Oedipus

A play

Part seven of

City of Wine

A cycle in three trilogies

by
Ned Dickens

The Grape Trilogy
HARMONIA
PENTHEUS
THEBE

The Vine Trilogy
CADMEA
ELIS
JOCASTA

The Wine Trilogy
OEDIPUS
CREON
SEVEN

Commissioned by Nightswimming
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"Thebes is famous everywhere, for wine and welcoming."
City of Wine is a nine-play cycle telling the story of the Greek city of Thebes—best known as the home of Oedipus. It begins with the founding of Thebes by Cadmus and Harmonia, and ends with the death of six of its last seven citizens on the battlefield of Troy.

The *City of Wine* cycle is a powerful portrayal of leadership and civic life. This contemporary epic breathes new life into these magnificent stories while portraying the citizens of Thebes as distinct yet familiar individuals, unique to playwright Ned Dickens' vision of this legendary city. Brian Quirt.

Playwright's Notes

The UnNamed
City of Wine features great names: Zeus, Athena, Harmonia, Laius, Jocasta, Oedipus, Dionysus, and Tiresias, to mention only a few. Such names are so powerful that I felt I could not introduce fictional ones into the mix. At the same time, I very much wanted to find a new approach to the idea of the Chorus. I wanted to show a diversity of interacting personalities which, taken together, would represent the ordinary people—the citizens—of the *City of Wine*.

The result is a group of seven personalities (often related from play to play but not always the same individuals) who, although distinct and real, are never named. Throughout *City of Wine* they are always present, reacting to and affecting the actions of the Named.

The UnNamed are "the aching, dancing body of my town." In order to keep them straight in the text I gave them "tags". The truth of my premise that names are powerful things is borne out by the fact that many people persist in thinking of these tags as names. You, of course, will not make that mistake.

Synopsis

The Grape Trilogy

Harmonia
This is the story of how Harmonia, daughter of the gods Ares and Aphrodite, and her mortal husband Cadmus, become the founders of the city that will become Thebes. In the kitchen of Ares' palace on Mount Olympus, surrounded by the desires and games of both gods and mortals, Cadmus wins the love of Harmonia but incites the fury of the gods. Harmonia gives up her immortality to pursue her love as she and her new husband are driven from Olympus. They vow to found a great city dedicated to equality and truth—and thus the city is born.

"Nothing begins in history." As I scratched around for a point of entry into the story of Thebes I tripped over the idea that two gods would give Harmonia, their goddess daughter, to marry an enslaved mortal who had not only offended them but had failed at everything he had tried to do so far. Equally intriguing was that she might fall in love with him. "There has to be a story behind that!" I told myself, and here it is.

Pentheus
The second play introduces us to Harmonia and Cadmus' grandson Pentheus, who finds himself chosen king just as the city is undergoing an unexpected transformation. Also brought to life are the magical characters of Tiresias, the seer whose prophecies play a pivotal role in city's story,

and Dionysus, the god whose gift of wine brings both joy and chaos to Thebes. In this alternative version of the events of The Bacchae, the tragedy of King Pentheus (and a hidden love story!) brings our city into a new era .

While HARMONIA can be said to deal with the conception of the city, this play looks at its adolescence. It swirls with sexual infatuation, questions of emerging identity, and a tragic loss of innocence. Robert Graves (poet and scholar) suggests that the real root of all the problems which beset Thebes (called Cadmea at this point in the story) is the institution of patrilineal monarchy, the idea that the crown must pass from father to son. He argues that this idea offends the powerful female energy in the ancient world and sets off "the war of the sexes" with a bang. I have tried to show how, in context, that idea, called here Pentheus' Law, might make sense to a young man who unexpectedly finds himself on a throne for which he feels completely unprepared.

Thebe

The character and story of Thebe have grown organically over the years. Exploring and unpacking both was a huge part of the impetus behind the last expansion of *City of Wine* from seven to nine plays. In HARMONIA, Poseidon, spurned by her, spits into Thebe's mouth (a particularly nasty assault that echoes the story of Apollo and Cassandra) and he decrees that her kiss will always give instant forgetfulness. The dynamic between memory and forgetfulness is central to our story, and storytelling. It also allows me to introduce narrative elements that have no basis in traditional versions, as long as I arrange to have them forgotten, such as Thebe's being the mother of Tiresias and, eventually, Laius.

The Vine Trilogy

Cadmea

The city has grown, but so has distrust and fear between the sexes. Lycus and Dirce rule in luxury while Laius waits impatiently to take the crown. Amphion and Zethus, the twin unacknowledged sons of Lycus, arrive. They use Laius to punish Lycus for his treatment of their mother, Antiope, unleashing assassination, riot, and massacre. Laius escapes into exile and the brothers arrange to be elected twin kings. Thebe fulfills the prophesy that she will be queen.

Fairly late in the 30+ year *City of Wine* writing process it occurred to me that the Theban plays of Sophocles et al. weren't Theban at all: they were created and celebrated in a city trying to be a democracy (Athens). They are stories about the horrifically dysfunctional monarchy, and military rival, next door. They are deeply political. The city of Cadmea/Thebes is the protagonist of *City of Wine*, and her challenges, growth, triumphs, disasters, and her journey from an intentional settlement to a city state, take centre stage in the Vine Trilogy. Here she becomes a place familiar to a modern audience, shaped by familiar characters: grifters, schemers, dreamers, and traditionalists.

Elis
Elis is a nearby city in the mountains, where Laius has sought refuge in exile. Wine has also arrived in town and a dis-used slaughterhouse is becoming a tavern, with help from Bowl. Laius festers in bitterness and self-pity, abusing the hospitality and the vulnerable son of his hosts until he, Laius, commits a crime that will haunt Thebes and its people for generations.
ELIS is the middle play of the cycle and, like the first and last, it doesn't take place in Cadmea/ Thebes. Elis is a mountain city based heavily on cattle farming. Their main festival celebrates the semi-annual slaughter. Dionysus is the god of wine, of course, but he is also god of the theatre. One theory suggests that public theatre emerged as a way to contain and control the rites of the riotous god. The need for that containment shows when bacchanalia meets slaughter festival.

Jocasta
This play illuminates the story of Jocasta, one of the great figures of ancient mythology, familiar to us largely for her death scene in the play Oedipus. The exiled Laius returns to Thebes, marries Jocasta and she bears him a son. The first act of Jocasta traces the descent of the city, under King Laius' rule, into dictatorship and despair. Act two brings with it a much-discussed moment in Greek mythology/legend: the magnetic first meeting between Jocasta and Oedipus. With no idea what their relationship portends (for themselves or Thebes) their happy marriage restores peace to the city.

Tragedy is often an architecture of unfortunate choices, many of which make sense in context, but which add up to disaster. The impulse to write this play (fourth in the cycle but the second written, after Oedipus) came from the realization that many of the critical choices which inform that story were made before it begins, by Jocasta and Laius, rather than by Oedipus. I wanted to find out why, and what those situations may have looked like. The more I explored and imagined my way backwards into hypothetical time, the more enthralled I became with this extraordinary woman. Wanting to understand her is the seed crystal around which the entire *City of Wine* has grown.

The Wine Trilogy

Oedipus
Oedipus attempts to relieve Thebes of a plague, and the curse that brought it to the city, and in doing so brings the famous story of Jocasta, Laius, and Oedipus to its disastrous and horrifying conclusion.

OEDIPUS was the first play written, and still marks the grand climax of the cycle. Much of the motivation for writing the larger project was rooted in a desire to fully contextualize what happens here. In the modern world we have tended to think of ourselves as moral singularities, responsible only for our own choices and actions. Seen through that frame, Oedipus becomes a victim of cruel and irrational fate, doomed to suffer despite his best efforts. I offer him rather as a point in a larger narrative curve, paying the cost of his father's crimes and his family's unfolding pattern of well-intentioned error.

Creon

On a pleasant evening, years after the events of Oedipus, a visiting stranger enters a peaceful tavern and acquaints himself with the Thebans savouring the local wine. His questions about their city and its history result in an impromptu and often comic reconstruction of the story of Antigone. Its controversial story about leadership is re-evaluated and the fate of Thebes is explored, disputed and reinvented. Once again, wine points the way, bringing both chaos and, finally, good cheer in its wake.

Throughout *City of Wine* the Unnamed are always present, responding to and influencing the actions of the Named, but in CREON they take over, and the cycle enters a new stage. Increasingly it is less about history and more about story. BOWL says "I have just listened to the stories that wounds tell." I wanted to look at how communities define, heal, and even re-create themselves through the sharing of narratives. I also wanted to introduce an element of suspense to an ancient tale. Since I have chosen to wander from the path of received mythology from time to time, in this play I decided to offer my characters the same opportunity, and then see where they would take the story.

Seven

During the siege of Troy, seven scruffy Theban citizens, all that remain of Thebes, sit drinking around a campfire in their makeshift outdoor tavern. After receiving orders to go on a futile and certainly fatal mission the next morning, the seven spend their last night trying to make sense of their lives, their place in history and in memory. Will wine offer insight or blindness? How will they meet the challenge that dawn brings? What will remain of Thebes after they are gone?
The Iliad is such a detailed account of the Trojan War that some scholars surmise that the author was actually present for the great events and not just passing on an oral tradition, thus marking a transition from myth to history. How stories, and through them societies, evolve and survive, or not, up to and then through such a massive transition fascinates me. Theatre itself, in a way, sits on the threshold between written and remembered narratives. Indeed, it pushes backwards from written into oral narrative. Beyond all that however, I could not resist the temptation to spend one last night with the UnNamed.

Characters

The Named

CREON brother to JOCASTA
JOCASTA queen of Thebes
MANTO daughter of TIRESIAS
OEDIPUS king of Thebes
TIRESIAS a blind seer

The Unnamed

Thebans

BLOOD
BOTTLE
BOWL
BREAD
CLOTH
FIREWOOD (*who is blind)*
GLASS
SHEPHERD
WATER

Corinthians

BLADE
OLD MAN
ALSO (Non-speaking): Soldiers, Shepherds, a Youth.

Setting: A public square before the palace steps, the steps, the royal chamber overlooking, and off the square, the ruins of a tavern with a fire pit. Also there is the suggestion of a rough road, perhaps through the audience,which leads up into the hills. All of Thebes, especially the public spaces, show the effects of the present emergency: plague, drought, fire, and looting have all left their marks.

Oedipus

Act One

on a road above Thebes

(Enter MANTO, who peers down on the city.)

TIRESIAS
Wait, Manto!

Wait for me!

MANTO
Oh, father.

(Enter TIRESIAS.)

TIRESIAS
Yes? What do you see?

MANTO
Mostly just smoke.

It coils like a rope around the town.

TIRESIAS
It does, around her throat.

Poor Thebes.

Come child

your nimble fingers must let loose this knot

And let our city breath.

MANTO
My fingers?

TIRESIAS
Yes, mine are too slippery.

Old blood that will not dry.

Help me climb down.

The path is treacherous.

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(Exeunt TIRESIAS and MANTO.)

pre-dawn in Thebes, below the palace

(In the darkness WATER coaxes an ember in the fire pit to burn. By its feeble light we see FIREWOOD snatching up what look like sticks and beginning to scurry off.)

WATER

Stop, stop, friend, neighbour.

Stop and rest.

I weep, with something like the memory of joy,

To see you here.

FIREWOOD

Who can still weep in Thebes?

My eyes are scorched and blistered

from feeding flames with death.

WATER

Here, drink, and rest with me.

FIREWOOD

I recognize your voice and know your kindness.

(WATER puts a cup into the hand of FIREWOOD.)

WATER

Raise up the cup and drink.

(FIREWOOD drinks. Previously unseen, BOWL sits up.)

BOWL

Cup? What cup?

Who drinks? And what?

FIREWOOD

I know that voice as well, though hoarse and dry.

WATER

What next will crawl into my pit to die?

BOWL

Be kind.

I have, oh, once or twice, crawled out of here, but never in.

GLASS *(from the shadows)*

So says each mother's son.

BOWL *(to WATER)*

Good host.

Your lack of roof I can forgive.

We still can look for shelter in the stars.

But you must find a door

Or who can say what beast may find your fire?

(GLASS joins the others by the fire.)

GLASS

Show some respect.

My father was—

BOWL, WATER & FIREWOOD

- a Sown Man of Thebes,

GLASS

He was, descended from the warriors

Who sprang up from this very dirt so long ago.

A Sown man I say.

BOWL

Who knows?

So many teeth are in this soil now

That anything might spring from it.

(BOWL begins to rummage about in the wreckage

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above

(OEDIPUS looks out on the city from the royal chambers.)

OEDIPUS
More fires, less light.
This darkness bites my eyes.
My lungs refuse what breathing offers them.
My hand, stretched out above my town, is lost to me.
And yet, as cold and dark and foul as all this is,
I long for it to last.
For in the East that other fire begins to burn.
Tomorrow comes and will consume us all.

below

WATER *(To BOWL)*
Peace friend.
As wild as all this seems,
It all was placed most carefully.

GLASS
By gravity.

(BLOOD approaches the fire.)

BOWL
What falls upon us now?

BLOOD
What fire is this?

GLASS
The same, always the same.

BLOOD
But…
Sacrifice or funeral?

FIREWOOD
Or warmth and light.

Come closer, friend.

WATER
Yes, come.

All come around the fire

And share what water I have left.

(They do.)

FIREWOOD
This was our town.

BOWL
All drink.

I cannot offer health or life

But we can hope for rest,

And so, I wish you death for your water.

WATER
Death and thanks.

BLOOD
Death is the only generosity left.

BOWL *(to BLOOD)*
A speedy death to you my friend.

(To FIREWOOD.)

Death has been to your house again, I think.

You have sad need of fire?

FIREWOOD
I have, of hot consuming fire.

BOWL
And light.

Pardon, my friend, this is no stick but bone,

a femur this, this humerus,

I know not what this is,

But any heat it had is gone.

These all had life, and names, but will not burn.

WATER

Come friends.

Dawn waits for no-one,

king or common man.

(They move toward **the steps***. Others join them.)*

BOWL *(meeting CLOTH in* **the street***)*

Oh. You.

You live.

CLOTH

I do. I think.

I have been vainly scratching at my fields but nothing grows

And so I have returned, early, I thought,

But now it seems too late.

So much has changed that nothing now is sure.

Where are the children?

BOWL

Dead, all dead,

The aged and the young were first to fall.

Perhaps a dozen ancients stand,

Only the dying crawl.

All Thebes is of an age.

CLOTH

An age of darkness, then.

(Exit CLOTH.)

above

(JOCASTA, coming from bed, joins OEDIPUS.)

OEDIPUS
The fires stir and crawl across the town to feed on me.

JOCASTA
So stir yourself, King Oedipus,
And bring what judgment you can gather
Onto the palace steps to meet this dawn.
You are her king,
Thebes is expecting you.

(OEDIPUS begins to go **below***.)*

BLADE
What passes now?
Why such a crowd so early in the day?

WATER
We come at dawn,
To meet the king and try the issues of the day.

FIREWOOD
The king and queen.

BLOOD
If Dionysus did not ask too much of her last night.

BOWL
We have done so since Laius died.

BOTTLE
The late king is no more
and now the king is late.
Only the dead wait patiently.

OEDIPUS *(Coming down)*
Exhausted, suffering, patient Thebes.

BOTTLE
He must speak louder if the Patient are to hear.

OEDIPUS
Forgive your king.

I am come late.

No words, excuses, arguments or oaths

Can help but make me more so.

Our task is great.

The sun is up.

Bring on the business of the day.

(SEVERAL call out for attention.)

WATER
Water, my lord, the water.

BLADE
What of the water?

WATER
The civic cisterns lack the depth to drown a rat.

FIREWOOD
Once pure and sweet to taste,

Dirce, the bloodstream river of Thebes,

Blood like, is clotted now,

Its banks are black and foul.

GLASS
To drink is death, and not to drink, to die.

BLOOD
The Plague, the plague.

WATER
It is the water.

BOTTLE
No, it is the rats.

BOWL
The wine.

OEDIPUS
Each voice in turn, the dead must wait.

BOTTLE
They wait for us to join them, and they laugh.

OEDIPUS
What of the water?

Speak.

WATER
Myself,

On reaching in to fill a bowl with hope,

Was caught against my balance by a hand,

corrupted quite,

That gripped my dish more firmly than it gripped its arm.

I staggered and fell in.

The bubbling mess collapsed beneath my weight

and swirled away.

OEDIPUS
Is there no water fit to drink?

WATER
All that remains is bottled up in homes

or carried hand to hand.

There is no more,

And those without will die.

(JOCASTA joins OEDIPUS.)

OEDIPUS
Many have died already, many will die today.

JOCASTA
Bring wine.

Judgment is thirsty work.

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OEDIPUS

Thanks, no, my queen.

Judgment today is dry.

Collect all private stores toward the general equal use.

Measure, proportion, justice.

The private ownership of drink is past.

GLASS

An echo in our emptiness.

BLADE

Of what?

WATER

When Laius seized the wine.

BLADE

And now?

What wine remains?

FIREWOOD

None from this year at least, or last.

WATER

And all reserves are gone.

GLASS

From off the shelves.

Who knows how deep some cellars are?

BLADE

What does that mean?

FIREWOOD

It long has been our way

To leave a bottle in each new dug grave.

GLASS

It was.

So much has changed.

BOTTLE

Earth's shallow bowl is full of death,

And when we prod it, it will spill.

BOWL

The wine.

The wine.

OEDIPUS

What of the wine?

BOWL

It soon will be all that we have to drink,

Yet still we sink a bottle into every grave.

Should we not save it for tomorrow’s thirst?

OEDIPUS

We should.

And now we do.

We will return to all our ancient ways

When this emergency is past.

What next?

(Enter CLOTH.)

CLOTH

I saw my teacher sitting in a doorway,

Rolling and lurching as he used to do

When laughing at his own outrageous jests.

I went to him,

Drawn in by such uncommon merriment,

But he was dead a week or more,

And rats fought in his skull for what remained.

BLOOD

Two legged rats brought all of this to Thebes.

CLOTH

The dead, the dead, bloated and splayed,

Without the privacy allowed to garbage,

Are everywhere but where they out to be.

(Exit CLOTH.)

JOCASTA

Have patience.

Trust the king.

OEDIPUS

Details by noon.

Action today.

My word is law.

What next.

More simply speak.

BREAD

You ordered that all those

Who showed the purple ulcers of the plague

Be brought, by force,

Within the theatre walls,

And there be left to die.

OEDIPUS

I did.

BREAD

And that they must attend each other there,

In isolation from those left untouched.

OEDIPUS

To slow the triumph of disease that marches through the streets.

I saw a thing to do, and did it.

I am the king.

BREAD

My children, infants both, were taken yesterday.

JOCASTA

The theatre is full with death,

As are the temples and the marketplace.

(Turning away.)

Give me more wine.

OEDIPUS

What sorrow I can find

Above the common anguish of the state, is yours.

But here is time for actions only.

BREAD

I am, myself, so far, not ill.

OEDIPUS

And so, I know not why, am I.

Your point?

BREAD

I beg permission to go to the stage.

To see my babies die.

To hold them at the end and give them this.

(A straw doll.)

JOCASTA

A potent scene indeed.

(JOCASTA takes the doll from BREAD's hand.)

And what is this?

BREAD

Only the last thing that I have.

JOCASTA

A toy? A doll of straw?

BREAD

Which you gave to my mother long ago,

And she to me.

JOCASTA
I know it now.

BREAD
Please, grip it carefully.

It is so dry,

I fear that it might crumble into dust and blow away.

JOCASTA
Protect it from me then.

OEDIPUS
You may go to the theatre.

But hear me.

When you make your entrance to that place

no exit is allowed.

BREAD
I ask no more.

OEDIPUS
And I applaud you.

JOCASTA
Yes.

A parent's love is tutor to a king's.

(Exit JOCASTA within.)

OEDIPUS *(To BLOOD)*
Someone go see her safely there.

BLOOD
There is no safety anywhere.

The fragments of the Civil Guard

Run mad with fear and fever.

All government is dead or swells the mob.

We can do nothing now but die ourselves.

OEDIPUS
We must, therefore we can.

(CLOTH and others drag in a bloody youth.)

What noise breaks through the usual choir
of pain and lamentation?
So many citizens, and not a funeral?
Stand silent all.
You. Release him.
You, at the centre,
Can all this gore be yours alone?
Speak.
Your king,
if man of Thebes you are, must have the truth.
Has he no voice?

CLOTH

No teeth, that much I can account for.
His other scratches fall from as many hands
as citizens stand here,
Come to the king, for justice and for vengeance.

WATER

An unlikely marriage.

FIREWOOD

And a fruitless bed.
Help me withdraw.
Unless the king prevails,
This wedding promises a feast of blood.

WATER

I will attend you, and, in time,
Will see you safe from here,
But for the moment,
Let us bear witness to the crown.

OEDIPUS

Justice will be as long as I am king.

Vengeance is for the gods.

What crimes is he accused of?

CLOTH

This monster,

Under the shadowing arm of darkness

And the city's great distress,

Was looting through the silent home of Thebans,

Newly dead,

An honoured ancient pair,

Dead in an hour, entwined as if at love.

There was he found,

Picking and pulling even at their rings and clothing.

It seemed as he might feed upon the flesh itself

Were he not apprehended.

BLOOD

The crisis of the state demands a clear and present justice.

Do something now.

BLADE

He must die now or Thebes is lost

Into a pit of chaos and of crime.

(The crowd agrees.)

OEDIPUS

High justice would cry death indeed

For raging mobs who hack a bound and silent victim to the dirt,

Unheard, unnamed, without recourse to counsel,

Convicted by the rumour of the crowd.

CLOTH

More strong by far than rumour is the case.

I was the one to see him in the act

And was the first to strike him where he stood.

OEDIPUS
You struck him down in anger,
And come now, here, at dawn,
Demanding justice?

CLOTH
I was a friend of those he sought to rob.
I heard a sound,
Knew they would sound no more,
And peered into the darkness of their house.
I saw a thing to do,
And did it.

OEDIPUS
What is his name?
Your name, boy.
Silent still.
He needs a name.
For there can be no justice
When we know not whom we judge.

BLOOD
I will name him!
Thief! Infection! Wound!
The earth cries out against this town
with vermin, drought and plague.
The gods demand that Thebans make Thebes clean.
Strange people bring strange ways.
His clothing and his silence call him foreign,
Not of Cadmus' clan.
Their sewers crawled with sin and vice and crime.
Impure, unwanted,
We must assist the gods

And make this drowning city Thebes again.

Thebes must be purified.

Thebes must be purged.

The judgment of the gods is death!!

(The crowd falls on the youth and kills him. OEDIPUS breaks up the mob with his sword.)

OEDIPUS

STOP! STOP!!

Be still.

Be silent and stand back.

Am I in Thebes?

Is this a Theban sight?

If such it is then mild and moderate are the gods

That any few of us remain alive.

The man is dead.

The shame is mine as well as yours.

(To CLOTH.)

Give me your Theban scarf, bloodied already.

This water, that was mine,

By my own stern decree,

Belongs to no one and to all.

So, like the law, of similar estate,

Shall it shed light and coolness on our acts.

You saw the man in darkness and in anger,

You see him now.

Does any know his name?

(OEDIPUS washes the blood from the face of YOUTH.)

BOTTLE

What names can corpses have in Thebes?

He is the one not killed by plague.

CLOTH

I know that face.

He was their son.

It was his home.

He has been gone a year or more

In search of fortune and himself,

As youth so often do.

This we have done.

With all my breath

I wish his silence had been mine.

OEDIPUS

By Cadmus, common father of the town,

And Polybus my own most royal sire,

And by the very name of king,

Which burns above my brow,

I swear a king's commitment.

To know, to find, and solve

The deepest root of this perverse calamity.

This sickness of the flesh, earth, water, air,

and soul of Thebes.

And knowing sure,

not let the intake of a breath,

Nor yet the flicker of an eye,

Delay the swift dispatch of justice.

Go home, or join the efforts in the street.

Lend comfort where you can.

There will be no more gatherings,

These are not times for gentle kings.

On pain of death I say, go home!

(OEDIPUS threatens the crowd.)

The bloody business of the day is done.

I said go home, there is no more to see.

(Exeunt the crowd)

Your eyes accuse me, youth, and rightly so.

Were I the king I seek to be you might yet live.

We might exchange our travellers' tales over a cup.

Instead I stand alone,

Assuring corpses of my kingly will.

Perhaps I am a fool.

A thing to do?

I will go seek my wife.

FIREWOOD

There is enough of darkness here to light my path away.

CLOTH

Until tomorrow, if at all, be well.

BOWL

Die well, I think you mean.

CLOTH

All else is dreams and nightmares.

BOWL

I have no time for dreams of any kind,

The deaths and dying of my house

demand attention every hour.

And in that voice my mother calls.

WATER

Here, friend.

You cannot wait until tomorrow.

Take this to her.

(WATER gives BOWL a bowl of water.)

BOWL *(weeping)*

Say what you will and call me criminal,

I care for nothing now,

And would as soon throw all this precious water on the wind

If it would blow my pains away

and let me sleep.

BLADE

Your words have weight,

Of truth as much as pain.

BOWL

The weight you speak of presses more than torture could,

And I confess, awake,

I dream of rest,

Envy the suffering of the sick, for it will end,

And yet the sickness takes me not,

I know not why.

BLADE

You hope for death?

BOWL

I hope for nothing,

But life is now a long and weary road

Between me here

And death's sure, cool, repose.

BLADE

Well, may a stranger offer hope?

BOWL

No one I know can claim to.

BLADE

Come with me to a darker place

And I will ease your pain with dreamless sleep.

BOWL

Darkness is not hard to find,

I come, and I am grateful.

27

BLADE

No gratitude required.

I think we find each other

in the balance of a bargain.

Come. *(Exeunt)*

above

OEDIPUS

This day is new but all its woes are old.

How tired I am already, and afraid.

JOCASTA

To think of fear is human, to feel it natural,

To speak of it does not befit a king.

A king,

charged with the desperate manage of a tortured state,

Must plant his courage firmly in the ground,

That all may cling to it and him

Against the wild torrents of despair.

OEDIPUS

You are the queen and what you say is true.

JOCASTA

Am I the queen?

Not long ago we ruled together with one voice,

Like breathing in and breathing out.

Now, suddenly, we are both so alone.

OEDIPUS

You have embraced the robes of royalty longer,

By far, than I.

JOCASTA

I know the past.

OEDIPUS

And I embrace your wisdom with a grateful heart.

I am the king; I will not yield to fear.

But I am still a man.

JOCASTA

Yes, so you told the Sphinx.

OEDIPUS

And you, my queen, are still wife to that man.

All living things grow tired, know fear, seek comfort.

JOCASTA

You are a man, and more, you are a king,

But Oedipus, you need not stand alone.

OEDIPUS

I think it true to say I have some cause for fear.

JOCASTA

Good Creon,

Brother bound by love to you as much as I,

Soon comes to lend his strength and judgment to the crown.

Tiresias too, the soul of sight,

Descends from privacy at your request.

And I…

I am beside you, day as close as night.

OEDIPUS

Lend me your courage, queen.

JOCASTA

Oedipus, breathe slowly and be still.

In this brief bubble of the world is only love.

(They embrace.)

JOCASTA

You know I love you well.

I chide your fear, not you,

29

That you may conquer fear,

As you have conquered all who dared oppose you.

OEDIPUS

I slew the Sphinx.

I faced its monstrous fury, standing firm.

I took its riddled knot of legs and cut it through,

By saying what I am.

I am…

JOCASTA

… a man.

I know it well.

And King of Thebes.

You rule well.

Now, for a moment, rest.

Why does the king shake still?

OEDIPUS

What more can I do now?

Each day I walk the limits of the town.

Tender pathetic rules

That only serve to rearrange the chaos.

I have seen, touched, inhaled, the promise of death,

Yet still am well.

Preserved, prepared for what?

JOCASTA

To be the saviour of the state once more.

You will know what to do when it is time.

As you climbed through the spray to face the Sphinx,

Your sharp eye up,

your youthful body straight,

Hand solid on the stone,

Did you know then what you would say?

30

Your courage then was false if you were sure.

No, no,

The moment comes, the hero acts,

And all is well.

OEDIPUS

Maybe.

True action happens only in the present,

Gods grant the time is not yet past.

What hell the future holds I stand to see.

BLOOD

Creon comes!

My lord and lady, noble Creon comes on foot.

Full fast he rode to meet your royalty,

When, in the intake of a breath,

His sweating horse collapsed and died.

Himself, thrust wildly from his mount,

Gathered his legs and landed,

Dancing more swiftly than a man can run

Into the sudden welcome of the crowd.

See, here he comes.

JOCASTA

And still more welcome here.

(She goes **below***.)*

CREON *(below)*

Beloved sister, beautiful and true,

embrace me.

I have been many miles upon the road,

And yet, I fear,

Together we must travel more than miles

Before our quest is done.

31

(JOCASTA speaks privately.)

JOCASTA
Our time is brief.

What does the oracle now say of me?

CREON
Nothing, sweet love.

JOCASTA
No curse?

Or punishment?

CREON
No, sister, nothing.

JOCASTA
Good.

GLASS (*to BOTTLE)*
You are, I see, so far, not dead.

(GLASS looks at BOTTLE's hands, which are soiled.)

And yet I see you have been in the earth.

BOTTLE
To drink deeply we must dig deeply,

Only the dead can host us now.

(Shares a bottle of wine.)

My secret. Is it safe?

GLASS *(drinking)*
As the grave.

OEDIPUS *(descending)*
Good Creon, hail.

Your feet are light but yet I see your words

Have weight enough

that we should bear them into privacy

Before you lay them down.

32

Welcome and enter.

Some water for the prince.

CREON

In truth, my limbs complain,

I have not known the burden of the crown

To train my back for labour.

The sweat of sport and dance

is sweeter far I think.

Come sister; lend a traveler your arm.

(They enter the palace.)

BOWL

Lying, lurking, sneaking, cheating, carrion coward

To use a person so in such extremity.

BLADE

I? Cheating?

I? Lying?

You have the honour of a bog.

Your word is as corrupted as your breath!

FIREWOOD

Breathe gently friends, and rest,

it is already hot today.

Your violent words draw up the dust,

Ignite the air, and threaten fire.

This is a place to hope for justice.

BOWL

I rest my hope for justice on the imagination of the king.

Mere death or torture would rank you

Among our best and most beloved.

Where is the king?

33

BLADE

Where is king Oedipus?

We have a right to justice.

FIREWOOD

You have a right to seek for, ask, demand,

And even fight for justice,

But where you seek, you will not always find.

BLADE

Ba! Theban riddles.

WATER

The king has gone inside.

BOWL

The king is gone?

Fled, sick and dying, or already dead.

The king is gone!

All hope is gone!

Thebes is no more!!

WATER

The king has gone inside the door.

Withdrawn, not fled, to hear report from Creon,

Newly come from consultation with the oracle.

The state stands still, though shaken to its roots,

But we must sort and sift our own affairs without the king,

At least until the present agony is past.

BOWL

We are alone and lost.

FIREWOOD

We are together, and in Thebes.

above

JOCASTA
Bathed and anointed,
Fed and refreshed
as much as present circumstance allows,
The highest flower of Cadmus' tree, in bloom.

CREON
What blush I have is partly from the sun,
Which brightly lights the highways and the hills,
Despite the dark, oppressive air which leans on Thebes,
But mostly from the joy of seeing you,
My royal sister and my loving queen.

OEDIPUS
Your king is pleased to see you home.

CREON
Your home, my king, my home is in the hills.
My fragrant villa floats above the plague and politics and pain.
And there, I gladly can report,
Your children play and grow, in health and love.

OEDIPUS
They speak of me?

CREON
No doubt they do.
I often hear them say Jocasta's name.
My friends and I delight to watch them all the day.
Antigone especially, sweet child.

OEDIPUS
I see.
I trust they sleep when you delight your friends.
You saw the oracle.
Report.

CREON

As you must know, my king,

The words of prophesy are wild,

More like an ocean than a stream,

They surge and shift against themselves

And lack one clear direction.

More like a riddle than a rule.

OEDIPUS

I have been known to answer riddles.

And kill the asker too.

JOCASTA

Permit him time to sift his memory.

The gold is there.

CREON

A moment, sweet, I will.

below

BOWL

This stranger stopped me in the street,

Inquired about my grief, and offered aid.

I, desperate and weak,

Grasped at that rising feather on the air and followed.

Not twenty breaths nor half that many strides had passed

When flashed a blade intent on stopping both.

I struggled for my life, and doing so,

I lost the bowl of precious water in my hand.

It spilled upon the ground,

Which, groaning with relief, sucked it away.

BLADE

My water.

We had a deal, struck here not long ago,
That I would swiftly end this life of pain,
And gain, as my reward, the drink now lost.

BOWL
No deal was made.

BLADE
A compact fair and just.
The law is clear.

FIREWOOD
What law is clear?

BLADE
And who are you to say?

FIREWOOD
I have no knowledge of your case
and do not think to judge,
But in your swollen voice I hear a thing to fear.

(The people defer to FIREWOOD, BLADE grudgingly.)

Fear more than plague or drought or armies,
Fear more, I think, than all the anger of the gods.
I hear despair.
I hear the last surrender of the soul.
Hope is the final strand
that saves the spider from the fire,
And when, as now, the light is strange,
We cannot see its line,
But it is there.

BLADE
I wish to see this spider dangle in a fire.

FIREWOOD
Somehow, together, something will be saved.

37

Have faith, if only in the thought of hope.

Where is the water now?

WATER

Back to the earth.

From which it came.

FIREWOOD

What have you lost, that ever was your own?

And you, if I may guess,

Enjoyed a sweeter taste than water,

When you fought to live.

WATER

No loss and some small gain.

BLADE

Royal judgement, solving nothing.

FIREWOOD

You drew a blade against this citizen.

(BLADE pushes FIREWOOD down and breaks from the circle.)

BLADE

And if you try to take me, take your care,

I grip more like a blade than like a bowl.

(BLADE flees.)

BOWL

The truth is found and nothing changes.

above

CREON

The path.

The path both leads and follows

Through the swamps and groves

around the mountain's skirts.

Wandering, as if unsure about the choice to climb,
Sometimes through thorns
And sometimes overgrown with fragrant vines.

OEDIPUS
The oracle.

JOCASTA
Give time. He will arrive.
Give time, my lord.
His heart is poetry, not prose.

CREON
My guide, the priest, rich with the beauty of the world,
Led me along that path I never could have found.
We reached a grove of many different trees,
Diverse in colour, size, and form,
Twined with each other like a tapestry,
And there,
Between two shining lips of mossy stone,
the torrent's spring.
The young priest stopped, and turned,
And beckoned me to come to him.
His mantle fell.
Silent and naked in that ringing dream,
We bathed each other in the icy pool.
Performed the ancient rites of purity
And sang in breathless murmurs to the gods.
Then he untied his mass of hair,
And, slowly as the tide at first
then violent as the surf,
Rode on the waves of light,
His cloud of hair like smoke about his head.
The trees, in awe, shrunk back and gave him room.

39

Another pool, of sunlight, on the ground,
Spread like spilled gold as the sky peered down,
And at its centre sprang a sycamore,
Which grew in moments to a mighty tree,
And then its roots tore upwards through the earth.
Naked and pale, thinly defiant of gravity,
They wormed across his form,
Then sought the branches of the tree.
Blindly the tendrils twined about the bark,
Gripped and grew hard.
The tangled knot convulsed,
The shriek that heralds death's descent
into a tortured prisoner's soul
Silenced the water's song,
The horrid thing tore open and collapsed,
No part remaining in the ground.
The young priest stood, the shattered tree lay dead,
And stillness filled the place,
Or sought to.
As we sometimes see things by their shadows,
I heard the truths that were not there.
The murder of the king.

OEDIPUS
I am the king.

CREON
Forgive me, brother, king,
I fear a thing unnamed.

OEDIPUS
Forget your hollow fear.
Truth is justice and it cannot do us harm.

40

CREON

The silence spoke.

The rottenness of Thebes will not subside

Until the man who slew old Laius king

Is hunted out, is named, and banished,

Blood and name, forever, from this city's soul.

OEDIPUS

Obscene, unnatural, filthy whelp.

CREON

All nature shrieks with pain.

It must be ended.

Life must be avenged.

OEDIPUS

Laius must be avenged.

It falls from gods to kings to save the state.

I am the man to do this.

The king of Thebes was slain and I,

who bear that name,

Must close the circle of the crown.

By blood, by birth,

By all the names of justice and of truth,

I swear before you all,

This man is mine

and I will root him out

And like the cancerous pustule that he is,

Cut him away and wash his memory from Thebes.

Or, if I fail,

To never more accept the name of king.

CREON

I hear and see no more.

The memory dissolves.

41

OEDIPUS
How can I have his name?

CREON
His name?

One name?

King Oedipus, you know as well as I

How many men attacked that day.

OEDIPUS
Give me again the murder of the king in clear detail.

No dreams or visions, prophesy or song,

Truth can be made from truth alone.

Give to me now all that is known.

CREON
It happened at a place we both have seen,

I marked it as I passed.

Above the sea,

Just where the sacred stream flows near the road.

All those who go to Delphi, and come back,

Must twice be there.

OEDIPUS
I know where I have been.

below

(BLADE torments a very drunk BOTTLE, from whom he has taken a bottle.)

BOTTLE
You think.

You … think.

But you don't know.

Let me tell you, you mad Corinthian dog.

I know you.

You better not deny it or else I will...

Oh, I get so mad.

Give me my bottle back, my purple pillow.

Let me sleep.

BLADE

Silence,

you bubbling swamp of drunkenness and dirt,

You putrid pickle,

You dreg from Cadmus' cup,

Show some respect for those who die around you,

(Kicks.)

Show some for yourself

(Kicks again.)

You have no need of wine,

For you are drunk enough to last until you die.

See here,

(Again.)

and here,

(Again.)

The ulcers of the plague.

BOTTLE

Where? What? The plague?

So suddenly, but where?

BLADE

Under your skin, not ready to be seen,

Like knife wounds working outwards from the core.

See now, as if by prophesy,

The surface swells and bubbles

43

at the very spots I marked,

Here I foresee another

(Again.)

(Enter GLASS.)

GLASS

Stop now!

Or I will teach you about wounds.

BLADE *(dropping the bottle and backing away)*

My blade, your back.

I promise you.

BOTTLE

You promise. Ha!

(Exit BLADE. GLASS returns the wine to BOTTLE, who shares it. Enter WATER.)

WATER*(Carrying a corpse)*

A grave! A hole! A peaceful pipe!

Where I may lay this blistered burden that was love.

There was, I heard, a hungry blaze at work

To send a wealthy elder on his way.

I sought it out, following a greasy plume that lay along the ground.

It seemed as though the smoke laboured against its load,

As I did too, unable to lift it to the clouds,

Unwilling to lay it down.

But when I found the place there was no flame,

No mourners, and no sacred practice honouring the dead.

Only a crooked fissure in the rock,

And from it boiled forth a scalding stream I cannot name.

It reeked of blood, was thick and foul,

Smoldering, curdling, curling on the ground.

I saw myself, as if reflected, and I fled.

on the road into town

(TIRESIAS and MANTO enter.)

TIRESIAS
Stop here a moment child.
When we pass through that gate
we both will leave
What innocence we have
to die upon these hills.

below

BLOOD
See, see, here comes Tiresias.

MANTO
Too late, we have been seen.

OEDIPUS
And Manto, his young daughter, I am told.

JOCASTA
How old he looks,
And somehow still more blind.

OEDIPUS
Maybe the blind can lead the way
For I have seen too much already.
He has been one familiar with the ways of nature
When it wanders from its course.

JOCASTA
He has seen far too much for anyone.
Wisdom.
Welcome home.
Much love awaits you.

45

FIREWOOD
Our fire blazes brighter now, I think.

OEDIPUS (*coming* **below***)*
Tiresias, honoured sage,
The state of Thebes attends you,
And Manto, gracious woman grown, welcome.
Your beauty, unattended by your skills,
Would offer much relief.
Now, by report of Creon,
Newly come from dancing with the oracle,
We need a name,
The man who murdered Laius King.
We curse him, try him, sentence him,
A thousand times exile him in our minds,
But still we cannot name him.
Can you help?

TIRESIAS
You ask for much.

OEDIPUS
I only ask a name.

TIRESIAS
A name is everything.
Forgive me, I am old,
And older far than this my crooked frame implies.
I have seen naked gods and naked truth
And only grow more blind.
I will, as best I can, discover truth.
I cannot say what it will be.
When I was young…

OEDIPUS
When you were young

There then was time to talk of being young.

Respected as you are in age,

I beg to be excused your youth.

JOCASTA

The world grows old, and leans upon us all.

OEDIPUS

I seek a name.

TIRESIAS

We juggle shadows in the darkness yet.

We must perform a sacrifice.

A noble bull, all white, and tall,

As well, a heifer never yoked.

BLOOD

I have a friend who has such beasts,

And I can get them.

MANTO

Do, please.

And while we wait I will prepare

The other things we need.

(MANTO, in studied ritual, lays out the tools of her trade, Including her knife. OEDIPUS, in particular, watches her.)

MANTO *(Cont'd)*

They stand attendant, father,

As do I.

OEDIPUS

As do I.

The mantle of the seer rides lightly

On your shoulder's curve, fair priestess.

Such eyes see all,

In darkness and in light.

JOCASTA
Yet still so young.

(Somehow we understand that BLOOD has brought the animals.)

TIRESIAS
Manto, daughter, strength, attend the task.

The thing we open now is larger far

Than is this world we bring it to.

I hear a kind of thunder in the earth.

I need you now.

Conduct the rites and tell me what you see.

BLOOD *(indicating the fire pit.)*
This fire burns most eager for the sacrifice.

GLASS
It does?

FIREWOOD
A Theban fire welcomes all.

(All move towards **the fire***.)*

MANTO
The beasts, examined and prepared, stand ready.

TIRESIAS
Make solemn music.

On the altar hearth feed ancient incense

And the sacred wine

Into the very centre of the flames.

MANTO
I make the patterns as you taught me to.

TIRESIAS
You offer food, but does the fire eat?

MANTO
It flares, a beacon bright and clear, then falls away.

TIRESIAS

What shape the flame?A blade? A hand?

Divided or all one?

What colours and what movements do you see?

MANTO

Both, neither, all.

It changed, it changes still.

At first a twist of colours in a cloud.

Like dancing revellers by torchlight.

Then it turned red, a bleeding red,

Like all the world at dawn.

And now, oh, now...

OEDIPUS

The fires caress her flesh.

TIRESIAS

You are a priestess.

See and tell all.

MANTO

It climbs again.

Divides against itself like horns.

The offered wine is blood

and moves upon the altar like a snake,

Lashing the flames, which lick and bite and snarl.

A pool of greasy smoke, as from a pyre,

Labours across the ground,

No, climbs towards the king,

Not floating on the air but crawling up.

It clings to him as if to pull him down,

And coils around his head,

Sits heavy on his shoulders,

Hides his face.

49

I fear he cannot breathe or see or…

Oh Wisdom, tell us what this means.

BLOOD

Fall on your faces in the dust.

The gods come down on

Thebes in warlike rage.

TIRESIAS

The smoke.

Explore the texture of the smoke.

MANTO

It runs like sweat or blood along his limbs,

Is hot, and yet he shivers.

His whole frame quivers with the touch.

His breath uneven, sharp and deep.

BOWL

The king has gone.

The gods dissolve him in their angry breath.

OEDIPUS

Hold me now priestess, or I fall.

TIRESIAS

Too dark to say, too heavy to resist.

Oh shame, consuming shame and horror.

Drag it up, the way is open now, it must be seen.

OEDIPUS

Make way, I am the man to do this thing.

(OEDIPUS draws his sword and joins MANTO in the sacrifice.)

TIRESIAS

The animals, Manto.

Now the sacrifice.

50

MANTO

The bull resists as if he knows.

He fears the light and turns his head away,

He sweats and struggles, cannot long be held.

The sword comes down.

(OEDIPUS strikes.)

TIRESIAS

How do they die?

MANTO

The smoke, the smoke,

Still dense and hot, begins to fill the square.

The crowd, in swirls too,

Turns and heaves between the sacrifice and fire.

Each second breath is thick and foul.

I only half can see.

TIRESIAS

Move closer, touch and smell.

Explore the bloods.

How do they feel, smell and taste?

How do they move?

Do they flow freely or seep slowly out?

MANTO

Most of all this is from the heifer's wound,

Which spouts more still.

The bull is dry though pierced two dozen times.

No, wait,

His mouth and eyes compete with streams of gore.

Some light a moment shines.

OEDIPUS

The bull's thick blood is black.

51

MANTO

The heifer has but one deep wound,

As if she threw herself against the blade.

OEDIPUS

The bull, the bull is hewn in many ways,

But will not cease to move.

TIRESIAS

Dig into what remains.

The entrails, womb and brains.

Now, my young priestess, now is your hour.

Describe and feel.

MANTO

I do and will.

OEDIPUS

This wound is strange.

MANTO

No blade made this.

OEDIPUS

The bull's own horn has torn this steaming hole in its flank.

MANTO

The entrails move,

Not twitching into death but writhing, leaping,

Like beasts themselves in desperate agony.

OEDIPUS

My arm,

They seize upon my arm and pull me in.

There is no heart,

What drives this flood of gore?

MANTO

No, here, this stone, by its connections, might be heart.

This crumbling swollen mass is liver,

If it is flesh at all.

What more?

The air declines to move.

OEDIPUS

I cannot breathe except to draw my own breath back.

TIRESIAS

Move on.

The heifer next.

Observe.

Describe.

OEDIPUS

Where is the nature in this thing?

It all, I know, is wrong.

MANTO

What's this?

A heavy lump, deep buried in the mess.

Not so.

An unborn calf.

Not mated but with child.

The fetus fights for life, for air, for light,

It swims against the death that bore it.

They rise.

Help me!

They stand,

The heifer and the bull though butchered, disemboweled,

Lurch from the earth and howl.

OEDIPUS

Where is the earth?

I fall.

MANTO

The stones, the altar, and the fire all shriek and howl,

More men go down beneath the hooves and horns,

Slip in the putrid pool.

I cannot tell you more.

I cannot tell you more.

JOCASTA

What can it mean?

The final failure of the world?

(OEDIPUS emerges from the chaos.)

OEDIPUS

It means one simple thing, a name,

And as you say, old one, a name is everything.

Tell me,

I am the one to know.

I am the one to set the gods to rest.

Who killed the king?

Now ancient.

Now, the name.

(He seizes Tiresias and knocks him down.)

MANTO

What hope for justice when a royal hand

Throws mystic wisdom on the ground?

TIRESIAS

Organs spilling in the smoky dark.

Half echoed voices.

Trampled flesh.

How can such things pronounce a human name

Without the very sound of it

crushing the mind within?

OEDIPUS

Tell me.

TIRESIAS

Too much of truth has made me blind,

Too much too soon will kill us all.

More than to hear or see this truth is needed,

it must be known.

Its weight must rest upon the very soul.

To know the name

we need to ask of one who knows.

And only Laius knows.

Someone must go to death

and speak with him.

Must open up the pit and enter in.

Then, only then, your answer can be found.

OEDIPUS

I go myself,

The burden of the state is for the king to bear.

JOCASTA

You cannot go, your place is here,

With Thebes,

With me.

CREON

I name myself to go.

OEDIPUS

You? Creon.

No.

CREON

In truth, I knew the man, and you did not.

It is for kings to rule on earth.

I have no throne.

Allow this purpose to my royalty.

55

JOCASTA
Trust in him Oedipus, as I have always done.

OEDIPUS
Go then.

It cannot now be far from here to death.

CREON
Farewell.

I will return.

JOCASTA
You will.

You must.

(Exit CREON up the road.)

TIRESIAS
Manto?

Where are you child?

I need you more than ever now.

MANTO
Here, father.

TIRESIAS
Come to me, Manto.

Blood made you woman, and now priestess too.

You have done well.

MANTO
I have?

TIRESIAS
You have.

And will do more.

MANTO
Alone?

TIRESIAS
Always alone.

MANTO
Surely our task is done.

TIRESIAS
Mine, yes, for now.

MANTO
Come, rest.

TIRESIAS
Yes, all the rest.

(Exeunt TIRESIAS and MANTO.)

BLOOD
It was a mighty sacrifice!

The gods return at last to Thebes!

All will be well, all will be well.

WATER
The smoke subsides.

FIREWOOD
The fire is ours again.

CLOTH
And fresh meat, crudely cut, lies in the sun.

GLASS
A feast! A final feast for Thebes!

(With a common shout the people fall on the dead animals and begin to roast and devour them.)

in the wreckage of the tavern

BOWL
Our temple has been sacrificed.

Come faithful customers, and put things right.

(BOWL begins to clear the mess.)

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WATER
No.

Not tonight, I will tomorrow—

(BOWL discovers a full barrel of wine.)

BOWL
What is this?

(More wine.)

Again? Again?

What deeper mysteries remain?

WATER
Wine is, to me, both memory and hope.

I thought to keep a bit of both alive.

BOTTLE
All drink all that remains

and hope to drown in memories.

WATER
No. No!

(They hand out the wine.)

BOWL *(to WATER)*
Too late.

Drink friend.

All drink.

Let Dionysus be our king.

above

OEDIPUS
Jocasta, wife.

Come now with me.

More blood than we have seen today

boils in me now.

(Exeunt OEDIPUS and JOCASTA.)

ALL

All drink!!

(A Bacchanalia: Directors, Designers, Choreographers. Go nuts! The drinking song might be of use here in some way.)

End of Act One

Act 2

(The next morning. JOCASTA walks through **the public square***, Bodies are everywhere: some dead, some asleep.One of them is TIRESIAS.)*

JOCASTA

Oh, what a tangled heap of chaos is my love.

And yet I am alone.

My husband, frantic master of the night,

is sleeping like a child.

He starts, cries out for safety in the dark,

Then, curled up like a stone,

falls far away.

My brother, hero of my childhood dreams,

Who held me, gave me comfort when I cried,

Against whose side

I found such rest so many years ago,

Whom I love more than life itself,

Is gone to death,

To see the man I dreamed was dead

59

A hundred thousand times before he fell.

That man,

who filled my womb with life

Then tore it from my heart,

Once more stands potent in his grave.

I have wed twice.

Five children have I borne.

And still I am alone.

Alone and queen.

More chaos day by day.

The gods themselves against my city rage,

The sun is up.

Bring on the business of the age.

(She climbs **the stairs***.)*

below

CLOTH

Well.

That was life.

BOWL

We lived indeed.

Does any meat or drink remain?

CLOTH

I do not know.

We shared and shared

And now all shares are gone.

BOWL

At least two hundred more have died since dusk,

But we had life.

60

CLOTH

Now, by this light,

I am not sure, but still,

I think you shared yourself with me.

BOWL

It makes a kind of sense,

Do you agree?

To live before you die.

(BLOOD climbs the palace steps.)

BLOOD

My king and queen,

Prince Creon is returned.

See, slowly, how he comes.

JOCASTA

How he is changed.

I fear that something of that place

Has come with him

And part of him remains forever there.

(Enter OEDIPUS, from bed.)

OEDIPUS

So late the day?

What news?

CLOTH

Creon returns, dragging his shadow.

OEDIPUS

Go fetch him,

bring him here immediately.

WATER

Some drops of water for the man, at least.

His voice is for us all.

OEDIPUS

Prince Creon, brother.

Tell us all now what you have seen and heard,

That holds your dancing feet upon the dust.

There has been dancing here while you were gone.

CREON

King of this land.

I cannot.

OEDIPUS

Remember as you did before,

Begin, if so you must, at the beginning,

Then…

CREON

No.

Forgive me.

It is not memory this time.

It is a flood of truth that bursts the channels of my soul.

I struggle to contain it,

What soul remains demands that I do so.

OEDIPUS

You will not tell?

CREON

I dare not tell.

OEDIPUS

Your city, family, name,

All hang from this one moment.

Your words contain the medicine

We need to save the body of the state.

CREON

Most medicines are poisons held at bay.

62

OEDIPUS
I will know, and you will tell me.
Know that truth.

CREON
You are the king, and I am not a strong man.
But kings too have regrets.
My brother, hear me.
You do not want to know.

OEDIPUS
Not want to?
We talk not here of wishes and desires.
I will know, I must know,
You are a vessel carrying this drink to me.
If I must smash the bottle to release the wine,
I will.

CREON
I know the tools of truth that serve you,
And, in truth, I fear them.

OEDIPUS
I warn you Creon,
I will not stop at death.

CREON
And nor did I.
I claim the right of silence under law.

OEDIPUS
Denied.

WATER
Silence denied?

CLOTH
The law denied?

63

OEDIPUS

What you retain is not your own,

But like the water, air, and law, belongs to all.

Your king commands you,

Speak.

CREON

No freedom, law, or state survives

When silence is denied.

OEDIPUS

Frank treason in our direst hour.

CREON

Not that, my king.

Take my burden then,

I do not freely give it, and yet, in truth,

I think that it is yours.

OEDIPUS

It is for all of Thebes and I demand it.

The weight and consequence are mine.

I am the king.

CREON

I will begin and we approach the end.

There was a forest, dense and dark.

So thickly hung the vines and moss and weeds

That no light shone.

Only the rotting glow of woody earth

Gave shadows to the shapes around.

One shadow moved.

The ancient priest brought sounds

From somewhere in himself

but never human.

He dragged a heavy branch against the ground

64

And carved deep symbols in the dirt.
The naked topsoil smoked.
The forest wall began to shake.
Sheep, oxen, pigs, covered in bleeding scratches,
Forced their way into the narrow grove.
The priest heaved up the branch above his head,
It flared alight,
He struck it down upon the centre of design,
The ground itself then sighed and fell away.
The hungry hole sucked in the screaming animals.
Bouncing and rolling on their backs,
He leaped against the air and cried out
" I am heard",
Then landed flatly at the ragged lip,
his face within the hole.
A sound, a sense, a shifting of the air,
One half a breath of silence, and I saw.
A broken dam of dead, in panic beyond fear,
Tearing each other in the press,
Swept up and over me.
I fell upon my knees and held my head.
Corrupted limbs stumbled against me and collapsed.
Faces and fingers pried at me,
Many of Thebes, many of long ago.
Our father, yes, and mother too.
They wailed and whispered,
many knew my name.
Many, many, so many.
The history of death flowed by.
And then, just as my eyes and limbs lost sense,
I saw him come.

65

(CREON looks up at JOCASTA.)

JOCASTA
Laius.

CREON
His robe and ornament declared his name,
His face was gone.
Black twisted shreds of flesh and shattered bone
Hung limply from the skull.
But he knew me, He knows me still.
Forgive me, sister,

Laius come.

(Possessed by LAIUS.)

Oh, Oedipus.
What answer did you give the Sphinx?

OEDIPUS
I..I... I am a man.

CREON
THE man.

OEDIPUS
I am the king.

CREON
City of Cadmus, hear and know,
I was your king.
Your king killed me.
Crawled bloody in his father's throne.
Bloodier still his mother's bed.
Reversing nature.
Defying life.
Embracing death.

I must be avenged.

Life must be avenged.

I banish Oedipus from Thebes.

(CREON collapses in a fit.)

OEDIPUS

NO.

I am the king and I say no.

Silence the crowd.

Silence the prince.

Silence the dead.

There is no truth in this.

No conjury.

Think of it Thebes.

How can this be?

I am accused, by vague report,

Behind the echo of a dancer's dream.

But what of truth?

My father lives,

King Polybus,

our wise and gentle neighbour,

Rests happy on the throne of Corinth.

Merope, my loving mother,

Most honoured of that name, sits by his side.

Their grey hands curled together all the day.

Unstained by blood or scandal.

Do the gods lie?

Can the prophet twist the truth?

Or, does a mortal man, a second prince,

Grow thirsty for the crown?

Creon.

67

Who sings this song?

Creon.

Who calls for my exile?

Creon.

Who seeks the throne of Thebes?

CREON

I went to death.

I saw the dead king.

Would I were dead if I have lied.

I have not even spoken.

The words, Laius himself,

Rode in me and they brought me here.

Evidence, logic, argument,

Are broken tools beneath our feet

When we stand naked in the presence of the truth.

And this is true.

OEDIPUS

A poet prince, luxurious dreamer, and a traitor.

CREON

The throne, the crown, the agony,

are more than I could bear.

My life is good, simple and sweet and safe.

I tend a gentle garden

full of love and art and music.

I know I never want the binding of the crown about my brow

As fully as I know that you,

Oedipus, king of Thebes,

Must leave this place to save it.

OEDIPUS

A graceful dance to bear a poisoned blade.

CREON
How many years have I made service to your crown?

OEDIPUS
Deeper the darkness.
Careful more the aim.

CREON
I have the life I want.

OEDIPUS
Greed is a thing of having more, not having.

CREON
In your eyes I see that I am tried,
Condemned, and punished, now and here.

OEDIPUS
In your words, so am I.

CREON
You shake with guilt and doubt.

OEDIPUS
The unaccustomed burden of those words
does make me bow.
But I am strong enough to lift them,
And rest them where the truth says they belong.

CREON
Guilt fills the eyes, like blood,
And lends its colour to the world.

OEDIPUS
Enough.
Your time is done.
Your life offends the state.

JOCASTA
No, please, my king.
Death is our common enemy.

69

Killing has brought us here.

Your queen entreats your wisdom

to show your mercy.

Let him live.

OEDIPUS

I will not kill him.

But I think that he will die.

Proud prince Creon,

as I honour you, and trust you,

I name you Master of the Theatre.

Since you have grown so cozy with the dead,

Let you go there, and rule triumphant.

Go.

CREON

Unguarded, king,

Compelled by nothing but your royal word,

I go.

OEDIPUS

Come queen.

I shake with fury now.

We will go in and speak in private of these things.

Of truth and vengeance, loyalty and kings.

JOCASTA

I come.

Have strength my brother.

CREON

Jocasta, please.

Come for this walk with me.

I have made many journeys, more than most,

And always on my own.

For this, my shortest, last, most frightening,

I ask your company.

JOCASTA
The king, my husband…

CREON
Is alone,
More now than any man has ever been,
And no-one, no, not even you,
can go where he must go.
So join me now for one last stroll
across the town we love.

JOCASTA
Brother, I will.

(JOCASTA and CREON cross through **the public space***. They overhear the people.)*

GLASS *(drinks from BOTTLE's bottle.)*
This is still full.

BOTTLE
Well, full again.

GLASS
Who is our host today?

BOTTLE
No matter, friend.
The wine is cool, the welcome warm.

GLASS
All graves are open now.

BOTTLE
Especially our own.

(They both drink.)

WATER
And so, they say, the old king has returned.

71

BOTTLE
Death would not have him, then?

BLOOD
We must prepare another sacrifice

To lift the fury of the gods from off our town.

FIREWOOD
Our children and our parents are all gone,

Full half the city lies in broken heaps of bone and ash,

The rest leans on itself,

Exhausted and destroyed,

And still you speak of sacrifice?

BLOOD
A true offering, not a question.

WATER
With what? For what?

FIREWOOD
Above the natural vices of our breed

We have done nothing wrong.

Fury at what?

CLOTH
We all have wounded souls.

We are but mortals trying to survive.

(One of the bodies on the ground stirs, it is TIRESIAS.)

TIRESIAS
Oh, is that all?

JOCASTA
Tiresias, is that you?

TIRESIAS
It was.

CREON
Wisdom, what brings you to the ground?

TIRESIAS

Oh, gravity… and wine… and grief….

(Enter MANTO.)

MANTO

Oh father, there you are.

I lost you in the crowd.

TIRESIAS

I lost myself, for just a little while, in wine.

The only peace I know is purple now.

Jocasta, child, your father—

JOCASTA

Yes, is dead, for many years.

TIRESIAS

Was slain by me,

My wine-washed failure to see.

JOCASTA

No, no, old friend.

He freely chose,

And he believed he died for Thebes.

TIRESIAS

Because I told him so.

Believe me, my little butterfly,

I thought I saw the truth,

Through smoke and fear and drunkenness.

And there was truth, somewhere, in what I saw.

Not yet, but it was there.

I could not lie to him.

He was my friend.

JOCASTA

I know.

73

TIRESIAS

But I…

I failed him and I failed you,

Myself, I… I…

(TIRESIAS rises slowly.)

CREON

Find peace, old one.

TIRESIAS

It must, I fear, find me.

(Exit TIRESIAS and MANTO. At the fire.)

BLOOD

The oracle was clear.

We know that we must find the killer of the king.

Prince Creon went to death

to find the name and gave it to us.

The time for questions is now past.

We only fear the power of the state.

And now the state is powerless.

King Oedipus must fall.

WATER

And so we tear him down and thrust him out

And sit and watch the river and our skin?

BLOOD

It is, at least, a thing to do.

JOCASTA

Is Thebes so lost?

CREON

Not lost, not yet, but very far from home.

FIREWOOD

We have been told the name of Oedipus is what we seek,

The root and cause of all our pain.

His other name is king.

GLASS

I wonder,

If the name of king itself were banished from the state…

(Enter BOWL distraught.)

BOWL

Some help.

Come quickly, neighbours, strangers, friends.

Fire. Fire.

Huge and wild,

Runs madly through the houses that remain.

My fault. My guilt.

FIREWOOD

Guilt is a luxury, tell of the fire.

BOWL

I used the timber of my roof to build a pyre.

All whom I loved are gone.

My home is empty,

I have no need of house.

I lost control, it spread.

Now more will die.

WATER

A thing to do, indeed.

Come all.

Together we will end this funeral.

(Exeunt WATER, BOWL, CLOTH, GLASS, BOTTLE, and BLOOD. FIREWOOD is left alone. Enter BREAD.JOCASTA hesitates.)

CREON

Jocasta?

JOCASTA

Courage brother,

My love alone must keep you company.

CREON

Still queen, I see.

JOCASTA

If nothing else,

Farewell.

(They embrace. Exit CREON. FIREWOOD and BREAD are apart at first.)

FIREWOOD

Am I alone?

Does anyone or thing remain?

BREAD

These arms.

These hands and arms once wrapped

a universe of love.

My babies squirmed and twisted here

Like leaping fish in an abundant net.

And then the plague.

And then the law.

I went to them.

I went to the theatre.

The doors hung open and the place was still.

Only the gritty murmur of the flies.

Together, in a corner of the stage,

Among the wooden swords and crowns of foil,

Across the fall of shadow,

Back and forth, my daughter rocked

her brother in her arms.

Without a word.

What words could serve?

76

I slipped myself around them both.

I drew them in.

I felt her fading breath respond to mine.

Eyes closed with blisters, features torn with pain,

She sighed, "His heart is still".

I held them for an hour.

Death spread its stain.

Her back grew cold.

My life is over,

What do I do now?

FIREWOOD

Help me to find my friend.

I am alone.

(JOCASTA brings the two together. As they embrace the doll crumbles on the ground. As they exit together, she picks up the fragments of the dolland then climbs **the palace steps***.)*

above

OEDIPUS

My mind, stern parent to my heart,

Is clear that I have done no wrong.

JOCASTA

I am still here.

You need not be alone in this.

OEDIPUS

I know my father lives in peace,

A three day's march beyond the shallow hills.

News of his rule has often guided mine.

My mother too,

Sleeps nightly in his arms.

JOCASTA

As I am queen, again as I am wife,

I stand to share your burden.

What makes you twist and mutter so?

Is there something that I should Know?

OEDIPUS

As you have more than once advised me, queen,

I turn from fear, mistrust it, almost fear it,

Yet, now, my very self is fear.

My doubting heart rejects the guidance of my mind.

No.

Fact.

Facts beget truth,

And truth is the gold of judgment's scales,

And memory is womb to fact.

And, in my memory,

A seed of fear.

JOCASTA

Tell me, good Oedipus.

OEDIPUS

I killed a man.

Two men.

JOCASTA

A murder, king?

OEDIPUS

No, no, my conscience there is clear.

They rode at me upon the way

that led me to the oracle.

They would not turn nor yield,

and nor would I.

How old was Laius when he died?

78

JOCASTA

Why do you ask when you already know?

All Thebes can tell.

The early autumn of his years.

Still strong, but in decline.

OEDIPUS

Tell me again.

JOCASTA

As many robbers died in killing him

As soldiers fell in his defence.

It was a bloody day.

Those few men of the Guard who lived

Were deeply maimed.

OEDIPUS

But some still live?

OLD MAN *(entering)*

Release me fool.

OEDIPUS

Who is this man?

I am pursued by madness.

BLOOD

Pardon lord.

This rude malodorous thing demands your ear.

I could not stop him, sir.

OLD MAN

Remember that, and mind your words.

You rudely called me rude.

Whelp.

Oedipus.

I bear a message here that is significant and sad.

It touches both your heart and head.

79

OEDIPUS
What, more?

I listen.

Briefly.

OLD MAN
The roads are dusty and the sun is hot.

BLOOD
This is your news?

You have come late to tell it.

OEDIPUS
Give water to the man.

OLD MAN
The dust is thick and oily.

I fear, if I am to be heard, a stronger wash than water …

BLOOD
Some soap then.

JOCASTA
A little wine.

The man is old and tired.

OEDIPUS
I listen still, but will not long stand still to listen.

OLD MAN *(removing his dusty cloak)*
My clothing, as you see,

Though not entirely of the latest cut, more full I think,

And now a little dirty,

Will tell you that I am a man of Corinth.

BLOOD
I wish it did, it might come to the point.

OEDIPUS
Silence.

Speak.

What news from Corinth?

OLD MAN
I come, indeed, am sent,
Though gladly would have come,
To speak for all of Corinth when I say, to you,
Oedipus, king of Thebes,
In these most painful times,
To tell you that
.... my legs are weary and my feet are sore.

BLOOD
What?

OEDIPUS
Get him a chair.

OLD MAN
No trouble please,
I would not waste your time with work.
This chair will serve.

BLOOD
The throne?
My lord ..

OEDIPUS
It is a chair.
Go on.
I too am tired.

OLD MAN
In brief then.
Indeed, it is of thrones I speak.
Your father, kind and wise,
Who never harshly spoke to any man,
With whom I passed some twenty years or more of faithful service,
King Polybus of Corinth,

81

is dead.

OEDIPUS
Polybus dead?

Oh loss.

Oh loss of life and loss of love and time not spent with him.

And yet, behind this wall of grief some peace may lie,

both for the living and the dead.

How did he die?

OLD MAN
Like winter sunsets, slowly, silently,

He slipped from the horizon of this world.

Grew weary after food, lay down,

First slept and then was gone.

OEDIPUS
Not slain?

OLD MAN
Only by time.

He had no enemies.

OEDIPUS
He has none now.

JOCASTA
We weep together tears of many shades.

OLD MAN
The king is dead and now long live the king.

The streets of Corinth swell to call you home.

OEDIPUS
My father rests,

His cup was filled and drained and never drop did spill.

I too can rest on his account.

One serpent fear alone coils in my heart.

82

OLD MAN
No fears, my lord.
What harm can touch a brow
protected by a double crown?

OEDIPUS
In truth old man.
Much more than any misbehaving child,
I fear my mother.

OLD MAN
She loves you, needs you now.
Merope charged me firmly,
But gently too as always is her way,
To urge you hurry home.
All that she wishes you
is worlds away from harm.
What fear can enter in the circle of a mother's arms?

OEDIPUS
When I was young the oracle foretold that I,
Oh shame even to say,
That I would kill my father and
Would roll in carnal heat against,
Within, my mother's naked flesh.
I—

JOCASTA
What?

OEDIPUS
Of course I fled my home, my family, immediately,
For any man would rather die than see the day
When such monstrosity should come to pass.
So I left Corinth and came here at last.

83

OLD MAN
I see, I think.
Again I say no fear.
Rejoice as you are king, again,
With due solemnity towards the old king gone.
Rejoice again that you are free from fear.
Merope loves you as a mother,
Binds you to her heart as her one son,
But birth she never gave you.

OEDIPUS
What?

OLD MAN
She never has borne child.

OEDIPUS
Why would a royal house adopt a child?

OLD MAN
Because it is a royal house,
And royal lines continue, or they end—

JOCASTA
In blood.

OEDIPUS
How can it be that you alone know this?
Of all the servants in my father's house?

OLD MAN
My lord, it is not pride or rudeness
That makes me easy with my tongue to you.
I held you, wet and weeping, in these hands,
And placed you in Merope's arms.
These hands removed the wire
Which tore and tangled through your infant skin.

JOCASTA
Stop.

OEDIPUS
No. Go on.

OLD MAN
I bathed the wounds which gave your name to you.
I spoke it first, it has a meaning in my mother tongue,
Young Oedipus, he of the twisted feet.

OEDIPUS
How came I to your hands?

OLD MAN
A mountain shepherd put you there.
If ancient memory recalls,
His sheep were not his own.I was a shepherd too.

JOCASTA
I cannot hear.

OEDIPUS
Go on.

OLD MAN
It all is dry and grey with time.
My brain is dry,
I cannot grip my thoughts.

OEDIPUS
I am no more a child.
These games annoy me.
Give him more wine.
Go on.

OLD MAN
We worked the slopes that we could see from here,
But for the smoke that blinds the town.
He was a royal shepherd.

85

The sheep belonged to Laius, king of Thebes.

OEDIPUS
What is his name?

OLD MAN
The king?

No, shepherd,

I must think.

OEDIPUS
Go on, man.

OLD MAN
No game my lord.

I cannot now recall.

Forgive an old man's memory.

We die each day in little corners of our minds.

OEDIPUS
We do. I know it too.

You need not fear me.

Might you know this shepherd's face if seen again?

OLD MAN
I might and I will try,

And if the years have kindly played with him

And he is not much changed,

There is some hope I will.

OEDIPUS
Royal herders, who tended Laius' flocks,

All those of this man's years,

Here, now, under the impulse of my word.

BLOOD
I go and it is done.

OLD MAN
Move quickly now,

We have not much of time.

(OEDIPUS puts on the Old Man's cloak.)

JOCASTA
No.

Do not leave me.No.

Where are you going, so disguised?

OEDIPUS
To bare the truth.

A hotter thing than love surrounds us now.

(Exit OEDIPUS.)

at the firepit

FIREWOOD
The fire is hot.

Who watches it?

WATER
I do.

A branch has fallen, that is all.

CLOTH
No fear, we are as safe as-

Well.

This fire will do no harm.

(OEDIPUS joins them, cloaked.)

BOTTLE
Hail friend, what news?

No, none of news until a better day.

OEDIPUS
No news, only old pain and some few questions.

(BOTTLE raises the bottle which OEDIPUS brought to Thebes so long ago.)

BOTTLE
Old pain and questions, always questions.(*Offers it to OEDIPUS*)

above

JOCASTA *(Drinking.)*
I taste the coming of a time
When chaos, doubt, and fear
will seem old friends.

below

OEDIPUS
Where did you get your bottle?

BOTTLE
I found it, stole it, no, it was a gift, I think,
From old Tiresias.
The wine within, my wife gave me today.

GLASS
Old times, old pains.

OEDIPUS
I heard that one of you had spent some time in royal service,
Are you the man?

BOTTLE
Scarcely a man, but yes,
More than a few of these,
A love, a loss, too many deaths ago
1I guarded the old king,
At least, that was my task.

GLASS
You did?
Of course, you did.

above

JOCASTA
What was a tangle now is proved a knot

And, as we struggle, closes tight.

below

OEDIPUS
Were you beside him when he died?

GLASS
Old pain and even older questions.

OEDIPUS
But do the answers ever change?

BOTTLE
It matters less than nothing now.

We all will join him soon.

Death would be warm and welcoming without him there.

OEDIPUS
You did not love him, then?

BOTTLE
Not then and no more now.

That much is truth.

(Exit GLASS.)

OEDIPUS *(to BOTTLE)*
More wine, more truth,

and then perhaps less pain.

BOTTLE
Oh well,

The truth holds neither pain nor promise any more.

It is all lies.

We did our best and yet he died

89

And we all shared the lie.

OEDIPUS
"We all"?

His guard?

BOTTLE
Some fifty men…

The best that ever bore a blade or wound.

OEDIPUS
No doubt.

Fifty, you say?

Thank Zeus.

BOTTLE
… but fallen far behind.

His driver, chariot, horses were with him.

OEDIPUS
What?

BOTTLE
The king came down from Delphi full of rage.

He hurled his chariot through the guard

As if we were his enemies,

And with but one companion, charged ahead.

King Laius was an angry man.

We followed quickly as our feet

against his dust allowed.

Within an hour's double march

we found the king.

His driver's corpse played prologue to the scene.

The chariot, wrecked, in pieces in the ditch.

OEDIPUS
The driver then?

How did he die?

BOTTLE

Who knows?

But he was slain.

Laius, wounded, fell, and, tangled in his reins,

Was dashed against the broken road

And dragged some thousand paces to his death.

His face was gone.

OEDIPUS

Still more exact.

And when?

BOTTLE

At harvest time,

Though harvest we had none,

Was ten years since.

OEDIPUS

The seed of fear now drives its root into the ground,

This fits in me like dagger in a wound.

(OEDIPUS rises to go.)

BOWL

Leaving so soon?

OEDIPUS

My wife, I go to her.

(Exit OEDIPUS.)

BOTTLE

And so must I.

BOWL

I thought your wife was dead.

BOTTLE

She is.

He is a lucky man.

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elsewhere

(MANTO and TIRESIAS. TIRESIAS digs in the dirt as he speaks.)

TIRESIAS
Find me more wine, my dear.

MANTO
I think that you have had enough.

TIRESIAS
Then you do not know wine.

Too little or too much,

But never just enough.

MANTO
Too much for now then, father.

Sleep.

TIRESIAS
Sleep? Now?

No, sleep brings dreams,

And dreams are just a flood of agony.

No, child, I cannot face this day,

Not sleeping or awake,

So help me fill a ditch with wine to keep it out.

You are their priestess now.

MANTO
I cannot be.

No god has touched my eyes.

I see no more than light alone provides.

TIRESIAS
What you will see today

Is what I vainly hoped to keep away.

(TIRESIAS finds something.)

TIRESIAS*(Cont'd)*

Ah good, thank you old town.

I knew that you would never let me down.

(He pulls a bottle of wine from the earth and opens it. Exit MANTO)

above

BLOOD *(Leading in a group of ancient Shepherds)*
These are the men of that estate

who still survive in Thebes.

Few others of their years still stand.

OLD MAN
A shepherd's smell protects him from the plague.

Welcome, my brothers of the fields.

OEDIPUS *(entering)*
Come down old man,

And do not play at king,

it is a weary game.

Speak not at first.

Examine faces

then ask questions as you need,

But waste no words.

OLD MAN
I think I know not you.

Nor you.

Hail friend,

I know you well, but from another tale,

Your wife forgave you then?

Is well.

This man. This face.

This way of leaning on his pole.

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OEDIPUS
Who are you, man?

SHEPHERD
My lord, I am your shepherd.

OEDIPUS
What say your friends?

How call they in the field?

SHEPHERD
Why, loudly, lord.

My hearing is not good.

BLOOD
Their minds, like sheep, wander and graze at will.

OEDIPUS
This man of Corinth.

Is he known to you?

SHEPHERD
There is a chance.

In truth, my lord, I

better know the characters of beasts.

All men to me begin to seem the same.

OEDIPUS
Did you, in Laius' time,

Give him an infant boy, out of your hand?

SHEPHERD
A child. A boy.

There is a wisp of something.

Yes.

I think I may have.

No. I did.

I did my lord.

I could not bear to watch it die.

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The tiny hero raged against the world.

Infection raged more loudly against him.

His legs were pierced and bound with iron bands.

It could not hope to live.

How died the child?

JOCASTA

One word, and all the stars together pull us down.

OEDIPUS

Who laid this baby in the world?

JOCASTA

I will not watch.

I cannot bear to hear.

OEDIPUS

We all will hear and know.

And you will say.

SHEPHERD

I swore against my life to never tell.

OEDIPUS

You stand between two deaths,

One promised long ago and one here, now.

Answer me now

Or I will tear you open with my hands

and find the truth myself.

(Exit JOCASTA.)

OEDIPUS *(Cont'd)*

Who was the parent of that child?

SHEPHERD

My word.

OEDIPUS

Your life.

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SHEPHERD

The truth, my king?

It was your wife.

OEDIPUS *(coming below)*

My wife?

My wife my mother?

What am I?

Am I a thing of nature?

Can I exist and call it life,

Or am I all that life and truth despise

pressed in the form of man?

I am the man.

Cursed.

Hated.

Hunted, and now found.

I am the answer.

What am I?

A city ruined,

more dead than still remain alive,

An age of children gone.

Thebes models horror to the underworld.

A punishment.

I beg the universe to give me perfect punishment.

Something consume me now,

Or fire or flood come snatch me from my skin

And hurl me into nothingness.

Where is the limy wrinkle of the earth

Where I may crawl and hide me from the scornful stars?

Who will twist and wrack my frame

Until the sun no longer knows me by my shade?

I grasp at death and yet I think

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The desperate dead would shun my company.
The earth herself would gag
against the vileness of my flesh,
And spew me out upon the feast of life.
The living cannot see me now.
The light of day itself turns cold away.
Only the corpses hear my plea for punishment.
The Theatre attends.
My cue is said.
I bow before the judgment of the dead.

(Exit OEDIPUS.)

below

(The people gather slowly in fearful, agonized anticipation. All together they wince or otherwise react to a terrible shock. Enter MANTO.)

MANTO

I found myself alone,
And grown, it seems, beyond my father's care.
I wandered Thebes and wept for her.
The bodies of those trampled in the sacrifice
led me into the theatre.
Seeking to still my heart with simple work,
Sorting the dead by name and family.
Collecting what I could for memory.
(*Enter TIRESIAS*)
I thought that I had seen the tide of human pain
Mark out its highest limit in this world,
when staggered in the king.
Oedipus.
The man who vowed to solve it all.

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He saw me not,
but stood upon the margin of the stage
And stared out at the steaming rows before.
"Receive me now."
He cried, then whispered "No."
"As I have vainly fled from fear,
death now will flee from me.
Mere death,
so common in the world, is not for me.
If I could die each death that you have done,
Know all your loss,
And stand for those who held you when you fell...
...still not enough.
I almost doubt there is enough of suffering
to fill my punishment,
Except I do you shame to circumscribe a limit to your pain.
A thing to do?
Have I not done enough?
I weep.
More tears than all my life has seen,
flow from me now.
Would I could weep a river rushing backwards
On the rocks and sands of time
To lift us all above, beyond,
before the fissure of my birth.
His hands explored his face,
As if he met himself in darkness.
"A thing to do. I see it now." He said.
And then.
And then.

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FIREWOOD

Support her or she falls.

Her burden is for all.

MANTO

His fingers wandered, each alone,

Across the landscape of his face.

First one, then others, stiffened,

As they knew what they would do.

They gathered like a mob upon his brow.

The knowledge flickered down his hands.

The message in the muscles of his arms

Ran up and down

until the whole strong body surged towards his eyes.

Under the lids, his nails forced their way,

Sliding across the glisten of the orbs.

His whole frame rattled.

Black sweat pulled at his clothes.

Two fingers.

Three.

Beyond the second knuckle, curled around.

His head turned up.

His elbows rose.

For one eternal instant all was still.

Then, with a shriek like birth,

his neck convulsed, his arms drove up,

and from behind his face

the ragged roots of sight tore full away.

He balanced there,

offering the wreckage to the sky,

and begged the mercy of the gods to rain on Thebes.

Another narrow blade of time

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sunk deep into my memory

and then the blood.

The blood.

Release, collapse, or answer, it is not mine to say.

But blood,

as if the stream of all his line found surface there,

Broke from his shattered mask

and washed him to the ground.

(MANTO collapses.)

TIRESIAS

Now rest, my child.

MANTO

How can you call me child?

TIRESIAS

Your mighty deed is done.

MANTO

How could you know all this,

And, knowing, let me witness it?

TIRESIAS

I had no choice.

This is the truth.

MANTO

It tears my soul apart just as Pentheus was.

My mind is scattered on the bloody ground.

I cannot hold it all.

TIRESIAS

I know.

MANTO

What can I do?

TIRESIAS

Nothing, the hardest task of all.

(MANTO hesitates, then flees. TIRESIAS sits and bears silent witness.)

BLOOD

Some citizens go now and fetch the queen.

This thing must find its end.

If we act now.

The future can be ours.

FIREWOOD

No-one can own the future.

WATER

And the past owns everyone.

BLADE

Bring out the queen.

She now must answer

for her womb's monstrosity

And for the suffering of all of Thebes.

My blade stands ready, here and now,

To end this reign of crime.

Who dares rise up and follow me?

Kill her, kill her today,

And anyone who dares to block our way.

Does any Theban have the heart to act?

FIREWOOD

More blindness yet.

So, one by one,

The people of the world slide into night.

If dawn does come,

Will any face be raised to catch the light?

CLOTH

Come. Gather. See.

Towards us now comes Oedipus.

More blood than death itself demands

anoints him now.

Mark how he measures out his course by memory

BREAD

And from the theatre,

Along that path of royal blood,

Released to suffer freely with us all,

Comes Creon too.

WATER

We, Thebes, together, here,

Must witness the fulfillment of this tale,

Or spill its poison in the stream of time.

OEDIPUS

What more remains?

My father is avenged, the prophesy fulfilled.

The man is found and punishment begun.

What further loss?

What more must still be done?

JOCASTA

Who are we now?

My husband?

Baby?

King?

So much of love has flowed between us.

So much of horror floods upon us now.

How do I speak to what you have become?

How can I speak of what you always were?

Oedipus, it all was love.

OEDIPUS

No.

You cannot touch me more.

JOCASTA

We chose no wrong.

We saw what lay before us

And we sought in all things that which led to good.

We loved each other well.

We led the people too, as well we could.

Something, above, beyond, the shallow scope

Of what we knew has chosen this.

Like birds who ride the rising hurricane,

We fight, heroic, but we go where nature goes.

OEDIPUS

I see you not and I will hear no more.

Clear thought and argument have led me here.

I set my will against that storm,

And it has dashed me humble on the ground.

I am alone, adrift, at peace with misery.

JOCASTA

You were a hero then.

You strove against the world to make it good.

To act was life itself.

You climbed from fear to thought to deed,

accepting all that came.

You were a name.

And now you are too small a thing to die.

Even to die, the common act of all that lives.

Do something.

Kill me now,

if you are shy to meet the thing yourself.

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You cannot.

A child again.

Give me that blade that marks the hand of kings,

Your father's sword,

he raised it against you,

You turned it sharply,

swiftly brought him down,

And now it dangles like an infant's drool

against your quaking side.

Where shall it die?

This throat,

that twice has sworn its love for you?

This heart, which bore that love in double store?

No.

Backwards into time, here.

(JOCASTA stabs herself in the womb and dies.)

OEDIPUS

Jocasta. Queen.

My mother, slain.

This was not prophesied.

My father first

and now my mother too

Lie dead beneath the chariot of my deeds.

This was not prophesied.

What can we say?

I met a woman, and we loved,

the rest is agony.I go.

CREON

You, Oedipus,

Pursued the truth into its lair

and it has turned on you.

But you have done what you set out to do.

OEDIPUS

My life has been a flight away from this.

One eye across my shoulder,

Watching for any sign that this approached,

I stumbled and fell here.

I go now in pursuit of suffering.

No more its prey,

I am become its faithful hound

And mark its heels throughout the universe.

Come plague, come drought, come death,

we are a family now.

I am your lover, child, and father too,

We go to see what next the world will do.

(Exit OEDIPUS. During the following the people pick up the corpse of JOCASTA and, followed by CREON, carry it off.)

WATER

Collect the dead.

Collect yourselves.

And recollect what you have seen today.

The present wanders, with the king,

into the past.

The future waits to be.

This day has seen its fill of bloody deeds.

The world needs rest and time to heal.

Tomorrow, early, we have much to do.

(TIRESIAS is left alone on stage.)

End of Play

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