



The Phoenician Women, by Euripides
Recension/translation by David Travis

Jokasta's Opening Monologue

Before the royal palace of Thebes. Jokasta enters from the palace.

Jokasta

O light of day!

What a cruel light you shone on Thebes that day [5]

When Kadmos reached this land from his far Phoenician shore!

He fathered the father of the father of Laius;

Laius was my husband, the king.

I am Jokasta.

After many childless years of living in the palace, [15]

Laius went to Phoebus' oracle to beg the god to bless our union

And grant his wish to sire sons for the house.

But the god said: "Lord of Thebes and its famed horses,

Sow not that furrow, for it is against the will of the gods;

If you beget a son, that child will kill you, [20]

And all your house shall wade through blood."

Despite this warning, one night full of lust and wine

Laius planted his seed in me.

When the child was born, the father knew the danger of his sin;

Fearful of the god's warning,

He gave the child to shepherds to abandon [25]

In Hera's meadow, high on the crag of Kithaeron.

But not before he had the babe's ankles pinned with iron spikes;

This is how it later got its name: "Swollen Foot,"

Or as all of Greece now calls him, "Oedipus."

Horsemen of King Polybos found the child; they carried him home

To lay him in the arms of their queen. [30]

She took the child to breast, he that I had borne, suckled it,

And told her husband that it was her own.

By the time my young son's beard began to grow,

He had either guessed the truth or learned it from another,

And he set out towards the shrine of Phoebus,

To learn his parents' true identity. [35]

On that same day my husband Laius departed for the oracle,

Seeking assurance that the child he had exposed was dead.

And it was thus they met. In middle journey,



At the branching road of Phokis.
The driver of Laius commanded my son: [40]
“Out of the road, Stranger! Make way for the King!”
But he walked on without a word, silent in his pride.
So the horses’ hoofs tore the tendons of his feet...
But the details are irrelevant. The result was disaster:
Son slew father; and he took the team and chariot [45]
And gave them to his foster-father, Polybos.
It was then the Sphinx began her raids, ravaging our kingless city.
My brother Kreon proclaimed to all the land
That he who could guess her riddle
Would be rewarded with my marriage-bed.
And so it was.
It was my son, my Oedipus, who guessed the Sphinx’s song;
And won the scepter of this land
And wed his mother in ignorance, wretched man!
And she never knew herself that she was sleeping with her child. [55]

I bore my son two sons, Eteokles and my famous Polyneikes,
And two daughters; the one her father called Ismene;
The other, which was the elder, I named Antigone.

But when Oedipus learned the truth,
That he had fulfilled the awful prophecy,
That he now lived as husband with his mother, [60]
He had endured all suffering.
And so he searched for solace with a golden brooch,
Slaughtering his own eyes, stabbing them until the pupils burst with blood.

When my two sons were grown to bearded men,
They locked their father out of sight,
So that his misfortune might fade from memory. [65]
But Oedipus lives on within the house.
Afflicted by his fate, he calls down the most unholy curses on his sons,
Praying that they may split their inheritance with sharpened steel
And divide this house with rivers of blood.
Fearful that the gods might fulfill their father’s prayers if they lived together,
My sons made a pact: [70]
Polyneikes, the younger, would first leave the land in voluntary exile;
Eteokles would stay behind in Thebes
To wield the scepter, ruling for one year
And then change places yearly.
But once secure in power, Eteokles refused to yield the throne, [75]



And now he keeps his brother banished from the land.
Polyneikes went to Argos and married into the royal family of Adrastos.
He has collected a great army of Argives
And he has led them here;
He has come against these seven-gated walls, [80]
Claiming his father's scepter, demanding his share of Thebes.
Yet still I hope for peace.
I have persuaded one son to meet the other under truce,
Before battle flares and countless lives are lost.
The messenger I sent tells me he will come.
O Zeus, you who sit in the bright folds of heaven, [85]
Save us from catastrophe!
You of all gods, in your infinite wisdom, must not allow one mortal to be forever
wretched.
O Zeus, hear my prayer! Reconcile my sons!

Jokasta re-enters the palace, as the old servant appears on the roof.