



Sophocles

*The Tragedies
of Sophocles*

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The Tragedies of Sophocles



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IN writing this translation as an adjunct to a commentary on Sophocles, the author had no intention of publishing it separately; but he has seen reason to think that, by doing so, he may meet the convenience of some readers. The brief introduction here prefixed to each play supplies τὰ ἔξω τῆς τραγωδίας,—the events which are supposed to have occurred before the moment at which the drama begins.

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Oedipus the King

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OEDIPUS THE KING.

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PERSONS OF THE DRAMA.

OEDIPUS, KING OF THEBES.

PRIEST OF ZEUS.

CREON, *brother of locasta.*

TEIRESIAS, *the blind prophet.*

LOCASTA.

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 locasta.

SCENE: Before the Royal Palace at Thebes.

Laius, son of Labdacus, King of Thebes, had been told at Delphi by the oracle that a son would be born to him who should slay him. When his wife Iocasta bore a son, the babe was given by its mother to a Theban shepherd, to expose on Mount Cithaeron. This man, in pity, gave it to a Corinthian shepherd whom he met in the hills, who took it to Corinth; and there the child was brought up as the son of King Polybus and his wife Merope.

Years went by. Once at a feast the young Oedipus was taunted with not being really the son of Polybus. He went to ask the oracle at Delphi; and was told that it was his destiny to slay his father and to wed his mother. He resolved never to go near Corinth again, and took the road leading eastwards into Boeotia. On his way he met Laius, King of Thebes, at the 'Branching Roads' in Phocis, without knowing who he was. A quarrel occurred: Oedipus slew Laius, and three of his four attendants. The fourth, who escaped, was the Theban shepherd who in old days had received the infant from Iocasta.

Oedipus continued his journey, and reached Thebes at the time when it was being plagued by the Sphinx. He guessed the monster's riddle, and the Sphinx hurled herself from a rock. Oedipus was made King of Thebes, and married Iocasta. Soon afterwards the shepherd sought an audience of the Queen, and earnestly prayed that he might be sent to tend flocks in certain distant pastures. She readily granted the boon; it was a small thing for an old and faithful servant to ask.

About sixteen years have passed since then, and Iocasta has borne two sons and two daughters to Oedipus.

But now a great calamity has visited Thebes: there is a blight on the fruits of the earth: a pestilence is desolating the city. While offerings are made at the altars, a band of suppliants, old and young, is led by the Priest of Zeus into the presence of the wise King. He, if any mortal, can help them.

OEDIPUS THE KING.

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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 ¹⁰these—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,²⁰ 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, ³⁰but 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.

40And 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: 50nay, 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.

O ϵ . Oh my piteous children, known, well known to me are the desires wherewith ye have come: well wot I that ye suffer all; 60yet, 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 Menoeceus, Creon, mine own wife's brother, to the Pythian house of Phoebus, 70to 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.

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

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

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

OE. We shall know soon: he is at range to hear.—Prince, my kinsman, son of Menoeceus, 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.

OE. But what is the oracle? So far, thy words make me neither bold nor yet afraid.⁹⁰

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

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

CR. 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.

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

CR. ¹⁰⁰By banishing a man, or by bloodshed in quittance of bloodshed, since it is that blood which brings the tempest on our city.

OE. And who is the man whose fate he thus reveals?

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

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

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

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

CR. In this land,—said the god. ¹¹⁰What is sought for can be caught; only that which is not watched escapes.

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

CR. '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.

OE. 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?

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

OE. And what was that? ¹²⁰One thing might show the clue to many, could we get but a small beginning for hope.

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

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

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

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

CR. The riddling Sphinx had made us let dark ¹³⁰things go, and was inviting us to think of what lay at our doors.

OE. 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.¹⁴⁰ 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.

PR. 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.¹⁵⁰

CHORUS.

str. O sweetly-speaking message of Zeus, in what spirit hast
1.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!

*ant.*First call I on thee, daughter of Zeus, divine Athena, and on
1.thy sister,¹⁶⁰ 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!

*str.*Woe is me, countless are the sorrows that I bear; a plague
2.is on all our host,¹⁷⁰ 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.

By such deaths, past numbering, the city perishes: unpitied, her

ant. children lie on the ground, spreading pestilence, with none

2. to mourn:180 and meanwhile young wives, and gray-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.

str. And grant that the fierce god of death,190 who now with no

3. 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 a fair wind to the great deep of Amphitritè, 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,200 O Zeus our father, slay him beneath thy thunderbolt!

ant. Lycean King, fain were I that thy shafts also, from thy bent

3. 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,210 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.

OÈ. 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;220 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,²³⁰ 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;²⁴⁰ 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,²⁵⁰ 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,²⁶⁰ who possess 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 them²⁷⁰ 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.

CH. 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.

OE. Justly said; but no man on the earth²⁸⁰ can force the gods to what they will not.

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

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

CH. 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.

OE. 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.

CH. Indeed (his skill apart) the rumours are but faint and old.²⁹⁰

OE. What rumours are they? I look to every story.

CH. Certain wayfarers were said to have killed him.

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

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

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

CH. 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.

O_E. Teiresias, whose soul grasps all things,³⁰⁰ 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.³¹⁰ 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.

O_E. What now? How sad thou hast come in!

T_E. Let me go home;³²⁰ most easily wilt thou bear thine own burden to the end, and I mine, if thou wilt consent.

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

T_E. 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.

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

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

O_E. How sayest thou?³³⁰ Thou knowest the secret, and wilt not tell it, but art minded to betray us and to destroy the State?

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

O_E. 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?

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

O_E. And who would not be angry to hear the words with which thou now dost slight this city?³⁴⁰

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

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

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

O_E. 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.

T_E. In sooth?—I charge thee that thou abide³⁵⁰ 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.

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

T_E. I have escaped: in my truth is my strength.

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

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

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

T_E. Didst thou not take my sense before?³⁶⁰ Or art thou tempting me in talk?

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

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

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

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

O_E. What thou wilt; it will be said in vain.

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

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

T_E. Yes, if there is any strength in truth.

O_E. Nay, there is,—for all save thee;³⁷⁰ for thee that strength is not, since thou art maimed in ear, and in wit, and in eye.

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

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

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

O_E. Are these Creon's devices, or thine?

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

O_E. O wealth, and empire, and skill surpassing skill³⁸⁰ 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, a tricky quack, who hath eyes only for his gains, but in his art is blind!

Come, now, tell me, where hast thou proved thyself³⁹⁰ 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.⁴⁰⁰ 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.

CH. 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.

TE. 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;⁴¹⁰ 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,⁴²⁰ 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.

OE. Are these taunts to be indeed borne from ⁴³⁰*him*?— Hence, ruin take thee! Hence, this instant! Back!—away!—avaunt thee from these doors!

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

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

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

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

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

O_E. What riddles, what dark words thou always speakest!

T_E. Nay, art not thou most skilled to unravel dark speech?⁴⁴⁰

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

T_E. Yet 'twas just that fortune that undid thee.

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

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

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

T_E. 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,⁴⁵⁰ 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;⁴⁶⁰ 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.

str. Who is he of whom the divine voice from the Delphian
1.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,⁴⁷⁰ all armed with fiery lightnings, and with him come the dread, unerring Fates.

ant. Yea, newly given from snowy Parnassus, the message hath fl
1. 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,⁴⁸⁰ still
seeking to put from him the doom spoken at Earth's central shrine:
but that doom ever lives, ever flits around him.

str. Dreadly, in sooth, dreadly doth the wise augur move
2. 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 heard⁴⁹⁰ 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.

ant. Nay, Zeus indeed and Apollo are keen of thought, and
2. know the things of earth; but that mortal seer wins
knowledge above mine,⁵⁰⁰ 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,⁵¹⁰ 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.

CREON.

Fellow-citizens, having learned that Oedipus the king lays dire
charges against me, I am here, indignant. If, in the present
troubles, he thinks that he has suffered from *me*, by word or deed,
ought 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,⁵²⁰ 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.

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

CR. And the saying was uttered, that my counsels won the seer to utter his falsehoods?

CH. Such things were said—I know not with what meaning.

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

CH. I know not; I see not what my masters do:⁵³⁰ but here comes our lord forth from the house.

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 attempt⁵⁴⁰ foolish,—to seek, without followers or friends, a throne,—a prize which followers and wealth must win?

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

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

CR. Now first hear how I will explain this very thing—

OE. Explain me not one thing—that thou art not false.

CR. If thou deemest that stubbornness without sense is a good gift,⁵⁵⁰ thou art not wise.

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

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

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

CR. And now I am still of the same mind.

OE. How long is it, then, since Laius—

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

OE. —was swept from men's sight by a deadly violence?⁵⁶⁰

CR. The count of years would run far into the past.

OE. Was this seer, then, of the craft in those days?

CR. Yea, skilled as now, and in equal honour.

OE. Made he, then, any mention of me at that time?

CR. Never, certainly, when I was within hearing.

OE. But held ye not a search touching the murder?

CR. Due search we held, of course—and learned nothing.

OE. And how was it that this sage did not tell his story *then*?

CR. I know not; where I lack light, 'tis my wont to be silent.

OE. Thus much, at least, thou knowest,⁵⁷⁰ and couldst declare with light enough.

CR. What is that? If I know it, I will not deny.

OE. That, if he had not conferred with thee, he would never have named *my* slaying of Laius.

CR. If so he speaks, thou best knowest; but I claim to learn from thee as much as thou hast now from me.

OE. Learn thy fill: I shall never be found guilty of the blood.

CR. Say, then—thou hast married my sister?

OE. The question allows not of denial.

CR. And thou rulest the land as she doth, with like sway?

OE. She obtains from me all her desire.⁵⁸⁰

CR. And rank not I as a third peer of you twain?

OE. Aye, 'tis just therein that thou art seen a false friend.

CR. 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.⁵⁹⁰ 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 a 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?⁶⁰⁰ 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.⁶¹⁰ 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.

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

OE. 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,⁶²⁰ and mine missed.

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

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

CR. Thou speakest as resolved not to yield or to believe?

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

CR. No, for I find thee not sane. OE. Sane, at least, in mine own interest.

CR. Nay, thou shouldst be so in mine also. OE. Nay, thou art false.

CR. But if thou understandest nought? OE. Yet must I rule.

CR. Not if thou rule ill. OE. Hear him, O Thebes!

CR. Thebes is for me also—not for thee alone.⁶³⁰

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

IOCASTA.

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.

CR. Kinswoman, Oedipus thy lord claims to do dread things unto me,⁶⁴⁰ even one or other of two ills,—to thrust me from the land of my fathers, or to slay me a main.

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

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

IO. 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?

*str.*CH. Consent, reflect, hearken, O my king, I pray thee!

1. OE. What grace, then, wouldest thou have me grant thee?⁶⁵⁰

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

OE. Now dost thou know what thou cravest?

CH. Yea.

OE. Declare, then, what thou meanest.

CH. That thou shouldest never use an unproved rumour to cast a dishonouring charge on the friend who has bound himself with a curse.

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

*str.*CH. No,⁶⁶⁰ by him who stands in the front of all the
2.heavenly host, no, by the Sun! Unblest, unfriended, may I die by the uttermost doom, if I 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.

O_E. Then let him go, though I am surely doomed to death, or to be thrust dishonoured from the land.⁶⁷⁰ Thy lips, not his, move my compassion by their plaint; but he, where'er he be, shall be hated.

CR. 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.

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

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

[*Exit.*

*ant.*CH. Lady, why dost thou delay to take yon man into the
1.house?

Io. I will do so, when I have learned what hath chanced.⁶⁸⁰

CH. Blind suspicion, bred of talk, arose; and, on the other part, injustice wounds.

Io. It was on both sides?

CH. Aye.

Io. And what was the story?

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

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

*ant.*CH. King, I have said it not once alone—be sure that I

2.should have been shown a madman,⁶⁹⁰ 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.

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

O_E. That will I;⁷⁰⁰ for I honour thee, lady, above yonder men:—the cause is Creon, and the plots that he hath laid against me.

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

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

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

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

I_O. 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.⁷¹⁰

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 that⁷²⁰ 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.

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

I_O. What anxiety hath startled thee, that thou sayest this?

O_E. Methought I heard this from thee,—that Laius was slain where three highways meet.⁷³⁰

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

O_E. And where is the place where this befell?

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

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

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

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

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

O_E. Ask me not yet;⁷⁴⁰ but say what was the stature of Laius, and how ripe his manhood.

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

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

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

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

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

O_E. Went he in small force,⁷⁵⁰ or with many armed followers, like a chieftain?

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

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

Io. A servant—the sole survivor who came home.

Oe. Is he haply at hand in the house now?

Io. 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,⁷⁶⁰ 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.

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

Io. It is easy: but wherefore dost thou enjoin this?

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

Io. Nay, he shall come. But I too, methinks, have a claim to learn what lies heavy on thy heart, my king.⁷⁷⁰

Oe. 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 Meropè; 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.⁷⁸⁰ 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;⁷⁹⁰ 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.⁸⁰⁰ 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.⁸¹⁰ 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 I 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!⁸²⁰ 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,⁸³⁰ 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!

CH. 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.