



Sappho
Oedipus
at Colonus

translated by C. John Holcombe

Ocouso Press 2008

Oedipus at Colonus by Sophocles

translated by

Colin John Holcombe

Ocaso Press 2008

Sophocles's Oedipus at Colonus

a new translation by Colin John Holcombe

Ocaso Press 2008

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INTRODUCTION

Oedipus at Colonus was the last play Sophocles wrote, and was not performed until BC 401, four years after his death. The Athens that Sophocles had known through its period of greatness — Salamis, the Delian League and Athenian Empire — was no more: the Second Peloponnesian War had ended with the defeat of Athens and an imposed dictatorship. When the play opens, Oedipus is also a shadow of his former self: the great king of Thebes who blinded himself on discovering his true identity has been wandering for twenty years, an outcast begging for food, and is now led by his daughter Antigone. He comes to Colonus as a defeated man, anxious to abide by local customs and receive food and shelter. An outcast he remains throughout the play, but one that gradually grows in stature as he recognizes the old prophecies are coming true. He will die in the grove of the Eumenides. His death will bring rewards to the land that takes him in. The sons that disinherited him will both die in their struggle for the throne of Thebes. Oedipus is a fierce and angry character, and grows more so as he comes to see the part the gods have prepared him to play.¹

The play concerns suffering, therefore, but not redemption. Oedipus's tomb will safeguard Athens, but the gods will continue to bring misfortune to the family line. His independent daughter Antigone has given her word to Polyneices, and at Thebes will be sentenced to death for defying Creon. Polyneices is locked into his struggle with Eteocles, and neither can give way. Even the smooth-talking Creon has his commission to fulfil, and acts as the capable administrator, though treacherous and high-handed in going about the State's business. Theseus represents Athens' bravery and love of justice, but was a man, as all Athens knew, capable of deceit in his innumerable liaisons.

The play is not realistic in our sense of the word. Attic tragedy employed only a small number of actors, and these wore masks. The dialogue is interwoven with passages of poetry, music, singing and probably dance. We can imagine how impressive the spectacle must have been, but have few details. The play is in verse, in places of a very high order, with several of the choral pieces among the most famous of Greek poetry. I have tried in this translation to return attention to the verse, using rhyme to shape the formal but plain nature of Sophocles's text. For the same reason, the

translation largely preserves the line numbering and verse structure of the original.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

Characters

Oedipus, formerly King of Thebes

Antigone, daughter of Oedipus

Ismene, daughter of Oedipus

A man of Colonus

Theseus, King of Athens

Polyneices, elder son of Oedipus

A messenger

Chorus of Elders of Colonus

Scene

Colonus, a spot a mile and a quarter north-west of Athens, in front of a grove sacred to the Erinyes or Furies, here worshipped under the name of Eumenides or Kindly Powers.

Time

Afternoon, some twenty years after the actions of Oedipus at Thebes.

PART ONE: PROLOGOS (Opening of Play)

Oedipus, a blind beggar, enters stage right, led by Antigone.

OEDIPUS

What land or city now, Antigone?
Come tell your old blind father what you see.
Who'll take in wandering Oedipus and give
the little that he begs for so he live?
Or less than that will do: the years have brought
acceptance of his sufferings, as they ought.
Long roads and hardship are his friends on earth
who had nobility in royal birth.
Perhaps now, child, you see some resting-place,
10. some grove or common ground where we may face
the probing questions there are sure to be.
We come as strangers here, and scrupulously
must show obedience to the local powers.

ANTIGONE

My careworn father, Oedipus, the towers
that guard the city seem but distant still,
a long way off from us, but here we will
sit down and rest in what is holy ground
with vine and olive, laurel and the sound
of the sweet nightingale in song. Now on
20. this rough rock rest for such a long way gone.

OEDIPUS

Guide, but do not leave me on my own.

ANTIGONE

As always, father, as the years have shown.

OEDIPUS

So tell me, if you know, the place we're at.

ANTIGONE

Athens I recognize: no more than that.

OEDIPUS

So passers-by have said, in any case.

ANTIGONE

Shall I go on and ask about this place?

OEDIPUS

Yes, do, and ask if there be people here.

ANTIGONE

There is no need. I see their houses. Near
is someone, father, who acknowledges.

OEDIPUS

30. And he is moving on his way to us?

A stranger enters stage left.

ANTIGONE.

He's here already, father. You can speak
as prompted by the answers that we seek.

OEDIPUS

Now, friend, I understand from one whose eyes
must serve for both of us that you'll advise
on matters where we both are taking stock.

STRANGER

I can, but first you must get off that rock,

for on this holy ground you may not tread.

OEDIPUS

To whom so consecrated, have you said?

STRANGER

Inviolable, to mortal steps denied,
40. where Goddesses of Earth and Dark abide.

OEDIPUS

Tell me the fateful name that's here installed.

STRANGER

Eumenides, the prescient ones, they're called
by us, though elsewhere they have other names.

OEDIPUS

Then may they show this suppliant their claims
for from this sanctuary I'll never go.

STRANGER

What's that?

OEDIPUS

The fates have said that this is so.

STRANGER

If that's the case I will not arbitrate,
without report or warrant from the State.

OEDIPUS

To one whose wandering was ever so
50. you'll not deny the facts he has to know?

OEDIPUS

As much by deeds as in his speech assured?

STRANGER

Theseus, son of Aegeus, our late king.

OEDIPUS

70. Could messenger be sent for summoning?

STRANGER

What expectation could that act afford?

OEDIPUS

A kindness to me earns a great reward.

STRANGER

How can a blind man grant so great a prize?

OEDIPUS

All I tell him will be winged with eyes.

STRANGER

I'd not bring further injury on you,
my friend, who seem a noble man, though, true,
ill-fated currently. So stay on here
while I go find what countrymen are near
and not in town at present. They can say
80. if you may rest here or must go your way.

Exit stranger stage left.

OEDIPUS

Tell me, daughter, has the stranger gone?

ANTIGONE

Yes, he is gone, and we're entirely on
our own now: you can speak in privacy.

OEDIPUS

Since, mighty Goddesses, your sanctuary
is first where I have come to pay my due,
receive me graciously, and Phoebus who,
in telling of such wretchedness as mine
for many years to come, yet made your shrine
the port and sleeping place at my decease:
90 a place ordained to great divinities
where I would end, he said, my weary life
with benefits that lay beyond the strife
that marked me out. And more: for he that took
me in would benefit, while he that shook
me off should be accurst, his land destroyed.
He told me portents too would be employed
in Zeus's earthquake, fire and thunderclap.
So now I recognize, at last, that no mishap
has led my wandering footsteps to your grove.
100. Some omen guided me in what I strove
to be, a man like you denied all wine,
who sits now solemnly at your great shrine.
Great ones, recall the words Apollo said,
and give me consummation of the life I've led.
Unless it be I am beyond all grace,
and stay the most accursed of any race,
hear, gentle daughters of the night and old
and you, the gathered in Athena's fold,
the first of cities: pity this poor wraith
110. who's only Oedipus by outworn faith.

ANTIGONE

Hush, my father: some elders come, no doubt
to search this sanctuary and turn us out.

OEDIPUS

I will be quiet and by you bestowed
into the covert from the public road,
to learn their drift of speech, for in that source
there lies the natural safeguard of our course.

Oedipus and Antigone withdraw to grove.

PARADOS (Choral dialogue spoken or sung as chorus enters)

Chorus enters from stage left.

CHORUS

Strophe (chorus turning in one direction)

Where's he gone? Now look around.
Find the man who's fled away.
On such holy ground he goes,
120. most insolent of men alive.
Some wanderer no doubt, to strive
against the customs of our land.
In ignorance the foolish chose
not to ask or understand
how hazardous is this quiet ground.
Come quickly, search, he must not stray.
For here the thoughtful man complies
with virgins holding life and death,
and from this grove averts his eyes.
130. He only mentions them in breath,
in whispers and in piety:
he murmurs and he passes on,
and not as this one in disgrace
who desecrates the holy place.
Where is the overconfident?
We look and search but cannot see
the spot where this old man has gone.

Oedipus comes forward from the grove.

OEDIPUS

Behold: I am the man you want.
With ears a blind man yet may see.

CHORUS

140. Ah, what a horror is to be
this ruined thing we meet and hear!

OEDIPUS

It is no common outlaw here.

CHORUS

Who, Zeus protect us, can he be?

OEDIPUS

Bereft of fortune, such is he,
that you, good guardians of the land,
will not much envy one whose hand
is held by others, and whose guide
is one supporting at my side.

CHORUS

Antistrophe (chorus reverses direction of dance)

If you were sightless from your birth
150. then harsh your days and all too long
have been your troubles on this earth.
You shall not all the same prolong
afflictions with an added curse:
we tell you, stranger, that you err.
You go too far now and may do
much violence to us, maybe, worse,
will desecrate that silent glade
where bowls of water mix with mead.
Withdraw at once from this dread shade,
160. yes, stranger, go at once, and heed

how much you trespass on their grace.
A distance separates but you
will hear us all the same and know
what pains your errors may incur.
We ask you therefore, leave and go,
but if, thereafter, you would speak
with us, unhappy wanderer,
then do so then, and do not seek
before to violate this place.

OEDIPUS

170. My daughter, what to do for best?

ANTIGONE

We must comply with their request
and follow what their counsels say.

OEDIPUS

Your hand to help me on my way.

ANTIGONE

You feel it now it's laid in yours?

OEDIPUS

You promise me? I'll have no cause
in leaving to regret this trust?

Led by Antigone, Oedipus starts moving downstage.

CHORUS

Strophe (chorus turns to dance in one direction)

Come, old man, as come you must;
you'll not be forced to move again.

OEDIPUS

Enough?

CHORUS

No, more.

OEDIPUS

You'll tell me when?

CHORUS

180. Help him, you who see the way,
on stumbling steps that he must take.

Several unnumbered verses seem to have been lost here.

ANTIGONE

Follow, father, in my wake:
here, so clasp it, is my hand.

CHORUS

A stranger in another's land
accepts that country's practices.
Against her hates he takes his stand
and moulds affections into his.

OEDIPUS

Let us do then as we need.
Come, my daughter, lead again
190. to safer ground where we may heed
the speech of pious countrymen.

CHORUS

Antistrophe (chorus reverses direction of dance)

Then at the base of that rock floor

so sit you down and stir no more.

OEDIPUS

Enough?

CHORUS

It is.

OEDIPUS

Sit as before?

CHORUS

Move a little sideways now and show
yourself upon that ledge bent low.

ANTIGONE

Come, I'll help you: reach for me.

OEDIPUS

How hard this life now seems to be.

ANTIGONE

We'll step together out of harm:
200. here now, father, is my arm.
So lean on me, and walk, and rest.

OEDIPUS

And dark for this unwelcome guest.

Oedipus is settled on the rock centre stage.

CHORUS

So tell us, now you have your rest,
your reasons for this way on earth,
the name by which you are addressed,

and father's name and place of birth.

OEDIPUS

I am an exile: that must do.
No more now, I beg of you.

CHORUS

What is it you would conceal?

OEDIPUS

210. No, do not ask me to reveal
my name or lineage to you now.

CHORUS

Why?

OEDIPUS

Repugnant.

CHORUS

Then tell us how.

OEDIPUS

I've said as much as any can.

CHORUS

What is your lineage? Tell, old man.

OEDIPUS

My child, what can I say to them?

ANTIGONE

Truth's our only stratagem.

OEDIPUS

It is, and that is what we'll do.

CHORUS

Why waste our time, the two of you?

OEDIPUS

You know, do you, the son of Laius?

CHORUS

220. Ah no!

OEDIPUS

The race of Labdicus?

CHORUS

Dear Gods!

OEDIPUS

The hapless Oedipus.

CHORUS

And you're that man who's come to us?

OEDIPUS

But have no fear of what I say.

CHORUS

Enough, enough, be on your way.

OEDIPUS

A wretch I am.

CHORUS

Be off we say!

OEDIPUS

My child, what will they do?

CHORUS

Leave our lands, the two of you!

OEDIPUS

You must fulfil what's promised me.

CHORUS

No man is visited by fate
230. by giving back what was received.
Recklessly we were deceived
and so deny our former oath.
Give up this resting place, the both
of you. Your being here will see
a heavy burden on the State.

ANTIGONE

Strangers, in all reverence
I ask you to perceive our case.
You have not helped my father hence,
but only heard of his disgrace
240. in vile and unintended deeds.
I ask you look upon his child
that's here imploring you with eyes
as yours are, open, undefiled,
and looking as your own, to hear
her plea to you and sympathise
as she can barely hope for. Straight-
way grant this end to misery.
By what you hold in child most dear,
in wife, possessions, holy creeds,

250. consider man, poor man, and see
there is no mortal or estate
that from the gods is ever free
if they should drive him to his fate.

End of Parados

PART TWO

CHORUS

Now all too surely, child of Oedipus,
we pity one and both, and what has passed,
but dread the evils gods prepare for us
if we go further than we granted last.

OEDIPUS

What good that famous glory of a State
if emptiness of breath but issues out?
260. It may be Athens is the most devout,
indeed men say so, of all cities praised
as prompt to take in strangers, give them aid.
Yet not from looks or laws that I may flout
but by my name alone I'm driven out,
from seat and country, though in truth my deeds
were more of suffering than what proceeds
from willing it. I do not need to tell
you stories of my family, which well
you know, and dread, but only ask in fact:
270. was I so evil to repay an act
of one unknown to me, but such to lend
a certainty to thoughts he wished my end.
I beg you by the gods, that, as you've made
me leave my seat, to have that trust repaid.
Do not refuse the gods their due, nor fail
to see they aid the pious and curtail
the lease of the profane. Whatever birth
a man has, none escapes them on this earth.
I ask you therefore by your gods' own fame
280. to keep the radiance of Athens' name,
not stoop to petty acts of sacrilege
nor undo words you gave in solemn pledge,
but, as the unfathomable gods will send

this man, you will protect him to the end.
Forget therefore his plain, unlovely face:
he comes as someone sacred, filled with grace
with power and piety and comforting
for all the populace. And when the king
arrives, your leader, you will know the how
290. and wherefore of my purposes. For now
be not made treacherous by fear or doubt.

CHORUS

Old man, what you have said must give us pause
though has been given out in words, not light,
We'll hand to rulers of our land the cause
for their adjudicating what is right.

OEDIPUS

Where is the ruler of this land about?

CHORUS

He's in the city that his father graced,
where he who brought us here has gone post-haste.

OEDIPUS

You think he'll come himself, that message can
300. entice him out for such a blind old man?

CHORUS

Most certainly, the once he knows your name.

OEDIPUS

And who is there to bring him such a claim?

CHORUS

The rumours travel on from place to place.
He'll soon be hastening here: you need not doubt.
Your name is known, old man, and word is out,

No, were he tired or occupied, he'd lose
no opportunity to see your face.

OEDIPUS

I pray for his and my sake that he choose
that course: the good man is his own best friend.

ANTIGONE

310. Dear Zeus, I can't think next what fate will send.

OEDIPUS

What is it you say?

ANTIGONE

That I can see
a woman coming, though far off from me.
She's mounted on a colt of Etna's breed
a woman riding to us. I can read,
beneath a wide-brimmed Thessalian hat
she wears no doubt to shade herself from that
fierce sun, some features known to me. Or what
I fancy are, perhaps. It's her. It's not.
I see her greet me with a smile, confer
320. a brightening glance. I look, I stare at her,
but, true enough, it is Ismene near.

Ismene enters stage right.

OEDIPUS

It's who?

ANTIGONE

Your daughter and my sister here.
Her voice will straightway tell you what I see.

ISMENE

Father, sister: names most dear to me.
How hard to find you, and there's such relief
although I hardly see you through my grief.

OEDIPUS

You've come, my child?

ISMENE

How very sad your plight.

OEDIPUS

It's you?

ISMENE

A journey hard, by day and night.

OEDIPUS

Touch me, my child.

ISMENE

I give a hand to each.

OEDIPUS

My children. Sisters.

ISMENE

330. What wretched straits I reach.

OEDIPUS

You mean her life and mine?

ISMENE

And mine no less.

OEDIPUS

So tell me why you've come.

ISMENE

A life to bless.

OEDIPUS

A daughter's yearning?

ISMENE

That, and as I must
convey this news by someone whom I trust.

OEDIPUS

Your brothers, where are they when needed?

ISMENE

But to their darkest hour have now acceded.

OEDIPUS

Enough of them, their very thoughts and days
are modelled on those base Egyptian ways
where men sit idly at the loom instead
340. while women slave outside for daily bread.
Look at your case, children: those whose place
was helping me in hardship choose to grace
the hearth, while you go out, in no way shun
the aid your father needs.

(turning to Antigone)

For here is one
who from the day her girlish form was past
has been this old man's guide, from first to last,
and shared his erring, hard and stumbling days
when barefoot, hungry through the forest ways

he went in drenching rain or in the heat.

350. For her, that father's care was incomplete
if short of food or tenderness.

(turning to Ismene)

And you,
my child, who ventured here from Thebes to do
the office of a faithful messenger and bring
your father oracles on anything
that might concern his fate, concealed from them,
the treacherous Cadmeians, who would condemn
this Oedipus and cast him out. What news,
Ismene, have you brought your father, does
you will not fail to notice, or to be
360 a warning of such dangers presently.

ISMENE

All I suffered on the way, to find
you, father, how you were and fared, it's kind
to pass on over: none will want to add
to pain by telling hardships that were had.
It is the trouble of your wretched sons
I came to tell you of, and how it runs.
At first they willed the throne to Creon, thus
avoiding, so they thought, that curse on us,
on city also, that bad blood of old
370. that stains the family house and fold.
But now a god has occupied their minds
and stirs up inbred rivalry it finds
to seize the throne and all it represent.
The younger son is now a hothead bent
on keeping Polyneices off the throne,
and thrust him out, to keep the land alone.
And that said brother, is from Thebes now fled
and occupies the hill-girt Argos, where, instead,
has made alliances with mighty hands
380 that Argos fight and triumph in those lands

or, anyway, lift glory to the sky.
No empty threat is this: I do not lie
but feel a terror darkening on this spell.
When gods will pity you, I cannot tell.

OEDIPUS

But have you ever entertained a stroke
of fortune other than how gods once spoke?

ISMENE

The latest oracles won't be denied.

OEDIPUS

What are these oracles, and on whose side?

ISMENE

Your country benefits, so they have said,
390. from having you contained, alive or dead.

OEDIPUS

What gain from having such a man as I?

ISMENE

Your power, it's said, is how the futures lie.

OEDIPUS

So when I'm nothing now my worth begins.

ISMENE

At last the gods will lift you from your sins.

OEDIPUS

Late help to this, an old man hurt before.

ISMENE

That well may be, but Creon's coming for
you. That 's the reason, and more soon that late.

OEDIPUS

With what intent? In this you'll tell me straight.

ISMENE

To settle you on Theban land, but never let
400. you live in boundaries by the city set.

OEDIPUS

What use to rest beyond their city gates?

ISMENE

It is a curse your tomb anticipates.

OEDIPUS

It needs no god to give them common sense.

ISMENE

That is why they'll come to take you hence,
not in, but as a neighbour, as they must.

OEDIPUS

They mean to shroud my bones with Theban dust?

ISMENE

The guilt of kinsmen's blood forbids them that.

OEDIPUS

And not to master me some place I'm at.

ISMENE

Or else the griefs for them will gather hence.

OEDIPUS

410. My child, by what arrangement with events?

ISMENE

Your angry wraith when at your tomb they stand.

OEDIPUS

Whence came this, child, or so you'd understand?

ISMENE

The envoys visiting the Delphian hearth.

OEDIPUS

And Phoebus spoke, they said, on my behalf?

ISMENE

In coming back to Thebes they made that claim.

OEDIPUS

Can either of my sons have heard the same?

ISMENE

Yes, both, and know its meaning all too well.

OEDIPUS

A greed by which those renegades foretell
their grasp at kingship more than want for me?

ISMENE

420. It's hard to hear that, but it may well be.

OEDIPUS

May gods urge on that feuding appetite,
and I decide the ending of that fight
for which the both are arming, spear for spear,
that neither he who holds the sceptre near
may keep his throne, nor he who fled the land
come back. The ingrates never raised a hand
to help or to defend their father when
they saw him weeping, most despised of men
thrust out from his own country, shamefully
430. without a place to go. What was their plea
when I was exiled from the household fire?
Nothing. You'll say it was at my desire,
I left, in which the State allowed my say.
Not so, for, notice, on the very day
when in self-loathing I desired but death,
and even death by stoning, none gave breath
to further that wild yearning, but, when time
had numbed my anguish, and too much my crime
was overrun by grief and disapproved
440. of, then, and only then, the city moved
with force to oust me, and not hitherto.
My sons, who should have helped as sons must do,
did nothing. All that wanted was one little word
and they said nothing, no, they were not heard
when I was banished, as a beggar too,
condemned to wander. To their sisters due
alone, who were mere girls, the debt I bear
for daily food and shelter, daughters' care.
Yet both those brothers sacrificed their own
450. for power that lies in sceptred sway and throne.
Me they'll never win, nor will attain
from that great throne of Thebes a lasting gain.
I know from oracles my daughter brings
and prophecies in old rememberings
which Phoebus has at last fulfilled for me,
that Creon comes here with his captaincy

to seek me out. But if you take my cause,
defended by great goddesses of yours,
I will procure deliverance for this State
460. and from the enemies I'm forced to hate.

CHORUS

Since, Oedipus, our pity now you've earned
for self and daughters, and that pledge we've learned
will be the saving of our land, I should
now tell you things to do for your own good.

OEDIPUS

Gladly, if you'll guide me, friends, in these.

CHORUS

Make, first, atonement to the deities
whose grove you have profaned by straying here.

OEDIPUS

If you would tell me, strangers, and be clear.

CHORUS

You'll make libation of fresh water: bring
470. it here by unsoiled hands from some pure spring.

OEDIPUS

And then, when I have brought this natural draught.

CHORUS

You'll find bowls waiting, wrought by master-craft,
so cover them, both rims and handles crowned.

OEDIPUS

With olive shoots or wool you'd have them bound?

CHORUS

With wool from some ewe-lamb that's freshly shorn.

OEDIPUS

To what then afterwards must I be sworn?

CHORUS

Pour out the holy water, facing east.

OEDIPUS

It's from those bowls the water is released?

CHORUS

In three clear streams, and empty out the last.

OEDIPUS

480. What to fill them with, their contents cast?

CHORUS

With water and with honey: add no wine.

OEDIPUS

When shaded earth has drunk to this design?

CHORUS

Then three times on them lay nine olive sprays
with both your hands, and offer up this praise.

OEDIPUS

It is their potency that I would gain.

CHORUS

That as we call them gracious, they will deign
to grant the suppliant belated grace.

You'll pray yourself or someone in your place
with unraised voice, that is, inaudibly.
490. Then go and do not look behind. We'll be
your help if you'll conform, but, otherwise,
would think the greatest jeopardy applies.

OEDIPUS

You hear then, daughters, what our neighbours say?

ANTIGONE

We have listened, and are on our way.

OEDIPUS

I cannot go, disabled from this rite
as much by frailty as want of sight,
but one of you may serve. It will suffice,
for one alone to offer sacrifice
for thousands if the soul with all goodwill
500. approach there earnestly. Go quickly. Still
you leave me helplessly alone without
a hand to guide me as I move about.

ISMENE

I will perform these rites if they
would tell the place to me and point the way.

CHORUS

Beyond the grove, you'll find a guardian
who'll be at hand to help you if he can.

ISMENE

I go, and you, Antigone, take care
to guard our father now. For parents there
cannot be drudgery in what we do.

Ismene exits stage right.

Kommos (Choral dialogue)

Strophe (chorus turns to dance in one direction)

CHORUS

510. A hurtful thing it is to wake
a grief that can no longer ache
and hear again that old mistake . . .

OEDIPUS

What now?

CHORUS

The anguish that no doubt
you fought but left you no way out.

OEDIPUS

It is a kindness guests may claim
to be protected from their shame.

CHORUS

The tale continues far and near
It is a truth that we would hear.

OEDIPUS

Ah no.

CHORUS

Be calm.

OEDIPUS

You have no cause.

CHORUS

520. Grant our request: we granted yours.

OEDIPUS

Antistrophe (chorus reverses direction of dance)

Then know I suffered grievously.
Unwittingly, as Heaven may see,
I brought these troubles on my head.

CHORUS

But what exactly have you said?

OEDIPUS

I mean the unclean marriage bed
of Thebes, by which the curse was bred.

CHORUS

You shared the marriage bed with one
of whom in truth you were the son . . .

OEDIPUS

Words to bring such infamy,
530. and to the women bred of me.

CHORUS

Whatever would these women be?

OEDIPUS

Two daughters, both are cursed by me.

CHORUS

Dear Zeus, in what way cursed?

OEDIPUS

By birth in truth: I was the first.

CHORUS

By that same mother, whom you claim . . .

OEDIPUS

Daughters, sisters: both the same.

CHORUS

Horrors . . .

OEDIPUS

Equally to me.

CHORUS

Suffering . . .

OEDIPUS

That should not be.

CHORUS

For sins

OEDIPUS

No sins.

CHORUS

Then how?

OEDIPUS

I won

540. the prize by which I was undone
by Thebes in service to the State.

Antistrophe (chorus reverses direction of dance)

CHORUS

Yet blood you shed at any rate?

OEDIPUS

Of what is it that you'd hear more?

CHORUS

A father's?

OEDIPUS

One more wound in store.

CHORUS

Murderer.

OEDIPUS

A murderer but not . . .

CHORUS

You'd make?

OEDIPUS

A plea for justice.

CHORUS

What?

OEDIPUS

In law I slaughtered to prevent
my death: a wretch, but innocent.

End of Kommos. Chorus turns to face entrance of Theseus.

CHORUS

Theseus, son of Aegeus, we see near.

550. No doubt your part in this has brought him here.

Theseus enters with soldiers stage left.

THESEUS

I have heard of you in times gone by,
the mutilation of your sight, and I
now recognize you, son of Laius, see
to my conjectures added certainty
by all the tales I heard in hastening here.
In looks and in appearance I must fear
you are indeed as named. Though pitying
you also, Oedipus, I'd ask what thing
or task you need of me, or Athens too,
560. and likewise for that helpmate next to you.
Inform me of it. Strange would be the tale
to make the likes of me recoil or fail
to help. For I knew exile. On that shore
I met with many perils, no man more,
and so, whatever the adversity,
no case of yours shall be refused by me.
Like you I am a mortal, and my share
for what the morrow brings is as your care.

OEDIPUS

Theseus, your words, so apt and generous
570. do not need long-extended speech from us.
Both who I am and of my family line
you know, as well the country that was mine.
In short, to bring this story to its end,
I'll speak of purposes that I intend.

THESEUS

But tell me what it is that you would claim.

OEDIPUS

I come to offer you this careworn frame

that is not much to look on, but contains
far more than beauty in its royal gains.

THESEUS

What are these gains you've brought, what benefit?

OEDIPUS

580. In times to come you'll know, but not as yet.

THESEUS

So tell me when these benefits will be?

OEDIPUS

When I am dead and you have buried me.

THESEUS

Life's last offices: you do not care
for what still stays or is remembered there?

OEDIPUS

This act of kindness makes up all the rest.

THESEUS

Then what you'd mention is a small request.

OEDIPUS

Not so, but weigh the import carefully.

THESEUS

Disputes, you think, between your sons and me?

OEDIPUS

To Thebes they'll want to take me, that I know.

THESEUS

590. Why stay an exile here if you can go?

OEDIPUS

But when I wanted that, the two refused.

THESEUS

Such temper in misfortune's badly used.

OEDIPUS

Well, chide me if you wish, but hear me out.

THESEUS

Speak on. There's no pronouncing when in doubt.

OEDIPUS

Theseus, such wrongs have been my case.

THESEUS

You'll not retell the troubles of your race?

OEDIPUS

No, that's too well known throughout all Greece.

THESEUS

Then what's the grief that passes mortal lease?

OEDIPUS

It's thus with me: that from my country driven
600. out by own offspring, I'm forbidden
to return: am now a parricide.

THESEUS

But why collect you if stay outside?

OEDIPUS

A god has spoken, and they must obey.

THESEUS

Ah, some threat of oracles, you say?

OEDIPUS

That they'll be humbled by this land is true.

THESEUS

Whence comes this bitterness between us two?

OEDIPUS

Kind son of Aegeus, to gods alone
immunity from age and death is known,
but nothing else escapes time's ruinous ways.
610. Earth's power decays, the strength of men decays,
good faith will pass from life, distrust be born
when best of steadfast friendship is foresworn
between two people and two cities. Sweet
turns bitter, changes, turns to love's fierce heat.
Between you now and Thebes there is but sun,
but time, his days and nights not yet begun
to unfold trivial differences, may foil
the harmony between each native soil
and brandish banks of spears, when fury stalks.
620. So shall my slumbering and buried corpse
then drink their warm blood up, though cold in death,
if Zeus and Phoebus speak with truthful breath.
But let us hear no more of mysteries,
the matters I began with now should cease.
Sufficient that you keep your oath to us
when you will never think that Oedipus
had come to you an idle, thankless guest
unless the gods would cheat us for the rest.

CHORUS

It's true such promises this man has nursed
630. have been with blessings for us from the first.

THESEUS

Who could deny the amity of such a man
who should be welcome here as any can?
He joins as ally, which we can't withhold
and comes as suppliant to gods we hold
to add a recompense that we may earn,
both I and country. I could never spurn
a man so qualified as citizen.
And therefore, if it suits the stranger then
to stay, I place him in your charge, if not
640. to come with me. Now Oedipus the what
you choose will be for me the course to take.

OEDIPUS

Zeus's blessing for your country's sake.

THESEUS

What will you choose now, friend? My house is near.

OEDIPUS

If that were possible I would. But here . . .

THESEUS

Do what? Although I'd not obstruct your way.

OEDIPUS

Confound my persecutors: make them pay.

THESEUS

Your presence promises, as we have heard.

OEDIPUS

And that more truly if you'll keep your word.

THESEUS

Be calm. My word is binding on us both.

OEDIPUS

650. Then I'll not ask you for a formal oath.

THESEUS

An oath's no surer than my word in that.

OEDIPUS

You'll act?

THESEUS

What is the case we're looking at?

OEDIPUS

That enemies will come.

THESEUS

You have these men.

OEDIPUS

But if you leave?

THESEUS

Don't speak of that again.

OEDIPUS

But fear compels . . .

THESEUS

And fear's no part of me.

OEDIPUS

You do not know the threats.

THESEUS

The what I see
is none will haul you off against my charge.
Such threats are often made in bluster, large
in anger doubtless, but when danger's hence
660. so are the threats, and mind regains its sense.
And as for men who'd come, make good their threat
to haul you off by force, they'll be upset
to find the seas between us hard to sail.
Take heart. If Phoebus sent you he'll not fail
to help and to protect you. More, besides:
if I am absent then my name provides
a shield for you from every harm and fret.

Exit Theseus and soldiers stage right. Chorus turns to face audience.

Stasimon (stationary choral poem)

Strophe (chorus turns to dance in one direction)

Colonus, stranger: here is calm
in limestone white and woven shade:
670. a land of horses, thick with tales
of loveliness that none dispute.
Far from sun's or tempest's harm,
in wine-dark ivy through the glade,
our constant guests, the nightingales,
pour out their ever joyful sound.
Sacred too is each leafed thing
endowed with berries and with fruit
as, nymphs attending, revelling,

Dionysus walks this ground.

Antistrophe (chorus reverses direction of dance)

680. Here bloom the crocuses in gold,
and on their graves the white narcissus
guards the Goddesses of old
from dewed awakening, dawn to dawn.
And through this flows the Cephisus,
unendingly, from fountains drawn:
its stainless waters daily trace
their fecundations on the plain,
so blessing it with quick increase.
The Muses cannot hide their face
690. nor Aphrodite ever cease
to visit us with golden rein.

Strophe (chorus turns to dance in one direction)

There is a gift more versatile
than famed in Asian countries grows
or on the Dorian Pelop's isle:
we speak of grey-leafed olive trees
those self-renewing nourishers
of children, giving us our ease
but terror to our spearmen foes.
Our youths are not its ravagers
700. nor may the aged with their hand
destroy this bounty of our land.
Inviolate, they're never felled
but in Athena's eye's are held
sleepless in her grey-eyed stare,
as too in Morian Zeus's care.

Antistrophe (chorus reverses direction of dance)

Another praise we have to tell
is for our mother city, writ
in glory of the son of Cronus,
with might of horses, might of sea,

710. the god Poseidon, such is he
who to master horse has shown us
how to keep with iron bit
their powerful anger in our thrall.
More prodigal to us as well
he's given us the oar to meet
the hand that hauls us over seas,
giving it a wondrous ease
to follow on the rise and fall
of the Nereids' myriad feet.

End of Stasimon.

PART THREE

ANTIGONE

720. Land above all others praised, you yet
may have the chance to make those praises good.

OEDIPUS

Why say those words, my child?

ANTIGONE

The likelihood
is come: here is Creon with his men.

OEDIPUS

I must ask you, kindly elders, once again
to give me evidence of what was told.

CHORUS

Fear not. You have our promise. We are old,
no doubt, but this our State's not weak of arm.

Enter Creon with guards stage right.

CREON

Old men, my noble friends, you take alarm
at my approach. I see it in your eyes,
730. but beg you: do not shrink from me, devise
uncivil answers to my words. On no
ill purpose am I sent, and, old, I know
the city hereabouts will have its powers
if any has among these realms of ours.
It was for reason of my years that they
commissioned me to coax this man, convey
him safely back to Thebes, and not as voice

of one man only but as country's choice.
I am his kinsman too, and have to face
740. with tears the sorrows of his wretched case.
Hear me now, unhappy Oedipus:
the Cadmeian people beg return to us.
Rightfully they call you back, and strive,
as I do, or be worst of men alive,
to ease your sufferings, now seeing you
adrift and wandering as beggars do,
an outcast with a daughter for support.
Indeed I'd not foreseen the girl would court
a misery like this, hold up the frame
750. of one who has but penury for name.
A woman ripe for marriage but unwed,
and prey to every violence instead.
Why must you mortify us, cast this shame
on you, and on myself and people's name?
An outright shame like this cannot be hid
except by you. So, Oedipus, be bid
by all our fathers' pieties to roam
no more, but come to Thebes, our father's home.
Respectfully leave Athens. She that nursed
760. you from antiquity, she claims you first.

OEDIPUS

So speaks the guileful one, whose tongue enacts
more subtleties than truths are rightful facts.
Why try those practised skills on me, assert
the arguments where I'd be sorest hurt?
In past days when I wronged myself, it's true
I longed for exile but was held by you.
But after, frenzied grief then spent in force,
when I was happy in myself, it was your course
to thrust me from my cheerful house and land,
770. the ties of kinship scattered out of hand.
And so it is once more, and now you see
this State and kindly people welcome me,

you'd bear me off again, soft words designed
to hide hard purposes. Where can you find
a joy in giving where there is no need?
Suppose a man refused to pay you heed
in something that you sought, but, later, when
you'd gained that heart's desire, he proudly then
must offer that from which all grace has fled.

780. Would not that kindness be show instead?

Yet now is such the gift you offer me,
good in aspect but a falsity.

And I will prove you false, that these can hear
that you are come to take me, nowhere near
my home, but place me at your borders, there
to ward off any hurt this land may bear.

That's not for you, but this: that I will send
my ghost to haunt your country to the end,
and, for my sons, I give as heritage

790. a little plot to die in. That I pledge
in knowing all too well that Thebes has cause
to see my teachers surer guides than yours,
for such are Phoebus and his father, Zeus.

Your tongue is fraudulent. It will produce,
such is the sharpness of the whetted sword,
far more calamities than sweet accord.

Why should I waste my words? Be gone and leave
me in this place. Whatever troubles grieve,
he lives not badly one who has enough.

CREON

800. Who's hurt the most with all this childish stuff,
you think? It is their speaker you disgrace.

OEDIPUS

I am content to see you wreck your case
with me and in these stranger's eyes.

CREON

Why can't the years conceive to make you wise?
You bring reproach upon old age's span.

OEDIPUS

A ready tongue, but still an honest man
will not find words to plead for every claim.

CREON

Words too many may still miss their aim.

OEDIPUS

Your words were few then, and advance your cause?

CREON

810. But not sufficient for poor wits like yours.

OEDIPUS

Now in the name of these good folk, I say
do not place watches where I mean to stay.

CREON

It's these I call on, not on you, whose speech
has been outrageous, whom I now will teach . . .

OEDIPUS

By taking me, is it, despite my friends?

CREON

Yes, in spite of them, you'll make amends.

OEDIPUS

Where's force to further this vile fantasy?

CREON

One daughter is already seized by me,
the other I shall carry off and soon.

OEDIPUS

My daughter?

CREON

820. Now you'll sing another tune.

OEDIPUS

You have my child?

CREON

I'll soon have both.

OEDIPUS

You will not leave me, friends, forget the oath,
but chase the godless villain off your land?

CHORUS

Stranger, leave at once and understand
how vile this deed and its audacity.

CREON (*to guards*)

It's time to carry off the girl if she
won't go of her freewill. Men: to the task.

Guards approach Antigone.

ANTIGONE

Then all is lost. Where can I go, or ask
of men or gods?

CHORUS

Stranger, tell us you . . .

CREON

830. I will not touch the man. The girl will do.

OEDIPUS

Elders!

CHORUS

We say you make a gross mistake.

CREON

Not so.

CHORUS

How's that?

CREON

Mine is all I take.

OEDIPUS

Strophe (chorus turns to dance in one direction)

Athens, help!

Guards pinion Antigone's arms.

CHORUS

What would you do? My lord, with us?
A fight's not wise or generous:
our strength and yours we soon shall know.

CREON

Stand back from me.

CHORUS

First let her go.

CREON

If I am touched, it will be war.

OEDIPUS

You see.

CHORUS

Unhand the girl, or more . . .

CREON

I'm not some slave your words would slur.

CHORUS

Desist.

CREON

840. Now men, be off with her.

Guards haul Antigone stage right.

CHORUS

Athens help us, reinforce
Colonus that's betrayed by force.
Hasten, kinsmen, to the fight.

ANTIGONE

They drag me off, my friends. This can't be right.

OEDIPUS

Where are you now, my daughter?

ANTIGONE

They're taking me.

OEDIPUS

Hold out your hands.

ANTIGONE

I can't: I am not free.

CREON

Away with her.

Guards haul off Antigone.

OEDIPUS

Dear gods, what shall I do?

CREON

No more will these two women serve for you
as prop for your frail steps. If pride intends
850 a triumph over country and your friends,
then sensibly it is that love and fate
should make this prince the servant of his State.
I own those arguments, and you should know
how unproductive is the rage you show,
that bane of anger that you can't forswear.

CHORUS

Stop where you are, now stranger.

CREON

Have a care.

CHORUS

Give up the girls and leave, we say again.

CREON

You'd give my city greater captives then?
I'll have much more than daughters if I can.

CHORUS

What more is that?

CREON

860. I'll carry off this man.

CHORUS

Brave words.

CREON

 And acted on, with actions seen.

CHORUS

Unless our country's sovereign intervene.

OEDIPUS

Listen, see, see, he'd take me now.

CREON.

Be quiet.

OEDIPUS

 I ask the Goddesses allow
their suppliant to utter one more curse.
Since the miscreant has gone to worse
and taken one who offered sight to me,
now to the Sun god I will make this plea:
that you and Thebes' whole country may decline
870. into an old age crabbed and harsh as mine.

CREON

You see then, men, what anger breeds.

OEDIPUS

Of course they see it: wrongs were deeds,
but vengeance for them is a breath untold.

CREON

I'll not contain my rage. Though I be old
and single-handed, I will have this man.

Creon approaches Oedipus.

Antistrophe (chorus reverses direction of dance)

OEDIPUS

You won't.

CHORUS

What boldness, stranger, brought
with you, to think such actions can
achieve the purposes you sought.

CREON

I can.

CHORUS

Then Athens' ruin is in sight.

CREON

880. With justice weakness always conquers might.

OEDIPUS

You hear his words?

CHORUS

But not what words begot.

CREON

It's true that Zeus knows, but you do not.

CHORUS

Such insolence.

CREON

And one that you must bear.

CHORUS

People, rulers of the land,
come with speed on every hand;
these men are poised to cross the border.

Enter Theseus with armed men, stage right.

THESEUS

What is this wretched tumult and from where
that stops attendance on the sea-god's altar,
the lord of your Colonus? I've retraced
890. my steps immediately and come in haste.

OEDIPUS

Dear friend, I recognize your voice. You see
a gross injustice has been done to me.

THESEUS

And who has ventured on this desperate course?

OEDIPUS

Creon is the man, who's seized by force
my own two daughters who were all to me.

THESEUS

This man?

OEDIPUS

That is the case, with brevity.

THESEUS (*to his men*)

Then hasten to the altars, one of you,
command them leave the offerings and do
what now is needed. Haste by horse or feet
900. toward the neighbourhood where pathways meet
in case those girls be lost to us, and I
before my guest must shamefully deny
my word, betrayed by force. Go quickly now.

Exit soldier stage right.

And as for Creon here, if I showed how
my anger can be visited, he'd not escape
without some tribulation. Laws can shape
the matter though.

(*to Creon*)

So know you'll not be loosed
until those girls return and are produced
to me. Your actions are a grave disgrace
910. against my honour and your country's race.
We are a state that honours justice — more,
will sanction nothing that's beside the law.
In coming here you've set those rights aside
and made an inroad on them, rough and wide.
By taking them you've made yourself be seen
as some untutored brigand, where I've been
a thing of no importance, the whole place manned
by underlings too weak to make a stand.
Not from Thebes comes such discourtesy.
920. She does not breed unrighteous sons, nor see

with pleasure such crude banditry. Askance
the gods will look on those poor suppliants
who are mere girls in truth. In Thebes I'd not
pursue freebooting ways unless I'd got,
whatever claims, approval of the State,
but live as ways of foreigners dictate.
You shame a city that deserves it not,
which is your own, as well, a shameful blot
on one advanced in years, whose fullness brings
930. no wise awareness of life's better things.
I've said it once, but now I shall repeat
myself to make my meaning more complete:
those women shall be brought to us with speed,
that is, immediately, and you will heed
the words that I repeat with force. Refuse —
you'll stay a guest of ours you didn't choose.

CHORUS

So see then, stranger, from a city graced
with justice how your actions stand misplaced.

CREON

I never thought this city lacked its men
940. of fight or counsel, Theseus. If then
I acted overbearingly, I thought
that never would its citizens be caught
by argument to keep against my will
this erring kin of mine. Indeed I'm still
persuaded they'll return this reprobate,
a godless parricide, polluting State,
the husband marrying who was the son.
And more unlikely still that anyone
who benefited from Mount Ares' share
950. of wisdom through these famous lands would care
to give a home to one like this. As such
I hunted down the prize, and would have much
refrained but for his curses, wrought on me

and mine, that gave my act authority.
Anger has no age to bridle it but death,
and those who lack all anger have no breath.
Do as you please with me. My case is just
but has no allies here. I'll do as must,
despite my age, to answer deed with deed.

OEDIPUS

960. Though shamelessly you strike at me, concede
that equally that taunt of age must fall
on you. True: bloodshed, incest, sorrow: all
you have accused me of, and worse, which I
have borne without complaint, nor will deny
what gods may sometimes do to us, or hold
against us as their birthright, as from old.
But take me singly, as a man, you'll find
no sin in me, but only troubled mind.
If prophecy had filled my father's ears
970. with doubtful whisperings that he should fear
his termination in some filial strife —
why should he care who had no son or wife?
Or I, who had that retribution's name,
should now plead guilty or be given blame,
in meeting one unknown whose son I was.
I killed him wantonly, you say, because
I did not know that blood was darkly hued?
My mother, your own sister even, you'd
require me curse all decency to tell
980. of unclean couplings, and of sins as well.
Enough: I'll not be silent now your speech
has far exceeded any decent reach.
She was my mother, true, and misery
that I knew nothing of it, nor did she.
To bear her children by the son she had
was gross and pitiful. In no way glad
I took the wife awarded, had no choice,
and not as you are now, who bravely voice

these crimes of mine to cast them in my teeth.

990. I am not guilty of such crimes beneath
that forced-on sanctity of marriage bed
nor of the parricide that you have said
substantiates the evil I have done.

For tell me now: suppose you were the son
who met his unknown father on some road
and was accosted by him, threatened, owed
some courtesy but given none, must try
by arms to settle with him or must die,
what would you do but I did: arm and fight.

1000. In this the gods compelled me, out of spite,
but he, my father, were he now to live
would mark the merit in it and forgive.

How flagrantly you smile and stir again
the argument in decent, trusting men.

To heap fresh horrors on me in my shame
you flatter Theseus and belaud his name,
but carry off my daughters from a land
that honours justice foremost and will stand
for this poor traveller that you would kill.

1010. Entreat some other place to serve your will:
for this I conjure from the sacred ground
of ancient goddesses still sleeping round:
that you will see what men will make a State.

CHORUS

An honest man, my lord, beset by great
misfortunes, true, but who deserves support.

THESEUS

Why are we talking when the girls are sought,
and captors making off, soon lost to view?

CREON

What would you have an unarmed man now do?

THESEUS

At least to show us where the women are,
1020. but if their captors are in flight, and far
away, then tell us too and spare our pains.
That chase is for the others: but such gains
they'll never get across our borders, not
to thank their gods for. No: we go, and what
they think they've seized, entrammels them in fact
when fate has caught the fowler in the act,
and winnings by deception soon are spent.
You have no allies here, though such extent
of violence is not borne alone but needs
1030. accomplices and help. I know these deeds
will have some backer if not forced on you,
whom I must search out now lest some undo
the State and by one man may weaken it.
You understand my words, or do they sit
as in your confidence when this was planned?

CREON

I would not argue here, which is your land,
but in my own place I'd know what to do.

THESEUS

Threaten as you wish. We go, and you,
now, Oedipus, can be assured that naught
1040. except my death will stop the women caught
from being rescued and returned to you.

OEDIPUS

May Theseus, your nobleness have due
from heaven, such your royal care for me.

Soldiers march off Creon.

Stasimon (stationary choral poem)

Strophe (chorus turns to dance in one direction)

CHORUS

Oh to be where enemy
is wheeled about and brought to bay,
triumphantly to join the fray
in battle clangour where before
along Apollo's haunted shore
in torch processions, secrecy,
1050. the Goddesses observe dread rites
for mortal kind, and on whose sights
of Eumolpidae priests have laid
the seal of silence. There for us
the war-awaking Theseus
will shortly have those captives stayed
within our borders, as the fights
join war cry of the battle-brave
to show themselves as strong to save.

Antistrophe (chorus reverses direction of dance)

Perhaps they soon will near the fields
1060. the west of Oea's snowy height,
borne of horses in their flight
or in their chariots at speed.
Creon, now defeated, yields
to the swords of our Colonus;
followers of Theseus
show their mettle in the fight,
the horseman flashing from above.
So sparkles steel in bit and lead
but now the slackened rein is seen
1070. and men applaud the chivalry:
Athena's gift, who is their queen,
and the earth-engirdling sea-
god, son of Rhea's fondest love.

Strophe (chorus turns to dance in one direction)

Are we now in battle cast
is the fighting joined at last?
It seems in this my soul would seek
to be with women sorely pressed,
to meet them as the battles speak
of, by a kinsman hard oppressed.
1080. For on this day will Zeus perform
some miracle. I'd take the form
of dove, if possible, and gaze
as clouds do on the splendid fray
and see the fight, how matters lay
between them on this day of days.

Antistrophe (chorus reverses direction of dance)

Hear me, ruler of the skies,
powerful, ever-sighted Zeus:
let our citizens produce
the victory that wins the prize.
1090. Grant Athena Pallas here,
and Apollo with his sister
following the fleeting deer,
coming strength as will assist her:
both of them, a double stand
by those who look on folk and land.

End of Stasimon

PART FOUR

CHORUS

You need not tax us with false augury.
We see the rescued women: thankfully
they're with their escort and are drawing near.

OEDIPUS

Where, how? What do you say?

Enter Theseus with Antigone and Ismene stage right, followed by soldiers.

ANTIGONE

My father, dear,
1100. would gods restore your eyes to witness here
the thanks our noble Theseus has earned.

OEDIPUS

My child; it's true, you have come back.

ANTIGONE

Returned
by Theseus and his valiant followers.

OEDIPUS

Come to your father's arms that I may nurse
a child's embrace again that I would know.

ANTIGONE

A yearning I am anxious to bestow.

OEDIPUS

Where are you then?

ANTIGONE

It's both, we both have flown.

OEDIPUS

My darlings.

ANTIGONE

A tender father loves his own.

OEDIPUS

Props of age.

ANTIGONE

And sharers of your sorrow.

OEDIPUS

1110. I have my dear ones and if tomorrow death should come to me I should not stand entirely wretched with you both at hand. Come, press close to me, and after rest from all the travails of this latest test, so tell me your adventures, but in short, for brevity is as only young girls ought.

ANTIGONE

Our rescuer is here and can be heard, for brevity I need not say a word.

OEDIPUS

In fondness for my children that you see,
1120. I hope you will not think it ill of me to have this joy of them so boldly shown.

The praise is yours, I know, and yours alone
who were their sole deliverer, a man
who may receive from heaven what I plan
for this, your city, and its people too.
Among all humankind it's foremost you
who fear the heavens and in fairness show
that lies need not be uttered. This I know
and speak in ever gratitude for such.
1130. Stretch out your right hand, king, that I may touch
it, reverently, and may kiss your cheek.
What do I say? No, no, I shouldn't speak
of such improprieties: a wretched stain
deprives me of the nearness I'd obtain.
I'll not allow it, no, for such calamity
must bear its burdens singly as they be.
But let me stand now in the care and power
that you've so loyally given me this hour.

THESEUS

Such love is natural. I'd not condemn
1140. your wanting first and most to talk to them.
They are your children, after all, and pay
more heed to what you have or need to say.
That behaviour's surely in the normal reach
and I'd be better known for deeds than speech.
Of this, old friend, you now have proof. My oath
I have fulfilled to you and brought back both
your daughters, and unhurt despite the threats.
In case the progress of the fight begets
some boasts, your daughters here can tell you all.
1150. But there's another matter I recall
on coming here, and I must ask on, what
may be but trivial, of course, but not
on that account beneath a man's concern.

OEDIPUS

What is it, son of Aegeus? I'd learn

the thing, unknown to me, that now falls due.

THESEUS

A man, no countryman but kin to you
it's said has lately come to beg the care
of great Poseidon, at his altar where
I was at sacrifice when called away.

OEDIPUS

1160. What need and land is his? What does he say?

THESEUS

I only know it's you he's waiting for:
a word or two and he'll not trouble more.

OEDIPUS

But why? A suppliant means something grave.

THESEUS

Whatever it may be, he will behave
appropriately: unharmed, go on his way.

OEDIPUS

But still, to ask of gods means much to pay.

THESEUS

Perhaps in Argos someone of your kin
has need to speak for favour he could win.

OEDIPUS

Enough of that, dear friend.

THESEUS

But you'll agree?

OEDIPUS

I won't.

THESEUS

1170. But why such fierce hostility?

OEDIPUS

Your words have told me who the seeker is.

THESEUS

Enough for blind refusal such as this?

OEDIPUS

King, it is my son, my hateful son,
and speech with him is what I most would shun.

THESEUS

But why not listen to him? What's to fear?
Deny his suit if needed, but still hear.

OEDIPUS

That voice is so abhorrent and amiss
I ask you, king: do not persist in this.

THESEUS

But think what being suppliant must mean
1180. and anger of that god you may demean.

ANTIGONE

Heed me, father, young in counsel though
I am. Allow the king his chance to show
a conscience and respect the god. Agree
for my sake that my brother come, but see
that nothing in his words can ever shake
your resolution or indeed can make

a good pretence for what is plainly ill.
But hear him all the same: what harm can still
befall in this? Let villainy betray
1190. itself. You are his father, must not pay
in kind a son's ingrained injustices.
Listen to him. For other men have this,
their thankless children and their griefs as well,
but yield at length to friends' persuasive spell
and let their savage mood be exorcised.
Recall, forget the present, be advised
by anguish father and your mother brought,
and in its stern morality be taught
that evil passion leads to evil ends.
1200. Not so trivial what reflection sends
to one bereft of sight. I ask you yield
to us, supposing that the suppliant not field
too long his reasons. Surely kindness bidden
will bless the man to whom it first was given.

OEDIPUS

What can I say, my child? You win assent:
against my peace of mind I must relent.
But if he come, I beg of you, my friend,
defend me from the power his words may send.

THESEUS

Not more than once these words shall be endured.
1210. I will not boast of powers, but be assured
your life is safe while any god saves mine.

Exit Theseus stage left with soldiers.

Stasimon (stationary choral dialogue)

CHORUS

Strophe (chorus turns to dance in one direction)

Of all the follies known to man

the worse is seek some longer span:
wrathfully I give him voice
as lacking in his rightful sense.
Beyond the modicum there come
but sufferings, and muted choice
that heaps on wearily the sum
of absences as joys go hence.
1220. There is no wedding dance in death,
no warmth or frolic at the gate:
the same Deliverer will wait
on Hades and its empty breath.

Antistrophe (chorus reverses direction of dance)

Never to have known the earth
is the best befalling man
but if he once is given birth
he best go back as fast he can.
Folly is the name of youth,
nothing lasting or in truth.
1230. Is it strange that these are lost
but still exact their fearful cost
in faction, envy, war and strife,
and curses to the end of life?
And so comes age that marks him out
as most afflicted and no doubt
infirm, dispraised, without a friend,
companionless to meet the end
in sore afflictions age must send.

Epode (sung after)

All too clearly of that case is he,
1240. but stands not in that state alone,
for we are like him in this dread
of tempest by the winter sea
that lashes headlands facing north
from every side to pound the stone
and lash such troubles on our head:

from where the sun at sunset stands,
from where the sun is setting forth,
and from the gloomy, northern lands.

End of Stasimon

PART FIVE

ANTIGONE

I see the stranger coming to us, on
1250. his own now, father, all attendants gone:
a suppliant he seems, his tears confessed.

OEDIPUS

Who is it then?

ANTIGONE

The man as you have guessed:
it's Polyneices who has come to you.

Enter Polyneices stage right.

POLYNEICES

What's best, my sisters? Tell me what to do:
to weep for hardships, or my father here?
Or you, in great distress, as all too clear
I see you wandering, in exile too,
as is my father helpless with the two
of you. A beggar travel-stained and torn
1260. with simple rags for clothes, and these so worn
each movement brings a whiff of body smell
that sits with age's dignity not well.
Across his hollow eyes the hair is blown
with looks about him where his way is shown
as arduous by scraps of scavenged food
he grasps to ward off hunger. These I've viewed
too late to help him, and appear the while,
as I'm too conscious of, as one most vile,
neglectful of a son's attendances.
1270. But as almighty Zeus in all he does
has Mercy for the sharer of his throne,

now let this mercy on your side be shown.
Great faults may heal in time, and, if adverse
the opportunity, it can't be worse.
My father, do not turn away in scorn
but tell me frankly how that hate was born.
Will not his daughters, you, my sisters, try
to loose this obstinacy and tell me why?
A god has been invoked. I should be heard.

ANTIGONE

1280. Tell him yourself, unhappy one. A word
may kindle in him sparks of joy, or stir
some rage or tenderness, and maybe spur
a voice from out of silence, which you seek.

POLYNEICES

You counsel wisely, and so I'll speak.
First I asked Poseidon's help be mine,
and then your ruler raised me from his shrine,
consenting to that counsel I had craved
if afterwards I'd go away unscathed.
If these are favours that they both accept,
1290. will not my family allow them kept?
So, father, I will tell you why I'm here.
From homeland I've been banished, and appear,
like you, an exile though the eldest-born
who should by rights the throne of Thebes adorn.
But Eteocles contrived to thrust me out
and not by any precedent of doubt
or trial of warfare, even, single fight
that would oppugn my clear and sovereign right
but by the people, whom he stirred to blame
1300. in me the offspring of our cursed name,
and then I learned the prophecies held sway.
So, dispossessed, I came by Argos way,
which is the Dorian land, and took for wife
the daughter of Adrastus, bound for life

as well the warriors of Apian lands,
the there most valiant of many stands
to fight for me , and make a sevenfold force
to contest Thebes and, bravely, in that course,
to die for me or cast offenders out.

1310. So am I here, to make that come about
by asking prayers of you as of my own
and still more help from allies, strongly shown
in seven great hosts of seven spears now set
to march upon the plain of Thebes. There yet
is Amphiaraus with his lightning spear,
a famous augur and without a peer,
and next the Aetolian Tydeus,
the son of Oeneus, Eteoclus
who is of Argive birth makes up the third.

1320. The fourth is Hippomedon on the word
of Talaos, his father, and the fifth,
Capaneus, who boasts he will forthwith
with fire destroy the city and will burn
it to the ground. The sixth will also earn
his place: he's Parthenopaeus, born
of Arcady who to the war in scorn
of danger rushes, and of that woman named
so long unmarried but now wed: the famed,
true son of Atalanta. Last, your son

1330. that offspring of a line that mortals shun,
but still your family. I lead the host
that wars on Thebes and so goes hithermost
to meet the destiny of his life's path.

I beg you to restrain that sternest wrath
you hold against me, being pledged to fight,
the one who's wronged me and to claim my right.
For victory, if oracles speak true,
will come to him who is allied to you.

So by our springs and native gods I ask,
1340. as exiles both of us, to share this task
ejecting him who sits upon my throne
and from the mockery that's thereby grown.

With you I'll scatter him and from disgrace
both you and I receive our rightful place.
Without you only death can come to us.

CHORUS

For the sake of he who sent him, Oedipus,
do not now send him off without reply.

OEDIPUS

My friends, I said for Theseus I'd try
to hear him, since he sent him on to me,
1350. for otherwise in truth I'd not agree.
But so it is, this final parting grace,
in which true happiness finds little trace.
Wretch, now listen. When you held the throne
which now your brother's keeping as his own,
you drove your own poor father out, and made
an exile of him, citiless, arrayed
in clothes that now seem sorry in your sight
and state that you have come to. In this plight
there's nothing left for tears: it must be borne
1360. by me perpetually, but still in scorn,
I count you murderer. You threw me out,
ensured by this that I should go without
and beg for bread from strangers. Indeed had not
my daughters tended me, and cared and got
me sustenance, I should be dead for aught
of help from you. Like men these two have wrought
true service to their father: you have not.
I see no kinsman's tenderness, but what
now makes you none of mine. So: Heaven's eye
1370. does not look fondly on you. By and by
it will be worse if with that threatened force
you come indeed to fall on Thebes. No course
of yours can overthrow that city: you
will die in conflict and your brother too.
Such are the curses that my soul has sent

against the both of you, and that event
I now require to fight and side with me
that hence you do not treat so thanklessly,
your old blind father who begat this crime,
1380. but, like your sisters more, respect his time.
My curse has influence on your throne, in fact
on supplication also if the law will act
of old, as Zeus portrays it, and with might.
Abhorred, no son of mine, be gone from sight,
the vilest of the vile, or hear the rest.
This curse I leave you as my last bequest:
never to win by arms your native land,
or even in that hill-girt Argos stand,
but by a kinsman's arm to die, and kill
1390. the one who's ousted you. For this I will
now call on dark of Tartarus to take
you hence, and on the spirits here to slake
no fury in that enmity. You've heard.
Go, give the Cadmeian troops my word,
and all, that this divisive heritage
is all that Oedipus to sons will pledge.

CHORUS

We never liked it, Polyneices: heed
that warning therefore and return with speed.

POLYNEICES

What can this journey and my hopes now lend
1400. to my poor comrades, but a dismal end
to that proud march from Argos? Not to tell
my loyal comrades even or compel
return, but go on till this war has end.
But you, his daughters — sisters — you can mend
the ruthless prayer of our father. If
indeed such curses come to pass, and with
the passage of the years some way is found
for your return to Thebes, do not compound

my sufferings but give me burial rites
1410. as that which should be mine. For in those rights
your duty finds itself and also praise
additional to our father's, and in ways
the furthering of offices will bring.

ANTIGONE

I'd ask you, Polyneices, one more thing.

POLYNEICES

From you, Antigone, I'd hear the most.

ANTIGONE

Turn back from Thebes with all your host
and ruin not yourself and Thebes as well.

POLYNEICES

That I cannot do. How could I quell
that force and still behave as though their chief?

ANTIGONE

1420. This new-bred anger reeks of misbelief
in power. Repent and do not sack our land.

POLYNEICES

Shameful is an exile, and I stand
the more belittled by my brother's taunts.

ANTIGONE

But think how strongly now that future haunts,
with both your deaths upon that bloodied field.

POLYNEICES

So my father wished. I may not yield.

ANTIGONE

Advised of prophecy, what will they do
but be reluctant there to follow you?

POLYNEICES

If wise, the general will not repeat
1430. his losses: talks of winning, not defeat.

ANTIGONE

So truly, brother, is your course now set?

POLYNEICES

It is, inflexibly, and will beget
no doubt the curse of which my father spoke,
where prophecies and Furies add their yoke.
May Zeus, my sisters, make your pathway bright
if you will serve when I have passed the light.
And so I leave you now. A long farewell:
we'll never meet again unless in Hell.

ANTIGONE

Ah gods.

POLYNEICES

Bewail me not.

ANTIGONE

Who would not mourn,
1440. you, brother, hurrying to death's empty bourn?

POLYNEICES

If I must die, I must.

ANTIGONE

But there are words I had.

POLYNEICES

And they will keep.

ANTIGONE

How desperately sad
I'll be to lose you, brother.

POLYNEICES

Such is fate
whatever end I have, for you of late
I pray the gods will keep you from all ill,
who were so blameless ever, and are still.

Exit Polyneices stage right.

Kommos (choral dialogue)

CHORUS

New ills have come, there is no rest
for this our sightless, wandering guest
unless it's fate that finds its way.
1450. But be it never ours to say
that powers of heaven are in vain
in what they do or will ordain.
Time watches with a sleepless eye
to curse or raise us, by and by.
Hear the thunder in the sky:
may Zeus protect us, we must cry.

End of Kommos

OEDIPUS

Children, find a messenger to send

to Theseus who is my peerless friend.

ANTIGONE

Again then, father, you would bring him here?

OEDIPUS

1460. Zeus's winged thunder's coming near
to carry me to Hades. Don't delay.

Second peal of thunder is heard.

Kommos (choral dialogue)

Thunder

CHORUS

Now again and louder calls
the thunder, deafening, that falls.
Hurled implacably by Zeus,
that makes the hair stand on the head.
Dark and terrified is earth,
lit by lightning in the sky
as though some issue had its birth.
And not in vain, for none deny
1470. a fearful signal has been said:
such the dreaded sky of Zeus.

End of Kommos

OEDIPUS

Destiny, my daughters. Now I may
not turn my face against what is to do.

ANTIGONE

How do you know? What sign is given you?

OEDIPUS

I know full well. Let someone go and bring

at once, with all despatch, the Athenian king.

Another peal of thunder.

Kommos (choral dialogue)

CHORUS

Once again we hear the sound,
a voice that thunders all around,
May God be merciful and bring
1480. no gloom upon us for this thing
that spreads its darkness through the mind.
Grace not anger we would win
who looked upon this man of sin,
but looked the more with pitying eye:
this to our great Zeus we cry.

End of Kommos

OEDIPUS

Has the man now come, and will he find
me living fully with my faculties?

ANTIGONE

What is the undertaking then in these?

OEDIPUS

It is the recompense which I conceived
1490 when those kind benefits I first received.

Kommos (choral dialogue)

CHORUS

Come here our son: it will suffice
from inmost glade the sacrifice
you leave at once, and so resign
attendance on Poseidon's shrine:
Worthy as the stranger spoke,

for both the city and its folk.
Attend the stranger; he will bring
for gifts received an offering.
Haste, and come now quickly, king.

End of Kommos

Thunder ends

Theseus enters stage left.

THESEUS

1500. Why is it I have been brought again
by all the people and our guest? Is it
the heavy thunderbolt from Zeus would fit
the purposes or this hard hail? A storm
brings dark forebodings if it takes this form.

OEDIPUS

Welcome, prince. You have a god repay
with fortune kindness coming on this way.

THESEUS

Son of Laius, how do matters lie?

OEDIPUS

My life hangs in the scale, and I would die
guiltless of my pledges lingering here.

THESEUS

1510. What sign is telling you your end is near?

OEDIPUS

The gods themselves are heralds of my fate,
and always have and will be, soon or late.

THESEUS

How do they signify their will at last?

OEDIPUS

This thunder, peal on peal, this lightning cast
in fury from the vast unconquered hand.

THESEUS

Then clearly I must let the omens stand.
You have been right before. What must I do?

OEDIPUS

Hear, son of Aegeus. For State and you
I bring a treasure that no age can blight
1520. I will and soon, unaided, in your sight,
convey you to the spot where life must end.
That place is not to be revealed — attend
my words — to any man, the spot or there-
abouts: so it may serve as sanctuary where
all shields and spears of friends are vain.
These mysteries, which words may not profane,
you'll gather coming to the place alone.
In short, these can't be spoken of or shown
to others here, my children even, though
1530. they're dear to me. You'll guard the signs and show
them to your heir when his time comes. So may
the truth be handed down, and heir gainsay
the trouble issuing from Dragon's brood
and Athens' safety have this certitude.
The upright state can be by neighbours wronged
and even gods, for all the evils thronged
about, may tarry in their justice, though
at last they make the frenzied sinner know.
Theseus: never let your faith incline
1540. to that, which needs in truth no word of mine.
So to that place, and do not hesitate:
the god within compels and will not wait.

Oedipus leads Antigone and Ismene stage left.

Follow me my children. Strange that I'd,
who'd always counted on you, act as guide.
No, do not touch me: let me on my own
search out the sepulchre that I alone
am destined for. Ah, here. I feel the way,
for guiding Hermes leads me, and the sway
of kind Persephone who rules the dead.

Oedipus steps confidently to the left, beckoning the others.

1550. The light's no light to me, but it has shed
its nearness for the last time now. I draw
on now to Hades' far and gloomy shore.

To Theseus.

Truest of friends, be blessed, be blessed by fate
in land and followers, and in this state
reflect on one who helps though closed his eyes.

Exeunt Oedipus, daughters, Theseus and soldiers stage left.

Stasimon (stationary choral dialogue)

CHORUS

Strophe (chorus turns to dance in one direction)

Let us with our prayers adore
the Unseen Goddess and implore
the lord of children of the night:
Aidoneus, Aidoneus,
1560. hear us, you, though out of sight.
Now not with pain and fearful doom
speed on this traveller to the gloom.
Let him enter without stain
the all-enshrouding Stygian plain.
Unsought evils came to pass,
but lift him up who was oppressed

and let his soul with justice rest.

Antistrophe (chorus reverses direction of dance)

May fearsome goddesses, and hound,
which in ferocious shape is bound
1570. to keep the gate — unconquerable,
that watcher at the gates of Hell,
still snarling from the cavern's jaws
but chained there by eternal laws —
and you, dread Death, that hear as well,
you son of Earth and Tartarus:
restrain your purposes and keep
his pathway clear across the dead,
you, giver of eternal sleep.

End of Stasimon

PART SIX: EXODOS (Conclusion of Play)

Enter messenger stage left.

MESSENGER

And so, my countrymen, to summarize:
1580. no more is Oedipus in mortal eyes.
But not so trivial was the way he went
that words may answer for the strange event.

CHORUS

He's gone, the hapless man?

MESSENGER

The end of breath
announces he has passed from life to death.

CHORUS

But how? As god-sent, painless, as he sought?

MESSENGER

Now you touch on what is worth your thought.
How he moved you saw, and, known to you,
he stepped without a friend to guide him through,
but led the way, and at the thoroughfares
1590. of that deep Threshold with its brazen stairs
he paused at one of the converging ways
hard by the rocky basin which portrays
the pact of Theseus with Pirithoüs.
Between that basin and Thorician boss,
the hollow pear-tree and the marble tomb,
he sat, stepped from his beggar's clothes, assumed
another self, and, calling daughters, made
them fetch him running water, both to bathe
and make libation: so they climbed the hill

1600. with foliage Demeter looks after still,
and in a short time brought him what he sought
and washed and dressed him as they ought.
When everything was done as he had willed,
with no desire of his left unfulfilled,
there came a thunder from the underworld.
The women to their father's knees were hurled
and wept and beat their breasts, and wailed, but he
on hearing their distress was wondrously
protective, warmly hugged them in his arms.

1610. There is no cause for tears or such alarms,
he said, but, children you will lose today
your father, all of him, or all that may
be still accounted man. That thing is spent
and you're no more to be oppressed and bent
beneath the burden of supporting me.
A heavy load in truth it was to be
but one word wholly wipes out misery
and troubles of so long a ministry.
That word is love, and love you had from me
1620. as from no other in this world. You'll be
henceforth without me all the days you live.
At that the three then clasped, and wept, and with
such tears they brought their sadness to its end
in silence such as only grief can send.
Then all at once there came a summoning,
a voice that called to them, a fearful thing
that made the hair stand rigid on each head.
They were amazed and looked about with dread
but still the voice spoke on and variously,
1630. now loud, now whispering, repeatedly:
Oedipus, Oedipus, why do
we tarry here so long? We wait for you.
And when he knew it was a god he heard
he asked that Theseus draw close, conferred.
My friend, now promise me with your right hand
to daughters, as they promise you, to stand
forever guardian of their good, and let

no inattention ever harm that debt.
Then noble Theseus, as to a friend,
1640. without complaint, so promised to that end.
Oedipus, therefore, his blind hands stretched
towards his children, holding them, then fetched
these final words. Children, be brave of heart
and leave this place, and never for your part
seek hence to witness evidence you may
not see, nor hear the things you may not say.
Now go and leave but Theseus with me
to witness rightfully what is to be.
All heard him speak, and then, and tearfully,
1650. we followed out his weeping daughters. We,
on glancing back a short time after, saw
that empty air was left, and nothing more.
Only the king we noted, with his hand
before his eyes as though he would withstand
a fearful sight that no one looks upon.
A moment later and a prayer had gone
to earth and heaven, both at once. What end
the stranger met with, none may comprehend
but Theseus alone. No thunderbolt from god
1660. removed him at that hour. No storm or odd
disturbance from the sea, but messenger
of sorts there must have been, who, as it were,
withdrew him to a hell or heaven above,
with earth that opened gently and with love.
If this be marvellous, that you'd dismiss
as nonsense, I'm content to err in this.

CHORUS

Where are the women and the friends around?

MESSENGER

They cannot be far off. The approaching sound
of lamentation tells they come this way.

Antigone and Ismene enter together, stage left.

Kommos (choral dialogue)

Strophe (chorus turns to dance in one direction)

ANTIGONE

1670. A luckless and unhappy day
to wail our father's blood in us.
We bore the curse of Oedipus
that long, long time he lived but now
is lost to us: we don't know how
to travel on for worse or well,
or even what we have to tell.

CHORUS

You mean?

ANTIGONE

We do not know, my friends.

CHORUS

He's gone?

ANTIGONE

He's gone as kindness sends:
not in waves or battle's might,
1680. but as though snatched to fields of night
by some almighty's unseen hand.
There is some doom to understand,
and bitterness, we must surmise,
has come upon our troubled eyes.
We do not know what livelihood
is ours across the land or waves,
how life diminishes or saves.

ISMENE

I do not know what prospect could,
or if to join my father's place:
1690. I cannot live the life I face
when everywhere's so desolate.

CHORUS

Best of daughters, such is fate:
what heaven gives us must be borne:
there is no further cause to mourn,
and mourn the more as ills persist.
Thus far you've suffered, but must let
the earth go on to hold you yet.

Antistrophe (chorus reverses direction of dance)

ANTIGONE

Even pains when gone are missed
and hurt the love of him we'd greet.
1700. I held him in my firm embrace
and helped his way on stumbling feet.
Though steps in darkness he must trace
he'll never languish for our love.

CHORUS

He fared . . .

ANTIGONE

as wished by heaven above.

CHORUS

Can that be true?

ANTIGONE

He died as willed,
on foreign ground his blood is stilled:

that was his choice and in this place
he sleeps for ever and has left
our lives of sorrow far behind.

1710. Father, not of tears bereft
I come to mourn with such a mind
that sorrow overwhelms me; you
with strangers chose to die,
and sleep without my being by.

ISMENE

My sister, what can we now do?

Lines 1716-7 missing from original text.

What life will greet us, sister, left
so orphaned, and of him bereft?

CHORUS

1720. To a blessed end he went:
children cease from this lament.
Mankind is ever apt to stray
and be to evil fortune prey,
misfortunes that no mortals stay.

ANTIGONE

Strophe (chorus turns to dance in one direction)

Sister, let us now return.

ISMENE

Why go back?

ANTIGONE

For such I yearn.

ISMENE

For what?

ANTIGONE

To see the shadowed bed.

ISMENE

A bed?

ANTIGONE

Where father's laid his head.

ISMENE

That is not lawful, cannot be.

ANTIGONE

1730. Sister, be not sore with me.

ISMENE

Besides . . .

ANTIGONE

What more must I now hear?

ISMENE

That he is tombless: none are near.

ANTIGONE

Lead me over; kill me there.

ISMENE

And how shall I, unhappy, fare
when I am helpless and alone:
to every fear and hardship prone.

CHORUS

Antistrophe (chorus reverses direction of dance)

Fear not, for you are kin of ours.

ANTIGONE

Where to go and with what powers?

CHORUS

There's refuge.

ANTIGONE

What is it you've thought?

CHORUS

1740. And with your fortunes safely brought.

ANTIGONE

That place I know.

CHORUS

And so appears?

ANTIGONE

I see it as a haven from my fears
but see not how we venture home.

CHORUS

And do not seek it, still would roam?

ANTIGONE

Troubles whelm us.

CHORUS

As before.

ANTIGONE

Such despair was not before.

CHORUS

Troubles round you as a sea.

ANTIGONE

That is so.

CHORUS

And must be.

ANTIGONE

Tell us, Zeus, where can we turn,
1750. in this our sadness and despair:
what last of hope may linger there?

End of Kommos

Enter Theseus with attendants, stage left.

THESEUS

Dry your tears and no more yearn,
for excess grief the gods resent.
The Dark Powers are beneficent.

ANTIGONE

Theseus, to you we pray.

THESEUS

For what, now children: say.

ANTIGONE

We would see with our own eyes
where our father, sleeping, lies.

THESEUS

That the very laws deny.

ANTIGONE

How so?

THESEUS

1760. Your father told me why.
For none should trespass on his tomb
or violate its haunts with speech.
My word, if kept from each to each,
will guarantee this land stays free
of conquest and of injury.
Heard by him my words assume
an oath to Zeus no man may break.

ANTIGONE

If this is pleasing to the dead
then we'll respect it as he said.
1770. But send us on to Thebes to take
some part in countering the strife
that threatens brothers with their life.

THESEUS

That I'll do, and would not spare
for one who's gone a single care.
On every need I will attend
to gladden him who was my friend.

CHORUS

Be not into sadness cast,
but let your sorrows weaken fast:

for such is sanctioned, and will last.

End of Play

NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

Structure

Most translators of the last fifty years have stressed the dramatic aspects of *Oedipus at Colonus*, loosening the metrical structure, but the play can also be seen as a long symphonic poem that weaves in actor, chorus, dance and song through a mixture of verse forms that divide its 1779 lines into six parts: a prologos, four interior sections, and an exodos:

Part One: Prologos: lines 1-253

Arrival of Oedipus and Antigone. Includes the parados (117-253), in which Oedipus is questioned by the chorus.

Part Two: lines 254-719

Appearance of Ismene and Theseus. Includes a first kommos (510-548) in which Oedipus is further pressed by the chorus, and the first stasimon (668-719), the paeon to Colonus (in effect Athens).

Part Three: lines 720-1095

Appearance of Creon. Includes the second stasimon (1044-95) and the rousing battle chorus.

Part Four: lines 1096-1248

Return of the women. Includes the third stasimon (1211-48): it's better not to be born.

Part Five: lines 1249-1578

Appeal by Polyneices, and death of Oedipus. Includes a second kommos (1447-56) in which the chorus intone that there is no escape from evil, a third kommos (1477-85) in which the chorus appeals to Zeus, and the fourth stasimon (1556-78) in which the chorus conveys Oedipus to the afterworld.

Part Six: Exodos: lines 1579-1779

Includes a fourth kommos (1670-1750) in which chorus and women lament Oedipus's death, and the women decide to return to Thebes.

Verse Matters

The original is written in verse, all of it, but that verse is not to a constant metrical base — unlike, for example, Shakespeare's blank verse, which plays variations on the pentameter. To greatly simplify, the bulk of the play is written in iambic trimeter (x ~ ~ ~ ~ | x ~ ~ ~ ~ | x ~ ~ ~ x, where - can substitute for ~ ~, and a caesura appear in one of two places in the middle foot, but the choral sections are much more varied. Jebb's critical edition of the play provides the details,³ but the following measures occur:

1. iagaoedic or prose-verse consisting of the choree (- ~) and the cyclic dactyl (- ~ ~). Found in the parados, first and fourth kommos, and in all the stasimons.
2. dochmiacs consisting of the bacchius (- - ~) and the shortened choree (-). Found in the second section and the second kommos.
3. ionic verse, consisting of the measure - - ~ ~. Found in the parados.

Sophocles is often difficult, occasionally inscrutable, but never less than formal. Several lines of the play have been lost, and a few seem corrupt, but scholars believe the text we have now is essentially correct. The language is often terse but beautiful, and the dialogue in particular shows great flexibility. "It is a mark of Sophoclean writing that it operates within highly formalized structures but uses those structures with masterly tact and subtlety."²

Adaptation

The translation and line numbering adopted are those of Sir Richard Jebb.³

⁴ More to make *Oedipus* work as an extended verse play than for academic correctness, I have:

1. Respected the structure of the play, keeping its six sections, the included kommos and stasimon sections, and the strophe and antistrophe aspects of

the chorus.

2. Written a stripped-down verse that retains Jebb's line arrangements, both in number and metrical type. Where, for example, the Greek text shows a speech of eight lines, I have also written a speech of that length.

3. Adopted an unobtrusive rhyme to give formal expression to the lines, making the rhyme schemes integral to each section or subsection.

4. Employed pentameters for the iambic trimeter of the dialogues, and tetrameters for the shorter lines of the remainder.

The original text is of course unrhymed, and the plain nature of the dialogues is prevented from falling into the prosaic by Sophocles's skill in handling the quantitative metre. The choral sections, and the interchanges between cast and chorus, are often more terse still, and yield their sense with difficulty: great poetry but somewhat gnomic and in places inscrutable.

I have followed the Jebb interpretation, as have largely all subsequent translators, but there are difficulties that should be noted. First is that the quantitative Greek measures cannot be reproduced in English. The nearest we have for dialogue is the pentameter, but this is often a little larger than needed to encompass the prose meaning. Though this translation is a concise rendering, many of the longer speeches could be reduced by a line or two without loss. Similarly for the choral sections, which are even more compact than shown. Since the translated lines can't be shortened — without writing some form of Pindaric or free verse, which would be inappropriate to the formal nature of Sophoclean tragedy — the only recourse would be to cut the number of lines and lose the original structure of the text. Jebb does this in his prose translation,³ but I have thought it better not to do so with verse. I have therefore expressed some lines more loosely than the original.

Rhyme here is simply an expedient to draw the verse together and give it grace, power and dignity. Earlier translators generally wrote rhymed verse, at least for the choral sections, but later translators have opted for a blank verse or blank verse verging on prose or free verse. The difficulty then is the pedestrian nature of the resulting dialogue, as even dropping the rhyme may show. Here is the opening of the play in blank verse:

OEDIPUS

Look and tell me now, Antigone,
what land or city have we come to here?
Inform your old blind father Oedipus
what men we ask to take the wanderer in,
to give the little asked for so he live.
And even less than that he will accept
as suffering teaches with increasing years
to join his dignity and royal birth.
Is there, my child, some grove or common
ground where we may linger for the while
to ask of passing strangers: where we be,
and what's expected of us, which we'll do?

ANTIGONE

Long-suffering father Oedipus: the towns
and towers I see are still a long way off
but where we stand is surely holy ground
thick blessed with olive, vine and laurel
and — listen — there are nightingales in song.
So therefore on this natural slab of rock
we will sit down, for you have travelled far.

Accurate, but undistinguished. In the rhymed version of this translation,
these sections run:

OEDIPUS

What land or city now, Antigone?
Come tell your old blind father what you see.
Who'll take in wandering Oedipus and give
the little that he begs for so he live?
Or less than that will do: the years have brought
acceptance of his sufferings, as they ought.
Long roads and hardship are his friends on earth
who had nobility in royal birth.
Perhaps now, child, you see some resting place,
10. some grove or common ground where we may face

the blunt enquiries there are bound to be.
We come as strangers here, and scrupulously
must show obedience to the local powers.

ANTIGONE

My careworn father, Oedipus, the towers
that guard the city seem but distant still,
a long way off from us, but here we will
sit down and rest in what is holy ground
with vine and olive, laurel and the sound
of the sweet nightingale in song. Now on
20. this flat rock rest for such a long way gone.

Much depends on the original text, of course. Given an intrinsic beauty, as
in the famous choral ode to Colonus, blank verse may well rise to the
occasion:

Antistrophe (chorus reverses direction of dance)

It is Colonus, stranger, that you've come to,
670. land famed for horses and for shining calm.
No storms can hurt her nor the scorching sun
for here are depths of forests, ripe with fruit,
and glades with berries where the nightingale
among the wine-dark ivy comes to sing.
Here the revelling Dionysus
walks beneath the sacred boughs with nymphs.

Antistrophe (chorus reverses direction of dance)

680. And, bathed in dew, the white narcissi flower
to crown the heads of ancient goddesses,
and there are crocuses in bloom with soft gold hue.
Fed incessantly by fountains here,
the Cephisus is fertile through a land
on which the Muses never scorn to dance,
690. nor Aphrodite of the golden rein.

Strophe (chorus turns to dance in one direction)

And what's unknown in Asia, even on
the Dorian isle of Pelops here abounds
in thick profusion: the grey-leafed olive tree:
that never conquered, self-renewing thing
that foils our enemies but is to children
700. nourishment, protected youth to age
by Zeus who watches it with sleepless eye,
Athena also with her grey-eyed stare.

Antistrophe (chorus reverses direction of dance)

But most we glory in our mother city
with might of horses, might of sea, for here
710. a great divinity, the son of Cronus,
has given us the rule of roads and waves:
an iron bit to curb our raging horses,
and oar so fashioned that, across the seas,
it haul us speedily, to rise and fall
after the hundred-footed Nereids.

Unfortunately, these 31 lines are represented by 52 in the original Greek.
Rhymed quatrains are also a possibility, but the line numbers are again
shortened and the shaping is not natural to the play:

Strophe (chorus turns to dance in one direction)

Colonus you have come to, land of peace,
670. white haze and horses and of windless shade:
in glades of wine-dark ivy, unafraid,
the songs of nightingales can never cease.

Here, rich with berries and each fruiting thing,
are boughs inviolate of foliage found,
beneath which Dionysus walks the ground
with tending nymphs about him revelling.

Antistrophe (chorus reverses direction of dance)

Here flows the Cephisus, from fountains drawn
680. unceasingly: and crocuses throw down
their gold with dewed narcissi, white, that crown

the ancient goddesses from dawn to dawn.

Thus blessed, the river through our swelling plain
pours water daily in its tidal race.

Nor do the laughing Muses shun this place,
690. nor Aphrodite with her golden train.

Strophe (chorus turns to dance in one direction)

Here more than islands off or Asia knows
we have our hills of grey-leafed olive trees:
for youth a livelihood, for age an ease,
a rich profusion that confounds our foes.

They're watched forever in great Zeus's eye,
and in the grey eyes of Athena held:
700. they nurture children and are never felled
but as unconquered gods on high slopes lie.

Antistrophe (chorus reverses direction of dance)

But most we praise our mother city, writ
710. in glory of our god, the son of Cronus,
who for our mastery of roads has shown us
the rage of horses reigned with iron bit.

More prodigal, he's given us to meet
the dash of sea waves and their angry thrall
a clean-limbed oar to crest them, leap and fall
after the Nereids' myriad feet.

I have therefore compromised, adopting rhymed couplets for the dialogue and free rhyme schemes for the choral exchanges. The exchanges respect the structure of the original, and sometimes pick up or return the rhyme schemes of the dialogue. The overall intention is to make the play work as an extended poem without sacrificing its dramatic power.

Finally, it should be noted that the dialogue sections are often rendered in a freer manner than the original. An extreme example: lines 49-51 run in

Jebb's literal rendering as:⁴

OEDIPUS

Now for the gods' love, stranger, refuse me not, hapless wanderer that I am, the knowledge for which I sue thee.

STRANGER

Speak, and from me thou shalt find no refusal.

Which I have rendered as:

OEDIPUS

To one whose wandering was ever so
50. you'll not deny the facts he has to know?

STRANGER

Ask. I'd not be thought discourteous.

GLOSSARY

40. Goddesses: Eumenides or Furies: the spirits of punishment without mercy.

54. Poseidon: God of earthquakes, the sea and horses.

56. Prometheus: in Greek myth the champion of mankind against the Gods: the bringer of fire from heaven.

58. Brazen Threshold: the hill at Colonus, perhaps protecting the approach to the Athenian citadel.

60. Colonus: birthplace of Sophocles, one mile north-west of the principal gate of Athens.

69. Aegeus: father of Theseus and King of Athens.

86. Phoebus: radiant Apollo.

97. Zeus: the supreme god in Greek myth and religion.

103. Apollo: son of Zeus and patron of the arts.

219. Laius: father of Oedipus.

221. Labdicus: family line of Oedipus.

338. Egyptian ways: borrowed from the history of Herodotus.

356. Cadmeians: people of Thebes, named after Cadmus, the city founder.

540. prize: in solving the riddle of the Sphinx, Oedipus became King of Thebes and husband to Jocasta.

601. parricide: the unknown man Oedipus killed on the road to Thebes was his father.

679. Dionysus: son of Zeus by Semele: god of wine and ecstasy.

682. goddesses of old: Demeter and Persephone, presiding deities of the Eleusinian mysteries.

684. Cephisus: river of Attica not running dry in summer (as most rivers do).
690. Aphrodite: Goddess of love: her chariot is often depicted with golden reins drawn by birds.
694. Pelop's isle: the Peloponnese.
705. Morian Zeus: Zeus as protector of olive trees in Attica.
708. Cronus: youngest of the Titans. Married his sister Rhea to produce the Olympian Gods.
719. Nereids: sea nymphs.
949. Mount Ares: hill in Athens and site of first law-court.
962. incest: Oedipus unknowingly married his mother Jocasta at Thebes.
980. sister: Jocasta, Oedipus's mother and wife, was the sister of Creon.
1052. Eumolpidae: family with duties at the Eleusinian mysteries.
1060. Oea: peak on route to battle, possibly Mount Aegaleos.
1090. Athena Pallas: name of Athena from playmate or the giant Pallas she overcame.
1222. Hades: brother of Zeus and Poseidon, ruler of the underworld.
1295. Eteocles: son of Oedipus and brother to Polyneices.
1302. Argos: city in the north-east Peloponnese.
1305. Apian: of Argos.
1391. Tartarus: deepest region of the underworld.
1533. Dragon's brood: in myth the people of Thebes, the principal city of Boetia, sprang from dragon's teeth sown by Cadmus, the city founder.
1538. Hermes: messenger of the Gods.
1559. Aïdoneus: Homeric form of Hades.

1564. Stygian: of Hades.

1568. hound: three-headed dog that guards the entrance to Hades.

1593. Pirithoüs: friend of Theseus who attempted to kidnap Persephone from the underworld.

1593-95: basin, Thorician boss, pear-tree and marble tomb: unknown to history but apparently features of the Colonus hill.

1600. Demeter: Goddess of grain crops.

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