



OIDIPOUS

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The second play in Aeschylus's Oedipus tetralogy. Only a couple of lines survive from the original, produced in Athens in 467 BC. This is a reimagining of the text, which deals with Oedipous' discovery of his origin, and of the parricide and incest, leading to the Curse on his two sons/brothers, Eteokles and Polyneikes.

By Andrew Wilson

For Juliet

The painting entitled *Kithairon* on the cover is
by Juliet Schubart

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THE OEDIPUS TETRALOGY

II

OIDIPOUS

Characters

OIDIPOUS, KING OF THEBES
CHORUS OF THEBAN ELDERS
EPIKASTE, THE QUEEN
AN OLD MAN
LYDIA, EPIKASTE'S SLAVE

Scene

In front of the Royal Palace, Thebes.

The palace doors open, and King Oedipus strides out, alone.

OIDIPOUS

Of all mankind I am the luckiest
And happiest, most blest by gods. My name
Is Oidipous, reminder of a problem
That I was born with, now though overcome –
A weakness in the feet and legs which made
It hard for me to walk at first, but now
Grown up, I walk with a slight limp.
I was born and raised a shepherd's son, up there
On Mount Kithairon. Hardship was my lot
Throughout my childhood. We were poor and life
Was always hard for us, as it has ever been
For mountain folk who struggle to survive.
I was, though, a contented child, never
Did I complain or criticise my fate, a happy
Peasant's son living a peasant's life.
And had I not received the blessing of
The gods, I would today be with my sheep
High on some pasture on Kithairon's slopes.
I was a young man, pleased with who I was
Good-looking, strong, confident in my world

Thinking to find a wife and settle down.
The suddenly a pair of heralds came
From Thebes, the city, where I'd never been.
The made a proclamation that set off
A train of thought in me. They said their king
Was dead. They sought a man to solve a riddle!
And If he could, he'd be made king of Thebes,
And have the lovely queen to be his wife!
Well, I was good at riddles! Round the fire
On winter evenings with my parents we
Would pass the time with puzzles, games with words.
My name itself was like a riddle too!
To cut things short, I soon set out for Thebes,
To find the heralds had concealed the truth!
The riddler was no man, or human, but
The Sphinx – a fearsome monster who devoured
The challengers who failed to answer her.
This knowledge made me more determined still
To solve the riddle, and obtain the throne
And win a wife! Beyond a pauper's dream!
I did not have to search to find the Sphinx:
She cornered me, and hissed the riddle out.
But I was calm and used my wits. I found

It was not hard to give her my reply.
My view is that she terrified her victims so
That they were too confused to think. But I,
Cool and determined answered her. And as
She heard my words she seemed to shrink
And shrivel up, as if consumed by fire -
But fire that was invisible to man.
A crowd at once conveyed me to the place -
The palace rather, where they welcomed me,
Sat me upon the throne, where I beheld -
The queen. She was by far the loveliest
Woman I'd ever seen, used up to now
To homely peasant girls. We talked for hours.
We seemed to have so many thoughts to share,
So much in common. Soon I truly sensed
My love for her, and hers for me. She was
A little older than myself – but neither she
Nor I felt this was any barrier to love.
We now have children to consolidate
Our happiness – two boys, now on
Their way to manhood. Eteokles, who shows
He's all the gifts of leadership. His twin
Polyneikes is brave and fearless, he

Will be a mighty warrior some day –
The pair of them will make their parents proud.
Sad she and Laios never had a child.
So, look on Oidipous , a man who rose
From poverty to be the king Thebes,
A city which has prospered and grown rich
As ,like a father, I watch over it...
There is however one small nagging thing
Something that sometimes spoils my rest at night,
A nightmare that brings to my mind
Something I feel I must someday confess....
That Oidipous' contentment be complete!

Parodos: enter the Chorus of senior Theban citizens. The king's councillors.

CHORUS

Strophe1

We look towards our honoured king with all
Respect. He came from nowhere
He was a shepherd's boy
Unschoolled uneducated, no
Expertise beyond a peasant's guile.
And yet he solved the riddle which

Beat all the finest minds in Thebes.
The riddle as was told to me was this:
What creature has four feet and two
And then again has three? Who's quadruped,
And biped, triped all in one? And only Oidipous
Saw clearly what the answer was.

Antistrophe 1

His name, as he in modesty admits,
Gave him the clue: From **oida**
I know, and **pous** *a foot*,
He quickly brought his mind to bear.
He more than any man *knew feet*.
He crawled on four, then tried to walk
on two, but ended up on three
through his infirmity – the stick he needs.
The answer, then, was very clear:
“Man”: as a baby needs four limbs to crawl,
Then, as he grows, strides on with two, but as he ages, then
he needs support from stick or crutch.

Strophe 2

So Thebes was pleased to make him one of theirs
Who saved the city when so many others came but failed
To overcome the man-devouring Sphinx.

Many were princes, famous in their kingdoms and their own lands.
We were afraid, at first, some low-born young man
A peasant's son, would not be capable of rule,
But straightway the queen
Embraced him most eagerly,
both as her husband and as king.
And Oidipous has in these past few years
Shown that he is well qualified to be our ruler.

Antistrophe 2

And we have every hope his sons as men
Will prove to be in turn fine rulers over Kadmos' land.
But what is causing Oedipus to fret?
What are the dreams that come to him disturbing his tranquil
mind?
Did he anger a god perhaps, before he came to us?
Some secret crime committed all unwittingly?
Or maybe the gods
Are sending upsetting news,
News of the family he left behind -
If father and mother are finding it hard
There on the cold unfriendly ridges of Kithairon?

The Queen, Epikaste, comes out of the palace to join her husband. She is alone.

EPIKASTE

What worries you my husband? Why so wan?

It upsets me, your loving wife, when I

See furrows on your troubled brow, and when

You get up in the night and pace the room,

Incapable of settling by my side.

OIDIPOUS

My mind keeps going back. Something I did.

EPIKASTE

Something you did before you married me?

OIDIPOUS

A deed I did before I came to Thebes.

EPIKASTE

Then it can have no bearing on our lives!

OIDIPOUS

Do you remember, it was some years back...

EPIKASTE

I don't forget the times I share with you!

OIDIPOUS

We'd gone together in a chariot...

EPIKASTE

To Mount Kithairon, where I asked if I ...

OIDIPOUS

Could sacrifice. I didn't ask you why.

EPIKASTE

And I am grateful for your tactfulness.

OIDIPOUS

As we returned to Thebes, we passed a place...

EPIKASTE

A place somehow connected to your dream?

OIDIPOUS

It was a place called Potniai, and where

The incident I now must tell you of

Occurred – our passing it reminded me.

At that same spot – this was some years ago –

Shortly before I came and first saw Thebes,

Before I beat the Sphinx and married you.

This day I was returning to the slopes

Of Mount Kithairon – I had been to sell

Some fleeces in a local town. I passed

A crossroads where the road split into three,

A triple junction known as Potniai.

Alone, on foot, my stick in hand, I was

About to start the climb along the track,

A path more than a road, not much frequented -

When suddenly I heard the noise of wheels
Churning the soil, and horses panting as
They strained to pull a chariot up the hill.
The leading horse struck me and knocked me down.
As I lay prostrate in the mud I felt
The chariot wheel rolling across my leg.
I screamed. I was in pain, and angry too,
I struggled to my feet, to face a driver
Using his whip on me, and shouting out:
“Get off the road, you wretched peasant, don’t
Stand in our way – your betters need to pass!”
I swung my stick and knocked the man clean off
His perch. Meanwhile his passenger had drawn
His sword, with clear intent to end my life.
I swung my stick once more, and as
He fell I grabbed his sword and killed
The man. The charioteer had now got up:
The sword soon finished him as well. I cut
The horses’ reins and set them loose, and then
I buried both the bodies by the track.
I kept the sword and took the belt as well.
You know them – you have seen me wearing them
Most days – as I am doing now, today.

Epikaste makes no comment, but walks away quickly and silently.

My wife has left so suddenly. What did
I say that has upset her so? She is
A woman, but not one that's prone to tears.
This action, so much out of character,
Makes me afraid I may have said too much.
Why should she worry if I killed a man
Who threatened me and put my life at risk?
I shall go in and pray now to the gods
That they may soothe her spirit and relieve
Whatever may be causing her distress.

Oidipous goes back into the palace.

CHORUS

Strophe 1

What can it mean? Can it be the queen is sick?
Stricken by some infirmity?
Some ague, fever, malady
The gods can infect mortals with
Without a warning, unexpectedly?
Or has the king offended her somehow?

His talk of violence, shedding blood -
Has it provoked a woman's fears?

Antistrophe 1

Men do kill men. Does it worry them so much?
When out there, in the countryside,
Far, far away from city laws?
No one would quarrel with a man
Who's been insulted and defends himself.
The gods themselves are quick to take offence
When one of them is threatened or
Feels disrespected, losing face.

Strophe 2

Even a poor man has a right to self-defence,
If he is bullied by a richer man
Who thinks it right to ridicule or mock
Persons he deems inferior to him.
Maybe the sight of the sword,
That Oidipous took from the man
Upset the queen? To me it looks quite like the one
Old Laios wore. Perhaps she worries now
About a sword she'd not examined properly before.

Antistrophe 2

Maybe It brought back painful memories of that time
When robbers stole her husband's life,
The highwaymen who brutally attacked him
And his charioteer and left them dead.
May Oidipous with the gods' help
Find a relief from distress.
And may there be some simple reason for his ugly dreams.
And may the queen too, aided by the gods,
Recover and come to herself again before too long.

But now I see some ancient man approach.
Can he have business with the king? To me
He seems a ragged peasant, not the sort
Of person one expects ever to see
Awaiting audience with the king of Thebes!

*An old man, a shepherd from the mountains, as is obvious from his dress,
enters slowly from the distance, and approaches the palace doors warily.*

OLD MAN

It's taken me a good long time, dragging

My aged limbs so very far, each step
More painful than the last. Where is the king?
Tell me where I can find the famous Oidipous,
The glorious ruler of this land of Thebes?

CHORUS

What is your business with the king? Tell us.

OLD MAN

My business is with Oidipous himself.

CHORUS

We are his councillors. State why you're here.

OLD MAN

I shall not speak to anyone except the king.

CHORUS

What could you have to say no one may share?

OLD MAN

That secret's mine until I meet the king.

CHORUS

The king has gone inside to pray. Perhaps,
When he returns, he will attend to you.

The palace door is opened, and Oidipous emerges with attendants

You are in luck, he's on his way back here.

Your majesty, here is a man who wants
To speak with you, alone. He will not share
His business with your loyal councillors.

OIDIPOUS

Welcome, old man! I recognise your face –
You are a neighbour of my parents, I
Recall! You are my family's friend – and you
Were one who always watched me growing up,
Almost a second father to me, as it seemed!
I'm pleased to see you after all this time.
What brings you here? It must have been a long
And arduous journey for a man your age.

OLD MAN

I well remember how I helped your parents
Look after you some days, when they were busy
Chasing missing sheep, or out there late
At night when ewes were giving birth to lambs.
But now I'm old, infirm, too old to bear
The cold on Mount Kithairon's flanks, too weak
To do a herdsman's job out on the hills.
And that is why I've come to you, my son,
With hope I'll be rewarded for my pains.
I've kept a secret no one knows but me.

I own a treasure I have hoarded long,
A treasure no one's seen besides myself,
A treasure it's now time at last to hand
To you, your majesty, and you alone,
OIDIPOUS [*as he dismisses the attendants*]
What treasure could an old man bring to me,
An ancient herdsman who has spent his life
With sheep and goats upon a mountainside?

OLD MAN

A precious treasure and a secret, worth...

OIDIPOUS

Worth how much? I am rich, I'll pay you well.

OLD MAN

What is it worth to know just who you are?

OIDIPOUS

Your words intrigue me. Name your price. I'll pay.

OLD MAN

It's value will be clear when I've told all.

OIDIPOUS

Then don't hold back. Be generous to me,
As I shall be to you when all is done.

OLD MAN

Then hear the secret I have kept for you.

The shepherd and his wife who brought you up
Are not your parents! You were found by me
A tiny baby huddled by a broken jar,
In which you had been hidden, it was clear,
Then dumped, abandoned and exposed
Upon the northern slope of Mount Kithairon,
Quite near the track that leads up there from Thebes.
I hear you whimpering and pick you up.
I gently ease out, from your bleeding feet,
A brace of metal spikes that pinioned them.
I wrap you in a sheepskin, and I know
At once what I will have to do. My neighbour's
Young wife had lost a child that very night,
My wife had been to help her with the birth.
Her husband was out somewhere on the hill -
When he returned next morning, she showed him
The child. She told him of the lucky chance
That cancelled out their grief. They reared
The child as if it were their own. That way
He and his wife maintained their happiness.

OIDIPOUS

Do you have proof, or is this just a ruse
To make me pity you and give you cash?

OLD MAN

You cannot think I'd lie, sir, when the truth
Is that important! I shall show you soon
Some things I've brought that will convince you, sir,
Beyond all doubt that what I say is true.

OIDIPOUS

I've known you all my life. I do believe
Your story's true. But hard for me to hear!
This is a fearful blow. A shock! My life,
And everything I thought I knew, is built
Upon a lie. I don't know who I am!
My parents loved me - I loved them -
My father, mother – no, no parents they!
I never was ashamed of them till now.
How could they live pretending all was well,
Raising some others' baby as their own?
I'll have them brought before me here in Thebes
Confront them with the wicked lies they told.

OLD MAN

Alas, they died last winter in the snows.
They weren't your parents, what of them?
You know my secret, and you are not pleased
To know you are not who you thought you were.

But I have come to do you good, not harm,
And benefit myself, if truth be told.

He produces the pins and the baby clothes.

This is the treasure which I've kept quite safe
Right from that very night I rescued you.
These are the spikes with which your feet had been
So cruelly pierced. And here, these are the clothes,
The baby clothes I found you in, that kept
You warm that bitter night and saved your life.
You parents, maybe, were not shepherd folk
Not simple herders living on the hill!
The shawl shows quality, expensive stuff!
Your skill in solving puzzles is well-known.
The Sphinx's riddle was a simple task for you –
These are the clues which famous Oidipous,
The king with intellect that's not surpassed
By any man alive, will take and soon
Unlock the mystery of his origin!
But first, reward me as you promised to,.
Then I will make my way back to my hut
With wealth enough to keep me for what small

Amount of time be left me on this earth.

OIDIPOUS

Take him away and give him all needs.

Thanks, honest herdsman for the truth you told.

The Old Man leaves with his money.

The truth is often painful, but with pain

Comes knowledge. Men, we know - it is

The Law of Zeus - must learn through suffering.

So I am not a shepherd boy as I

Had all my life so far assumed! I shall

Do all I can to understand why as

A tiny child my actual parents tried

To kill me, did not want me as their son.

This knowledge is a bitter blow, much worse

To me than learning of the lies the couple told

Who took me in. They at least valued me!

If I can use the clues he's given me

To find my real parents, there will be

No celebration, no joyful embrace!

I'll make them pay for what they tried to do.

What was the need to cripple me, the cause

Of pain throughout my life? I would have died
Quite soon in any case, of cold or hunger,
Or a snack for wolves or bears, had not
That kindly herdsman caught my feeble cries.
I'll find my wife, if she's recovered from
Whatever troubled her, show her these things.
A mother will know much about the stuff
Infants are wrapped in, and give me some help
As how and where to start the search, so I
May know at last the secrets of my birth.

CHORUS

Strophe 1

Kithairon! Misty Mount of mystery
What secrets are you keeping still?
You know the truth of how our former king was killed.
You know too how and why our current king
Was left to die among your crags and screes.

Antistrophe 1

Kithairon! You look down on many lands
Did a Corinthian princess
Have you exposed to hide her shame, result of some

Clandestine liaison with a youthful god
Her family must never know about?

Strophe 2

Or did a priestess from Apollo's shrine
On Delphi's cliff not dare reveal how she had let
Her vow of life-long chastity
Be broken by some local youth?
Or was it Thisbe, rich in doves, from where
A nervous maiden slipped away to hide
Her baby on a mountainside so far from her home
In desperate fear her father would find out
And punish her unsanctioned love??

Antistrophe 2

We know the gods can pick and choose
Which mortal woman they can lavish favours on,
Goddesses too – it's not unknown
For them to lust for mortal men.
But I revere the gods - I shall refrain
From pointing out the blame of any god -
Though, on Kithairon, Dryads, Oreads, and nymphs
Of Rivers, streams and rocks may find their sport –

With satyrs or with mortal men.

Epode

Oidipous, our beloved king
Is not an ordinary man.
His skill with riddles,
And his wise and firm
Rule over Kadmos' town
Has made us prosperous,
And saved us from the ruin which
The Sphinx was poised
To Bring when Laios ruled.
He is a king in everything he does.
Perhaps he will turn out to be of royal birth!

The palace doors open and Epikaste comes back out. She seems calm and in control.

EPIKASTE

I have come back to find you, Oidipous.
You told me how the sword and belt you wear
Were taken from this man you killed that day
At Potniai, the one you say insulted you.

OIDIPOUS

Why now this sudden interest in my sword?

I've worn it every day since I came here!

It's a fine weapon of Chalybian steel,

Though I have never used it since that time.

EPIKASTE

I need to look at it more closely than I have.

OIDIPUS

Then here it is. Examine it as you wish.

EPIKASTE [*after a pause. Calmly*]

It is, much as I feared, my husband's sword,

My late husband's that is, Laios I mean.

The man you killed and buried by the road

Was Laios, son of Labdakos, the king

Of Thebes. You are, it's clear, his murderer.

The mystery of his death is solved at last.

OIDIPUS

Of course, it grieves me much to find

The man I killed was known to you

And was your husband for so many years.

But when I killed him I had no idea

Just who he was. To me he seemed a rude

And violent old man, who threatened me;

Whose chariot-wheel ran over me, whose man
Dared whip me and who drew his sword on me.
I don't regret my deed, I'd do the same again.

EPIKASTE

Do not upset yourself. Laios to me
Was husband just in name. Our married life
Was sham, pretence. I did not mourn, except
In public, when I learned that he was dead.
You saw how keen I was to welcome you!
Whether you killed him, or some band of thieves,
It makes no odds. He did a wrong to me
Decades ago, which I could not forgive.

OIDIPOUS

What was the nature of this wrong, if it's
Permissible for me to know? I am
Your husband. Let me try to understand.

EPIKASTE

I had a child. A son. Whom Laios said must die.
He had his men conceal him in a pot
Of fired earth, which they then took away
To dump it in some barren place like trash.

OIDIPOUS

Now it's my turn to feel a sudden rush

Of fear and panic at something **you've** said.
I had been looking forward to a chance
To share with you some news I heard just now
From an old man, who knew my history.
He said he found me as tiny babe
On Mount Kithairon, and he gave me to
The loving pair who brought me up as theirs.
They are both dead, but he revealed he'd kept
The tokens I had when he rescued me.
I was excited, thinking we'd explore
The meaning of these things and help each other
Unpick the mystery of who I really am.
But now excitement turns to dread. What if
These objects in my hand are known - to you?

EPIKASTE

Give them to me! Ottototoi! Ottototoi!
This shawl, this wrap is mine! I wove it for
The child I longed to nurse. I wrapped It round
Him when they snatched him from my arms.
And these! These brutal metal spikes, they are
The weapons used to maim a little boy
As if he'd have the strength to crawl
To safety in the dark and cold, exposed

On Mount Kithairon's windy ridge to die.
O gods, you are that child! The child I longed
To kiss and hug and swamp with mother love.
Whom I have loved now as a wife, had sons with,
Sons brothers to my husband, son I never
Should have had, a son the gods forbade.
I thought I'd killed the son I longed to have:
And now I know that he's alive I wish
With all my heart, as desperately,
He never had been born. O Oidipous,
I used to dream, when Laios was alive,
The son I gave away was living still,
And in my dream my son would, as a man,
Come back to me, and I'd be overjoyed.
But then my joy would turn to horror, when,
The price was that the son would cause
His father's death and take his wife to bed.
It was a nightmare, but it seemed it just
Confirmed the hate I felt for Laios, and
The love I'd show my son if he returned.
My son, my lovely son, I've let you down
In every way I could. I let them take
You from my breast; I heard you scream

As they were forcing these vile rivets through
Your baby flesh. I stood there as they thrust
Your tiny body in that urn I thought
Would be your final resting place. And then
When you came home, I loved you like a tigress
Hunggrily, insatiably, so starved
Of sex through all those bitter joyless years.
I shudder to recall the passion and
The eager lust I felt – for my own son!
I am the most revolting creature on this earth.
I loathe myself, disgust myself. There is
No hesitation in my mind. I know
Exactly what I now must do. Come now. [*to attendants*]
Give me the sword Laios was murdered with.
Farewell my lover, husband, son, I wish
That neither you nor I myself had lived
To see this day that killed all joy in life.

Freeze. The queen rushes inside the palace, followed by her attendants.
Freeze. After a few seconds' hesitation, Oidipous looks to the Chorus. Is he
angry, outraged, fearful?, He stride intos the palace. The doors slam behind
them. Silence

CHORUS

What I heard is hard to comprehend.

Sounded like a riddle, the sister to

That riddle the Sphinx, wrecker of Thebes, asked:

What man, who should never have been there,

Came back to where he came from

Having killed the one who put him there?

Oidipous is after all Theban by birth, no

Humble herdsman's boy as he let us believe,

But offspring of Kadmos's royal house:

Oidipous - that name his parents did not give him

But which reveals the harm they intended.

Laos was warned by Apollo time and again

"You must not father a child, or else

Your city will be lost." Though warned that he should not exist,

Through foolishness Laos gave life to this poor man.

Life that was ended soon as it began -

They hoped. Before they'd given him a name

They maimed him, thrust him in a pot, and sent

Their men to leave him out on the mountains.

A kindly stranger chanced to find the babe, and gave

Him to a couple who raised him as theirs.

The lad grew up strong, and one day killed a man,

Who was his father, though he did not know.
He heard the call to come to Thebes, and save
The city from ruin, defeat the rampaging Sphinx.
As his reward they made him king, and gave
Him the late king's wife as his queen.
Same woman who those many years ago
Gave him his birth, and, she believed, his death.
What must be whirling through their minds?
A woman who had children with her son.
A son who killed his father then
Came home through the door by which he left.
O Oidipous, my heart goes out to you!
Why did the cruel gods preserve your life?
EPIKASTE *[inside]*
Leave me to die. That sword has work to do!
OIDIPOUS *[inside]*
Mother, I beg you, do not do this thing!
EPIKASTE *[inside]*
I must. There, through the belly, to the womb!
Where you should not have been, and where
I never should have let your brothers grow.
OIDIPOUS *[inside]*
I am your son. You gave me life. I must

Not lose my mother for a second time.

EPIKASTE [*inside*]

There, now, another blow will finish me!

Silence

CHORUS [severally]

_I heard the queen. I fear what she has done

_I can't believe she means to end her life,

_She grabbed the sword which killed the man

_Who was her husband once, and king, Laios ...

_King Oidipous has followed her inside.

_What do you think he had in mind to do?

_Did he intend to kill her in his rage?

_Or try to save her life? His loving wife...

_But mother too, the shame he feels! He ploughed ...

_ The actual field where he himself was sown.

_Perhaps he means to die along with her,

_If shame at what he did controls his mind.

_Should we attempt to force our way inside?

_No. We are old, too old to be of use.

_Better let kings and queens act as they must.

The doors open. One of Epikaste's servants comes out.

The doors are opening. Someone's coming out.

It's Lydia, who once was Epikaste's nurse.

Soon we shall learn what happened there inside.

LYDIA

I wish I'd died last night asleep in bed.

I've known my mistress since she was child,

When old Menoikeus bought me to be nurse
To his young daughter, and his baby son.
I dressed her, fed her, kept her entertained.
She was a lively girl, so full of fun.
And then as she left girlish things behind,
I followed her to live here in this place,
The royal palace with her lovely man,
Young Laios. Full of hope and joy she was,
That day he led her home to be his bride.
Alas, her happiness did not last long.
There came a dreadful oracle from lord
Apollo. The newly-weds must not enjoy
Their marriage-bed. They must not lie together.
They must avoid all Aphrodite's rites.
If they should let a child somehow arrive,
The city, and the house of Labdakos,
Would fall to ruin. They were young, how could
They meet the god's commandment every night -
For life! I did not blame them when just once
They disobeyed, were overcome by love.
I helped my mistress when their son was born.
I helped her weave his baby clothes, and ready
All of the little things a mother needs.

But then - the blow that shattered all our lives.
His father, frightened of the god's revenge,
Decided he must kill the little scrap.
My mistress screamed in outrage at the loss
Of her dear boy she'd held so brief a while.
No point. They wrenched him from her breast
And took him off to die. And from that day
She was so glad she'd never have to share
Her hated husband's bed. She never knew
The pleasure of a man again until ... o gods
I can't go on, the horror swamps my mind!
I am a slave, but I could not control my pain
At what we have been forced to learn today.

She breaks down, but manages to recover.

My noble mistress, using all her self-control,
Went back into the room where she and Laios
Flouted once the god's command, and where
The second husband whom she loved so much
Revisited that holy chamber he had known
Before but never knew he knew till now. [*She weeps again*]

CHORUS

Tell us what happened to the queen, if you
Can bear, despite your tears, to tell us more.

LYDIA

As soon as she was in her room, she dropped
All her composure. With a fearful scream
She raised the sword – the one her husband, son
Had handed her – thrusting it to the hilt
Into her belly, cried “This is the womb
In which I carried you!” And then she raised
The blade a second time, to stab herself
Between the breasts, she cried, which suckled him.
Poor Oidipous was by now at her side. The blood
Arched from her wounds – a ghastly cataract –
Which soaked her loved one with the very blood
They shared – the mother and her wretched son.

CHORUS

Ah! We are stunned. The way she killed herself
Was hideous; horror to hear described.

LYDIA

But there is more. If you are horrified by what
You’ve learned so far, prepare for horror worse
By far, too much for humankind to bear.

CHORUS

Has something happened to king Oidipous
That when we know will cause us greater pain?

LYDIA

He'd followed her inside and tried to grab
His sword, and stop her hand from doing what
She was determined to. But she was strong –
In her mad frenzy stronger than a man.
Try as he would he had not strength enough
To save his wife, his mother, from the blows,
The stabbing blade, with which she did the deed.
And then we saw the most distressing sight
Of all we'd witnessed to that time. The queen
Still clutched the iron spikes he'd handed her,
The pins that once had pierced the baby's feet
And given him his name Oidipous, Swollen Foot,
And proved beyond doubt who he really was.
The king now prised them from her fingers and,
As we looked on, took one in either hand
And jabbed and jabbed again at where his eyes
Had been, his own blood mingling its stream
With blood his mother's wounds had soaked him with.
I could not bear the piteous sight of him

Clinging to her, now overwhelmed by love
As son, and husband, for the stricken queen.
Now I have told you all there is to know.
I must go back inside and face the pain.

She hurries back inside. Stunned silence as the Chorus take in what has occurred.

Strophe 1

Did they play any part? What have the gods to do
With this intolerable, wretched scene?
Of family ruin, catastrophe?
They say that nothing in this world occurs
Without the will and knowledge of great Zeus.
How then do we assign some meaning to
What happened here just now?

Antistrophe 1

Obedience is what the gods always require of men
Laios ignored Apollo's clear command.
Command he gave not once, not twice
But three times, lest it not be wholly clear.
He knew the penalty for disobedience.

His rule would fail, his house would fall apart,
If he should sow his seed.

Strophe 2

He never knew the seed he'd planted then,
The son he fathered, disobeying god,
Had now grown up to be the agent of his ruin.
His second sin was, having sinned the once,
To try to cover up his sin,
Remove the evidence that proved his guilt.
As if the god Apollo could
Be fooled so easily.

Antistrophe 2

So son killed father – as the gods desired.
The son who never should have been
In turn bred other sons. I fear immortal anger
Of Apollo will next be turned on them.
A second generation that
If Laios had obeyed would not exist.
What is Apollo's plan for them,
The sons of Oidipous?

Strophe 3

The family shall for many years go on
Paying for the crime of Laios
As long as there is a house
Of Laios, son of Labdakos,
And what of Oidipous himself? We cannot truly know
The reason why he chose to blind himself,
Cripple himself so desperately.
Can he remain as king?

Antistrophe 3

If not where can he go – a blind man needs
Someone who can guide his steps
And keep him safe from harm.
But who will pilot Thebes's course?
The sons of Oidipous are yet too young to rule alone,
Although in time they may indeed provide
A pair of oxen guiding Thebes
To new prosperity.

Strophe 4

The helmsman, though, for now must be
The brother of our much-loved queen

Who'll navigate our leaky ship
In trust for Oidipous's sons.
But what's to be is never ours to know.
We are leaves in the wind to gods.

Antistrophe 4

We can't do more than pray the gods
Who watch our walls and guard our town:
Once more preserve our city-state.
May it ride out the deadly storm
Of these events which have destroyed
The future that we thought was ours.

But here he comes, the husk of Oidipous
Pathetic shadow of the man he was
Just hours ago. What explanation will
You give for what you did? Why choose to live
When life must now be constant agony?
Never should you have seen the light, but you
Were given life that you should not have had.
Light you should not have seen, which you
Without your eyes, will never see again,
O Oidipous, I weep to look on you,

A king, solver of riddles, now you show
How true the answer was you gave the Sphinx:
You crawled on Mount Kithairon's scree; you strode
To glory having killed the king - whom you
Replaced – in every sense. And now you feel
Your way reliant, as a blind man, on
Your stick. First four, then two, then three to end.

*In the course of this speech Oidipous has come back out from the palace,
feeling his way with his stick.*

OIDIPOUS

You mock my blindness, and you taunt me with
My skill in solving riddles. I chose life,
And not to end it, to accompany
My mother-wife to Hades. Let me tell
You why this was the choice I had to make.
I used to think I was a lucky man.
Chosen by gods to find success beyond
What should be due a simple country boy.
But now I know that I was kept alive by god,
Not so that I'd be rich, and king of Thebes,
But so my fall could make me learn the truth.

The gods control our lives. And if they tell
A man what he must do or must not do,
It is not wise to disobey that plain command.
If I had not been born, then Laios would
Be king of Thebes today. And Kadmos' city
Would not face ruin. Nor then would his wife
Have died in raging pain. Her first-born would
Not then have faced a life of lies and shame,
That blindly led him on to murder, incest ...
I see, now I am blind, what I could not before.
The past remains the past. The punishment
For disobeying god is harsh.
Harsher perhaps than mortals can endure.
Apollo's price for Laios' foolishness
Has not, I tell you, yet been paid in full.
There are two more sad creatures who
Should not have seen the light. My sons -
My brothers, still just boys, who yesterday
I teased and played with, teaching them
What growing up to act as men entailed.
But they are too picked out by god for doom.
If they grow up to manhood, find themselves
With wives and father children, then the anger

Of the god will still be causing pain, for two,
For three - how many generations hence?

CHORUS

What are you contemplating, Oidipous?
Surely your family's suffering is enough?

OIDIPOUS

You have not taken in what I just said.

CHORUS

Then please explain, so we may understand

OIDIPOUS

By suffering, one learns the truth, That I...

CHORUS

You've suffered more than any man, what
have...

OIDIPOUS

I learned? That gods don't change their minds!

CHORUS

Then why do we make prayers and sacrifice?

OIDIPOUS

Because we're fools and we delude ourselves.

CHORUS

Then do the gods not hear our pleas to them?

OIDIPOUS

The gods love flattery and praise. They take

What mortals offer them, are gratified
When men make lavish sacrifice to them.
As if they favour those whose prayers
Are most obsequious, whose offerings
Appear most generous! No one can prove
A prayer or sacrifice has caused a god
To deviate from their determined course.

CHORUS

Then nothing we can do will change their minds?

OIDIPOUS

That's what I said, and what I've proved is true.

CHORUS

Indeed, your fate shows gods mean what they say.

OIDIPOUS

The fate of Kadmos should have forewarned us.

He came to Greece to save his sister from

Zeus's violence, which he failed to do.

To compensate, the gods told him to build

A city where a wandering heifer stopped.

He founded Thebes, and married Harmony,

Ares and Aphrodite's child. The gods

All helped him celebrate this happy match!

This friend of gods, though, later in his life

Offended them some way. Was any quarter shown
To mark the close relationship they'd had?
Not for an instant; he - Bacchus decreed -
Became a slimy serpent doomed to lead
A foreign force to Greece and sack
Apollo's temple - whence redoubled pain!

CHORUS

How has this understanding of the gods
Helped you decide what next you mean to do?

OIDIPOUS

My path is obvious. Now I am blind
I see most clearly. I shall leave my Thebes
Immediately. Kreon shall rule the city
The best he can because my brothers, sons ...
Not yet – I'll come to them all in good time.
To Kreon too I leave the business of
His sister's funeral. Let him decide.
If there are any servants in the house
Who were involved in what was done to me,
I pardon them. They should not suffer blame.
And so, I come to my most fearsome task...
My sons, who never should have been conceived,
Or brought to birth, allowed to see the light.

They have to die, but must die in a way
That satisfies the gods, and ends the chain
Of sin Laios began in fathering me.
And thus, when father, son, and grandsons too,
Have suffered fates most terrible and grim:
There comes a time when it shall end, at last.

CHORUS

Your boys, your brothers, they are innocent!

OIDIPOUS

No more than I! I did not choose my fate!
The gods intended we should not be born
The gods did not want me or them to live.

CHORUS

Then what is to become of them? Please tell.

OIDIPOUS

There is one way and one alone in which
A mortal can require a god to do
What he demands. A terrifying power
Which no one ever should propose to use
Unless there were no other way to go.
I do not hate my sons; I love them both,
But they will doubtless hate me after this.
I have one chance before I die to end

The punishment Apollo has doled out
To Labdakos's house, the royal house
Of Thebes. I need to launch a solemn Curse:
Once uttered such a Curse cannot be stopped,
Annulled or taken back. If, in response,
The dread Erinys has once been unleashed,
She will, though it take time, take many years,
Pursue the victim of the Curse, make sure
Its terms are quite precisely carried out.
With this is mind, aware of what I do,
I solemnly do curse my sons, Eteokles
And Polyneikes in these weighty words:
"I, Oidipous, the king of Thebes, the son
Of Laios, son of Labdakos, do curse
Hereby my sons, and brothers - products of
The selfsame womb as I. From this day forth
May they fall out, and never more agree
To work together or cooperate. Hatred
And enmity shall blight their lives. But they
One day be shall find themselves united,
Together, reconciled. A stranger from
A distant land, land of the Chalybes,
Shall end their constant fighting, and at last

They each shall own the same, an equal share
Of my estate which I bequeath to them.”
Such is my Curse, will shall be brought to pass.
This way the House of Labdakos will end,
But Kadmos’ city, Thebes, shall prosper still.

CHORUS

You deal in riddles, as you always have!
Your sons will quarrel and be reconciled –
I see how they may disagree and fight –
In this your Curse makes perfect sense.
You vent your anger on the children whose
Very existence brings you shame. But still
I fail to see how Laios’ ancient crime
Is paid for if the pair are reconciled?

OIDIPOUS

Fear not. The gods will understand my words.
The Erinyes will execute the Curse.
Now having laid this Curse upon my sons,
The only certain way to save the state,
I shall depart. You asked me where I go?
I go to Mount Kithairon, place which gave
Me life. Though now I go there not to live
But to find death. The death I should have found

Those years ago, before they rescued me
To face a double horror, to perform
The most revolting crimes a man would not,
Even in some appalling dream, commit.
Farewell, my friends, I go a second time
To mount Kithairon to encounter death.

He does not leave immediately though, but stands in silence during the choral passages.

CHORUS

Strophe 1

Once we applauded you along with all
The cheering people of Thebes,
We welcomed you a guest of honour to our land.
You proved a cunning helmsman to
Prevent the shipwreck of our state.
Your outwitted that monstrous bitch,
Devourer of raw flesh.

Antistrophe 1

How we rejoiced when you became our king!
Gave heirs to the throne, to bring

A smile, and children to the mirthless widowed queen,
And made our city's future safe.
Then like a seasoned pilot you
Held the city of the Kadmeans to
A smooth and steady course.

Strophe 2

We blessed the gods who sent you
Alas! You were no stranger come to rescue us,
But native Theban coming home
To wreck his house, his family,
His city which his ancestors had built.

Antistrophe 2

O Oidipous, your fate now,
Alas, burns like a bitter beacon to mankind:
“Do not believe that happiness will last”.
When all seems well, the gods dig up
Our buried secrets, and exact revenge.

Strophe 3

Look on king Oidipous now:
He gropes his way towards

The Homoloides Gateway.
Of Thebes's seven gates, this is
The one that will
Take him across the Hismenus
From where he'll start the long
And arduous uphill track
To Mount Kithairon.

Antistrophe 3

See how he sways and stumbles –
A problem every step.
His gift was solving problems;
He saw what others could not see,
Though he could not
Foresee the dreadful Truth the gods
Had forbidden him to know,
Until the time was right
To claim their due.

Strophe 4

Who will be there to help him,
And guide the blind man through the city streets?
His sons should have been eager for that task:

Now they loathe him, turn away from him.
They will not lift a hand
To help the man who gave them life,
Whose Curse ensures their lives will now
Be ruled by hate and mutual distrust.

Oedipus begins to move away from the palace

Antistrophe 4

Will none of you, his people
Extend a hand to help him find his way?
He cared for Thebes and guided her when she
Could not clearly see the path ahead,
How to save herself.
Will none of you go take his hand?
When we were blind, he led the way
Can no one bear even to touch him now?

As Oedipus gropes his way, people shy away. They fear contact with him.

Strophe 5

Which son, if either, will be king
In Thebes? I fear a dismal dawn

Dark with foreboding gloom of storms to come,
When brother's king in Thebes
And brother leads an army from afar
To smother and supplant his kin.
O gods! Blot out this vision from my eyes.
Let Harmonia, your daughter,
Ares, you gave to Kadmos
Be free to have her sway,
and smile on them, we pray.

Antistrophe 5

I fear that Curse, the Erinys
Whom Oidipous has conjured up,
Has ancient power more weighty than a god's.
She is a goddess who
Is greater far than other goddesses.
The Furies - name that rouses dread -
The black-robed ones, Erinyes,- were born
Long before the reign of Zeus
And his Olympian gods,
Spawned from the potent drops
Of Uranus' Titan blood.

Strophe 6

They crave revenge, not Justice.
They must ensure that punishment
Is meted out –
It is not their concern
What's fair or is not fair.
They have no care for laws of men.
They do not listen to
The evidence, or balance
One side's views with the other's.

Anrastrophe 6

No. Once their wretched victim
Is singled out, he's marked for death.
His fate is sure,
However long it takes,
He will be hunted down
Pursued relentlessly for life
And killed: the agent might
Be husband, or a brother,
A wife, or son, or sister.

Epode

There's no way to escape for those
Once marked down as the Furies' prey.
The Erinys is not required
To reveal her true appearance
To the mortal she will destroy.
We imagine her swathed in rags,
Swirling, foul-smelling, black;
Snarling face like a dog,
Wings flap dark like a bat's,
Snakes writhe wild in her hair.
Or she'll take on herself
Ghostly likeness of one
Whose vengeance she fulfils:
Or appear as a shade
In some prophetic dream.
If her body is never seen
Still her power is immense.
All men tremble to speak,
Fear to mention her name.

*Oidopous now begins to move among the Chorus, as he makes his way
towards the Homoloides Gate.*

CHORUS

Oidipous, your fate is undeserved.

OIDIPOUS

Fate is not something that is earned.

CHORUS

Laios received what he was owed...

OIDIPOUS

He could not know in advance...

CHORUS

That he would be killed by his son.

OIDIPOUS

Nor did the son know whom he killed.

CHORUS

The son punished the father's sin...

OIDIPOUS

The seed he was told not to sow.

CHORUS

Why did he choose to have a son?

OIDIPOUS

He loved his family more than Thebes.

CHORUS

As king he ruled us well, I thought.

OIDIPOUS

If I did not exist, Thebes would be saved.

CHORUS

So when he chose to have a child...

OIDIPOUS

His family's future led him on.

CHORUS

Apollo wanted Thebes to thrive?

OIDIPOUS

Without the House of Labdakos.

CHORUS

And that is why you cursed your sons?

OIDIPOUS

When they are gone the city will...

CHORUS

Once more be favoured by the gods?

OIDIPOUS

Freed from a family's tyranny.

CHORUS

How do you know that this is so?

OIDIPOUS

I see the hand of Zeus in all ...

CHORUS

Your suffering, how can that be?

OIDIPOUS

Justice descends from Zeus, can you not see?

CHORUS

And Justice only comes through pain?

OIDIPOUS

It does. Only by suffering one learns.

CHORUS

Is this the lesson you have learned?

OIDIPOUS

Yes. Zeus fulfils his plan with time.

CHORUS

He is immortal, he has time enough!

OIDIPOUS

But Man needs time to know what god desires

CHORUS

So you accept the fate god gives?

OIDIPOUS

In time his plans will serve us well.

CHORUS

So that is why you choose to die...

OIDIPOUS

And why I can't allow my sons to live.

CHORUS

I understand now, Oidipous, I've learned...

OIDIPOUS

Through what I've suffered: Zeus is just!

CHORUS

Farewell now, Oidipous,

May you find rest and peace

Upon the mountainside

Which spared your life.

.

