

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-58560-7 - The Tragedies of Sophocles
 Sir Richard C. Jebb
 Excerpt
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OEDIPUS THE KING.

PERSONS OF THE DRAMA.

OEDIPUS, KING OF THEBES.

PRIEST OF ZEUS.

CREON, *brother of Iocasta.*

TEIRESIAS, *the blind prophet.*

IOCASTA.

FIRST MESSENGER, *a shepherd from Corinth.*

A SHEPHERD, *formerly in the service of Laius.*

SECOND MESSENGER, *from the house.*

CHORUS OF THEBAN ELDERS.

Mute Persons.

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

The children ANTIGONE and ISMENE, daughters of
 Oedipus and Iocasta.

SCENE: Before the Royal Palace at Thebes.

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

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

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

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

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

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OEDIPUS.

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

Tell me, then, thou venerable man—since it is thy
natural part to speak for these—in what mood are ye ¹⁰
placed here, with what dread or what desire? Be sure
that I would gladly give all aid; hard of heart were
I, did I not pity such suppliants as these.

PRIEST OF ZEUS.

Nay, Oedipus, ruler of my land, thou seest of what
years we are who beset thy altars,—some, nestlings still
too tender for far flights,—some, bowed with age, priests,
as I of Zeus,—and these, the chosen youth; while the
rest of the folk sit with wreathed branches in the market-
places, and before the two shrines of Pallas, and where ²⁰
Ismenus gives answer by fire.

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SOPHOCLES.

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

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

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

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

With good omen didst thou give us that past hap-

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OEDIPUS THE KING.

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

OE. Oh my piteous children, known, well known to me are the desires wherewith ye have come : well wot I that ye suffer all ; yet, sufferers as ye are, there is not 60 one of you whose suffering is as mine. Your pain comes on each one of you for himself alone, and for no other ; but my soul mourns at once for the city, and for myself, and for thee.

So that ye rouse me not, truly, as one sunk in sleep : no, be sure that I have wept full many tears, gone many ways in wanderings of thought. And the sole remedy which, well pondering, I could find, this I have put into act. I have sent the son of Menoeceus, Creon, mine own wife's brother, to the Pythian house of Phoebus, to learn 70 by what deed or word I might deliver this town. And already, when the lapse of days is reckoned, it troubles me what he doth ; for he tarries strangely, beyond the fitting space. But when he comes, then shall I be no true man if I do not all that the god shows.

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

OE. O king Apollo, may he come to us in the 80 brightness of saving fortune, even as his face is bright !

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

OE. We shall know soon : he is at range to hear.—

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SOPHOCLES.

[85—106]

Prince, my kinsman, son of Menoeceus, what news hast thou brought us from the god?

CREON.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CR. He was slain; and the god now bids us plainly

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OEDIPUS THE KING.

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to wreak vengeance on his murderers—whosoever they be.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHORUS.

str. 1. O sweetly-speaking message of Zeus, in what spirit hast thou come from golden Pytho unto glorious Thebes? I am on the rack, terror shakes my soul, O thou Delian healer to whom wild cries rise, in holy fear of thee, what thing thou wilt work for me, perchance unknown before, perchance renewed with the revolving years: tell me, thou immortal Voice, born of Golden Hope!

ant. 1. First call I on thee, daughter of Zeus, divine Athena,

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and on thy sister, guardian of our land, Artemis, who 160
 sits on her throne of fame, above the circle of our Agora,
 and on Phoebus the far-darter : O shine forth on me,
 my three-fold help against death ! If ever aforetime, in
 arrest of ruin hurrying on the city, ye drove a fiery pest
 beyond our borders, come now also !

Woe is me, countless are the sorrows that I bear ; a *str.* 2.
 plague is on all our host, and thought can find no 170
 weapon for defence. The fruits of the glorious earth
 grow not ; by no birth of children do women surmount
 the pangs in which they shriek ; and life on life mayest
 thou see sped, like bird on nimble wing, aye, swifter
 than resistless fire, to the shore of the western god.

By such deaths, past numbering, the city perishes : *ant.* 2.
 untied, her children lie on the ground, spreading
 pestilence, with none to mourn : and meanwhile young 180
 wives, and gray-haired mothers with them, uplift a wail
 at the steps of the altars, some here, some there, en-
 treating for their weary woes. The prayer to the
 Healer rings clear, and, blent therewith, the voice of
 lamentation : for these things, golden daughter of Zeus,
 send us the bright face of comfort.

And grant that the fierce god of death, who now *str.* 3.
 with no brazen shields, yet amid cries as of battle, wraps ¹⁹⁰
 me in the flame of his onset, may turn his back in speedy
 flight from our land, borne by a fair wind to the great
 deep of Amphitritè, or to those waters in which none
 find haven even to the Thracian wave ; for if night

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SOPHOCLES.

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leave aught undone, day follows to accomplish this. O
 200 thou who wieldest the powers of the fire-fraught light-
 ning, O Zeus our father, slay him beneath thy thunder-
 bolt!

ant. 3. Lycean King, fain were I that thy shafts also, from
 thy bent bow's string of woven gold, should go abroad
 in their might, our champions in the face of the foe;
 yea, and the flashing fires of Artemis wherewith she
 glances through the Lycian hills. And I call him whose
 210 locks are bound with gold, who is named with the name
 of this land, ruddy Bacchus to whom Bacchants cry,
 the comrade of the Maenads, to draw near with the
 blaze of his blithe torch, our ally against the god un-
 honoured among gods.

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

Whosoever of you knows by whom Laïus son of
 Labdacus was slain, I bid him to declare all to me.
 And if he is afraid, I tell him to remove the danger of
 the charge from his path by denouncing himself; for he
 shall suffer nothing else unlovely, but only leave the