



FOCUS Jocasta prays to the god Apollo, asking for help for her husband. Then a messenger arrives with startling news about Polybus, the king of Corinth. Read to find out what the news is.

(Enter Jocasta from the palace, carrying a suppliant's branch wound in wool.)

Jocasta. Lords of the realm, it occurred to me,
just now, to visit the temples of the gods,
1000 so I have my branch in hand and incense too.

Oedipus is beside himself. Racked with anguish,
no longer a man of sense, he won't admit
the latest prophecies are hollow as the old—
he's at the mercy of every passing voice
1005 if the voice tells of terror.
I urge him gently, nothing seems to help,
so I turn to you, Apollo, you are nearest.

(placing her branch on the altar, while an old herdsman enters from the side, not the one just summoned by the king but an unexpected Messenger from Corinth)

I come with prayers and offerings . . . I beg you,
cleanse us, set us free of defilement!
1010 Look at us, passengers in the grip of fear,
watching the pilot of the vessel go to pieces.

Messenger *(approaching Jocasta and the Chorus).*
Strangers, please, I wonder if you could lead us
to the palace of the king . . . I think it's Oedipus.
Better, the man himself—you know where he is?

1015 **Leader.** This is his palace, stranger. He's inside.
But here is his queen, his wife and mother
of his children.

Messenger. Blessings on you, noble queen,
queen of Oedipus crowned with all your family—
blessings on you always!

1020 **Jocasta.** And the same to you, stranger, you deserve it . . .
such a greeting. But what have you come for?
Have you brought us news?

Messenger. Wonderful news—
for the house, my lady, for your husband too.

Jocasta. Really, what? Who sent you?

1011 pilot of the vessel: Oedipus,
who guides the "ship of state."



Messenger. Corinth.
1025 I'll give you the message in a moment.
You'll be glad of it—how could you help it?—
though it costs a little sorrow in the bargain.

Jocasta. What can it be, with such a double edge?

Messenger. The people there, they want to make your
Oedipus
1030 king of Corinth, so they're saying now.

Jocasta. Why? Isn't old Polybus still in power?

Messenger. No more. Death has got him in the tomb.

Jocasta. What are you saying? Polybus, dead?—dead?

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

Jocasta (*to a servant*).
1035 Quickly, go to your master, tell him this!

You prophecies of the gods, where are you now?
This is the man that Oedipus feared for years,
he fled him, not to kill him—and now he's dead,
quite by chance, a normal, natural death,
1040 not murdered by his son.

Oedipus (*emerging from the palace*).
Dearest,
what now? Why call me from the palace?

Jocasta (*bringing the Messenger closer*).
Listen to *him*, see for yourself what all
those awful prophecies of god have come to.

Oedipus. And who is he? What can he have for me?

1045 **Jocasta.** He's from Corinth, he's come to tell you
your father is no more—Polybus—he's dead!

Oedipus (*wheeling on the Messenger*).
What? Let me have it from your lips.

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

1050 **Oedipus.** How—murder? sickness?—what? what killed him?

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

Oedipus. Sickness then—poor man, it wore him down.

1051 A light tip . . . to rest: A little disturbance can cause an old person to die.



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

Oedipus. So!

1055 Jocasta, why, why look to the Prophet's hearth,
the fires of the future? Why scan the birds
that scream above our heads? They winged me on
to the murder of my father, did they? That was my doom?
Well look, he's dead and buried, hidden under the earth,
and here I am in Thebes, I never put hand to sword—
1060 unless some longing for me wasted him away,
then in a sense you'd say I caused his death.
But now, all those prophecies I feared—Polybus
packs them off to sleep with him in hell!
They're nothing, worthless.

PAUSE & REFLECT What does Oedipus learn about Polybus from the messenger?

FOCUS Read to find out how Oedipus happened to be raised as the son of Polybus.

Jocasta. There.

1065 Didn't I tell you from the start?

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

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

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

Jocasta. Fear?

1070 What should a man fear? It's all chance,
chance rules our lives. Not a man on earth
can see a day ahead, groping through the dark.
Better to live at random, best we can.
And as for this marriage with your mother—
have no fear. Many a man before you,
1075 in his dreams, has shared his mother's bed.
Take such things for shadows, nothing at all—
Live, Oedipus,
as if there's no tomorrow!

Oedipus. Brave words,
and you'd persuade me if mother weren't alive.
1080 But mother lives, so for all your reassurances
I live in fear, I must.



- Jocasta.** But your father's death,
that, at least, is a great blessing, joy to the eyes!
- Oedipus.** Great, I know . . . but I fear *her*—she's still alive.
- Messenger.** Wait, who is this woman, makes you so afraid?
- 1085 **Oedipus.** Merope, old man. The wife of Polybus.
- Messenger.** The queen? What's there to fear in her?
- Oedipus.** A dreadful prophecy, stranger, sent by the gods.
- Messenger.** Tell me, could you? Unless it's forbidden
other ears to hear.
- Oedipus.** Not at all.
- 1090 Apollo told me once—it is my fate—
I must make love with my own mother,
shed my father's blood with my own hands.
So for years I've given Corinth a wide berth,
and it's been my good fortune too. But still,
1095 to see one's parents and look into their eyes
is the greatest joy I know.
- Messenger.** You're afraid of that?
That kept you out of Corinth?
- Oedipus.** My *father*, old man—
so I wouldn't kill my father.
- Messenger.** So that's it.
Well then, seeing I came with such good will, my king,
1100 why don't I rid you of that old worry now?
- Oedipus.** What a rich reward you'd have for that!
- Messenger.** What do you think I came for, majesty?
So you'd come home and I'd be better off.
- Oedipus.** Never, I will never go near my parents.
- 1105 **Messenger.** My boy, it's clear, you don't know what you're
doing.
- Oedipus.** What do you mean, old man? For god's sake,
explain.
- Messenger.** If you ran from *them*, always dodging home . . .
- Oedipus.** Always, terrified Apollo's oracle might come true—
- Messenger.** And you'd be covered with guilt, from both
your parents.
- 1110 **Oedipus.** That's right, old man, that fear is always with me.
- Messenger.** Don't you know? You've really nothing to fear.

1093 given Corinth a wide berth:
stayed far away from Corinth.



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

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

Oedipus. What are you saying—Polybus was not my father?

1115 **Messenger.** No more than I am. He and I are equals.

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

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

Oedipus. Then why did he call me his son?

Messenger. You were a gift,
years ago—know for a fact he took you
1120 from my hands.

Oedipus. No, from another's hands?
Then how could he love me so? He loved me, deeply . . .

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

Oedipus. And you, did you . . .
buy me? find me by accident?

Messenger. I stumbled on you,
1125 down the woody flanks of Mount Cithaeron.

Oedipus. So close,
what were you doing here, just passing through?

Messenger. Watching over my flocks, grazing them on the
slopes.

Oedipus. A herdsman, were you? A vagabond, scraping for
wages?

Messenger. Your savior too, my son, in your worst hour.

Oedipus. Oh—
1130 when you picked me up, was I in pain? What exactly?

Messenger. Your ankles . . . they tell the story. Look at them.

Oedipus. Why remind me of that, that old affliction?

Messenger. Your ankles were pinned together. I set you free.

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

1135 **Messenger.** And you got your name from that misfortune
too,
the name's still with you.

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

1135 you got your name from that misfortune: Oedipus' name comes from Greek words meaning "swollen foot."



- Messenger.** I don't know.
The one who gave you to me, he'd know more.
- Oedipus.** What? You took me from someone else?
1140 You didn't find me yourself?
- Messenger.** No sir,
another shepherd passed you on to me.
- Oedipus.** Who? Do you know? Describe him.
- Messenger.** He called himself a servant of . . .
if I remember rightly—Laius.
(*Jocasta turns sharply.*)
- 1145 **Oedipus.** The king of the land who ruled here long ago?
- Messenger.** That's the one. That herdsman was *his* man.
- Oedipus.** Is he still alive? Can I see him?
- Messenger.** They'd know best, the people of these parts.
(*Oedipus and the Messenger turn to the Chorus.*)
- Oedipus.** Does anyone know that herdsman,
1150 the one he mentioned? Anyone seen him
in the fields, here in the city? Out with it!
The time has come to reveal this once for all.
- Leader.** I think he's the very shepherd you wanted to see,
a moment ago. But the queen, Jocasta,
1155 she's the one to say.
- Oedipus.** Jocasta,
you remember the man we just sent for?
Is *that* the one he means?
- Jocasta.** That man . . .
why ask? Old shepherd, talk, empty nonsense,
don't give it another thought, don't even think—
- 1160 **Oedipus.** What—give up now, with a clue like this?
Fail to solve the mystery of my birth?
Not for all the world!
- Jocasta.** Stop—in the name of god,
if you love your own life, call off this search!
My suffering is enough.
- Oedipus.** Courage!
1165 Even if my mother turns out to be a slave,
and I a slave, three generations back,
you would not seem common.



Jocasta. Oh no,
listen to me, I beg you, don't do this.

Oedipus. Listen to you? No more. I must know it all,
1170 must see the truth at last.

Jocasta. No, please—
for your sake—I want the best for you!

Oedipus. Your best is more than I can bear.

Jocasta. You're doomed—
may you never fathom who you are!

Oedipus. *(to a servant).*
Hurry, fetch me the herdsman, now!
1175 Leave her to glory in her royal birth.

Jocasta. Aieeeee—
man of agony—
that is the only name I have for you,
that, no other—ever, ever, ever!

(Flinging through the palace doors. A long, tense silence follows.)

PAUSE & REFLECT How did it come about that Oedipus was raised as Polybus' son?

FOCUS Oedipus wants to solve the mystery of his birth. What do you predict he will find out when he questions the herdsman?

Leader. Where's she gone, Oedipus?
1180 Rushing off, such wild grief . . .
I'm afraid that from this silence
something monstrous may come bursting forth.

Oedipus. Let it burst! Whatever will, whatever must!
I must know my birth, no matter how common
1185 it may be—I must see my origins face-to-face.
She perhaps, she with her woman's pride
may well be mortified by my birth,
but I, I count myself the son of Chance,
the great goddess, giver of all good things—
1190 I'll never see myself disgraced. She is my mother!
And the moons have marked me out, my blood-brothers,
one moon on the wane, the next moon great with power.

1192 on the wane: with its lighted part getting smaller day by day.

WORDS TO KNOW

mortify (môr'tə-fī') *v.* to embarrass or humiliate



That is my blood, my nature—I will never betray it,
never fail to search and learn my birth!

1195 **Chorus.** Yes—if I am a true prophet
if I can grasp the truth,
by the boundless skies of Olympus,
at the full moon of tomorrow, Mount Cithaeron
you will know how Oedipus glories in you—
1200 you, his birthplace, nurse, his mountain-mother!
And we will sing you, dancing out your praise—
you lift our monarch’s heart!

Apollo, Apollo, god of the wild cry
may our dancing please you!

1205 Oedipus—
son, dear child, who bore you?

Who of the nymphs who seem to live forever
mated with Pan, the mountain-striding Father?
Who was your mother? who, some bride of Apollo
the god who loves the pastures spreading toward
the sun?

1206 nymphs (nĭmfs): minor nature goddesses.

1207 Pan: the god of forests, pastures, and shepherds.

1210 Or was it Hermes, king of the lightning ridges?
Or Dionysus, lord of frenzy, lord of the barren
peaks—
did he seize you in his hands, dearest of all his
lucky finds?—
found by the nymphs, their warm eyes dancing, gift
to the lord who loves them dancing out his joy!

(Oedipus strains to see a figure coming from the distance. Attended by palace guards, an old Shepherd enters slowly, reluctant to approach the king.)

1215 **Oedipus.** I never met the man, my friends . . . still,
if I had to guess, I’d say that’s the shepherd,
the very one we’ve looked for all along.
Brothers in old age, two of a kind,
he and our guest here. At any rate
1220 the ones who bring him in are my own men,
I recognize them.

(turning to the Leader)

But you know more than I,
you should, you’ve seen the man before.

Leader. I know him, definitely. One of Laius’ men,
a trusty shepherd, if there ever was one.



1225 **Oedipus.** You, I ask you first, stranger,
you from Corinth—is this the one you mean?

Messenger. You're looking at him. He's your man.

Oedipus. (*to the Shepherd*).

You, old man, come over here—
look at me. Answer all my questions.

1230 Did you ever serve King Laius?

Shepherd. So I did . . .
a slave, not bought on the block though,
born and reared in the palace.

Oedipus. Your duties, your kind of work?

Shepherd. Herding the flocks, the better part of my life.

1235 **Oedipus.** Where, mostly? Where did you do your grazing?

Shepherd. Well,
Cithaeron sometimes, or the foothills round about.

Oedipus. This man—you know him? ever see him there?

Shepherd (*confused, glancing from the Messenger to the King*).

Doing what?—what man do you mean?

Oedipus (*pointing to the Messenger*).

This one here—ever have dealings with him?

1240 **Shepherd.** Not so I could say, but give me a chance,
my memory's bad . . .

Messenger. No wonder he doesn't know me, master.
But let me refresh his memory for him.

1245 I'm sure he recalls old times we had
on the slopes of Mount Cithaeron;
he and I, grazing our flocks, he with two
and I with one—we both struck up together,
three whole seasons, six months at a stretch
1250 from spring to the rising of Arcturus in the fall,
then with winter coming on I'd drive my herds
to my own pens, and back he'd go with his
to Laius' folds.

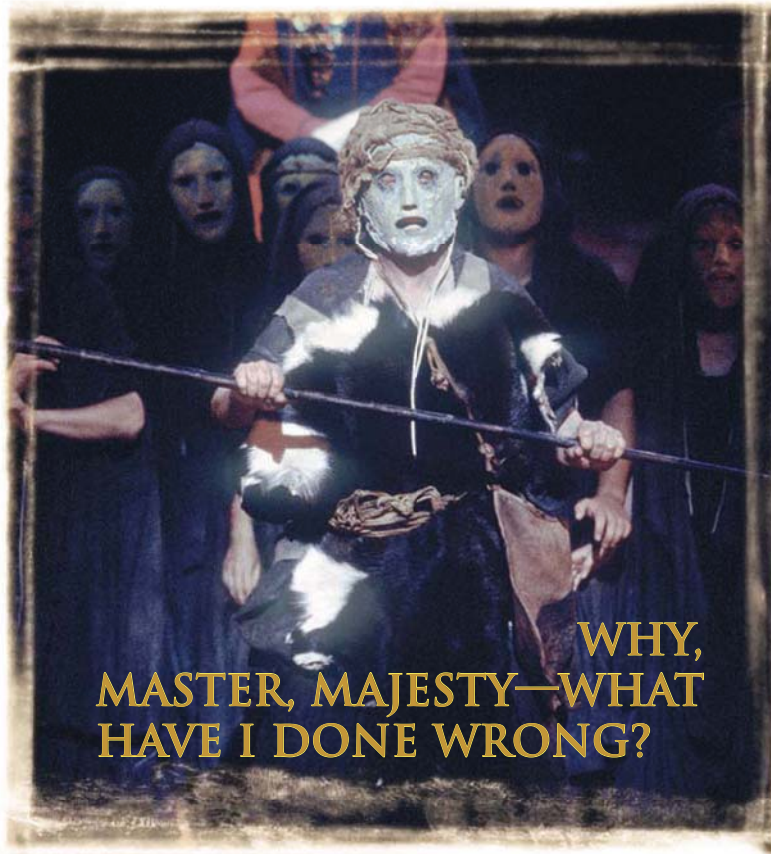
(*to the Shepherd*)

Now that's how it was,
wasn't it—yes or no?

Shepherd. Yes, I suppose . . .
it's all so long ago.

Messenger. Come, tell me,

1249 Arcturus (ärk-töör'əs): a bright star. (For the Greeks, its rising just before the sun marked the beginning of autumn.)



WHY,
MASTER, MAJESTY—WHAT
HAVE I DONE WRONG?

The shepherd in Peter Hall's stage production of *Oedipus the King* (1996).

1255 you gave me a child back then, a boy, remember?
A little fellow to rear, my very own.

Shepherd. What? Why rake up that again?

Messenger. Look, here he is, my fine old friend—
the same man who was just a baby then.

1260 **Shepherd.** Damn you, shut your mouth—quiet!

Oedipus. Don't lash out at him, old man—
you need lashing more than he does.

Shepherd. Why,
master, majesty—what have I done wrong?

Oedipus. You won't answer his question about the boy.

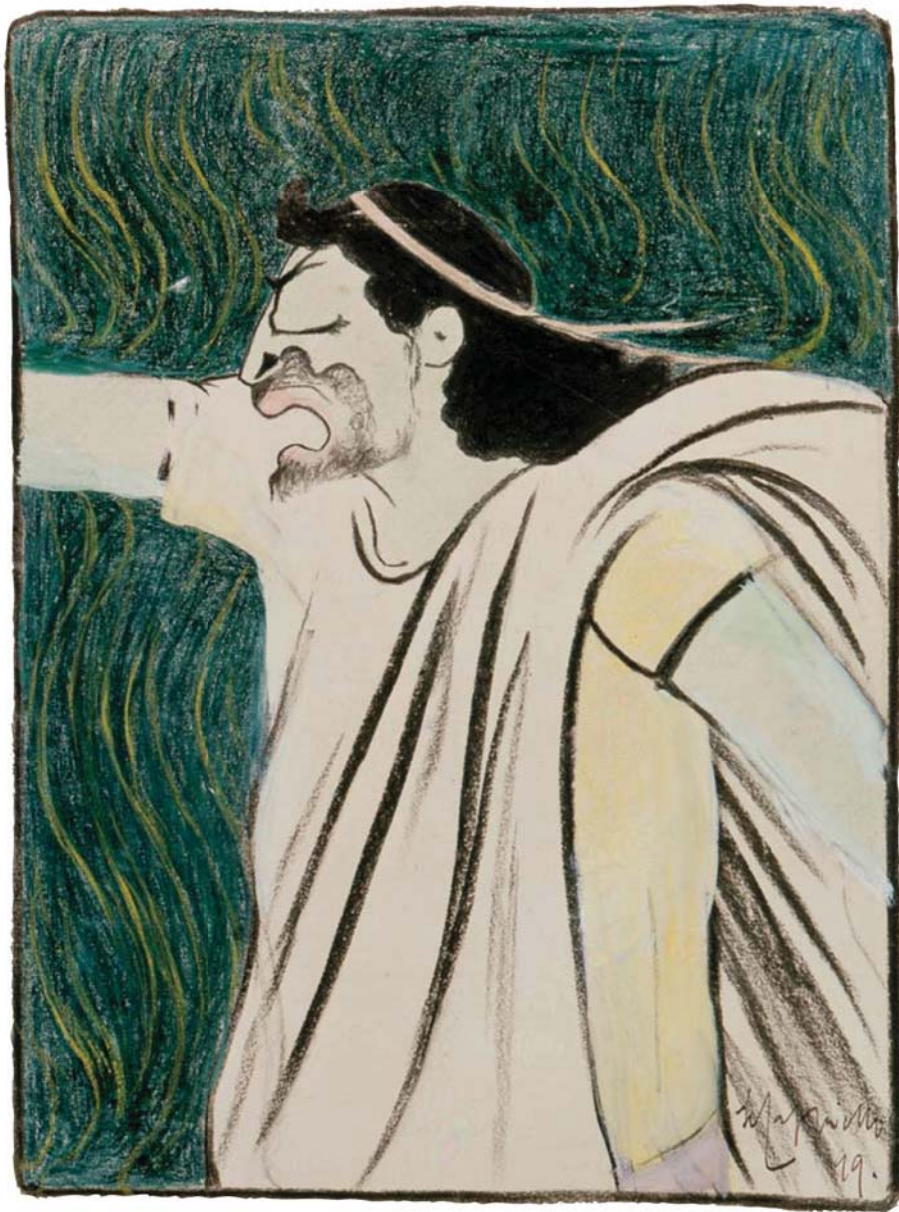
1265 **Shepherd.** He's talking nonsense, wasting his breath.

Oedipus. So, you won't talk willingly—
then you'll talk with pain.

(The guards seize the Shepherd.)



- Shepherd.** No, dear god, don't torture an old man!
- Oedipus.** Twist his arms back, quickly!
- Shepherd.** God help us, why?—
1270 what more do you need to know?
- Oedipus.** Did you give him that child? He's asking.
- Shepherd.** I did . . . I wish to god I'd died that day.
- Oedipus.** You've got your wish if you don't tell the truth.
- Shepherd.** The more I tell, the worse the death I'll die.
- 1275 **Oedipus.** Our friend here wants to stretch things out, does he?
(motioning to his men for torture)
- Shepherd.** No, no, I gave it to him—I just said so.
- Oedipus.** Where did you get it? Your house? Someone else's?
- Shepherd.** It wasn't mine, no, I got it from . . . someone.
- Oedipus.** Which one of them?
(looking at the citizens)
- Whose house?
- Shepherd.** No—
1280 god's sake, master, no more questions!
- Oedipus.** You're a dead man if I have to ask again.
- Shepherd.** Then—the child came from the house . . .
of Laius.
- Oedipus.** A slave? or born of his own blood?
- Shepherd.** Oh no,
I'm right at the edge, the horrible truth—I've got to say
it!
- 1285 **Oedipus.** And I'm at the edge of hearing horrors, yes, but I
must hear!
- Shepherd.** All right! His son, they said it was—his son!
But the one inside, your wife,
she'd tell it best.
- Oedipus.** My wife—
1290 *she* gave it to you?
- Shepherd.** Yes, yes, my king.
- Oedipus.** Why, what for?
- Shepherd.** To kill it.
- Oedipus.** Her own child,
1295 how could she?



Shepherd. She was afraid—
frightening prophecies.

Oedipus. What?

Shepherd. They said—
he'd kill his parents.

1300 **Oedipus.** But you gave him to this old man—why?

Shepherd. I pitied the little baby, master,
hoped he'd take him off to his own country,

Monnett-Sully in the role of Oedipus in "Oedipe Roi" (1899), Leonetto Cappiello. Pastel and gouache, 56.5 × 47.1 cm. Photo by Gérard Blot. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo © Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York © 2007 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



far away, but he saved him for this, this fate.
If you are the man he says you are, believe me,
1305 you were born for pain.

Oedipus. O god—
all come true, all burst to light!
O light—now let me look my last on you!
I stand revealed at last—
1310 cursed in my birth, cursed in marriage,
cursed in the lives I cut down with these hands!

*(Rushing through the doors with a great cry. The
Corinthian Messenger, the Shepherd and attendants exit
slowly to the side.)*

PAUSE & REFLECT What does Oedipus discover about his birth?

FOCUS The chorus reacts to Oedipus' discovery of the truth of his birth. Read to find out what the chorus thinks of him now.

Chorus. O the generations of men
the dying generations—adding the total
of all your lives I find they come to nothing . . .
does there exist, is there a man on earth
1315 who seizes more joy than just a dream, a vision?
And the vision no sooner dawns than dies
blazing into oblivion.

You are my great example, you, your life
your destiny, Oedipus, man of misery—
1320 I count no man blest.

You outranged all men!
Bending your bow to the breaking-point
you captured priceless glory, O dear god,
and the Sphinx came crashing down,
the virgin, claws hooked
1325 like a bird of omen singing, shrieking death—
like a fortress reared in the face of death
you rose and saved our land.

WORDS TO KNOW

oblivion (ə-blīv'ē-ən) *n.* a state of being forgotten



From that day on we called you king
we crowned you with honors, Oedipus, towering over
all—
1330 mighty king of the seven gates of Thebes.

But now to hear your story—is there a man more agonized?
More wed to pain and frenzy? Not a man on earth,
the joy of your life ground down to nothing
O Oedipus, name for the ages—
1335 one and the same wide harbor served you
son and father both
son and father came to rest in the same bridal chamber.
How, how could the furrows your father plowed
bear you, your agony, harrowing on
1340 in silence O so long?

But now for all your power
Time, all-seeing Time has dragged you to the light,
judged your marriage monstrous from the start—
the son and the father tangling, both one—
O child of Laius, would to god
1345 I'd never seen you, never never!
Now I weep like a man who wails the dead
and the dirge comes pouring forth with all my heart!
I tell you the truth, you gave me life
my breath leapt up in you
1350 and now you bring down night upon my eyes.

1347 dirge (dûrj): funeral song.

Thinking Through the Literature

1. What did the shepherd do with the baby he was ordered to kill?
2. At this point in the play, how does the chorus regard Oedipus, the man who once saved Thebes?
3. How did Oedipus unknowingly bring about the thing he most tried to avoid?
4. What do you predict Oedipus will do now that he knows the truth about his birth?