



champions strong before us rushing on!

235 Artemis, Huntress,
torches flaring over the eastern ridges—
ride Death down in pain!

God of the headdress gleaming gold, I cry to you—
your name and ours are one, Dionysus—
240 come with your face aflame with wine
your raving women's cries
your army on the march! Come with the lightning
come with torches blazing, eyes ablaze with glory!
Burn that god of death that all gods hate!

239 your name and ours are one, Dionysus (dī'ə-nī'sēs): Dionysus, god of wine, was born of a Theban woman.

PAUSE & REFLECT What details helped you visualize Thebes as a city of death?

FOCUS Oedipus will now speak to his people. Read to find out what he intends to do to the killer or killers of Laius.

(Oedipus enters from the palace to address the Chorus, as if addressing the entire city of Thebes.)

245 **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,
250 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,
255 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—
260 he will suffer no unbearable punishment,
nothing worse than exile, totally unharmed.

255 Labdacus (lăb'də-kəs).

(Oedipus pauses, waiting for a reply.)

WORDS TO KNOW



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
265 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
270 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.
275 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.

274 holy water: water used for purification after a sacrifice to the gods.

280 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
285 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!

285 intimate: friend.

These are your orders: perform them to the last.
I command you, for my sake, for Apollo's, for this country
290 blasted root and branch by the angry heavens.
Even if god had never urged you on to act,
how could you leave the crime uncleansed so long?
A man so noble—your king, brought down in blood—
you should have searched. But I am the king now,
295 I hold the throne that he held then, possess his bed
and a wife who shares our seed . . . why, our seed
might be the same, children born of the same mother
might have created blood-bonds between us
if his hope of offspring had not met disaster—



300 but fate swooped at his head and cut him short.
So I will fight for him as if he were my father,
stop at nothing, search the world
to lay my hands on the man who shed his blood,
the son of Labdacus descended of Polydorus,
305 Cadmus of old and Agenor, founder of the line:
their power and mine are one.

304 Polydorus (pŏl'ə-dŏr'əs).

305 Agenor (ə-jĕ'nŏr'): Cadmus' father.

Oh dear gods,
my curse on those who disobey these orders!
Let no crops grow out of the earth for them—
shrivel their women, kill their sons,
310 burn them to nothing in this plague
that hits us now, or something even worse.
But you, loyal men of Thebes who approve my actions,
may our champion, Justice, may all the gods
be with us, fight beside us to the end!

315 **Leader.** In the grip of your curse, my king, I swear
I'm not the murderer, I cannot point him out.
As for the search, Apollo pressed it on us—
he should name the killer.

Oedipus. Quite right,
but to force the gods to act against their will—
320 no man has the power.

Leader. Then if I might mention
the next best thing . . .

Oedipus. The third best too—
don't hold back, say it.

Leader. I still believe . . .
Lord Tiresias sees with the eyes of Lord Apollo.
Anyone searching for the truth, my king,
325 might learn it from the prophet, clear as day.

Oedipus. I've not been slow with that. On Creon's cue
I sent the escorts, twice, within the hour.
I'm surprised he isn't here.

Leader. We need him—
without him we have nothing but old, useless rumors.

330 **Oedipus.** Which rumors? I'll search out every word.

Leader. Laius was killed, they say, by certain travelers.

Oedipus. I know—but no one can find the murderer.

Leader. If the man has a trace of fear in him



335 he won't stay silent long,
not with your curses ringing in his ears.

Oedipus. He didn't flinch at murder,
he'll never flinch at words.

PAUSE & REFLECT What curse does Oedipus put on the killer or killers of Laius?

FOCUS After the prophet Tiresias enters, he and Oedipus quarrel bitterly. In the heat of anger, Tiresias blurts out the identity of Laius' murderer. Read to find out whom Tiresias names.

(Enter Tiresias, the blind prophet, led by a boy with escorts in attendance. He remains at a distance.)

Leader. Here is the one who will convict him, look,
they bring him on at last, the seer, the man of god.
340 The truth lives inside him, him alone.

Oedipus. O Tiresias,
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
345 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.
350 Uncover the murderers of Laius,
put them to death or drive them into exile.”
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.
355 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.

354 mantic: prophetic.

Tiresias. How terrible—to see the truth
360 when the truth is only pain to him who sees!
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?

365 **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.

370 **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.

375 **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?

380 **Tiresias.** I'd rather not cause pain for you or me.
So why this . . . useless interrogation?
You'll get nothing from me.

379 interrogation (ĭn-tĕr'ĕ-gā'shĕn): questioning.

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!

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

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

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

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

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

395 **Oedipus.** 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

WORDS TO KNOW



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
400 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.
405 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?
410 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.

415 **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.

418 infamy (ɪn'fə-mē): disgrace.

420 **Oedipus.** You think you can keep this up and never suffer?

Tiresias. Indeed, if the truth has any power.

Oedipus. It does
but not for you, old man. You've lost your power,
stone-blind, stone-deaf—senses, eyes blind as stone!

Tiresias. I pity you, flinging at me the very insults
425 each man here will fling at you so soon.

Oedipus. Blind,
lost in the night, endless night that nursed you!
You can't hurt me or anyone else who sees the light—

WORDS TO KNOW

appall (ə-pól') *v.* to horrify
futile (fyōōt'l) *adj.* useless



you can never touch me.

Tiresias. True, it is not your fate
to fall at my hands. Apollo is quite enough,
430 and he will take some pains to work this out.

Oedipus. Creon! Is this conspiracy his or yours?

Tiresias. Creon is not your downfall, no, you are your own.

Oedipus. O power—
wealth and empire, skill outstripping skill
in the heady rivalries of life,
435 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
440 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!

434 heady: violent; passionate.

Come here, you pious fraud. Tell me,
when did you ever prove yourself a prophet?
445 When the Sphinx, that chanting Fury kept her death-
watch here,
why silent then, not a word to set our people free?
There 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,
450 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?
455 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!

460 **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,
465 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.
470 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,
475 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

480 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!
485 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.

490 **Oedipus.** Enough! Such filth from him? Insufferable—
what, still alive? Get out—
faster, back where you came from—vanish!

Tiresias. I would never have come if you hadn't called me
here.

Oedipus. If I thought you would blurt out such absurdities,
495 you'd have died waiting before I'd had you summoned.

Tiresias. Absurd, am I! To you, not to your parents:
the ones who bore you found me sane enough.

Oedipus. Parents—who? Wait . . . who is my father?

Tiresias. This day will bring your birth and your destruction.

480 haven: place of safety.

481 Cithaeron (sĭ-thĭr'ən): a mountain about 12 miles south of Thebes.

WORDS TO KNOW



500 **Oedipus.** Riddles—all you can say are riddles, murk and darkness.

Tiresias. Ah, but aren't you the best man alive at solving riddles?

Oedipus. Mock me for that, go on, and you'll reveal my greatness.

Tiresias. Your great good fortune, true, it was your ruin.

Oedipus. Not if I saved the city—what do I care?

505 **Tiresias.** Well then, I'll be going.

(to his attendant)

Take me home, boy.

Oedipus. Yes, take him away. You're a nuisance here.

Out of the way, the irritation's gone.

(turning his back on Tiresias, moving toward the palace)

Tiresias. I will go,

once I have said what I came here to say.

I will never shrink from the anger in your eyes—

510 you can't destroy me. Listen to me closely:

the man you've sought so long, proclaiming,

cursing up and down, the murderer of Laius—

he is here. A stranger,

you may think, who lives among you,

515 he soon will be revealed a native Theban

but he will take no joy in the revelation.

Blind who now has eyes, beggar who now is rich,

he will grope his way toward a foreign soil,

a stick tapping before him step by step.

(Oedipus enters the palace.)

520 Revealed at last, brother and father both
to the children he embraces, to his mother
son and husband both—he sowed the loins
his father sowed, he spilled his father's blood!

Go in and reflect on that, solve that.

525 And if you find I've lied

from this day onward call the prophet blind.

(Tiresias and the boy exit to the side.)

PAUSE & REFLECT Whom does Tiresias name as the murderer of Laius?



FOCUS The chorus describes the panic that the murderer of Laius must now feel and then reflects on Oedipus. As you read, look for details that suggest how the chorus feels about Oedipus at this point in the play.

Chorus.

Who—

who is the man the voice of god denounces
resounding out of the rocky gorge of Delphi?

530 The horror too dark to tell,
whose ruthless bloody hands have done the work?
His time has come to fly
to outrace the stallions of the storm
his feet a streak of speed—

535 Cased in armor, Apollo son of the Father
lunges on him, lightning-bolts afire!
And the grim unerring Furies
closing for the kill.

Look,

the word of god has just come blazing
flashing off Parnassus' snowy heights!

540 That man who left no trace—
after him, hunt him down with all our strength!
Now under bristling timber
up through rocks and caves he stalks
like the wild mountain bull—

545 cut off from men, each step an agony, frenzied, racing
blind

but he cannot outrace the dread voices of Delphi
ringing out of the heart of Earth,

550 the dark wings beating around him shrieking doom
the doom that never dies, the terror—
The skilled prophet scans the birds and shatters me with
terror!

I can't accept him, can't deny him, don't know what to
say,

I'm lost, and the wings of dark foreboding beating—
I cannot see what's come, what's still to come . . .

555 and what could breed a blood feud between
Laius' house and the son of Polybus?

I know of nothing, not in the past and not now,
no charge to bring against our king, no cause

536 unerring: not turning aside; relentless; **Furies:** terrifying goddesses who pursue and punish criminals.

539 Parnassus' (pär-näs'əs) **snowy heights:** the peaks of the mountain that towers over Delphi.

555 the son of Polybus (pöll'e-bəs): Oedipus, who believes himself to be the son of Polybus, king of Corinth.

WORDS TO KNOW



560 to attack his fame that rings throughout Thebes—
not without proof—not for the ghost of Laius,
not to avenge a murder gone without a trace.

Zeus and Apollo know, they know, the great masters
of all the dark and depth of human life.

But whether a mere man can know the truth,
whether a seer can fathom more than I—

565 there is no test, no certain proof

though matching skill for skill

a man can outstrip a rival. No, not till I see
these charges proved will I side with his accusers.

570 We saw him then, when the she-hawk swept against him,
saw with our own eyes his skill, his brilliant triumph—

there was the test—he was the joy of Thebes!

Never will I convict my king, never in my heart.

564 fathom: understand.

569 she-hawk: the Sphinx.

Thinking Through the Literature

1. Why does Oedipus send for Tiresias?
2. How does the chorus feel about Oedipus at this point in the play?
3. Why do you think Oedipus is so determined to discover the murderer of Laius?

THINK
ABOUT

- how he feels about the people of Thebes
- how he once saved the city from the Sphinx
- why he might feel especially close to the murdered king