

Summary Lines 1311 to 1684

The Chorus enters and cries that even Oedipus, greatest of men, was brought low by destiny, for he unknowingly murdered his father and married his mother. The messenger enters again to tell the Chorus what has happened in the palace. Jocasta is dead, by suicide. She locked herself in her bedroom, crying for Laius and weeping for her monstrous fate. Oedipus came to the door in a fury, asking for a sword and cursing Jocasta. He finally hurled himself at the bedroom door and burst through it, where he saw Jocasta hanging from a noose. Seeing this, Oedipus sobbed and embraced Jocasta. He then took the gold pins that held her robes and, with them, stabbed out his eyes. He kept raking the pins down his eyes, crying that he could not bear to see the world now that he had learned the truth.

Just as the messenger finishes the story, Oedipus emerges from the palace. With blood streaming from his blind eyes, he fumes and rants at his fate, and at the infinite darkness that embraces him. He claims that though Apollo ordained his destiny, it was he alone who pierced his own eyes. He asks that he be banished from Thebes. The Chorus shrinks away from Oedipus as he curses his birth, his marriage, his life, and in turn all births, marriages, and lives.

Creon enters, and the Chorus expresses hope that he can restore order. Creon forgives Oedipus for his past accusations of treason and asks that Oedipus be sent inside so that the public display of shame might stop. Creon agrees to exile Oedipus from the city, but tells him that he will only do so if every detail is approved by the gods. Oedipus embraces the hope of exile, since he believes that, for some reason, the gods want to keep him alive. He says that his two sons are men and can take care of themselves, but asks that Creon take care of his girls, whom he would like to see one final time.

The girls, Antigone and Ismene, come forth, crying. Oedipus embraces them and says he weeps for them, since they will be excluded from society, and no man will want to marry the offspring of an incestuous marriage. He turns to Creon and asks him to promise that he will take care of them. He reaches out to Creon, but Creon will not

touch his hand. Oedipus asks his daughters to pray that they may have a better life than his. Creon then puts an end to the farewell, saying that Oedipus has wept shamefully long enough. Creon orders the guards to take Antigone and Ismene away from Oedipus, and tells Oedipus that his power has ended. Everyone exits, and the Chorus comes onstage once more. Oedipus, greatest of men, has fallen, they say, and so all life is miserable, and only death can bring peace.

Analysis

The speech of the Chorus, with which this section begins (1311–1350), turns the images of the plowman and ship's captain, which formerly stood for Oedipus's success and ability to manage the state, into images of his failure. And the way in which it does so is quite extreme, focusing particularly on the sexual aspect of Oedipus's actions. Oedipus and his father have, like two ships in one port, shared the same "wide harbor," and Oedipus has plowed the same "furrows" his father plowed (1334–1339). The harbor image ostensibly refers to Jocasta's bedchamber, but both images also quite obviously refer to the other space Oedipus and his father have shared: Jocasta sexually.

Images of earth and soil continue throughout the scene, most noticeably in one of Oedipus's final speeches, in which he talks to his children about what he has done (see 1621–1661). These images of earth, soil, and plowing are used to suggest the metaphor of the sturdy plowman tilling the soil of the state, but they also suggest the image of the soil drinking the blood of the family members Oedipus has killed (see in particular 1531–1537). Oedipus's crimes are presented as a kind of blight on the land, a plague—symbolized by the plague with which the play begins—that infects the earth on which Oedipus, his family, and his citizens stand, and in which all are buried as a result of Oedipus's violence.

After we learn of Oedipus's self-inflicted blinding, Oedipus enters, led by a boy (1432)—a clear visual echo of the Tiresias's entrance at line 337. Oedipus has become like the blind prophet whose words he scorned. Unable to see physically, he

is now possessed of an insight, or an inner sight, that is all too piercing and revealing. Though the Chorus is fascinated with the amount of physical pain Oedipus must be in after performing such an act, Oedipus makes no mention of physical pain. Like Tiresias, he has left the concerns of the physical world behind to focus on the psychological torment that accompanies contemplation of the truth.

Once the mystery of Laius's murder has been solved, Creon quickly transfers the power to himself. Even in his newfound humbleness, Oedipus still clings to some trappings of leadership, the most pathetic example being his command to Creon to bury Jocasta as he sees fit. Oedipus finds it difficult to leave the role of commander, which is why he tries to preempt Creon's power by asking Creon to banish him. Creon, however, knows that Oedipus no longer has any real control. Creon is brusque and just as efficient a leader as Oedipus was at the beginning of the play. Just as Oedipus anticipated the Chorus's demand for a consultation with the oracle in the first scene, so Creon has anticipated Oedipus's request for banishment now: when Oedipus requests banishment, Creon says that he's already consulted "the god" about it (1574). Creon has also anticipated Oedipus's desire to see his daughters, and has them brought onstage and taken away again.

Mostly because he is contrasted with Creon, Oedipus becomes a tragic figure rather than a monster in the play's final moments. Though throughout the play Oedipus has behaved willfully and proudly, he has also been earnest and forthright in all of his actions. We trust Oedipus's judgment because he always seems to mean what he says and to try to do what he believes is right. His punishment of blindness and exile seems just, therefore, because he inflicted it upon himself. Creon, on the other hand, has the outward trappings of Oedipus's candid, frank nature, but none of its substance. "I try to say what I mean; it's my habit," Creon tells Oedipus in the play's final lines, but the audience perceives this to be untrue (1671). Creon's earlier protestations that he lacked the desire for power are proved completely false by his eagerness to take Oedipus's place as king, and by the cutting ferocity with which he silences Oedipus at the end of the play. At the end of the play, one kind of pride has

merely replaced another, and all men, as the Chorus goes on to say, are destined to be miserable.