



Cambridge Translations from Greek Drama

Sophocles
Oedipus
Tyrannus

A new translation and
commentary by Ian McAuslan
and Judith Affleck

Introduction to the Greek Theatre
by P.E. Easterling

Series Editors: John Harrison and Judith Affleck



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PERFORMANCE

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Preface

The aim of the series is to enable students to approach Classical plays with confidence and understanding: to discover the play within the text.

The translations are new. Many recent versions of Greek tragedy have been produced by poets and playwrights who do not work from the original Greek. The translators of this series aim to bring readers, actors and directors as close as possible to the playwrights' actual words and intentions: to create translations which are faithful to the original in content and tone; and which are speakable, with all the immediacy of modern English.

The notes are designed for students of Classical Civilisation and Drama, and indeed anyone who is interested in theatre. They address points which present difficulty to the reader of today: chiefly relating to the Greeks' religious and moral attitudes, their social and political life, and mythology.

Our hope is that students should discover the play for themselves. The conventions of the Classical theatre are discussed, but there is no thought of recommending 'authentic' performances. Different groups will find different ways of responding to each play. The best way of bringing alive an ancient play, as any other, is to explore the text practically, to stimulate thought about ways of staging the plays today. Stage directions in the text are minimal, and the notes are not prescriptive; rather, they contain questions and exercises which explore the dramatic qualities of the text. Bullet points introduce suggestions for discussion and analysis; open bullet points focus on more practical exercises.

If the series encourages students to attempt a staged production, so much the better. But the primary aim is understanding and enjoyment.

This translation of *Oedipus Tyrannus* is based on the the Greek text, edited by H. Lloyd-Jones and N. G. Wilson for Oxford University Press. The line numbers in this translation correspond with those in the Greek text; occasionally in the lyric passages the number of lines has been condensed or expanded. All translations from Homer's *Odyssey* are from the Penguin translation, revised by Christopher Rieu and Peter Jones.

John Harrison
Judith Affleck

List of characters

(Non-speaking parts are marked with an asterisk.)

OEDIPUS	king of Thebes
CROWD OF SUPPLIANTS*	citizens of Thebes
PRIEST	a priest of Zeus
CREON	brother-in-law of Oedipus
CHORUS	elders of Thebes
TIRESIAS	a blind seer
JOCASTA	wife of Oedipus and sister of Creon
FIRST MESSENGER	a former herdsman from Corinth
SERVANT	a herdsman and former servant of Laius and Jocasta
SECOND MESSENGER	a palace servant
ANTIGONE AND ISMENE*	daughters of Oedipus and Jocasta

PROLOGUE (1–150)

The opening scene depicts a civic gathering: a deputation of citizens is grouped before the king of Thebes. In the original production the *skēnē* (stage building, see page 114) would have represented the royal palace. In front of the palace are altars (16), one of which is sacred to Lycean Apollo (919).

- What other incidental details of the scene and of the people assembled can be gathered from lines 1–21?
- In a modern indoor production the lights might come up revealing a ‘tableau’. In the original open-air production all the characters would be visible as they entered the *orchēstra* (see page 114). Consider different ways of staging the opening.

Sophoclean prologues

The term for the opening scene of a Greek tragedy prior to the arrival of the Chorus (see 151) is the *prologue*. In it often a single character sets the events of the play in context. In his seven surviving plays Sophocles differs from Euripides and Aeschylus in preferring to open the action with more than one character in dialogue.

1 Children The people Oedipus addresses include old men as well as children (9, 16–17). His first word in the play suggests paternal benevolence (see 58, note on 96, 142; also (the priest speaking) 147).

1 new blood of old Cadmus Cadmus was the founder of Thebes. The Delphic oracle commanded him to found a city in Boeotia, sowing a dragon’s teeth to create a new earth-born population whose descendants are addressed here. (See *Genealogical table*, page viii; 29.)

3 supplication In ancient Greece, the weak might ‘supplicate’ those with power: for example, a defeated enemy would beg for mercy. Suppliants were seen as being under the protection of Zeus, most powerful god of all. Supplication usually involved kneeling and touching the chin or knee of the person whose favour was being sought. Here the people of Thebes are kneeling and carry ritual emblems of supplication – branches of olive or laurel draped with wool. Supplication by mortals of gods generally took the form of prayer (see 913, 920).

5 the Healer One of the titles of the god Apollo (see note on 154).

8 ‘Famous Oedipus’ Oedipus’ reference to his past has a heroic ring and reminds the audience that there is a story behind his rise to kingship. Further hints or reminders are dropped in the course of the Prologue (35–57). To the original audience, the story of Oedipus and the Sphinx was well known (see *Background to the story*, page v).

OEDIPUS Children, new blood of old Cadmus,
Why are you all sitting here before me,
Carrying branches of supplication?
The city is full of the smell of incense,
Of hymns to the Healer and cries of suffering. 5
I thought it wrong to rely on the reports
Of others, so have come here myself,
'Famous Oedipus', as everyone calls me.
Old man, tell me – it is right that you
Should speak for these people – what has brought you all here? 10
Fear, or some request? I am ready
To give any help I can. I would be a hard man
Not to feel sympathy for a gathering like this.



Max Reinhardt's production of Oedipus Rex at Covent Garden in 1912.

Priests and gods

Ancient Greece was a polytheistic society and the people of Thebes appeal to several different gods for help (see note on 21). The old man selected by Oedipus to be the people's spokesman is a priest of Zeus. Priests were concerned principally with ritual: maintaining the temple, receiving offerings and presiding at sacrifices. They might help lead civic prayers but did not monopolise religious actions or decisions. The distinction between religion and government was slight; city authorities were involved in the management of religion.

14 ruler of my country (See note on 35.)

16 Sitting at your altars These words contrast with those of Oedipus, 'sitting here before me' (2). Although there is no necessary conflict in supplicating both man and god, the priest emphasises the religious nature of his appeal. There is an ambiguity in the words 'your altars'; the priest, however, is careful not to confuse Oedipus with a god (31).

20–1 at the twin shrines/Of Athene Athene was the protecting goddess of Athens, but was worshipped all over the Greek world. It would not be unusual to have more than one temple devoted to a single god (e.g. in Athens the temples of Athene Parthenos and Athene Nike are near to each other on Athens' citadel, the Acropolis).

21 the prophetic embers of Ismenus Ismenus was a local river that had close links with Apollo. Here the reference is to an oracular altar in Thebes. The embers show that the fire is *dying* because divination (consultation of the gods by burnt offerings) has already been tried.

The priest's language

The priest's language is colourful, rich in metaphor. He likens the youngest members of the gathering to baby birds, barely able to fly (16–17), and uses the repeated image of agricultural blight in 'wasting' (25–6). See also notes on 27, 30 and 39. He introduces the simile of the city as a ship and Oedipus as its helmsman (23–4, note on 56), an image used by others later in the play (104, 423, 923).

● What other aspects of the priest's language are striking?

27 The fiery god (plague) is later identified with Ares (see 190).

29 the house of Cadmus is the city of Thebes (see note on 1).

30 black Hades Hades was god of the underworld, the destination of the dead. Hades is growing rich (*ploutizetai*) from those dying in the plague. The priest makes a grim pun on his alternative name, Plouton (Pluto in Latin), linked with the word for wealth or riches (*ploutos*).

PRIEST Oedipus, ruler of my country,
You see us here – people of all ages 15
Sitting at your altars, some not yet
Strong enough to have flown far, others bowed with age;
Priests – I serve Zeus – and the pick of our young men.
The rest of the people, holding suppliant branches,
Are sitting in the town squares, at the twin shrines 20
Of Athene, and by the prophetic embers of Ismenus.
The city, as you can see for yourself,
Is like a ship caught in a storm at sea, unable
To keep afloat and escape the deadly waves.
She's wasting away – in the husks her soil produces, 25
Wasting away in the pasturing herds, and in the children
Stillborn to our women. The fiery god has struck
And is driving our city – a plague hated by all.
He is emptying the house of Cadmus; and with our groans
And lamentations, black Hades is growing rich. 30



*Interior of Attic red-figure cup by the Oedipus Painter.
Oedipus and the Sphinx.*

Blight

The priest graphically reveals the nature of the crisis: the city is stricken by a blight that prevents new growth and is destroying it.

31 It is not because we think of you as the gods' equal Failing to recognise the distinction between god and man was believed by the Greeks to lead to terrible consequences.

35 It was you, when you came to this city We learn here that Oedipus has not always lived in Thebes (hence, perhaps, the priest's address in 14 as 'ruler of *my* country') and that he has saved them in the past by solving the Sphinx's riddle.

The riddle of the Sphinx

'The remorseless singer' (36) is a reference to the well-known story of the Sphinx (see note on 8). She is named at 130 (compare 391, 507) (see illustration on page 5). The Theban Sphinx set a riddle and 'bound' (*sphinxai*) the Thebans to answer it. The riddle itself is never quoted in Sophocles' *Oedipus* but other versions survive (see *Background to the story*, page vi). As will be seen, the thematic significance of the riddle to the play is all-pervasive. (See **One witness, one clue** page 12.)

39 you set our lives to rights The idea of setting straight or upright (Greek: *orth-*) recurs in the priest's appeal (see 46, 50, 51). The image may suggest the raising of a suppliant or keeping a ship or chariot on course.

40 all-powerful ruler 46 best of men

- Does the priest flatter Oedipus?

43 knowledge from either god or man The priest speculates on how Oedipus was able to solve the riddle when others had failed. He speaks of Oedipus' 'readiness to act' (48) and seems to accept the possibility of some sort of divine assistance (38, 52). Later Oedipus expresses his own view on the source of his knowledge (398).

56 A walled town, like a ship This metaphor recurs, as do sea-faring metaphors generally (see **The priest's language** page 4).

Oedipus and the priest

- Both Oedipus and the priest are figures of authority: from where does each derive that authority? What relationship has been established between them in lines 1–57?
- How do you account for the warning tone of lines 46–57?

It is not because we think of you as the gods' equal
That I and these boys are sitting as your suppliants.
We judge that you more than any man can guide us
In life's troubles and in dealings with the gods.
It was you, when you came to this city, who delivered us 35
From the toll that we paid to the remorseless singer.
You did this without any special knowledge
Or instruction from us; it was with some god's help,
So men say and believe, that you set our lives to rights.
Now, Oedipus, all-powerful ruler, 40
All of us here turn to you in supplication
To find us some help – perhaps some message you have heard,
Giving you knowledge from either god or man.
As I see it, it is those with experience
Whose advice most often leads to effective action. 45
Come then, best of men, raise up our city –
Come, but take care: this land now calls you 'saviour'
Because of your readiness to act before.
Never let us remember your reign
As one that set us upright, only to let us fall. 50
Hold this city up, and keep her safe.
A bird of good omen was with you when you helped us before.
Bring us that same luck now.
If you're to go on ruling this land as now you do,
Better to rule men than a desert. 55
A walled town, like a ship, is worth nothing
If it is empty, with no one to man it.

58–9 I know ... I fully understand ... I am well aware Oedipus speaks emphatically of his understanding. His last verb of knowing (*oïda* in Greek) suggests his own name, *Oidi-pous* (*pous* in Greek means foot) (see also notes on 397, 1036). Man's knowledge – and its limitations – is the dominant theme in this play.

- What other signs of mental activity does Oedipus give in his speech (58–77)?

Sickness

Oedipus uses the city's sufferings as a metaphor for his own situation. He develops an argument about the relationship between ruler and ruled in which he as ruler comes to represent the city collectively, channelling its cares. Elsewhere he again claims that his individual interests are subordinate to those of the state (93–4, 443; 1411).

68 only one remedy Sustaining the metaphor, Oedipus prescribes as cure the consultation of the oracle at Delphi. The idea of treating the blight on the city as something requiring medical or human healing is not entertained: as in Homer's *Iliad* *i*, the problem is recognised as being of divine origin (see note on 154 and **Plague?** page 16).

70 Creon, my own brother-in-law See *Genealogical table*, page viii. Oedipus' marriage is first alluded to here (see 260).

The Delphic oracle

The oracle of Apollo in Delphi, on the slopes of Mt Parnassus (see 475, map on page vii), had been the most famous in the Greek world for the best part of three hundred years when this play was written. For states and individuals to travel to Delphi (the 'earth's navel' 481) to consult the oracle was regular practice in the late fifth century when this play was first produced. The advice given was often obscure or ambiguous. In this play three crucial oracles from Delphi are rejected or not understood by their human recipients.

Oedipus the king (see note on 514)

- What impressions of Oedipus as ruler have you formed from the opening 77 lines of the play?
- How might these impressions affect the way in which Oedipus might be dressed and move in a modern performance? Would he wear the trappings of royal power (see, for example, the picture on page 11)? How might this contrast with the priest's costume? Should Oedipus mingle amongst his people or keep his distance?

OEDIPUS I know, poor children, I fully understand
The desire that has brought you here; I am well aware
Of your sickness. But the sickness that you all suffer 60
Is less than mine – none of you can match it.
The pain you feel is a private one –
Your own, no one else's; whereas I groan in my heart
For the city, for myself, and for each one of you.
You are not stirring me out of some deep slumber; 65
Believe me, I've shed many tears
And let my mind range over many paths of thought.
After careful reflection I could find only one remedy:
This I've pursued. I have sent the son of Menoecus,
Creon, my own brother-in-law, to Apollo's shrine 70
In Delphi, to see if he can find out
What I can say or do to save this city.
In fact, I have been counting off the days
And I'm worried; he has been away for longer
Than expected – longer than he should be taking. 75
But when he does come, then I would be wrong
Not to do all that the god makes clear.

PRIEST Your remark is well timed; these people have just now
Pointed out to me Creon approaching.

The arrival of Creon

Oedipus' words expressing anxiety about Creon's late return (73–5) anticipate his arrival on stage. The size of Greek theatres contributed to the audience's difficulty in recognising new characters and it was conventional to identify them as they arrived. In the original production Creon would have appeared from one of the *parodoi* (see plan of the Greek theatre, page 114).

83 thickly crowned with laurel The priest is first to spot the wreath of laurel, sacred to the god Apollo.

87 Good news Creon's next words hint that the 'cure' will not be easy.

92 perhaps you'd rather go inside In Greek tragedy there is a practical problem about reporting 'private words' (which could not be heard if they were spoken 'inside' the *skēnē*), but Sophocles seems deliberately to highlight this moment of decision, indicating a possible alternative to the public proclamation that follows.

- What differences in their characters/views on government do Creon's remark and Oedipus' reply at lines 91–4 suggest?

Pollution (*miasma*)

The idea that a community could be infected by the impious act of an individual ran deep in ancient Greek thought. Often murderers had to leave their community and travel to find purification. The best-known case in the Greek tragic world was that of Orestes, whose search for purification for the murder of his mother forms the subject of the *Eumenides*, the concluding play of Aeschylus' trilogy the *Oresteia* (see note on 472, line 1012). The historian Thucydides describes an attempt to use a blood-curse to exile Pericles, the pre-eminent politician of his day, not long before this play is thought to have been written (i. 126–7).

Clear instructions?

In lines 96–111 Creon gradually reveals what the oracle has said, twice stating that these instructions are clear (97, 106). Oracular responses are typically obscure (see note on **The Delphic oracle**, page 8, and on 791–3) and it would be unlikely, for example, that Laius was named as the murder victim (103).

- How clear are the words of the oracle? Do you think Creon is quoting or paraphrasing? Does it matter (see 243, 306–9)?

96 The pollution we've been nursing The Greek word (*troph-/troph-*) occurs frequently in this play. It means to rear, feed or nurture and is used in the first line of the 'new blood' (more literally 'new brood/rearing') of Cadmus. (See also 98, 323, 374 'wrapped'.)

OEDIPUS Lord Apollo, may he bring salvation,
As the brightness in his eye suggests he does. 80

PRIEST I would guess his news is welcome – otherwise
His head wouldn't be so thickly crowned with laurel.

OEDIPUS We'll know soon enough; he's within hearing distance.
My lord, son of Menoeceus, brother, 85
What message do you bring us from the god?

CREON Good news. For I say that even hardship
Is all for the best, if the outcome is good.

OEDIPUS But what did the oracle say? Your words just now
Can give me neither confidence nor fear. 90

CREON If you want to hear me with all these people near
I'm ready to speak; but perhaps you'd rather go inside.

OEDIPUS Speak out in front of us all. I suffer more
For these people than for myself.

CREON I'll tell you what I heard from the god. 95
The pollution we've been nursing in this land –
Apollo clearly orders us, my lord,
To drive it out, not nurture it; it can't be cured.



Douglas Campbell as Oedipus in the Stratford (Ontario) Festival's production of Oedipus Rex, directed by Tyrone Guthrie, 1955.

103 Laius King of Thebes and husband of Queen Jocasta before Oedipus (see *Genealogical table*, page viii).

104 set the city back on course This image is to do with steering in the right direction, developing the nautical idea of the city as a ship and Oedipus as helmsman (see notes on 39 and 56).

109 Any trail will be hard to find Oedipus uses hunting imagery (see 221, 476 and note on 541).

112 Was Laius murdered at home or in the country? Oedipus' speech since the arrival of Creon has been largely a sequence of questions. Now, with characteristic *prothūmia* ('readiness to act' 48), he launches his 'search' in obedience to the oracle's instructions (see note on 278). The effect of these questions is to inform not only Oedipus but also the audience of the recent history of Thebes before the Sphinx's reign of terror and Oedipus' victory (see note on 8).

114 He'd left Thebes – to consult the oracle We do not hear what Laius' intended question to the oracle was. In Euripides' *Phoenissae* (see **Sophoclean prologues** page 2) his childlessness is given as a reason – a common enough motive (Aegeus in Euripides' *Medea* asks oracular advice on the same question) but one which, for reasons which become apparent, does not suit Sophocles' version.

One witness, one clue

Despite – or perhaps because of – Oedipus' eager questioning, he appears not to master the one clue offered to him. Oedipus is told of a witness (118–19), a fact he does not follow up until line 765; he is also told – emphatically – that Laius was the victim of a group of robbers (122–3), yet in the next line Oedipus uses the singular (see also 247; cf. 845). This is perhaps surprising for a man who has shown awareness of the importance of number (e.g. his counting off the days of Creon's absence (73–5) and his solution of the Sphinx's riddle – see **The riddle of the Sphinx** page 6).

- Suggest reasons for Oedipus' use of the singular in line 124.

125 Unless he was hired to do the job by someone here? This is the germ of a conspiracy theory that Oedipus will develop in the following scene (see 378–403).

128 What 'trouble' stopped you...? Oedipus' question carries with it a reproach, understandable coming from the ruler who had taken the dead king's place (see also 138–41). He repeats the question to Creon later in the play (566).

- How excusable do you find Creon's response to this criticism?
Whose responsibility was it to carry out an investigation?

OEDIPUS How can we cleanse ourselves? How have things gone
so wrong?

CREON Someone must be exiled, or a death must pay for a death. 100
The spilling of blood has brought this storm on the city.

OEDIPUS Who is the man? Whose fate does the god refer to?

CREON My lord, Laius was once the ruler of this land –
Before you set the city back on course.

OEDIPUS I know – I’ve heard of him, though I never saw him. 105

CREON He was killed, and now our instructions are clear:
To make those who killed him pay.

OEDIPUS Where are these men? The crime happened long ago;
Any trail will be hard to find. Where do we start?

CREON In this land, he said. If we search, we can find it; 110
But if we’re negligent, it slips our grasp.

OEDIPUS Was Laius murdered at home or in the country?
Or did he meet his death in some other land?

CREON He’d left Thebes – to consult the oracle, he said.
But after he’d gone he never came home again. 115

OEDIPUS Was there no messenger, no fellow traveller who saw
What happened – someone from whom we could usefully learn?

CREON Dead, all but one. He fled in fear and couldn’t talk
Clearly about what he saw – except for one thing.

OEDIPUS What was that? We could learn a lot from one clue. 120
Even a small start might give us grounds for hope.

CREON He said it was a group of robbers who met Laius
And killed him – working together, not just one man.

OEDIPUS What could have made a robber so daring –
Unless he was hired to do the job by someone here? 125

CREON This was suspected; but after Laius died,
We had our troubles, and no one to help us.

OEDIPUS What ‘trouble’ stopped you from learning all there was
to know,
When your ruler had died in such circumstances?

131 Immediate problems The Greek literally says ‘what was at our feet’.

A fresh start

Oedipus is plausibly portrayed as an energetic leader, full of confidence and resolution. The contrast with the same man at the end of the play will be stark. He does not anticipate how far back he will need to go to find ‘the beginning’.

137–8 it’s not for some distant friend/But for my own sake In Athenian law prosecutions for murder could only be initiated by a relative of the victim. Oedipus’ insistence on his connection with Laius (see also 258–64; cf. note on 128) seems in part a justification for taking up the ‘case’. Those familiar with the myth of Oedipus (see *Background to the story*, page v) will recognise the chilling irony in these words (see **Dramatic irony** page 22).

142 Quick as you can now, children, rise from these steps A sense of closure is given to the opening scene by these words which echo the first lines of the play.

144 Someone, go and bring the people of Cadmus together here Oedipus’ words herald the arrival of the Chorus. We heard from the priest that throughout Thebes prayers and offerings are being made at the city’s shrines (19–21). As the Chorus – consisting of citizens of Thebes (see page 16) – enter the *orchēstra* singing, the audience hear their prayers.

147–8 This man has publicly/Proclaimed all that we came for The priest closes with a prayer to Apollo and leaves with his group of suppliants. It remains to be seen how Apollo will answer.

- Is the priest right to be satisfied with Oedipus’ response?

Review of the Prologue

- What have we learned of Oedipus’ character and background from his own words and the priest’s response to him?
- Consider the physical appearance of the suppliants. How might they be dressed? Would it be more effective if they remain still during the scene, or move about? How mobile should they be? What effects are created by increasing or decreasing the numbers in the deputation? (See the picture on page 3.)

CREON The Sphinx, with her riddling songs, made us look to Immediate problems, putting aside unsolved mysteries.	130
OEDIPUS Then I shall go back to the beginning again, and make all clear.	
Apollo has done well, and so have you, To draw attention to the dead man's cause.	
You will, then, find in me a true ally – Seeking vengeance for this land, and for the god as well.	135
After all, it's not for some distant friend But for my own sake that I'll be ridding us of this pollution.	
For whoever it was that killed Laius May choose to strike again, just as violently,	140
So in assisting him, I am helping myself. Quick as you can now, children, rise from these steps And take away your branches of supplication.	
Someone, go and bring the people of Cadmus together here To witness that I will do all I can: either, with the god's help, We shall be seen to prosper – or to fall.	145
PRIEST Let us rise now, children. This man has publicly Proclaimed all that we came for. May Apollo, who sent this oracle, Come to save and deliver us from our plague.	150

PARODOS (ENTRY OF THE CHORUS) (151–215)

The chorus was central to Athenian tragedy; it may have developed out of choral songs and dances in honour of Dionysus. Once the chorus have entered they remain until the end – observing and commenting on the action. All odes are in lyric metres and were sung; most are arranged in pairs of stanzas (*strophē* and *antistrophē*) where the second mirrors the rhythms (and probably the dance steps) of the first. The language tends to be rich and rhythmically complex. The Chorus in this play consists of ‘elders’ (1110).

News of the oracle’s response has passed swiftly through the city. The Chorus speculate about it (151–7), then begin a prayer of supplication (158–67). A lament follows, developing some of the priest’s images of plague. This ends with further appeals to Apollo and Athene (168–89). In 190–202 the Chorus launch an attack on Ares as god of destruction, calling on Zeus as champion. Finally they rally Apollo, Artemis and Dionysus to oppose Ares (203–15).

151 Sweet voice of Zeus, in what guise have you come From at least the time of Homer’s *Iliad* human destiny was represented as dependent on Zeus’ will. The prophecy from Zeus’ son Apollo could not come without his sanction and the two generally work in harmony (see note on 469–70). The Chorus seem not to know the nature of the prophecy, merely that the oracle has responded (see First *Stasimon* page 38).

154 Delian lord of healing The reference here and in 162 is to Apollo, who with his twin sister Artemis (159, 207) was born on Delos. Most of Apollo’s attributes are benevolent: he is god of healing, the sun, music and the arts, and prophecy. But much in Greek thought is viewed in terms of opposites: as god of healing he is also the god who can bring plague. The Chorus show both mortal dread and hope. Apollo is the most pervasive divine presence in the play; in the *Parodos* he is invoked again at lines 162 and 203–5; his ‘unerring arrows’ are used in *Iliad i* against the Greeks at Troy (see note on 68 and **Pollution** page 10).

158 Athene (See note on 20–1.)

159 Artemis (See note on 154.) Twin of Apollo, daughter of Zeus and Leto (worshipped as goddess ‘of Fair Repute’).

Plague?

Some of the details in lines 174–85 suggest the blight is not only affecting those yet to be born. In Sophocles’ lifetime Athens experienced plague as a result of overcrowding in 429–425 BC, the early years of the Peloponnesian War documented in Thucydides *ii*. The date of *Oedipus Tyrannus* is uncertain but it may belong to this period.

CHORUS Sweet voice of Zeus, in what guise have you come
 From golden Delphi to glorious Thebes?
 I am tense with fear; my heart shakes in dread of you,
 Delian lord of healing,
 What debt will you be calling in – 155
 A new one or an old – as the seasons come round?
 Tell me, child of golden Hope, immortal Oracle.
 First I call on you, daughter of Zeus, deathless Athene,
 Then on sister Artemis,
 Famed guardian of our land, 160
 Seated on her throne in the heart of our city;
 Thirdly I ask Phoebus the archer:
 Trinity of gods, appear before us, protecting us from death.
 When ruin loomed
 Over our city before 165
 You banished its searing flame,
 So come to us again now.

Ah, I have lost count of my sufferings.
 All the people of my city are sick,
 And there is no weapon we can think of 170
 To defend ourselves. Nothing grows
 From our rich soil; our women have no live births
 To help them through the cries of labour.
 One after another you can see the dead,
 Like birds of omen, 175
 Speeding more fiercely than unquenchable fire
 To the coast of the god of darkness.

And, losing count of its dead,
 The city dies.
 Its children lie unpitied and unlamented 180
 On the ground, infected with death;
 Meanwhile, wives and white-haired mothers
 Come from all over the city to the altar-ground,
 Crying for deliverance
 From the suffering that destroys them. 185

Lament

Lines 168–87 consist of a lament for the city. The repetition ‘lost/losing count’ (168 and 178) helps bind together these two stanzas.

- How closely do the details correspond with those given by the priest in 25–30? How do the two descriptions differ in language and intensity?
- In the original production, the *Parodos* would have been sung. Consider what effects might be achieved by adding a simple rhythmical accompaniment to these lines.

190 Ares The representation of Ares almost as the personification of destruction is striking as we see the desperate and impassioned response of the Thebans to their relentless suffering. Thucydides (*ii*, ch. 49) records the sensation of burning (see also 27) in his account of the symptoms of the plague in Athens (see **Plague?** page 16). The Chorus’ wish that Ares should be routed or ‘Wafted by the winds’ (195) is a poetic expression of their desire for his destructive violence to end.

195–6 to Amphitrite’s great bedchamber/Or to the Thracian breakers Thrace was to the far north-east of Greece. The bedchamber of Amphitrite, wife of the sea-god Poseidon, is likely to be the Atlantic.

209 Bacchus is an alternative name for Dionysus, the god within whose sacred precinct in Athens the theatre stood. The Chorus’ appeal is particularly appropriate since by tradition Dionysus was born in Thebes. His associations with wine, Bacchantes (his ecstatic female followers with their characteristic cry, *Euhoe!* 211–12) and the riches of the East (‘gold-turbaned’ 209), where Dionysus reputedly travelled before returning to establish his worship in Greece, are alluded to here (see also 1105).

Review of the *Parodos*

- How do the invocations of gods in the last two stanzas differ from those in the first two? How different is the tone?
- Is there any sense from the Chorus that Apollo is responsible for the blight?
- What sort of effects could be produced by use of either separate voices or instruments to characterise the different gods and ideas in this ode?

The prayer to the Healer blazes out
In unison with the voice of suffering.
Answer them, golden daughter of Zeus:
Send your sweet-faced protection.

As for Ares, the destroyer, 190
Who, without armour of bronze,
Now faces me in the fray surrounded by screams,
And burns me up,
Make him turn tail and rush in flight from my land,
Wafted by the winds to Amphitrite's great bedchamber 195
Or to the Thracian breakers
Hostile to ships;
For if night offers any relief,
He comes by day to complete his work.
Father Zeus, you control the fiery lightning: 200
Blast Ares to a cinder
With your thunderbolt.

Apollo, lord of light,
May your arrows be our aid and our defence –
Shot unerringly from your gold-strung bow – 205
And those fiery torches
With which Artemis speeds
Through the mountains of Lycia;
I call upon Bacchus too, gold-turbaned,
God of this land 210
Flushed with wine, summoned with a cry
By his own troop of ecstatic women:
Come close, blazing
With radiant pine-brand
Against Ares, a god dishonoured among gods. 215

FIRST EPISODE (216–462)

Stage directions

Most entrances and exits are indicated by the actors or chorus (see **The arrival of Creon** page 10). We are not told whether Oedipus remains on stage during the *Parodos*.

- What are the dramatic advantages and disadvantages of Oedipus remaining visible for part or all of the *Parodos*?

216–18 You pray... Oedipus seems confident that the answer to his people's prayers lies in human action and enquiry.

- How 'godlike' does Oedipus sound in his opening words here? (cf. 31–43)
- Compare the tone of the opening words of the play and lines 58–67 with Oedipus' lines here. How might an actor or director reflect any change (voice, costume, attendants etc.)?

219 a stranger Oedipus draws attention to the difference between his own history as a newcomer and that of the Thebans, suggesting (ironically, as it turns out – see **Dramatic irony** page 22) that he is in the weakest position to find the killer.

221 some clue The Greek word for 'clue' is *sumbolon*, a sign or token (see note on 1059). Oedipus seems to suggest that he is already 'on the trail' (see note on 109). As well as establishing that Laius was murdered, he has had some preliminary thoughts as to motive (see 124–5), including the hypothesis that the murderer may strike again (140).

Oedipus' proclamation

Consider lines 224–43 of Oedipus' proclamation.

- Public appeals on radio or television to help catch a criminal are familiar to us. How does Oedipus' approach here compare with these?
- What qualities in Oedipus as a ruler are revealed? Among others, consider the following adjectives: *merciful*, *resolute*, *weak*, *ruthless*, *tyrannical*, *kind*, *practical*, *optimistic*.
- Where might an actor pause during these lines and for what effect? How might the Chorus respond?

230–1 a stranger/From abroad See **Dramatic irony** page 22, note on 350–1 and 452.

The consequences

Refusing an individual the communal privileges mentioned in lines 237–40 in effect means exclusion and disgrace. The heaviness of this penalty is a recurrent subject in the heroic world of Greek tragedy. In the fifth century, too, exile was a powerful form of degradation (see Herodotus *viii*, ch. 61; Thucydides *i*, ch. 126–7).