though your form repels the eye, your grief compels compassion. Speak if speech can lighten anything. We will stay and hear you.

OEDIPUS. A dark cloud has come down upon me, hateful and irresistible, driven on by a cruel wind that never misses its mark. My outward wounds burn, but the deeper pain is memory. Every thought I touch turns into grief. I cry out again and again because the sorrow within has no end.

CHORUS. It is no wonder that your pain comes doubled. The body suffers from what the hand has done, and the mind suffers from what the life has been. A lesser misery would break a lesser man. Yours returns upon itself from every side. No human lot could bear much more.

OEDIPUS. Yet you remain beside me, faithful even now. Though I cannot see, I still know the voice of one who has not turned away from the blind man. That kindness enters my darkness like the last small memory of daylight. I know you are there, and for that I thank you. So even now not all human feeling has died around me.

CHORUS. But why did you do this? How could you force your own hand against your own eyes? What power drove you to such an act? Was it pure despair, or did some god urge you on when no human mind could bear what had been revealed? Tell us, because we cannot understand it otherwise. The deed is almost as terrible as the truth that caused it.

OEDIPUS. Apollo brought the misery of my life to completion, but the hand that struck these eyes was mine alone. No other man did this. Why should I wish to see any longer, when nothing I could look upon would give me joy? The eyes that once failed to know the truth deserved at last to be put out.

## Part 9

CHORUS. Even now your words pierce us, because they come from a man who

has lost everything and still understands what has been lost. Yet another step remains before this sorrow reaches its full end. Creon is here, and the city must now decide what is to be done with you. What do you ask of him, and what help can any mortal still give?

OEDIPUS. Help me by taking me far from this land at once, to some place where no human voice will know my name. I myself pronounced the curse that the polluted man must be driven out, and now I know that man was I. Let my own law stand. Do not keep me here to poison the air of Thebes any longer.

CREON. I would do what is right, but I must not act too quickly in a matter so heavy. Once before I was charged with plotting against you, and I learned then how dangerous haste can be. I will first ask the god what should be done, because in your life and in your fall the hand of Apollo has been plain. No man should try to cut through such darkness by his own will alone.

OEDIPUS. You need not go to the god for what is already clear. The man made impure by blood and marriage must be cast out from the city he has stained. That is the law of heaven, and I myself proclaimed it before all Thebes. I ask no softer judgment than the one I gave. Let me be driven out and left to the mountain that should have been my grave at first.

CREON. Perhaps all this is true, and perhaps exile is indeed what the god will command. Yet the city must not move in sacred matters without sacred direction. When men act from pity alone, they often do wrong while thinking they do right. I will not mock you, nor deny your pain, but neither will I promise more than I can rightly give. The gods have ruled your life too strongly for me to pretend that I now rule it alone.

OEDIPUS. Then grant me at least the one thing that no oracle should delay. Care for my two sons as men, because they are males and can go where men go, find

food, and stand among citizens though shame follows them. But my daughters are another matter. They are innocent, yet they will carry my name, and that name will close many doors before them. No feast, no marriage, no easy welcome will come to girls known as mine.

[At a sign from Creon, attendants bring out Antigone and Ismene. The children come weeping, and Oedipus hears their voices before their small hands touch him. He reaches toward them blindly, and when they come near, he gathers them close with desperate tenderness.]

OEDIPUS. My children, my poor daughters, come into your father's arms, if that ruined man may still be called your father. I cannot see your faces, yet I know your crying, and each sound cuts me more deeply than the iron that struck my eyes. You have been brought into a world already burdened with my curse. I weep for what lies before you, because every eye that looks on you will remember me.

OEDIPUS. What man will marry you, when your birth itself will make men turn away in fear and disgust? What holy gathering will welcome you easily, or what festival will not whisper against you when you pass? You will grow, but with sorrow beside you. Others will feast while you remember the blind man who held you and the mother who died in shame. And when people speak of your house, they will speak not of joy, but of horror.

ANTIGONE and ISMENE. Father, your grief makes us grieve more deeply, because we are too young to answer it and yet old enough to feel it. We do not understand all that has happened, but we understand that you are in pain and that our mother is gone. If we must suffer later, we will suffer later. For now let us remain with you a little longer, because your touch is all that is left of what was once our home.

OEDIPUS. Bless you, my children, for that kindness. But children cannot rule

what life will do to them, and that is why I turn again to Creon. He now holds power in Thebes, and the future of these girls will stand in his hands more than in their own. Creon, by all the gods and by whatever pity remains in you for a fallen man, do not abandon them. Be father to them where I can no longer be anything but a curse remembered.

CREON. I have already shown you some mercy, and I will not refuse care to children who have done no wrong. Yet even now you must learn what you have not always known: you cannot command every end merely because grief burns strongly in you. There was a time when you ruled, but that time has passed. Accept what must be accepted, and do not struggle against necessity even at the final edge of your ruin.

OEDIPUS. I know that power has gone from me, and I do not ask now as king, but as a broken man. Since I can no longer guide my own life, let my last human wish be granted through another's strength. Touch my daughters' heads and promise you will not willingly cast them away. If some good still remains possible in this house, it can only live through them.

CREON. I will not neglect them, and you may trust me as far as any man may trust another in a world ruled by change. But this scene must not go on outside for all eyes to feed upon it. There is measure even in sorrow. Come now within, and leave the children, because too much clinging only opens the wound again.

OEDIPUS. No, not yet. Do not tear them from me so quickly. They are the last sweetness left in a life turned bitter, and even that sweetness is mixed with pain. Let me hold them for one more moment, since darkness has already taken the sight of them forever. A man who has lost all else may still beg for time enough to feel the shape of what he loves.

CREON. Your pain is great, but pain does not give you the right to overrule what

must now be done. The children cannot remain forever in your arms, just as the crown could not remain forever on your head. Yield to necessity. Many things in your life came by force, but this last act must be obedience.

OEDIPUS. Then lead me in. I have spoken what I could, and the rest belongs to powers stronger than I am. Children, remember that your father loved you, though his love brought no safety with it. If ever you speak my name, let it be not in pride, but in pity. That is all the inheritance I leave you.

[Creon gently but firmly separates Oedipus from the girls. Antigone and Ismene are led away weeping, while attendants turn the blinded king toward the palace doors. He goes within under guidance, no longer as ruler but as a man enclosed by the ruin of his own life. The Chorus remains before the house and speaks the final lesson over Thebes.]

CHORUS. People of Thebes, look on Oedipus and remember him well. He solved the great riddle, rose to the highest honor, and was admired by all for wisdom and success. Yet the same man has fallen into a sea of anguish deeper than any enemy could have made for him. Therefore let no mortal be called happy while life still remains to be lived. Wait until the final day, and only then, if he has passed without sorrow, call him blessed.