

OEDIPUS

Translated by Frank Justus Miller

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

- OEDIPUS King of Thebes; the son, as he supposed, of Polybus, king of Corinth, and Merope, his wife, but found to be the son of Laius and Jocasta.
- Jocasta Wife and, as the play develops, found to be also the mother of Oedipus.
- Creon Theban prince, brother of Jocasta.
- Tiresias A celebrated prophet of Thebes, now old and blind.
- Manto His daughter.
- Old Man Sent from Corinth to announce to Oedipus the death of Polybus.
- Phorbas Head-shepherd of the royal flocks of Thebes.
- Messenger Who announces the self-inflicted blindness of Oedipus and the suicide of Jocasta.
- Chorus Of Theban elders.

THE SCENE is laid before the royal palace of Thebes; the play opens in the early morning of the day within which the tragedy is consummated.

An oracle once came to Laius, king of Thebes, that he should perish by his own son's hands. When, therefore, a son was born to him, he gave the infant to his chief of shepherds to expose on Mount Cithaeron. But the tenderhearted rustic gave the babe instead to a wandering herdsman of Polybus, the king of Corinth.

Years later, a reputed son of Polybus, Oedipus by name, fearing an oracle which doomed him to slay his father and wed his mother, fled from Corinth, that so he might escape this dreadful fate. As he fared northward, he met and slew an old man who imperiously disputed the narrow way with him. Upon arriving at the Theban land, he read the riddle of the Sphinx, and so destroyed that monster which Juno had sent to harass the land which she hated; and for this service, Oedipus was made the husband of Jocasta, the widowed queen of Laius (who had recently been slain upon the road), and set upon the vacant throne.

Now other years have passed, and sons and daughters have been born to the royal pair. But now a dreadful pestilence afflicts the state. Oedipus has sent Creon to consult the

oracle, to learn the cause and seek the means of deliverance from the scourge. And while he waits his messenger's return, the murky dawn still finds him grieving for his kingdom's wretched plight.

ACT I

Oedipus: Now night has fled; and with a wavering gleam
Returns the sun; all wrapped in murky clouds
His beams arise, and with their baleful light
Shall soon look forth upon our stricken homes,
And day reveal the havoc of the night.
Oh, who in all this realm is glad? O fate,
That seemest good, how many ills lie hid
Behind thy smiling face! As lofty peaks
Most feel the winds' abuse; and as the cliff,
That with its rocky front divides the deep,
The waves of e'en a quiet sea assail;
So is the loftiest power the most exposed
To hostile fate's assaults.

'Twas well conceived
That I should flee the kingdom of my sire,
Old Polybus, and from my fears be freed,
A homeless exile, dauntless, wandering.
Be heaven and all the gods my witnesses,
I chanced upon this realm. Yet even now
The dreadful fear remains that by my hand
My sire shall die. Thus spoke the Delphic god.
And still another, greater sin he showed.
And can there be a blacker crime than this,
A father slain? Oh, cursed impiety!
'Twere shame to tell the hideous oracle:
For Phoebus warned me of my father's couch,
And impious wedlock. 'Twas the fear of this
That drove me headlong from my father's realm,
And for no sin I left my native land.
All self-distrustful did I well secure
Thy sacred laws, O mother Nature; still,
When in the heart a mighty dread abides,
Though well assured it cannot be fulfilled,
The fear remains. I fear exceedingly,

Nor can I trust myself unto myself.
And even now the fates are aimed at me.
For what am I to think, when this fell pest,
Although it lays its blighting hand on all,
Spares me alone? For what new horror now
Am I reserved? Amidst my city's woes,
'Mid funeral pyres that ever must be wet
With tears of grief afresh, 'mid heaps of slain,
I stand unscathed. And couldst thou hope that thou,
A culprit at the bar of God, shouldst gain
For guilt a wholesome kingdom in return?
Nay, rather, I myself infect the air.
For now no breeze with its soft breath relieves
Our spirits suffocating with the heat;
No gentle zephyrs breathe upon the land;
But Titan with the dog-star's scorching fires
Doth parch us, pressing hard upon the back
Of Nemea's lion. From their wonted streams
The waters all have fled, and from the herbs
Their accustomed green. Now Dirce's fount is dry;
While to a trickling rill Ismenus' flood
Hath shrunk, and barely laves the naked sands.
Athwart the sky doth Phoebus' sister glide
With paling light, and, 'mid the lowering clouds,
The darkling heavens fade. No starlight gleams
Amid the gloomy silence of the night,
But heavy mists brood low upon the earth;
And those bright mansions of the heavenly gods
Are sicklied over with the hues of hell.
The full-grown harvest doth withhold its fruit;
And, though the yellow fields stand thick with corn,
Upon the stalk the shriveled grain is dead.
No class is free from this destructive plague,
But every age and sex falls equally;
Where youth with age, and sire with son are joined,
And wife and husband are together burned.
Now funerals claim no more their wonted grief;
The magnitude of woe hath dried our eyes;
And tears, the last resource of woeful hearts,
Have perished utterly. The stricken sire
Here bears his son unto the funeral flames;

And there the mother lays her dead child down,
And hastes to bring another to the pyre.
Nay, in the midst of grief a new woe springs;
For, while they minister unto the dead,
Themselves need funeral rites. Anon they burn
With others' fires the bodies of their friends.
The fire is stol'n, for in their wretchedness
No shame remains. No separate tombs receive
The hallowed bones; mere burning is enough.
How small a covering their ashes need!
And yet the land does not suffice for all;
And now the very woods have failed the pyre.
Nor prayers nor skill avail to serve the sick,
For even they who own the healing art
Are smitten down. The baleful pestilence
Removes the check that would restrain its force.

So, prostrate at the altar, do I fall
And, stretching suppliant hands, I pray the gods
To grant a speedy end; that in my death
I may anticipate my falling throne,
Nor be myself the last of all to die,
The sole surviving remnant of my realm.
O gods of heaven, too hard! O heavy fate!
Is death to be denied to me alone,
So easy for all else? Come, fly the land
Thy baleful touch has tainted. Leave thou here
The grief, the death, the pestilential air,
Which with thyself thou bring'st. Go speed thy flight
To any land, e'en to thy parents' realm.

Jocasta [who has entered in time to hear her husband's last words]: What boots it, husband,
to augment thy woes
With lamentations? For I think, indeed,
This very thing is regal, to endure
Adversity, and all the more to stand,
With heart more valiant and with foot more sure,
When the weight of empire totters to its fall.
For 'tis not manly to present thy back
To fortunes's darts.

Oedipus: Not mine the guilt of fear;
My valor feels no such ignoble throes.

Should swords be drawn against me, should the power,
The dreadful power of Mars upon me rush,
Against the very giants would I stand.
The Sphinx I fled not when she wove her words
In mystic measures, but I bore to look
Upon the bloody jaws of that fell bard,
And on the ground, all white with scattered bones.
But when, from a lofty cliff, with threatening mien,
The baleful creature poised her wings to strike,
And, like a savage lion, lashed her tail,^u
In act to spring; still did I dare my fate
And ask her riddle. Then with horrid sound
Of deadly jaws together crashed, she spake;
The while her claws, impatient of delay,
And eager for my vitals, rent the rock.
But the close-wrought words of fate with guile entwined,
And that dark riddle of the wingéd beast
Did I resolve.

Jocasta: What meant'st then thou by these
Thy maddened prayers for death? Thou mightst have died.
But no; the very scepter in thy hand
Is thy reward for that fell Sphinx destroyed.

Oedipus: Yea that, the artful monster's cruel shade,
Doth war against me still. Now she alone,
In vengeance for her death, is wasting Thebes.
But now, one only way of safety still is left,
If Phoebus show us not of safety all bereft.

[*Enter the Chorus of Theban elders, deploring the violence of the plague.*]

Chorus: How art thou fall'n, O glorious stock
Of Cadmus, thou and Thebes in one!
How dost thou see, poor ruined Thebes,
Thy lands laid waste and tenantless.
And thou, O Theban Bacchus, hear:
That hardy soldiery of thine,
Thy comrades to the farthest Ind,
Who dared invade the Eastern plains,
And plant thy banners at the gates of dawn—
Behold, destruction feeds on them.

They saw the blessed Arabes,
'Mid spicy groves; and the fleeing steeds
Of the Parthian, deadliest when he flees;
They trod the marge of the ruddy sea,
Where Phoebus his rising beams displays,
And the day reveals; where his nearer fires
Darken the naked Indians.
Yea we, that race invincible,
Beneath the hand of greedy fate
Are falling fast.
The gloomy retinue of death
In march unceasing hurries on;
The grieving line unending hastes
To the place of death. Space fails the throng.
For, though seven gates stand open wide,
Still for the crowding funerals
'Tis not enough; for everywhere
Is carnage seen, and death treads hard
Upon the heels of death.
The sluggish ewes first felt the blight,
For the woolly flock the rich grass cropped
To its own doom. At the victim's neck
The priest stood still, in act to strike;
But while his hand still poised the blow,
Behold, the bull, with gilded horns,
Fell heavily; whereat his neck,
Beneath the shock of his huge weight,
Was broken and asunder yawned.
No blood the sacred weapon stained,
But from the wound dark gore oozed forth.
The steed a sudden languor feels,
And stumbles in his circling course,
While from his downward-sinking side
His rider falls.
The abandoned flocks lie in the fields;
The bull amid his dying herd
Is pining; and the shepherd fails
His scanty flock, for he himself
'Mid his wasting kine is perishing.
The stag no more fears the ravenous wolf;
No longer the lion's roar is heard;

The shaggy bear has lost her rage,
And the lurking serpent his deadly sting;
For parched and dying now he lies,
With venom dried.
No more do the woods, with leafage crowned,
Spread out their shade in the mountain glens;
No more are fields with verdure clad;
No vines bend low with laden arms;
For the very earth has felt the breath
Of our dire pestilence.
Through the riven bars of Erebus,
With torches lit in Tartara,
The raging band of the Furies troop;
Dark Phlegethon has changed his course,
And forced the waters of the Styx
To mingle with our Theban streams.
Grim Death opes wide his greedy jaws,
And all his baleful wings outspreads.
And he who plies that swollen stream
In his roomy skiff, though his age is fresh
And hardy, scarce can raise his arms,
O'erwearied with his constant toil
And the passage of the endless throng.
'Tis even rumored that the dog
Hath burst the chains of Taenara,
And through our fields is wandering.
Now dreadful prodigies appear:
The earth gives out a rumbling sound,
And ghosts go stealing through the groves,
Larger than mortal forms; and twice
The trees of our Cadmean woods
Have trembled sore and shed their snows;
Twice Dirce flowed with streams of blood;
And in the stilly night we heard
The baying of Amphion's hounds.
Oh, cruel, strange new form of death,
And worse than death! The sluggish limbs
Are with a weary languor seized;
The sickly cheek with fever burns,
And all the head with loathsome sores
Is blotched. Now heated vapors rise

And scorch with fever's flames the brain
Within the body's citadel,
And the throbbing temples swell with blood.
The eyeballs start; the accurséd fire
Devours the limbs; the ears resound,
And from the nostrils dark blood drips
And strains apart the swelling veins.
Now quick convulsions rend and tear
The inmost vitals.
Now to their burning hearts they strain
Cold stones to soothe their agony;
And they, whom laxer care permits,
Since they who should control are dead,
The fountains seek, and feed their thirst
With copious draughts. The smitten throng
All prostrate at the altars lie
And pray for death; and this alone
The gods, compliant, grant to them.
Men seek the sacred fanes, and pray,
Not that the gods may be appeased,
But glutted with their feast of death.

[*Creon is seen approaching.*]

But who with hasty step the palace seeks?
Is this our Creon, high in birth and deed,
Or does my sickened soul see false for true?
'Tis Creon's self, in answer to our prayer.

ACT II

[*Enter Creon.*]

Oedipus: I quake with horror, and I fear to know
The tendency of fate. My trembling soul
Strives 'neath a double load; for joy and grief
Lie mingled still in dark obscurity.
I shrink from knowing what I long to know.
Wherefore, O brother of my consort, speak;
And if to weary hearts thou bring'st relief,
With quickened utterance thy news proclaim.

Creon: In dark obscurity the answer lies.

Oedipus: Who gives me doubtful succor grants me none.

Creon: It is the custom of the Delphic god
In dark enigmas to conceal the fates.

Oedipus: Yet speak; however dark the riddle be
'Tis given to Oedipus alone to solve.

Creon: Apollo doth ordain that banishment
Be meted out to him who slew our king,
And so our murdered Laius be avenged;
For only thus shall we again behold
The day's clear light, and drink safe draughts of air.

Oedipus: Who was the slayer of the noble king?
Tell who is designated by the god,
That he th' allotted punishment may pay.

Creon: May it be granted me to tell the things
To sight and hearing dreadful. At the thought,
Numb horror holds my limbs, my blood runs cold.
When to Apollo's hallowed shrine I came
With reverent feet, and pious hands upraised,
Parnassus' double-crested, snowy peak
Gave forth a fearful crash, the laurels shook,
And fair Castalia's waters ceased to flow.
The priestess of the son of Lato then
Began to spread her bristling locks abroad,
And felt the inspiration of the god.
Scarce had she reached the sacred inner shrine,
When with a roar, beyond the voice of man,
There sounded forth this doubtful oracle:
"Kind shall the stars return to the Theban city of Cadmus,
If, O fugitive guest, Ismenian Dirce thou leavest,
Stained with the blood of a king, from infancy known to Apollo.
Brief shall be thy joys, the impious joys of slaughter.
With thee war thou bringest, and war to thy children thou leavest,
Foul returned once more to the impious arms of thy mother."

Oedipus: What I at heaven's command now meditate,
Long since should have been rendered to the king,
That none by craft might violate the throne.
And most doth it become a sceptered king
To guard the life of kings; for none lament
The death of him whose safety breedeth fear.

Creon: Our care for him a greater fear removed.

Oedipus: What fear so great that duty to prevent?

Creon: The Sphinx and her accurséd riddle's threats.

Oedipus: Then now at heaven's command shall be atoned
That impious deed. Whoever of the gods
Dost look with kindly eye upon our realm;
And thou, whose hand doth guide the rolling sphere;
And thou, O glory of the smiling sky,
Who in thy wandering course dost rule the stars,
And with thy flying wheels dost measure out
The slow procession of the centuries;
Thou sister of the sun, night-wanderer,
Who ever dost reflect thy brother's fires;
And thou, great ruler of the boisterous winds,
Who o'er the level deep dost drive thy car;
And thou, who dost allot the sunless homes:
May he, by whose right hand king Laius fell,
No peaceful home, no trusty lares find;
And may no land in hospitality
Receive his cheerless, exiled wanderings.
O'er shameful marriage may he live to grieve,
And monstrous progeny. May he his sire
By his own hand destroy; and may he do
(What doom more dreadful can I imprecate?)
The deed which by my flight I did not do.
No room for pardon shall be given him;
By this my regal scepter do I swear,
Both by the sway which I as stranger hold,
And that I left behind; by my household gods,
And thee, O Neptune, who with shorter waves
And twofold current dost disport thyself
Upon my native Corinth's double shores.
And thou thyself be witness to my words,
Who dost inspire the fate-revealing lips
Of Cirrha's priestess: so may Polybus,
My royal father, spend a quiet age,
And end his days in peace upon the throne;
And so may Merope, my mother, know
The marriage of her Polybus alone,
As from my grasp no favoring power shall snatch
That guilty one, who basely slew the king.

But tell me, where was that foul murder done?
In open fight, or was he basely snared?

Creon: In quest of cool Castalia's sacred fount
And leafy woods, along the way he fared,
On either side with tangled thickets hedged.
'Twas where the road, three-forked, spreads to the plain.
One leads through Phocian land, to Bacchus dear,
Where high Parnassus, by a gentle slope
The lowlands leaving, lifts his double peak
Into the heavens; and one leads off to where
Two oceans bathe the land of Sisyphus;
A third path, passing through Olenian fields,
Along a hollow valley's winding way,
Attains the vagrant waters and divides
The chilling current of the Elean stream.
'Twas here he journeyed, safe 'mid general peace,
When on a sudden, lo, a robber band
Fell on him with the sword and slew him there.

[*Tiresias is seen approaching.*]

But in the nick of time, by Phoebus roused,
Tiresias, agéd and with trembling limbs,
Hastes to our presence with what speed he may;
And, as his faithful comrade, Manto comes,
Her sightless father leading by the hand.

[*Enter Tiresias, led by his daughter Manto.*]

Oedipus: O priest of heaven, thou next to Phoebus' self,
Explain the oracle which he hath sent,
And tell on whom the penalty is laid.

Tiresias: Because my tongue is slow and seeks delay,
Thou shouldst not wonder, great-souled Oedipus;
Much truth is hidden when the eye is dimmed.
But when my country, when Apollo calls,
I will obey. Then let me search the fates.
If in my veins still flowed the blood of youth,
I would myself sustain the god and speak.
Now to the altar drive a pure-white bull,
A heifer, too, upon whose tender neck
The curvéd yoke of toil hath never pressed.
And thou, my child, who guid'st my darkened steps,
Describe the omens which Apollo sends.

[*The victims are stationed before the altar as directed.*]

Manto: A perfect victim at the altar stands.

Tiresias: With prayer invoke the presence of the gods,
And heap the altar high with frankincense.

Manto: Lo, on the sacred fire the spice is heaped.

Tiresias: What of the flame? Did it with vigor seize
The generous feast?

Manto: With sudden gleam it leaped
Into the air, and quickly fell again.

Tiresias: And did the sacred fire burn bright and clear,
And point its gleaming summit straight to heaven,
And, spreading outward, to the breeze unfold;
Or crawl, with course uncertain, near the ground,
And, flickering, die away in gloomy smoke?

Manto: Not one appearance only had the flame.
As when the tempest-bringing Iris spreads
Her varying colors on the vault of heaven,
And with her painted bow adorns the sky;
So to the sacred fire thou wouldst not tell
What hue is wanting there and what prevails.
Dark blue it flickered first, with yellow spots;
Then bloody red, and then it vanished quite.
But see! the flame is rent in rival parts,
And the glowing embers of one sacred pile
Are cleft in double heaps and fall apart!
O father, horror fills me as I gaze;
For, as I pour the sacred liquid forth,
It changes straight to blood—Oh, horrible!
And stifling smoke surrounds the royal head.
And now in denser gloom it settles down
Upon his face, and, with its veiling cloud,
It shuts away from him the fading light.
Oh, speak, and tell us what it doth portend.

Tiresias: How can I speak, who halting stand amazed
Amid conflicting voices of the soul?
What shall I say? Dire ills are here, indeed,
But hidden yet in deepest mystery.
With signs well known the wrath of heaven is wont

To be made manifest: but what is that
Which now they would disclose, and then, again,
With changing and destructive purpose hide?
Some deed so vile, it shameth heaven to tell.
But quickly set the chosen victims here,
And sprinkle salted meal upon their heads.
With peaceful face do they endure the rites,
And hands outstretched to smite?

Manto: His lofty head
The bull uplifted to the eastern sky,
Then shunned the light of day, and quickly turned
In terror from the newly risen sun.

Tiresias: With one blow, smitten, do they fall to earth?

Manto: The heifer threw herself upon the steel,
And with one blow has fallen; but the bull,
Though smitten by a double deadly blow,
Distracted wanders here and there in pain,
And scarce can force his struggling life away.

Tiresias: Driven through a narrow opening spurts the blood,
Or, sluggish, does it water deeper wounds?

Manto: The blood of one, through that same welcome thrust,
Doth flow in generous streams; but of the bull,
Those yawning wounds are stained with scanty drops,
While, turning backward, through his eyes and mouth
The plenteous current flows.

Tiresias: These unblest rites
Some dreadful ills portend. But come, describe
The trusty markings of the viscera.

Manto: Oh, what is this? For not, as is their wont,
With gentle motion do the entrails quake,
But, rather, strongly throb beneath the touch,
While from the veins the blood leaps forth anew.
The sickly heart is shriveled up and lies
Deep hidden in the breast; the veins appear
Of livid hue. The entrails suffer lack;
And from the wasting liver oozes slow
A stream of black corruption. Nay, behold
(A sign of dark foreboding to a king
Who holdeth single sway), two swelling points

Of equal elevation rise to view;
But both are lopped and covered with a veil.
Refusing lurking-place to things unseen,
The hostile side uprears itself with strength
And shows seven swelling veins; but these, again,
An intersecting line cuts straight across,
Preventing their return. The natural law
And order of the parts has been reversed,
And nothing lies within its proper place.
All on the right the blood-filled lungs appear,
Incapable of air; the heart no more
Is found upon the left, its 'customed place.
The fatty walls, with their soft covering,
No longer richly fold the entrails in.
The ways of nature are in all things changed;
The womb itself is most unnatural.
Look close, and see what impious thing is this:
Oh, monstrous! 'tis the unborn progeny
Of a heifer still unmated! stranger still,
It lies not in the wonted place, assigned
By nature's laws, but fills its mother's side.
It moves its members with a feeble groan;
Its unformed limbs with trembling rigors twitch.
Black blood has stained the darkened entrails all;
The mangled bodies strive e'en yet to move,
Make show to rise, and menace with their horns
The priestly hands. The entrails shun the touch.
Nor is that lowing which has frightened thee
The deep-voiced roar of bulls, nor do the calls
Of frightened cattle sound upon our ears:
It is the lowing of the altar fires,
It is the frightened muttering of the shrine!

Oedipus: What meaning have these monstrous signs? Declare;
And with no timid ears will I attend.
For he who has the dregs of fortune drained
Fears nothing more.

Tiresias: The time will come to thee,
When these thy ills, for which thou seekest aid,
Will blessings seem.

Oedipus: But tell me then, I pray,

The one thing which the gods would have me know:
Whose hands are stained with murder of the king?

Tiresias: Neither the birds can summon up the name,
Who cleave the depths of heaven on fleeting wing,
Nor yet the vitals plucked from living breasts.
But we must seek it in another way:
The murdered king himself must be recalled
From realms of everlasting night, that thus,
Released from Erebus, he may declare
His murderer. The earth must be unsealed;
The pitiless divinity of Dis
Must be implored, and hither brought the shades
Who live beyond the Styx.

Now do thou tell
To whom thou giv'st the sacred embassy;
For 'tis not right for thee who hold'st the reins
Of government to seek the gloomy shades.

Oedipus: O Creon, thee this task demands, to whom,
As next in power, my kingdom looks for aid.

Tiresias: And while we loose the bars of deepest hell,
Do ye the praises of our Bacchus tell.

[*Exeunt* Creon, *Tiresias*, and *Manto*.]

The Chorus [*in dithyrambic strain sings in praise of Bacchus*]: Bind ye now your flowing
locks with the swaying ivy,
Brandish aloft with your languishing arms the Nysaeon thyrsus!
O glorious light of heaven, attend the prayers
Which noble Thebes, thy Thebes, O beautiful Bacchus,
With suppliant hands outstretched here offers thee.
Turn hither thy smiling virgin face,
Dispel the clouds with thy starry glance,
The gloomy threats of Erebus,
And ravenous fate.
Thee it becomes to crown thy locks with flowers of the springtime,
Thee to bind thy head with the Tyrian fillet;
Or with the clinging ivy, gleaming with berries,
Softly to wreath thy brow;
Now thy hair to unbind and spread in confusion,
Now in close-drawn knot to collect and confine it;
Just as when thou, fearing the wrath of Juno,

Didst conceal thyself in the guise of maidens.
Virgin, too, thou seemedst with golden ringlets,
Binding up thy robe with a saffron girdle.
So the softer graces of living please thee,
Robes ungirt and flowing in long profusion.
When in thy golden car thou wast drawn by lions,
Clad in flowing garments, the East beheld thee,
All the vast expanse of the Indian country,
They who drink the Ganges and cleave the surface
Of snowy Araxes.

Seated on humble beast the old Silenus attends thee,
Binding his throbbing brows with a waving garland of ivy;
While the wanton priests lead on the mysterious revels.

And then a troop of Bassarids
With dancing step conducted thee,
Now ranging o'er Pangaeus' foot,
And now on Thracian Pindus' top.
Soon, 'mid the noble dames of Thebes,
A furious Maenad, the comrade of Bacchus,
In garment of fawn-skin, conducted the god.
The Theban dames, by Bacchus excited,
With streaming locks and thyrsus uplifted
In high-waving hands, now join in the revels,
And wild in their madness they rend Pentheus
Limb from limb.
Their fury spent, with weary frame,
They look upon their impious deed,
And know it not.

Into the sea realms holds, the foster-mother of Bacchus;
Round her the daughters of Nereus dance, Leucothoë singing;
Over the mighty deep, though new to its waves, Palaemon,
Brother of Bacchus, rules, a mortal changed to a sea-god.

When in childhood a band of robbers assailing
Bore thee away in their flying vessel a captive,
Nereus quickly calmed the billowy ocean;
When lo! to rolling meadows the dark sea changes;
Here stands in vernal green the flourishing plane-tree,
There the groves of laurel dear to Apollo;
While resounds the chatter of birds in the branches.
Now are the oars enwreathed with the living ivy,
While at the masthead hang the clustering grape vines;

There on the prow loud roars a lion of Ida,
At the stern appears a terrible tiger of Ganges.
Filled with terror the pirates leap in the ocean.
Straight in their plunging forms new changes appear;
For first their arms are seen to shrink and fall,
Their bodies' length to shorten; and on their sides
The hands appear as fins; with curving back
They skim the waves, and, lashing their crescent tails,
They dash through the water.

Changed to a school of dolphins now, they follow the vessel.
Soon did the Lydian stream with its precious waters receive thee,
Pouring down its golden waves in a billowy current.
Loosed was the vanquished bow and Scythian darts of the savage
Massagetan who mingles blood in his milky goblets.
The realm of Lycurgus, bearer of axes, submitted to Bacchus;

The land of the Dacians^u untamable felt his dominion,
The wandering tribes of the north by Boreas smitten,
And whom the Maeotis bathes with its frozen waters.
Where the Arcadian star looks down from the zenith,
Even there the power of Bacchus extended;
Conquered too the scattered Gelonian peoples.
From the warlike maidens their arms he wrested;
Down to the earth they fell in desperate conflict,
The hardy bands of Amazonian maidens.
Now, at last, their arrows swift are abandoned,
And Maenads have they become.

Holy Cithaeron too has streamed with slaughter,
Where was spilt the noble blood of Ophion.
Proetus' daughters the forests sought; and Argos,
Juno at last consenting, paid homage to Bacchus.
The island of Naxos, girt by the broad Aegean,
Gave to Bacchus the maid whom Theseus abandoned,
Compensating her loss by a better husband.
Out of the rock there gushed Nyctelian liquor;
Babbling streams at his word clove the grassy meadows;
Deep the earth drank in the nectarean juices;
Streams of snowy milk burst forth from the fountains,
Mingled with Lesbian wine all fragrant with spices.
Now is the bride to her place in the heavens conducted;
Phoebus, with flowing locks, sings a stately anthem;
Love, in honor of both, bears the wedding torches;

Jove lays down the deadly darts of his lightning,
Halting his bolts of flame at the coming of Bacchus.
While the gleaming stars in their boundless pasturage wander,
While the sea shall gird th' imprisoned earth with its waters,
While the full-orb'd moon shall gather her lost refulgence,
While the morning star shall herald the coming of Phoebus,
While in the north the Bear shall fear the cerulean ocean,
Still shall we worship the shining face of the beautiful Bacchus.

ACT III

[Enter Creon, returned from the rites of necromancy.]

Oedipus: Although thy face displays the marks of grief,
Declare whose death an angry heaven demands.

Creon: Thou bid'st me speak where fear would silence keep.

Oedipus: If Thebes, to ruin falling, move thee not,
Regard the scepter of thy kindred house.

Creon: Thou wilt repent the knowledge which thou seek'st.

Oedipus: A useless cure for ills is ignorance.
And wilt thou still obstruct the public weal?

Creon: Where foul the cure, 'tis grievous to be cured.

Oedipus: Thy tidings speak; or, by thy pains subdued,
Thou soon shalt know what angered kings can do.

Creon: Kings hate the words whose speech they would compel.

Oedipus: In hades shalt thou pay thy life for all,
Unless thou tell the secrets of the fates.

Creon: Nay, let me hold my peace. No smaller boon
Was ever sought.

Oedipus: More often than by speech,
Have kingdoms by the boon of silence fall'n.

Creon: When silence is denied what can be given?

Oedipus: He sins who silence holds when speech is best.

Creon: Then hear in peace the words which I must speak.

Oedipus: Was ever punishment for speech compelled?

Creon: Afar from Thebes there is a frowning grove

Near the well-watered vale of Dirce's fount.
And there a cypress lifts its giant head
And holds within its evergreen embrace
The trees around. Here stands an ancient oak
And spreads its branches dark with clustering mould.
One side is torn by time's destructive hand;
The rest, with roots decayed and falling, hangs
Supported on a neighbor's trunk. Here stand
The bitter laurel, rustling linden trees,
The myrtle, and the alder destined soon
To sweep its oarage on the boundless sea.
Midway, a mighty pine its smooth trunk lifts
Against the rays of Phoebus and the winds,
And with its heavy shade it overwhelms
The lesser trees; for, with its spreading boughs,
It stands, the giant guardian of the wood.
Beneath this pine there springs a gloomy pool
That never saw the sun nor light of day.
An oozy swamp surrounds the sluggish pool.
Here did the agéd priest direct his steps;
Nor was there need to wait; the gloomy spot
Supplied the shades of night. A trench is dug,
Where brands are kindled, pluck'd from funeral pyres.
The priest is shrouded in a mourning pall,
And waves the bough; his dark robe sweeps the earth.
And now, in squalid garb and wrapped in gloom,
The priest advances, with his hoary locks
Encircled by the yew-tree's deadly leaves.
Black sheep and sable oxen, backward driven,¹
Are sacrificed. The fire devours the food,
And the living entrails quiver in the flames.
The shades he calls, and him who rules the shades,
And him who guards the dark Lethaeian stream.
A magic rune he mutters o'er and o'er
And fiercely chants the charm which either lures
The shifting ghosts, or forces them to come.
He burns the victims whole, and fills the trench
With sacrificial blood, and snowy milk,
And, with his left hand pouring, mingles wine;
Again he chants, and, bending to the earth,
With stronger words and frantic, summons up

The manes. Loudly bayed the hounds of hell;
And thrice the hollows gave a mournful sound;
The whole earth trembled and the solid ground
Was rent asunder. Then the priest exclaimed:
"I have prevailed, for strong the words I spoke;
The deep and gloomy realm of chaos yawns,
And for the dwellers in the home of Dis
A way is opened to the world of light."
The whole wood shrank away; its leaves erect
In horror stood, the mighty trunks were split,
And all the grove was smitten with amaze.
The frightened earth crouched back with hollow groans,
As if unwillingly she saw the deeps
Of Acheron assailed; or else herself,
That back to life the dead might find a way,
With crashing sound her close-wrought barriers burst;
Or threefold Cerberus in angry rage
Clanked loud his heavy chains. Then suddenly
The earth yawned wide, and at our very feet
A deep abyss appeared. I saw, myself,
The sluggish pools amidst the dusky shades;
I saw the shadowy gods, and that black gloom
No earthly night can give. At that dread sight
My blood ran cold and froze within my veins.
And then there hurried forth a dreadful band,
And stood in armed array, that viper brood,
The troop of brothers sprung from dragon's teeth;
And that fell pestilence, the curse of Thebes.
Then grim Erinys raised her piercing cry,
Blind Fury, Dread, and all the ghastly forms
Which spawn and lurk within the endless shades:
Grief, in her madness, tearing out her hair;
Disease, scarce holding up her weary head;
Age, burdened with itself, and brooding Fear.
Our spirits died within us at the sight.
Even the prophet's daughter stood amazed,
Though well she knew her father's mystic arts.
But he, undaunted, since he saw them not,
Convoked the bloodless throng of gloomy Dis.
Like clouds the shadowy forms come trooping up,
And snuff the air of unrestricted heaven.

Not lofty Eryx in his mountain glades
As many falling leaves, nor Hybla's slopes
As many flowers produce, in sunny spring,
When greedy bees in teeming bunches swarm;
As many waves break not upon the shore;
As many birds deserting Strymon's streams,
Exchange not wintry blasts and Arctic snows,
And seek the milder valley of the Nile;
As were the shades the prophet summoned forth.
In eager haste the shivering spirits seek
The hiding-places of the leafy grove.
From out the cave, his right hand by the horns
A raging bull restraining, Zethus came,
And next Amphion, with that famous shell
Whose magic strains insensate rocks allured.
Here haughty Niobe, in safety now,
Amongst her children lifts her head in scorn
And proudly counts her shades. And worse than she,
That mother, mad Agave, next appears,
With all the impious band who rent the king.
Then Pentheus' self, all torn and bleeding, comes,
In rage pursuing those wild Bacchanals.
At length, when often summoned, Laius comes
In shame, and, skulking, flees the shadowy throng,
And hides himself away; but still the seer,
With unrelenting purpose pressing on,
Repeats his strong compelling exorcisms,
Until he brings the ghost to open view.
I shudder as I tell it. There he stood,
A fearful sight, his body drenched with blood,
His matted locks o'erspread with horrid filth.
And now, with raging tongue, the specter spoke:
"O wild and savage house of Cadmus, thou
Who ever dost rejoice in brother's blood!
The thyrsus wave, in madness rend thy sons.
The greatest crime of Thebes is mother's love.
O fatherland, 'tis not the wrath of heaven,
But sin of man by which thou art undone.
No plague-fraught south wind with its deadly blast,
Nor yet the parchéd earth with its dry breath,
Is harming thee; but 'tis thy bloody king,

Who, as the prize of savage murder done,
Hath seized his father's scepter and his bed.
An impious son (but far more impious,
The mother who in most unhallowed womb
Bore children once again), he forced his way
Back to his source of life, and there begot
Upon his mother offspring horrible,
Got brothers to himself, a custom base,
Whence e'en the very beasts of prey are free.
Oh, base entanglement, more monstrous far
Than that fell Sphinx which he himself hath slain.
Thee, thee, who dost the bloody scepter hold,
Thee will thy sire, still unavenged, pursue,
With all thy town; and with me will I bring
Th' attendant fury of my wedding night—
I'll bring her with her loud-resounding^u lash!
Thy house, polluted, will I overthrow,
And thy Penates will I trample down
In fratricidal strife! Then quickly drive
Thy king, O Thebes, from out thy boundaries!
For when his baleful step shall leave the land,
In vernal green shall it renew itself,
The air shall give again pure springs of life,
And to the woods their beauty shall return.
Destruction, Pestilence and Death, Distress,
Disease, Despair—his fitting company—
Shall all depart with him. And he, indeed,
Will seek with eager haste to flee his realm,
But him will I hedge round with barriers,
And hold him back. Uncertain of his way,
And with his staff to guide his faltering steps,
He'll creep along his sad and darkened path.
Do ye the land deny him; I, his sire,
Will take away from him the light of heaven."

Oedipus: A chilling tremor penetrates my bones;
The very thing which I have feared to do,
They say that I have done it. But the charge
That in unholy wedlock I am joined,
My mother Merope refutes, for she
To Polybus, my sire, is wedded still;
And my hands from stain of father's blood are clean,

Since Polybus in safety lives and reigns.
Since both my parents free me from the guilt
Of murder and that base, incestuous crime,
What room is there for accusation more?
And as for Laius, Thebes his death deplored
Long 'ere I set my feet upon her soil.
What shall we say then? Was the seer deceived,
Or does the hand of God afflict the state?
No! now we see these two confederates
Deep in a crafty plot: that priest of thine
With lying tongue pretends the will of heaven,
And promises my sovereignty to thee.

Creon: Would I expel my sister from the throne?
But if that sacred fealty which I owe
Unto my kindred house restrained me not,
Yet fortune would herself affright me sore,
For with care and danger is she ever fraught.
But be thyself content to lay aside,
While still thou safely mayst, the cares of state,
Lest, borne too long, they may o'erwhelm thee quite.
In a humbler state more safely shalt thou dwell.

Oedipus: And dost thou bid me, then, of mine own will
To lay aside the heavy cares of state?

Creon: Thus would I counsel those to whom the way
Is open yet to choose the path he will.
But the lot that fortune sends thee thou must bear.

Oedipus: When one desires to reign, 'tis ever thus,
That humble life he praises, and the joys
Of ease and sleep are ever in his mouth.
A peaceful face oft hides a restless heart.

Creon: Does my long loyalty defend me not?

Oedipus: To traitors, loyalty's a cloak to crime.

Creon: Free from the burdens of a kingly state,
I still enjoy the fruits of royalty;
My house is honored by our citizens;
And day by day thy royal gifts o'erflow,
And fill my kindred home with luxury.
Rich food and clothing, gifts of every sort,
And safety flow to many through my aid.

Why should I think aught lacking to my lot?

Oedipus: Because there is a lack. Prosperity
Ne'er halts at any bounds.

Creon: And shall I fall,
Prejudged, and have no right to plead my cause?

Oedipus: Hadst thou consideration for *my* life?
Did old Tiresias listen to my cause?
And yet I am condemned. My pattern, thou;
I do but follow in the way thou lead'st.

Creon: But what if I am guiltless?

Oedipus: Kings are wont
To fear alike the doubtful and the true.

Creon: Who quakes at empty fears, hath true in store.

Oedipus: Who in a fault is taken, and forgiven,
Is filled with hate. Let all such dubious faith
Be far from me.

Creon: But thus is hatred bred.

Oedipus: Nay, he who feareth hatred overmuch,
Knows not the art of ruling like a king;
For 'tis by fear that kings are guarded most.

Creon: Who holds the scepter with tyrannic sway,
Doth live in fear of those who fear his power;
For terror ever doth return to him
Who doth inspire it.

Oedipus [*to attendants*]: Hence, away with him;
Deep in some rocky dungeon let him stay,
While I unto the palace take my way.

[*Creon is led away by the attendants, while Oedipus retires into the palace.*]

Chorus: Not thou the cause of these our ills;
And not on thy account hath fate
Attacked the house of Labdacus;
But 'tis the ancient wrath of heaven
That still pursues our race.
Castalia's grove once lent its shade
Unto the Tyrian wanderer,
And Dirce gave her cooling waves,

What time the great Agenor's son,
O'er all the earth the stolen prey
Of Jove pursuing, worn and spent,
Within these forests knelt him down
And adored the heavenly ravisher.
Then by Apollo's bidding led,
A wandering heifer following,
Upon whose neck the dragging plow,
Nor the plodding wagon's curving yoke
Had never rested, he his quest
At last gave over, and his race
From that ill-omened heifer named.
From that time forth, the land of Thebes
Strange monsters hath engendered: first,
That serpent, sprung from the valley's depths,
Hissing, o'ertopped the agéd oaks
And lofty pines; and higher still,
Above Chaonia's woods, he reared
His gleaming head, though on the ground
His body lay in many coils.
And next the teeming earth produced
An impious brood of armed men.
The battle call resounded loud
From the curving horn, and the piercing notes
Of the brazen trumpet shrill were heard.
Their new-created, nimble tongues,
And voices strange, they first employ
In hostile clamor; and the fields,
The plains, their kindred soil, they fill.
This monster brood, consorting well
With that dire seed from which they sprung,
Their life within a day's brief span
Enjoyed; for after Phoebus rose
They had their birth, but ere he set
They perished. At the dreadful sight
Great terror seized the wanderer;
And much he feared to face in war
His new-born foes. Until, at length
The savage youth in mutual strife
Fell down, and mother earth
Beheld her sons, but now produced,

Returned again to her embrace.
And Oh, that with their fall might end
All impious strife within the state!
May Thebes, the land of Hercules,
Such fratricidal strife behold
No more!
Why sing Actaeon's fate,
Whose brow the new-sprung antlers crowned
Of the long-lived stag, and whom his hounds,
Though their hapless master still, pursued?
In headlong haste through the mountains and woods,
He flees in fear, and with nimble feet
He scours the glades and rocky passes,
In fear of the wind-tossed feathers hung
Among the trees; but most he shuns
The snares which he himself has set;
Until at last in the still, smooth pool
He sees his horns and his features wild,
The pool where the goddess, too sternly chaste,
Had bathed her virgin limbs.

ACT IV

Oedipus: My soul is filled with dark, foreboding fear;
For the gods in heaven and hades join the charge
That by my guilty hand King Laius fell.
And yet my soul, in conscious innocence,
And knowing better than the gods themselves
Its secret deeds, denies the charge. But now,
Along the shadowy vistas of the past,
My memory beholds an aged man who fell
Beneath the heavy stroke of my stout staff.
But first the elder strove with haughty words
To drive the younger traveler from the path.
But that was far from Thebes, in Phocis' realm,
Where the forked road in three directions leads.
But thou, my faithful wife, dispel my care:
What span of life had Laius at his death?
Fell he in manhood's bloom, or spent with age?

Jocasta: Midway 'twixt youth and age, but nearer age.

Oedipus: Did courtiers, thronging round, protect his course?

Jocasta: The many lost him on the winding way;
A few by faithful toil kept near his side.

Oedipus: Did any fall as comrade of his fate?

Jocasta: One comrade in his death did valor give.

Oedipus: Alas, I stand convicted, for the place
And number tally. Tell me now the time.

Jocasta: Since Laius fell, ten harvests have been reaped.

[*Enter an old Corinthian man, a messenger from Merope.*]

Old Man [to Oedipus]: The state of Corinth calls thee to the throne,
For Polybus has gained his lasting rest.

Oedipus: See how a heartless fate doth compass me!
But tell me how my father met his end.

Old Man: In gentle sleep he breathed his life away.

Oedipus: My sire is dead, and not by violence!
I call the gods to witness that to heaven
I now in piety may lift my hands,
And fear no stain of impious slaughter more.
And yet a still more fearful fate remains.

Old Man: Thy father's kingdom will dispel thy fears.

Oedipus: My father's kingdom would I seek, but still
I fear my mother.

Old Man: Fear'st thou her who waits.
With anxious heart, imploring thy return?

Oedipus: 'Tis piety itself that bids me flee.

Old Man: And wouldst thou leave her in her widowhood?

Oedipus: Thou speak'st the very essence of my fears.

Old Man: Speak out the fear that doth oppress thy soul;
For 'tis my wont in trusty confidence
To counsel kings.

Oedipus: By Phoebus' word forewarned,
From wedlock with my mother do I flee.

Old Man: Then cease thy empty fears, and lay aside
Thy base forebodings; for I tell thee here
That thou art not the son of Merope.

Oedipus: Why did she wish to rear a spurious son?

Old Man: Because the proud security of kings
Is by a son established.

Oedipus: Tell me now.
How thou dost know the secrets of the court.

Old Man: With my own hands I gave thee to the king.

Oedipus: Thou gavest me? But who gave me to thee?

Old Man: A shepherd on Cithaeron's snowy slopes.

Oedipus: How camest thou within that sacred wood?

Old Man: My sheep upon that mountain did I seek.

Oedipus: Now on my body name some well-known mark.

Old Man: Behold, thy feet in infancy were pierced,
And from thy swollen ankles art thou named.

Oedipus: Who was the man who gave me as a gift
Into thy hands?

Old Man: He fed the royal flocks,
And under him the hireling shepherds served.

Oedipus: But tell his name.

Old Man: An old man's memory
Grows faint and weakly falters with disuse.

Oedipus: But wouldst thou know the features of the man?

Old Man: I might recall him, for a slender clue
Ofttimes awakens memory of things
Long buried and forgot.

Oedipus: Then hasten, slaves,
Let all the master-shepherds drive their flocks
Before the altar here, yea, summon all
On whom depends the guidance of the flocks.

Old Man: Or chance or providence has kept thy fate
In darkness hid. What long hath lain concealed,
I bid thee suffer to remain in doubt.
For often truth, when brought into the light,
Becomes the bane of him who seeks for her.

Oedipus: Can any ills be worse than those I fear?

Old Man: Oh, be thou sure the truth is big with fate,
Whose meaning must be sought with toil and pain.
The public weal calls there, and here thine own,
And both with equal voice. Direct thy steps
Along a middle course! provoke not fate;
Permit thy fortune to unfold itself.
It profits naught to change a happy state.

Oedipus: A change is well when all is at the worst.

Old Man: What better canst thou ask than royal birth?
No further seek, lest thou thy sire repent.

Oedipus: Though I should prove to be of shameful blood,
My purpose still is fixed to know the truth.

[*Enter Phorbas, the head-shepherd.*]

But see, the aged man, old Phorbas, comes,
'Neath whose control the royal flocks are kept.
Dost thou remember still his face or name?

Old Man: His form eludes my mind; not fully known,
And yet again not all unknown his face.
[*To Phorbas.*]

Old man, while Laius still was king, didst thou,
His shepherd, ever drive the royal flocks
To pasture here upon Cithaeron's slopes?

Phorbas: On fair Cithaeron's sunny slopes my flocks
Have ever found the greenest pasturage.

Old Man: Dost thou know me?

Phorbas: But dim and indistinct
My memory.

Oedipus: Didst thou at any time
An infant boy deliver to this man?
[*Phorbas falters and turns pale.*]

Come then, speak out! why dost thou hesitate?
And why does pallor overspread thy cheeks?
Why seek for words? The truth no respite needs.

Phorbas: Thou speak'st of things long buried and forgot.

Oedipus: But speak, or pain shall drive thee to confess.

Phorbas: I gave a boy to him, a useless gift;
He never could have lived or known the light.

Old Man: The gods forbid! The child is living still;
And may his life be long on earth, I pray.

Oedipus: Why dost thou think the child did not survive?

Phorbas: A slender rod of iron his ankles pierced,
And bound his limbs. This wound produced a sore,
Which by contagion spread o'er all his frame.

Old Man: Why question more? The fatal truth draws near.
Who was that infant boy?

Phorbas: My lips are sealed.

Oedipus: Bring hither fire! Its flames shall loose thy speech.

Phorbas: Must truth be sought along such cruel paths?
I pray thy grace.

Oedipus: If I seem harsh to thee,
Or headstrong, thy revenge is in thy hand—
The truth revealed. Then speak: who was the child?
Of what sire gotten? Of what mother born?

Phorbas: He was the son of her who is thy—wife.

Oedipus: Then yawn, O earth! and thou, O king of shades,
Into the lowest depths of hades hurl
This vile confounder of the son and sire!
Ye citizens, on my incestuous head
Heap crushing rocks! with weapons slaughter me!
Let husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers—all
Whose name I have defiled, against me arm!
And let the poor, plague-smitten populace
Hurl blazing brands from off their funeral pyres!
The plague spot of the age, I wander here,
Heaven-cursed pollutor of all sacred ties;
Who, in the day when first I breathed the air,
Was doomed to death.

[*To himself.*]

Call up thy courage now,
And dare some deed befitting these thy crimes.
Haste to thy palace and congratulate
Thy mother's house increased by children's sons.

[*Exit.*]

Chorus: If it were mine to choose my fate

And fashion as I would,
I'd trim my sails to the gentle breeze,
Lest, by the raging blasts o'erwhelmed,
My spars should broken be.
May soft and gently blowing winds
My dauntless bark lead on;
And ever on the middle course,
Where safely runs the path of life,
May I be traveling.
Fearing the Cretan king, 'tis said,
And trusting in strange arts,
Young Icarus essayed the stars,
And strove to conquer birds in flight,
On false wings balancing.
He fell into the raging sea
And his name alone survived.
But, wiser far, old Daedalus
A safer course midst the clouds pursued,
Awaiting his wingéd son.
As the timid bird flees the threat'ning hawk,
And collects her scattered young;
So the father watched till he saw his son
Plying his hands in the gulphing sea,
Enmeshed in his useless wings.
So does he stand in treacherous ways,
Whoever goes beyond the bounds
Ordained by nature's law.
[Enter Messenger from within the palace.]

But what is this? The palace gates resound;
Behold, it is the royal messenger.
With wild and woeful mien he seems to come.
Speak out, and tell us what the news thou bring'st.

ACT V

Messenger: When Oedipus his impious race perceived,
And saw the warning fates had been fulfilled;
When on a hideous charge he stood condemned;
Then, with a deadly purpose in his breast,
Did he approach his palace, and in haste
Beneath those hated battlements he went.
And as a lion rages o'er the sands,

And, threat'ning, tosses back his tawny mane;
So Oedipus advanced with blazing eyes,
And stern, mad face, while hollow groans burst forth,
And from his limbs there dripped a chilling sweat.
He foams and vents a stream of threat'ning words,
And from his heart his mighty grief o'erflows.
He in his madness seeks against himself
Some heavy penalty and like his fate.
"Why do I wait for punishment?" he cries;
"Let my guilty heart with hostile sword be pierced,
Or overwhelmed with flames or crushing rocks!
Oh, for a tiger or some bird of prey,
To rend my tender flesh! Do thou thyself,
Who hast beheld full many deeds of blood,
O cursed Cithaeron, from thy forests send
Thy wild beasts 'gainst me or thy greedy dogs.
Oh, that Agave were returned to earth!
But thou, my soul, why dost thou shrink from death?
For death alone can make thee innocent."
So spake he, and his impious hand he laid
Upon the hilt and drew his glittering sword.
"And dost thou, then, with this brief punishment
Expect to pay thy mighty debt of guilt,
And with one blow wilt balance all thy sins?
Thy death would satisfy thy murdered sire;
But what to appease thy mother wilt thou do,
And those thy children, shamefully begot?
What recompense canst make unto thy land,
Which for thy sin is smit with pestilence?
Such debts as these thou canst not pay by death.
Let Nature, who, in Oedipus alone,
Strange births devising, hath her laws o'erturned,
Subvert herself again to punish him.
Let it be mine, in never-ending round,
To live and die, and to be born again,
That for my crimes by never-ending pain
I may atone. Now use thy wit, poor soul.
Since by repeated death thou canst not die,
Choose then some form of lingering death in life,
Some way by which, not numbered with the dead,
Nor yet the living, thou mayst linger on.

So die, that in thy death thou mayst remain
Without the land wherein thy father dwells.
O soul, why dost thou hesitate?" And then
A sudden stream of tears o'erspread his face,
And wet his cheeks. "And can my tears suffice?
Too long my eyes these useless showers have poured;
Nay, let them follow where the tears have flowed,
From out their sockets driven. O gods of wedlock,
Is this enough? These eyes must be removed."
He spoke with frenzied rage; and all the while
His cheeks were flaming with a dangerous light,
And his starting eyeballs strained to leave their seats.
His face was full of passion, fierce resolve.
Groaning he thrust his hands into his eyes;
And those fierce eyes stood forth to meet his hands,
And eager followed of their own accord
Their kindred hands, as courting that deep wound.
Deep in with hooked fingers he explores,
And rends his eyeballs from their deepest roots.
Still stays his hands within those empty seats,
And tears the hollow sockets with his nails,
With savage joy, with vain and endless rage;
So great his fear and hatred of the light.
He lifts his head, and with those empty eyes
The heavens surveying, tests his darkened sight.
Whatever from his mangled eyes still hangs,
He tears away, and now in triumph cries
To all the gods: "Oh, spare my country now,
I pray; for I have done what must be done,
And I have paid the penalty I owed.
Now have I found at last a fitting night
To match my impious wedlock." As he speaks,
His face is watered by a hideous shower,
As the blood flows streaming from his ruptured veins.

Chorus: By fate we're driven; then yield to fate.

No anxious, brooding care can change
The thread of destiny that falls
From that grim spindle of the Fates.
Whate'er we mortals suffer here,
Whate'er we do, all hath its birth
In that deep realm of mystery.

Stern Lachesis her distaff whirls,
Spinning the threads of mortal men,
But with no backward-turning hand.
All things in ordered pathways go;
And on our natal day was fixed
Our day of death. Not God himself
Can change the current of our lives,
Which bears its own compelling force
Within itself. Each life goes on
In order fixed and absolute,
Unmoved by prayer. Nay fear itself
Has been by many found a bane;
For, while they sought to shun their fate,
They came upon it in their flight.
But now the palace gates resound, and see,
The sightless king himself, with none to guide,
Takes hitherward his blind and groping way.

[Enter Oedipus.]

Oedipus: Now all is well and finished; to my sire
I've paid the debt I owed. How sweet these shades!
What god, at length appeased, hath wrapped my head
In a pall of darkness, and my crimes forgiven?
Now have I 'scaped the conscious eye of day;
And nothing dost thou owe, O parricide,
To thine avenging hand. Thy sight is gone,
And such a countenance becomes thee well.

[Enter Jocasta.]

Chorus: See where with hurried step Jocasta comes,
Beside herself and overcome with grief;
As when in maddened rage that Theban dame
Her son's head tore away and realized
What she had done. She wavers, longs to speak
To that afflicted one, and fears to speak.
Now shame at last has yielded to her grief,
And with a faltering tongue she speaks to him.

Jocasta: What shall I call thee? Son? Dost shun that name?
Thou art my son; thy shame confesseth it.
And yet, O son, though all unwilling, speak.
Why dost thou turn away thy sightless face?

Oedipus: Who now forbids me to enjoy my night?
Who gives me back mine eyes? My mother's voice!
Oh, awful sound! Now is my labor vain.
Stay where thou art! Each step is impious.
Let boundless seas our guilty souls divide,
And lands remote; and if beneath this land
Some other hangs, beholding other stars,
May that far country one of us receive.

Jocasta: What thou deplorest is the fault of fate.
A fated crime can leave no stain of sin.

Oedipus: Now cease thy words, O mother, spare my ears,
By these poor remnants of my mangled form,
By that unhallowed offspring of my blood,
And all that in the double names we bear
Is right and wrong!

Jocasta [to herself]: Why art thou listless now,
O soul of mine? Since thou hast shared his guilt,
Why hesitate to share his punishment?
The beauty of all human intercourse
Has fallen into ruin for thy sake,
Confused and lost, O wretch incestuous.
Not if the father of the gods himself
Should hurl at me his glittering thunderbolts,
Could I for my foul crimes atonement make,
Since I the name of mother have profaned.
Now death is welcome, but the way of death
Must I consider.

[*To Oedipus.*]

Come, thou parricide,
And lift thy hand against thy mother too.
This act is wanting to complete thy work.

[*To herself.*]

Now let the sword be drawn. By this good blade
Was Laius, my husband, slain—not so;
My husband's father, by his rightful name!
Shall I this weapon plunge into my breast,
Or thrust it deep within my waiting neck?
Nay, nay: thou know'st not how to choose a place.
Strike here, O hand, through this capacious womb,
Which (horrible!) the son and husband bore.

[She stabs herself and falls dead.]

Chorus: She lies in death, her failing hand relaxed;
And spouting streams of blood drive out the sword.

Oedipus: O fate-revealer, thee do I upbraid,
Thou god and guardian of the oracles.
My father only was I doomed to slay;
But now, twice parricide and past my fears,
Have I been guilty, and my mother slain.
For 'tis by sin of mine that she is dead.
O lying Phoebus, now have I outdone
The impious fates.

With apprehensive feet
Let me go out upon my darkened way,
Planting my footsteps with a faltering tread,
And through the darkness grope with trembling hands.
Stay not thy flight, speed thy uncertain steps—
But hold! lest on thy mother's corse thou tread.
O Thebans, weak and smitten sore with ills,
Whose hearts are fainting in your breasts, behold,
I flee, I go: lift up your drooping heads.
A milder sky and sweeter air shall come
When I am gone. Whoever still retains
His feeble life may now inhale the air
In deep, life-giving draughts. Go, lend your aid
To those who were to certain death resigned;
For with me in my exile do I bear
All pestilential humors of the land.
Then come, ye blasting Fates and mad Despair,
Thou deadly Pestilence, come, come with me;
With such a company 'tis sweet to flee!

[Exit.]