

Sophocles Oedipus at Colonus

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

In the following text the line numbers without brackets refer to the English translation; the line numbers in square brackets refer to the original Greek text (following the edition available at Perseus). Partial lines in the English text are normally combined in the reckoning. The superscript numbers refer to footnotes provided by the translator.

In this translation, possessives of words ending in -s are usually indicated in the common way (that is, by adding -'s (e.g. *Zeus* and *Zeus's*). This convention adds a syllable to the spoken word (the sound -iz). Sometimes, for metrical reasons, this English text indicates such possession in an alternate manner, with a simple apostrophe. This form of the possessive does not add an extra syllable to the spoken name (e.g., *Oedipus* and *Oedipus'* are both three-syllable words; whereas, *Oedipus's* has four syllables).

The translator would like to acknowledge the extremely valuable help of the commentary by Sir Richard Jebb (available online at Perseus).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

After Oedipus, king of Thebes, overwhelmed with horror at the discovery that he had killed his father and married his mother, stabbed out his eyes, he eventually left Thebes as a blind wanderer, accompanied by his daughter Antigone (there are differing accounts of when and why he left the city). Since Oedipus's two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, were too young to take over, Creon, the brother of Oedipus's wife and mother (Jocasta, who had committed suicide) ruled Thebes as regent.

Sophocles's play opens many years later. Oedipus's wanderings have brought him and Antigone to Colonus, a short distance from Athens, where there is a grove sacred to the Furies, the goddesses of blood revenge, also known as the Kindly Ones (the Eumenides).

Oedipus at Colonus was first produced in Athens at the Festival of Dionysus in 401 BC.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

OEDIPUS: exiled king of Thebes, an old blind wanderer.
ANTIGONE: daughter of Oedipus.
ISMENE: daughter of Oedipus.
THESEUS: king of Athens.
CREON: regent at Thebes, brother of Oedipus's dead wife, Jocasta.
POLYNEICES: elder son of Oedipus.
STRANGER: a citizen of Colonus.
MESSENGER: a servant of Theseus.
CHORUS: elderly citizens of Colonus.¹
ATTENDANTS: escorts for Theseus and Creon.

[The dramatic action takes place in front of a grove sacred to the Furies (the Eumenides) in Colonus, a short distance from Athens. Enter OEDIPUS, led on by ANTIGONE.]

OEDIPUS

Antigone, you child of a blind old man,
what country have we reached? Whose city state?
What man will welcome wandering Oedipus
with meagre gifts today? I don't need much,
and I get even less than that small pittance.
But that's sufficient for me. My suffering,
all the long years I have been living through,
and my own noble origins have taught me
to be content with that. So, my daughter,
if you can see a place to rest somewhere 10
on public land or by a sacred grove, [10]
you must conduct me there and let me sit,
so we can find out where we are. We've come
as foreigners to learn from people here
and carry out whatever they may say.

ANTIGONE

O father, poor tormented Oedipus,
my eyes can glimpse, off in the distance,
walls around the city. This place, it seems,
is sacred ground clustered thick with grapevines,

¹Note that the lines assigned to the CHORUS are those spoken by any member of the Chorus (i.e., the Chorus Leader, individual members of the Chorus, or the Chorus as a single or partial group). The distribution of these speeches will be determined by the director of a production.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

[Enter the STRANGER, a citizen of Colonus.]

OEDIPUS

O stranger, from this girl whose eyes must serve
herself and me I learn that you have come
as an auspicious messenger to us
to tell us what we do not understand.

40

STRANGER

Before you question me at any length,
move from where you sit—it's a sacrilege
to walk upon that ground.

OEDIPUS

What is this place?
To which of the gods is it held sacred?

STRANGER

It's a holy place, where no man may stay—
a sanctuary of goddesses, daughters
of Darkness and of Earth.

[40]

OEDIPUS

Tell me their revered names,
so once I hear that I may pray to them.

STRANGER

The people here would call these goddesses
the Eumenides, the all-seeing Kindly Ones.
But elsewhere other names serve just as well.²

50

OEDIPUS

Then I pray they may receive their suppliant
with kindness, for from this sacred refuge,
here in this land, I never will depart.

STRANGER

What do you mean?

²The Eumenides (Kindly Ones) is another name for the Furies, the goddesses of blood revenge, especially within the family.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

OEDIPUS

It has been prearranged—
this is my destiny.³

STRANGER

I do not dare
drive you away from here, until I tell
the city what I'm doing and receive
their sanction.

OEDIPUS

By the gods, stranger,
do not dishonour me, a poor wanderer. 60
I beg you—tell me what I wish to know. [50]

STRANGER

Then speak up. I will not dishonour you.

OEDIPUS

This country we've just reached, what is it called?

STRANGER

Listen. I will tell you everything I know.
This entire place is consecrated ground,
owned by divine Poseidon. In it, too,
dwells the Titan god, the fire bearer,
Prometheus.⁴ That spot where you now sit
is called this land's bronze threshold, a place 70
that safeguards Athens.⁵ The neighbouring lands
claim horseman Colonus was their ruler
in ancient times, and they all bear his name [60]
in common. That's what these holy places are,
stranger. We do not honour them in story
but rather by living here among them.

³As we learn shortly, Apollo has told Oedipus that when he reaches a holy shrine his wanderings will end. See line 106 ff. below.

⁴The Titans, descendants of Earth and Sky, were divine figures of the generation before the Olympians. Prometheus, son of the Titan Iapetus, stole fire from heaven and gave it to human beings.

⁵Jebb explains that near this sacred grove was a steep channel in the rock, where someone had constructed some bronze steps. It was called the "threshold of Hades." Hence the whole area was called "the bronze threshold" and was considered an important element in the safety of Athens.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

OEDIPUS

So this land truly has inhabitants.

STRANGER [*pointing to a statue nearby*]

Indeed it does—those who derive their name
from that hero over there, from Colonus.

OEDIPUS

Who governs them? Do they have a king,
or is there a popular assembly?

80

STRANGER

The king of Athens rules the people here.

OEDIPUS

What man now speaks and acts with royal power?

STRANGER

His name is Theseus, son of Aegeus,
who was king before him.

OEDIPUS

Is it possible
for one of you to reach him with a message?

[70]

STRANGER

With what in mind? To tell him something
or encourage him to come in person?

OEDIPUS

To inform him that a trifling service
will garner him great reward.

STRANGER

What assistance
can a man who does not see provide?

90

OEDIPUS

The words I say have visionary power.

STRANGER

Be careful, stranger, not to come to grief.
For, quite apart from your unlucky fate,

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

I see you have a true nobility.
Wait where you are. I am going to go
and tell the people what is happening—
those in this district, not the city folk.
They will determine whether you should stay [80]
or travel back again.

[The STRANGER leaves.]

OEDIPUS
Tell me, my child,
has that stranger left us?

ANTIGONE
He has, father. 100
You are free to say whatever you wish.
I am the only person close to you.

OEDIPUS
O you fierce-eyed, reverend divinities,
since here at Athens it was at your shrine
I first sought refuge, may you not be ungracious
to Phoebus and to me.⁶ When he prophesied
the many evils I would undergo,
he said eventually I would find rest,
once I reached my final goal in a place
where I would find a sacred sanctuary 110
of dreadful goddesses, shelter for strangers, [90]
and there my life of suffering would end.
By remaining in that land I would bring
advantages to those who welcomed me
and ruin to the ones who drove me out,
who exiled me from Thebes. Apollo said
that signs of this would come to me—earthquakes
and thunder or a lightning flash from Zeus.
I now recognize it surely must have been
some trusty omen sent from you that led me 120
on my journey to this consecrated ground.
How otherwise, in my wandering around,

⁶Phoebus is a common name for the god Apollo, son of Zeus. Apollo is the prophetic god of the Delphic Oracle.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

would I, a temperate man, first have met
you austere goddesses, who touch no wine, [100]
or sat down on this sacred rough-hewn rock.⁷
O you deities, I pray you let me
follow what Apollo's oracle decreed
and end my life at last, unless perhaps
I seem unworthy, enslaved to misery
far worse than any other mortal man.⁸ 130
Hear me, sweet daughters of eternal Darkness!
Hear me, city named for mighty Pallas,
O Athens, most honoured of all cities,
pity the poor ghost of that man Oedipus,
for now his old living body is no more. [110]

ANTIGONE

You should stop talking. Some old men are coming
to check out the place where you are sitting.

OEDIPUS

I will be quiet. Hide me in the grove
some distance from the road, until I learn
what these men are saying. That is something 140
we must find out in order to act safely.

*[ANTIGONE leads OEDIPUS to a hiding place. Enter the CHORUS, elderly citizens of
Colonus]*

CHORUS

Look around. Who was that man,
that most presumptuous of mortals?
Where did he go when he left here? [120]
Keep a sharp look out. Search the place.
Hunt everywhere. That old man
must be a wandering vagabond,
and not a local citizen,
for otherwise he'd never dare
to set foot in the sacred grove 150
dedicated to those goddesses

⁷Libations to the Furies were made, not with wine, but with water.

⁸As Jebb points out, this remark is bitterly ironic. Oedipus is, in effect, saying: "I have suffered more than any other living person, but perhaps I have not yet suffered enough to win a concession from the gods."

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

no one can resist—whose very names
we cannot utter without trembling,
and from whose gaze when we walk past [130]
we avert our eyes and look away
without a word, our voices mute,
mouthing pious thoughts in silence.
Now, so they say, someone has come,
who has no reverence for these deities.
We've searched this sacred shrine 160
and caught no glimpse of him.
I do not know where he is hiding.

[OEDIPUS and ANTIGONE leave their hiding place and move forward]

OEDIPUS

I am the one you seek. The sounds you make
serve me instead of sight, as people say
of men who cannot see.

CHORUS *[horrified]*

Aaaiii, Aaaiii! [140]
What a horrific sight! And that fearful voice!

OEDIPUS

Do not consider me outside the law—
I'm begging you!

CHORUS

By our defender Zeus,
who could this old man be?

OEDIPUS

You citizens,
guardians of this land, I am a man whose fate 170
no one could call happy. That much is clear,
for otherwise I would not creep around
requiring help from someone else's eyes,
my great age propped up by this weak girl.

CHORUS

Ah, have you been blind since you were born?
It looks as if a long and wretched life

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

has been your lot. But if I can stop you, [150]
here you will bring no more curses
down on yourself. You go too far—too far!
O you most wretched of all strangers, 180
do not stumble into this grassy shrine
where no one is allowed to speak,
where honey offerings and sweet water
pour from the mixing bowl.⁹ [160]
I am giving you fair warning.
Move back from there. Withdraw,
and keep your distance. You hear me,
you long-suffering wanderer?
If you have anything to say to us,
leave that forbidden ground. 190
Talk where people are allowed to speak.
Until that time, be silent.

OEDIPUS

Daughter, what course of action should we choose? [170]

ANTIGONE

We must obey the customs here, father,
act as the locals do. We must listen
and where we have no choice do what they say.

OEDIPUS

Then take my hand.

ANTIGONE

I have it.

OEDIPUS

Strangers,
if I trust you and leave this sanctuary,
do not harm me.

CHORUS

Old man, no one will ever
take you from your refuge here against your will. 200

[OEDIPUS starts to move out of his hiding place]

⁹In the religious rituals libations of water and of water mixed with honey were poured separately.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

OEDIPUS

Is this far enough?

CHORUS

Move on a little more.

OEDIPUS

Further still?

CHORUS

You know what we mean, young girl—
lead him out this way.

[.....]¹⁰

ANTIGONE

Come, father, let your dark steps follow me.
I'll lead you out.

CHORUS

Stranger in a foreign land,
you ill-fated man, you must have courage
to hate what the city here has grown to hate
and to love what it holds dear.

OEDIPUS

Lead me out,
my child, to where we may speak and listen,
treading a path of pious righteousness,
not waging war against necessity.

210

CHORUS

There! Do not step beyond that rocky ledge!

OEDIPUS

Right here?

CHORUS

That's far enough. Are you listening?

¹⁰At this point there is apparently a gap in the manuscript of three or four lines.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

OEDIPUS

Should I sit down?

CHORUS

Move sideways and crouch there—
down on the edge of that low rock.

ANTIGONE

Father,
let me do it. Gently now . . .

OEDIPUS

Alas for me!

ANTIGONE [*helping OEDIPUS sit down*]

. . . match me step for step. Lean your ancient frame [200]
here on my loving arm.

OEDIPUS

Ah, my dreadful fate!

CHORUS

Now you are seated, you unfortunate man,
speak to us. From what line of mortal men 220
do you descend? Who are you to be led like this
in such distress? What land do you call home?

OEDIPUS

Strangers, I am a man who has been banished.
I have no home. But do not . . .

CHORUS

What is it, old man,
you would not have us do?

OEDIPUS

You must not ask . . .
you must not ask me who I am. [210]

CHORUS

Why not?

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

OEDIPUS

My origin is dreadful.

CHORUS

Tell us more.

OEDIPUS

Alas, my child! What do I say?

CHORUS

Stranger,
tell us your lineage, your father's name.

OEDIPUS

Alas my child, what will become of me?

230

ANTIGONE

You've come as far as you can go. You must speak.

OEDIPUS

I will speak. I cannot conceal the truth.

CHORUS

You two have been delaying for some time.
Get to the point.

OEDIPUS

Are you familiar with
the son of Laius . . .

CHORUS

O no!

OEDIPUS

. . . the race of Labdacus . . .

CHORUS

O Zeus!

OEDIPUS

. . . and the pitiful Oedipus?"

¹¹Laius was Oedipus's father; Labdacus was the father of Laius. They were both kings of Thebes.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

CHORUS

That's who you are?

OEDIPUS

You must not be afraid
of anything I say.

CHORUS

O no! No! No!

OEDIPUS

I am so wretched!

CHORUS

No! No!

OEDIPUS

My daughter,
what will happen now?

CHORUS

You must leave this land. 240
Go away!

OEDIPUS

What about those words you swore?
How will you keep your promises to me?

CHORUS

A man incurs no punishment from Fate
when he responds to evils done to him. [230]
You deceived us—now we are doing the same.
Such actions bring no gratifying reward
but merely pain.¹² So you must go away,
leave where you are sitting, set off again,
and hurry out of Athens without delay,
in case you bring pollution to our state. 250

ANTIGONE

You reverend strangers, you do not accept

¹²The argument here is that Oedipus earlier deceived the Chorus by not revealing who he was before they made their promise to him. Therefore, they are justified in setting that promise aside.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

my aged father. You have heard the stories
and know what he did without intending to.
But, strangers, at least pity me, a poor girl,
I beg you, as I plead for him alone,
my father. I implore you with these eyes,
which can still gaze into your own, like one
who shares your blood, let this suffering man
win your compassion. In our wretched state
you are like gods—we are in your power. 260
Grant us this unexpected benefit!
I'm begging you by all the things you love, [250]
your child, your wife, your property, your gods!
No matter where you search, you will not find
a mortal man who can escape the gods
when they lead him to disaster.

CHORUS

Know this,
child of Oedipus, we do have pity
for you and him alike in your ordeal.
But we fear what the gods may do to us
and lack the power to say anything 270
other than what we have said already.

OEDIPUS

What use is a fine reputation then
or glory, if what it turns out to be
is empty breath? People claim that Athens, [260]
more than any other place, reveres the gods
and is the only city with the strength
to save a stranger in distress—it alone
can rescue him. Yet in my situation
where are these qualities? You have made me
rise from that rock ledge and will drive me out 280
only because my name makes you afraid.
For surely you cannot fear my presence
or my actions, because, if I must tell
the story of my father and my mother—
which is why you fear me—then what matters
is not what I did but what I suffered.
I know that well. So how am I by birth [270]
an evil man, when I was reacting

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to others who had harmed me? Even if
I had fully known what I was doing, 290
you would not allege that I was evil.¹³
But as it was, when I went where I did
I knew nothing, while those who injured me
in full knowledge of what they were doing
sought my destruction.¹⁴ And therefore, strangers,
I'm begging you, in the name of the gods,
just as you made me leave my refuge,
rescue me. While you pay tribute to the gods,
do not, at any moment, act impiously.
Consider this: they watch those who believe 300
as well as those who show them no respect, [280]
and never yet has any godless man
escaped them. Strangers, seek help from the gods,
and do not shame the good name of Athens
by lowering yourselves to profane deeds.
You have given this suppliant your pledge,
so take me in, protect me to the end.
This face of mine is horrible to look at,
but when you do, do not dishonour me,
for I have come, a pious, holy man, 310
bringing benefits to all the citizens.
Once your ruler comes, whoever he is
who is your leader, he will hear all things [290]
and understand. Meanwhile, do not harm me.

CHORUS

The argument you have just made, old man,
in words that carry weight, we must respect.
In my view, this issue must be resolved
by those who rule this land.

¹³Oedipus is arguing that in his actions he was responding to the treatment he received from his parents (who had tried to kill him as an infant by exposing him on Mount Cithaeron, outside Thebes). And in attacking his father, Oedipus was reacting to the latter's hostile actions. Hence, even if he had known that his opponent was his father, Oedipus states, one could not consider him evil for defending himself.

¹⁴This is almost certainly a reference to the way his parents tried to kill the infant Oedipus by pinning his feet together and abandoning him on the mountain. They were driven to do that by a prophecy that said the newborn child would grow up to kill his father.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

OEDIPUS

And where, strangers,
is the ruler of this state?

CHORUS

In the city
of his ancestors, here in this land. The scout 320
who sent us out has gone to summon him.

OEDIPUS

Do you think he will be concerned enough
about a blind man to come in person? [300]

CHORUS

Of course he will, once he finds out your name.

OEDIPUS

Who will tell him that?

CHORUS

It's a long distance,
and often things that travellers report
get spread around. There's no need to worry.
Once he hears the news, he will come to us.
We are all familiar with your name, old man,
so even if the king is tired and resting, 330
when he learns of you he'll soon be here.

OEDIPUS

May he get here quickly and bring good fortune
to me and to his city. What decent man
does not help himself by helping others?

ANTIGONE

O Zeus! What am I going to say, father? [310]
What should I think?

OEDIPUS

Antigone my child,
what is it?

ANTIGONE

I see a woman coming here

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riding a pony—a young Sicilian horse.
She's wearing a Thessalian cloth hat
to keep her face protected from the sun. 340
What am I to say? Is it her or not?
My mind keeps changing! Should I say it's her
or someone else? What a wretched business!
Yes, it must be her. As she gets closer,
the brightness in her eyes is welcoming me.
She's giving me a signal! It's obvious— [320]
the rider has to be Ismene.

OEDIPUS

My child,
what are you saying?

ANTIGONE

I see my sister,
your daughter! You'll recognize her soon enough,
once you hear her voice.

[Enter ISMENE.]

ISMENE

Ah, there you are, you two, 350
my father and my sister, a double joy
to utter those two words. How difficult
it was to find you—and now how painful
it is to look at you!

OEDIPUS

Are you here, my child?

ISMENE

O father, your fate is sad to witness!

OEDIPUS

O Ismene, have you really come?

ISMENE

Yes I have.
But travelling here was not easy for me.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

OEDIPUS

Touch me, my child.

ISMENE

I'll hold you both at once.

OEDIPUS

O children of my blood!

ISMENE

What wretched lives!

OEDIPUS

Antigone's and mine?

ISMENE

And mine as well.

360

I am the third whose life is miserable.

OEDIPUS

Child, why have you come?

ISMENE

I came for your sake—

I'm concerned about you.

OEDIPUS

Did you miss me?

ISMENE

Yes . . . and I came in person to bring news
with the only trusty servant I possess.

OEDIPUS

Where are your young brothers? They should help you.

ISMENE

They are where they are. Their situation
at the present time is dreadful.

OEDIPUS

Those two!

In their style of life and dispositions,

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

they always seem to like Egyptian ways, 370
for in that land men sit around the house
working the loom, while women leave the home
all the time to bring back what they live on. [340]
And in your case, my daughters, those two sons,
who should be doing the work, remain at home,
like girls, while you two assume the burden
of your poor father's pain, instead of them.
This one here, since she stopped being a child
and had sufficient strength, has constantly
been an old man's guide on his harsh journeys, 380
often wandering barefoot and famished
through savage woods and often beaten down [350]
by storms or by sun's unrelenting heat.
She resolutely sets aside the comforts
home provides, so her father can have food.
And you too, my child, in earlier days,
without the knowledge of those men in Thebes,
came to your father, bringing him reports
of all the oracles concerning Oedipus.
When I was exiled, driven from that land, 390
you became a faithful sentry for me.
And now here you are again, Ismene.
What recent news have you brought your father?
Why have you made this journey from your home?
You've not come empty handed—that I know—
not without bringing me some new concern. [360]

ISMENE

Father, I will not speak of what I suffered
in my attempts to find out where you live.
I do not wish to undergo that pain
a second time by telling you the story. 400
I came to talk about the fearful things
happening with your two ill-fated sons.
At first, being reasonable, they thought
about that old curse on the family,
how it has clung to your unlucky race,
and to make sure the city did not suffer
from pollution, they both wanted Creon [370]

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to be given the throne.¹⁵ But now, urged on
by some god or their own corrupted minds,
these triply-wretched men are now engaged
in vicious war, trying to seize the throne
and win a tyrant's power. The younger one
has stripped his older brother, Polyneices,
of power and expelled him from his home.¹⁶
So Polyneices, according to what people say
throughout the city, has fled for refuge
to the Argos valley and is taking
a new wife there, a foreigner.¹⁷ His friends
are now comrades in arms, and they intend
that Argos will soon seize Cadmean land
and win great honour or else sing their praise,
exalting them up to the heavens.¹⁸ Father,
what I have said is not just idle chat!
No! These are desperate acts. At what point
the gods will pity you in your distress
I do not know.

OEDIPUS

Do you have some sudden hope
the gods will ever care enough about me
to grant me my salvation?

¹⁵The curse on the family of Laius, Oedipus's father, originated in Laius's abduction and rape of Chrysippus, a young son of Pelops, king of Pisa (in the Peloponnese) and Pelops's host. As a result of this crime, Chrysippus committed suicide, and Pelops laid a curse on Laius and his descendants. A profane act by a member of the family could bring religious pollution to an entire community.

¹⁶Sophocles here makes Polyneices the elder of the two brothers. In some other versions of the story, Eteocles is the firstborn son. This change makes each brother a wrongdoer: Eteocles for usurping his elder brother, and Polyneices for seeking a foreign army to fight against his homeland.

¹⁷Polyneices married Argeia, daughter of Adrastus, king of Argos, as part of his strategy to raise an army and attack Thebes.

¹⁸This sentence is rather ambiguous in the Greek. If Argos defeats Thebes, Polyneices and his friends will win honour. The alternative is that Argos will sing someone's praises to the skies. Jebb suggests that Argos will be singing the praises of Thebes for having won the battle. Another possibility is that Argos will be exalting Polyneices and his friends for having taken a great risk, fought the battle, and behaved heroically, even though they did not succeed. The latter seems to me more probable, given that it is the sort of idea young men bent on a dangerous expedition would come up with. The phrase "Cadmean land" is a reference to Thebes: Cadmus was the one who founded the city.

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ISMENE

Yes, father,
that's what I think from recent oracles.

OEDIPUS

What are they? My child, what has been foretold? 430

ISMENE

The people of Thebes will soon seek you out,
alive or dead, for their own security. [390]

OEDIPUS

Who might benefit from a man like me?

ISMENE

People say their power depends on you.

OEDIPUS

And so when I am no longer living,
at that point I truly become someone?

ISMENE

Yes. For the gods are now supporting you.
Earlier they were set on your destruction.

OEDIPUS

That is mean-spirited—to restore power
to an old man who in his youth was crushed. 440

ISMENE

Whatever the cause, you should think of this:
Creon will be coming here to deal with you—
and soon. It will not take him long.

OEDIPUS

What for?
Tell me why he would do that, my daughter.

ISMENE

To set you up near Theban territory,
so they can use their power to control you,
without you setting foot inside the state. [400]

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

OEDIPUS

What help am I to them if I'm lying there
outside their borders?

ISMENE

They face disaster
should someone fail to pay your tomb due honours. 450

OEDIPUS

This I could assume without help from the gods.

ISMENE

That's why they want to keep you near their land,
but not where you might live by your own rules.

OEDIPUS

Will they bury me in Theban soil?

ISMENE

No.
That's not allowed, father. You are guilty
of killing one of your own blood.

OEDIPUS

In that case
they will never get their hands on me!

ISMENE

At some point that will be calamitous
for citizens of Thebes.

OEDIPUS

How will that happen, [410]
my child? Under what conditions?

ISMENE

From your anger, 460
when they stand beside your tomb.

OEDIPUS

Tell me, Ismene,
where did you hear these things you're saying?

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

ISMENE

From sacred messengers when they returned
from the shrine at Delphi.¹⁹

OEDIPUS

Has Phoebus uttered
all these things about me?

ISMENE

So those men said
when they came back to Thebes.

OEDIPUS

What about my sons—
has either of them heard this prophecy?

ISMENE

Yes, both of them. They know all about it.

OEDIPUS

So those two sons, the very worst of men,
heard of this, and instead of loving me, 470
preferred to seek the throne.²⁰

ISMENE

To listen to this [420]
is difficult, but it's the painful truth.

OEDIPUS

Well then, I pray the gods will not prevent
the predestined quarrel of these two sons.
I wish I could be the final arbiter
of this battle they are about to fight,
levelling spears against each other. For then

¹⁹What the prophecy is saying is that if Oedipus is buried in Athenian lands then, at some point in the future the Thebans will invade those lands but will be defeated by the Athenians at Oedipus's grave. In other words, Oedipus's anger will eventually work against them. The only way of averting that is to get control of Oedipus now, to make sure he cannot be buried in Athens.

²⁰Oedipus's anger at his sons is not primarily rage at their foolish conduct for quarrelling over the throne but rather fury because, although the sons know about the prophecy that the security of Thebes is to depend upon the way Thebans treat Oedipus and his tomb, they are not working to get him accepted back at Thebes and perhaps even restored to the throne. Instead they are concentrating on trying to become king themselves. His concern is the injury he thinks has been done to him.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

the one who holds the sceptre and the throne
would not survive, and the one in exile
would not be coming back. I am their father, 480
but when the Thebans drove me from my home
in great disgrace, they did not intervene.
Nor did they defend me. Those two looked on,
as I was exiled and the herald cried [430]
the edict of my banishment. You might say
that that was what I wanted at the time
and thus the city did the proper thing
in granting me that gift. That is not true!
For on the very day when my heart burned
and my sweetest wish was death by stoning, 490
no one appeared to grant what I desired.
Later on, once all my anger ebbed away,
I thought my passionate heart had sought
a punishment too great for past mistakes,
but then the city, after all that time, [440]
forced me out of Thebes and into exile.²¹
At that point those two sons could well have helped—
two children taking care of their own father.
But they refused! They did not say a thing,
not even one small word! By doing that, 500
those two abandoned me, let me wander
for all eternity an exiled beggar!
It is from these two here, these girls, I get
my daily food, a secure resting place,
and family care, as much as nature
enables them to give. But their brothers
betrayed their father for throne and sceptre
and power to rule the land. Those sons of mine
will never win me as an ally—never! [450]
And they will derive no benefits at all 510
from ruling Thebes as king. All this I know
from listening to this girl's prophecies
and thinking about those I remember
from long ago, which Phoebus Apollo

²¹It is not clear how long a period of time passed between Oedipus's self-mutilation and his exile from Thebes. During this period the city was ruled by Creon, who presumably made the decision to exile Oedipus.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

is now at last bringing to fruition.²²

So let them dispatch Creon to find me,
or anyone else with power in Thebes.

If you, strangers, are willing to protect me,
assisted by these revered goddesses
who guard your people, then you will receive
a powerful saviour for the city
and cause my enemies distress.

520

[460]

CHORUS

Oedipus,
you have earned our sympathy, you and these girls,
and since, in addition to your story,
you offer yourself as this land's saviour,
I would like now, for your own benefit,
to offer some advice.

OEDIPUS

My dearest friends,
give me your help, and I will carry out
everything you say.

CHORUS

You must cleanse yourself
before these goddesses you first approached
and on whose grounds you trampled.

530

OEDIPUS

Tell me how—
instruct me, strangers, what I should perform.

CHORUS

First of all, once you have purified your hands,
bring sacred water from the ever-flowing spring.

[470]

OEDIPUS

When I bring this pure water back, what then?

²²Oedipus has spoken earlier about a prophecy he received from Apollo many years before that he would finally find rest (see line 106 above). He is now combining that oracular utterance with what Ismene has told him about recent prophecies concerning him.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

CHORUS

There are bowls, the work of skilful craftsmen—
cover the rims and handles on both sides.

OEDIPUS

Cover them with what? Wool or olive twigs?

CHORUS

Use wool freshly shorn from a female lamb.

OEDIPUS

All right. What next? How do I end the rite? 540

CHORUS

Pour your libations facing early dawn.

OEDIPUS

I pour them from the mixing bowls you mentioned?

CHORUS

Yes, from two bowls pour three separate streams,
but with the last one pour it all at once.

OEDIPUS

Before I set the third bowl with the others, [480]
what do I fill it with? Tell me that.

CHORUS

With water and honey, but add no wine.

OEDIPUS

And when the dark leaf-covered earth has drunk,
what then?

CHORUS

With both hands set down olive twigs—
three sets of nine—while you recite this prayer . . . 550

OEDIPUS

I need to hear the prayer—that's most important.

CHORUS

Pray that, since we call them the Kindly Ones,

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

they will graciously receive a suppliant
and save him. You must make this prayer yourself
or have someone recite it in your place.
Speak so no one hears you. Don't pray out loud.
Then leave the place, and do not turn around. [490]
If you do this, then I will have the strength
to stand beside you as your friend. If not,
then, stranger, I would be afraid for you. 560

OEDIPUS

Children, did you hear what the strangers said?
They live here.

ANTIGONE

We heard. Tell us what we must do.

OEDIPUS

It is not possible for me to do it,
since two afflictions render me unfit:
I am not strong enough, and I am blind.
One of you go in and perform this rite.
For I believe one heart can intercede
and atone in full for tens of thousands,
if that heart is pure. But you must hurry.
Do not leave me by myself—my body 570 [500]
cannot shuffle along all on its own,
not without somebody there to guide me.

ISMENE

I will go and carry out the ritual,
but where is the place? I need to know that.

CHORUS

It's over there, stranger, beyond the grove.
If you need anything, there's someone there.
He will direct you.

ISMENE

I'll go and do it.
Antigone, look after father here.
If helping out our parents requires work,
we should not consider that a burden. 580

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

[Exit ISMENE.]

CHORUS

Stranger, to stir up ancient suffering [510]
that for a long time has been lying dormant
is a dreadful thing, but I would like to know . . .

OEDIPUS

What it is?

CHORUS

. . . about those torments you endured—
the painful inescapable regrets.

OEDIPUS

By all the laws of hospitality,
do not bring up the shame I have been through.

CHORUS

But the story is well known, and people
talk about it still. My friend, I'd like to hear
the truth about what really happened. 590

OEDIPUS

No, no.

CHORUS

Please tell me. I am begging you.

OEDIPUS

Alas! Alas!

CHORUS

You should grant me this request. [520]
I have done everything you asked me.

OEDIPUS

O my friends, I have suffered agonies,
the worst there are, but the things I did—
and may the gods be witness to my words!—
were unintentional. I did not choose
to do any of them of my own free will.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

CHORUS

How did that happen?

OEDIPUS

Without my knowledge,
the city entangled me in ruin 600
with a disastrous marriage.

CHORUS

Is it true
you shamed the marriage bed by sharing it
with your own mother? That's what people say.

OEDIPUS

Alas for me! Those are deadly words to hear!
Friends, those two girls of mine . . . [530]

CHORUS

What are you saying?

OEDIPUS

Those two daughters—they are abominations!

CHORUS

O Zeus!

OEDIPUS

Born from their mother's agony—
the very mother who bore me as well!

CHORUS

So these young girls here are your daughters and . . .

OEDIPUS

Yes, and their father's sisters, too.

CHORUS

O god!²³ 610

²³As Jebb observes, the Chorus's shock here suggests that they are just finding out that Jocasta was not only Oedipus's wife and mother, but also the mother of his children. In some versions of the story of Oedipus, he had no children with Jocasta, and his children were from a second wife, Euryganeia.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

OEDIPUS

Alas! Countless torments return once more,
wheeling to attack me!

CHORUS

You have suffered . . .

OEDIPUS

What I have been through I cannot forget!

CHORUS

You have committed . . .

OEDIPUS

I have committed nothing!

CHORUS

What do you mean?

OEDIPUS

I received her as a gift. [540]
How I wish, in my miserable state,
I had not taken her as my reward
for rescuing the city.²⁴

CHORUS

You poor man!
What then? Did you murder . . .

OEDIPUS

What is it now?
What do you wish to know?

CHORUS

Did you kill your father? 620

OEDIPUS

O no, not that! You stab me once again,
wound piled on wound!

²⁴Thebes had been plagued by a monster, the Sphinx, which could only be conquered by someone who answered a riddle correctly. Oedipus solved the riddle and saved the city. He was made king for his services and married Jocasta, the wife of king Laius (who had been murdered some years before).

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

CHORUS

So then you did kill him.

OEDIPUS

I killed him. But in my defence there is . . .

CHORUS

What?

OEDIPUS

. . . something to justify my action.

CHORUS

What is that?

OEDIPUS

I will tell you. I killed men
who would have slaughtered me, and I did so
in ignorance. By law I'm innocent,
and yet I've come to this.²⁵

CHORUS

Look over there!
Here comes Theseus, son of Aegeus,
our ruler, responding to your summons
and prepared to help.

630

[Enter THESEUS and ATTENDANTS.]

THESEUS

In the past many men
have told me of the bloody mutilation
of your eyes, son of Laius, and what I heard
while on my way here makes me more certain
I truly recognize just who you are.
Your clothing and your ravaged features, too,
both confirm your identity for us.
I pity you, ill-fated Oedipus,
and I would like to know what petition

²⁵Oedipus killed his father, Laius when the two encountered each other in a place where three roads meet. Laius and his escort shoved Oedipus aside and assaulted him. Thinking his life in danger, Oedipus killed them all, not knowing who they were.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

OEDIPUS

You may find out later on, [580]
but not right now.

THESEUS

Well then, at what point
will this gift of yours reveal itself to us?

OEDIPUS

When I am dead and you have buried me.

THESEUS

You ask for your life's final ritual
but ignore what happens before you die, 670
or else you do not care.

OEDIPUS

It does not matter.
All those other things are part of my request.²⁷

THESEUS

The favour you request from me is small.

OEDIPUS

But take care. This is no trifling matter—
the struggle over me will not be small.

THESEUS

Are you referring to your sons and me?

OEDIPUS

My lord, they will be seeking to force you
to send me back to Thebes.

THESEUS

If that is what you wish, [590]
your banishment is not appropriate.

²⁷Theseus seems surprised by Oedipus's remarks, since he is probably assuming Oedipus will request protection during his lifetime. Oedipus, however, is concerned only about where he will be buried; hence, he does not care about what happens to him between now and his death, so long as he is confident his grave will be in Athens. As we soon learn, Oedipus's request to be buried in Athens implicitly includes a demand that the Athenians will not hand him over to anyone else, because if he is taken away, then Theseus will be unable to fulfil his pledge to bury Oedipus at Athens.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

OEDIPUS

The oracle of the god will force them to.

THESEUS

What evil has the oracle declared
that makes them so afraid?

OEDIPUS

It prophesied
that in your country they will be defeated. 700

THESEUS

And how will they become my enemies?

OEDIPUS

Dearest son of Aegeus, only gods
are never troubled by old age and death.
All other things are finally destroyed
by all-conquering Time. The power of Earth
passes away, the body's strength withers, [610]
loyalty perishes, distrust appears,
and between one city and another,
just as between good friends, relationships
never remain the same. Sooner or later 710
pleasant concord turns to bitter hatred
and then hatred, once again, to friendship.
So if today between yourself and Thebes
the sun is shining bright and all is well,
the endless passage of infinite Time
engenders innumerable days and nights,
and in that time some trivial reason
will persuade them to shatter with their spears [620]
whatever treaties you now have between you.
And then, if Zeus is, at that time, still Zeus 720
and if his son Apollo speaks the truth,
my frigid, slumbering, and buried corpse
will drink hot Theban blood. I will not speak
of secrets that should remain unspoken,
so let me end my speech where I began:
if you will only do what you have pledged,
and if the gods are not deceiving me,

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

you will never say you sheltered Oedipus
here in your land and reaped no benefits.

CHORUS

My lord, this man has, from the very start, 730
made it clear to us he would accomplish
these and similar good things for our state. [630]

THESEUS

Who then would repudiate the friendship
of a man like this, one for whom, first of all,
an ally's hearth, by mutual agreement,
is always welcoming? Then he has come
as a suppliant to our gods and offers
no small reward to this land and to me.
I respect these things—I will never spurn 740
the favours of this man. I will establish
a place where he may live as a citizen.
If the stranger wishes to remain here,
I will appoint you his protectors. But if
he would prefer to, he can come with me.
Choose the option you think best, Oedipus. [640]
Whatever choice you make will be my own.

OEDIPUS

O Zeus, be gracious to such men as these!

THESEUS

What would you like? To come back to my home?

OEDIPUS

I would, if that had been ordained for me.
But this is the place . . .

THESEUS

What will you do here? 750
Speak up. I will not countermand your choice.

OEDIPUS

. . . where I will conquer those who drove me out.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

THESEUS

If so, your presence here would prove to be
a major benefit for us.

OEDIPUS

It will,
if you fulfil your promises to me.

THESEUS

Have faith in me. I will not let you down.

OEDIPUS

I will not ask you to confirm your pledge
with an oath, as one does with wicked men. [650]

THESEUS

An oath would be no more reliable
than giving you my word.

OEDIPUS

What will you do? 760

THESEUS

What precisely do you fear?

OEDIPUS

Men will come . . .

THESEUS

But these citizens here will deal with them.

OEDIPUS

Be careful when you leave me.

THESEUS

There is no need
to lecture me in what I have to do.

OEDIPUS

My fear drives me to do it.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

THESEUS

But my heart
has no fear.

OEDIPUS

You know nothing of their threats.

THESEUS

But I do know this: no one will carry you
away from here without permission from me.
Often men utter threats from angry hearts
in loud and empty words, but when their minds 770
regain control once more, their threats are gone. [660]
And if those men are bold enough to act
on threats they made to take you back by force,
they will, I tell you, sail into rough seas
on their harsh journey here. You must take heart.
That's my advice—even without my pledge—
if Phoebus was the one who led you here.
And though I am elsewhere, I know my name
will nonetheless protect you from all harm.

[Exit THESEUS.]

CHORUS

Stranger, in this land famed for horses 780
you have reached bright Colonus,
earth's finest home. Here the nightingale, [670]
always chants her sweet, sharp melodies,
from deep within green forest groves,
living among the wine-dark ivy vines,
fruit-rich foliage of the god, a place
where no sun penetrates, no winds blow
in any storm, and no man ever treads.
Here Dionysus, the Bacchic reveller,
always roams with his companions, 790
the nymphs who nursed him as a child.²⁸ [680]

²⁸The nymphs of Mount Nysa were given the infant god Dionysus to raise after he was born from Zeus's thigh. They later became the first of those who joined him in his revels (the Bacchantes).

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

And every day narcissus flowers bloom
in lovely clusters fed on heavenly dew,
the ancient crown of two great goddesses,
as well as glistening gold crocuses.²⁹
The sleepless fountains never fail to feed
the wandering waters of the Cephisus, [690]
whose pure, clear stream flows every day
across the ample bosom of the land,
bringing rich nourishment to the plain. 800
Nor do the Muses' dancing choruses
or Aphrodite of the golden reins
fail to grant their favours to this land.

And here we have a certain kind of plant—
I have not heard of it in Asian lands,
nor does it thrive in that great Dorian isle
of Pelops. It grows without man's help,
renews itself, and terrifies our foes.
This plant truly flourishes in our land, [700]
the gray-leafed olive tree, nurturing 810
our country's youth.³⁰ No young person here
will lift a hand to damage or destroy it,
nor any citizen living with old age,
for it guarded by the ever-watchful gaze
of grey-eyed Athena and protector Zeus.³¹

I have more praises for our mother state,
a tribute to those most glorious gifts [710]
from a mighty god, our country's proudest boast—
the great strength of our colts and stallions
and the mighty power of the sea. For you, 820
my lord Poseidon, Cronos' son, placed her

²⁹The two great goddesses are Demeter and her daughter Persephone. Persephone was gathering a narcissus when she was abducted by Hades, god of the underworld.

³⁰The "great Dorian isle of Pelops" is a reference to the Peloponnese, that area of mainland Greece south of the Isthmus of Corinth (it is almost an island). Jebb notes that Sophocles does not mean that the olive tree does not grow elsewhere, but rather that the olive does not flourish in other places the way it does in Athens, where it enjoys divine protection. The tree was, according to Athenian legends, a gift from the goddess Athena, who made the first one spring spontaneously from the soil of the city (hence human beings did not plant it in Athens).

³¹Zeus here is called "morios," a word referring to the sacred olive trees in Athens, of which Zeus was the divine guardian. Hence, the title Zeus Morios.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

on that proud throne and first introduced
into our roads the bridle and the bit
that curb the wildness in our horses.
You trained our hands to ply the flashing oar
and race in wonder over open seas,
chasing sea nymphs dancing in the waves,
the fifty daughters of Nereus.³²

ANTIGONE

O Athens, land praised more than any other, [720]
now is the time to show in how you act 830
just what such splendid commendations mean.

OEDIPUS

What's happening, my child?

ANTIGONE

It's Creon, father.
He's coming towards us—and with an escort.

OEDIPUS

O you old men, my dearest friends, may you now
make good that final pledge of yours and save me!

CHORUS

Take heart—our pledge still stands. We may have aged,
but still our country's strength has not grown old.

[Enter CREON with an escort.]

CREON

You men, noble inhabitants of this land,
from your eyes I see that my arrival
has gripped you all with unexpected fear. 840 [730]
Do not shrink back or utter hostile words,
for I do not come intending to use force.
I am an old man, and I understand
that if any state in Greece is truly strong

³²Nereus, a sea god in Greek mythology, was a son of Pontus and Gaia (the Sea and the Earth) and the father of the fifty Nereids, nymphs who lived in the sea. This last stanza is a tribute to the importance of Poseidon at Athens. According to legend he introduced horses in Athens and helped to make Athenians expert sailors.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

it is the powerful city I have reached.
No. I have been sent here, old though I am,
to convince this man to return to Thebes.
I was not dispatched by just one person,
but by the wish of all the citizens,
and more than any other man in Thebes 850
it falls on me to grieve for his misfortune,
because he is a relative of mine.³³
O you, poor miserable Oedipus, [740]
hear what I have to say and come back home!
Cadmeans are all summoning you back—
and justly so—I more than all the rest.³⁴
I would be the very worst of all men born
if I did not find your suffering painful,
seeing you, old man, a wretched outcast,
an eternal wanderer and beggar, 860
stumbling around with one young girl for help.
Alas, I never thought that she would fall
into such degrading misery as this—
the poor creature, living like a vagrant,
always nursing you in your condition. [750]
She's of marriageable age, but unwed,
there for some passing man to violate.
In pointing out all these misfortunes,
am I not casting a disgraceful slur
on you and me and our whole family line? 870
But no one can conceal a public shame.
So, Oedipus, by our ancestral gods,
listen to what I say—hide our disgrace
by agreeing to return to Thebes, the home
of your own ancestors. Bid this place here
a fond farewell—these men have earned your thanks.
But your own homeland merits more respect,
because she nursed you all those years ago. [760]

OEDIPUS

You are crass enough to try anything,

³³Creon was the brother of Oedipus's wife and mother, Jocasta.

³⁴The word "justly" here refers to the law. Creon is reminding those listening that Thebes has a better legal claim to Oedipus than Athens does, because of the time Oedipus spent there and his family connection with Creon.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

even to base your devious intent 88o
on pleas for justice! Why are you doing this?
Why do you wish to catch me once again
in a snare that will bring me still more grief?
Back when I was suffering from the pain
I brought upon myself, I yearned to leave,
to be driven from Thebes, but you refused!
That favour you were not prepared to grant.
Later, once my anger had run its course
and I desired to live in my own home, 89o [77o]
you cast me out, forced me into exile.
At that time you were not concerned at all
with those common kinship ties you mention.
Now here we are again. When you can see
how this city and its inhabitants
are all offering me their hospitality,
you try to snatch me back once more, voicing
your vicious wish in a sweet-sounding speech.
And yet what pleasure do you get from this,
welcoming me as a guest against my will?
It's as if you kept pleading with someone 90o
to grant a favour but he was unwilling
and refused to help, and then later on,
once your spirit had everything you wished,
he granted your request, when such kindness
would not be kind at all. In such a case, [78o]
would not your joy be empty? Nonetheless,
that is what you are offering me now—
noble-sounding speeches and deceitful acts.
I will explain that to these people here
to show what a dishonest man you are. 91o
You have not come to lead me to my home,
but to take me into custody, to set me
near your borders, so the city of Thebes
may escape unharmed any future troubles
coming from this land. But you will not succeed.
Instead of that what you will get is this:
my vengeful ghost haunting your land forever
and for my sons this legacy from me,
as much of my own land as they will need
to lie on when they die, no more than that. 92o [79o]

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

As far as Thebes's future is concerned,
Creon, am I not a wiser man than you?
Yes, much wiser—since those I listen to
are the most knowledgeable ones of all,
Phoebus Apollo and his father Zeus.
You come here with that corrupt tongue of yours
honed sharp as hardened steel, but what you say
will bring you grief rather than salvation.
I know these words of mine will not convince you,
so you should leave. Let us keep living here. 930
To exist like this would not be difficult,
not if it brought enjoyment and content.

CREON

In this debate, which one of us do you think [800]
has more to lose by what you are doing,
you or me?

OEDIPUS

For me the sweetest outcome
will be when you fail to win me over
or to convince the people standing here.

CREON

You poor man! Will you make a public show
of how in all these years you have learned nothing?
Will you keep on disgracing your old age? 940

OEDIPUS

You have a glib tongue, but I do not know
a single righteous man who can reason well
supporting all sides in an argument.

CREON

One can say a lot and yet avoid the issue.

OEDIPUS

As if your speech was short and to the point!

CREON

That is not possible with minds like yours. [810]

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

OEDIPUS

Go away! I speak for these men here, as well.
And do not try to set up a blockade
and spy on me where I am meant to live.

CREON

I call on these men—not on you—to witness
the way you answer your own family friends. 950
If I ever capture you . . .³⁵

OEDIPUS

Who could seize me
if these men, my allies, are unwilling?

CREON

Even without that you will still suffer!

OEDIPUS

You are threatening me? What will you do?

CREON

I have just seized one of your two daughters
and sent her away. Soon I'll take the other.

OEDIPUS

No!

CREON

Before long you'll have more to cry about. [820]

OEDIPUS

You have taken my daughter?

CREON

Yes I have.
And soon enough I'll have this other one. 960

³⁵Creon's appeal for the Chorus to witness Oedipus's conduct is a continuation of his legal thinking. Oedipus wishes to associate himself with Colonus and Athens. Creon has been making the point that, given Oedipus's history and family ties, Thebes has a better legal right to have Oedipus back. At this point, seeing that neither Oedipus nor the Chorus is accepting the legal argument, Creon resorts to threats and violence.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

CREON

I am taking what is mine.

OEDIPUS

Help us, Athens!

CHORUS

Stranger, what are you doing?
Leave her alone—or else you'll quickly face
a test where we resolve this in a fight.

CREON

Stay back!

CHORUS

Not if you keep acting in this way. 980

CREON

If you harm me, you'll be at war with Thebes.

OEDIPUS

Is that not just what I predicted?

[Members of CREON'S ESCORT seize ANTIGONE.]

CHORUS

Let go!
Take your hands off that girl immediately!

CREON

Do not give orders to those you do not rule.

CHORUS

I'm telling you to let that young girl go.

CREON *[to one of his soldiers holding Antigone]*

And I am ordering you to take her off.

[The ESCORT starts to drag ANTIGONE away.]

CHORUS

Come here, you citizens of Colonus!
Come here and help! The city—our city—
is being violently attacked! Help us!

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

ANTIGONE

It's over for me—I'm being dragged away! 990
O you strangers, you are our hosts and friends . . .

OEDIPUS

Where are you, my child?

ANTIGONE

They're forcing me to go.

OEDIPUS

Give me your hand!

ANTIGONE

I can't—I haven't got the strength.

CREON

You men, take her away!

OEDIPUS

Alas, I'm finished!

[*Creon's SOLDIERS take ANTIGONE away.*]

CREON

You will not be stumbling around again
using these two young girls as your support.
But since you wish to win a victory
over your native country and your friends, [850]
on whose behalf I undertook these acts,
though I am their king, enjoy your triumph. 1000
I know in time to come you'll recognize
how in all your actions, now and in the past,
you have not acted well by giving in,
despite your friends, to your own temper.
That has always led you to disaster.³⁶

³⁶The "triumph" Creon refers to is Oedipus's "victory" in not returning to Thebes with him. Creon is claiming here that he has been acting in the best interests of Thebes and of Oedipus's family, although, as absolute ruler of the city, he has no need to defer to their wishes. He is also pointing out that Oedipus's temper has always led to consequences injurious to his family (e.g., his own self-mutilation and expulsion from Thebes, the suicide of Jocasta, his mother-wife and Creon's sister, and the harsh life of his two daughters).

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

[The CHORUS moves to block CREON from leaving.]

CHORUS

Stop there, stranger!

CREON

I warn you: do not touch me!

CHORUS

If those young girls are taken away from here,
I will not let you leave.

CREON

If you do that,
you'll soon be giving Thebes a greater prize—
for I'll be taking more than these two girls.

1010 [860]

CHORUS

What do you mean to do?

CREON *[pointing to Oedipus]*

I'll seize that man
and carry him away.

CHORUS

That's a bold threat.

CREON

One that will be made good without delay.
unless this country's ruler intervenes.

OEDIPUS

You glib talker! Would you lay hands on me?

CREON

Do as I tell you and keep quiet!

OEDIPUS

No!
May the spirits here permit me to call down
one more curse against you, you worst of men,
since you have hauled away that helpless girl
and taken by force my one remaining eye.

1020

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

May all-seeing Helios, god of the sun,
grant you and your entire family
a life like mine when you are growing old. [870]

CREON
Do you see this, you men of Colonus?

OEDIPUS
They are observing you and me—they see
that when hostile actions make me suffer,
I defend myself with words.

CREON
I'll not check
the anger in my heart one moment more—
though I'm alone and age has slowed me down,
I'll seize this man and lead him off by force! 1030

[CREON moves to take OEDIPUS away by himself.]

OEDIPUS *[struggling with Creon]*
Help me! Help!

CHORUS
How insolent you are, stranger,
if you believe you can accomplish this!

CREON
That is my intention.

CHORUS
If you succeed,
then I will say our city is no more.

CREON
With justice on its side, weakness conquers might. [880]

OEDIPUS *[still struggling with Creon]*
You hear the sort of words he splutters?

CHORUS
But great Zeus knows that he will not succeed
in doing what he says.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

CREON

Zeus may well know,
but you do not.

CHORUS

Your actions are outrageous!

CREON

An outrage? Yes, but one you must endure! 1040

CHORUS

All those of you who rule this land, help! Help!
Come here on the run! Come on! These Thebans
are on the move back across the border!

[THESEUS enters with a few ATTENDANTS.]

THESEUS

Why all this shouting? What's happening here?
What are you afraid of? Why did you stop
my sacrifice at the altar to Poseidon,
god of the sea and lord of Colonus?
Explain all this, so that I understand
why I had to hurry here more quickly 890
than was convenient.

OEDIPUS

I know that voice! 1050
My dearest friend, I have just been suffering
dreadful things from this creature here.

THESEUS

What things?
Who has mistreated you? Tell me.

OEDIPUS

Creon has—
the man you see here. He took my children,
the only two I have.

THESEUS

What are you saying?

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

OEDIPUS

I've told you what I have had to suffer.

THESEUS [*to his ATTENDANTS*]

One of you men, go as fast as you can
to those altars. Tell all the people there
to leave the sacrifice and move with speed— [900]
both on foot and horseback—to that junction 1060
where two highroads meet, so those young girls
do not pass by the place and I become
an object to be laughed at by this stranger
because his power got the better of me.
Go now! Do as I say—and quickly!

[*One of the attendants accompanying Theseus runs off. THESEUS turns his attention to CREON.*]

As for this man, if my anger judged him
as he deserves, he would not escape my hand
without some injury. But now those laws
he himself brought with him when he came here
will render judgment—we need no others. 1070
You will not leave this land until you bring
those young girls back and set them in plain view, [910]
right here in front of me. What you have done
is a disgrace to me, to your parents,
and to your native land. You marched in here,
to a city state that honours justice
and never condones acts outside the law,
and brushed aside this land's authorities,
bursting in like this and seizing prisoners,
using force to take whatever you desired. 1080
You seem to think this city has no men
or is full of slaves and I am nothing.
It was not Thebes who taught you to be bad.
That state does not like raising lawless men [920]
and would not praise your actions if it learned
that you were stealing from me and the gods,
forcefully abducting their poor suppliants.
If I were to move into your country,
even with the most righteous of all claims,
I would not seize someone or lead them off 1090

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

without permission of the ruling power,
whoever he might be. I would know how
a stranger ought to act with citizens.
But you are a disgrace to your own city.
Thebes does not deserve that. Advancing years [930]
have made you old and robbed you of all sense.
So now I'll tell you what I said before—
have those girls brought here as quickly as you can,
unless you wish to be held here by force,
a resident of this land against your will. 1100
What my tongue utters, I intend to do.

CHORUS [*to Creon*]

You see the situation you are in, stranger?
From your origins you seem a righteous man,
but your actions show you are dishonest.

CREON

Son of Aegeus, I have not done these things
because I thought Athens was devoid of men, [940]
as you have claimed. No. I had sound reasons.
But I did not believe your citizens
would be so devoted to my relatives
that they would keep them here against my will. 1110
And I was sure people would not welcome
a polluted man, who killed his father
and whose unholy marriage was exposed,
a mother wedded to her son. For I knew
such wise restrictions were traditional
with the Council on the Hill of Ares,
which never would permit such vagrant types
to settle in the Athenian state.³⁷
Trusting that knowledge, I chased down my prey. [950]
But I would not have acted in this fashion, 1120
if he had not called down stinging curses
on my family and me. In my view,
what he made me suffer entitled me
to take revenge. Anger never grows old

³⁷The Hill of Ares is a rocky outcrop near the entrance to the Acropolis in Athens. The Council there, the Areopagus, was a court dealing with criminal and civil cases and general moral censorship in the earlier days of Athenian democracy.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

And she had children with the son she bore,
to her great shame. But this one thing I know—
you freely choose to heap insults on us,
but I did not freely choose to marry her,
nor do I ever choose to mention it.
No, I will not be called an evil man
because I married her and killed my father, 1170
that death you keep on hurling in my teeth,
always abusing me with bitter insults. [990]
Here is a question. How would you answer?
If someone were to march in here right now
and attempt to kill you, you righteous man,
would your first response be to ask the killer,
“Are you my father?” or to fight him back?
It seems to me that, if you love your life,
you would fight back against the murderer,
not search for what was legally correct. 1180
That is how I was led on by the gods
and embarked upon a life of evils.
I do not think my father’s ghostly shade,
if it came back to life, would contradict me.
But because you are not a righteous man, [1000]
you think you can say anything at all,
without considering if what you speak
is suitable or should not be mentioned.
And so in front of all these people here
you keep hurling accusations at me. 1190
You think it serves your purposes to flatter
the great name of Theseus and Athens
as a well-governed state. But when you praise,
you forget that if there is one city
that understands how to respect the gods
that place is Athens—she excels in that.
Yet it is from here you wished to steal me,
an old man and a suppliant, as well.
You laid hands on me, tried to drag me off,
after having hauled away my daughters. 1200
So now I call upon these goddesses, [1010]
I appeal to them, and with my prayers
I beseech them to come to my aid here,

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

one man must not prove stronger than the state.
Do these words of warning make any sense,
or do they now seem as meaningless to you
as what you heard when you were planning this?

CREON

Here in Athens, you can say what you wish.
I will not object. But when I am home,
I, too, will realize what must be done.

THESEUS

Make your threats, but move. And you, Oedipus, 1240
stay here, and do not worry. Trust this pledge—
unless I die beforehand, I will not rest [1040]
until I have restored your children to you.

[CREON, THESEUS, and the ATTENDANTS leave.]

OEDIPUS *[calling after Theseus]*

Bless you, Theseus, for your noble heart
and for your righteous care on my behalf!

CHORUS

O how I wish I could be there,
where the enemy wheels to fight
and quickly joins the battle clash,
the clamour of Ares' brazen spears,
hard by the Pythian shore— 1250
or else beside the torch-lit strand
where those two goddesses perform [1050]
their sacred rites for mortal men
whose tongues their holy ministers,
the Eumolpidae, have silenced
by placing there a seal of gold.³⁹
There, I think, our warlike Theseus
and those two unmarried girls

³⁹The Chorus is here imagining the impending clash between Theseus and Creon, which, in their view, may take place either on the bay of Eleusis ("the Pythian shores") or else at Eleusis, the centre of a major religious festival dedicated to the goddess Demeter ("beside the torch-lit shore"). In the next section they consider a third possibility. Ares is the god of war, and the goddesses referred to are Demeter and her daughter Persephone. The Eumolpidae were the priests of the religious rituals, responsible for ensuring the secrets of the divine mysteries.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

will soon meet in this land of ours,
amid the cries of our brave fighting men. 1260

Or else they may be closing in
on pastures west of Oea's snowy peak, [1060]
racing ahead on youthful horses,
their chariots careening at full speed.
Now Creon will be overthrown!
Our men are terrifying in war,
and Theseus' troops are battle strong.
Every bit and bridle glitters,
as all our horsemen charge the foe,
in honour of equestrian Athena 1270 [1070]
and the god encircling the earth,
lord of the sea, Rhea's beloved son.⁴⁰

Have they already come to blows,
or are our men about to fight?
My mind is telling me to hope
we soon will meet those two young girls,
whose suffering has been intense,
afflictions they have undergone
at the blood-linked hands of their own kin.
Today Zeus brings some great event 1280
to its fulfillment, its final end.
I can foresee a glorious fight!
O to be a dove on the wing,
as strong and swift as a storming wind,
to soar up high in the upper air [1080]
and gaze from a cloud on the battle below!

O Zeus, who watches everything,
almighty king of all the gods,
grant to defenders of this land
the strength to win a victory, 1290
to catch the enemy unaware
and end the chase successfully!

⁴⁰This tribute to the two main deities of Athens, Athena and Poseidon, identifies the former with the epithet *hippeia* ("of the horse," "equestrian"), an association linked to her as the inventor of the chariot, and the latter by a common epithet "encircling the earth" and by a reference to his mother, Rhea, also the mother of the gods Zeus and Hades.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

And I pray that Pallas Athena,
your reverend daughter, grants that, too, [1090]
as well as Apollo, the hunter god,
and with him his sister Artemis,
who tracks swift-moving speckled deer—
O may they bring their two-fold help,
assisting Athens and our citizens.

[Enter THESEUS, ANTIGONE, ISMENE, and ATTENDANTS.]

CHORUS *[to OEDIPUS]*

Well, my wandering friend, you cannot say [1300]
those watching out for you are lying prophets—
I see your daughters being escorted back.

OEDIPUS

What? Where are they? What are you talking about?

ANTIGONE

O father, father, I wish one of the gods [1100]
would let you see this very best of men,
who brought us here and led us back to you.

OEDIPUS

My child, are you really here, both of you?

ANTIGONE

Yes—saved by the strong hands of Theseus
and his most loyal comrades.

OEDIPUS

O children,
come to your father and let me hold you. [1310]
I was losing hope you would be coming back.

ANTIGONE

You will get your wish. That embrace you want
is what we long for.

OEDIPUS

Where are the two of you?

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

ANTIGONE

We're coming—both of us together.

[ANTIGONE, ISMENE, and OEDIPUS embrace]

OEDIPUS

My dearest children!

ANTIGONE

To any father
every child is dear.

OEDIPUS

An old man's support . . .

ANTIGONE

With a destiny as wretched as his own.

OEDIPUS

I am now holding those I love the most. [1110]
If I should die with you two beside me,
I could not be entirely unhappy. 1320
O children, hold me close—one on each side—
cling to your father, help him recover
from his past days of lonely wandering,
a life of misery. And now tell us
what you went through, but keep the speeches short—
from girls like you a brief word is enough.

ANTIGONE

Father, the one who rescued us is here.
He is the one you should be listening to,
the man who did it. What I have to say
will not be much.

OEDIPUS [to THESEUS]

You must not be amazed, 1330
my friend, that I keep talking for so long [1120]
to these children, so suddenly restored.
For I know that my present joy in them
I owe entirely to you. You saved them—
you and no one else. And may gods grant
to you and to this land what I would wish,

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

for among all those living on the earth
only here with you have I encountered
men of piety and just character
who tell no lies. I know that about you, 1340
and I pay tribute to your qualities
with these words of mine. Everything I have
I have because of you and no one else.
O royal king, hold your right hand out to me, [1130]
so I can touch it. If it is lawful,
let me be permitted to kiss your cheek.
But what am I saying? A wretch like me,
how could I want you to touch a man
in whom every form of defiling stain
has found a home? No, I will not touch you. 1350
That is an action I cannot permit,
not even if you yourself were willing.
Only those mortals who have been with me
in my misfortunes can share my suffering.⁴¹
So from where you stand accept my gratitude,
and, as you have done up to this moment,
deal with me justly in the days to come.

THESEUS

Given your delight in these two children,
I am not surprised your conversation [1140]
has taken some time or that you prefer 1360
to talk to them before you talk to me.
I can find no offence to me in that.
I do not wish to add lustre to my life
through the words I speak, but by what I do.
And I have demonstrated that to you,
old man, for my word has not proven false
in any of those promises I made.
I am here, having brought back your daughters
alive and unharmed by the threats they faced.
As for how we triumphed in that struggle, 1370
why should I vainly boast about a fight

⁴¹These lines indicate that Oedipus still feels he is suffering from religious pollution. Hence, anyone who shows him affection (e.g., by touching) runs the risk of being contaminated. Those who have been with him throughout his suffering run no such risk, since they have long been in frequent physical contact with him.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

whose details you will hear from these two girls
when you get to spend some time together.
But a moment ago, on my way here, [1150]
I heard an odd report, and I would like
to learn what you advise. It was quite short,
but very strange and worth attending to,
for men should never overlook anything
that might be of concern.

OEDIPUS

What did it say,
son of Aegeus? Describe it to me. 1380
Otherwise I have no idea at all
what you wish to know.

THESEUS

People say a man,
someone who is a relative of yours
but not from Thebes, has somehow made his way
to Poseidon's altar and is sitting there,
where I was offering a sacrifice
the first time I was summoned here.

OEDIPUS

Where is he from? [1160]
If he's a suppliant, what does he want?

THESEUS

From what people tell me, I only know
he wishes to have a brief word with you 1390
about some minor matter.

OEDIPUS

What about?
If he's there sitting as a suppliant,
the issue is not trivial.

THESEUS

They say
he only wants to have a talk with you
and then safe passage to return from here.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

OEDIPUS

What man would sit there praying for such things?

THESEUS

Could it be a member of your family,
someone from Argos, who might be asking
a favour from you?

OEDIPUS

Stop there, my dear friend!

THESEUS

What's troubling you?

OEDIPUS

You must not ask me to . . . 1400

THESEUS

Do what? Tell me. [1170]

OEDIPUS

From what you said just now,
I know the suppliant.

THESEUS

Who is he?
And why should I find him offensive?

OEDIPUS

My lord, he is a son of mine, a person
I detest. What he has to say would pain me
more than words from any other man.

THESEUS

What? Could you not just listen to him speak
and then not do what you don't wish to do?
Is there any harm in merely listening?

OEDIPUS

My lord, his voice has become abhorrent
to me, his father. Do not compel me
to yield to his request. 1410

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

THESEUS

But consider this—
does not the fact that he's a suppliant
force your hand? What about the reverence
you owe the god? [1180]

ANTIGONE

Father, listen to me.
Though I am young, I'll offer my advice.
Permit the king to act as his own heart
and the god dictate and do what he desires.
And for the sake of your two daughters,
let our brother come here. You need not fear. 1420
His words cannot force you to change your mind,
if what he says is not for your own good.
What harm is there in listening to him?
As you know, a conversation can expose
malicious acts someone intends to do.
Besides, he is your son, and even if 1190
he harmed you with the most immoral act,
for you to take revenge by hurting him,
father, would not be right. So let him come.
Other men have evil sons who make them 1430
intensely angry, but when they listen
to advice from friends, then, as if spellbound,
their mood softens and they are pacified.
Set aside the present—think of the past,
the sufferings your parents made you bear.
If you consider that, then I am sure
you'll recognize how an evil temper
can lead to catastrophic consequences.
This is a serious matter, and you 1200
have every reason to reflect on it— 1440
you have no eyes and can no longer see.
Do what we ask. For it is not proper
that those pleading on behalf of justice
should have to persist with their entreaties,
nor is it appropriate that someone

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

who has been treated kindly does not know
how to show such kindness in return.⁴²

OEDIPUS

My child,
what you desire is difficult for me.
However, your speech has won me over.
We will do as you wish. But still, my friend, 1450
if that man does come here, I only pray
that no one will end up controlling me.

THESEUS

I do not need to hear you say that twice.
Once is enough. I do not wish to boast,
old man, but you should surely understand
you are quite safe, if gods keep me alive. [1210]

[THESEUS and his ATTENDANTS leave.]

CHORUS

A man desperate for many years of life,
not content to live a moderate span,
is, in my judgment, obviously a fool.
For many feelings stored by lengthy years 1460
evoke more pain than joy, and when we live
beyond those years that are appropriate,
then our delights are nowhere to be found.
The same Deliverer visits all of us, [1220]
and when our fate from Hades comes at last,
there is no music, dance, or wedding song—
no—only the finality of Death.

The finest of all possibilities
is never to be born, but if a man
sees the light of day, the next best thing by far 1470
is to return as quickly as he can,
to go back to the place from which he came.
For once the careless follies of his youth [1230]
have passed, what harsh affliction is he spared,

⁴²Antigone's obvious point here is that in his past actions Oedipus has let his explosive temper take control of his actions, with disastrous effect. The most obvious evidence for that is his self-inflicted blindness.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

what suffering does he not undergo?
Envy and quarrels, murder, strife and war,
until at last he reaches his old age,
rejected and alone, unloved and weak,
a state where every form of sadness dwells.

That is where I live, but not alone, 1480
for suffering Oedipus is there as well—
like some north-facing cliff beside the sea [1240]
lashed on every side by winter blasts,
beaten constantly by breaking waves
of violent disaster, storms which come
from western regions of the setting sun,
or eastern countries where it rises,
or southern realms of noontime heat,
or northern mountains, dark as night.

ANTIGONE

Look there! It appears as if the stranger 1490
is coming here alone, without an escort. [1250]
Father, he has tears streaming from his eyes.

OEDIPUS

Who is he?

ANTIGONE

The one we talked about just now—
it's Polyneices. He's coming closer!

[Enter POLYNEICES. He greets ANTIGONE and ISMENE first.]

POLYNEICES

Alas, my sisters, how should I begin?
Should I lament my own misfortunes first
or my father's troubles? I see him here,
an old man, and I find him with you
cast out in a foreign land, an exile,
dressed in such disgusting clothes—so filthy 1500
the grime from years ago is now ingrained [1260]
in his old flesh, putrefying his skin.
Above those empty sockets in his face
his wild dishevelled hair blows in the wind,

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

and I suppose the food he has with him
is just the same, scraps for his poor belly.
I am a wretch to learn of this too late!

[POLYNEICES turns his attention to OEDIPUS.]

I admit that in the care I've shown for you
I've proved myself the very worst of men—
and I'm the one confessing this to you! 1510
But since in all he does Zeus shares his throne
with divine Compassion, let that goddess
inspire you, father. For the wrongs I did
can be made good—I cannot make them worse. [1270]
Why are you silent? Say something, father.
Do not turn aside! Will you not answer me?
Will you dishonour me—send me away
without uttering a word or telling me
why you are so angry?

[OEDIPUS refuses to acknowledge POLYNEICES.]

Come, my sisters,
you are this man's daughters. You, above all, 1520
should try to ease that stubborn tongue of his
which makes him so difficult to talk to.
Otherwise he will never speak to me
and will dismiss me in disgrace from here,
where I stand a suppliant to the gods.

ANTIGONE

You poor unfortunate, tell him yourself 1280
the reason you came here. A moving speech
may well awaken pleasure, rage, or pity
and rouse a silent listener to speak.

POLYNEICES

You have advised me well. I will speak out. 1530
And to begin with, I appeal for help
to lord Poseidon, for at his altar
the king of Athens told me to stand up
and come here, giving me assurances
I could listen and speak and leave unharmed.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

I trust these promises will be observed,
strangers, by you, by both my sisters here,
and by my father, too. And now, father, [1290]
I want to tell you the reason I am here.
I have been driven from my native land 1540
into exile because, as your elder son,
I thought the right to sit upon your throne
and wield your royal power belonged to me.
But then Eteocles, my younger brother,
forced me out of Thebes, not by prevailing
with legal arguments or trial by combat,
but by persuading Thebes to back his side.
The most important cause of this, in my view,
is that old curse placed on your family,
an opinion I have heard from prophets, too. 1550 [1300]
And so I went to Dorian Argos,
made king Adrastus my father-in-law,
and bound to me as sworn companions
all the most celebrated warriors
in Apian lands, so that with these allies
I might levy an armed force of spearmen
in seven companies to march on Thebes
and die in a just cause or else drive out
the people who had treated me this way.⁴³
What then do I now seek by coming here? 1560
Father, I have come to you in person
pleading for your help—with prayers from me
and from my comrades, those seven spearmen,
who with their seven armies now surround
the entire Theban plain. Of those leaders,
one is spear-hurling Amphiaraus,
an expert warrior and preeminent
in reading omens in the flights of birds.
The second chieftain there is Tydeus,
from Aetolia, son of Oeneus. 1570
The third is Argive-born Eteoclus;
the fourth is Hippomedon, sent to Thebes
by Talaos, his father. The fifth of them,

⁴³The words *Dorian* and *Apian* in these lines both refer to the Peloponnese. The word *Argos* by itself can refer to a number of different places in ancient Hellas.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

Capaneus, boasts he will burn Thebes
and utterly obliterate the city.

The sixth, Arcadian Parthenopaeus, [1320]
is eager for the fight. He gets his name
from Atalanta, who was his mother.

She remained a virgin for many years
before she married and gave birth to him. 1580

I am the seventh of them, your own son,
or if not yours, a child of evil fate,
although I may be yours in name. ⁴⁴ I've brought
to Thebes a valiant force of Argives.

Each and every one of us implores you,
as you love your daughters and your life,
pleading with you, father, to put aside
that oppressive rage you feel against me,
as I set out to pay my brother back.

He forced me into exile and robbed me 1590 [1330]
of my native land. For if we can trust
in prophecy, then those allied with you,
so say the oracles, will win the day.

So by our fountains and our family gods,
I'm begging you to listen and relent.

For I am a stranger and a beggar
on foreign soil, and so are you, as well.

You and I both share a similar fate—
we get a place to live by flattery,
paying court to others, while my brother, 1600
unhappily for me, lives in the palace,
an arrogant tyrant mocking both of us.

If you become our ally in this fight, [1340]
I'll scatter his armed forces to the winds—
that won't be difficult or take much time—
and then I'll bring you back and set you up
in your own home and me in mine and drive
Eteocles away by force. All this

I promise to achieve with your support.

Without you, I shall not return alive. 1610

⁴⁴Eteocles, the Argive leader in the force Polyneices has assembled, should obviously not be confused with Eteocles, Polyneices' younger brother. The name Parthenopaeus means "child of the maiden" or "child of the virgin." Polyneices' words mean, in effect, "I am your son, but if I am not (because you have disowned me), then I am the child of fate, even if among the general public I am still considered your child."

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

they provide for me and share my suffering. 1640
They are like men, not women. But you two,
you are both bastards, born from someone else,
no sons of mine! And so the eye of god [1370]
is watching you—but not as it will soon,
if your armies mean to march on Thebes.
For you will never overwhelm that city.
Before that happens, you and your brother
will fall, polluted by each other's blood.
And now I summon those very curses
I called down earlier against you both. 1650
I cry to them to come to my assistance,
so that the two of you will understand
those who bore you are worthy of respect.⁴⁶
It is not right to treat them with contempt,
because a father who had sons like you
has lost his eyes. These girls did not do that.
And so if Justice established long ago [1380]
and sanctioned by our ancient laws still sits
alongside Zeus, these curses I call down
will overpower your suppliant prayers 1660
and all claims to the throne. Get out of here!
I spit you out! You are no son of mine!⁴⁷
You most contemptible of evil men!
Take with you these prayers I make on your behalf—
may your armies never overwhelm that land
where you were born, may you never return
to the land of Argos, but rather die
at the hand of the one of your own kinsmen,
and kill the man who drove you out of Thebes!
That is what I pray for. And I call on 1670
the dreadful paternal dark of Tartarus [1390]

⁴⁶Jebb offers the useful note that curses, once uttered, become divine agents of vengeance. Oedipus is therefore calling for the agents created by his earlier curses against his two sons to come to his assistance now.

⁴⁷Oedipus is claiming here that his curse on Polyneices will defeat any legal claims Polyneices may have to justify his attack on Thebes (both as a suppliant and as the elder son) because ancient natural Justice demands that children respect their parents, a law that is more powerful than any Polyneices can appeal to.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

to deliver you to your new dwelling place.⁴⁸
I invoke the spirits here, the Furies,
and summon Ares, god of war, who set
such lethal hatred in the two of you!
You have heard what I have spoken. Now leave.
Proclaim to all the citizens of Thebes
and to your loyal confederates, as well,
that Oedipus has handed out these gifts
as royal bequests to his two sons.

CHORUS

Polyneices, 1680
the journey you have made brings me no joy—
and now you must return without delay.

POLYNEICES

So much for my trip here—it's a disaster.
Alas for my companions! This is the end [1400]
of the road we marched when we left Argos—
unhappily for me! I cannot speak of this
to any of my friends or turn them back.
I must stay silent and confront my fate.
But you, my sisters, daughters of this man,
you have heard our father's brutal curses. 1690
If what he is praying for is fulfilled
and you get back to Thebes, then I beg you,
by all the gods, do not leave my body
to be dishonored. Set me in a tomb,
and have me buried with full funeral rites. [1410]
If you do that, the praises you both earn
from this man for the help you two provide
will be increased by no less generous praise
you will receive for looking after me.

ANTIGONE

Polyneices, listen to me, I beg you! 1700

⁴⁸Tartarus is a deep pit in Hades, usually associated with punishment and imprisonment. The word “paternal” may refer to the idea that darkness is the father of everything or that Polyneices will be going to a place as dark as the world of his father, Oedipus.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

POLYNEICES

Dearest Antigone, what is it? Speak out.

ANTIGONE

Turn your forces back—and do it quickly.
Return to Argos. Do not ravage Thebes
and destroy yourself.

POLYNEICES

That is not possible.
Once I turn back because I am afraid,
how could I ever lead that force again?

ANTIGONE

Again? Why, brother, would you ever again
get so angry? How do you benefit
from destroying the city of your birth? [1420]

POLYNEICES

It is dishonourable to live in exile
and to be made a laughing stock like this,
when I'm the elder son. 1710

ANTIGONE

But don't you see
you will be confirming the prophecies
our father uttered? They are predicting
you and Eteocles will kill each other.

POLYNEICES

That's what he wants. But I cannot give up.

ANTIGONE

Alas, that is insufferable for me!
But who will follow you once he has heard
what has been prophesied?

POLYNEICES

I will not tell them
such a grim prediction. A proper leader
conveys good things and hides unwelcome news. 1720 [1430]

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

ANTIGONE

Are you resolved to do this, my brother?

POLYNEICES

I am. Do not attempt to hold me back.
This ill-fated, catastrophic path is now
the one destined for me, thanks to my father
and his avenging Furies. But for you two,
my sisters, may Zeus provide rich favours,
if you will carry out full burial rites
for me when I am dead. There's nothing more
you can perform for me while I still live. 1730
So let me set out on my way. Farewell.
You will not see me in this life again.

ANTIGONE

I am so wretched!

POLYNEICES

Do not feel sad for me.

ANTIGONE

Who would not feel sad for you, my brother,
when you are marching off to certain death? [1440]

POLYNEICES

If it is my fate, then I shall die.

ANTIGONE

Listen to me instead! No!

POLYNEICES

Do not keep pleading
for what will never happen.

ANTIGONE

If I lose you,
my life will have no joy.

POLYNEICES

Fate will decide
one way or the other. As for you both, 1740

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

may gods grant you never meet disaster,
for all men know you two do not deserve
a life of suffering and misery.

[POLYNEICES leaves. There is a rumble of thunder in the distance.]

CHORUS

I sense the approach of fresh misfortune,
a new load of grief from this blind stranger,
unless Fate is now perhaps approaching [1450]
its predestined end, for I cannot say
decisions of the gods stay unfulfilled.
Time keeps watch and always sees these things—
one day it casts some down, and on the next 1750
it raises others up once more.

[There is another peal of thunder, this time much closer than before.]

O Zeus,
your heavenly skies reverberate!

OEDIPUS

My children, if there is anyone here,
tell him to summon Theseus back,
that finest of all men.

ANTIGONE

Why, father?
Why do you want us to send for Theseus?

OEDIPUS

Zeus's winged thunder will soon lead me [1460]
on to Hades. Send someone now—and quickly!

[Thunder peals again, sounding very close, and lightning flashes.]

CHORUS

Listen! The crash of an immense thunderbolt
hurled down by Zeus—my scalp bristles, 1760
overwhelmed with fear, my heart recoils!

Lightning blazes once more through the sky!
What final purposes are being revealed?

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

I am afraid. Such fire from Zeus
never flashes down in vain, not without
some great calamity. [1470]

[Another peal of thunder breaks above them.]

O mighty heavens! O Zeus!

OEDIPUS

My children, for me the destined end of life
is drawing near. There is no turning back.

ANTIGONE

How do you know? What signs have you received?

OEDIPUS

I sense it clearly. Get someone to go
and fetch the king as quickly as he can. 1770

[More peals of thunder and flashes of lightning.]

CHORUS

Listen! Listen to that! The piercing noise
is all around us once again!

O god,
be gracious to us—show us your mercy,
if you are bringing some catastrophe
to Athens, our maternal home. [1480]

May I find you
generous to us—if I have looked upon
a man polluted by his acts, do not,
I beg you, somehow let me share his curse
or favours that bring no benefit to me!
O Zeus on high, I cry out to you! 1780

OEDIPUS

My children, is lord Theseus nearby?
When he gets here will I still be alive
with my mind intact?

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

ANTIGONE

What trustworthy pledge
do you wish to plant within his heart?

OEDIPUS

In return for the goodwill I received,
I will do him a favour by fulfilling [1490]
everything I promised earlier.

CHORUS

Come, my son, come here to us!
If you by chance are at the altar 1790
in the deepest corner of the grove
offering an ox to god Poseidon,
lord of the sea, then come to us.
This stranger thinks it only just
that you, your city, and your friends
receive a favour for those benefits
you have so graciously conferred on him.
My lord, make haste! Come quickly!

[THESEUS enters.]

THESEUS

What is this noise? Why are you once again [1500]
all making such a din—it's clearly coming 1800
from you citizens and from the stranger, too.
Were you frightened by a thunderbolt from Zeus
or driving showers of hail? When a god
unleashes a ferocious storm like this,
it can presage all sorts of things to come.

OEDIPUS

My lord, I have been hoping you were here—
some god has seen to it that you arrive
at a propitious time.

THESEUS

Son of Laius,
What is going on? Is it something new?

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

OEDIPUS

For me life moves beyond its tipping point. 1810
I do not wish to die without confirming
the promises I made to you and Athens.

THESEUS

What omens tell you that your death is near? [1510]

OEDIPUS

The messengers who announced the news to me
are the gods themselves. They have not proven false,
for they have shown me the appointed signs.

THESEUS

What are these fatal signs, old man? Tell me.

OEDIPUS

All those frequent rolling peals of thunder
and many lightning flashes hurtling down
from an invincible hand.

THESEUS

You have convinced me. 1820
From your many prophecies I have learned
you do not lie. Tell me what I must do.

OEDIPUS

Son of Aegeus, I will set out for you
the glories that lie in store for Athens
and that never will diminish with old age.
In a moment I myself will lead the way [1520]
to the place where I must die. I will need
no hand to guide me. You must not ever
divulge this place to any mortal man
by revealing its concealed location 1830
or the general area where it lies,
so that for all time it may protect you
more effectively than shields and spears
or many foreign allies. You yourself
will learn, once you enter that place alone,
forbidden things of which no one may speak.
I would not talk of them to any citizen

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

or to my children, although I love them.
You must always keep these matters secret, [1530]
and when your life is coming to an end, 1840
reveal them to your most important heir—
to him alone. He must always pass them on
to his successor. If you keep doing this,
then life in Athens will never be disrupted
by citizens born from the dragon's teeth.⁴⁹
Even if in countless cities men live well,
they find it all too easy to commit
outrageous crimes, for gods are slow to act,
although they clearly intervene when men
abandon piety and turn to madness.⁵⁰ 1850
Son of Aegeus, do not let that happen.
But I am stating what you know already.
But since what comes from god urges me on, [1540]
let us set off for the designated place
and hesitate no longer.

[*OEDIPUS turns his attention to ANTIGONE and ISMENE.*]

My children,
follow me, for though it seems new and strange,
I will once more show both of you the way,
just as you two used to guide your father.
So move on. Do not lay a hand on me.
Let me find the sacred burial ground myself, 1860
where Fate has ordained I will lie hidden
here in Athens. This way—follow my lead.
Hermes the Guide and the goddess of the dead,
Persephone, are showing me the path.
O light, that is no light to me, though once,
in earlier days, my eyes could see you,
now for the last time you caress my body. [1550]
For already I am shuffling on my way

⁴⁹The founder of Thebes, Cadmus, killed a dragon living at the site of the future city. When he sowed the monster's teeth across the earth, armed men sprang up and began fighting and killing each other, until only a few were left. These men were the first Thebans.

⁵⁰The point here is that even well-governed cities will suffer from the hubristic ambitions of some citizens because, although the gods will eventually punish evil citizens, such divine retribution is slow and therefore the troublemakers will have time to disrupt civic life.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

to hide the final portion of my life
in Hades.

[OEDIPUS stops to address THESEUS.]

But you, most cherished stranger, 1870
may you, your followers, and your land
fare well, and may you, in your prosperity,
remember me, as I move to my death,
and may you have good fortune evermore.

[OEDIPUS, ANTIGONE, ISMENE, and THESEUS move off together.]

CHORUS

If by our traditions it is right
for me to worship with my prayers
the unseen goddess, as well as you,
lord of the dead, then Aidoneus,
O Aidoneus, I entreat you— [1560]
may the stranger move on free of pain 1880
or heavy grieving for his fate
to the all-concealing fields of death
and the chamber of the Styx below.⁵¹
Through no fault of his own he met
great torments, but may a righteous god
restore his splendour once again.

O goddesses of the lower world
and you, the unconquerable beast,
whose body lies, so people say,
beside the gate of countless guests, 1890 [1570]
snarling at the entry to your cave,
invincible guardian of Hades,
O child of Earth and Tartarus,
I pray the path the stranger treads
may be left clear, as he moves on

⁵¹Aidoneus is another name for Hades, god of the underworld. The “unseen goddess” is Persephone, wife of Hades. The name “Styx” refers to the river separating the earth and the underworld. The word also often designates the underworld generally.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

to fields of the dead below.
I cry to you, lord of eternal sleep.⁵²

[A MESSENGER enters.]

MESSENGER

Citizens, the news I will report is brief—
Oedipus is dead. But I cannot provide [1580]
details of his death in a short report, 1900
since what went on there lasted for some time.

CHORUS

Has that unfortunate man died at last?

MESSENGER

You can rest assured—he has left this life.

CHORUS

How did the poor man die? Was his passing
divinely ordered and free of pain?

MESSENGER

To tell the truth,
his death inspired wonder. How he left here
you already know, since you were present.
None of his loved ones led him on his way.
Instead, he acted as a guide for all of us.
When he came to the steep cleft that plunges 1910 [1590]
down the bronze stairway rooted deep in earth,
he stopped near one of the many pathways
which converge by a hollow in the rock
where Theseus and Peirithous set up
the lasting pledge of their eternal bond.
He stood halfway between the basin there
and the Thorician rock, with the stone tomb
and the hollow pear tree on either side.
There he sat down, took off his filthy clothes,

⁵²The “goddesses in the lower world” are probably the Furies, the divine agents of blood revenge, and the “beast” is a reference to Cerberus, a dog with several heads (the number varies from one account to another) who is a resident of Hades, with a lair near the entrance to the underworld. It is not clear to whom the phrase “child of Earth and Tartarus” refers, since it does not describe the parentage of Cerberus (perhaps it is a general reference to Death, the “lord of eternal sleep”).

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

and, after calling for his daughters, asked them
to bring him water from a flowing stream,
so he could wash and offer a libation.⁵³
The two of them went up the rocky hill
of fresh, green Demeter, which we could see, [1600]
soon came back with what their father wanted,
and then, following our usual customs,
washed and dressed him.⁵⁴ When they were finished
and had done all that Oedipus requested,
without ignoring any of his wishes,
at that moment Zeus of the Underworld 1930
produced a peal of thunder.⁵⁵ The young girls
heard the noise and trembled. Then they collapsed,
falling at their father's knees and weeping.
They kept on striking their breasts and wailing,
voicing their pain with loud and bitter cries.
When he heard these sudden howls of sorrow, [1610]
Oedipus held them in his arms and said,
"Children, today your father is no more.
Everything I was has perished, and you two
will no longer share the heavy burden 1940
of looking after me. Children, I know
that task was difficult, but a single word
makes up for all your labours, for never
will you find anyone whose love for you
is greater than the love you both received
from the man who was your father. And now,
for all the days remaining in your lives,
you will not have him with you anymore."
They remained like this, holding one another, [1620]

⁵³For an explanation of the "bronze stairway" as the threshold of the descent to Hades, see Footnote 5 above. Peirithous was king of the Lapiths and a close friend of Theseus. In a famous heroic exploit, the two men together went down to the underworld, were captured by Hades, and then rescued by Hercules. The "lasting pledge" is some sort of memorial to their friendship. Thoricus was a town in Attica. Jebb notes that in a legendary story Thoricus was a place where a mortal called Cephalus was taken up to the gods and that the "hollow pear tree" may mark the spot where Persephone was abducted by Hades and taken down to the underworld (i.e., they are references to places where the gods took some mortal being away).

⁵⁴Demeter was a goddess protecting crops. She was worshipped in various manifestations (Black Demeter, Green Demeter, Yellow Demeter—symbolizing the different stages of the crop cycle—black earth, the first appearance of a young crop, and harvest time).

⁵⁵Zeus is traditionally a god associated with the sky and heaven, but some Greek cities worshipped Zeus as a god of earth or of under the earth.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

all of them distraught with grief and sobbing. 1950
Then they paused and stopped their mournful wailing.
They made no sound, and everything was still.
Suddenly a voice called out to Oedipus.
It made the hairs on all our heads stand up—
we were so terrified! Again and again
the god cried out to him from every side,
“You there, you, Oedipus, why this delay
in our departure? You have been lingering
for far too long.” Once he became aware
the god was summoning him, Oedipus 1960
asked lord Theseus to come up to him, [1630]
and when the king did so, Oedipus said,
“My dear friend, give me the time-honoured pledge
of your right hand for my children, and you,
my daughters, give him your sworn pledge, as well.
My lord, promise you will not betray them
of your own free will but will always do
whatever you believe is best for them.”
Since Theseus is an honorable king,
he showed no sign of sorrow and agreed 1970
to fulfil that promise for the stranger.
Once Theseus had sworn he would do this,
Oedipus suddenly clutched his daughters
with his blind hands and said to them, “Children,
you must bear my death with a noble heart [1640]
and leave this place. For you cannot believe
it is appropriate to view those acts
which our traditions say should not be seen
or listen to things said you should not hear.
You must go now—and quickly. Let Theseus, 1980
the sovereign king, stay and learn what happens.”
All of us heard him say these words and then,
full of sorrow, with our eyes streaming tears,
we followed the young girls and left the place.
Once we moved off, after a few moments
we looked back from a distance and noticed
Oedipus was no longer to be seen.
Theseus was alone, holding his hands up [1650]
right before his face to protect his eyes,
as if he had just seen something fearful 1990

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

that no human being could bear to see.
And then, after that, a short time later,
we saw Theseus offering a single prayer,
worshipping divine Olympus and the Earth.
How Oedipus met his fate and perished
no mortal knows, other than Theseus.
It was no fiery lightning bolt from god
that took him away, nor was he carried off
by some momentary whirlwind rising [1660]
out at sea. No—some escort from the gods 2000
came for him or else, in an act of kindness,
the rock-hard world of the dead split open
so he would feel no pain. He passed away
without a groan or symptom of disease.
If any mortal man has ever died
in a miraculous way, then he did.
If someone thinks I talk just like a fool,
I will not try to teach him otherwise,
since he believes my words do not make sense.

CHORUS

Where are the ones who went away with him— 2010
his daughters and their friends?

MESSENGER

Not far away. The sound of their laments
is getting closer—they are almost here.

[ANTIGONE and ISMENE enter.]

ANTIGONE

Alas! This is so sad! Now the two of us, [1670]
both subject to an abject destiny,
will spend every moment grieving
the family curse we carry in our blood,
inherited from our father. For him
before today we laboured long and hard.
Now he is dead, and we are left to speak 2020
of what we saw and went through at the end,
events that baffle reason.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

CHORUS

What happened?

ANTIGONE

One can only guess, my friends.

CHORUS

Has Oedipus truly gone?

ANTIGONE

He has gone
exactly as one might have wished—
not seized by Ares, god of war,
or by the sea, but snatched away [1680]
by unseen fate and carried off
to the hidden fields of death.
I feel so sad! A death-filled night 2030
now shrouds our eyes. How do we find
daily nourishment in a harsh life
of wandering some distant land
or roaming waves of the sea?

ISMENE

I do not know.
Things are desperate! How I wish
Hades the killer would seize me too
and let me share death with my old father!
For the life I face is not worth living. [1690]

CHORUS

You two most excellent of daughters
must bear whatever gods provide. 2040
Do not let your hearts burn up
in flames of excess passion—
for what has happened to you here
gives you no reason to complain.

ANTIGONE

One laments the loss of even painful things.
That life for which I felt no love at all [1700]
I did love when I held him in my arms.
O my beloved father, now wrapped

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

in the underworld's eternal darkness,
even though you are no longer here, 2050
my sister and I will love you always.

CHORUS
He ended . . .

ANTIGONE
He had the end he wished for.

CHORUS
In what way?

ANTIGONE
He perished in a foreign land,
as he desired, and is eternally at rest
beneath the ground in a well-shaded place.
He did not leave us without being mourned.
With tear-filled eyes I still grieve for you,
my father, and in my unhappy state
I do not know how I should relieve [1710]
the grief I feel with such intensity. 2060
Alas! You wished to die in a strange land,
but when you died I was not with you!

ISMENE
I feel so desperate! What fate awaits us,
my dear sister, now we have no father?⁵⁶

CHORUS
Friends, since the ending of his life was blessed, [1720]
you should cease this grieving. No mortal
has a life immune from great misfortune.

ANTIGONE
Dear sister, we must hurry back.

ISMENE
But why?
What do we have to do?

⁵⁶Some lines have been apparently been lost from this speech.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

ANTIGONE

I need to see it!

ISMENE

See what?

ANTIGONE

That earthly resting place. 2070

ISMENE

Whose resting place?

ANTIGONE

I cannot bear this grief—
I have to see our father's burial ground!

ISMENE

But how does such a wish not break our laws? [1730]
Don't you see that?

ANTIGONE

Why do you disapprove?

ISMENE

And then there is also this . . .

ANTIGONE

What other things
are you objecting to?

ISMENE

Our father perished
without a grave—and no one else was there.

ANTIGONE

Lead me there, and then kill me, too.⁵⁷

ISMENE

Alas for me, in my miserable state!

⁵⁷Ismene's objections to Antigone's desire to visit Oedipus's resting place are that it opposes Oedipus's express wishes (and is therefore not lawful) and that no one knows where the burial site is.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

Where am I now to spend this wretched life,
with no support and totally abandoned! 2080

CHORUS

Do not fear, my friends.

ANTIGONE

But where do I take refuge?⁵⁸

CHORUS

You have already found a place for that.

ANTIGONE

What are you saying?

CHORUS

You two have reached
a place where you are safe from harm. [1740]

ANTIGONE

Yes, I understand that.

CHORUS

What else is there?
What are you thinking?

ANTIGONE

I have no idea
how we get home to Thebes.

CHORUS

Don't even think of that!

ANTIGONE

This present trouble has us in its grip!

⁵⁸Jebb questions whether in this exchange (up to the arrival of Theseus) there might be some confusion in the way speeches have traditionally been assigned, since Antigone's sudden and urgent concern about where she is to go now does not seem to fit her obviously strong preoccupation with visiting her father's burial place as soon as possible. The speeches given to Antigone here seem much more appropriate coming from Ismene, who is clearly wondering about where she is to find a home now that Oedipus is dead. I have made no changes to the traditional arrangement, but I find Jebb's observations interesting and I would probably try them out if I were mounting a production of the play.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

CHORUS

The evils you faced before were harsh enough. 2090

ANTIGONE

Back then we had no hope. Now things are worse.

CHORUS

You have been destined for a sea of troubles.

ANTIGONE

Yes, that is true.

CHORUS

That's what it seems to me.

ANTIGONE

Alas! Alas! O Zeus, where do we go?
Where is our destiny now driving us—
towards what last remaining hope? [1750]

[Enter THESEUS.]

THESEUS

Stop these laments, children! When gods below
store up public favours for the dead,
we must feel no sorrow—for if we do
then retribution follows.⁵⁹

ANTIGONE

Son of Aegeus, 2100
we beg one request from you.

THESEUS

What is it,
my children. What do you desire?

ANTIGONE

We wish
to see our father's grave with our own eyes.

⁵⁹Since with the death of Oedipus in Athens, the gods have seen to it that he gets what he most desires and that the Athenians obtain a guarantee of political security, there is no reason to feel sad. To do so would be to go against what the gods have established (and thus invite their angry punishment).

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

THESEUS

To go there is forbidden by our laws.

ANTIGONE

O lord and ruler of Athenians,
what do you mean?

THESEUS

Children, your father told me [1760]
that no living person should come near the place
or speak any words beside the sacred ground
where he is buried. And he promised me,
if I made sure of that, then I would keep 2110
the land of Athens free of pain forever.
The god there heard me swear that I would do it,
and so did Horkos, too, Zeus's servant,
who witnesses all oaths and makes them strong.⁶⁰

ANTIGONE

If this is what my father has in mind,
then we must comply. Send us on our way
to ancient Thebes, to see if we somehow [1770]
can stop the coming slaughter of our brothers.

THESEUS

I will do that and perform whatever else 2120
may be a service to you and to the man
who has just died and lies beneath the earth.
On his behalf, I must spare no effort
for Oedipus has earned my gratitude.

CHORUS

So let us cease with our laments,
and chant our funeral songs no more.
For these events have all been preordained.

[Theseus leads them all away, towards the city.]

⁶⁰The "god there" is (one assumes) the divine spirit who took Oedipus away. Horkos (meaning Oath) is a god who serves Zeus by witnessing oaths and punishing perjury. I have added a line in English to clarify his function.