



FOCUS A messenger reveals the terrible events that have occurred offstage. Read to find out about these events.

(Enter a Messenger from the palace.)

Messenger. Men of Thebes, always first in honor,
what horrors you will hear, what you will see,
what a heavy weight of sorrow you will shoulder . . .
if you are true to your birth, if you still have
1355 some feeling for the royal house of Thebes.
I tell you neither the waters of the Danube
nor the Nile can wash this palace clean.
Such things it hides, it soon will bring to light—
terrible things, and none done blindly now,
1360 all done with a will. The pains
we inflict upon ourselves hurt most of all.

Leader. God knows we have pains enough already.
What can you add to them?

Messenger. The queen is dead.

Leader. Poor lady—how?

1365 **Messenger.** By her own hand. But you are spared the worst,
you never had to watch . . . I saw it all,
and with all the memory that's in me
you will learn what that poor woman suffered.

1370 Once she'd broken in through the gates,
dashing past us, frantic, whipped to fury,
ripping her hair out with both hands—
straight to her rooms she rushed, flinging herself
across the bridal-bed, doors slamming behind her—
once inside, she wailed for Laius, dead so long,
1375 remembering how she bore his child long ago,
the life that rose up to destroy him, leaving
its mother to mother living creatures
with the very son she'd borne.
Oh how she wept, mourning the marriage-bed
1380 where she let loose that double brood—monsters—



husband by her husband, children by her child.

And then—

but how she died is more than I can say. Suddenly
Oedipus burst in, screaming, he stunned us so
we couldn't watch her agony to the end,
1385 our eyes were fixed on him. Circling
like a maddened beast, stalking, here, there,
crying out to us—

Give him a sword! His wife,
no wife, his mother, where can he find the mother earth
that cropped two crops at once, himself and all his
children?
1390 He was raging—one of the dark powers pointing the
way,
none of us mortals crowding around him, no,
with a great shattering cry—someone, something leading
him on—
he hurled at the twin doors and bending the bolts back
out of their sockets, crashed through the chamber.

1395 And there we saw the woman hanging by the neck,
cradled high in a woven noose, spinning,
swinging back and forth. And when he saw her,
giving a low, wrenching sob that broke our hearts,
slipping the halter from her throat, he eased her down,
1400 in a slow embrace he laid her down, poor thing . . .
then, what came next, what horror we beheld!

He rips off her brooches, the long gold pins
holding her robes—and lifting them high,
looking straight up into the points,
1405 he digs them down the sockets of his eyes, crying, “You,
you'll see no more the pain I suffered, all the pain I
caused!
Too long you looked on the ones you never should have
seen,
blind to the ones you longed to see, to know! Blind
from this hour on! Blind in the darkness—blind!”
1410 His voice like a dirge, rising, over and over
raising the pins, raking them down his eyes.
And at each stroke blood spurts from the roots,



splashing his beard, a swirl of it, nerves and clots—
black hail of blood pulsing, gushing down.

1415 These are the griefs that burst upon them both,
coupling man and woman. The joy they had so lately,
the fortune of their old ancestral house
was deep joy indeed. Now, in this one day,
wailing, madness and doom, death, disgrace,
1420 all the griefs in the world that you can name,
all are theirs forever.

Leader. Oh poor man, the misery—
has he any rest from pain now?

(A voice within, in torment.)

Messenger. He's shouting,
“Loose the bolts, someone, show me to all of Thebes!
My father's murderer, my mother's—”
1425 No, I can't repeat it, it's unholy.
Now he'll tear himself from his native earth,
not linger, curse the house with his own curse.
But he needs strength, and a guide to lead him on.
This is sickness more than he can bear.

(The palace doors open.)

1430 Look,
he'll show you himself. The great doors are opening—
you are about to see a sight, a horror
even his mortal enemy would pity.

*(Enter Oedipus, blinded, led by a boy. He stands at the
palace steps, as if surveying his people once again.)*

Chorus. O the terror—
the suffering, for all the world to see,
the worst terror that ever met my eyes.
1435 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.
1440 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?
1445 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.

1450 **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
1455 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,
1460 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 . . .
1465 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,
1470 mine alone—no one else—
I did it all myself!
What good were eyes to me?
Nothing I could see could bring me joy.

1468 ordained: decreed;
commanded.

Chorus. No, no, exactly as you say.

Oedipus. What can I ever see?
1475 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,
1480 the man the deathless gods hate most of all!

Chorus. Pitiful, you suffer so, you understand so much . . .
I wish you had never known.

Oedipus. Die, die—
whoever he was that day in the wilds
who cut my ankles free of the ruthless pins,
1485 he pulled me clear of death, he saved my life
for this, this kindness—
Curse him, kill him!
If I'd died then, I'd never have dragged myself,
my loved ones through such hell.

1490 **Chorus.** Oh if only . . . would to god.

Oedipus. I'd never have come to this,
my father's murderer—never been branded
mother's husband, all men see me now! Now,
loathed by the gods, son of the mother I defiled
coupling in my father's bed, spawning lives in the
loins
1495 that spawned my wretched life. What grief can crown
this grief?
It's mine alone, my destiny—I am Oedipus!

Chorus. How can I say you've chosen for the best?
Better to die than be alive and blind.

Oedipus. What I did was best—don't lecture me,
1500 no more advice. I, with *my* eyes,
how could I look my father in the eyes
when I go down to death? Or mother, so abused . . .
I have done such things to the two of them,
crimes too huge for hanging.
Worse yet,
1505 the sight of my children, born as they were born,
how could I long to look into their eyes?
No, not with these eyes of mine, never.
Not this city either, her high towers,
the sacred glittering images of her gods—
1510 I am misery! I, her best son, reared
as no other son of Thebes was ever reared,
I've stripped myself, I gave the command myself.

WORDS TO KNOW



1515 All men must cast away the great blasphemer,
the curse now brought to light by the gods,
the son of Laius—I, my father's son!

1513 blasphemer (bläs-fē'mər): a person who shows disrespect for sacred things.

Now I've exposed my guilt, horrendous guilt,
could I train a level glance on you, my countrymen?
Impossible! No, if I could just block off my ears,
the springs of hearing, I would stop at nothing—
1520 I'd wall up my loathsome body like a prison,
blind to the sound of life, not just the sight.
Oblivion—what a blessing . . .
for the mind to dwell a world away from pain.

1517 train a level glance on you: look you straight in the eye.

1525 O Cithaeron, why did you give me shelter?
Why didn't you take me, crush my life out on the spot?
I'd never have revealed my birth to all mankind.

O Polybus, Corinth, the old house of my fathers,
so I believed—what a handsome prince you raised—
under the skin, what sickness to the core.
1530 Look at me! Born of outrage, outrage to the core.

1530 outrage: a horribly offensive act.

O triple roads—it all comes back, the secret,
dark ravine, and the oaks closing in
where the three roads join . . .
You drank my father's blood, my own blood
1535 spilled by my own hands—you still remember me?
What things you saw me do? Then I came here
and did them all once more!

Marriages! O marriage,
you gave me birth, and once you brought me into the
world
you brought my sperm rising back, springing to light
1540 fathers, brothers, sons—one murderous breed—
brides, wives, mothers. The blackest things
a man can do, I have done them all!

No more—
it's wrong to name what's wrong to do. Quickly,
for the love of god, hide me somewhere,
1545 kill me, hurl me into the sea
where you can never look on me again.

(beckoning to the Chorus as they shrink away)



Closer,
it's all right. Touch the man of grief.
Do. Don't be afraid. My troubles are mine
and I am the only man alive who can sustain them.

1549 sustain: endure.

PAUSE & REFLECT How and why does Oedipus blind himself?

FOCUS Read to find out what happens to Oedipus at the end of the play.

(Enter Creon from the palace, attended by palace guards.)

1550 **Leader.** Put your requests to Creon. Here he is,
just when we need him. He'll have a plan, he'll act.
Now that he's the sole defense of the country
in your place.

Oedipus. Oh no, what can I say to him?
How can I ever hope to win his trust?
1555 I wronged him so, just now, in every way.
You must see that—I was so wrong, so wrong.

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?
1560 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.
1565 Piety demands no less. Kindred alone
should see a kinsman's shame. This is obscene.

1566 obscene: disgusting.

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.

1570 **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.

1575 **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—
1580 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,
I will. And you, I command you—I beg you . . .
the woman inside, bury her as you see fit.
1585 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,
1590 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,
1595 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,
1600 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,
1605 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.
1610 If I could hold them, just once, I'd think

1604 hovering (hŭv'ər-ĭng): hang-
ing about.



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?
1615 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,
1620 better than he ever guarded me.

Children, where are you?

Here, come quickly—
*(groping for Antigone and Ismene, who approach their
father cautiously, then embrace him)*

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,
1625 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.
1630 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,
1635 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,
1640 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,
1645 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,
1650 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!

(reaching toward Creon, who draws back)

1655 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.
1660 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.

1665 **Oedipus.** I am going—you know on what condition?

Creon. Tell me. I'm listening.

Oedipus. Drive me out of Thebes, in exile.

Creon. Not I. Only the gods can give you that.

Oedipus. Surely the gods hate me so much—

1670 **Creon.** You'll get your wish at once.

Oedipus. You consent?

Creon. I try to say what I mean; it's my habit.



Oedipus. Then take me away. It's time.

Creon. Come along, let go of the children.

Oedipus. No—
don't take them away from me, not now! No no no!
*(clutching his daughters as the guards wrench them loose
and take them through the palace doors)*

1675 **Creon.** Still the king, the master of all things?
No more: here your power ends.
None of your power follows you through life.
*(Exit Oedipus and Creon to the palace. The Chorus comes
forward to address the audience directly.)*

Chorus. People of Thebes, my countrymen, look on Oedipus.
He solved the famous riddle with his brilliance,
1680 he rose to power, a man beyond all power.
Who could behold his greatness without envy?
Now what a black sea of terror has overwhelmed him.
Now as we keep our watch and wait the final day,
count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last.
(Exit in procession.)