

OEDIPUS THE KING

by Sophocles

translated by R. C. Jebb

CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

OEDIPUS, King of Thebes

PRIEST OF ZEUS

CREON, brother Of JOCASTA

TEIRESIAS, the blind prophet

JOCASTA

FIRST MESSENGER, a shepherd from Corinth

A SHEPHERD, formerly in the service of Laius

SECOND MESSENGER, from the house

CHORUS OF THEBAN ELDERS

Mute Persons

A train of Suppliants (old men, youths, and children).

The children ANTIGONE and ISMENE, daughters of
OEDIPUS and JOCASTA

OEDIPUS_THE_KING

OEDIPUS THE KING

(SCENE: -Before the royal palace of Oedipus at Thebes. In front of the large central doors there is an altar; a smaller altar stands also near each of the two side-doors. Suppliants-old men, youths, and young children-are seated on the steps of the altars. They are dressed in white tunics and cloaks,-their hair bound with white fillets. On the altars they have laid down olive-branches wreathed with fillets of wool. The PRIEST OF ZEUS, a venerable man, is alone standing, facing the central doors of the palace. These are now thrown open. Followed by two attendants, who place themselves on either side of the doors, OEDIPUS enters, in the robes of a king. For a moment he gazes silently on the groups at the altars, and then speaks.)

OEDIPUS

MY CHILDREN, latest-born to Cadmus who was of old, why are ye set before me thus with wreathed branches of suppliants, while the city reeks with incense, rings with prayers for health and cries of woe? I deemed it unmeet, my children, to hear these things at the mouth of others, and have come hither myself, I, Oedipus renowned of all.

Tell me, then, thou venerable man-since it is thy natural part to speak for these-in what mood are ye placed here, with what dread or what desire? Be sure that I would gladly give all aid; hard of heart were I, did I not pity such suppliants as these.

PRIEST OF ZEUS

Nay, Oedipus, ruler of my land, thou seest of what years we are who beset thy altars,-some, nestlings still too tender for far flights,-some, bowed with age, priests, as I of Zeus,-and these, the chosen youth; while the rest of the folk sit with wreathed branches in

the market-places, and before the two shrines of Pallas, and where Ismenus gives answer by fire.

For the city, as thou thyself seest, is now too sorely vexed, and can no more lift her head from beneath the angry waves of death; a blight is on her in the fruitful blossoms of the land, in the herds among the pastures, in the barren pangs of women; and withal the flaming god, the malign plague, hath swooped on us, and ravages the town; by whom the house of Cadmus is made waste, but dark Hades rich in groans and tears.

It is not as deeming thee ranked with gods that I and these children are suppliants at thy hearth, but as deeming thee first of men, both in life's common chances, and when mortals have to do with more than man: seeing that thou camest to the town of Cadmus, and didst quit us of the tax that we rendered to the hard songstress; and this, though thou knewest nothing from us that could avail thee, nor hadst been schooled; no, by a god's aid, 'tis said and believed, didst thou uplift our life.

And now, Oedipus, king glorious in all eyes, we beseech thee, all we suppliants, to find for us some succour, whether by the whisper of a god thou knowest it, or haply as in the power of man; for I see that, when men have been proved in deeds past, the issues of their counsels, too, most often have effect.

On, best of mortals, again uplift our State! On, guard thy fame,-since now this land calls thee saviour for thy former zeal; and never be it our memory of thy reign that we were first restored and afterward cast down: nay, lift up this State in such wise that it fall no more!

With good omen didst thou give us that past happiness; now also show thyself the same. For if thou art to rule this land, even as thou art now its lord, 'tis better to be lord of men than of a waste: since neither walled town nor ship is anything, if it is void and no men dwell with thee therein.

OEDIPUS

Oh my piteous children, known, well known to me are the desires wherewith ye have come: well wot I that ye suffer all; yet, sufferers as ye are, there is not one of you whose suffering is as mine. Your pain comes on each one of you for himself alone, and for no other; but my soul mourns at once for the city, and for myself, and for thee.

So that ye rouse me not, truly, as one sunk in sleep: no, be sure that I have wept full many tears, gone many ways in wanderings of thought. And the sole remedy which, well pondering, I could find, this I have put into act. I have sent the son of Menoecus, Creon, mine own wife's brother, to the Pythian house of Phoebus, to learn by what deed or word I might deliver this town. And already, when the lapse of days is reckoned, it troubles me what he doth; for he tarries strangely, beyond the fitting space. But when he comes, then shall I be no true man if I do not all that the god shows.

PRIEST

Nay, in season hast thou spoken; at this moment these sign to me that Creon draws near.

OEDIPUS

O king Apollo, may he come to us in the brightness of saving fortune, even as his face is bright!

PRIEST

Nay, to all seeming, he brings comfort; else would he not be coming crowned thus thickly with berry-laden bay.

OEDIPUS

We shall know soon: he is at range to hear.-(Enter CREON)
Prince, my kinsman, son of Menoecus, what news hast thou brought us from the god?

CREON

Good news: I tell thee that even troubles hard to bear,-if haply they find the right issue,-will end in perfect peace.

OEDIPUS

But what is the oracle? So far, thy words make me neither bold nor yet afraid.

CREON

If thou wouldest hear while these are nigh, I am ready to speak; or else to go within.

OEDIPUS

Speak before all: the sorrow which I bear is for these more than for mine own life.

CREON

With thy leave, I will tell what I heard from the god. Phoebus our lord bids us plainly to drive out a defiling thing, which (he saith) hath been harboured in this land, and not to harbour it, so that it cannot be healed.

OEDIPUS

By what rite shall we cleanse us? What is the manner of the misfortune?

CREON

By banishing a man, or by bloodshed in quittance of bloodshed, since it is that blood which brings the tempest on our city.

OEDIPUS

And who is the man whose fate he thus reveals?

CREON

Laius, king, was lord of our land before thou wast pilot of this State.

OEDIPUS

I know it well-by hearsay, for I saw him never.

CREON

He was slain; and the god now bids us plainly to wreak vengeance on his murderers-whosoever they be.

OEDIPUS

And where are they upon the earth? Where shall the dim track of this old crime be found?

CREON

In this land,-said the god. What is sought for can be caught; only that which is not watched escapes.

OEDIPUS

And was it in the house, or in the field, or on strange soil that Laius met this bloody end?

CREON

'Twas on a visit to Delphi, as he said, that he had left our land; and he came home no more, after he had once set forth.

OEDIPUS

And was there none to tell? Was there no comrade of his journey who saw the deed, from whom tidings might have been gained, and used?

CREON

All perished, save one who fled in fear, and could tell for certain but one thing of all that he saw.

OEDIPUS

And what was that? One thing might show the clue to many, could we get but a small beginning for hope.

CREON

He said that robbers met and fell on them, not in one man's might, but with full many hands.

OEDIPUS

How, then, unless there was some trafficking in bribes from here, should the robber have dared thus far?

CREON

Such things were surmised; but, Laius once slain, amid our troubles no avenger arose.

OEDIPUS

But, when royalty had fallen thus, what trouble in your path can have hindered a full search?

CREON

The riddling Sphinx had made us let dark things go, and was inviting us to think of what lay at our doors.

OEDIPUS

Nay, I will start afresh, and once more make dark things plain. Right worthily hath Phoebus, and worthily hast thou, bestowed this care on the cause of the dead; and so, as is meet, ye shall find me too leagued with you in seeking vengeance for this land, and for the god besides. On behalf of no far-off friend, no, but in mine own cause, shall I dispel this taint. For whoever was the slayer of Laius might wish to take vengeance on me also with a hand as fierce. Therefore, in doing right to Laius, I serve myself.

Come, haste ye, my children, rise from the altar-steps, and lift these suppliant boughs; and let some other summon hither the folk of Cadmus, warned that I mean to leave nought untried; for our health (with the god's help) shall be made certain-or our ruin.

PRIEST

My children, let us rise; we came at first to seek what this man promises of himself. And may Phoebus, who sent these oracles, come to us therewith, our saviour and deliverer from the pest.

(Exeunt OEDIPUS and PRIEST. Enter CHORUS OF THEBAN ELDERS.)
CHORUS (singing)

strophe 1

O sweetly-speaking message of Zeus, in what spirit hast thou come from golden Pytho unto glorious Thebes? I am on the rack, terror shakes my soul, O thou Delian healer to whom wild cries rise, in holy-fear of thee, what thing thou wilt work for me, perchance unknown before, perchance renewed with the revolving years: tell me, thou immortal Voice, born of Golden Hope!

antistrophe 1

First call I on thee, daughter of Zeus, divine Athena, and on thy sister, guardian of our land, Artemis, who sits on her throne of fame, above the circle of our Agora, and on Phoebus the far-darter: O shine forth on me, my three-fold help against death! If ever aforetime, in arrest of ruin hurrying on the city, ye drove a fiery pest beyond our borders, come now also!

strophe 2

Woe is me, countless are the sorrows that I bear; a plague is on all our host, and thought can find no weapon for defence. The fruits of the glorious earth grow not; by no birth of children do women surmount the pangs in which they shriek; and life on life mayest thou see sped, like bird on nimble wing, aye, swifter than resistless fire, to the shore of the western god.

antistrophe 2

By such deaths, past numbering, the city perishes: unpitied, her children lie on the ground, spreading pestilence, with none to mourn: and meanwhile young wives, and grey-haired mothers with them, uplift a wail at the steps of the altars, some here, some there, entreating for their weary woes. The prayer to the Healer rings clear, and, blent therewith, the voice of lamentation: for these things, golden daughter of Zeus, send us the bright face of comfort.

strophe 3

And grant that the fierce god of death, who now with no brazen shields, yet amid cries as of battle, wraps me in the flame of his onset, may turn his back in speedy flight from our land, borne by fair wind to the great deep of Amphitrite, or to those waters in which none find haven, even to the Thracian wave; for if night leave aught undone, day follows to accomplish this. O thou who wieldest the powers of the fire-fraught lightning, O Zeus our father, slay him beneath thy thunderbolt!

antistrophe 3

Lycean King, fain were I that thy shafts also, from thy bent bow's string of woven gold, should go abroad in their might, our champions in the face of the foe; yea, and the flashing fires of Artemis wherewith she glances through the Lycian hills. And I call him whose locks are bound with gold, who is named with the name of this land, ruddy Bacchus to whom Bacchants cry, the comrade of the Maenads, to draw near with the blaze of his blithe torch, our ally against the god unhonoured among gods.

(OEDIPUS enters during the closing strains of the choral song.)

OEDIPUS

Thou prayest: and in answer to thy prayer, -if thou wilt give a loyal welcome to my words and minister to thine own disease,-thou mayest hope to find succour and relief from woes. These words will I speak publicly, as one who has been a stranger to this report, a stranger to the deed; for I should not be far on the track, if I were tracing it alone, without a clue. But as it is,-since it was only after the time of the deed that I was numbered a Theban among Thebans,-to you, the Cadmeans all, I do thus proclaim.

Whosoever of you knows by whom Laius son of Labdacus was slain, I bid him to declare all to me. And if he is afraid, I tell him to remove the danger of the charge from his path by denouncing himself; for he shall suffer nothing else unlovely, but only leave the land, unhurt. Or if any one knows an alien, from another land, as the assassin, let him not keep silence; for I will pay his guerdon, and my thanks shall rest with him besides.

But if ye keep silence-if any one, through fear, shall seek to screen friend or self from my behest-hear ye what I then shall do. I charge you that no one of this land, whereof I hold the empire and the throne, give shelter or speak word unto that murderer, whosoever he be,-make him partner of his prayer or sacrifice, or serve him with the lustral rite; but that all ban him their homes, knowing that this is our defiling thing, as the oracle of the Pythian god hath newly shown me. I then am on this wise the ally of the god and of the slain. And I pray solemnly that the slayer, whoso he be, whether his hidden guilt is lonely or hath partners, evilly, as he is evil, may wear out his unblest life. And for myself I pray that if, with my privity, he should become an inmate of my house, I may suffer the same things which even now I called down upon others. And on you I lay it to make all these words good, for my sake, and for the sake of the god, and for our land's, thus blasted with barrenness by angry heaven.

For even if the matter had not been urged on us by a god, it was not meet that ye should leave the guilt thus unpurged, when one so noble, and he your king, had perished; rather were ye bound to search it out. And now, since 'tis I who hold the powers which once he held, who posses his bed and the wife who bare seed to him; and since, had his hope of issue not been frustrate, children born of one mother would have made ties betwixt him and me-but, as it was, fate swooped upon his head; by reason of these things will I uphold this cause, even as the cause of mine own sire, and will leave nought untried in seeking to find him whose hand shed that blood, for the honour of the son of Labdacus and of Polydorus and elder Cadmus and Agenor who was of old.

And for those who obey me not, I pray that the gods send them neither harvest of the earth nor fruit of the womb, but that they be wasted by their lot that now is, or by one yet more dire. But for all you, the loyal folk of Cadmus to whom these things seem good, may justice, our ally, and all the gods be with you graciously for

ever.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

As thou hast put me on my oath, on my oath, O king, I will speak. I am not the slayer, nor can I point to him who slew. As for the question, it was for Phoebus, who sent it, to tell us this thing-who can have wrought the deed.

OEDIPUS

Justly said; but no man on the earth can force the gods to what they will not.

LEADER

I would fain say what seems to me next best after this.

OEDIPUS

If there is yet a third course, spare not to show it.

LEADER

I know that our lord Teiresias is the seer most like to our lord Phoebus; from whom, O king, a searcher of these things might learn them most clearly.

OEDIPUS

Not even this have I left out of my cares. On the hint of Creon, I have twice sent a man to bring him; and this long while I marvel why he is not here.

LEADER

Indeed (his skill apart) the rumours are but faint and old.

OEDIPUS

What rumours are they? I look to every story.

LEADER

Certain wayfarers were said to have killed him.

OEDIPUS

I, too, have heard it, but none sees him who saw it.

LEADER

Nay, if he knows what fear is, he will not stay when he hears thy curses, so dire as they are.

OEDIPUS

When a man shrinks not from a deed, neither is he scared by a word.

LEADER

But there is one to convict him. For here they bring at last the godlike prophet, in whom alone of men doth live the truth.

(Enter TEIRESIAS, led by a boy.)

OEDIPUS

Teiresias, whose soul grasps all things, the lore that may be told and the unspeakable, the secrets of heaven and the low things of earth,-thou feelest, though thou canst not see, what a plague doth haunt our State,-from which, great prophet, we find in thee our protector and only saviour. Now, Phoebus-if indeed thou knowest it not from the messengers-sent answer to our question that the only riddance from this pest which could come was if we should learn aright the slayers of Laius, and slay them, or send them into exile from our land. Do thou, then, grudge neither voice of birds nor any other way

of seer-lore that thou hast, but rescue thyself and the State, rescue me, rescue all that is defiled by the dead. For we are in thy hand; and man's noblest task is to help others by his best means and powers.

TEIRESIAS

Alas, how dreadful to have wisdom where it profits not the wise! Aye, I knew this well, but let it slip out of mind; else would I never have come here.

OEDIPUS

What now? How sad thou hast come in!

TEIRESIAS

Let me go home; most easily wilt thou bear thine own burden to the end, and I mine, if thou wilt consent.

OEDIPUS

Thy words are strange, nor kindly to this State which nurtured thee, when thou withholdest this response.

TEIRESIAS

Nay, I see that thou, on thy part, openest not thy lips in season: therefore I speak not, that neither may I have thy mishap.

OEDIPUS

For the love of the gods, turn not away, if thou hast knowledge: all we suppliants implore thee on our knees.

TEIRESIAS

Aye, for ye are all without knowledge; but never will I reveal my griefs-that I say not thine.

OEDIPUS

How sayest thou? Thou knowest the secret, and wilt not tell it, but art minded to betray us and to destroy the State?

TEIRESIAS

I will pain neither myself nor thee. Why vainly ask these things? Thou wilt not learn them from me.

OEDIPUS

What, basest of the base,-for thou wouldest anger a very stone,-wilt thou never speak out? Can nothing touch thee? Wilt thou never make an end?

TEIRESIAS

Thou blamest my temper, but seest not that to which thou thyself art wedded: no, thou findest fault with me.

OEDIPUS

And who would not be angry to hear the words with which thou now dost slight this city?

TEIRESIAS

The future will come of itself, though I shroud it in silence.

OEDIPUS

Then, seeing that it must come, thou on thy part shouldst tell me thereof.

TEIRESIAS

I will speak no further; rage, then, if thou wilt, with the fiercest wrath thy heart doth know.

OEDIPUS

Aye, verily, I will not spare-so wroth I am-to speak all my thought. Know that thou seemest to me e'en to have helped in plotting the deed, and to have done it. short of slaying with thy hands. Hadst thou eyesight, I would have said that the doing, also, of this thing was thine alone.

TEIRESIAS

In sooth?-I charge thee that thou abide by the decree of thine own mouth, and from this day speak neither to these nor to me: thou art the accursed defiler of this land.

OEDIPUS

So brazen with thy blustering taunt? And wherein dost thou trust to escape thy due?

TEIRESIAS

I have escaped: in my truth is my strength.

OEDIPUS

Who taught thee this? It was not, at least, thine art.

TEIRESIAS

Thou: for thou didst spur me into speech against my will.

OEDIPUS

What speech? Speak again that I may learn it better.

TEIRESIAS

Didst thou not take my sense before? Or art thou tempting me in talk?

OEDIPUS

No, I took it not so that I can call it known:-speak again.

TEIRESIAS

I say that thou art the slayer of the man whose slayer thou seekest.

OEDIPUS

Now thou shalt rue that thou hast twice said words so dire.

TEIRESIAS

Wouldst thou have me say more, that thou mayest be more wroth?

OEDIPUS

What thou wilt; it will be said in vain.

TEIRESIAS

I say that thou hast been living in unguessed shame with thy nearest kin, and seest not to what woe thou hast come.

OEDIPUS

Dost thou indeed think that thou shalt always speak thus without smarting?

TEIRESIAS

Yes, if there is any strength in truth

OEDIPUS

Nay, there is,-for all save thee; for thee that strength is not, since thou art maimed in ear, and in wit, and in eye.

TEIRESIAS

Aye, and thou art a poor wretch to utter taunts which every man here will soon hurl at thee.

OEDIPUS

Night, endless night hath thee in her keeping, so that thou canst never hurt me, or any man who sees the sun.

TEIRESIAS

No, thy doom is not to fall by me: Apollo is enough, whose care it is to work that out.

OEDIPUS

Are these Creon's devices, or thine?

TEIRESIAS

Nay, Creon is no plague to thee; thou art thine own.

OEDIPUS

O wealth, and empire, and skill surpassing skill in life's keen rivalries, how great is the envy that cleaves to you, if for the sake, yea, of this power which the city hath put into my hands, a gift unsought, Creon the trusty, Creon mine old friend, hath crept on me by stealth, yearning to thrust me out of it, and hath suborned such a scheming juggler as this, tricky quack, who hath eyes only for his gains, but in his art is blind!

Come, now, tell me, where hast thou proved thyself a seer? Why, when the Watcher was here who wove dark song, didst thou say nothing that could free this folk? Yet the riddle, at least, was not for the first comer to read; there was need of a seer's skill; and none such thou wast found to have. either by help of birds, or as known from any god: no, I came, I, Oedipus the ignorant, and made her mute, when I had seized the answer by my wit, untaught of birds. And it is I whom thou art trying to oust, thinking to stand close to Creon's throne. Methinks thou and the plotter of these things will rue your zeal to purge the land. Nay, didst thou not seem to be an old man, thou shouldst have learned to thy cost how bold thou art.

LEADER

To our thinking, both this man's words and thine, Oedipus, have been said in anger. Not for such words is our need, but to seek how we shall best discharge the mandates of the god.

TEIRESIAS

King though thou art, the right of reply, at least, must be deemed the same for both; of that I too am lord. Not to thee do I live servant, but to Loxias; and so I shall not stand enrolled under Creon for my patron. And I tell thee-since thou hast taunted me even with blindness-that thou hast sight, yet seest not in what misery thou art, nor where thou dwellest, nor with whom. Dost thou know of what stock thou art? And thou hast been an unwitting foe to thine own kin, in the shades, and on the earth above; and the double lash of thy mother's and thy father's curse shall one day drive thee from this land in dreadful haste, with darkness then on the eyes that now see true.

And what place shall not be harbour to thy shriek, what of all Cithaeron shall not ring with it soon, when thou hast learnt the meaning of the nuptials in which, within that house, thou didst find a fatal haven, after a voyage so fair? And a throng of other ills thou

guessest not, which shall make thee level with thy true self and with thine own brood.

Therefore heap thy scorns on Creon and on my message: for no one among men shall ever be crushed more miserably than thou.

OEDIPUS

Are these taunts to be indeed borne from him?-Hence, ruin take thee! Hence, this instant! Back!-away!-avaunt thee from these doors!

TEIRESIAS

I had never come, not I, hadst thou not called me.

OEDIPUS

I knew not that thou wast about to speak folly, or it had been long ere I had sent for thee to my house.

TEIRESIAS

Such am I,-as thou thinkest, a fool; but for the parents who begat thee, sane.

OEDIPUS

What parents? Stay... and who of men is my sire?

TEIRESIAS

This day shall show thy birth and shall bring thy ruin.

OEDIPUS

What riddles, what dark words thou always speakest!

TEIRESIAS

Nay, art not thou most skilled to unravel dark speech?

OEDIPUS

Make that my reproach in which thou shalt find me great.

TEIRESIAS

Yet 'twas just that fortune that undid thee.

OEDIPUS

Nay, if I delivered this town. I care not.

TEIRESIAS

Then I will go: so do thou, boy, take me hence.

OEDIPUS

Aye, let him take thee: while here, thou art a hindrance, thou, trouble: when thou hast vanished, thou wilt not vex me more.

TEIRESIAS

I will go when I have done mine errand, fearless of thy frown: for thou canst never destroy me. And I tell thee-the man of whom thou hast this long while been in quest, uttering threats, and proclaiming a search into the murder of Laius-that man is here,-in seeming, an alien sojourner, but anon he shall be found a native Theban, and shall not be glad of his fortune. A blind man, he who now hath sight, a beggar, who now is rich, he shall make his way to a strange land, feeling the ground before him with his staff. And he shall be found at once brother and father of the children with whom he consorts; son and husband of the woman who bore him; heir to his father's bed, shedder of his father's blood.

So go thou in and think on that; and if thou find that I have been at fault, say thenceforth that I have no wit in prophecy.

(TEIRESIAS is led out by the boy. OEDIPUS enters the palace.)

CHORUS (singing)

strophe 1

Who is he of whom the divine voice from the Delphian rock hath spoken, as having wrought with red hands horrors that no tongue can tell?

It is time that he ply in flight a foot stronger than the feet of storm-swift steeds: for the son of Zeus is springing on him, all armed with fiery lightnings, and with him come the dread, unerring Fates.

antistrophe 1

Yea, newly given from snowy Parnassus, the message hath flashed forth to make all search for the unknown man. Into the wild wood's covert, among caves and rocks he is roaming, fierce as a bull, wretched and forlorn on his joyless path, still seeking to put from him the doom spoken at Earth's central shrine: but that doom ever lives, ever flits around him.

strophe 2

Dreadly, in sooth, dreadly doth the wise auger move me, who approve not, nor am able to deny. How to speak, I know not; I am fluttered with forebodings; neither in the present have I clear vision, nor of the future. Never in past days, nor in these, have I heard how the house of Labdacus or the son of Polybus had, either against other, any grief that I could bring as proof in assailing the public fame of Oedipus, and seeking to avenge the line of Labdacus for the undiscovered murder.

antistrophe 2

Nay, Zeus indeed and Apollo are keen of thought, and know the things of earth; but that mortal seer wins knowledge above mine, of this there can be no sure test; though man may surpass man in lore. Yet, until I see the word made good, never will I assent when men blame Oedipus. Before all eyes, the winged maiden came against him of old, and he was seen to be wise; he bore the test, in welcome service to our State; never, therefore, by the verdict of my heart shall he be adjudged guilty of crime.

(Enter CREON)

CREON

Fellow-citizens, having learned that Oedipus the king lays dire charge against me, I am here, indignant. If, in the present troubles, he thinks that he has suffered from me, by word or deed, aught that tends to harm, in truth I crave not my full term of years, when I must bear such blame as this. The wrong of this rumour touches me not in one point alone, but has the largest scope, if I am to be called a traitor in the city, a traitor too by thee and by my friends.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

Nay, but this taunt came under stress, perchance, of anger, rather than from the purpose of the heart.

CREON

And the saying was uttered, that my counsels won the seer to utter

his falsehoods?

LEADER

Such things were said-I know not with what meaning.

CREON

And was this charge laid against me with steady eyes and steady mind?

LEADER

I know not; I see not what my masters do: but here comes our lord forth from the house.

(Enter OEDIPUS)

OEDIPUS

Sirrah, how camest thou here? Hast thou a front so bold that thou hast come to my house, who art the proved assassin of its master,-the palpable robber of my crown? Come, tell me, in the name of the gods, was it cowardice or folly that thou sawest in me, that thou didst plot to do this thing? Didst thou think that I would not note this deed of thine creeping on me by stealth, or, aware, would not ward it off? Now is not thine attempt foolish,-to seek, without followers or friends, a throne,-a prize which followers and wealth must win?

CREON

Mark me now,-in answer to thy words, hear a fair reply, and then judge for thyself on knowledge.

OEDIPUS

Thou art apt in speech, but I have a poor wit for thy lessons, since have found thee my malignant foe.

CREON

Now first hear how I will explain this very thing-

OEDIPUS

Explain me not one thing-that thou art not false.

CREON

If thou deemest that stubbornness without sense is a good gift, thou art not wise.

OEDIPUS

If thou deemest that thou canst wrong a kinsman and escape the penalty, thou art not sane.

CREON

Justly said, I grant thee: but tell me what is the wrong that thou sayest thou hast suffered from me.

OEDIPUS

Didst thou advise, or didst thou not, that I should send for that reverend seer?

CREON

And now I am still of the same mind.

OEDIPUS

How long is it, then, since Laius-

CREON

Since Laius...? I take not thy drift...

OEDIPUS

-was swept from men's sight by a deadly violence?
CREON
The count of years would run far into the past.
OEDIPUS
Was this seer, then, of the craft in those days?
CREON
Yea, skilled as now, and in equal honour.
OEDIPUS
Made he, then, any mention of me at that time?
CREON
Never, certainly, when I was within hearing.
OEDIPUS
But held ye not a search touching the murder?
CREON
Due search we held, of course -and learned nothing.
OEDIPUS
And how was it that this sage did not tell his story then?
CREON
I know not; where I lack light, 'tis my wont to be silent.
OEDIPUS
Thus much, at least, thou knowest, and couldst declare with
light enough.
CREON
What is that? If I know it, I will not deny.
OEDIPUS
That, if he had not conferred with thee, he would never have named
my slaying of Laius.
CREON
If so he speaks, thou best knowest; but I claim to learn from thee
as much as thou hast now from me.
OEDIPUS
Learn thy fill: I shall never be found guilty of the blood.
CREON
Say, then-thou hast married my sister?
OEDIPUS
The question allows not of denial.
CREON
And thou rulest the land as she doth, with like sway?
OEDIPUS
She obtains from me all her desire.
CREON
And rank not I as a third peer of you twain?
OEDIPUS
Aye, 'tis just therein that thou art seen a false friend.
CREON
Not so, if thou wouldst reason with thine own heart as I with
mine, And first weigh this,-whether thou thinkest that any one would
choose to rule amid terrors rather than in unruffled peace,-granting
that he is to have the same powers. Now I, for one, have no yearning

in my nature to be a king rather than to do kingly deeds, no, nor hath any man who knows how to keep a sober mind. For now I win all boons from thee without fear; but, were I ruler myself, I should be doing much e'en against mine own pleasure.

How, then, could royalty be sweeter for me to have than painless rule and influence? Not yet am I so misguided as to desire other honours than those which profit. Now, all wish me joy; now, every man has greeting for me; now, those who have a suit to thee crave speech with me, since therein is all their hope of success. Then why should I resign these things, and take those? No mind will become false, while it is wise. Nay, I am no lover of such policy, and, if another put it into deed, never could I bear to act with him.

And, in proof of this, first, go to Pytho, and ask if I brought thee true word of the oracle; then next, if thou find that I have planned aught in concert with the soothsayer, take and slay me, by the sentence not of one mouth, but of twain -by mine own, no less than thine. But make me not guilty in a corner, on unproved surmise. It is not right to adjudge bad men good at random, or good men bad. I count it a like thing for a man to cast off a true friend as to cast away the life in his own bosom, which most he loves. Nay, thou wilt learn these things with sureness in time, for time alone shows a just man; but thou couldst discern a knave even in one day.

LEADER

Well hath he spoken, O king, for one who giveth heed not to fall: the quick in counsel are not sure.

OEDIPUS

When the stealthy plotter is moving on me in quick sort, I, too, must be quick with my counterplot. If I await him in repose, his ends will have been gained, and mine missed,

CREON

What wouldst thou, then? Cast me out of the land?

OEDIPUS

Not so: I desire thy death-not thy banishment-that thou mayest show forth what manner of thing is envy.

CREON

Thou speakest as resolved not to yield or to believe?

OEDIPUS

No; for thou persuadest me not that thou art worthy of belief.

CREON

No, for I find thee not sane.

OEDIPUS

Sane, at least, in mine own interest.

CREON

Nay, thou shouldst be so in mine also.

OEDIPUS

Nay, thou art false.

CREON

But if thou understandest nought?

OEDIPUS

Yet must I rule.

CREON

Not if thou rule ill.

OEDIPUS

Hear him, O Thebes!

CREON

Thebes is for me also-not for thee alone.

(JOCASTA enters from the palace.)

LEADER

Cease, princes; and in good time for you I see Jocasta coming yonder from the house, with whose help ye should compose your present feud.

JOCASTA

Misguided men, why have ye raised such foolish strife of tongues? Are ye not ashamed, while the land is thus sick, to stir up troubles of your own? Come, go thou into the house,-and thou, Creon, to thy home,-and forbear to make much of a petty grief.

CREON

Kinswoman, Oedipus thy lord claims to do dread things unto me, even one or other of two ills,-to thrust me from the land of my fathers, or to slay me amain.

OEDIPUS

Yea; for I have caught him, lady, working evil, by ill arts, against my person.

CREON

Now may I see no good, but perish accursed, if I have done aught to thee of that wherewith thou chargest me!

JOCASTA

O, for the gods' love, believe it, Oedipus-first, for the awful sake of this oath unto the gods,-then for my sake and for theirs who stand before thee!

(The following lines between the CHORUS and OEDIPUS and between the CHORUS, JOCASTA, and OEDIPUS are chanted responsively.)

CHORUS

strophe 1

Consent, reflect, hearken, O my king, I pray thee!

OEDIPUS

What grace, then wouldest thou have me grant thee?

CHORUS

Respect him who aforesaid was not foolish, and who now is strong in his oath.

OEDIPUS

Now dost thou know what thou cravest?

CHORUS

Yea.

OEDIPUS

Declare, then, what thou meanest.

CHORUS

That thou shouldest never use an unproved rumour to cast a

dishonouring charge on the friend who has bound himself with a curse.

OEDIPUS

Then be very sure that, when thou seekest this, for me thou art seeking destruction, or exile from this land.

CHORUS

strophe 2

No, by him who stands in the front of all the heavenly host, no, by the Sun! Unblest, unfriended, may I die by the uttermost doom, if have that thought! But my unhappy soul is worn by the withering of the land, and again by the thought that our old sorrows should be crowned by sorrows springing from you twain.

OEDIPUS

Then let him go, though I am surely doomed to death, or to be thrust dishonoured from the land. Thy lips, not his, move my compassion by their plaint; but he, where'er he be, shall be hated.

CREON

Sullen in yielding art thou seen, even as vehement in the excesses of thy wrath; but such natures are justly sorest for themselves to bear.

OEDIPUS

Then wilt thou not leave me in peace, and get thee gone?

CREON

I will go my way; I have found thee undiscerning, but in the sight of these I am just.

(Exit CREON.)

CHORUS

antistrophe 1

Lady, why dost thou delay to take yon man into the house?

JOCASTA

I will do so, when I have learned what hath chanced.

CHORUS

Blind suspicion, bred of talk, arose; and, on the other part, in-justice wounds.

JOCASTA

It was on both sides?

CHORUS

Aye.

JOCASTA

And what was the story?

CHORUS

Enough, methinks, enough-when our land is already vexed-that the matter should rest where it ceased.

OEDIPUS

Seest thou to what thou hast come, for all thy honest purpose, in seeking to slack and blunt my zeal?

CHORUS

antistrophe 2

King, I have said it not once alone-be sure that I should have been shown a madman, bankrupt in sane counsel, if I put thee

away-thee, who gavest a true course to my beloved country when distraught by troubles-thee, who now also art like to prove our prospering guide.

JOCASTA

In the name of the gods, tell me also, O king, on what account thou hast conceived this steadfast wrath.

OEDIPUS

That will I; for I honour thee, lady, above yonder men:-the cause is Creon, and the plots that he hath laid against me.

JOCASTA

Speak on-if thou canst tell clearly how the feud began.

OEDIPUS

He says that I stand guilty of the blood of Laius.

JOCASTA

As on his own knowledge? Or on hearsay from another?

OEDIPUS

Nay, he hath made a rascal seer his mouthpiece; as for himself, he keeps his lips wholly pure.

JOCASTA

Then absolve thyself of the things whereof thou speakest; hearken to me, and learn for thy comfort that nought of mortal birth is a sharer in the science of the seer. I will give thee pithy proof of that.

An oracle came to Laius once-I will not say from Phoebus himself, but from his ministers-that the doom should overtake him to die by the hand of his child, who should spring from him and me.

Now Laius,-as, at least, the rumour saith,-was murdered one day by foreign robbers at a place where three highways meet. And the child's birth was not three days past, when Laius pinned its ankles together, and had it thrown, by others' hands, on a trackless mountain.

So, in that case, Apollo brought it not to pass that the babe should become the slayer of his sire, or that Laius should die-the dread thing which he feared-by his child's hand. Thus did the messages of seer-craft map out the future. Regard them, thou, not at all. Whatsoever needful things the god seeks, he himself will easily bring to light.

OEDIPUS

What restlessness of soul, lady, what tumult of the mind hath just come upon me since I heard thee speak!

JOCASTA

What anxiety hath startled thee, that thou sayest this?

OEDIPUS

Methought I heard this from thee,-that Laius was slain where three highways meet.

JOCASTA

Yea, that was the story; nor hath it ceased yet.

OEDIPUS

And where is the place where this befell?

JOCASTA

The land is called Phocis; and branching roads lead to the same spot from Delphi and from Daulia.

OEDIPUS

And what is the time that hath passed since these things were?

JOCASTA

The news was published to the town shortly before thou wast first seen in power over this land.

OEDIPUS

O Zeus, what hast thou decreed to do unto me?

JOCASTA

And wherefore, Oedipus, doth this thing weigh upon thy soul?

OEDIPUS

Ask me not yet; but say what was the stature of Laius, and how ripe his manhood.

JOCASTA

He was tall,-the silver just lightly strewn among his hair; and his form was not greatly unlike to thine.

OEDIPUS

Unhappy that I am! Methinks I have been laying myself even now under a dread curse, and knew it not.

JOCASTA

How sayest thou? I tremble when I look on thee, my king.

OEDIPUS

Dread misgivings have I that the seer can see. But thou wilt show better if thou wilt tell me one thing more.

JOCASTA

Indeed-though I tremble-I will answer all thou askest, when I hear it.

OEDIPUS

Went he in small force, or with many armed followers, like a chieftain?

JOCASTA

Five they were in all,-a herald one of them; and there was one carriage, which bore Laius.

OEDIPUS

Alas! 'Tis now clear indeed. Who was he who gave you these tidings lady?

JOCASTA

A servant-the sole survivor who came home.

OEDIPUS

Is he haply at hand in the house now?

JOCASTA

No, truly; so soon as he came thence, and found thee reigning in the stead of Laius, he supplicated me, with hand laid on mine, that I would send him to the fields, to the pastures of the flocks, that he might be far from the sight of this town. And I sent him; he was worthy, for a slave, to win e'en a larger boon than that.

OEDIPUS

Would, then, that he could return to us without delay!

JOCASTA

It is easy: but wherefore dost thou enjoin this?

OEDIPUS

I fear, lady, that mine own lips have been unguarded; and therefore am I fain to behold him.

JOCASTA

Nay, he shall come. But I too, methinks, have a claim to learn what lies heavy on thy heart, my king.

OEDIPUS

Yea, and it shall not be kept from thee, now that my forebodings have advanced so far. Who, indeed, is more to me than thou, to whom I should speak in passing through such a fortune as this?

My father was Polybus of Corinth,-my mother, the Dorian Merope; and I was held the first of all the folk in that town, until a chance befell me, worthy, indeed, of wonder, though not worthy of mine own heat concerning it. At a banquet, a man full of wine cast it at me in his cups that I was not the true son of my sire. And I, vexed, restrained myself for that day as best I might; but on the next I went to my mother and father, and questioned them; and they were wroth for the taunt with him who had let that word fly. So on their part I had comfort; yet was this thing ever rankling in my heart; for it still crept abroad with strong rumour. And, unknown to mother or father, I went to Delphi; and Phoebus sent me forth disappointed of that knowledge for which I came, but in his response set forth other things, full of sorrow and terror and woe; even that I was fated to defile my mother's bed; and that I should show unto men a brood which they could not endure to behold; and that I should be the slayer of the sire who begat me.

And I, when I had listened to this, turned to flight from the land of Corinth, thenceforth wotting of its region by the stars alone, to some spot where I should never see fulfilment of the infamies foretold in mine evil doom. And on my way I came to the regions in which thou sayest that this prince perished. Now, lady, I will tell thee the truth. When in my journey I was near to those three roads, there met me a herald, and a man seated in a carriage drawn by colts, as thou hast described; and he who was in front, and the old man himself, were for thrusting me rudely from the path. Then, in anger, I struck him who pushed me aside-the driver; and the old man, seeing it, watched the moment when I was passing, and, from the carriage, brought his goad with two teeth down full upon my head. Yet was he paid with interest; by one swift blow from the staff in this hand he was rolled right out of the carriage, on his back; and slew every man of them.

But if this stranger had any tie of kinship with Laius, who is now more wretched than the man before thee? What mortal could prove more hated of heaven? Whom no stranger, no citizen, is allowed to receive in his house; whom it is unlawful that any one accost; whom all must repel from their homes! And this-this curse-was laid on me by no mouth

but mine own! And I pollute the bed of the slain man with the hands by which he perished. Say, am I vile? Oh, am I not utterly unclean?-seeing that I must be banished, and in banishment see not mine own people, nor set foot in mine own land, or else be joined in wedlock to my-mother, and slay my sire, even Polybus, who begat and reared me.

Then would not he speak aright of Oedipus, who judged these things sent by some cruel power above man? Forbid, forbid, ye pure and awful gods, that I should see that day! No, may I be swept from among men, ere I behold myself visited with the brand of such a doom!

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

To us, indeed, these things, O king, are fraught with fear; yet have hope, until at least thou hast gained full knowledge from him who saw the deed.

OEDIPUS

Hope, in truth, rests with me thus far alone; I can await the man summoned from the pastures.

JOCASTA

And when he has appeared-what wouldst thou have of him?

OEDIPUS

I will tell thee. If his story be found to tally with thine, I, at least, shall stand clear of disaster.

JOCASTA

And what of special note didst thou hear from me?

OEDIPUS

Thou wast saying that he spoke of Laius as slain by robbers. If, then, he still speaks, as before, of several, I was not the slayer: a solitary man could not be held the same with that band. But if he names one lonely wayfarer, then beyond doubt this guilt leans to me.

JOCASTA

Nay, be assured that thus, at least, the tale was first told; he cannot revoke that, for the city heard it, not I alone. But even if he should diverge somewhat from his former story, never, king, can he show that the murder of Laius, at least, is truly square to prophecy; of whom Loxias plainly said that he must die by the hand of my child. Howbeit that poor innocent never slew him, but perished first itself. So henceforth, for what touches divination, I would not look to my right hand or my left.

OEDIPUS

Thou judgest well. But nevertheless send some one to fetch the peasant, and neglect not this matter.

JOCASTA

I will send without delay. But let us come into the house: nothing will I do save at thy good pleasure.

(OEDIPUS and JOCASTA go into the palace.)

CHORUS (singing)

strophe 1

May destiny still find me winning the praise of reverent purity in all words and deeds sanctioned by those laws of range sublime,

called into life throughout the high clear heaven, whose father is Olympus alone; their parent was no race of mortal men, no, nor shall oblivion ever lay them to sleep; the god is mighty in them, and he grows not old.

antistrophe 1

Insolence breeds the tyrant; Insolence, once vainly surfeited on wealth that is not meet nor good for it, when it bath scaled the topmost ramparts, is hurled to a dire doom, wherein no service of the feet can serve. But I pray that the god never quell such rivalry as benefits the State; the god will I ever hold for our protector.

strophe 2

But if any man walks haughtily in deed or word, with no fear of justice, no reverence for the images of gods, may an evil doom seize him for his ill-starred pride, if he will not win his vantage fairly, nor keep him from unholy deeds, but must lay profaning hands on sanctities.

Where such things are, what mortal shall boast any more that he can ward the arrows of the gods from his life? Nay, if such deeds are in honour, wherefore should we join in the sacred dance?

antistrophe 2

No more will I go reverently to earth's central and inviolate shrine, no more to Abae's temple or Olympia, if these oracles fit not the issue, so that all men shall point at them with the finger. Nay, king,-if thou art rightly called,--Zeus all-ruling, may it not escape thee and thine ever-deathless power!

The old prophecies concerning Laius are fading; already men are setting them at nought, and nowhere is Apollo glorified with honours; the worship of the gods is perishing.

(JOCASTA comes forth, bearing a branch, wreathed with festoons of wool, which, as a suppliant, she is about to lay on the altar of the household god, Lycean Apollo, in front of the palace.)

JOCASTA

Princes of the land, the thought has come to me to visit the shrines of the gods, with this wreathed branch in my hands, and these gifts of incense. For Oedipus excites his soul overmuch with all manner of alarms, nor, like a man of sense, judges the new things by the old, but is at the will of the speaker, if he speak terrors.

Since, then, by counsel I can do no good, to thee, Lycean Apollo, for thou art nearest, I have come, a suppliant with these symbols of prayer, that thou mayest find us some riddance from uncleanness. For now we are all afraid, seeing him affrighted, even as they who see fear in the helmsman of their ship.

(While JOCASTA is offering her prayers to the god, a MESSENGER, evidently a stranger, enters and addresses the Elders of the CHORUS.)

MESSENGER

Might I learn from you, strangers, where is the house of the king Oedipus? Or, better still, tell me where he himself is-if ye know.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

This is his dwelling, and he himself, stranger, is within; and this lady is the mother of his children.

MESSENGER

Then may she be ever happy in a happy home, since she is his heaven-blest queen.

JOCASTA

Happiness to thee also, stranger! 'tis the due of thy fair greeting. But say what thou hast come to seek or to tell.

MESSENGER

Good tidings, lady, for thy house and for thy husband.

JOCASTA

What are they? And from whom hast thou come?

MESSENGER

From Corinth: and at the message which I will speak anon thou wilt rejoice-doubtless; yet haply grieve.

JOCASTA

And what is it? How hath it thus a double potency?

MESSENGER

The people will make him king of the Isthmian land, as 'twas said there.

JOCASTA

How then? Is the aged Polybus no more in power?

MESSENGER

No, verily: for death holds him in the tomb.

JOCASTA

How sayest thou? Is Polybus dead, old man?

MESSENGER

If I speak not the truth, I am content to die.

JOCASTA

O handmaid, away with all speed, and tell this to thy master! O ye oracles of the gods, where stand ye now! This is the man whom Oedipus long feared and shunned, lest he should slay him; and now this man hath died in the course of destiny, not by his hand.

(OEDIPUS enters from the palace.)

OEDIPUS

Jocasta, dearest wife, why hast thou summoned me forth from these doors?

JOCASTA

Hear this man, and judge, as thou listenest, to what the awful oracles of the gods have come.

OEDIPUS

And he-who may he be, and what news hath he for me?

JOCASTA

He is from Corinth, to tell that thy father Polybus lives no longer, but hath perished.

OEDIPUS

How, stranger? Let me have it from thine own mouth.

MESSENGER

If I must first make these tidings plain, know indeed that he is

dead and gone.

OEDIPUS

By treachery, or by visit of disease?

MESSENGER

A light thing in the scale brings the aged to their rest.

OEDIPUS

Ah, he died, it seems, of sickness?

MESSENGER

Yea, and of the long years that he had told.

OEDIPUS

Alas, alas! Why, indeed, my wife, should one look to the hearth of the Pythian seer, or to the birds that scream above our heads, on whose showing I was doomed to slay my sire? But he is dead, and hid already beneath the earth; and here am I, who have not put hand to spear. Unless, perchance, he was killed by longing for me: thus, indeed, I should be the cause of his death. But the oracles as they stand, at least, Polybus hath swept with him to his rest in Hades: they are worth nought.

JOCASTA

Nay, did I not so foretell to thee long since?

OEDIPUS

Thou didst: but I was misled by my fear.

JOCASTA

Now no more lay aught of those things to heart.

OEDIPUS

But surely I must needs fear my mother's bed?

JOCASTA

Nay, what should mortal fear, for whom the decrees of Fortune are supreme, and who hath clear foresight of nothing? 'Tis best to live at random, as one may. But fear not thou touching wedlock with thy mother. Many men ere now have so fared in dreams also: but he to whom these things are as nought bears his life most easily.

OEDIPUS

All these bold words of thine would have been well, were not my mother living; but as it is, since she lives, I must needs fear-though thou sayest well.

JOCASTA

Howbeit thy father's death is a great sign to cheer us.

OEDIPUS

Great, I know; but my fear is of her who lives.

MESSENGER

And who is the woman about whom ye fear?

OEDIPUS

Merope, old man, the consort of Polybus.

MESSENGER

And what is it in her that moves your fear?

OEDIPUS

A heaven-sent oracle of dread import, stranger.

MESSENGER

Lawful, or unlawful, for another to know?

OEDIPUS

Lawful, surely. Loxias once said that I was doomed to espouse mine own mother, and to shed with mine own hands my father's blood. Wherefore my home in Corinth was long kept by me afar; with happy event, indeed,-yet still 'tis sweet to see the face of parents.

MESSENGER

Was it indeed for fear of this that thou wast an exile from that city?

OEDIPUS

And because I wished not, old man, to be the slayer of my sire.

MESSENGER

Then why have I not freed thee, king, from this fear, seeing that I came with friendly purpose?

OEDIPUS

Indeed thou shouldst have guerdon due from me.

MESSENGER

Indeed 'twas chiefly for this that I came that, on thy return home, might reap some good.

OEDIPUS

Nay, I will never go near my parents.

MESSENGER

Ah my son, 'tis plain enough that thou knowest not what thou doest.

OEDIPUS

How, old man? For the gods' love, tell me.

MESSENGER

If for these reasons thou shrinkest from going home.

OEDIPUS

Aye, I dread lest Phoebus prove himself true for me.

MESSENGER

Thou darest to be stained with guilt through thy parents?

OEDIPUS

Even so, old man-this it is that ever affrights me.

MESSENGER

Dost thou know, then, that thy fears are wholly vain?

OEDIPUS

How so, if I was born of those parents?

MESSENGER

Because Polybus was nothing to thee in blood.

OEDIPUS

What sayest thou? Was Polybus not my sire?

MESSENGER

No more than he who speaks to thee, but just so much.

OEDIPUS

And how can my sire be level with him who is as nought to me?

MESSENGER

Nay, he begat thee not, any more than I.

OEDIPUS

Nay, wherefore, then, called he me his son?
MESSENGER
Know that he had received thee as a gift from my hands of yore.
OEDIPUS
And yet he loved me so dearly, who came from another's hand?
MESSENGER
Yea, his former childlessness won him thereto.
OEDIPUS
And thou-hadst thou bought me or found me by chance, when thou gavest me to him?
MESSENGER
Found thee in Cithaeron's winding glens.
OEDIPUS
And wherefore wast thou roaming in those regions?
MESSENGER
I was there in charge of mountain flocks.
OEDIPUS
What, thou wast a shepherd-a vagrant hireling?
MESSENGER
But thy preserver, my son, in that hour.
OEDIPUS
And what pain was mine when thou didst take me in thine arms?
MESSENGER
The ankles of thy feet might witness.
OEDIPUS
Ah me, why dost thou speak of that old trouble?
MESSENGER
I freed thee when thou hadst thine ankles pinned together.
OEDIPUS
Aye, 'twas a dread brand of shame that I took from my cradle.
MESSENGER
Such, that from that fortune thou wast called by the name which still is thine.
OEDIPUS
Oh, for the gods' love-was the deed my mother's or father's?
Speak!
MESSENGER
I know not; he who gave thee to me wots better of that than I.
OEDIPUS
What, thou hadst me from another? Thou didst not light on me thyself?
MESSENGER
No: another shepherd gave thee up to me.
OEDIPUS
Who was he? Art thou in case to tell clearly?
MESSENGER
I think he was called one of the household of Laius.
OEDIPUS
The king who ruled this country long ago?

MESSENGER

The same: 'twas in his service that the man was a herd.

OEDIPUS

Is he still alive, that I might see him?

MESSENGER

Nay, ye folk of the country should know best.

OEDIPUS

Is there any of you here present that knows the herd of whom he speaks-that hath seen him in the pastures or the town? Answer! The hour hath come that these things should be finally revealed.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

Methinks he speaks of no other than the peasant whom thou wast already fain to see; but our lady Jocasta might best tell that.

OEDIPUS

Lady, wottest thou of him whom we lately summoned? Is it of him that this man speaks?

JOCASTA

Why ask of whom he spoke? Regard it not... waste not a thought on what he said... 'twere idle.

OEDIPUS

It must not be that, with such clues in my grasp, I should fail to bring my birth to light.

JOCASTA

For the gods' sake, if thou hast any care for thine own life, forbear this search! My anguish is enough.

OEDIPUS

Be of good courage; though I be found the son of servile mother,-aye, a slave by three descents,-thou wilt not be proved base-born.

JOCASTA

Yet hear me, I implore thee: do not thus.

OEDIPUS

I must not hear of not discovering the whole truth.

JOCASTA

Yet I wish thee well-I counsel thee for the best.

OEDIPUS

These best counsels, then, vex my patience.

JOCASTA

Ill-fated one! Mayst thou never come to know who thou art!

OEDIPUS

Go, some one, fetch me the herdsman hither, -and leave yon woman to glory in her princely stock.

JOCASTA

Alas, alas, miserable!-that word alone can I say unto thee, and no other word henceforth for ever.

(She rushes into the palace.)

LEADER

Why hath the lady gone, Oedipus, in a transport of wild grief? I misdoubt, a storm of sorrow will break forth from this silence.

OEDIPUS

Break forth what will! Be my race never so lowly, I must crave to learn it. Yon woman, perchance,-for she is proud with more than a woman's pride -thinks shame of my base source. But I, who hold myself son of Fortune that gives good, will not be dishonoured. She is the mother from whom I spring; and the months, my kinsmen, have marked me sometimes lowly, sometimes great. Such being my lineage, never more can I prove false to it, or spare to search out the secret of my birth.

CHORUS (singing)

strophe

If I am a seer or wise of heart, O Cithaeron, thou shalt not fail-by yon heaven, thou shalt not!-to know at tomorrow's full moon that Oedipus honours thee as native to him, as his nurse, and his mother, and that thou art celebrated in our dance and song, because thou art well-pleasing to our prince. O Phoebus to whom we cry, may these things find favour in thy sight!

antistrophe

Who was it, my son, who of the race whose years are many that bore thee in wedlock with Pan, the mountain-roaming father? Or was it a bride of Loxias that bore thee? For dear to him are all the upland pastures. Or perchance 'twas Cyllene's lord, or the Bacchants' god, dweller on the hill-tops, that received thee, a new-born joy, from one of the Nymphs of Helicon, with whom he most doth sport.

OEDIPUS

Elders, if 'tis for me to guess, who have never met with him, I think I see the herdsman of whom we have long been in quest; for in his venerable age he tallies with yon stranger's years, and withal I know those who bring him, methinks, as servants of mine own. But perchance thou mayest have the advantage of me in knowledge, if thou hast seen the herdsman before.

LEADER

Aye, I know him, be sure; he was in the service of Laius-trusty as any man, in his shepherd's place.

(The HERDSMAN is brought in.)

OEDIPUS

I ask thee first, Corinthian stranger, is this he whom thou meanest?

MESSENGER

This man whom thou beholdest.

OEDIPUS

Ho thou, old man-I would have thee look this way, and answer all that I ask thee. Thou wast once in the service of Laius?

HERDSMAN

I was-a slave not bought, but reared in his house.

OEDIPUS

Employed in what labour, or what way of life?

HERDSMAN

For the best part of my life I tended flocks.

OEDIPUS

And what the regions that thou didst chiefly haunt?

HERDSMAN

Sometimes it was Cithaeron, sometimes the neighbouring ground.

OEDIPUS

Then wottest thou of having noted yon man in these parts-

HERDSMAN

Doing what?... What man dost thou mean?...

OEDIPUS

This man here -or of having ever met him before?

HERDSMAN

Not so that I could speak at once from memory.

MESSENGER

And no wonder, master. But I will bring clear recollection to his ignorance. I am sure that he well wots of the time when we abode in the region of Cithaeron,-he with two flocks, I, his comrade, with one,--three full half-years, from spring to Arcturus; and then for the winter I used to drive my flock to mine own fold, and he took his to the fold of Laius. Did aught of this happen as I tell, or did it not?

HERDSMAN

Thou speakest the truth-though 'tis long ago.

MESSENGER

Come, tell me now-wottest thou of having given me a boy in those days, to be reared as mine own foster-son?

HERDSMAN

What now? Why dost thou ask the question?

MESSENGER

Yonder man, my friend, is he who then was young.

HERDSMAN

Plague seize thee-be silent once for all!

OEDIPUS

Ha! chide him not, old man-thy words need chiding more than his.

HERDSMAN

And wherein, most noble master, do I offend?

OEDIPUS

In not telling of the boy concerning whom he asks.

HERDSMAN

He speaks without knowledge-he is busy to no purpose.

OEDIPUS

Thou wilt not speak with a good grace, but thou shalt on pain.

HERDSMAN

Nay, for the gods' love, misuse not an old man!

OEDIPUS

Ho, some one-pinion him this instant!

HERDSMAN

Alas, wherefore? what more wouldst thou learn?

OEDIPUS

Didst thou give this man the child of whom he asks?

HERDSMAN

I did,-and would I had perished that day!
OEDIPUS
Well, thou wilt come to that, unless thou tell the honest truth.
HERDSMAN
Nay, much more am I lost, if I speak.
OEDIPUS
The fellow is bent, methinks, on more delays...
HERDSMAN
No, no!-I said before that I gave it to him.
OEDIPUS
Whence hadst thou got it? In thine own house, or from another?
HERDSMAN
Mine own it was not-I had received it from a man.
OEDIPUS
From whom of the citizens here? from what home?
HERDSMAN
Forbear, for the gods' love, master, forbear to ask more!
OEDIPUS
Thou art lost if I have to question thee again.
HERDSMAN
It was a child, then, of the house of Laius.
OEDIPUS
A slave? or one born of his own race?
HERDSMAN
Ah me-I am on the dreaded brink of speech.
OEDIPUS
And I of hearing; yet must I hear.
HERDSMAN
Thou must know, then, that 'twas said to be his own child-but
thy lady within could best say how these things are.
OEDIPUS
How? She gave it to thee?
HERDSMAN
Yea, O king.
OEDIPUS
For what end?
HERDSMAN
That I should make away with it.
OEDIPUS
Her own child, the wretch?
HERDSMAN
Aye, from fear of evil prophecies.
OEDIPUS
What were they?
HERDSMAN
The tale ran that he must slay his sire.
OEDIPUS
Why, then, didst thou give him up to this old man?
HERDSMAN

Through pity, master, as deeming that he would bear him away to another land, whence he himself came; but he saved him for the direst woe. For if thou art what this man saith, know that thou wast born to misery.

OEDIPUS

Oh, oh! All brought to pass-all true! Thou light, may I now look my last on thee-I who have been found accursed in birth, accursed in wedlock, accursed in the shedding of blood!

(He rushes into the palace.)

CHORUS (singing)

strophe 1

Alas, ye generations of men, how mere a shadow do I count your life! Where, where is the mortal who wins more of happiness than just the seeming, and, after the semblance, a falling away? Thine is a fate that warns me, -thine, thine, unhappy Oedipus-to call no earthly creature blest.

antistrophe 1

For he, O Zeus, sped his shaft with peerless skill, and won the prize of an all-prosperous fortune; he slew the maiden with crooked talons who sang darkly; he arose for our land as a tower against death. And from that time, Oedipus, thou hast been called our king, and hast been honoured supremely, bearing sway in great Thebes.

strophe 2

But now whose story is more grievous in men's ears? Who is more wretched captive to fierce plagues and troubles, with all his life reversed?

Alas, renowned Oedipus! The same bounteous place of rest sufficed thee, as child and as sire also, that thou shouldst make thereon thy nuptial couch. Oh, how can the soil wherein thy father sowed, unhappy one, have suffered thee in silence so long?

antistrophe 2

Time the all-seeing hath found thee out in thy despite: he judgeth the monstrous marriage wherein begetter and begotten have long been one.

Alas, thou child of Laius, would, would that I had never seen thee! I wail as one who pours a dirge from his lips; sooth to speak, 'twas thou that gavest me new life, and through thee darkness hath fallen upon mine eyes.

(Enter SECOND MESSENGER from the palace.)

SECOND MESSENGER

Ye who are ever most honoured in this land, what deeds shall ye hear, what deeds behold, what burden of sorrow shall be yours, if, true to your race, ye still care for the house of Labdacus! For I ween that not Ister nor Phasis could wash this house clean, so many are the ills that it shrouds, or will soon bring to light, -ills wrought not unwittingly, but of purpose. And those griefs smart most which are seen to be of our own choice.

LEADER

Indeed those which we knew before fall not short of claiming

sore lamentation: besides them, what dost thou announce?

SECOND MESSENGER

This is the shortest tale to tell and to hear: our royal lady Jocasta is dead.

LEADER

Alas, hapless one! From what cause?

SECOND MESSENGER

By her own hand. The worst pain in what hath chanced is not for you, for yours it is not to behold. Nevertheless, so far as mine own memory serves, ye shall learn that unhappy woman's fate.

When, frantic, she had passed within the vestibule, she rushed straight towards her nuptial couch, clutching her hair with the fingers of both hands; once within the chamber, she dashed the doors together at her back; then called on the name of Laius, long since a corpse, mindful of that son, begotten long ago, by whom the sire was slain, leaving the mother to breed accursed offspring with his own.

And she bewailed the wedlock wherein, wretched, she had borne a two-fold brood, husband by husband, children by her child. And how thereafter she perished, is more than I know. For with a shriek Oedipus burst in, and suffered us not to watch her woe unto the end; on him, as he rushed around, our eyes were set. To and fro he went, asking us to give him a sword, -asking where he should find the wife who was no wife, but a mother whose womb had borne alike himself and his children. And, in his frenzy, a power above man was his guide; for 'twas none of us mortals who were nigh. And with a dread shriek, as though some one beckoned him on, he sprang at the double doors, and from their sockets forced the bending bolts, and rushed into the room.

There beheld we the women hanging by the neck in a twisted noose of swinging cords. But he, when he saw her, with a dread, deep cry of misery, loosed the halter whereby she hung. And when the hapless woman was stretched upon the ground, then was the sequel dread to see. For he tore from her raiment the golden brooches wherewith she was decked, and lifted them, and smote full on his own eye-balls, uttering words like these: 'No more shall ye behold such horrors as I was suffering and working! long enough have ye looked on those whom ye ought never to have seen, failed in knowledge of those whom I yearned to know-henceforth ye shall be dark!'

To such dire refrain, not once alone but oft struck he his eyes with lifted hand; and at each blow the ensanguined eye-balls bedewed his beard, nor sent forth sluggish drops of gore, but all at once a dark shower of blood came down like hail.

From the deeds of twain such ills have broken forth, not on one alone, but with mingled woe for man and wife. The old happiness of their ancestral fortune was aforesaid happiness indeed; but today-lamentation, ruin, death, shame, all earthly ills that can be named-all, all are theirs.

LEADER

And hath the sufferer now any respite from pain?

SECOND MESSENGER

He cries for some one to unbar the gates and show to all the
Cadmeans his father's slayer, his mother's-the unholy word must not
pass my lips,-as purposing to cast himself out of the land, and
abide no more, to make the house accursed under his own curse. Howbeit
he lacks strength, and one to guide his steps; for the anguish is more
than man may bear. And he will show this to thee also; for lo, the
bars of the gates are withdrawn, and soon thou shalt behold a sight
which even he who abhors it must pity.

(The central door of the palace is now opened. OEDIPUS comes
forth, leaning on attendants; the bloody stains are still upon his
face. The following lines between OEDIPUS and the CHORUS are chanted
responsively.)

CHORUS

O dread fate for men to see, O most dreadful of all that have
met mine eyes! Unhappy one, what madness hath come on thee? Who is the
unearthly foe that, with a bound of more than mortal range, hath
made thine ill-starred life his prey?

Alas, alas, thou hapless one! Nay, I cannot e'en look on thee,
though there is much that I would fain ask, fain learn, much that
draws my wistful gaze with such a shuddering dost thou fill me!

OEDIPUS

Woe is me! Alas, alas, wretched that I am! Whither, whither am I
borne in my misery? How is my voice swept abroad on the wings of the
air? Oh my Fate, how far hast thou sprung!

CHORUS

To a dread place, dire in men's ears, dire in their sight.

OEDIPUS

strophe 1

O thou horror of darkness that enfolded me, visitant unspeakable,
resistless, sped by a wind too fair!

Ay me! and once again, ay me!

How is my soul pierced by the stab of these goads, and withal by
the memory of sorrows!

CHORUS

Yea, amid woes so many a twofold pain may well be thine to mourn
and to bear.

OEDIPUS

antistrophe 1

Ah, friend, thou still art steadfast in thy tendance of me,-thou
still hast patience to care for the blind man! Ah me! Thy presence
is not hid from me-no, dark though I am, yet know I thy voice full
well.

CHORUS

Man of dread deeds, how couldst thou in such wise quench thy
vision? What more than human power urged thee?

OEDIPUS

strophe 2

Apollo, friends, Apollo was he that brought these my woes to pass,
these my sore, sore woes: but the hand that struck the eyes was none

save mine, wretched that I am! Why was I to see, when sight could show me nothing sweet?

CHORUS

These things were even as thou sayest.

OEDIPUS

Say, friends, what can I more behold, what can I love, what greeting can touch mine ear with joy? Haste, lead me from the land, friends, lead me hence, the utterly lost, the thrice accursed, yea, the mortal most abhorred of heaven!

CHORUS

Wretched alike for thy fortune and for thy sense thereof, would that I had never so much as known thee!

OEDIPUS

antistrophe 2

Perish the man, whoe'er he was, that freed me in the pastures from the cruel shackle on my feet, and saved me from death, and gave me back to life,-a thankless deed! Had I died then, to my friends and to thine own soul I had not been so sore a grief.

CHORUS

I also would have had it thus.

OEDIPUS

So had I not come to shed my father's blood, nor been called among men the spouse of her from whom I sprang: but now am I forsaken of the gods, son of a defiled mother, successor to his bed who gave me mine own wretched being: and if there be yet a woe surpassing woes, it hath become the portion of Oedipus.

CHORUS

I know not how I can say that thou hast counselled well: for thou wert better dead than living and blind.

OEDIPUS

Show me not at large that these things are not best done thus: given me counsel no more. For, had I sight, I know not with what eyes I could e'en have looked on my father, when I came to the place of the dead, aye, nor on my miserable mother, since against both I have sinned such sins as strangling could not punish. But deem ye that the sight of children, born as mine were born, was lovely for me to look upon? No, no, not lovely to mine eyes for ever! No, nor was this town with its towered walls, nor the sacred statues of the gods, since I, thrice wretched that I am,-I, noblest of the sons of Thebes,-have doomed myself to know these no more, by mine own command that all should thrust away the impious one,-even him whom gods have shown to be unholy-and of the race of Laius!

After bearing such a stain upon me, was I to look with steady eyes on this folk? No, verily: no, were there yet a way to choke the fount of hearing, I had not spared to make a fast prison of this wretched frame, that so I should have known nor sight nor sound; for 'tis sweet that our thought should dwell beyond the sphere of griefs.

Alas, Cithaeron, why hadst thou a shelter for me? When I was given to thee, why didst thou not slay me straightway, that so I might never

have revealed my source to men? Ah, Polybus,-ah, Corinth, and thou that wast called the ancient house of my fathers, how seeming-fair was your nurseling, and what ills were festering beneath! For now I am found evil, and of evil birth. O ye three roads, and thou secret glen,-thou coppice, and narrow way where three paths met-ye who drank from my hands that father's blood which was mine own,-remember ye, perchance, what deeds I wrought for you to see,-and then, when I came hither, what fresh deeds I went on to do?

O marriage-rites, ye gave me birth, and when ye had brought me forth, again ye bore children to your child, ye created an incestuous kinship of fathers, brothers, sons,-brides, wives, mothers,-yea, all the foulest shame that is wrought among men! Nay, but 'tis unmeet to name what 'tis unmeet to do:-haste ye, for the gods' love, hide me somewhere beyond the land, or slay me, or cast me into the sea, where ye shall never behold me more! Approach,-deign to lay your hands on a wretched man;-hearken, fear not,-my plague can rest on no mortal beside.

(Enter CREON)

LEADER

Nay, here is Creon, in meet season for thy requests, crave they act or counsel; for he alone is left to guard the land in thy stead.

OEDIPUS

Ah me, how indeed shall I accost him? What claim to credence can be shown on my part? For in the past I have been found wholly false to him.

CREON

I have not come in mockery, Oedipus, nor to reproach thee with any bygone fault. (To the attendants.) But ye, if ye respect the children of men no more, revere at least the all-nurturing flame of our lord the Sun,-spare to show thus nakedly a pollution such as this,-one which neither earth can welcome, nor the holy rain, nor the light. Nay, take him into the house as quickly as ye may; for it best accords with piety that kinsfolk alone should see and hear a kinsman's woes.

OEDIPUS

For the gods' love-since thou hast done a gentle violence to my presage, who hast come in a spirit so noble to me, a man most vile-grant me a boon:-for thy good I will speak, not for mine own.

CREON

And what wish art thou so fain to have of me?

OEDIPUS

Cast me out of this land with all speed, to a place where no mortal shall be found to greet me more.

CREON

This would I have done, be thou sure, but that I craved first to learn all my duty from the god.

OEDIPUS

Nay, his behest hath been set forth in full,-to let me perish, the parricide, the unholy one, that I am.

CREON

Such was the purport; yet, seeing to what a pass we have come, 'tis better to learn clearly what should be done.

OEDIPUS

Will ye, then, seek a response on behalf of such a wretch as I am?

CREON

Aye, for thou thyself wilt now surely put faith in the god.

OEDIPUS

Yea; and on thee lay I this charge, to thee will I make this entreaty:-give to her who is within such burial as thou thyself wouldest; for thou wilt meetly render the last rites to thine own. But for me-never let this city of my sire be condemned to have me dwelling therein, while I live: no, suffer me to abide on the hills, where yonder is Cithaeron, famed as mine,-which my mother and sire, while they lived, set for my appointed tomb, -that so I may die by their decree who sought to slay me. Howbeit of thus much am I sure,-that neither sickness nor aught else can destroy me; for never had I been snatched from death, but in reserve for some strange doom.

Nay, let my fate go whither it will: but as touching my children,-I pray thee, Creon, take no care on thee for my sons; they are men, so that, be they where they may, they can never lack the means to live. But my two girls, poor hapless ones,-who never knew my table spread apart, or lacked their father's presence, but ever in all things shared my daily bread,-I pray thee, care for them; and-if thou canst-suffer me to touch them with my hands, and to indulge my grief. Grant it, prince, grant it, thou noble heart! Ah, could I but once touch them with my hands, I should think that they were with me, even as when I had sight...

(CREON'S attendants lead in the children ANTIGONE and ISMENE.)

Ha? O ye gods, can it be my loved ones that I hear sobbing,-Can Creon have taken pity on me and sent me my children-my darlings? Am right?

CREON

Yea: 'tis of my contriving, for I knew thy joy in them of old,-the joy that now is thine.

OEDIPUS

Then blessed be thou, and, for guerdon of this errand, may heaven prove to thee a kinder guardian than it hath to me! My children, where are ye? Come hither,-hither to the hands of him whose mother was your own, the hands whose offices have wrought that your sire's once bright eyes should be such orbs as these,-his, who seeing nought, knowing nought, became your father by her from whom he sprang! For you also do I weep-behold you I cannot-when I think of the bitter life in days to come which men will make you live. To what company of the citizens will ye go, to what festival, from which ye shall not return home in tears, instead of sharing in the holiday? But when ye are now come to years ripe for marriage, who shall he be, who shall be the man, my daughters, that will hazard taking unto him such reproaches as must be baneful alike to my

offspring and to yours? For what misery is wanting? Your sire slew his sire, he had seed of her who bare him, and begat you at the sources of his own being! Such are the taunts that will be cast at you; and who then will wed? The man lives not, no, it cannot be, my children, but ye must wither in barren maidenhood.

Ah, son of Menoeceus, hear me-since thou art the only father left to them, for we, their parents, are lost, both of us,-allow them not to wander poor and unwed, who are thy kinswomen, nor abase them to the level of my woes. Nay, pity them, when thou seest them at this tender age so utterly forlorn, save for thee. Signify thy promise, generous man, by the touch of thy hand! To you, my children, I would have given much counsel, were your minds mature; but now I would have this to be your prayer-that ye live where occasion suffers, and that the life which is your portion may be happier than your sire's.

CREON

Thy grief hath had large scope enough: nay, pass into the house.

OEDIPUS

I must obey, though 'tis in no wise sweet.

CREON

Yea: for it is in season that all things are good.

OEDIPUS

Knowest thou, then, on what conditions I will go?

CREON

Thou shalt name them; so shall I know them when I hear.

OEDIPUS

See that thou send me to dwell beyond this land.

CREON

Thou askest me for what the god must give.

OEDIPUS

Nay, to the gods I have become most hateful.

CREON

Then shalt thou have thy wish anon.

OEDIPUS

So thou consentest?

CREON

'Tis not my wont to speak idly what I do not mean.

OEDIPUS

Then 'tis time to lead me hence.

CREON

Come, then,-but let thy children go.

OEDIPUS

Nay, take not these from me!

CREON

Crave not to be master in all things: for the mastery which thou didst win hath not followed thee through life.

CHORUS (singing)

Dwellers in our native Thebes, behold, this is Oedipus, who knew the famed riddle, and was a man most mighty; on whose fortunes what

citizen did not gaze with envy? Behold into what a stormy sea of dread trouble he hath come!

Therefore, while our eyes wait to see the destined final day, we must call no one happy who is of mortal race, until he hath crossed life's border, free from pain.

-THE END-