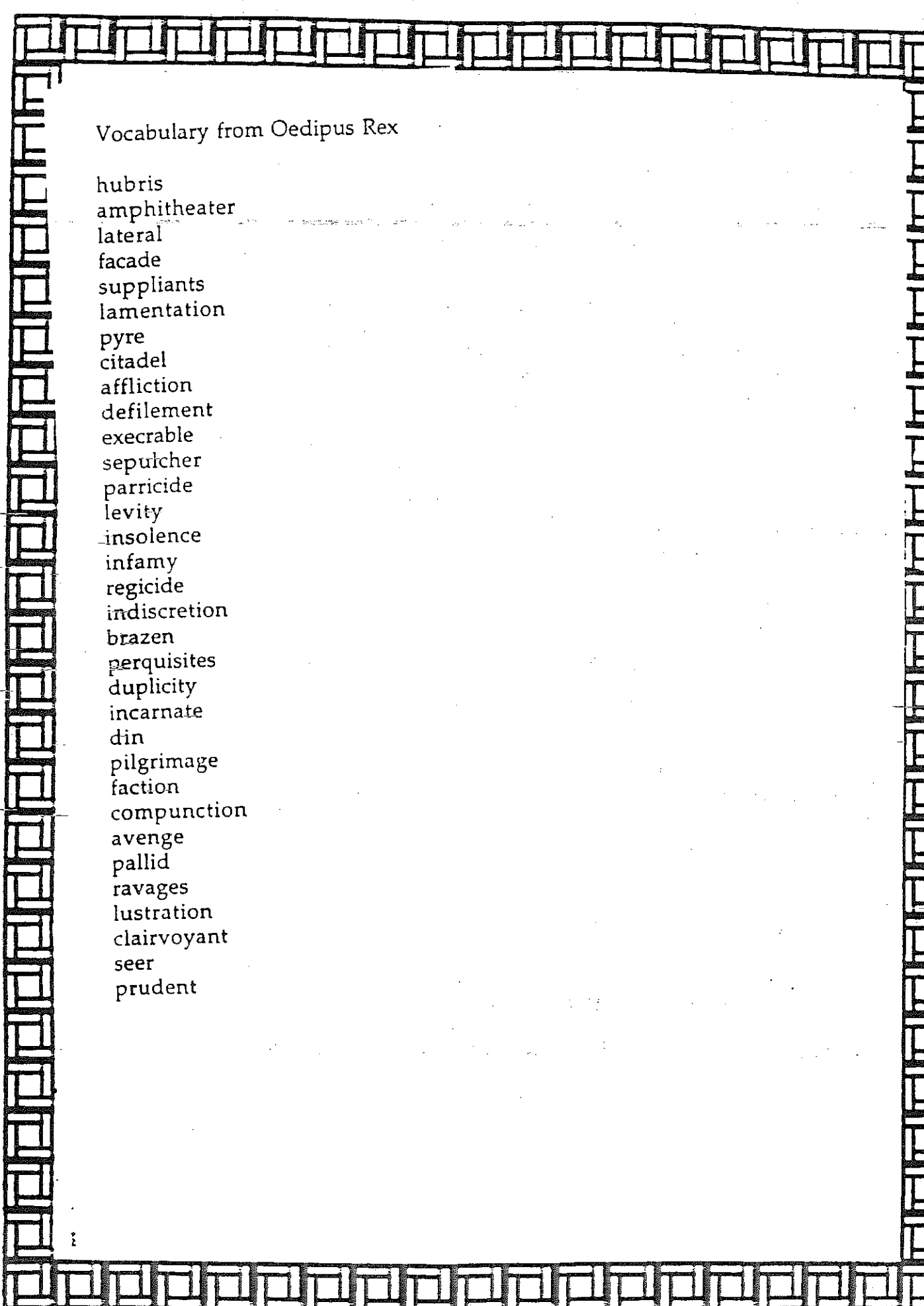


SOPHOCLES THE OEDIPUS CYCLE

OEDIPUS REX
OEDIPUS AT COLONUS
ANTIGONE



ENGLISH VERSIONS BY DUDLEY FITTS & ROBERT FITZGERALD



Vocabulary from Oedipus Rex

hubris
amphitheater
lateral
facade
suppliants
lamentation
pyre
citadel
affliction
defilement
execrable
sepulcher
parricide
levity
insolence
infamy
regicide
indiscretion
brazen
perquisites
duplicity
incarnate
din
pilgrimage
faction
compunction
avenge
pallid
ravages
lustration
clairvoyant
seer
prudent

Oedipus Rex for discussion

1. What admirable qualities do you find in Oedipus? What flaws?
2. Comment on Teiresias's role as the blind seer.
3. Comment on Jocaste's role in this play.
4. What line from the play would you choose that seems to embody the theme of the play?
5. Irony and dramatic irony: Be able to define and give examples of each from this play.
6. What question does Oedipus grapple with that is a universal dilemma?
7. Word play: Choose three quotations that appeal to you; explain the basis of their appeal.

Oedipus myth rooted in historical Egyptian king Akhnaton?

Oedipus and Akhnaton by Immanuel Velikovsky

At the beginning of this book Immanuel Velikovsky asks the intriguing, and quite reasonable, question: Why does the Oedipus legend have a sphinx outside of the Greek city of Thebes, when the sphinx is not part of Greek mythology? He then points out that Egypt, which has a very famous sphinx, also has a city named Thebes. Could the Oedipus legend be a Greek retelling of a historical event that took place in Egypt? From these speculations Velikovsky goes on to present an immense body of data and convincing interpretation of such data, to show that events and people surrounding the ancient Egyptian Pharaoh, Akhnaton, correspond to the major elements and characters in the Oedipus story. This is one of the most fascinating books I've ever read. I realize that many scientists are highly skeptical of Velikovsky's books showing various allegedly mythical stories to have a basis in historical evidence. I am a scientist with 43 years experience at a major research laboratory, and I find many of Velikovsky's positions to be both logical and based on sound historical and archeological evidence. Velikovsky was not a crackpot as some would claim; rather he was one of the most brilliant thinkers of the 20th century. *Amazon review by D. R Schryer (Hampton, VA United States)*

The reign of Akhnaton is considered one of the most interesting periods in the history of ancient Egypt and has inspired many books, but this work by Velikovsky still remains the most fascinating. As far as we know, the religious reform of Akhnaton was abolished, his line died out and his city was abandoned. Velikovsky attempts to elucidate the end of this king, the fate of his two young successors Smenkhare and Tutankhamen, the decline of the kingdom and the fate of Thebes, at the hand of the legends that came down to us from the Greeks. Although his work is controversial, in this book he makes a very strong case for the origin of the Oedipus myth being the true history of Akhnaton and his family. The mysterious relationships, the enigmatic sequence of events and the strange finds in the graves are no longer secret and obscure when illuminated by the legend. The known history in fact ties in perfectly with the details of the legend. Furthermore, the Oedipus legend does not fall into the category of myths that reflect events in nature, because its human character is too obvious. Whatever you think of Velikovsky's alternative history, this book is beautifully written, highly engaging and never less than fascinating in its scope and detail. He even identifies Antigone as Meritaten, the half-sister and wife of Smenkhare, partly based on a beautiful poem inscribed in gold foil that was found under the feet of a mummy in an undisturbed tomb. This moving prayer or word of parting ends with the lines: "Give me thy hands that hold thy soul/I shall embrace and live by it/Call me by name again, again, forever/And never will it sound without response." The text is illumined with 40 black & white plates, including limestone heads of Nefertete and Meritaten, gold coffins and masks of Tutankhamen, the sphinx and the Memnon colossi. "Oedipus and Akhnaton" is a must for those interested in ancient Egypt, in alternative history or in the origin of ancient myths and legends. - *Amazon.com review by Pieter Toypam, Johannesburg*

NEW YORK TIMES, EDITORIAL OBSERVER

Oedipus Max: Four Nights of Anguish and Applause in Sing Sing

By LAWRENCE DOWNES

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OSSINING, N.Y.

To enter a maximum-security prison to see inmates put on a Greek tragedy — in this case “Oedipus Rex” at Sing Sing — is to descend into an echo chamber of ironies. An ancient story of murder and banishment brought to life by banished murderers. Imaginary horrors summoned in solid flesh by men whose own stories are horrifying and real.

It’s a lot to ponder as you hand over wallet, keys, watch and train schedule at the prison entrance. As for your illusions and misperceptions about inmates and prison life — those you surrender inside.

I went to Sing Sing with the play’s director, Sister Joanna Chan of the Maryknoll order, whose headquarters is not far from the Hudson River bluffs on which Sing Sing has hunkered since the 1820s. Sister Joanna, who is petite, Chinese and in her 60s, had been working with the inmates since June, and Friday’s performance was the last in a four-night run. The cast and crew, serving time for murder, rape, robbery, assault and other crimes, called her Grandma.

We walked through long, low corridors to the auditorium, called the Chapel, with a high ceiling of exposed steel beams and the grimy yellow light of bare bulbs. Nuns and other visitors from town nibbled cheese cubes and drank coffee from paper cups. A few mingled with inmates, easy to pick out not by their air of menace but by their green pants.

There were jitters in the room, not in the audience but in the cast and crew — the bustling nerves of any amateur production. Previous nights had gone well, I was told. The play had even won over B-block, a brutal crowd. Tonight’s show was for guests, and the final chance to shine.

I met the assistant director, an inmate with a white skullcap and deep-set eyes who went by his Muslim name, Bilal. He told me how faith helped him to face his guilt — murder — and how theater polished the tarnished gem inside. Like other inmates I met, he had the taut intensity of someone gripping his beliefs tightly, so as not to let them get away.

Sing Sing, the former home of Old Sparky, is not widely known as a progressive place. But its theater program is a rarity in New York prisons. It relies on a nonprofit group, Rehabilitation Through the Arts, and the savvy benevolence of Sing Sing’s superintendent, Brian Fischer, who considers its virtues self-evident.

The inmates chose “Oedipus Rex” because they had done more than a dozen productions — including “Jitney,” by August Wilson — and wanted something really difficult. Sister Joanna persuaded them to choose Sophocles over Shakespeare, since it was more accessible and would fit in the maximum allowed two hours.

She took me backstage before the curtain rose. The cast and crew held hands in a circle and prayed for a good show. Jocasta, Oedipus’s wife and mother, was an actress from New York City and the cast’s only non-inmate. She told everyone how proud she was. Oedipus, with tongue-in-cheek pomposity, demanded silence and offered encouragement. “Please, let’s kill ’em,” he said. We all knew what he meant.

Then everyone came in close to lay hands on Bilal’s head and to give the program shout: “R.T.A.!”

The room went dark, gloomy music rumbled, and the lights came up on the temple pillars and plague-wracked citizens of Thebes, who wore bedsheet togas over T-shirts and green pants. Oedipus entered, his raised arms N.F.L.-thick, his dreadlocks wrapped in regal gold ribbons. The cast was almost all black or Hispanic, except for the Priest, a lanky bearded Shepherd and a dark-haired fireplug of a Messenger No. 1.

This production went to Greece by way of the five boroughs, as the ancients were summoned to be asked important questions about a foretold murdah. But the men hit their marks precisely, and moved and spoke with elegance and conviction. If they were haunted by the play's resonance in their lives, they didn't show it. They seemed like people trying to produce art, and in so doing to somehow assert an identity better than the one — murderer, rapist, robber — that had overwhelmed all others.

As I watched, I wondered what it would be like to be defined by my own worst sins. It struck me that when people are locked up for horrible crimes, a lot of goodness and beauty necessarily get locked up too. It also seemed that the Theban society onstage — though afflicted by plague, vengeance and divine cruelty — was probably gentler and saner than the one the inmates knew. Its members clearly cared for one another, and were not numb to grief.

When Oedipus made his final entrance, blinded and lurching, from stage left, the Chorus trembled, and shock and sorrow rose on cue in the hushed auditorium, just as it has for the last 2,500 years.

Sister Joanna told me later that chorus members had been reluctant in rehearsal to touch one another, though they eventually got past it. Oedipus, a man of conspicuous self-control, had particular trouble losing it for his final breakdown, when he collapses into the arms of Creon, his uncle and brother-in-law. He didn't pull it off until Monday's dress rehearsal. On Friday, Sister Joanna thought she saw real tears.

After the curtain fell and the cheers and applause finally died, the crew joined the cast onstage, with officers quickly posted on the left and right steps. The inmates crowded the footlights, straining for the hands of audience members who filed slowly past to say thank you, great job, wonderful show. Clearing the room of visitors in small escorted groups took nearly an hour. The inmates never stopped chattering and hugging, their faces shining with relief, and with the yearning to savor every moment before the spell was broken and they were taken to their cells.

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ESSAY QUESTIONS FOR GREEK DRAMA:

1. "[Sophocles] invented tragedy as we know it: the confrontation of his destiny by a heroic individual whose freedom of action implies full responsibility."
~ *Bernard Knox, University of California*

What is the destiny that Oedipus faces? What actions does he take to confront his destiny? How does he take responsibility for his choices?

2. "Aeschylus composed correctly without knowing it; Euripedes portrays men as they are, and [Sophocles] portrays men as they ought to be."

How is Oedipus an example of "man as he ought to be?" Consider the choices he makes in terms of his family, his city, and himself.

3. "What the hero is really asked to do, the demand behind the appeal to reason and emotion, the advice to reflect and be persuaded is – to yield....This is the appeal made to all Sophoclean heroes...[But] the hero refuses to yield."
~ *Bernard Knox, University of California*

Who uses reason to appeal to Oedipus to stop his search? Who uses emotion? On what grounds does Oedipus refuse to yield to these appeals? Consider this in terms of the flaw common to many tragic heroes: *hubris*.

