SOPHOCLES
THE THREE
THEBAN PLAYS
ANTIGONE • OEDIPUS THE KING
OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

TRANSLATED BY
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INTRODUCTIONS AND
NOTES BY
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PENGUIN BOOKS
OEDIPUS enters from the palace to address the chorus, as if addressing the entire city of Thebes.

OEDIPUS:
You pray to the gods? Let me grant your prayers. Come, listen to me—do what the plague demands: you’ll find relief and lift your head from the depths.

I will speak out now as a stranger to the story, a stranger to the crime. If I’d been present then, there would have been no mystery, no long hunt without a clue in hand. So now, counted a native Theban years after the murder, to all of Thebes I make this proclamation: if any one of you knows who murdered Laius, the son of Labdacus, I order him to reveal the whole truth to me. Nothing to fear, even if he must denounce himself, let him speak up and so escape the brunt of the charge—he will suffer no unbearable punishment, nothing worse than exile, totally unharmed.

OEDIPUS pauses, waiting for a reply.

Next, if anyone knows the murderer is a stranger, a man from alien soil, come, speak up. I will give him a handsome reward, and lay up gratitude in my heart for him besides.

Silence again, no reply.
But if you keep silent, if anyone panicking, trying to shield himself or friend or kin, rejects my offer, then hear what I will do. I order you, every citizen of the state where I hold throne and power: banish this man— whoever he may be—never shelter him, never speak a word to him, never make him partner to your prayers, your victims burned to the gods. Never let the holy water touch his hands. Drive him out, each of you, from every home.

He is the plague, the heart of our corruption, as Apollo’s oracle has just revealed to me.

So I honor my obligations: I fight for the god and for the murdered man.

Now my curse on the murderer. Whoever he is, a lone man unknown in his crime or one among many, let that man drag out his life in agony, step by painful step— I curse myself as well . . . if by any chance he proves to be an intimate of our house, here at my hearth, with my full knowledge, may the curse I just called down on him strike me!
OEDIPUS:

O Tiresias, 340

master of all the mysteries of our life,
all you teach and all you dare not tell,
signs in the heavens, signs that walk the earth!
Blind as you are, you can feel all the more
what sickness haunts our city. You, my lord,
are the one shield, the one savior we can find.

We asked Apollo—perhaps the messengers
haven't told you—he sent his answer back:
“Relief from the plague can only come one way.
Uncover the murderers of Laius,
put them to death or drive them into exile.” 350
So I beg you, grudge us nothing now, no voice,
no message plucked from the birds, the embers
or the other mantic ways within your grasp.
Rescue yourself, your city, rescue me—
rescue everything infected by the dead.
We are in your hands. For a man to help others
with all his gifts and native strength:
that is the noblest work.

TIRESIAS:

How terrible—to see the truth
when the truth is only pain to him who sees! 360
I knew it well, but I put it from my mind,
else I never would have come.

OEDIPUS:

What's this? Why so grim, so dire?
TIRESIAS:
Just send me home. You bear your burdens,
I'll bear mine. It's better that way,
please believe me.

OEDIPUS:
Strange response . . . unlawful,
unfriendly too to the state that bred and reared you—
you withhold the word of god.

TIRESIAS:
I fail to see
that your own words are so well-timed.
I'd rather not have the same thing said of me . . .

OEDIPUS:
For the love of god, don't turn away,
not if you know something. We beg you,
all of us on our knees.

TIRESIAS:
None of you knows—
and I will never reveal my dreadful secrets,
not to say your own.

OEDIPUS:
What? You know and you won't tell?
You're bent on betraying us, destroying Thebes?

TIRESIAS:
I'd rather not cause pain for you or me.
So why this . . . useless interrogation?
You'll get nothing from me.
OEDIPUS:

Nothing! You, you scum of the earth, you'd enrage a heart of stone!
You won't talk? Nothing moves you?
Out with it, once and for all!

TIRESIAS:

You criticize my temper... unaware
of the one you live with, you revile me.

Who could restrain his anger hearing you?
What outrage—you spurn the city!

What will come will come.
Even if I shroud it all in silence.

What will come? You're bound to tell me that.

I will say no more. Do as you like, build your anger
to whatever pitch you please, rage your worst—

Oh I'll let loose, I have such fury in me—
now I see it all. You helped hatch the plot,
you did the work, yes, short of killing him
with your own hands—and given eyes I'd say
you did the killing single-handed!
TIRESIAS: Is that so!
I charge you, then, submit to that decree
you just laid down: from this day onward
speak to no one, not these citizens, not myself.
You are the curse, the corruption of the land!

OEDIPUS:
You, shameless—
aren’t you appalled to start up such a story?
You think you can get away with this?

TIRESIAS: I have already.
The truth with all its power lives inside me.

OEDIPUS:
Who primed you for this? Not your prophet’s trade.

TIRESIAS:
You did, you forced me, twisted it out of me.

OEDIPUS:
What? Say it again—I’ll understand it better.

TIRESIAS:
Didn’t you understand, just now?
Or are you tempting me to talk?
OEDIPUS:
No, I can't say I grasped your meaning. 
Out with it, again!

TIRESIAS:
I say you are the murderer you hunt.

OEDIPUS:
That obscenity, twice—by god, you'll pay.

TIRESIAS:
Shall I say more, so you can really rage?

OEDIPUS:
Much as you want. Your words are nothing—
futile.

TIRESIAS:
You cannot imagine . . . I tell you, 
you and your loved ones live together in infamy, 
you cannot see how far you've gone in guilt.

OEDIPUS:
You think you can keep this up and never suffer?

TIRESIAS:
Indeed, if the truth has any power.
wealth and empire, skill outstripping skill
in the heady rivalries of life,
what envy lurks inside you! Just for this,
the crown the city gave me—I never sought it,
they laid it in my hands—for this alone, Creon,
the soul of trust, my loyal friend from the start
steals against me... so hungry to overthrow me
he sets this wizard on me, this scheming quack,
this fortune-teller peddling lies, eyes peeled
for his own profit—seer blind in his craft!

Come here, you pious fraud. Tell me,
when did you ever prove yourself a prophet?
When the Sphinx, that chanting Fury kept her deathwatch here,
why silent then, not a word to set our people free?
Theré was a riddle, not for some passer-by to solve—
it cried out for a prophet. Where were you?
Did you rise to the crisis? Not a word,
you and your birds, your gods—nothing.
No, but I came by, Oedipus the ignorant,
I stopped the Sphinx! With no help from the birds,
the flight of my own intelligence hit the mark.

And this is the man you'd try to overthrow?
You think you'll stand by Creon when he's king?
You and the great mastermind—
you'll pay in tears, I promise you, for this,
this witch-hunt. If you didn't look so senile
the lash would teach you what your scheming means!

LEADER:
I would suggest his words were spoken in anger,
Oedipus... yours too, and it isn't what we need.
The best solution to the oracle, the riddle
posed by god—we should look for that.
TIRESIAS:
You are the king no doubt, but in one respect,
at least, I am your equal: the right to reply.
I claim that privilege too.
I am not your slave. I serve Apollo.
I don’t need Creon to speak for me in public.

So,
you mock my blindness? Let me tell you this.
You with your precious eyes,
you’re blind to the corruption of your life,
to the house you live in, those you live with—
who are your parents? Do you know? All unknowing
you are the scourge of your own flesh and blood,
the dead below the earth and the living here above,
and the double lash of your mother and your father’s curse
will whip you from this land one day, their footfall
treading you down in terror, darkness shrouding
your eyes that now can see the light!

Soon, soon
you’ll scream aloud—what haven won’t reverberate?
What rock of Cithaeron won’t scream back in echo?
That day you learn the truth about your marriage,
the wedding-march that sang you into your halls,
the lusty voyage home to the fatal harbor!
And a crowd of other horrors you’d never dream
will level you with yourself and all your children.

There. Now smear us with insults—Creon, myself
and every word I’ve said. No man will ever
be rooted from the earth as brutally as you.

OEDIPUS:
Enough! Such filth from him? Insufferable—
what, still alive? Get out—
faaster, back where you came from—vanish!
JOCASTA:

A prophet?
Well then, free yourself of every charge!
Listen to me and learn some peace of mind:
no skill in the world,
nothing human can penetrate the future.
Here is proof, quick and to the point.

An oracle came to Laius one fine day
(I won't say from Apollo himself
but his underlings his priests) and it declared
that doom would strike him down at the hands of a son,
our son, to be born of our own flesh and blood. But Laius,
so the report goes at least, was killed by strangers,
thieves, at a place where three roads meet . . . my son—
he wasn't three days old and the boy's father
fastened his ankles, had a henchman fling him away
on a barren, trackless mountain.

There, you see?

Apollo brought neither thing to pass. My baby
no more murdered his father than Laius suffered—
his wildest fear—death at his own son's hands.
That's how the seers and all their revelations
mapped out the future. Brush them from your mind.
Whatever the god needs and seeks
he'll bring to light himself, with ease.

OEDIPUS:

Strange,
hearing you just now . . . my mind wandered,
my thoughts racing back and forth.

JOCASTA:

What do you mean? Why so anxious, startled?
OEDIPUS:
I thought I heard you say that Laius
was cut down at a place where three roads meet.

JOCASTA:
That was the story. It hasn’t died out yet.

OEDIPUS:
Where did this thing happen? Be precise.

JOCASTA:
A place called Phocis, where two branching roads,
one from Daulia, one from Delphi,
come together—a crossroads.

OEDIPUS:
When? How long ago?

JOCASTA:
The heralds no sooner reported Laius dead
than you appeared and they hailed you king of Thebes.

OEDIPUS:
My god, my god—what have you planned to do to me?

JOCASTA:
What, Oedipus? What haunts you so?

OEDIPUS:
Laius—how did he look? Describe him.
Had he reached his prime?
Now, Jocasta, I will tell you all.
Making my way toward this triple crossroad
I began to see a herald, then a brace of colts
drawing a wagon, and mounted on the bench... a man,
just as you've described him, coming face-to-face,
and the one in the lead and the old man himself
were about to thrust me off the road—brute force—
and the one shouldering me aside, the driver,
I strike him in anger!—and the old man, watching me
coming up along his wheels—he brings down
his prod, two prongs straight at my head!
I paid him back with interest!
Short work, by god—with one blow of the staff
in this right hand I knock him out of his high seat,
roll him out of the wagon, sprawling headlong—
I killed them all—every mother's son!

Oh, but if there is any blood-tie
between Laius and this stranger...
what man alive more miserable than I?
More hated by the gods? I am the man
no alien, no citizen welcomes to his house,
law forbids it—not a word to me in public,
driven out of every hearth and home.
And all these curses I—no one but I
brought down these piling curses on myself!
And you, his wife, I've touched your body with these,
the hands that killed your husband cover you with blood.

Wasn't I born for torment? Look me in the eyes!
I am abomination—heart and soul!
I must be exiled, and even in exile
never see my parents, never set foot
on native ground again. Else I am doomed
to couple with my mother and cut my father down...
Polybus who reared me, gave me life.
But why, why?
Wouldn't a man of judgment say—and wouldn't he be right—
some savage power has brought this down upon my head?

Oh no, not that, you pure and awesome gods,
ever let me see that day! Let me slip
from the world of men, vanish without a trace
before I see myself stained with such corruption,
stained to the heart.

LEADER:
My lord, you fill our hearts with fear.
But at least until you question the witness,
do take hope.

OEDIPUS: Exactly. He is my last hope—
I am waiting for the shepherd. He is crucial.

JOCASTA: And once he appears, what then? Why so urgent?

OEDIPUS: I will tell you. If it turns out that his story
matches yours, I've escaped the worst.

JOCASTA: What did I say? What struck you so?
JOCASTA: What are you saying? Polybus, dead?—dead?

MESSENGER: If not, if I'm not telling the truth, strike me dead too.

JOCASTA: Quickly, go to your master, tell him this!

You prophecies of the gods, where are you now? This is the man that Oedipus feared for years, he fled him, not to kill him—and now he's dead, quite by chance, a normal, natural death, not murdered by his son.

OEDIPUS: Emerging from the palace.

Dearest, what now? Why call me from the palace?

JOCASTA: Bringing the messenger closer.

Listen to him, see for yourself what all those awful prophecies of god have come to.

OEDIPUS: And who is he? What can he have for me?

JOCASTA: He's from Corinth, he's come to tell you your father is no more—Polybus—he's dead!
OEDIPUS: Wheeling on the messenger.

What? Let me have it from your lips.

MESSENGER: Well,

if that's what you want first, then here it is:
make no mistake, Polybus is dead and gone.


MESSENGER: A light tip of the scales can put old bones to rest.

OEDIPUS: Sickness then—poor man, it wore him down.

MESSENGER: That,

and the long count of years he'd measured out.

OEDIPUS: So!

Jocasta, why, why look to the Prophet's hearth,
the fires of the future? Why scan the birds
that scream above our heads? They winged me on
to the murder of my father, did they? That was my doom?
Well look, he's dead and buried, hidden under the earth,
and here I am in Thebes, I never put hand to sword—
unless some longing for me wasted him away,
then in a sense you'd say I caused his death.
But now, all those prophecies I feared—Polybus
packs them off to sleep with him in hell!
They're nothing, worthless.
Jocasta: There. Didn't I tell you from the start?

Oedipus: So you did. I was lost in fear.

Jocasta: No more, sweep it from your mind forever.

Oedipus: But my mother's bed, surely I must fear—

Jocasta: What should a man fear? It's all chance, chance rules our lives. Not a man on earth can see a day ahead, groping through the dark. Better to live at random, best we can. And as for this marriage with your mother—have no fear. Many a man before you, in his dreams, has shared his mother's bed. Take such things for shadows, nothing at all—Live, Oedipus, as if there's no tomorrow!

Oedipus: Brave words, and you'd persuade me if mother weren't alive. But mother lives, so for all your reassurances I live in fear, I must.

Jocasta: But your father's death, that, at least, is a great blessing, joy to the eyes!
That's right, old man, that fear is always with me.

Don't you know? You've really nothing to fear.

But why? If I'm their son—Merope, Polybus?

Polybus was nothing to you, that's why, not in blood.

What are you saying—Polybus was not my father?

No more than I am. He and I are equals.

My father—how can my father equal nothing? You're nothing to me!

Neither was he, no more your father than I am.

Then why did he call me his son?

You were a gift, years ago—know for a fact he took you from my hands.
OEDIPUS: No, from another's hands? Then how could he love me so? He loved me, deeply...

MESSENGER: True, and his early years without a child made him love you all the more.

OEDIPUS: And you, did you... buy me? find me by accident?

MESSENGER: I stumbled on you, down the woody flanks of Mount Cithaeron.

OEDIPUS: what were you doing here, just passing through?

MESSENGER: Watching over my flocks, grazing them on the slopes.

OEDIPUS: A herdsman, were you? A vagabond, scraping for wages?

MESSENGER: Your savior too, my son, in your worst hour.

OEDIPUS: Oh— when you picked me up, was I in pain? What exactly?
MESSENGER:
Your ankles . . . they tell the story. Look at them.

OEDIPUS:
Why remind me of that, that old affliction?

MESSENGER:
Your ankles were pinned together. I set you free.

OEDIPUS:
That dreadful mark—I've had it from the cradle.

MESSENGER:
And you got your name from that misfortune too, the name's still with you.

OEDIPUS:
Dear god, who did it?—mother? father? Tell me.

MESSENGER:
I don't know. The one who gave you to me, he'd know more.

OEDIPUS:
What? You took me from someone else? You didn't find me yourself?

MESSENGER:
No sir, another shepherd passed you on to me.
OEDIPUS: Who? Do you know? Describe him.

MESSANGER: He called himself a servant of... if I remember rightly—Laius.

OEDIPUS: The king of the land who ruled here long ago?

MESSANGER: That's the one. That herdsman was his man.

OEDIPUS: Is he still alive? Can I see him?

MESSANGER: They'd know best, the people of these parts.

OEDIPUS: Does anyone know that herdsman, the one he mentioned? Anyone seen him in the fields, here in the city? Out with it! The time has come to reveal this once for all.

LEADER: I think he's the very shepherd you wanted to see, a moment ago. But the queen, Jocasta, she's the one to say.
SHEPHERD:
It wasn’t mine, no, I got it from . . . someone.

OEDIPUS:
Which one of them?  

Looking at the citizens.

Whose house?

SHEPHERD:
No—  
god’s sake, master, no more questions!  

OEDIPUS:
You’re a dead man if I have to ask again.

SHEPHERD:
Then—the child came from the house . . .  
of Laius.

OEDIPUS:
A slave? or born of his own blood?

SHEPHERD:
Oh no,
I’m right at the edge, the horrible truth—I’ve got to say it!

OEDIPUS:
And I’m at the edge of hearing horrors, yes, but I must hear!
SHEPHERD:
All right! His son, they said it was—his son!
But the one inside, your wife,
she'd tell it best.

OEDIPUS:
My wife—
she gave it to you?

SHEPHERD:
Yes, yes, my king.

OEDIPUS:
Why, what for?

SHEPHERD:
To kill it.

OEDIPUS:
Her own child,
how could she?

SHEPHERD:
She was afraid—
frightening prophecies.

OEDIPUS:
What?
SHEPHERD:
They said—
he'd kill his parents.

OEDIPUS:
But you gave him to this old man—why?

SHEPHERD:
I pitied the little baby, master,
hoped he'd take him off to his own country,
far away, but he saved him for this, this fate.
If you are the man he says you are, believe me,
you were born for pain.

OEDIPUS:
O god—
all come true, all burst to light!
O light—now let me look my last on you!
I stand revealed at last—
cursed in my birth, cursed in marriage,
cursed in the lives I cut down with these hands!

Rushing through the doors with a great cry. The Corinthian
MESSENGER, the SHEPHERD and attendants exit slowly to the side.
CHORUS:

O the terror—
the suffering, for all the world to see,
the worst terror that ever met my eyes.
What madness swept over you? What god,
what dark power leapt beyond all bounds,
beyond belief, to crush your wretched life?—
godforsaken, cursed by the gods!
I pity you but I can’t bear to look.
I’ve much to ask, so much to learn,
so much fascinates my eyes,
but you . . . I shudder at the sight.

OEDIPUS:

Oh, Ohh—
the agony! I am agony—
where am I going? where on earth?
where does all this agony hurl me?
where’s my voice?—
winging, swept away on a dark tide—
My destiny, my dark power, what a leap you made!

CHORUS:
To the depths of terror, too dark to hear, to see.
Oedipus: Dark, horror of darkness
my darkness, drowning, swirling around me
crashing wave on wave—unspeakable, irresistible
headwind, fatal harbor! Oh again,
the misery, all at once, over and over
the stabbing daggers, stab of memory
raking me insane.

Chorus: No wonder you suffer
twice over, the pain of your wounds,
the lasting grief of pain.

Oedipus: Dear friend, still here?
Standing by me, still with a care for me,
the blind man? Such compassion,
loyal to the last. Oh it's you,
I know you're here, dark as it is
I'd know you anywhere, your voice—
it's yours, clearly yours.

Chorus: Dreadful, what you've done . . .
how could you bear it, gouging out your eyes?
What superhuman power drove you on?
OEDIPUS: Apollo, friends, Apollo—
he ordained my agonies—these, my pains on pains!
But the hand that struck my eyes was mine,
mine alone—no one else—
I did it all myself!
What good were eyes to me?
Nothing I could see could bring me joy.

CHORUS: No, no, exactly as you say.

OEDIPUS: What can I ever see?

What love, what call of the heart
can touch my ears with joy? Nothing, friends.
Take me away, far, far from Thebes,
quickly, cast me away, my friends—
this great murderous ruin, this man cursed to heaven,
the man the deathless gods hate most of all!

CHORUS: Pitiful, you suffer so, you understand so much . . .
I wish you had never known.
CREON:
I haven’t come to mock you, Oedipus,
or to criticize your former failings.

Turning to the guards.

You there,
have you lost all respect for human feelings?
At least revere the Sun, the holy fire
that keeps us all alive. Never expose a thing
of guilt and holy dread so great it appalls
the earth, the rain from heaven, the light of day!
Get him into the halls—quickly as you can.
Piety demands no less. Kindred alone
should see a kinsman’s shame. This is obscene.

OEDIPUS:
Please, in god’s name . . . you wipe my fears away,
coming so generously to me, the worst of men.
Do one thing more, for your sake, not mine.

CREON:
What do you want? Why so insistent?

OEDIPUS:
Drive me out of the land at once, far from sight,
where I can never hear a human voice.

CREON:
I’d have done that already, I promise you.
First I wanted the god to clarify my duties.
OEDIPUS: The god? His command was clear, every word: death for the father-killer, the curse—he said destroy me!

CREON: So he did. Still, in such a crisis it's better to ask precisely what to do.

OEDIPUS: So miserable—you would consult the god about a man like me?

CREON: By all means. And this time, I assume, even you will obey the god's decrees.

OEDIPUS: I will. And you, I command you—I beg you... the woman inside, bury her as you see fit. It's the only decent thing, to give your own the last rites. As for me, never condemn the city of my fathers to house my body, not while I'm alive, no, let me live on the mountains, on Cithaeron, my favorite haunt, I have made it famous. Mother and father marked out that rock to be my everlasting tomb—buried alive. Let me die there, where they tried to kill me.

Oh but this I know: no sickness can destroy me, nothing can. I would never have been saved from death—I have been saved for something great and terrible, something strange. Well let my destiny come and take me on its way!
About my children, Creon, the boys at least, don't burden yourself. They're men, wherever they go, they'll find the means to live. But my two daughters, my poor helpless girls, clustering at our table, never without me hovering near them... whatever I touched, they always had their share. Take care of them, I beg you. Wait, better—permit me, would you? Just to touch them with my hands and take our fill of tears. Please... my king. Grant it, with all your noble heart. If I could hold them, just once, I'd think I had them with me, like the early days when I could see their eyes.

ANTIGONE and ISMENE, two small children, are led in from the palace by a nurse.

What's that? O god! Do I really hear you sobbing?—my two children. Creon, you've pitied me? Sent me my darling girls, my own flesh and blood! Am I right?

CREON: Yes, it's my doing. I know the joy they gave you all these years, the joy you must feel now.

OEDIPUS: Bless you, Creon! May god watch over you for this kindness, better than he ever guarded me.

Children, where are you? Here, come quickly—
Come to these hands of mine,
your brother’s hands, your own father’s hands
that served his once bright eyes so well—
that made them blind. Seeing nothing, children,
knowing nothing, I became your father,
I fathered you in the soil that gave me life.

How I weep for you—I cannot see you now . . .
just thinking of all your days to come, the bitterness,
the life that rough mankind will thrust upon you.
Where are the public gatherings you can join,
the banquets of the clans? Home you’ll come,
in tears, cut off from the sight of it all,
the brilliant rites unfinished.
And when you reach perfection, ripe for marriage,
who will he be, my dear ones? Risking all
to shoulder the curse that weighs down my parents,
yes and you too—that wounds us all together.
What more misery could you want?
Your father killed his father, sowed his mother,
one, one and the selfsame womb sprang you—
he cropped the very roots of his existence.

Such disgrace, and you must bear it all!
Who will marry you then? Not a man on earth.
Your doom is clear: you’ll wither away to nothing,
single, without a child.

Turning to Creon.
Oh Creon,
you are the only father they have now . . .
we who brought them into the world
are gone, both gone at a stroke—
Don't let them go begging, abandoned,
women without men. Your own flesh and blood!
Never bring them down to the level of my pains.
Pity them. Look at them, so young, so vulnerable,
shorn of everything—you're their only hope.
Promise me, noble Creon, touch my hand!

You, little ones, if you were old enough
to understand, there is much I'd tell you.
Now, as it is, I'd have you say a prayer.
Pray for life, my children,
live where you are free to grow and season.
Pray god you find a better life than mine,
the father who begot you.

CREON:
Enough.
You've wept enough. Into the palace now.

OEDIPUS:
I must, but I find it very hard.

CREON:
Time is the great healer, you will see.

OEDIPUS:
I am going—you know on what condition?

CREON:
Tell me. I'm listening.