OEDIPUS
My children, latest generation born from Cadmus,
why are you sitting here with wreathed sticks
in supplication to me, while the city
fills with incense, chants, and cries of pain?
Children, it would not be appropriate for me
to learn of this from any other source,
so I have come in person—I, Oedipus,
whose fame all men acknowledge. But you there,
old man, tell me—you seem to be the one
who ought to speak for those assembled here.
What feeling brings you to me—fear or desire?
You can be confident that I will help.
I shall assist you willingly in every way.
I would be a hard-hearted man indeed,
if I did not pity suppliants like these.

PRIEST
Oedipus, ruler of my native land,
you see how people here of every age
are crouching down around your altars,
some fledglings barely strong enough to fly
and others bent by age, with priests as well—
for I’m priest of Zeus—and these ones here,
the pick of all our youth. The other groups
sit in the market place with suppliant sticks
or else in front of Pallas’ two shrines,
or where Ismenus prophesies with fire.
For our city, as you yourself can see,
is badly shaken—she cannot raise her head
above the depths of so much surging death.
Disease infects fruit blossoms in our land,
disease infects our herds of grazing cattle,
makes women in labour lose their children.
And deadly pestilence, that fiery god,
swoops down to blast the city, emptying
the House of Cadmus, and fills black
Hades
with groans and howls. These children and myself
now sit here by your home, not because we think
you’re equal to the gods. No. We judge you
the first of men in what happens in this life
and in our interactions with the gods.
For you came here, to our Cadmeian city,
and freed us from the tribute we were paying
to that cruel singer—and yet you knew
no more than we did and had not been taught.
In their stories, the people testify
how, with gods’ help, you gave us back our lives.
So now, Oedipus, our king, most
powerful
in all men’s eyes, we’re here as suppliants,
all begging you to find some help for us,
either by listening to a heavenly voice,
or learning from some other human being.
For, in my view, men of experience
provide advice which gives the best results.
So now, you best of men, raise up our state.
Act to consolidate your fame, for now,
thanks to your eagerness in earlier days,
the city celebrates you as its saviour.
Don’t let our memory of your ruling
here
declare that we were first set right again,
and later fell. No. Restore our city,
so that it stands secure. In those times past
you brought us joy—and with good omens, too.
Be that same man today. If you’re to rule
as you are doing now, it’s better to be king
in a land of men than in a desert.
An empty ship or city wall is nothing
if no men share your life together there.

OEDIPUS

My poor children, I know why you have come—
I am not ignorant of what you yearn for.
For I well know that you are ill, and
yet,
sick as you are, there is not one of you
whose illness equals mine. Your agony
comes to each one of you as his alone,
a special pain for him and no one else.
But the soul inside me sorrows for myself,
and for the city, and for you—all together.
You are not rousing me from a deep sleep.
You must know I’ve been shedding many tears
and, in my wandering thoughts, exploring
many pathways. After a careful search
I followed up the one thing I could find
and acted on it. So I have sent away
my brother-in-law, son of Menoeceus,
Creon, to Pythian Apollo’s
shrine,
to learn from him what I might do or say
to save our city. But when I count the days—
the time he’s been away—I now worry
what he’s doing. For he’s been gone too long,
well past the time he should have taken.
But when he comes, I’ll be a wicked man
if I do not act on all the god reveals.

PRIEST
What you have said is most appropriate,
for these men here have just informed me
that Creon is approaching.

OEDIPUS

Lord Apollo,
as he returns may fine shining fortune,
bright as his countenance, attend on him.

PRIEST
It seems the news he brings is good—if not,
he would not wear that wreath around his head,
a laurel thickly packed with berries.

OEDIPUS
We’ll know soon enough—he’s within earshot.

[Enter CREON. OEDIPUS calls to him as he approaches]

My royal kinsman, child of Menoeceus,
what message from the god do you bring us?

CREON
Good news. I tell you even troubles
difficult to bear will all end happily
if events lead to the right conclusion.
OEDIPUS
   What is the oracle? So far your words
   inspire in me no confidence or
   fear.

CREON
   If you wish to hear the news in public,
   I’m prepared to speak. Or we could step inside.

OEDIPUS
   Speak out to everyone. The grief I feel
   for these citizens is even greater
   than any pain I feel for my own life.

CREON
   Then let me report what I heard from the god.
   Lord Phoebus clearly orders us to drive away
   the polluting stain this land has harboured—
   which will not be healed if we keep nursing it.

OEDIPUS
   What sort of cleansing? And this disaster—
   how did it happen?

CREON
   By banishment—
   or atone for murder by shedding blood again.
   This blood brings on the storm which blasts our state.