

Oedipus

A Closet Drama in Three Acts

by

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## The Characters

Creon, brother of Jocasta

A Farmer

Jocasta, Queen of Thebes

Laius, King of Thebes

A Maid to Jocasta

Merope, Queen of Corinth

Oedipus, son of Laius and Jocasta

Polybus, King of Corinth

The Priestess of the Oracle at Delphi

A Servant to Laius

A Servant to Polybus

A Shepherd

The Sphinx

A Wet Nurse

Attendants

Guards

Townspeople of Thebes

## Act I

### Scene I

*[lights up on Jocasta and her maid in the palace of Thebes – the queen looks out a window]*

Jocasta:

The clouds race in my mind. Three weeks and more  
He's been away, my husband – gone to seek  
That wisdom at the world's midst. Laius left  
Upon that yonder road, his chariot  
Pulled by one horse – so westward was he gone,  
While to my mind my heart whispered much doubt,  
As still it doth. I wait upon the sight  
Of Laius riding o'er that crest of hill  
So distant.

Maid:

Only, it may hap he comes  
By some road other. Many are the ways  
And crossroads of our country – to retrace  
Some path exact one's ta'en before, 'tis hard  
'Twixt here and Delphi. Could be, he got lost  
Returning – going, too: 'twould be the cause  
His journey lingers.

Jocasta:

All roads I cannot  
Keep eye on; but one must I – shall be this.

*[enter a servant]*

Servant:

My queen, he comes.

Jocasta:  
King Laius?

Servant:  
Yes, of course.

Jocasta:  
Which way? By which route?

Servant:  
By the northwest road.  
We heard a cry – men saw him from the wall,  
And howled to raise the gate.

Jocasta:  
Saw'st thou his face?  
Was't glad or sad?

Servant:  
Oh queen, I did not see,  
For I did dash straight here. E'en now, I'd say,  
He passes in the city. Thou shalt see  
His countenance anon – he'll wish to speak  
To thee, and no one else.

Jocasta:  
I ought don gowns  
And meet him... Yet this chair sure hold me down,  
As if it glued me! Scarcely do I breathe,  
And feeling's left my nerves.

Maid:  
Madam, dost wish  
Some med'cine?

Servant:  
Hark, I hear him in the hall...

Jocasta:  
[*to maid*] No time. The word of Delphi enters in.

[*enter Laius*]

Laius:  
My wife, straight from my chariot I sprang  
To tell thee answer.

Jocasta:  
Leave us, both of ye.

[*exeunt maid and servant*]

I tremble as I wait thy word... Thy face  
Doth sure misgive me.

Laius:  
If I look a fright,  
Think it but wear and weather of my trip  
Upon these features... Wife so dear, I shan't  
Extend thy anguish – we shall have a child.

Jocasta:  
Oh – Apollo said so?

Laius:  
In plain words.

Jocasta:  
And spake he else?

Laius:  
Naught else. His priestess kept  
Full silent when I asked if one sole child  
Be vouchsafed us by heaven, or if more  
Thou shouldst bear afterwards.

Jocasta:

It is enough;

Oh surely, 'tis enough! So long I've lain  
In dismal low despair, two years or more,  
Since not long after I did marry thee  
At fifteen years of age – thou, twenty-one –  
And nowise felt the telling change in me,  
Saw not my belly swell. But now the god  
Assures me, shall not last, this barren time,  
But soon yield to sweet fruitfulness, and close  
Our pain, our anguished sorrow... But why dost  
Thou not look happy? Strangled seem thy smiles,  
Unsure thine eyes.

Laius:

My glad wife, as I said,  
This headlong journey's bruised me – little rest  
I gave my courser, for to spare thy heart  
Too much of waiting. Still the rumbling trip  
Harsh-rattles in my mind – but be assured,  
I'm glad, as thou art... Only give me leave  
To lie, and hear no sounds. Since long ere dawn  
O'er hard paths have I ridden.

Jocasta:

Lie thee down;

I'll make a quick bed – and the slaves I'll warn  
To not disturb thee.

Laius:

Send a gentle voice  
To rouse me when 'tis supper.

Jocasta:

And when thou

Goest up again, I'll join thee.

[*exit Jocasta*]

Laius:  
Dare I tell

All I was told? Another prophecy  
The Pythia spake while fumes did kiss her nose,  
Casting black horror on me. I must pray,  
When gods bestow our much-awaited child,  
They bring not grief, but happiness to home:  
A comfort for my wife, a joy to Thebes –  
No cause for nightmare sorrows, whereby I  
Must speak what crimson words Apollo breathed,  
And tell my wife what dread act must ensue.  
This is the curse of gods for my great sin –  
Such dark deed I shan't say, e'en to myself.

*[lights down]*

## Scene II

*[lights up on one end of the stage, where Laius sits]*

Laius:  
She screams no more, my wife. I heard a squeal,  
The cry of one who breathes his first of life –  
But nothing doth it teach me, save that soon  
I must learn how to weep, or thank that lord  
Of light, music, forevision. I daren't rise –  
I dare not enter where my child's been born;  
My legs and will forsake me. Soon enough  
A slave shall come and bid me view my wife  
And what the gods have gifted... I alone  
Within this house know it might be no gift,  
But something which brings tears along with it.

*[enter maid]*

Maid:

My king, thou hast –

Laius:

Speak not. Oh, seal thy lips.

I will go in, and see.

*[lights up on the rest of the stage, showing Jocasta holding an infant, surrounded by two or three female attendants]*

Jocasta:

Oh Laius, look,

Thou art a father. I have born a son.

Laius:

*[aside]* Ye damnèd heavens, say Apollo lied.  
Say that his priestess misconstrued, or that  
I am bewildered, and mistake this dream  
For hard event.

Jocasta:

My husband, wilt thou see?

Why dost thou turn aside?

Laius:

Bid these be gone.

Jocasta:

*[to maid and servants]* A moment, pray.

*[exeunt maid and servants]*

What thought or illness ails

My worthy lord?

Laius:

The child is healthy?



Jocasta:  
Yes.

My king, why art thou sad?

Laius:  
A son?

Jocasta:  
A son,  
Oh husband! Why, thy face looks moonish pale,  
As though this late travail had been thine own.  
Thou shouldst wish more for son than daughter, yes?  
But tell me what thy pain is.

Laius:  
I cannot,  
Without I rip this sweet delight from thee,  
And drag thee straight to that grief I am in.

Jocasta:  
What mean'st thou?

Laius:  
My Jocasta... it must die.

Jocasta:  
Must die? Our child?

Laius:  
Oh Fate, or Chance, relent –  
Give up thy scepter to Compassion's sway.  
One child – one daughter! And no more, an end:  
Enough that blood of mine might once more drip,  
And I grow old in hopes a further drop –  
And further, further – compensate decline  
Into the darksome bed! My wife, I told  
Not all the sibyl spake.

Upon her perch

Of three legs sat she, while her nostrils breathed  
Corruption of that snake beneath the earth  
Apollo slew; and in her answer to  
My desp'rate question, first she said thy womb  
Would not for aye refuse my seed... but then,  
After a pause, a fearful prophecy  
Pursued that utt'rance: Voice came low and dire,  
And said that, should I bear a son, that boy  
Would slaughter me, and take my throne... and thou  
Shouldst be his wife.

Jocasta:  
It cannot be that thou  
Misheard'st?

Laius:  
Oh, that some barest of belief  
I *had* misheard dwelt in me! and I should  
Risk all – risk so unnatural and foul  
A consequence. But, still rush in mine ears  
Those words, like winds that echo in grim caves  
In regions where men tremble. I must act...  
But oh, my limbs stir not.

Jocasta:  
I do not trust  
I am not dreaming.

Laius:  
Do not hold the babe  
So close – call in a servant, have her take  
It from thee.

Jocasta:  
No.

Laius:  
The longer thou dost press

Thy son to thee, the harder it shall go  
When thou must him relinquish.

Jocasta:  
Say not such,

Be silent!

Laius:  
Would I'd bidden silence when  
The Pythia 'gan to trespass towards those things  
I had not asked. This danger still would be,  
(More dangerous for our not knowing it) –  
And yet I'd rather ignorance, since now  
We must this sund'ring suffer, and our branch  
Cast down to Hades' depths.

Jocasta:  
Thy words are flames  
Scorching my heart, my Laius.

Laius:  
I'll call in

A servant.

Jocasta:  
Do not so!

Laius:  
[*calling through doors*] One thrall who stands  
Without, and is a male, I bid thee come.

[*enter servant*]

Servant:  
My lord, I wait upon thy will.

Laius:  
Seest thou

This child my wife holds?

Servant:  
Aye, my lord.

Laius:  
I bid  
Ye take it from her, bear it from this town,  
And leave it in a place amongst the peaks  
Where none shall find it.

Jocasta:  
Stay thy hest, my king,  
My husband!

Laius:  
No, there is no remedy  
Except we leave this poor babe to expire –  
Unless thou wishest words the sibyl spake  
To shape themselves amidst us, in our lives,  
Bringing a hateful doom to thee and me,  
Corrupting Thebes, our blood, with incest's taint:  
Horrendous union, scarcely to be spoke...  
And what might issue –

Jocasta:  
Is there not some way  
Short of his death to save us three from fate  
Of wickedness and blood-spill?

Laius:  
Do not ask,  
Thou know'st the answer.

Jocasta:  
What I know is that  
Two feet which cannot walk shall not come near  
The father which their owner hath been said

Shall threaten him. We'll let our young one crawl,  
My lord, but never walk – and I shall keep  
Him far from thee! What hath a king to fear  
From one removed cripple, raised in hut  
Out in the wildish country? He'll ne'er know  
He is a prince! He'll think I am his aunt,  
Who sometimes comes to visit – and his sire  
And mother shall be shepherd, shepherdess,  
Himself taught in their work.

Laius:  
Thou ravest.

Jocasta:  
See,  
See, husband, how I pull a brooch from where  
My gown it fastens – this shall cripple him –  
I'll pin his feet together!

*[wounds left foot of infant]*

Laius:  
*[to servant]* Seize her hand!

*[servant restrains the queen – Laius takes the infant]*

I'll hold the child myself. Give me a cloth,  
I'll staunch the bleeding – so.

Jocasta:  
Oh, thou art cruel!  
Thou heedest sibyl's words, but not mine own  
Which tell thee thou mayst spare thy son, yet live!

Laius:  
Thou glimpsest naught but grief – the priestess saw  
(And could not help but speak) the very truth  
Our future hides. If there live hope at all

For us unhappy couple, it must thrive  
By necessary murder... Do not think  
I mourn not – but my sternness means the sobs  
Must well in towards my heart, not outward moan.  
Our child will meet his doom in innocence,  
And suffer nothing in the place he goes;  
But were he left alive, when he must die,  
Then should his guilt hurl him to fearsome ache  
Unending, in the gloom where weights are rolled,  
And whirlpools and the wind swirl souls about  
Like helpless motes and specks. This act is for  
Our child no less than us... And if it be,  
Oh dear Jocasta, that in years to come  
Thou never bear'st a daughter – maugre all  
Our prayers and vows – then once again I'll ride  
To priestess, for to seek some straight response  
Whether our blood's not destined to expire  
With our two deaths – and I shall not depart  
'Til plain I'm answered.

*[gives servant the child]*

Jocasta:

Oh, I turn my sight.

I wish I'd faint! My little one, forgive  
Thy mother, who thee fails.

Laius:

*[to servant]*                      Away from her –  
Come with me, towards the door. You best were off  
With haste. I'll calm the queen. With dispatch move  
Toward southern mountains.

Servant:

Yes, my king.

Laius:

Leave it

Where none might see it, neither hear its squeals –  
Somewhere deep in a hollow, 'mongst the crags  
Beside the frosty summits, where so few  
Surely must wander... And let no man spy  
What thou art bearing: keep a lonesome way.  
It now is night, and few should catch its cries.  
Thou'lt be in empty country by the morn.  
Stay off the main paths.

Servant:  
Lord, forgive me, but  
Would not some surer means –

Laius:  
Be silent, thou.  
In sight of gods, I'll not work deed direct  
To end my son's life – nor have such as ye  
Do same upon my order. This way, earth  
And nature are the culprits, storm and cold,  
Or wild beasts – and I save myself the groans  
Of endless hell – thee also! Go... I think  
The queen is overcome.

Servant:  
She rests, and sleeps.  
I shall do as thou bid'st, with stealth and speed.

*[exit servant, lights down]*

### Scene III

*[lights up on a hollow in the mountains south of Thebes – enter servant with the infant]*

Servant:  
A chill wind blows here. Plenty high I've gone,

And view the lowlands both to south and north.  
Poor infant... Thou didst bawl a little while,  
But now look'st weaker. Oh, how hateful this,  
Such piteous task! What man could let thee die,  
E'en if he knew 'twould stay such wickedness  
As I did hear discussed. Thou seem'st not such  
Should work unnatural crimes – who saith thou shouldst?  
An oracle? A god? What nonsense that,  
Especially if's told to those who'd wish  
To cancel such a destiny, and own  
All power to do so... Art thou still alive?  
Thy face looks wan.

I trow this place shall serve  
To hide thee from all eyes: the oaks grow thick,  
The rocks sit massive. How long shalt thou live  
After I've left thee? Oh, too horrible  
A thought to bide with! I shall set thee down  
And quickly leave – the king hath bidden so.

*[he starts to go, but hesitates]*

I cannot walk... my legs must bring me back.  
Some little squeaks thou yet hast in thy voice.  
Thou mov'st thy legs and arms... I'll kneel by thee,  
Wait by thee. Oh, how thou want'st mother's milk,  
Poor feeble one, and wouldst much louder cry  
If thou wert able! Shall I stay by you?  
I cannot leave... I cannot bring thee back  
(That were sure death for both of us) – yet shall  
These eyes take in thy death? How might it go  
Without my heart then cracking? All is grief,  
Each way is nightmare... Yet still chant the birds  
And pass the clouds and breeze. The bee roams by,  
Droning like some strange spirit. In the gloom  
Of this high place, the king's voice comes less loud  
Within my memory, less stern his words,  
And all seems soft, though mournful.



*[bleating is heard]*

What is that?...

A shepherd's flock, of course. All things seem strange  
Not far from roof of sky, but sadness-low.  
How far's that flock? They seem to drift this way –  
A mild-voiced crowd of sheep. I'm not as far  
From wand'ers as I thought. Ah well, nowhere  
I go, might not another... Still they come,  
Those bleats, as though they sought me. Somehow soothes  
That gentle noise mine anguish. I ought bear  
The infant someplace else... but now drops weak  
Each of my limbs. I wait who shall arrive.

*[enter shepherd with sheep]*

Shepherd:

How now? What hast thou there? Who art thou, man?  
Thou'rt dressed like palace-fellow. Seldom I  
Meet those not of my labor on these peaks  
Or 'pon the slopes. Of Corinth art thou? Thebes?  
What is that bundle next thee?

Servant:

'Tis a thing

A great one thinks shall bring an evil work  
If left to thrive; but seems it me, 'tis I  
Am forced to work the only ill which e'er  
Shall touch its being.

Shepherd:

Thou'rt an odd one, man –  
Such strange talk to my question! Let me see...  
Oh, oh – an infant!... What was that thou saidst  
Of evil works?

Servant:  
Pure nothing... I grow faint,  
Confused – pay it no heed.

Shepherd:  
What dost thou do  
With infant here? The wee one wastes away...  
Thou mean'st to let it die?

Servant:  
My master doth,  
But I do war within what I intend.

Shepherd:  
I'll tell thee – thou need'st not resolve such fight,  
But leave it be, and let two wills at odds  
Be o'ercome by a third which knows no check.  
No questions from thee, fellow; time is short –  
I'll take him from thee.

Servant:  
Wouldst thou, sir? I think  
I may allow thee. Only, say where thou  
Dost mean to bear him.

Shepherd:  
To the south, good sir.

Servant:  
He shall live far from Thebes?

Shepherd:  
That's where thou'rt from?

Servant:  
It is. I more and more do think thee sent  
By some sweet agency – some mercy-sprite's  
Dispatched thee! But, do render me relief

From guilt and worry both: say, all his life,  
He shall live far from Thebes.

Shepherd:  
If Corinth's far  
From city Cadmus founded, then thou hast  
Solid assurance. I know of a pair  
Shall gladly take this child, and will not wish  
To let him far from sight, so precious he  
Shall be to lonesome hearth.

Servant:  
Oh shepherd, haste,  
And speak not of me – tell what soul shall ask,  
Thou found'st the child alone.

*[gives infant]*

Shepherd:  
I shall.

Servant:  
Run swift –  
The babe needs soft breast, warmer clime, and milk.  
I love thee for this deed – I pray and call  
All honors on thee.

Shepherd:  
But my sheep shall roam  
All ways while I am gone... Take thou my staff,  
Keep them close by. A little while thou'lt serve  
In what I labor. Suppertime, I ween,  
Shall see me here again.

Servant:  
Gods speed thy feet.

Shepherd:  
I wrap the infant close – my cloaks shall fold  
A thick coat round the bairn. Keep all this wool  
Close round thee, and the frost shall jab thee not.  
*[exit shepherd – lights down]*

Scene IV

*[lights up on Polybus and Merope in the palace of Corinth – enter servant]*

Servant:  
Lord and lady, there's a man outside the gate  
Hath something for ye.

Polybus:  
What's the man? And what  
Hath he to give us?

Servant:  
'Tis a rustic wight,  
Of rags, half out of breath – a herdsman, or  
One of such work. The bundle which he bears  
Is much-wrapped, and he holds it close his chest.  
The sweat shines freshly on him, and he gasps  
He must be let within – not for himself,  
But one in peril.

Merope:  
Let him in at once;  
We'll learn whereof he speaks.

*[servant gestures – enter shepherd escorted by a guard]*

Shepherd:  
Oh, entrance, good!  
My king and queen, I come from northern heights

Bearing this urgent burden. By your leave,  
I'll show you.

*[lays the infant on a table and unwraps it]*  
Watching sheep upon a hill,  
I found him all alone.

Merope:  
Abandoned! Quick,  
Oh servant, find a wet nurse, take the child  
With thee.

*[exit servant with infant]*

Polybus:  
Who art thou, shepherd?

Shepherd:  
Merely one  
Who thought of ye two, how you have no child,  
As all the kingdom knows, when one loud cry,  
High up where wand'ring mists obscure one's view,  
Did seize mine ear amidst the chatt'ring birds  
And led me towards the piteous sight of babe  
Exposed to elements. I wrapped him in  
The blanket 'neath him, and added mine own,  
Praying I'd make this palace ere he died,  
So weak sounded his wails... And now I weep  
In gratitude the gods lended me speed.

Polybus:  
And we shall dedicate ten goats to them,  
As many kine, for thanks this boon hath come,  
Making less lonesome our too-silent hall,  
And giving joy to Corinth.

Merope:  
We shall raise

This infant as our own: an heir for us,  
The promise we were lacking, each and all  
Who've wished, "May Polybus' descendants reign" –  
For this young soul indeed shall be our blood  
In all the town's belief.

Polybus:  
Good shepherd, thou  
Look'st most-gone into death's house: sit ye down  
In the next room. I'll have our kitchen brought  
Entire – for must thy stomach wish it all.

Merope:  
Soft couch for thee, if wouldst.

Shepherd:  
My lady, I  
Shall grab some bread and fruit, but must run back  
Where clouds are caps for hilltops, for my flock  
I've left unguarded.

Polybus:  
Go by chariot –  
I'll gain a driver for thee.

Merope:  
And a purse  
Much-stuffed with silver.

Shepherd:  
If 'tis swiftly stuffed,  
I'll not refuse it.

Polybus:  
Follow me, good friend.  
The car shall take thee far as roads might go  
Towards where thy loose sheep wander.

[*exeunt Polybus and shepherd – enter wet nurse with infant*]

Wet Nurse:

Queen, observe:

He drinks, and much of color's in his cheek  
Which showed all pale when brought.

Merope:

Kind gods o'erhead:

Ye own the gentle feelings after all,  
And sometimes pity even those you've cursed –  
Perhaps reck'ning our trials feed enough  
Whatever mouths bid suff'ring. Let me hold  
My babe and newfound sweet one...

Oh – he bleeds,

Redd'ning a bandage on his foot!

Wet Nurse:

I changed

The dressing, wrapped it tight, but still the blood  
Oozes a little. Somewhat swell'n's his foot –  
I rubbed oil on't. A healer I've called for;  
He should be here anon.

[*enter Polybus*]

Polybus:

[*taking infant*] My little one,  
Thou'rt brave, for not at all ye scream or sob,  
E'en though the first wound nature shall inflict's  
Already on thy body. [*to wet nurse*] Saw'st the wound?

Wet Nurse:

I did, lord. 'Tis a puncture, as though thorn  
Or needle jabbed 'im.

Merope:

[*to Polybus*]                      The foot's swoll'n, she said.  
We've sent for care.

Polybus:

Whether this be a sign  
Of some strange meaning – 'tis a thing I shall  
Mull over most these days. He seems at ease,  
Well-fed and warm. Thou'st tied the bandage well,  
Good nurse – mayhap the doctor little more  
Can practice. Let me give him to thine arms  
Again.

[*gives infant to wet nurse – looks out a window*]

This is a gladsome winter's day,  
When sun and light stoop most, but royal joy  
Riseth to zenith. Whate'er mean the gods,  
If anything, by this odd injury  
Upon such fortunate gift, I have a mind  
We ought acknowledge it, as sign we show  
Rev'rence for workings past all ken and thought –  
And therefore I command this child be called  
The One of Swollen Foot, or Oedipus.  
Before the ear of heaven, I proclaim  
Myself a thrall to fate – my realm as well,  
My family, my new son. He is our blood:  
So shall the city, kingdom, be informed,  
And think him queen's own issue. And our word  
To Oedipus himself (once he hath gained  
The use of reason, language), if he asks  
If Merope and I indeed are those  
Who made him, shall be that none other brought  
His soul and flesh from out vast nothingness  
Of uncreation... for I might believe,  
By such time, 'tis the truth, and this same day  
When shepherd came, set infant down, and sped,



Mere fable of my mind, a dream o'ergrown,  
Strange metaphor I live in... And our son,  
Convinced as well, hintless of otherwise,  
Shall all the more cleave tight with family-love  
To mother, father, kingdom, while he grows  
To happy manhood, proud he'll take our throne.

[*lights down*]

Act II

Scene I

*[lights up on Oedipus in the palace of Corinth – enter Merope]*

Merope:

Thou broodest, son – again.

Oedipus:

Mother, it mars  
What thou call'st brooding, so to speak the fact –  
And so distracted, I must needs brood more  
To find the place I lost.

Merope:

Thou didst not used  
To dwell so long this way.

Oedipus:

I like to look  
Out of this window – often I've done so...  
Though more, perhaps, of late.

Merope:

Thy bosom friends  
Do lack thee at the hunt.

Oedipus:

I know not why,  
But somewhat aches my foot. Ne'er did before;  
But this slight pain confines me.

Merope:

Tell me true,  
Is there some sorrow in thee?

Oedipus:  
Mother, no.

Why dost thou ask me?

Merope:  
I trow thou know'st not  
How seem thy features.

Oedipus:  
Straight mine eyesight shoots:  
It turns not in a bend, upon my face,  
That I might glimpse myself.

[*enter Polybus*]

Polybus:  
I wish good morn  
To both of ye.

Merope:  
Good day, my king.

Oedipus:  
Hi there.

Polybus:  
The feast I and thy mother have arranged,  
With all thy friends, shall be tonight.

Oedipus:  
I know.

Polybus:  
You miss the forest hunt.

Oedipus:  
Today I wish  
To watch the world in silence.

Merope:  
He hath been  
Staring from out this casement most the week,  
Sulky and strange; and oft his friends have come  
To ask him for their rambles, but he saith  
He wisheth solitude.

Oedipus:  
Mine eyes trace o'er  
Yon marble walls, white stairs, the tiled roofs,  
Right angles of the courtyards and the towers –  
All underneath a yellow sun: such scene  
Beyond our palace draws me long to look.  
Those temple pillars, standing 'top yon hill,  
Exact and solid, shining in the morn,  
Look proud as titans' legs – seem bold and grand,  
As though I'd never viewed them... while the dawn  
Throws some enchanting glance on every face  
Of wall and hill – as though we lived back when  
The age glowed golden.

Merope:  
Oedipus – last night  
The atest alone; we had the cooks send in  
Thy dishes to thy room, so thou mightst brood  
All by thyself while supping... Oh, we wish  
Thou'lt join us, and thy friends, in banquet hall  
Once day dips low.

Polybus:  
The new moon means thou'lt view  
But darkness, out a window.

Oedipus:  
I'll be there,  
Don't worry ye.

Merope:  
We thank thee, son.

[*aside to Polybus*] Five years  
And ten – I think back when I was so young,  
And reckon I was twice as snappish, yet  
Not half so full of thought.

Polybus:  
[*aside to Merope*] They pass anon,  
These moods of youth.

[*exeunt Polybus and Merope*]

Oedipus:  
My left foot throbs again –  
A twinge every so often. This began  
Only some weeks ago: a little ache,  
And's gone. Disquieting, for there's no wound;  
The skin shows nothing. Swollen Foot's my name:  
They said an insect bit me my first hour,  
But swelling soon went down... Truth, it's not pain  
Keeps me at home, but how I sudden grow  
So weary of my fellows. Something's strange  
Of late about this landscape which I watch –  
This scenery of all my life, as though  
It were in truth remote from my real home:  
A curtain veiling notions I can't grasp,  
But which knock at my mind.

Lately a dream  
Most nights assails me: I cross o'er a bridge  
Which spans the bournless ocean, while the clouds  
Like mourning faces shrouded all in gray  
Shuffle above the waves. I cannot peek  
What land I walk from, nor the realm I go,  
But listen to sea's mumble; and I squint  
The infinite point ahead, and that behind,

Knowing I have walked long from some faint place –  
A bleary world we go to, and come from.  
And moving 'cross that span, I sense the sky,  
Straight down from vast above, lets go some form –  
All empty shadow, weirdness – like some crow  
Or blackbird of the utmost, to descend  
And hover where I may not see, but feel  
Its looming dark intention... *Run*, I think:  
*Run where ye head, poor Oedipus, or turn*  
*Back where ye came from* – but both ways are vain;  
For either path I go, that bird, or ghost –  
Or what, I know not – still shall find my soul  
And flutter o'er my pate, swishing its wings  
On back of ears and neck's nape. This dream's come  
A dozen times or more – some nights, some not –  
Making more strange each time this place I wake:  
This chamber, and the country where I'll reign  
When passes my good father.

More and more

I wonder what doth bide behind my head,  
Only to show in sleep... The meaning here,  
Behind this room and city, dormant lies;  
And I must journey towards it in my bed  
To learn what shape it hath. Here under sun  
All's veiled by light. My life awake is but  
To wait for what is real to rise, moon-like –  
Then watch, by dimmest glow of sleeping sense,  
Those true things which bestir themselves by stars.

[*lights down*]

## Scene II

[*lights up on Polybus and Merope after the feast is over*]

Merope:

The last guest staggers down the torch-lit hall,  
Poured up with wine. The servants creep to bed,  
And so ought I and thou.

Polybus:

Hast seen our son?

Of sudden I recall his chair sat void  
This banquet towards its end.

Merope:

I did not see;

But often, glimpsed I, did he whisper with  
One of his quaffing chums, the one who sat  
Upon his left. His face looked often grave,  
His eyes as though, within, he turned some thought  
He could not compass – like some bulky thing  
Which won't fit in one's chest, to shut and lock.

Polybus:

So serious and sad, e'en at a feast!

Merope:

Always he's been slight soberer than's friends,  
Retiring sooner, laughing not as much –  
But these seem darker signals.

Polybus:

Dost thou muse

He might gain inklings of the truth we vowed  
We ne'er ought tell him?

Merope:

Hush – I think he comes.

[*enter Oedipus*]

Polybus:  
Good evening – I had thought you'd gone to bed.

Merope:  
Thou didst not eat much – there sits still some fare  
Upon the table.

Oedipus:  
No, I don't come down  
For food or drink.

Merope:  
Thou look'st so ghastly wan!

Oedipus:  
I feel uneasy.

Merope:  
Fever, or a cold?

Polybus:  
Thou shouldst lie down again, if feel'st unwell.

Oedipus:  
No cure waits in my bed.

Merope:  
And what mean'st thou?  
What troubles thee?

Oedipus:  
Mother, the words of one  
I've often jested with, at sport and play,  
But who's now spoke a heavy thing to me  
E'en while he felt most light at heart – cast off  
From cares, for wine untied him.

Merope:  
Tell me what



His words were.

Oedipus:

Oh, alas! – e'en now my tongue  
Revolts from telling... Would I might disclose,  
So that my illness passes!

Merope:

Bid thy lips  
Make shapes to heal thy sickness – thou art lord,  
Thy flesh the servant.

Oedipus:

Too great hath a strength  
This stern rebellion.

Polybus:

Son, if thou wouldst not  
Spread thy unease to us – for we do love  
Thee sorely, and when thou dost suffer, so  
Do Merope and I – say what thou'st heard,  
And what thou wouldst speak with us.

Oedipus:

'Tis the thought –  
I cannot say it.

Merope:

Oh, thou must.

Oedipus:

'Tis what  
Was put in me by my good friend's loose words:  
That thou art not my mother – and thou, sire,  
Art not my father.

Merope:

Oh – thy friend was drunk.

A rambling nonsense! Why wouldst thou believe  
Such stray spark from a brain burning with drink?  
Thy friend quaffs much, and often, if I judge  
From how much passed his lips tonight.

Oedipus:

He said

My face looks not like thine – nor father's face.

Merope:

He saith so – but I think the opposite.

Polybus:

Sometimes my nobles say, thou hast mine eyes,  
Or nose or chin of Merope – they've said  
Such things since thou didst toddle.

Oedipus:

In a glass

I've stared my face o'er, shut up in my room  
These two hours past – and nowise could I mark  
Even some faint similitude 'twixt me  
And either one of you two.

Polybus:

There are those

Who'd swear the contrary: thy parents, first,  
And hundreds more who'd vow, straight to thy soul,  
Thou lookest much like we do.

Oedipus:

Aye, because

Thou art the king, and crave them so to speak.  
They wish thy pleasure.

Merope:

Son, what might we speak  
To set thy mind at rest? I say thou art

Our son, born of my womb; what need'st thou more?

Oedipus:  
Apollo's word.

Polybus:  
Thou mean'st, the priestess's  
Who prophecies at Delphi?

Oedipus:  
Yes.

Polybus:  
Oh son,  
Thou'st ne'er roamed more than five miles from this hall –  
Thou knowest not the way.

Oedipus:  
I shall inquire  
And suss it out. I know the sibyl lips  
Her mystic words at navel of the world.

Merope:  
What might a priestess tell thee, leagues away,  
Thou oughtst trust more than what thy parents tell  
In heartfelt tones, imploring thou believ'st?

Oedipus:  
She might say ye speak truth – but if she don't,  
'Twill be a second mouth (after that first  
Which gnawed mine ear) saying your words are false.

Merope:  
Why would we lie?

Oedipus:  
Perhaps to keep me here –  
To keep the throne for one for whom you're fond,

Even if not your blood: that would fit in  
With how I'm siblingless... And 'tis well known  
When no heir waits a throne, questions arise  
Which horrid warfare answers.

Polybus:  
I fear not  
What might speak priestess. Only know, full oft  
She tells not to one's inquiry, but gives  
Only enigmas.

Merope:  
How canst thou believe  
I'm not thy mother?

Oedipus:  
Oh, I'm lost to where  
I ought set truth... I love ye both.

[*exit Oedipus*]

Merope:  
We let  
Him go, and leave us?

Polybus:  
Wouldst thou keep a guard  
Around him, every minute?

Merope:  
Much I fear  
We ne'er shall glimpse him more.

Polybus:  
The oracle  
Might tell him nothing.

Merope:

I must pray the Fates

It should be so... If Oedipus hear truth,  
He'll seek the one who bore him, and his sire,  
And we must once more know a childless home –  
So lonely, desolate.

Polybus:

He must seek out,

By ship and foot, that wisdom which the gods  
Consent to show him... Somehow, he's a one  
Senses strange things thou glimpsest not, nor I;  
And therefore can't we stay him. He shall go –  
Return, most likely. Let him hear what words  
Apollo chooseth. If he's meant for us,  
They'll steer him back, swift back, into our arms –  
Telling him fate and parents' love are one.

*[lights down]*

### Scene III

*[Delphi, nighttime – lights up on one side of the stage – enter Oedipus with a walking staff]*

Oedipus:

With trembling I approach this sacred spot  
At midst of Gaia's belly. All this way  
From Corinth unto Delphi, wind's been calm,  
So eerie-soundless... On the ship across  
The almost waveless gulf, no breezes puffed  
Our sail – it was all rowing – and on land  
The groves and grasses seemed quite emptied of  
Bird, creature, insect; for without the wind,  
I ought have heard each chirping, drone, and croak –  
But those parts made no murmur. I did ask

The sailors and the farmers where to seek  
Amongst the countless paths to reach my goal,  
And have wandered so long, deep night hath fall'n –  
But I believe that now, partly by luck,  
I've happened on the place the sibyl sits,  
And soon shall gain my answer.

*[he advances tentatively]*

Here are steps,  
And in the dark, the thin moon dimly shows  
Some columns in half-circle.

*[lights up on the rest of the stage, showing the Pythia on her tripod]*

Art thou she  
Who speaks for that bright one who slew the worm  
What once guarded this place?

Priestess:  
I am that maid:  
A spotless holy virgin, wise and pure,  
Whom lord Apollo's chosen shall pronounce  
What each man ought to know, who comes to me  
And asks his question.

Oedipus:  
Truly thou dost seem  
Some dread interpreter, dressed all in red,  
Sitting above this vent which steams with smoke  
And wreathes thee in its heat.

Priestess:  
I draw in breathe,  
And sup upon these fumes the earth exhales,  
Maintaining some sweet in-between of mind:  
Half-gone towards ecstasy my every hour –  
For midway 'twixt the gods and our dull sense

I'm bid to constant hover.

Oedipus:  
How I long

For vision as thou hast.

Priestess:  
If thou didst gain  
Such sweven never-dying, thou shouldst rue  
The meaning of this earth, and waves, and air,  
As much as love the soft face of their change  
Across the eons.

Oedipus:  
What thou sayst compels  
I tell thee of strange intuitions gleaned  
Lately and often: staring from my house  
Upon the landscapes and the simple walls  
Of marble, perfect Corinth, I've discerned  
The will of something dreadful and unknown  
Behind all such appearance – how 'tis so,  
I cannot 'gin t'explain.

Priestess:  
I smile at thee,  
For thou dost stand at threshold of a house  
Contains uncounted rooms.

Oedipus:  
But I do come  
To ask and learn, that I might pass that door  
And edge some slight ways farther.

Priestess:  
Then begin  
Thy question.

Oedipus:  
When I ask thee, shalt thou give  
A riddling answer – or no more than plain  
Reply to what's plain put?

Priestess:  
I cannot speak  
For how the bright god might respond. Full oft  
A mystery he's channeled through my lips,  
Confounding those before me.

Oedipus:  
Then I must  
Both ask and pray at once – ask what I'd know,  
And pray the answer, answer be indeed.

Priestess:  
Speak on – one question, nothing more.

Oedipus:  
I am  
The prince of Corinth. All my life I've known  
Its king as father, queen as mother – but  
One friend, set wild by wine, did lately claim  
I'm not indeed the flower of such tree,  
But only grafted on; and much I've looked  
To grasp some faint resemblance which might tame  
My raucous fears – but none, for all my wish,  
Could I discern... Tell plainly to me, god  
Who standeth here, though I might see thee not:  
Am I the son of Corinth's king and queen?

Priestess:  
[*in a trance*] This first shall pass, and then this second thing:  
Thy father thou shalt slay, then mother thine  
Shalt marry.



Oedipus:  
What is that?

Priestess:  
[*leaving her trance*] Thou'st heard the words  
Apollo breathed in me – he'll say no more,  
Nor what he's said, repeat.

Oedipus:  
My father I  
Shall slay, and mother marry?

Priestess:  
Thou hast heard;  
Be gone.

Oedipus:  
But 'tis no answer.

Priestess:  
I did warn  
Ofttimes Apollo speaks crosswise to men  
Who questions bring.

Oedipus:  
'Tis nothing but a hoax,  
Thy dream and vision!

Priestess:  
If thou think'st so, leave,  
And trouble not thyself.

Oedipus:  
Six days I've walked  
And o'er the wide gulf rowed – and this I hear,  
That I shall turn a parricide, and take  
Mine own womb-origin as love and wife?

Priestess:

Be gone.

Oedipus:

*[he turns away – lights down on all but him]*

What ought I do? Where ought I turn?  
I told the priestess I thought vision false –  
But that was shock: I tremble once again,  
Now with a sicker worry. She spoke words  
Disclosed by heaven's wisdom... Slay my sire?  
Couple with mother? Two more grievous crimes  
Might any brain imagine? And what's worse,  
I know not whom is meant. Is Merope  
My mother? Father, Polybus? I'd fain  
Know answer vastly more now, now I've learned  
What light of Phoebus deigned to cast on me.  
What oracle is this, which leaves the man  
Who cometh, more bewildered when he leaves?  
And if 'tis set, why tell me? Is fate still  
Firm fate, if it be known? I might straightway  
Do in my wretched life – leap off a cliff  
Or borrow sword: Then where would be that phrase  
The priestess spoke, that I should work these crimes?

But could I slay me, when the moment comes?  
Commit such fateful act? I think I'd balk,  
Too terrified of pain, of nothingness,  
And loving life too much. Where then, I say,  
Ought I to go? If Corinth's royal pair  
Indeed are those who gave me life, I must  
Avoid that town for aye... But if they're not,  
Then any place I travel might contain  
Mother and father. Seems it best to go  
Where few folks live.

I'll think awhile on this:

I'll meditate upon some mountaintop,  
Eating the nuts and berries – life needs not  
So very much to keep it. From a font  
Or stream or pool I'll sip; and it may be  
In time I'll find some simple rustic work  
To keep a better living. I must stay  
Far from each man aged 'nough to be my sire,  
And far from women who might mother be.  
Those tall peaks 'fore the dawn look peopled least  
Of places I might go – I'll head that way,  
Thinking on what I've heard.

If I avoid  
The fate Apollo's told – then what's that god?  
No god at all. If I reach my last day  
All guiltless, free from shame, from injury  
Committed 'gainst my parents, I'll have learned  
This oracle's a fraud – and God is not  
Our fate, but rather man's own soul doth guide  
His ways, as he doth wend this world wide.

*[exits – lights down]*

## Act III

### Scene I

*[lights up on a narrow road cut into the very steep slope of a mountain east of Delphi – enter Oedipus with his staff, going east]*

Oedipus:

How run the clouds like rivers, passing from  
Unseen to unseen, same way as my walk...  
The more I dwell on it, the more it seems  
I am the son of those I've always called  
Mother and father. Who said otherwise  
Hath hardly sober wits e'en when not drunk;  
And ne'er before hath any other giv'n  
Some stray hint they might doubt my parentage.  
The semblance claimed by king and queen, I might  
Turn out to glimpse some day, in other light,  
When face hath grown mature – more near that age  
In which my parents stand.

If so, 'tis well

I journey not back home, but seek a path  
Into remotest safety. I shan't brood  
A longer while on what the priestess said;  
For if I keep myself hidden in gloom  
Of thickest leaf, then shall the god prove wrong –  
And I, rather, prove master.

*[the winds pick up]*

Rain portends,  
To judge from this dark welkin. How gray's all  
This stony land... The trees grow white and dead.  
It is unnerving country.

*[sounds of a chariot approaching]*

What is that  
I hear? It sounds to be some rumbling wheels  
And horse hoofs clopping – coming down the road,  
Around this bend.

*[enter Laius in a chariot, holding a whip]*

Laius:  
You peasant, move aside.

Oedipus:  
I cannot, sir: this slope is very steep,  
And thy car fills the road.

Laius:  
Then go back down  
Ahead of me.

Oedipus:  
Back down? 'Tis half a mile,  
At least, 'til I might find some slimmest spot  
Where I could grant thee way... But say, if thou  
Dost back up but few yards, there is a place,  
I see, where this road splits, and thou mayst edge  
Some slight ways in, to let me pass, and then  
We'll each go on our way.

Laius:  
Thou country clown,  
Thou feeble-brain – this road's too steep for that,  
And slope too dangerous to have my horse  
Push chariot backwards! Run ahead of me,  
Or perish 'neath my wheels – I care not which.

Oedipus:  
Might not I climb up o'er thy car? Put foot  
Upon this trace, then swing legs o'er the rim,  
One after other?

Laius:

[*raising whip*] Touch my horse or car,  
And I shall lash thee.

Oedipus:

What has made thee thus,  
So cruel?

Laius:

I have an urgent thing I'd ask  
One of great wisdom.

Oedipus:

Dost thou mean the seer  
Apollo grants his myst'ries?

Laius:

Very same.

I go to ask if ever I shall breed  
A child t'outlast me. But what of it, boy?  
Thou dost delay me. Run ahead, or wait  
These wheels to crush thee.

Oedipus:

Let me but climb o'er!  
I'm light, 'twill be no trouble...

[*he begins to climb, but Laius whips him fiercely – Oedipus swings his staff impulsively, breaking it against the head of his foe, who falls and lies motionless*]

Sacred gods,

What have I done? Wake, sir, wake up, I meant  
No violence 'gainst thee!... Oh, how I most wish  
I could reclaim this morn – I'd choose my way  
By some road other.

[*he glances about*]

No eye's seen this act;  
And no soul soon shall find the murdered man.  
Let blind the world keep to my part in this!

*[he rolls Laius down the hill, unhitches the horse and slaps it down the road,  
then pushes the chariot down after the body]*

I'll wander off the road as soon's I can,  
And journey by the woods. My guilty look  
Must go unwitnessed. Let great heaven's power  
Observe I struck not first, nor wished his death.

*[exit – lights down]*

## Scene II

*[lights up on a grim wilderness – it is raining – enter Oedipus]*

Oedipus:

“I go to ask if ever I shall breed  
A child t'outlast me.” That is what he said...  
He could not be my father, for no child  
He's bred's outlasted him – and he would know,  
Would not he? He seemed certain of it... Yes.  
No, not my father – just a desp'rate man  
I killed by accident. Will he be found?  
Who was he? Body and the chariot  
I tumbled into tangled, branchy swale:  
They disappeared in leaf. Mayhap, his corpse  
The birds shall pick to bones well ere a soul  
Doth happen on the wreck. He might be sought,  
Though seemed he figure of no lofty rank,  
Wearing such modest cloaks... But wilderness  
Out here upon the heights spreads vast and dark;  
And rain should wash our struggle's marks away.

This is the forest's heart: a black remote  
High mountain near the clouds. I ought to search  
For something to sustain me – but fatigue  
O'errules my stomach... Suddenly, not one  
Step farther might I move.

*[he collapses and sleeps – the rain dwindles out, and a long time seems to pass – an eerie whistling proceeds softly overhead – he wakes]*

What did I hear  
In sleep's profoundest part, just ere I stirred?  
It seemed to pass on high... The world's still gray,  
Though gentle. All my thoughts sit gray as well  
And own a blank unrealness.

*[the whistling goes by again, even more softly]*

Am I hid?  
What do I hide from? I'll crawl next this oak  
And cower 'neath its limbs. Is't morn, or eve?  
*[touching his chin]* My beard hath grown full as this wilderness,  
Woolly, unclipped: two thickets never shorn,  
A wild bush and a wild man. What's about?  
Only great tangle, knotted and uncleared  
As far as goes my vision – or my thought.  
No sounds, except that whisper... Was it bird?  
What strange place have I come to?

*[enter the Sphinx opposite Oedipus – she hovers slowly through the woods, a stiff, couchant entity, bringing to mind a floating machine or statue – she settles on the ground soundlessly, and speaks without moving her bloody lips, in an unearthly, menacing whisper]*

Sphinx:  
I must set  
Myself down gently, lest I crack this world,  
This delicate egg.



Oedipus:  
Go back, go back – thou'rt not  
A true thing.

Sphinx:  
True as thou – and truer than  
What thou dost think thy life is.

Oedipus:  
I dream things  
My grief and hunger send me.

Sphinx:  
I spring not  
From grief and hunger – rather, those from me.

Oedipus:  
Leave me, and fly away.

Sphinx:  
Presumptuous man:  
Thou cam'st to where I dwell, not I to thee.

Oedipus:  
I sought but empty wastes.

Sphinx:  
The way thou goest  
Leads on to Thebes.

Oedipus:  
I would bide in these woods,  
And for a long while, speak with not a soul.  
But thou compel'st attention from mine eyes –  
And art more gruesome-beautiful than all  
The terrors of ill sleep... I look away,  
But still thou com'st at me: each place, thou art.  
I'll not to Thebes! Be gone.

Sphinx:  
Thou'st broke the bourne  
Of where I hover. Any who approach  
Must answer me a riddle – and I'll clutch  
Whilst I await his answer.

Oedipus:  
I shall sleep –  
Thou canst not ask me then!

Sphinx:  
Sleep then, if canst;  
And I shall move about like winging death,  
As I have done, from field, to house, to town,  
Consuming crop and kine and living man.

Oedipus:  
Oh rest, o'erwhelm me!

Sphinx:  
Thou must hear some words  
Require unrav'ling.

Oedipus:  
And if I speak not,  
Or answer falsely?

Sphinx:  
Dost not know?

Oedipus:  
I have  
A notion.

Sphinx:  
Look about this grisly earth;  
It hath full many bones.

Oedipus:  
Thou'lt tear with claws,  
Or chew?

Sphinx:  
All men who've wandered in my ways  
Have been consumed.

Oedipus:  
And yet thy mouth seems stone.  
I am too weak to flee, but cannot rest.

Sphinx:  
Thou needs must hear me.

Oedipus:  
And if I strike true  
In my reply?

Sphinx:  
I'll vanish, as a breeze  
Passes through forest.

Oedipus:  
Speak then. I am bound  
To hear thee, I believe. Only thou must  
Give ample space for answer.

Sphinx:  
Then I ask:  
There live two sisters, and the first gives birth  
To second; yet, in time, the second gives  
Birth to the first, in turn. Who are these two?

Oedipus:  
[*after a long pause*] I have it, I believe... One sister's day,  
The other, night.

*[the whistling sound returns softly, then dwindles as the Sphinx slowly vanishes]*

How did I dream reply  
So well? Now all this peril's melted, gone,  
And I am left serene. The ancient glades  
Look white and holy. Now I'll sleep again,  
And on the morrow, dwell upon that wraith.

*[he sleeps, and another long stretch of time seems to pass – lights down]*

### Scene III

*[lights up on the boundary between woods and fields outside Thebes – a farmer is sitting near his hut upon a stump, weeping]*

Farmer:

When I was young, they taught me how began  
Yon city, which o'er all these lands I view  
Enjoys dominion, and which hath in it  
The folk I love... I say this tale again  
My poor state to console.

Long age ago,  
The emperor of sky, roving his glance  
With zealous lust 'cross earth, fixed on a maid  
Who walked Phoenician strand: Europa she,  
Princess of Tyre. The white foam washed her toes;  
The wind blew o'er her long gown and her hair,  
Lifting them up, so that she halfway seemed  
Some flowing sprite of ocean, with her train  
By airy spirits borne.

The bull of Zeus,  
His hot-heart transformation, white like frost  
Or like the sea's froth, raptured that poor girl

Upon his back across the lapping surge  
While king and queen with sorrow watched her ta'en  
To some land they kened not – lost in blue haze  
Of sea's horizon.

Sons were called to search  
All realms she might be found – to west they rowed,  
Enjoined not to return 'til sister they  
Bore back with them. Cadmus the longest sought;  
But at the last, like brothers, did relent,  
Relinquishing his sister – and his home –  
As ever lost. At Delphi he inquired  
Where ought he turn his tread: the priestess told  
He should a cow with crescent on her flank  
Go follow, 'til she settled down – there he  
Ought found a city, one which would revere  
His memory through ages.

So he did,  
Sighting such heifer, hiking in her tracks;  
And in the place she rested, he gave thanks  
To deities, and meant to slay that beast  
As gift for their good favor. To a spring  
Of sacred water, Cadmus sent two men  
To fetch its holy liquid... but a worm  
Which made that font its home sprang forth and ate  
The pitcher-bearers.

'Neath the hero's sword  
That dragon soon shed life; and from its maw  
One hundred fangs he pulled. Athena showed  
The furrowed field – he broadcasted the teeth,  
Where'pon one hundred soldiers sprang to life –  
And goddess set a stone in Cadmus' hand,  
And bade him throw. It clanged upon a helm,  
Sending that man berserk: he swung his blade,  
All heedless whom he harmed; and soon vast crowd  
Did war upon itself, 'til only five

Remained, all fury spent, no longer mad  
To slay their neighbors.

By those five, and by  
The prince of Tyre, did Thebes rise from the ground  
And gain its populace – of which I'm one.  
In my despair, a different field I sow:  
This one with grain, to feed those souls which shall  
Spring after me, repairing harm was done  
So lately to my people. With my tears  
These seeds I nourish – let them grow a race  
E'en stronger than the fruit of Cadmus' toil,  
Their fathers, men who winnowed out the weak...  
For Thebes shall now bear memory of that  
Cruel thing of howling dread – the vicious Sphinx,  
Which came in woeful season, nights of ache –  
And all the mightier rise, for how it dured  
Such awful shape of destiny and doom.

*[enter Oedipus from the woods]*

Oedipus:  
Oh sir, hast food and drink?

Farmer:  
What's that?

Oedipus:  
Hast food  
And drink? I'm nearly starved.

Farmer:  
Thou seemest wild.  
Say who thou art.

Oedipus:  
Wouldst know my name? It is  
The One of Swollen Foot.

Farmer:  
Both of thy feet  
Look blistered, but not swollen.

Oedipus:  
Friend, I'll pay  
With labor when I'm well – but please, I beg,  
Give somewhat 'gainst my hunger!

Farmer:  
Very well.  
Sit here – I'll see what poverty supplies.

*[he goes into his hut and returns with food and water]*

Oedipus:  
*[eating and drinking]* I thank thee.

Farmer:  
Thou wert lost amid the woods?

Oedipus:  
I was – though one did tell me I had come  
To Theban outskirts.

Farmer:  
Who was that?

Oedipus:  
A dream...  
Or more, perhaps. I know not.

Farmer:  
Whate'er was,  
It told thee true. The city's yonder.

Oedipus:  
Why

Wert thou in tears?

Farmer:  
Today, three years ago,  
My wife was eaten by the monstrous Sphinx,  
And all my young ones.

Oedipus:  
Oh – 'twas not a dream!  
'Twas 'fore mine eyes, in sooth!

Farmer:  
Thou sawst the thing  
And lived?

Oedipus:  
I did – and spoke to it.

Farmer:  
But 'twas  
Three years ago the creature disappeared,  
Not long after my family it consumed.  
They were among its final victims, ere  
All depredations ended. My folk guessed  
Some soul its riddle answered... but that man  
We've ne'er discovered.

Oedipus:  
It was I.

Farmer:  
But thou  
Hast just come out the woods!

Oedipus:  
I'll tell thee what



The monster riddled me, and what I spake.

Farmer:

Say on.

Oedipus:

There are two sisters: One doth give  
Birth to the second; and that second, then,  
Gives birth to first one.

Farmer:

And what spake ye?

Oedipus:

Day

And night, good fellow.

Farmer:

Aye, an answer just.

I do believe thy story. But didst thou  
For three years wander round these pathless tracts  
And ne'er stumble on Thebes?

Oedipus:

I was asleep,

But did not know how long.

Farmer:

Thou brought'st an end

To Thebes' destruction – if none had replied  
So wisely, sure each man and wife and child  
Had soon or late been gobbled.

Oedipus:

I am glad

And proud... yet strangely empty in my soul.  
It was three years ago.

Farmer:  
Thou shalt be joyed,  
And shrug such stunned condition, once thou hear'st  
What meed awaits thee.

Oedipus:  
Only if it seems  
Less dream-like than the Sphinx did.

Farmer:  
So, so odd –  
Ye curious wight! But I shall let the king  
Inform thee what thou gain'st.

Oedipus:  
In yonder gloom,  
I view the gray rocks rise, the trails ascend,  
A bold wall crown that hill – and at the top,  
A palace 'midst the houses. Seven gates,  
It looks, surround that city. All blinks white  
Or golden.

Farmer:  
'Tis the fortress where the king,  
Jocasta's brother, reigns: Creon by name.  
He's six years ruled – the first three were the time  
Of stalking terror, but these recent three  
A blessed peace, thanks to you.

Oedipus:  
Thou saidst he hath  
Some boon for me?

Farmer:  
I did.

Oedipus:  
I shan't object

To take it 'pon me.

Farmer:

Let me hold thine arm,  
And help thee to the palace. I shall vouch  
Thy talk with me did prove thee to be sure  
That vanquisher of Sphinx we've so long sought!  
All shall be glad they may adore the one  
Who slew, to let the Theban people live.

*[exeunt – lights down]*

#### Scene IV

*[lights up on the palace of Thebes – Oedipus, the farmer, and various townspeople stand before Creon on his throne, who's accompanied by Jocasta, guards, and attendants]*

Creon:

*[to farmer]* And he whom bring'st before us seemed full true  
In's story?

Farmer:

True and honest, king. He told  
The riddle and its answer, which I've said,  
With hesitation none.

Creon:

The stranger claims  
For three years slept he. *[to Oedipus]* Tell me: when thou sawst  
The horrible Sphinx – what was she? Tell her look.

Oedipus:

A fiery head, oh king – a golden face  
Sweet as one's first love. Lion's limbs and fur,  
And wings like no bird owns, as rich as fields

Of night twice-crammed with stars. She did not move  
In any part, but as a monolith  
Floated above the land, and settled down  
Exceeding softly. Tumult swam in eyes;  
Much gore did stain her lips.

Creon:

And how'd ye guess  
The answer to her riddle, when thrice-twelve  
And more of Theban champions did fall  
Beneath her teeth and talons, torn and mauled,  
As well all those who wandered in her way,  
Or sought to reach this city?

Oedipus:

I know not...  
Except that, oft there's justice in a dream –  
A ready consequence, or answer made  
Right sudden – which doth close some fatal trial  
Or parlous circumstance, swiftly as one  
Doth later wake... And while that creature moved  
And sat before me, I did scarcely wit  
Whether I lived awake.

Creon:

For three years then  
Thou wert lost to the world, and no one happed  
To find thee in thy sleep?

Oedipus:

They may have found,  
But thought me dead. I think I also slept  
Prior the riddle.

Jocasta:

Brother, and my king:  
I do believe the stranger. For a man  
To sleep long years, 'tis hardly marvel more  
Than such a creature.

Creon:  
Sister – I see through  
Thy argument.

Jocasta:  
Oh so?

Creon:  
Ye miss the lord  
Was ta'en from you by fate.

Jocasta:  
I miss him, true.

Creon:  
And thou wouldst find replacement.

Jocasta:  
I'll not say  
Thou'rt wrong.

Oedipus:  
I do not understand.

Creon:  
Young friend:  
The one who slew the Sphinx – I did decree  
He shall marry my sister, and put on  
This kingly crown which once her husband wore.

From out a wretched sky, six years ago,  
That horrid figure flew – all folks hid in  
Their homes, or where thy might; but still it slew,  
And fed upon us. I this throne assumed,  
As we our monarch lacked, and I sent men  
Much-famed for shrewdness 'gainst that evil thing  
Which stared us in our nightmares – but none solved  
Its baffling knot of words. We heard it soar

Above our heads, like ship or bird of death –  
Whistling and passing, borne upon cruel winds  
While mothers sobbed beneath it.

Then they ceased,  
These awful slayings, and none spied the beast  
Or heard its movement anymore. We held  
Our breath – and luck did hold – then thanked the Fates,  
Made sacrifice; and I sent word through all  
Boeotia that the rescuer ought come  
And claim my sister's bed... but none came forth.  
That was three years ago, and much it seemed  
All this long while, that Thebes should have no heir,  
And I should reign to old age, keeping what  
By right should fall to evil's vanquisher.  
I'm no true king, for such a man must be  
Than I much wiser, fit to lead our folk.

Oedipus:

[*in disbelief*] Is't true?

Jocasta:

'Tis surely true. But we've not found  
That man, until this day.

Farmer:

[*to Creon*] All here agree  
This man is no impostor, all those here  
Who've heard him speak his story, and who've come  
To see him claim the kingship.

Creon:

Oedipus,  
Where wert thou born, where raised?

Oedipus:

In Corinth, lord...  
I come of humble folk. I did not care

For whom my parents wishèd me to wed,  
And wand'ring went, o'er mountains, for to seek  
Some life of my own making.

Creon:  
And why wert  
Thou named the One of Swollen Foot?

Oedipus:  
They said,  
My parents, that an insect bit me when  
I was but few hours old – the swelling died,  
But that bite bit the name into my fate.

Creon:  
It seems it bit thee for to mark the man  
Should lead most blessèd life.

Jocasta:  
[*to Creon*] Thou dost relent?

Creon:  
I must acknowledge him the man who shall  
Steal crown from me.

Jocasta:  
And I acknowledge him  
My second husband – if he'll me accept  
And take Thebes' scepter.

Oedipus:  
[*aside*] She's far o'er my age...  
But cannot be my mother. It was said  
I should first kill my father, ere I wed  
My mother – but that man upon the road  
Was not my father, for he wondered if  
He e'er should breed a child might him outlive...  
And if the first half of the prophecy

Hath not fulfilled, the second cannot so,  
Since it must runneth prior, when the word  
The sibyl spake said murder must go first...  
And therefore have I dodged Apollo's words.  
[*to Jocasta*] I shall accept thy hand.

Jocasta:  
I gladly give  
Myself to one who threw the grim Sphinx o'er  
And brought my city succor from its gloom  
Of plague-like death.

[*they hold hands*]

Creon:  
[*to Oedipus*] Take thou crown from me,  
And this staff, which declares that thou now reign'st.  
In name of Cadmus – and in name of his  
Great-grandson Laius, who was lost to us  
Some years ago – I now relinquish these  
Symbols of Theban sway, and them bestow  
On blood of new beginning. Let all here  
Show rev'rence to the king Fates have decreed.

Oedipus:  
[*he takes the crown and scepter and assumes Creon's place, standing beside Jocasta*]

To rule with that strange wisdom which I seemed  
So swiftly granted, 'pon that eerie hour  
At mountain's top, I shall endeavor hence.  
I wish the health and honor of this town,  
My unsought, newfound home. And to my wife –  
My wife of soon-to-be, whose hand I hold –  
Now once again a queen – I pledge no fate  
Shall ever sunder us, if 'tis not sent  
By some god who shan't sway from what's his will.



Jocasta:

And I do thee devote my trust, and pray  
That we shall grow in love, while Thebes shall thrive,  
No more by nightmares blighted. May thy breed  
In sweetness live and rule, e'er favored by  
Those strange things 'bove our lives we cannot speak,  
But ever yearn towards, and entreat with prayers.

Oedipus:

[*aside*] I reach the silver summit of some hill,  
And hope along a crest I may walk on  
Ere slow descent shall set me down again  
Amongst the shadowed lowlands. May the light  
Shine not too bright for me whilst here I stand,  
As may the dark not overwhelm me once I set  
My last step at slope's ending. I shall act  
With cautious glances round me.

All seems past

That was my dire travail – the gods have struck,  
But I have slipped their blow; and I'll be sure  
Not once again t'address them, or invite  
Some trial they hold. Mine eyes such richness take  
From all this room – it tells me goodness gleams  
In hearts of Fates; and I believe I've lost  
All fear of oracles.

[*to all*]                      Let us prepare  
Our feasts, plan revelry and common mirth,  
And ceremony, whereby shall be wed  
Jocasta and the much-blessed king of Thebes.

[*exeunt Oedipus and Jocasta – lights down*]

Finis

