

Thebes has been suffering under a curse. The crops are failing and the land is dying. On stage stand two Priests, facing the audience. Below the stage, the Chorus enters. They sit on the ground in front of the stage and face the Priests, some looking dejected, some making gestures asking for help.

*Death drum plays
Chorus members groan and slump over*

Enter Oedipus

Oedipus: My people, children of Cadmus' ancient city,
why do you sit before me dressed as suppliants?
Everywhere the city is choked with the smoke
of burning sacrifices and mourners' cries.



I have come here myself, my people,
to find this out for myself, not from someone else.
I am Oedipus: my name is known to all.

He moves towards Priest 1

Now come on, old fellow,
and tell me why you stand here.
Your age gives you the right to speak for your friends.
What do you fear, and what do you want from me now?

I am ready to do anything:
for I would be hard-hearted indeed if I did not pity
people sitting here in this state.

Priest 1: Oedipus, ruler of my land,
you see us perched before your altars like birds.
Some are barely able to fly,
others are heavy with old age:
priests all, these the pick of our youth,
and I, the priest of Zeus.

Priest 2: The rest of the crowd sits in the market places,
before the two temples of Athena and by the place
where Apollo makes prophecies in the ashes of the fire.
The city is under a terrible curse, as you see yourself,
and can barely lift its head from a sea of blood.

Priest 1: There is death in the crops of the fields:
death in our herds and flocks:
death too when women feel their labour pains.

A cruel cancer has swept down on the city,
and is devouring it like a god of fire,
draining Cadmus' house.
The black hall of hell is rich in cries of mourning.

These young ones and I sit before you,
not counting you a god - but the first of men
in your knowledge of human life, and the ways of gods.

Priest 2: You came to Cadmus' city and released us from the
Sphinx's cruel tax which we were paying then.
You seemed to restore us to prosperity
without human teaching, but with the help of a god.

We here all turn to you now, most mighty Oedipus,
and beg you to find a cure for our disease
with divine or mortal help.
Clearly do I see that men of experience are most likely
to give the best advice.

Priest 1: Come, noblest of men, restore our city!
Come, be on your guard:
this land calls you its saviour now:
let us not remember your rule as a happy time,
dissolving in sadness.
Restore our city, make it well again!
The gods were on your side before,
and you brought us luck - be equal to that now.

Better to rule a land that lives than an empty kingdom:
a city wall or a ship has nothing if it has no men inside it.

Oedipus: My poor people, you have come here
and your concerns are not unknown to me.
I know your sufferings well:
I know too that none of you suffers as I.
For all your pain is focused on me, one man, alone.

My heart grieves for the city, for myself, and for you.
You do not wake me from sleep.

Know that I have cried many tears,
and travelled many roads in the wanderings of my mind.
In all my searching, I found one answer,
and this I acted on...

I sent Creon my brother in law, son of Menoeceus,
to consult the oracle of Apollo at Delphi,
to ask how I could save Thebes.

I am surprised he has not yet returned,
for he has been away longer
than I would have thought likely.
As soon as he comes, I would be wrong indeed
if I did not do everything Apollo advised.

Priest 1: You speak just at the right time:
these people here are saying that Creon is just coming.

Oedipus: Lord Apollo, come to our help!
May you shine on us, as Creon's face is shining!

Priest 1: So to see, he will help:
Creon wears a crown of laurel on his head.

Oedipus: We shall soon know: he can hear us now.

Enter Creon, moving to embrace Oedipus

My Lord, my kinsman, son of Menoeceus,
what message do you bring from Apollo?

Creon: A good one. My message is that the suffering
will all be at an end, if things turn out right.

Oedipus: What sort of message is this?
I don't know if I should take heart, or fear what you say.

Creon: I am ready to speak in front of these people if you like,
or to tell you in private.

Oedipus: Speak to us all.
For my sadness concerns them more than my own life.

Creon: I will tell all I heard from the god.
Apollo ordered us, quite plainly,
to cut out the cancer which is embedded in our land,
and not to let it grow.

Oedipus: What cure is this? What cancer?

Creon: We must cast out a man,
or punish a murderer with murder,
since this bloodshed is lashing the city.

Oedipus: Whose murder? Who does Apollo mean?

Creon: Once we had a king in Thebes, Laius by name:
he ruled the city before you came.

Oedipus: I know: I heard: I never saw him.

Creon: He orders us clearly now
to punish the dead King's murderers,
whoever they may be.

Oedipus: Where in the world could they be?
Where could we find the vaguest trace
of this ancient crime?

Creon: In this land, he said. If we looked, we would find:
if we neglected, it would escape us.

Oedipus: Was Laius at home or abroad, when he met his death?

Creon: The story goes that he was away, consulting the oracle.
He never returned home after hearing the reply.

Oedipus: Did no fellow-traveller see anything,
who could teach us the truth?

Creon: They are all dead, except one who ran terrified.
He only had one thing to say of what he had seen.

Oedipus: What was that? From one thing we could learn many,
if we only had a little starting point to our search.

Creon: He said that robbers met with and killed Laius:
not with a single hand, but with a mob of attackers.

Oedipus: How would a robber have dared to do this?
Was it for money?

Creon: We thought so:
but no-one came forward
to help in the troubles after Laius died.

Oedipus: What sort of trouble stopped you searching,
when your King was dead?

Creon: The riddle of the Sphinx:
she made us face what was right in front of us
and forget what was unclear.

Oedipus: Then I will begin the search again.
For Apollo is right,
and you are right to respect the dead King.

Speaking more confidently

I will be your ally, you will see:
I will take vengeance for Thebes, and for Apollo.
I will cut out the cancer for myself, not for loved ones far away.

Perhaps the king's murderer might decide to attack me
with the same hand, whoever he was.
So, in helping Laius, I will help myself.

Come my children, as fast as you can!
Take your prayers with you!
Get someone to call together the people of Cadmus,
and tell them I'll do all I can!
We'll either succeed with Apollo's help, or be destroyed.

Exit Oedipus, Creon and Priest 1

Priest 2: Children, let us stand!
We have heard what we came to hear.
Apollo has sent this oracle:
may he be our saviour and end our suffering.

Exit Priest 2

Music plays

Chorus members all stand up and turn to face the audience

Chorus 1: You came to Thebes from golden Delphi, Lord,
and spoke to us,
but what do your words mean?
I am in torment,
and shiver in fear of your new demands, Delian Apollo,
even if they only come to me
with the changing of the seasons.
Speak to me, divine voice,
child of golden Hope.

Chorus 2: Athena, daughter of Zeus,
I call on you first,
then on your sister, Artemis,
protectress of the country,
who sits in splendour in the city's precincts.
Next I call Apollo, the archer-god:
come and give us triple protection from death!
Come now, if ever you protected us before.
Drive away fiery plague from our land!

Chorus 3: Countless are the sufferings before me.
All are sick and we have no way to fight the disease.
Our crops wither in the fields.
In the cries of women's labour,
there is no joy of childbirth.
One after another,
we flock to the shores of death,
like winged birds, defying a raging fire.

