



LAIOS

Laios was the first play in Aeschylus' Oedipus tetralogy, first produced in 467 BC. The original does not survive: this is a reimagining of what there might have been in the original text.

By Andrew Wilson

LAIOS

FOR JULIET, MY INSPIRATION

THE OEDIPUS TETRALOGY

I

LAIOS

Characters

Laios, king of Thebes

Epikaste, his wife

Chorus of Theban elders

A herdsman

Scene

Thebes, outside the royal palace.

LAIOS

LAIOS

This is the city Kadmos founded long ago,
I am descended from that man who mixed
With gods, who sowed the dragon's teeth.
My name is Laios, son of Labdakos,
And I am king, through right of birth, and, too
By right of conquest, having driven out
Zethos and Amphion his twin, who boasted
In his songs that he had built the walls of Thebes.
When I was still a young man in my prime,
Apollo wished on me a cruel fate.
He told me through his oracle, not once
But several times, it was my destiny
To save the city that I loved, ensure
Her future free from famine, plague, and from
Invading foreigners. But this success
To crown my rule came at a dreadful price.
If I should have a son, or any child,
My city would face ruin and despair.
Epikaste, my wife was of course distressed

To bear the brutal fate of childlessness,
To have no baby to fulfil her dreams.
For me no son to carry on my name
To help me rule, and nurture my old age,
Was a most bitter blow. My wife and I
Hardened our resolve and in time began
To think it normal to abjure the gifts
Of Aphrodite. I was brother to my wife,
My wife to me performed a sister's role.
And thus we felt we had complied with what
Apollo had commanded us to do. Alas!
In striving hard to please the Delphic god,
We had forgot a closer deity:
The god of wine, Dionysus, as I,
With Kadmus' blood strong in his veins.
Our many years of abstinence were now
Worth nothing as we both succumbed to Bacchus
And that all-conquering urge we had suppressed
So long. I hoped that after such a time
My seed perhaps would have lost all its power,
But in due course Epikaste bore a son.
I never saw the boy, but had my wife

And servants make sure that he disappeared.
I thought Apollo might not be aware
Of what we'd done, if we were quick enough,
Or maybe after time he'd have forgotten us.
My men were ordered not to kill the boy –
That would have made us guilty of his death –
But make quite sure he'd not survive. His life
Would end through natural means, exposure
Or consumed by wild beasts. And I am pleased
To say our plan's worked out. Twice ten summers
And twice ten winters have rolled by. And still
I reign secure in Thebes, and Thebes is safe.

CHORUS LEADER

You are the king, and your opinion is the law,
But as your humble counsellor I have to beg
You, listen to another voice besides your own!
Our city at the moment is not safe
A hideous monster lurks in alleyways
And squares – she terrifies our people. They
Are killed if they should fail to satisfy
Its merciless demands. Admittedly
Her victims have been few – so far: the city

Still finds itself distraught and full of fear.

I feel it is my duty as your friend

To help you stay informed when in our streets

Our citizens are dying helplessly.

LAIOS

This is indeed news I've not heard before.

What is the nature of this savage beast?

How are our people forced to suffer pain?

CHORUS

Undoubtedly it has been sent to punish

Kadmos's city for some long-forgotten

Crime or sin against the gods. Which god

Has sent it is unclear, or what the crime.

Its voice is female, and its head and breasts

Are of a woman: yet below you'd see

The body of a dog, a serpent's tail,

A lioness's paws and eagle's wings.

Truly a monstrous horror to behold.

She corners those she's singled out for death:

She forces them to solve a riddle: when

They can't, she then devours them instantly.

What god could have devised so vile a threat?

What evil man lurks undetected here,
Polluting Kadmos' city with his crimes?

LAIOS

I find you story hard to comprehend.
Surely no monster such as that exists!
If citizens have vanished from our streets
There will be some clear reason found -
Some enemy, someone who hates my rule.
I shall investigate, unearth the truth.
Trust me, your king for all these years.
But just in case some divine displeasure
Is manifested here, I order this:
Let offerings be made to all the gods
Who help protect our city; let there be
Prayers made at every shrine, at every
Altar, in every temple: make quite sure
No god can take offence through our neglect.

CHORUS

Strophe 1

First in our prayers should be almighty Zeus

Who willed the power of Justice to be shown to men.
We call upon the goddess Earth, the oldest
Of powers, she whose fertile womb
Has brought forth monsters in times past.
We pray to Onka, goddess who once accompanied
Our founder Kadmos from his Phoenician home.
Our special pleas go out to Hera who
Has shown her hate for Thebes. If you
Are punishing another generation of Kadmeans

Antistrophe 1

Then tell us why, and what we have to do!
Ares has always shown his constant love for Thebes
Since once he gave Harmonia, his daughter,
To Kadmos: she who with her husband
Was the ancestress of our royal house,
Mother of Polydorus, who fathered Labdakos,
Who fathered Laios who now reigns over us.
Harmonia's mother, Aphrodite, too
Deserves our prayers and offerings,
Who's always been a friend to Kadmos' s city.

Strophe 2

If Theban has offended you, Apollo,
O mighty god, whose oracle
At Delphi is our near neighbour,
Which warns us men what fate intends for us,
Accept our offerings and please pardon him.
And you, Poseidon, and
You nymphs who guard our woods and streams,
Look kindly on us as we offer sacrifice to you.
The minds of the immortals though
Are not revealed to mortals, creatures of a day.

Antistrophe 2

We struggle hard to understand, to follow
The random actions of the gods
If in the end they care at all
To help the human race survive and thrive,
Or if they carelessly live enthroned above
And use us for their sport,
With no concern if mortals live or die.
We honour Father Zeus and all the gods
In hopes that they can understand

How men and women suffer in their wretched lives

But look, here comes your queen. I see

Epikaste leaving Hera's sanctuary

Up on the citadel. As she draws near

I see the signs of weeping in her face

As if she had just heard distressing news.

Has she some personal pain to bear besides

The common grief our city's suffering?

EPIKASTE

Excuse my tears. I know a queen should not

Be seen to weep so openly. But you,

My husband, may give way to grief,

When I pass on the tragic news to you.

Haemon, my nephew, Kreon's boy, is dead.

The latest victim of the monster with

The wings to fly, the claws to snatch:

I heard them while I made my offering

Give her a name. She's called the Sphinx: she has

Been sent from furthest Ethiopia

By Hera's spite, goddess of motherhood,

Who watches over mortal marriages
And oversees our children's births. She's come
To punish us for murdering our child!
The Sphinx in vengeance has already claimed
The life of one poor innocent, whose crime,
Whose only crime, was to be born of that
Same blood as I! How many more must die
To punish us for what we did back then?
O how I rue that day when I, so pleased
Secretly in my heart to know the joy
Of motherhood, in spite of all the pain,
Allowed you to persuade me that my son
Must die, a sacrifice to save his father's name!
O what a fool I was to trade a child
So that my husband could remain a king!
And now it's time for you to be a king;
To show your people how to rid themselves
Of this abomination which destroys
The Kadmeans' city you proudly rule.
Tell us what you intend to do? What next?
LAIOS
My queen, for what you claim there is no shred

Of proof! You put much trust in idle talk:
Hera's priestess, as you'd expect, desires
To make her mistress seem all-powerful.
You show yourself like all the female sex
As gullible and easy to mislead.
No one has seen this 'sphinx' you talk about:
It is impossible –when it confronts
A person, they're devoured – and not around
To tell the tale! A rumour spread by women
And sad old men with nothing else to do.
But to be safe in any case, I have decreed
The gods be honoured with due sacrifice.

EPIKASTE

I am not pleased you doubt my words. Too late,
Perhaps you may begin to understand
That Hera hates us and has now begun
To wreck the life we thought was so secure.
But there is something else that you must hear
From me, gullible creature though I am!
Last night in bed alone, as all these years,
I had a dream – a dream I've had before –
But never told you lest it cause you pain,

So strong was my instinct to shield you from
Distress. This was the dream I dreamed.
Our son is living, grown into a fine
Young man. He's strong and handsome yet he seems
Unhappy, restless, ill at ease. I ask
Him in my dream what troubles him so much:
His chilling answer this: "I have been told
That I must kill my father. It is fated so."
And then comes horror I am loth to tell:
"And having killed my father, I must take
His wife, my mother, into bed, and marry her!"

LAIOS

These are a woman's fantasies, just dreams!
Women are timid, creatures full of fear,
Prone to imaginings and idle thoughts.
Apollo told me thrice that I should not
Have children: when by accident one came,
We silently disposed of it – and I've remained
As king of Thebes for twenty prosperous years!
The gods do not control our lives. We do.
Back to your quarters. Leave the men to rule.

EPIKASTE

My son still lives. I'm confident. I'm sure ...

LAIOS

Impossible. They left him on a mountainside!

EPIKASTE

Maybe he crawled into some creature's den ...

LAIOS

He could not crawl. My men made sure of that!

EPIKASTE

Can you be sure they did this cruel thing?

LAIOS

They'd not have dared to disobey my word.

EPIKASTE

Did they make really certain he was dead?

LAIOS

High on Kithairon? He'd have died of cold.

EPIKASTE

But if they left him still alive, what if...

LAIOS

A naked child could not survive up there!

EPIKASTE

Some lonely herdsman wandering on the hill ...

LAIOS

Who would be wandering on those barren slopes?

EPIKASTE

Took pity on the mite and took him home?

LAIOS

Deluded nonsense! Childlessness has made ...

EPIKASTE

Me what? Frustrated, angry? Any woman would ...

LAIOS [*with genuine anguish*]

A decent woman would have understood

Her husband's anguish, how he grieved as well,

How wretched he has felt without an heir.

A man is not a man without a family

To profit from his life's achievements. If

He does not have a son, his family dies.

You must see how I've suffered all these years.

EPIKASTE

Then share my hope that somehow he may live!

Perhaps Apollo meant to test our strength:

We slipped up once, but otherwise we kept

To his instructions faithfully, preserved

Our vow of continence for twenty years.

What if Apollo's kept him safe for us?

LAIOS

Your sly persuasive tongue worked well on me

That fateful day! And now again I find

Myself reluctant victim of your charm.

If there can be the slightest hope our son

Still sees the light and breathes the air, I shall

Do everything a human can to find

The truth. Two lines of action I intend

To instigate. I shall consult Teiresias

Our own expert on matters of the gods,

And I shall go to Kithairon myself

If someone there has any memory

Or knows of any clue to give us hope.

CHORUS

Strophe 1

I heard tell of a young girl once

Who gave birth to a child that she

Poor thing, was not allowed to keep.

She then wrapped him up carefully

Took him into a cave she knew

A place where offerings would be left

In honour of the god Apollo.

Antistrophe 1

She mourned piteously, distressed,
Anguished, having to leave her son
So soon after she'd given birth.
Imagine how ashamed she felt!
But she grew up to womanhood
Still pining for the child she lost
And was married to a famous warrior.

Strophe 2

Though they were married for many years
Living together, sharing a bed
She never bore another child, to be
A brother or a sister to the son she gave away.
She robbed of motherhood
And he denied an heir –

Antistrophe 2

She was now queen let it be said

Of a famous city well-known to all –
They had been patient now for many years
When they decided they would take the road that led
To Delphi's Pythian seat
To seek Apollos's help

Strophe 3

Unknown to his sad mother
The god had not allowed the infant child
So reluctantly abandoned by his mother
To die, consumed by wild beasts.
He had his brother rescue it,
And bring the baby cot and all
To Delphi, where the boy grew up
Thinking himself an orphan, result
Of indiscretion by a local girl. Not yet
A man, he revelled in the service he performed

Antistrophe 3

For Apollo's Delphic temple –
He swept, he organised the offerings.
But the god had waited for the moment when

His mother should arrive to ask
The reason for her childlessness.
And he was pleased to reunite
the mother with her long-lost son,
While hinting that the actual father
Might have been the king himself
When as a youth he visited the Phocian land
And had a brief affair with some young local maid.

Epode

The gods move in unfathomable ways
Sometimes we see the harm that they intend,
At other times they offer hope and help.
I see the holy man heading this way
The old blind seer, Teiresias, led by a boy
Who is his eyes. The king has sent for him.
He needs advice from one who knows the gods.

LAIOS

Welcome, Teiresias, old man, I need
To ask advice on what I should do next.
The rumour-mongers are all out in force,
Spreading their stories that there is some monstrous

Unnatural creature, sent by god, to Thebes
To ruin us because of some unknown
Offence, some undetected ancient crime.
I need you to confirm this “Sphinx-thing” is
Not real. My nephew’s death and those of others
Are work of enemies here in the town:
A king has many who are jealous of
His power and wish to cause him harm.
My soldiers will track down these terrorists
These rebels who would undermine my rule.
They will be swiftly dealt with by the law.
No. The important task I have for you
Is this. I’m getting old and will not live
For ever. I must find my son, if he’s alive,
By any chance, or else I risk my kingdom will
Descend to anarchy when I am gone.
I’m going to Kithairon where I hope to find
Some clue to prove our son perhaps still lives.

TEIRESIAS

At last you pause and give me space to speak.
O son of Labdakus, the latest crop
Descended from the dragon’s teeth once sown

By Kadmus, honoured founder of our race,
Beware! You teeter on the very edge
Of doom. Your fate is near at hand, although
As yet you do not know precisely how
And where you will encounter it. Beware!
The monster you deride is real indeed.
The Sphinx I can indeed confirm was sent
By Hera, queen of heaven, to destroy
Your realm, to spread despair and misery.
She hates your race and loathes what once you did.
My blindness may remind your majesty
Or Hera's unforgiving spite to men!
The Sphinx demands an answer to a riddle
Which every victim has to solve or else
Must die at once crushed in her ravening jaws.
You must confront the creature. If a man
Like you can answer what she asks, she will
In shame destroy herself, or so I'm told.
Somehow a Labdakid, like you, should have
The strength of mind to force her to her death.
LAIOS
Teiresias, you are an old man and

A fool, if truly you imagine I am not
Aware of your intent. You are in league
With those who would destroy me, and replace
Me on the throne with rebels, enemies:
The answer to the riddle's in the word
Itself. A sphinx! Means "throttler", one who kills
by stealth, garottes his victim with a rope.
A common criminal in other words.
We shall arrest him. He'll be put to death.
A disappointment, I am sure to those
Who dream of revolution, like yourself.
Be off! Take him away! You're old and blind
Or else I'd have you whipped and clapped in chains.
Where is my chariot? I'm keen to go!
Kithairon will perhaps have news for me.

Laios prepares to leave. He does not hear the speech that follows.

TEIRESIAS

I'll not outstay my welcome, never fear.
But as I leave I tell you – good advice –
Make sacrifice to Hera, that's your only chance.

You and your wife must make amends to her.
Let me remind you that Apollo has revealed
His mind three times already. He gave advice,
Informed you of your fate. If you begot
A child it would grow up to ruin you.
If you are father to a son, that man now waits
To be revenged on him who cast him out.
Beware! Perhaps you'll find your son, and wish
You never had set eyes on him again.

CHORUS

Strophe 1

Kithairon! That mountain, which in time past
Delivered doom and death, to men
Descended from the seed of Kadmos,
That stubborn race of warriors,
Never deterred by fear
From challenging immortals,
Or defying the power of gods.
Aktaion, who was Kadmos' grandson,
Loved to go hunting out with his hounds
Across the peaks and over the gullies
Way up there on the Mountain. With his faithful dogs, he,
Chasing a lively stag, by sheer mischance
Happened to light upon the goddess Artemis
Together with her lovely band of nymphs
Naked and bathing in a pool.
He could not unsee what he had seen
But had no need to stop and stare.

Antistrophe 1

The goddess saw him ogling her girls,
Her privacy was compromised.
Without a moment's doubt, she changed him

Into the stag he'd meant to kill.
Aktaion was now the prey,
The hunter hunted by his
Own pack of fifty hungry hounds.
Pentheus, son of Ekhion, a sown-man,
Born to Agauë, one of the four
Unhappy, wretched, daughters of Kadmos
Met a similar fate, when he denied his cousin
Dionysus was a god. High on the slopes,
He, in the wilderness, was seized and torn apart
Not by his faithful pack of hounds, but by
His mother and friends all enslaved
By madness inspired by Zeus's son.
Kithairon claimed two of their blood.

Strophe 2

And Laios now heads towards
Kithairon's lonely mountainside
This Haunt of lions, wolves and bears
This dismal place, where two of Kadmos' seed
Gave up their lives in agony. And where

His only son was left to die,
Stuffed in a pitcher moulded from
The very earth of Kadmos's terrain.
Does Laios really hope to find the actual pot?
Or broken fragments that might tell
How someone destroyed it, unaware,
And saved the tiny child inside?

Antistrophe 2

Could he, some herdsman, wild
Man, brigand, outlaw from the state
Have rescued him and brought him up
To be his slave - or treat him as a son?
If so, there could perhaps still live and breathe
Somewhere on that remote and rough
Rock-studded windblown mountainside
A young man of the line of Labdakos,
Quite unaware, unknowing as he tends the flocks
His herdsman father owns, and brings the fresh
Milk home for one loved, whom he thinks
His mother, to be churned for cheese?

Strophe 3

But gods are cruel more than they are kind.

They punish us so we

May learn through suffering,

However long it takes,

How powerful they are,

How useless it will always be

For men to fight immortals.

Unless Apollo did make sure of him

And organise a rescue for the child?

Antistrophe 3

More likely though the boy did not survive,

And Laios's journey will

Have ended without joy.

So many days have passed.

Nothing's been heard of him.

Since on his own he headed off

Again to Mount Kithairon

Where once he left his infant son to die

Whom after all these years he prays still lives.

But what is this? Epikaste comes in haste
Out from the palace. Her demeanour says
She's in distress. Could she have heard bad news?

EPIKASTE

Ten days and nights since he set out, alone
But for his trusted charioteer, I wait
With mounting worry and disquiet for news
About my husband's mission to the place
Where he commanded that his infant son
Should be exposed and left to die. Poor thing,
He did not even have a name before
Laos decided he could not permit
The child to live and grow up in his house.
I do not blame my husband for this deed.
It was his right as father to decide
On life or death for any child he sowed.
So many women must have shared the pain
I felt when I obeyed the orders of my man
And let him kill the offspring of my womb,
Born with such pain, the pain redoubled then

As I was forced to let my baby go.
My hope these twenty years – a hope I dared
Not share with anyone – was that, by chance,
Some miracle, somewhere, somehow, my son
Was breathing still and growing up.
My dreams renewed my hope, though caused me fear
As well – but son and mother marrying
Seemed, as I pondered it, no more than to
Reflect how much love both of us would show
Each other if he might return to me.

CHORUS

Your majesty, I see a countryman, one who
Tends sheep along the banks of the Asopos
A servant of the king, I know him well.
He seems in haste, maybe he's bringing news
Of how your husband's journey has turned out.

MESSENGER

I have things I can only tell the queen
In person. Please, your majesty, prepare
To hear news that will bring you only grief.

EPIKASTE

Speak, loyal slave. I had already guessed

From your expression that your news is bad.

I do not have much hope therefore

That you will tell me Laios is alive.

Give me the details, then, so I may grieve.

MESSENGER

His chariot has been found. Left in a ditch.

CHORUS

What of its driver – and its passenger?

MESSENGER

No sign of them. The horses - nowhere to be seen.

But after searching for while we found...

CHORUS

What did you find? I'm ready to be told.

Keep nothing back through fear of causing pain.

MESSENGER

I was returning to my hut which sits

Remote, high up on Mount Kithairon's slope,

When by the roadside something caught my eye.

I recognised the royal chariot

And sent my sons to scour the territory

On both sides of the road, and journey on

Towards Kithairon, just in case there'd been

An accident, and they gone for help.
But there was no one to be found, nor did
Enquiries of my fellow herdsmen lead
To any information we could use.

EPIKASTE

Please, tell me where the chariot was found.

CHORUS

At Potniai, a place where three roads meet.

EPIKASTE

I know the place. He'd not gone very far.
It's clear there was an accident, the pair
Both injured, I assume, and losing blood
Were easy victims to a bear, or pack
Of wolves. Somewhere their clothing will be found,
Blood-stained and mangled, in some creature's lair.
At any rate it's clear – his mission to locate
His son found no success. Father and son
Were destined not to meet again. Fate moves
In a mysterious way. The child, the man
Who fathered him, both perished there alone
On Mount Kithairon's empty tree-less moors.
I mourn the death of Thebes's king, the last

Of Labdakos's line. Apollo's words are now
Fulfilled. If Laios had no son, he'd save
His city from its doom. He had a son
And now the end of Thebes is very near.
The Sphinx devours more people day by day.
Those rich enough, our leading citizens,
Are leaving Thebes or making plans to leave,
A city may still have its walls, but if
It has no city life inside, it is
An empty shell and won't survive for long.

MESSENGER

There's more, your majesty, to tell, that might
When heard make bad news even worse for you.
As we found no one, we called off the search,
But then I heard a shout from someone near.
He'd found two bodies, buried in the earth
Not far from where the chariot still lay.
A fresh disturbance in the soil revealed
That someone had been digging there. We moved
The soil and found the body of the king -
His clothes, regalia, all proved it was him.
Beside him lay his charioteer still dressed.

We moved them carefully to bring them home:

The cart that carries them will soon be here,

So you may, with your brother, lay to rest

The last king of the famous royal house

Of Kadmos, Laios son of Labdakos.

One thing was strange, though, maybe, it

Means nothing. But the king was lying there

In all his royal robes and ornaments -

Without his belt. The sword he always wore

Was missing too. Maybe this will provide

A clue to how he died and at whose hand.

EPIKASTE

The king is dead, that's all that matters now.

We'll see he's buried as befits a king.

Today there is a far more pressing need:

The monstrous Sphinx still devastates our land.

Our fit young men are dying in the streets,

The very men we need as warriors to

Defend our city from its enemies.

The horror of their deaths revolts their friends

And families: they have no corpse to bury,

No body they could honour with a tomb.

The Sphinx's jaws devour, them bones and all.

Imagine fathers' grief, bereaved, the sons

not slain in war, no blood-stained corpse

Brought home for them to mourn with pride.

CHORUS

Since it is clear your husband is no more,

Then you as queen must rule, and do your best

To save our citizens of Thebes from death.

The Sphinx will kill us one by one until

We find some cure, some remedy, some one

Who understands her riddle and can answer it.

Is there somewhere a man with such a skill

Such sharp intelligence, to understand

What can and must be done to stop the Sphinx?

The holy man said she can't be destroyed

By force, but only by the cunning wit of man.

If once her riddle is resolved, then Hera will,

He said, make sure the sphinx destroys herself.

Our only hope is to believe his words!

But how and where is Thebes to find this man

Of god-like intellect? No Theban has

This skill, or he'd be known to us by now.

EPIKASTE

My brother Kreon always gives me good
Advice. Though not of Kadmos' line, he is
Descended from the dragon's teeth he sowed.
I'll ask him how he thinks we may attract
To Thebes a person of the calibre we need.
No Kadmean has skill or intellect
To solve the Sphinx's awesome conundrum.

CHORUS

Strophe

O Zeus, o father of us all, we pray -
Without your help our city cannot now be saved.
You have allowed great Hera to
Inflict such punishment
As we merit.
But would you stand aloof, watch, while
That vile abomination she let loose
Devours our citizens and wrecks our town?
When you were young you
Threw out the monsters terrorising Earth -
The Titans, Giants, Hundred-handers, all.

Persuade your goddess wife that she has done
Enough to punish us.
We do admit our sin, and wish
To make amends.
A woman's pain was over-ruled by a man
Who welcomed Aphrodite to his bed,
But outraged Hera when the consequence was clear.
He hoped to sow his seed and take the joy
But then disown the woman's burden that he'd caused.

May Laios' widow hit upon a way
To lure a man of intellect this way
To rid us soon from Hera's jinx
And solve the riddle of the Sphinx.

Antistrophe

Now he is dead, do not, dear Hera, let
Your wrath still linger and destroy our peace.
On Mount Olympus there dwell three
All-powerful goddesses:
Aphrodite:
Sad Laios honoured you, though well

He knew it was forbidden so to do.
Hera, you could not
Endure the consequence of love that had been banned
By god, and took revenge, and punished them
So now Athena, it is up to you, the third,
To help repair the harm
Provided that is Zeus's will.
The will of Zeus!
How can we ever know what Zeus requires?
Was then Apollo's command to King Laios
Part of some great divinely-ordained plan?
We can but hope that Justice, sent by Zeus,
Will in the end make all seem clear and right.

May Laios' widow hit upon a way
To lure a man of intellect this way
To rid us soon from Hera's jinx
And solve the riddle of the Sphinx.

Here comes the queen, let's hope she has devised
Some brilliant plan to save us from the Sphinx.
She looks quite confident, a queen indeed.

EPIKASTE

My brother Kreon and myself have come
To this decision. We shall have these words
Proclaimed throughout the land, that “He,
Whoever solves the riddle of the Sphinx
And causes her to disappear from Thebes,
Shall be made king of Thebes, and Epikaste
Shall serve him as his queen and wedded wife.”
Thebes, once the Sphinx is vanquished, would become
A splendid prize for an ambitious man,
And though I have been queen for twenty years,
I trust my beauty still has power to cause
A young man to consider me a worthy catch!
Go, all of you, spread this abroad. There is
No time to waste. Our duty is to find
A saviour to restore our troubled land.

CHORUS

A fine decision you have made, my queen.
Your noble brother helped, I do not doubt!
We'll send out messengers without delay
To take your proclamation far and wide.

Through all Boiotia shall the message spread,
Though doubtful it must be to find someone
Who's qualified so close to home. We'll send
To Phocis, Doris, Thessaly and more
To Corinth, Athens, Argos, Sikyon,
To Elis where King Laios once was guest
Of Pelops, when forced out of Thebes that day.
Arcadia, Laconia, in truth
All Hellas shall receive the news we send:
That Thebes the city Kadmos built now needs
A hero who's ambitious, clever, brave.

CHORUS

So once again almighty Zeus
And all the gods, protectors of our town,
We call on you to help the city find
A man of supreme intellect somewhere.
Help us persuade him too
That he will be a great and powerful king
Once he has made his home in Thebes
And vanquished through his brain
The vile man-snatcher, evil throttler,

Predator that preys on youth,
The Ethiopian Sphinx,
That Hera sent to punish Laios.
Laios is punished. He saw his kingdom
Crash to ruins, just as the gods foretold.
O Zeus, please make it be
The gods cease from their sport with Thebes.
Laios did wrong. His family is extinct.
Surely there's no more need to punish us?