

W. B. Yeats

SOPHOCLES' OEDIPUS AT COLONUS A VERSION FOR THE MODERN STAGE 1934

PERSONS IN THE PLAY

Oedipus

Antigone

daughters of Oedipus

Ismene

Polyneices, son of Oedipus

Theseus, King of Athens

Creon, King of Thebes, brother-in-law of Oedipus

A Stranger

A Messenger

Chorus

Servants and Soldiers

SCENE: The neighbourhood of Athens, near a shrine

OEDIPUS. To what town or country have we come, Antigone? Who to-day gives alms to the blind man, to wandering Oedipus? I ask little and get less and am content; where there is nobility of character suffering teaches patience, and we have been long enough together to learn that lesson. Bring me, daughter, to some place, to some sacred place perhaps, where we can rest and speak to a passer-by, and find out where we are and what we are to do. We must do whatever they bid us.

ANTIGONE. I can see the distant towers of a city, and this place seems to be sacred; it is shaded

with laurels, olives and vines, and nightingales are singing. So sit down upon this stone; you have travelled far for an old man.

OEDIPUS. Seat me upon it and keep a watch over the blind man. 401

ANTIGONE. I have no need to learn that.

OEDIPUS. Where are we?

ANTIGONE. I do not know this place, but the town I see is Athens.

OEDIPUS. Every passer-by has told us that.

ANTIGONE. Shall I find somebody to tell us where we are?

OEDIPUS. Yes, child, if the place is inhabited.

ANTIGONE. Inhabited it certainly is, but I need not search: somebody is coming.

OEDIPUS. Coming towards us?

ANTIGONE. He is already beside us; ask whatever you want to know.

Enter Stranger, a man of Colonus

OEDIPUS. Stranger, this girl who has sight both for herself and for me tells me that you are there. There is something I would ask.

STRANGER. Get up from that seat before you ask it. You are in a place where no man is permitted to set his foot.

OEDIPUS. What place? And to what God sacred?

STRANGER. A place where none may set his foot, for it belongs to the Dreadful Goddesses, daughters of the earth and of darkness.

OEDIPUS. I will pray to them if you tell me their names.

STRANGER. We natives call them the Furies, but there are pleasanter names.

OEDIPUS. I beseech them to be gracious to me and to welcome me, for never will I leave this place.

STRANGER. What do you mean by those words?

OEDIPUS. My fate.

STRANGER. I cannot remove you by force until I have reported to the authorities and got their warrant. 402

OEDIPUS. Seeing that I am an unlucky wanderer, do not for God's love refuse to answer my questions.

STRANGER. Question and I will answer.

OEDIPUS. Into what manner of country have I come?

STRANGER. The whole neighbourhood is sacred, sacred to Poseidon and to Prometheus the Firebringer; but the spot where you are seated protects Athens and is called the Brazen Threshold. And the first Lord of the Manor was named Colonus, and all his people bear his name as well as their own. Such is this neighbourhood. It is not famous in history, but it is dear to those that inhabit it.

OEDIPUS. So, then, there are inhabitants?

STRANGER. Yes, all that bear the name of that settler.

OEDIPUS. Have they a king? Or do they decide everything for themselves?

STRANGER. The King of Athens rules them.

OEDIPUS. What is his name?

STRANGER. Theseus, son of Aegeus.

OEDIPUS. Could someone go to him with a message?

STRANGER. With what object? To bring him here?

OEDIPUS. That he may win a great profit by doing a small service.

STRANGER. What profit can he get from a blind man?

OEDIPUS. My words shall not be blind.

STRANGER. Attend to what I say, friend. If I can judge by a man's looks and not by his clothes, you are no common man. I would not have you get into trouble. I will send no messenger to the town, but I will say what you have said to the neighbours; and so stay there where I found you until they decide whether you may stay there or not.

[The Stranger goes out. 403]

OEDIPUS. Is that man gone?

ANTIGONE. He is gone: say whatever comes into your head; no ear listens but mine.

OEDIPUS. Dreadful apparitions, Furies, Queens, your shrine is the first in this land at which I have bent my knees; therefore be gracious to me and gracious to the God Phoebus. When he proclaimed my doom, my countless sorrows, the God proclaimed that after many years I should come to a shrine of yours and find there rest, hospitality, and death, and bring good fortune to those that did me good, and ruin upon those that had driven me into wandering. Furthermore, he warned me that thunder and lightning and earthquake would announce my death. If I am not too base for your notice, Queens, I who have borne the worst burden in the world, and if it has been by your guidance, as I think, that I have found this sacred wood, fulfil the words of Phoebus and

show me how to bring all to an end. Dear daughters of ancient darkness, and Athens, most honoured among cities, have mercy upon this ghost of Oedipus, upon this ghost, for the man Oedipus is dead, the man men knew.

ANTIGONE. Hush. Some old men are coming, doubtless to ask what we are doing here.

OEDIPUS. I will be silent, but lead me into the wood and away from the road, till we have learnt what their intentions are.

[She leads him into the wood. The Elders of Colonus, the Chorus, enter as if searching for someone. At first there are confused voices, then one man speaks for all. Where the words are in rhyme all may join in the singing.

CHORUS. Where is he gone? Where has he hidden himself? Look carefully, search every place, for this must be the most insolent man alive. He must be a foreigner, a man from a distant country. No native would dare to enter this untrodden wood, profane a spot sacred to the apparitions whose very name we dare not speak. A shrine which we pass turning our eyes away, and pray to so silently that we dare not even move our lips.

OEDIPUS [led from his hiding-place by Antigone]. I am the man you are looking for. I can see with the mind's eye but have no other sight.

CHORUS. O! O! Dreadful to look upon! 404

OEDIPUS. Do not consider me a lawless man.

CHORUS. God protect us! Who is this old man?

OEDIPUS. Not so fortunate a man that you need envy him. This girl lets me walk with her strength and look through her eyes.

CHORUS. Alas! Have you been blind from birth? Your life has indeed been accursed, and as it seems to me long, but do not add a new curse to the other. I can save you from that at any rate. Turn back from there before you have wandered into the silent depths of the wood where the sacred pool is. Come back. Come back. Do you not hear me, road-weary man? If you have anything to say to us, come first out of that forbidden spot, come to some place where it is lawful to speak, but keep silent until you have found it.

OEDIPUS. How shall we answer him, daughter?

ANTIGONE. We must obey the customs of this place, listening to its people, and, as far as we can, doing what they ask.

OEDIPUS. Then give me your hand.

ANTIGONE. I put it into yours.

OEDIPUS. No one dare touch me while I stand upon this spot. Promise me, therefore, that when I leave it and put myself into your hands I shall not suffer injury.

CHORUS. We promise that, old man.

[Oedipus begins to move forward and then stops.

OEDIPUS. Further?

CHORUS. Yes, still further.

OEDIPUS. Further yet?

CHORUS. Lead him further yet, lady.

ANTIGONE. Follow me as I lead.

CHORUS. We would have you learn what our people hate that you may hate it also, and what we reverence that you may reverence it also. 405

OEDIPUS. Lead on, child, to some spot where I may speak and hear, for I would hear what is customary, and so not set myself up against fate.

[Oedipus is brought to a ledge of rock at the edge of the road.

CHORUS. Stay your feet at that edge of rock.

OEDIPUS. Have I gone far enough?

CHORUS. I tell you that is far enough.

OEDIPUS. Shall I sit down?

CHORUS. Move him sideways and put him down on the edge of the rock.

ANTIGONE. This is my work; father, step carefully.

[Oedipus groans.

ANTIGONE. Another step; lean your old body upon my arm.

OEDIPUS. It is a dreadful thing to be blind.

[Antigone seats him upon the rock.

CHORUS. Tell me now, unhappy man, what your name is, in what country you were born, and from what country you come.

OEDIPUS. I am an exile, strangers, but forbear.

CHORUS. From what would you have us forbear, old man?

OEDIPUS. From asking my name, from asking anything.

CHORUS. Why do you say that?

OEDIPUS. My birth was horrible.

CHORUS. You must answer.

OEDIPUS [to Antigone]. My child, what am I to say?

CHORUS. Who was your father, stranger? And of what family?

OEDIPUS. O misery, misery, what will become of me, my child? 406

ANTIGONE. Speak: necessity compels it.

OEDIPUS. I will speak, if speak I must.

CHORUS. You make a great delay between you; come, speak out.

OEDIPUS. I am the son of Laius-- [cry from the Chorus] and my family the Labdacidae.

CHORUS. O God!

OEDIPUS. And my name Oedipus.

CHORUS. That man!

OEDIPUS. But why should my words make you afraid?

[The Chorus half turn away, cover their eyes with their cloaks, and cry out.

OEDIPUS. Miserable that I am! [Clamour goes on.] Daughter, what is going to happen?

CHORUS. Away with you, away out of this land!

OEDIPUS. And your promise? Will you not keep your promise?

CHORUS. The Gods do not punish any man for doing to another what that other has done to him. You knew I did not know your name; you let me promise in ignorance of that, and so I but pay deceit by deceit. Get you gone from this sacred spot, and gone from this neighbourhood before you have brought a curse upon it.

ANTIGONE. Strangers, good honourable men, you will not listen to my father because of what he did against his will, but you should have compassion upon me; there is nothing to set me apart from you! I can still look at you with eyes that might be those of your own kin, and I beseech you that you may have compassion also upon this old man. We come to you in our misery as if you were a God--no, do not turn away--we scarce dare hope; and yet grant our prayer. I implore you by everything that you hold dear, by wife, by child, by your home, by the God you worship. My father was driven on by a God; how could he help himself?

CHORUS. We pity your father and you his daughter, we pity both alike; you have shared misfortune together: but we dread the 407 anger of the Gods and cannot add anything to what we have already said.

OEDIPUS. It is said that Athens of all the cities of the world has most will and power to succour and protect the exile, but that is fame and therefore but a breath of wind. You persuaded me to leave the rocky place where none dared touch me that you might drive me from your country. Was that succour and protection? What are you afraid of? What can I do against you? My life

has been suffering, not doing. I need not tell you that story of my father and my mother; you know it already: it has put terror into you. But tell me this, how does it prove my nature evil? Even had I struck my father knowingly it would have been in self-defence, and I did it in ignorance; but the men that wronged me knew all that they did. Remember, strangers, that I left under a promise a place where the Gods protected me, and that if you do not keep your promise you do dishonour to those Gods, and the Gods know well how to separate those that do them honour from those that do not, and what man ever made them angry and prospered afterwards? Give the Gods their due, avoid what would blast the fair name of Athens. Do not despise me because my face is maimed and hideous. I came to you as a suppliant, I hold your pledge, fulfil that pledge. To you at any rate I should be sacred; for I can bring luck to all this neighbourhood if I have a mind to. When your master comes, whatever his name be, I shall explain my meaning; and as for the rest, see that you are not treacherous.

CHORUS. You have spoken words that fill me with awe. I cannot understand, for they are full of hints and mysteries, but it is for my betters to find out their meaning.

OEDIPUS. Where is your master, strangers?

CHORUS. At Athens, and the messenger who has brought us here has gone to fetch him. We sent him when you named yourself.

OEDIPUS. Do you think that he will come, that he will have respect enough for a blind man to come himself?

CHORUS. Yes, certainly; for he will hear your name. Your name has gone through all countries, and whatever he is doing, resting or working, he will put it aside and come upon the instant.

OEDIPUS. May he act so that he may call down a blessing not upon me alone but upon his city! Only a fool is his own enemy.

ANTIGONE. O God! Can I believe my own eyes? Can I be mistaken? 408

OEDIPUS. What is it, my child? What is it, Antigone?

ANTIGONE. A girl in a Thessalian sunbonnet upon one of those young horses from Etna. But can it be she, or does my sight deceive me? Is it all my imagination? No, I cannot be certain, but it is, it is; she is waving her hand. She is flinging herself from her horse. She is here.
Enter Ismene

OEDIPUS. What are you saying, child?

ANTIGONE. It is your daughter and my sister, Ismene. You will know in a moment, for she is going to speak.

ISMENE. Father and sister, I had a long search before I found you--you who are more dear to me than anybody in the world,--and now can hardly see because of my tears.

OEDIPUS. You have come, my child.

ISMENE. Old man, you have had a dreadful life.

OEDIPUS. But you are here, my child.

ISMENE. Yes, after much toil.

OEDIPUS. Touch me, my daughter.

ISMENE. A hand for both of you.

OEDIPUS. Children--sisters.

ISMENE. Yes, child and sister, a twice wretched life.

OEDIPUS. Her life and mine.

ISMENE. Mine also.

OEDIPUS. Child, what has brought you?

ISMENE. Care for you, father.

OEDIPUS. That you may see me?

ISMENE. Yes, and because there is news that I cannot trust to any mouth but my own. 409

OEDIPUS. Your brothers might have brought it.

ISMENE. They are--where they are. It is their dark hour.

OEDIPUS. Their dark hour? A true saying, for both in character and in life they are like those Egyptians who send out their wives to earn their daily bread but keep the house themselves. My daughters carry their father's burden while their brothers stay at home in comfort like women. One, since she came into a woman's strength, has been the guide of the old blind man. Often hungry and barefoot, often vexed by rain or summer's heat, often travel-weary amid waste places; and always that her father might have protection, indifferent to her own comfort. And you, my child, have been my messenger and my watcher, bringing, unknown to the men of Thebes, every oracle that touched upon my fate. And now what news, what message, what oracle have you brought? What words of terror? For you have not come empty-handed.

ISMENE. I went through much before I found you, father, but let that pass, for I will not talk of myself but of the misfortunes that afflict your two sons. I have come to tell you of those misfortunes. At first they had only one thought, to save the city from the curse our family has brought upon it; that it might escape further pollution they made no claim upon the throne but let Creon have it. But now, driven mad by some God or stirred up by their own wickedness, they have both claimed the throne. The younger, and therefore the more excitable of the two, has seized it and driven the elder son Polyneices into banishment; but he, or so it has been rumoured, is in Argos, and has gathered soldiers there. He plans to bring Thebes under the rule of Argos. I have brought you an evil tale, father; when will the Gods have pity upon you?

OEDIPUS. You still hope that they will have pity?

ISMENE. Yes, father, I have that hope. There have been new oracles.

OEDIPUS. What are they? What has been foretold that I can fix my hopes upon?

ISMENE. A day will come when the men of Thebes will long for the living man that he may bequeath to them his bones.

OEDIPUS. So they know it at last, know that I am good still for something.

ISMENE. You shall make them strong or weak as you please. 410

OEDIPUS. I have been made into nothing; am I to be made into a man once more?

ISMENE. Yes, the Gods unmade you and the Gods remake you.

OEDIPUS. A poor gift to a man to abase his youth and exalt his age.

ISMENE. However that may be, Creon is coming to talk of these things and may be here sooner than you think.

OEDIPUS. What brings him, daughter?

ISMENE. To set you somewhere outside the Theban border, yet near enough to be within their power.

OEDIPUS. What good can I do beyond the border?

ISMENE. If an enemy's country possess your bones, they will bring it victory.

OEDIPUS. So the oracle has spoken at last.

ISMENE. Yes, you must not be your own master, so they will have you for a neighbour but not for a Theban.

OEDIPUS. But if I die in that place, will they bury me in Theban earth?

ISMENE. No, father, they dread pollution.

OEDIPUS. Then never shall they be my masters.

ISMENE. A day is coming when that shall be a great grief to Thebes.

OEDIPUS. What do you know of that?

ISMENE. They will come in arms and you will blast them from the tomb.

OEDIPUS. Where had you these things, child?

ISMENE. I had them from the messengers of Delphi.

OEDIPUS. Yes; Apollo has said these things?

ISMENE. Men went from Thebes to Delphi and brought back the news. 411

OEDIPUS. Do my sons know it?

ISMENE. Both. They know it well.

OEDIPUS. Then they are base indeed not to have used the oracle for my recall.

ISMENE. And not to the border but into the city itself.

OEDIPUS. They are afraid of offending; they think more of the kingship and of their struggle for it than of their own father.

ISMENE. Your words fill me with grief, but I cannot contradict you.

OEDIPUS. Then may no God turn them from this war, may spear meet spear till I blast them from the tomb! I shall permit neither the son that now holds the throne to keep his throne, nor the son that is banished to return. They neither raised up their hands nor their voices to defend me driven out to shame and wandering. Say if you will that when the city drove me out it did the very thing I asked of it. No, I say, no! Upon that first day, when my soul was all in tumult and the dearest wish of my heart was to die, though I were to be stoned to death, no man would grant me my desire; but later on, when a long time had passed, when the tumult in my soul had passed, when I began to feel that in my anger against myself I had asked for punishments beyond my deserts, the city drove me out. My sons, who might have hindered, did nothing, though one word could have changed everything, and I their father was driven out to wander through my whole life as a beggar and an outcast. I owe my daily bread and whatever I have found of care and shelter to my daughters, to these two girls. Their brothers have preferred the mob's favour; yes, they have trafficked with it and bartered away their father for throne and sceptre. Never, never shall Oedipus be ally of one or the other, never shall the throne of Thebes be lucky to one or the other. I meditate upon the new prophecies the girl has brought, and when I speak, Phoebus Apollo speaks. Nor shall I help the men of Thebes whether it be Creon that they send or any other that may be great amongst them. But, strangers, if you are willing to help, if these Dreadful Goddesses are willing, I shall deliver your country from all its enemies.

CHORUS. Who could refuse compassion to Oedipus and his daughters?--and you have added another claim upon us, that you can deliver this country. Yet I have advice to give, and you shall be the better for it. 412

OEDIPUS. Advise me, sir, and whatever that advice be I shall take it.

CHORUS. Make prayer and atonement to the Dark Goddesses, for you have trespassed upon their ground.

OEDIPUS. How shall I go about it, stranger?

CHORUS. Draw water from the spring well over there.

OEDIPUS. And when I have drawn the water?

CHORUS. There are three bowls made by a famous potter.

OEDIPUS. Yes; what must I do?

CHORUS. Pour out three streams of water, facing to the spot where the sun rises.

OEDIPUS. A stream from each bowl?

CHORUS. Yes; and be careful to empty the last bowl completely.

OEDIPUS. And when the earth has drunk it?

CHORUS. Put three times nine sprays from an olive-tree upon that earth, and pray.

OEDIPUS. What are the words that I must say? That is what chiefly matters.

CHORUS. Remind them to be good to suppliants, seeing that they are called the Good People, and then pray for whatever you most need, but do not move your lips, or if you move your lips do not permit them to make any sound, and having prayed come from the place without looking behind you. Do this, and I will help you all I can.

OEDIPUS. These are men of the neighbourhood, daughters; you have heard them.

ANTIGONE. We have heard them; what would you have us do?

OEDIPUS. I cannot go, for I have neither sight nor strength, but let one of you two go, for I think that one can perform a rite of this kind. If it be done with goodwill, one can make an atonement for ten thousand men. Go quickly, but one must remain here, for I am helpless without a guide.

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ISMENE. I will go. I will perform the rite, but where shall I find the spot? Direct me.

CHORUS. On the further side of the wood, lady, and there is a custodian of the shrine who has everything that you will want.

ISMENE. Take care of our father, Antigone, until I return.

[She goes.]

CHORUS. It is a terrible thing, stranger, to stir that old grief of yours, but there are things I long to know.

OEDIPUS. Must I tell all again?

CHORUS. I am thinking of that heavy sorrow, that sorrow for which there is no cure, of all that heavy burden which you have borne.

OEDIPUS. You should be too considerate to probe into my shame; am I not your guest?

CHORUS. I only speak of it because that tale has gone everywhere. I would know the true facts.

OEDIPUS. O misery!

CHORUS. Do not deny me.

OEDIPUS. Misery! Misery!

CHORUS. I have answered all your questions.

OEDIPUS. Every misfortune that I have suffered came from what I did in ignorance. I swear to God that I did nothing of my own will.

CHORUS. How did that come about?

OEDIPUS. Thebes gave me the wife that brought the curse upon me. I knew nothing.

CHORUS. Is it true then that you lay with your own mother?

OEDIPUS. O misery! For you have spoken words that are cruel as death, and those two girls that I begot--

CHORUS. What is it that you say? 414

OEDIPUS. Those two daughters, those two curses.

CHORUS. O God!

OEDIPUS. The womb that bore me bore them also.

CHORUS. They are at once your children and--

OEDIPUS. My children and my sisters!

CHORUS. O horror!

OEDIPUS. Horror indeed, every horror has again swept back upon me; my soul is drowned.

CHORUS. You have suffered.

OEDIPUS. Suffered dreadful things.

CHORUS. But you have sinned.

OEDIPUS. Sinned without knowledge.

CHORUS. I do not understand.

OEDIPUS. I tell you that Thebes gave her to me. Would that I had never served that city, never been rewarded by it, miserable that I am.

CHORUS. But that is not all the tale; there was somebody that you killed.

OEDIPUS. So you must still question?

CHORUS. You killed your own father!

OEDIPUS. Another stab! Have I not suffered enough?

CHORUS. You killed him!

OEDIPUS. Yes; but I can plead--

CHORUS. What can you plead?

OEDIPUS. And plead justly. 415

CHORUS. And what can you plead?

OEDIPUS. That those whom I slew would have taken my own life, and that therefore I am innocent before the law. No evil intent brought me into this misery.

CHORUS. Our King Theseus comes, summoned by the messenger. Theseus, son of Aegeus, will hear and judge all that you have to say.

Enter Theseus

THESEUS. Son of Laius, I have long known you by hearsay and of the cruel putting out of your eyes, and now you stand visible before me, a ragged man with a disfigured face. I am full of compassion, Oedipus; I have come to find out why you have taken up your stand in this place, you and this luckless girl, and what you would ask of Athens and of myself? I will not refuse it, for I myself have been in exile, nor has any living man been in greater peril of his life than I. Never will I reject such a wanderer; what am I but a man, and I may suffer to-morrow what you suffer to-day.

OEDIPUS. Theseus, you have put great nobleness into a few words, and why should I speak many words? You have named me aright and named my father aright, and you know from what land I come; I will say what I must and so finish the tale.

THESEUS. Say it, for I am all ears.

OEDIPUS. I offer you as a gift this battered body; though hideous to look upon, it brings a blessing greater than beauty.

THESEUS. What blessing?

OEDIPUS. That you shall know later.

THESEUS. But the blessing? When does it come?

OEDIPUS. When I am dead and you have given me a grave.

THESEUS. That is the last gift of all, the last service hands can do. Is there nothing that you would have between this and then?

OEDIPUS. Nothing. Give me that and I have all the rest.

THESEUS. This is a trifling thing you ask.

OEDIPUS. It is no trifling thing. Weigh well what you do; it will stir up rancour. 416

THESEUS. What? Between your sons and me?

OEDIPUS. Yes, and before you bury me.

THESEUS. How could that be?

OEDIPUS. They may come to carry me to Thebes.

THESEUS. But if they come, why remain in exile?

OEDIPUS. When I would, they would not.

THESEUS. It is folly to make ill-fortune worse by temper.

OEDIPUS. Blame me when you have heard my story, not before.

THESEUS. Speak. I would not blame you from ignorance.

OEDIPUS. I have suffered an unheard-of wrong.

THESEUS. You mean that ancient misery?

OEDIPUS. No. Who in all Hellas but knows that?

THESEUS. What new grief is this that no man has seen the like of?

OEDIPUS. I have been driven from my country by my own children, banished by them as my father's murderer.

THESEUS. Then why should they come to fetch you?

OEDIPUS. Compelled by an oracle from the God.

THESEUS. Because of some misfortune it foretells?

OEDIPUS. That they shall be conquered if they do not, conquered by Athens.

THESEUS. Why should Thebes and Athens fight? What can disturb the friendship between myself and Thebes?

OEDIPUS. Friendly son of Aegeus, the Gods neither grow old nor die, but all else is subject to change. Bodily strength and earth's fertility decay, man's trust in man dies out and enmity takes its place. Not even the best of friends can keep in the same mood toward one another, nor can city toward city, for be it soon or late men find the bitter better than the sweet, and then again, it may be, turn to the 417 sweet. All is sweet to-day between Thebes and you, but the known goes and the unknown comes in its stead, and men take to the spear for any trifle. My body shall be asleep and buried, and yet, if Phoebus, son of God, spoke truth and God be God, it shall, though

cold in death, drink hot Theban blood. But these are mysteries I may not speak. Ask no more. I end the tale where I began it--do that which you have promised and you shall not, unless the God has cheated me, make Oedipus welcome and get nothing in return.

CHORUS. From the first moment, King, he has promised this or some like thing.

THESEUS. Who would reject the friendship of such a man? His house and mine are ancient allies, he promises great gifts to our city, and he is the suppliant of the Gods. I cannot refuse what he asks. I admit his claim and establish him as citizen amongst us. Whatever choice you make, Oedipus, whether to remain here under the protection of these men or to live with me in my own house, your will shall be my will.

OEDIPUS. The blessing of God upon such men as this!

THESEUS. What is your decision? Will you come into my house?

OEDIPUS. I would were it lawful--but this is the place.

THESEUS. The place for what? I will not thwart you--

OEDIPUS. To vanquish those that drove me out, and to blast them from the ground.

THESEUS. Your presence may bring us a great destiny.

OEDIPUS. It shall--if you keep faith.

THESEUS. Have no fear of that--I shall not fail you.

OEDIPUS. I will not bind you with an oath as we bind unworthy men.

THESEUS. You would have gained nothing if you had; my word is my oath.

OEDIPUS. What will you do? How will you keep faith?

THESEUS. What do you fear? 418

OEDIPUS. Men will come.

THESEUS. There are those here who will see to that.

OEDIPUS. Beware--for if you leave me--

THESEUS. It is not for you to teach me my business.

OEDIPUS. My fear drives me on.

THESEUS. I see nothing to be afraid of.

OEDIPUS. You do not know what they have threatened.

THESEUS. Let these Thebans threaten as they will, there shall be foul weather between the

threat and the act. Be of good courage. If God sent you hither, you need no protection of mine, but God or no God my mere name will protect.

[Theseus goes out.]

CHORUS.

Come praise Colonus' horses, and come praise
The wine-dark of the wood's intricacies,
The nightingale that deafens daylight there,
If daylight ever visit where,
Unvisited by tempest or by sun,
Immortal ladies tread the ground
Dizzy with harmonious sound,
Semele's lad a gay companion.

And yonder in the gymnasts' garden thrives
The self-sown, self-begotten shape that gives
Athenian intellect its mastery,
Even the grey-leaved olive-tree
Miracle-bred out of the living stone;
Nor accident of peace nor war
Shall wither that old marvel, for
The great grey-eyed Athena stares thereon.

Who comes into this country, and has come
Where golden crocus and narcissus bloom,
Where the Great Mother, mourning for her daughter
And beauty-drunken by the water
Glittering among grey-leaved olive-trees,
Has plucked a flower and sung her loss;
Who finds abounding Cephissus
419 Has found the loveliest spectacle there is.

Because this country has a pious mind
And so remembers that when all mankind
But trod the road, or splashed about the shore,
Poseidon gave it bit and oar,
Every Colonus lad or lass discourses
Of that oar and of that bit;
Summer and winter, day and night,
Of horses and horses of the sea, white horses.

ANTIGONE. O country that all men praise, the time has come to pay for praise.

OEDIPUS. Why do you say that? What has happened, daughter?

ANTIGONE. To pay with deeds--Creon approaches, with many at his heels.

OEDIPUS. Kind old men, prove that I am safe indeed.

CHORUS. You shall have that proof. Put away all fear; though age has robbed me of my strength my country is as strong as ever.

Enter Creon with attendants

CREON. Sirs, worthy countrymen, my coming has alarmed you; I can see it by your eyes. Why do you shrink away? I have no hostile purpose. I come, an old man, to the strongest city in all Greece; I come, old as I am, to persuade that man there to return to Thebes. And I have been sent, not by any one man, but by the whole people, chosen for this embassy since being of his own blood I mourn for his misfortune as no other Theban can. Hear me, luckless Oedipus, come home. All the people call you hither, and I in chief, because I would be the basest of men if it did not grieve me more than it can any other to see you standing there, old man, a stranger and a wanderer, and to think that you have gone, one woman for attendant, hither and thither in beggary; and never did I think to see that woman sunk into such a state of misery, chained to your blindness and your penury, and she a ripe unmarried girl at every brute's mercy. That such a thing should be is a public scandal, a shame that affects me and all our family. End this shame, Oedipus, by returning to your native city and to the house of your fathers; say goodbye in all friendship to this land, worthy though it be, for your own land has the first claim since you were born and bred there.

OEDIPUS. Audacity, professing the highest motives that you may deceive! You would carry me away bound and shackled to that 420 very place where captivity would be the most bitter. In old days, driven mad by all the evil that I had brought upon myself, I cried out that you should cast me out of the land, but you were deaf and would not grant me what I asked; and when the violence of grief had passed and the seclusion of the house grown dear to me, then, then it was that you cast me from the house and from the land. You did not remember that I was of your blood, but now you remember it. Now that I have been welcomed by Athens and her children you would drag me away, covering up your purpose with specious words. What good is kindness done against our will? If a man gave no help in need, no gift when you asked it, but offered help and gift when you had no need of either, would you take pleasure in that man? Or thank him? Yet that is what you offer me, and, therefore, though it looks good it is evil. I will tell you what that evil is and prove how false you are. You have come to fetch me, but not that you may take me home, but to plant me somewhere on the borders that you may keep me in your power and therefore escape defeat in war, defeat from this land. But you shall not escape, that shall not be your portion, but this--the vengeance of my ghost; and for my two sons this heritage, a place in Thebes where they may die, a place in my kingdom just large enough for that. What do you know of the fortune of that kingdom? But I know it. My knowledge comes from Phoebus and his father God most high, aye, from truth itself, while you have come with fraudulent lips and between them a tongue like a sword; yet plead however you may, you shall not gain your case. What is the use of words? No words of mine can alter you. Get you gone; she and I live where we have chosen, and no matter what a plight we are in, our life, so long as we are contented with it, shall not be altogether wretched.

CREON. Whom has this debate made the more wretched? You who injure yourself thereby, or me that you have injured?

OEDIPUS. I am well content with your part in it, for you have moved neither me nor these that stand beside us.

CREON. Do you want everybody to know, miserable man, that age has not brought you sense? Do you want to make yourself a byword?

OEDIPUS. Your tongue is too ready to be honest.

CREON. And you speak many words and nothing to the point.

OEDIPUS. And yours, it seems, are to the point and few.

CREON. Who could speak to the point that had you for a listener? 421

OEDIPUS. Begone, I tell you to be gone, in my own name, and in the name of these others. And stop spying upon me in this place where I am predestined to remain.

CREON. These others will bear me out in what I have said, and as to the answer that you have sent to your own kith and kin, if ever I take you--

OEDIPUS. Can you take me in spite of these?

CREON. No need to take you; I can make you smart enough without that.

OEDIPUS. No matter how you bluster, what can you do?

CREON. One of your daughters has been seized and sent hence, and now I shall seize the other and send her after.

OEDIPUS. O misery!

CREON. You shall be more miserable yet.

OEDIPUS. You have taken my child.

CREON. And I shall take this one in a moment.

OEDIPUS. What will you do to help me, friends? Will you forsake me, or will you drive away this godless man?

CHORUS. Get you gone, stranger; you have done a most wicked act and plan another.

CREON [to his attendants]. Take that girl by force if she will not come of her own will.

ANTIGONE. What am I to do, miserable that I am? Where shall I find help from Gods or men?

CHORUS [to Creon]. What are you doing, stranger?

CREON. I will not touch that man, but his daughter is mine.

OEDIPUS. Worthy old men--

CHORUS. Stranger, what you do is unjust.

CREON. No. Just. 422

CHORUS. How can it be just?

CREON. I take one of my own kin.

[Lays his hand on Antigone.

OEDIPUS. Hear me, Athens!

CHORUS. Be careful, stranger, let her go. We shall soon find out whether you or we are the stronger.

[They gather round him, threatening.

CREON. Stand back.

CHORUS. We shall not stand back unless you change your mind.

CREON. If you injure me it will be war between Thebes and Athens.

OEDIPUS. War. I said so.

CHORUS. Take your hands from that girl.

CREON. You are not the master here.

CHORUS. Leave hold, I tell you.

CREON [to one of his guards who seizes Antigone]. Take her and begone.

CHORUS. To the rescue, men of Colonus, to the rescue! The might of Athens is insulted. Help! Help!

ANTIGONE. They are dragging me away--friends--friends--

OEDIPUS [blindly seeking for her]. Where are you, my child?

ANTIGONE. They are dragging me away.

OEDIPUS. Your hands, my child.

ANTIGONE. I am helpless.

CREON [to his guards]. Away with you.

OEDIPUS. O misery!

[Guards go out with Antigone.

CREON. Never will those two crutches prop your steps again. It is 423 your will to ruin friends and country, and I can do nothing to prevent you. I thought a prince have been their messenger, and I have failed, but you have done yourself no good in giving way to anger, and you will know that in times to come. You have always given yourself up to anger, no friend could ever turn you from it, and that has been your curse.

[He turns to follow his guard.

CHORUS. Stop! Stop!

CREON. Hands off!

CHORUS. You shall not go until those two girls have been given back.

CREON. Then I shall take what is, it seems, dearer to Athens than those two girls.

CHORUS. What are you planning now?

CREON. To take that man there captive.

CHORUS. A brave threat!

CREON. It shall be made a deed upon the instant.

CHORUS. Yes, unless the King of this country intervenes.

OEDIPUS. Will you dare to touch me?

CREON. Be silent.

OEDIPUS. No, no, but by permission of the powers of this place I speak yet one more curse. Wretch, I am blind, and you have taken by force the unhappy creature who gave me sight. Therefore I call upon the Sun-God that sees all things, to give you an old age like mine.

CREON. Hear him, men of Colonus.

OEDIPUS. They hear both you and me, and they know that my wrongs can strike, that my revenge shall not be in words.

CREON. Then I will do what I threatened; alone and slow with age though I am, I will take that man by force.

[Approaches Oedipus to seize him.

OEDIPUS. O misfortune! 424

CHORUS. You are a foolhardy man to think that you can do it.

CREON. I think it.

CHORUS. If you do it there is no such city as Athens.

CREON. Even a weak man is strong in a good cause.

OEDIPUS. Hear what he is saying.

CHORUS. Let him say what he likes. He cannot do it, by God, he cannot.

CREON. What do you know of God?

CHORUS. Insolence!

CREON. Insolence that you must put up with.

Enter Theseus

THESEUS. What is this quarrel? What is the trouble? High words have reached me at the altar of the Sea-God, the patron saint of your own Colonus. Speak out--you have interrupted the sacrifice.

OEDIPUS. Friend, I know your voice. That man there has done me a foul wrong.

THESEUS. What wrong? What man? Speak out.

OEDIPUS. The man that is before your eyes--Creon. He has taken my children from me, all that I had.

THESEUS. What is that you say?

OEDIPUS. My tale is finished.

THESEUS [to his attendants]. Let one of you run to the altars, bid every one to leave the sacrifice and hurry to the cross-roads, whether upon foot or upon horseback. Let the horsemen ride with a loose rein, for if they do not get there before the girls I shall be made a mockery. Away, away. [Turning to Creon.] As for this man, if I had not kept a tight hold upon myself he would already have had something to remember me by, but it is better to deal out to him the law that he dealt out to Oedipus. [To Creon.] You shall not leave this country until you have brought back those girls and set them there in my sight, for what you have done is a disgrace to me and to my people as it is to you and to your people. You have come to a city that observes justice, that does all things according to the law, and you have set aside the laws of that city, taken captives at your own pleasure, taken what you wanted by violence, as though my city were uninhabited, or inhabited by slaves, and I a mere nothing. Thebes never taught you this--her men are honourable--nor would Thebes approve an act of robbery against me, nor that you should commit an act of robbery against the Gods, and carry away their suppliants. Do you suppose that I, if I trod your soil, would take anything without licence from its ruler, even if my claim were of all claims the most just? I know better how to deport myself among the people of another nation. But you who are old and should have learnt wisdom, you have brought disgrace upon an honourable city. I therefore repeat, unless those girls are brought to me you shall remain here, a captive in their stead, and do not think what I say mere words, for I say them with my whole heart and soul.

CHORUS. Think where you stand, stranger; you come of a just race, but your actions have been weighed and they are unjust.

CREON. I have done what I have done, not because I thought this city lacked law, lacked men for its defence, as you have declared, but because I did not believe that its people were so much in love with my own kindred that they would keep them against my will. I thought they would not protect a parricide, a pollution, a man who had taken his own mother to wife. That is why I dared to act, nor had I done so even then, but that he called down curses upon my people and upon myself. I thought I could requite such wrong. Only the dead are free from anger, and anger does not grow less as a man grows old. I have a just cause, but I am in your power, so do what you think right, and yet remember that however old I may be I can requite one deed with another.

OEDIPUS. Do such taunts disgrace most the man at whom they are aimed or the man that makes them? All that I am taunted with, parricide, incest, misery, I have borne indeed, but by no choice of mine, but at the pleasure of the Gods. Set me apart from these acts, apart from all that they, enraged, it may be, against my ancestors, have made me do against my family and myself, and there is nobody can accuse me of anything. They settled before my birth all that I was to do. The oracle had announced that my father was to die by the hand of his son. How then can I be blamed? I met my father not knowing who he was, and killed him not knowing what I did, but misery is not guilt. Are you not ashamed to have spoken of my mother, and to make me speak of my marriage with her, seeing that she was your own sister? You drive me to shameless speech and speak I must, whether I will or no--Misery! Misery! She was my mother indeed, and a mother bore children to her son, but one thing is plain as day, that what we did we did unknowingly, but that you knowingly have reviled her and me. You throw all that has happened in my teeth, and yet no man can judge me guilty either of that marriage or of my father's death. Answer this one question--if an armed man were to start up before you now, would you out of your righteousness ask before you drew to defend yourself if he were, perchance, your father? I think that you would have at him without further words and not search here and there to find the rights of it, seeing that you love your life. Yet that was how it was with me; into that dilemma had the Gods led me. If my father could come back to life he would not contradict what I have said. Yet you in a frenzy of speech, not caring what you say or do not say, have accused me, and before these strangers. You began with flattery, praising Theseus and Athens for their justice, and then when you could not get your way showed how little you thought of that justice by stealing my daughters and by laying your hands on me, yes, upon the old man and the suppliant. And therefore I call upon those Goddesses whom this land worships to fight upon my side, and I call upon this land that you may learn what men serve it.

CHORUS. King, he is a good man though under a curse, and worthy of our help.

THESEUS. Enough of words; the doers of the wrong are in flight and we do nothing.

CREON. Well, what would you have me do? I am in your power.

THESEUS. Bring me to the girls if near at hand, put me upon their track if your men have carried them away. They will never cross the border. Come, set out, for the robber has been robbed and the hunter taken in the net. I will see to it that no accomplice helps you. I am very certain that you would never have dared to commit this outrage without some treachery among

my people. If you have any wits you will pay more attention to my words than you paid to the warnings these others spoke a while back.

CREON. You are in your own country, say what you will, but when I get home to mine I shall know how to act.

THESEUS. Threaten if you have a fancy for it, but set out. Oedipus, 427 stay here in peace, be satisfied with this pledge: I shall bring those children or die attempting it.

OEDIPUS. May Heaven reward you, Theseus, for you are a noble and faithful man.

[Theseus, Creon, and attendants go out.]

CHORUS.

Would I were there when they turn and Theban robbers face,
 Amid the brazen roar of shields, Colonus in chase;
 Whether by the Pythian strand, or further away to the west
 Where immortal spirits reveal the life of the blessed
 To the living man that has sworn to let none living know;
 Or it may be north and west amid Oea's desolate snow.
 No matter how steep the climb Colonus follows the track;
 No matter how loose the rein Theseus rides at their back;
 And the captives turn in the saddle, turn their heads at his call.
 Swords upon brazen shields and brazen helmets fall.
 Creon is captured or slain, many are captured or slain.
 Terrible the men of Colonus, terrible Theseus' men.
 O glitter of bridle and bit; O lads in company
 To the son of Rhea that rides upon the horses of the sea
 Vowed, and to the Goddess Pallas Athena vowed!
 O that I had seen it all mounted upon a cloud!
 O that I had run thither, a bird upon the wind!
 I have but imagined it all, seen it in the eye of the mind,
 And cannot know what happened for all the words I say,
 And therefore to God's daughter Pallas Athena pray
 To bring the lads and the horses and the luckless ladies home,
 And when that prayer is finished that a double blessing come
 From the running ground of the deer, from the mountain land to this,
 Pray to the brother and sister, Apollo and Artemis.

CHORUS. I have not raised false hopes. The men return with your daughters in the midst of them. 428

OEDIPUS. Where? Where? What is that you say?

Enter Antigone, Ismene, Theseus, and attendants

ANTIGONE. O father, father! that God would restore your sight that you might see how noble a

man stands there!

OEDIPUS. My child, so you have come back to me.

ANTIGONE. Yes, thanks to the strong arms of Theseus and his men.

OEDIPUS. Come to me, children; let me embrace you. I never thought to have touched you with my hands again.

ANTIGONE. We come, for we too long to embrace you.

OEDIPUS. Where are you?

ANTIGONE. Here, approaching you together.

OEDIPUS. My darlings--props of my old age.

ANTIGONE. We three are under the same curse.

OEDIPUS. I draw my darlings to me, and now should I die I shall not be altogether wretched since you have come to me again. Come closer on either side, children; cling to your father; rest, for you are tired out after all that has happened. Tell me of it all; but no, you are young girls and so afraid to speak before such a crowd as this.

ANTIGONE. There is nothing we need say, for our deliverer is there, and he can tell you all.

OEDIPUS. Do not wonder, sir, that I have so much to say to these children lost and found when hope itself seemed lost. I have not forgotten that by you and you alone were they rescued. May the Gods give you all the good that I wish, give it to you and to this land, for through you and through you alone, and here alone, here in this one place out of the whole world, have I found truth and piety and justice, and I have nothing to give you in return but words. Stretch out your hand towards me that I may take it in mine and kiss you upon the cheek. But what am I saying? I am miserable and sinful and polluted. I would not have you touch me; no, no, I dare not permit it even if you would. No one may touch me but those that lie under the same curse. Take my greeting there where you stand, and be as favourable in the future as in this hour. 429

THESEUS. What more natural than to dwell upon your joy and speak of it to these children; what more natural than to think of these before you thought of me? My fame comes from what I do and not from the words of any man. Your daughters are there; I have carried out my promise, old man, and all those threats came to nothing; they will tell you all in good time, for I will tell no tale and make no boast. But as I returned here something happened that I must speak of and get your advice about, for though no great matter in itself I do not know what it may mean.

OEDIPUS. What is it, son of Aegeus? For I have heard nothing of it.

THESEUS. When the noise of the quarrel with Creon reached me I was sacrificing at the altar of Poseidon, and as I brought your daughters hither I passed that altar and there I found a man who was, they told me, a kinsman of yours, though not your countryman.

OEDIPUS. Of what country? What does he want?

THESEUS. I know nothing but this one thing: he wants to speak with you, but as he promises to be brief it will not trouble you much.

OEDIPUS. What brings him? A man does not go to the altar of Poseidon about nothing.

THESEUS. All that he has asked of the God is that he may speak with you and return home uninjured.

OEDIPUS. But who can this man be?

THESEUS. He is of Argos. Have you a kinsman there?

OEDIPUS. Do not plead for that man, King.

THESEUS. What ails you?

OEDIPUS. Do not ask me.

THESEUS. Ask what?

OEDIPUS. I know that suppliant.

THESEUS. But what has he done that I should not plead for him?

OEDIPUS. My son, the hateful son whose voice would vex me more than that of any living man.
430

THESEUS. Are you afraid that he will persuade you to something against your will? It can do you no harm to hear what he has to say.

OEDIPUS. The voice of that son is hateful to his father; do not compel me to give way.

THESEUS. Remember that he is a suppliant to the God and that you have a duty to the God.

ANTIGONE. Father, let me speak, though I am too young to advise anyone. Do what the King asks, seeing that he asks it for his own sake and that of the God, and let my brother come. He cannot force you to anything against your will, nor will he be able to deceive you. It is far more likely that he will betray his own foolish plan. What harm, therefore, can come of hearing what he has to say? You are his father, and no matter what wrongs he may do against you, you must not wrong him in return. Let him come. Other men have been driven to anger by evil children and have been none the worse when friends have talked away their anger. Turn your eyes from the present moment; think of all the evils that have come upon you through your own father and mother; think what you did in your anger against your own father and against your own sight. What good ever came of intemperate anger? Give way because we all ask it of you. It is not right to receive a favour and give nothing in return, nor to keep a suppliant waiting.

OEDIPUS. What you have asked goes bitterly against the grain, my child, but let it be as you will. But promise me this, my friend, that if this man comes hither neither he nor any other shall be put over me as a master.

THESEUS. No need to ask that, old man. I will not boast, but you may be certain that while God keeps me in the world no man shall be put over you as a master.

[Theseus goes out.]

CHORUS.

Endure what life God gives and ask no longer span;
Cease to remember the delights of youth, travel-wearied aged man;
Delight becomes death-longing if all longing else be vain.

Even from that delight memory treasures so,
Death, despair, division of families, all entanglements of mankind grow,
431 As that old wandering beggar and these God-hated children know.

In the long echoing street the laughing dancers throng,
The bride is carried to the bridegroom's chamber through torchlight and tumultuous song;
I celebrate the silent kiss that ends short life or long.

Never to have lived is best, ancient writers say;
Never to have drawn the breath of life, never to have looked into the eye of day;
The second best's a gay goodnight and quickly turn away.

ANTIGONE. Father, I can see the suppliant coming, a man without attendants, the tears pouring from his eyes.

OEDIPUS. Who is he?

ANTIGONE. The man who was in your thoughts from the first--Polyneices.

Polyneices enters

POLYNEICES. What shall I do or say? Must I mourn first for my own sorrow or first for my father, for that man there, that man lost among strangers, you two his only friends, his eyeballs blind, his clothing in squalid rags, his hair tossed by the wind, and his food--Heaven knows what scraps--in that old wallet. That is how I find him. I know now--now that it is too late--that I have proved myself, father, by neglect of you, the basest of living men. I proclaim it aloud, admit all that I am. And yet Mercy is the Queen of Heaven, and wherever God goes Mercy goes at His side, and that emboldens me to pray that she may stand at your side also. I have committed a great wrong, and yet all may be set right again. [A pause.] Why do you keep silent? Speak, father: do not turn away; will you not even answer? Will you drive me away with a contempt so great that you will not even explain why you are angry? Do what you can, sisters, to make our father speak to me; persuade him not to drive me away without even an answer. Remind him that I have come from the altar of the God.

ANTIGONE. Say why you come, my unhappy brother, for words full of emotion, joy, anger, tenderness, whatever it is, can move a dumb man and make him speak.

POLYNEICES. I will tell everything--you have given me good advice; 432 but first put myself

under the God's protection. The King of this country brought me from the altar and promised that I should say whatever I had to say and suffer no wrong thereby, and I appeal to those here, to those who are strangers, and to my father and to my sisters, not to dishonour the King's word. And now, father, I will say what brings me here. I have been driven into exile, driven out of my own country, because being your eldest son I had claimed the throne. Eteocles, though younger than I, drove me into exile, though he neither worsted me in battle nor won the people from me by any sound argument. His cajolery and intrigue prevailed against me because of the curse that is upon your house; so at least do I think, and so I have been told by the oracle. And I am the more certain because when I reached Argos all went well. I married the daughter of Adrastus, lately King there, gathered about me seven companies of spearmen, and all the men most famous in war, and all sworn to die or drive out my enemies. But why have I come? I come to entreat you, father, in my own name and in that of my allies. Seven leaders, each with his troop of spearmen, gathering against Thebes. Amphiaraus, incomparable in war and divination alike; Tydeus the Aetolian; Eteocles of Argos; Hippomedon, sent by Talaos his father; Capaneus, who boasts that he will burn Thebes to the ground; Parthenopaeus of Arcadia, son of Atalanta; and last of the seven, I, the son of Oedipus, but no, not his, but son of an accursed destiny. We seven who beleaguer Thebes and lead the men of Argos implore, pray, and beseech you. Remember your own children, remember your own exile, and turn away your anger. Do not let your anger follow when I march against the brother who has driven me out and stolen my inheritance. For victory, if truth be in the oracles, shall be with that party that you favour, and upon whatever side you claim to be your own. So by the Gods and by the founders of our race, I ask that you favour our party and our side. I too am a beggar and an exile--you and I eat the bread of strangers, and share a common doom, while he reigns as King, and strutting in our house mocks us both alike. With you to help, I shall conquer without toil or delay, and thereupon, my brother driven out, establish myself upon the throne and you in your own house once more. Favour our party, all shall be accomplished, but if you do not I shall not even return alive.

CHORUS. Remember the man that brought him hither, Oedipus; say something, speak, speak to your son before you send him away.

OEDIPUS. If I did not remember that Theseus brought him and begged me to speak, I would not speak a word. But now he shall hear words that shall bring no comfort to his heart, and after that 433 let him be gone. Villain, when you had the throne that your brother has taken, when you had the sceptre in your own hand, you drove me into exile, you made me a nationless man, aye, clapped these rags upon my back. And now that you are driven out in your turn you cannot look upon these rags without tears, but the time for tears is past. I bear my burden while I live, and while I live think you my murderer, for it was you that sent me wandering and begging for my bread. And but for these, these daughters, my nurses and preservers, these girls that have the strength of a man, I had been dead by now. But you and your brother are strangers and no sons of mine. Therefore the eye of God has seen you; punishment has begun, but it shall not ruin you utterly until your army marches upon Thebes. You shall not overthrow that city. No, but you shall fall and your brother fall, each drowned in the other's blood. I have called down that curse upon you, and now I call upon God that you may learn before your death what it is to mock a blind father. These are good, they are different, altogether different. But you, throne and supplication alike, are in the power of my curse, if indeed God's justice exists and his eternal law. Begone with my abhorrence, son that I have made no son, vilest of the vile, begone, orphan,

begone, carry my curses away--all that I have called down upon your head. Never as to the other.

CHORUS. Get you gone: as I do not approve of your plottings I cannot wish you good luck.

POLYNEICES. I mourn for my lost hope and for my useless journey, and I mourn for my comrades. What an end to all our plans; little did we think it when we marched from Argos. Misery, misery; such an end that I dare not speak of it to any, but must go in silence to this doom. Promise, you who are my sisters though his daughters, that if our father's curses be fulfilled, and if you be recalled to Thebes, you will give me fitting burial. Promise that my body suffer no dishonour; be praised among men for a double service--that done to a father, that done to a brother. 434

ANTIGONE. One thing I entreat of you, Polyneices.

POLYNEICES. What is it, dear Antigone?

ANTIGONE. Order your army back to Argos. Do not destroy yourself and Thebes.

POLYNEICES. No, it is impossible; I never could lead that army again once it were known that I had blenched.

ANTIGONE. So you would lead it again--why rage against Thebes? If you destroy your native city at last, how will you be the better?

POLYNEICES. It is shameful to be an exile, an elder brother mocked at by a younger.

ANTIGONE. Then it is you that make all certain, you that bring about the fulfilment of his prophecies, the killing of a brother by a brother.

POLYNEICES. Yes, that is what he wants, but I must not yield.

ANTIGONE. Alas! Alas! But who dare follow you when he has heard the prophecy?

POLYNEICES. He will never hear it; no good leader brings bad news.

ANTIGONE. So, then, my brother, your decision is taken?

POLYNEICES. Yes, taken. Do not delay me further. Henceforth I run my race followed by demons and my father's curse; but I call down God's blessing upon you, my sister, if after my death you do my will, for while I live I am beyond your help. Take away your arms. Good-bye, sisters, for never will you look again upon my living body.

ANTIGONE. Alas!

POLYNEICES. Do not mourn for me.

ANTIGONE. Who would not mourn you, brother, hurrying away to a foreknown death?

POLYNEICES. How can I help it if I am fated to die?

ANTIGONE. No, no: hear me, I beseech. 435

POLYNEICES. You waste breath.

ANTIGONE. If wasted, then indeed am I wretched, for I must lose you.

POLYNEICES. Fortune will decide, but I pray to God that only good fortune attend you two, for there is not a man in the world but knows that you deserve it.

[He goes out.

CHORUS.

What is this portent? What does it shadow forth?
Have Heaven and Earth in dreadful marriage lain?
What shall the allotted season bring to birth?
This blind old ragged, rambling beggar-man
Calls curses upon cities, upon the great,
And scatters at his pleasure rich estate.

[Thunder.

CHORUS. What an uproar! God protect us!

OEDIPUS. My children, my children, if there is any man who can be sent, send to Theseus and summon him hither.

ANTIGONE. Why should he be summoned, father?

OEDIPUS. God's winged thunder comes to lead me down to Hades; send for him, send for him upon the instant.

[A second peal of thunder.

CHORUS.

Thunder has stirred the hair upon my head.
What horror comes to birth? What shall be found,
That travail finished, on the lowly bed?
Never in vain the dreadful thunder sounds,
Nor can the living lightning flash in vain;
Heaven has borne a child and shrieks from pain.

OEDIPUS. Daughters, your father comes to his predestined end; he can no more turn away his face.

ANTIGONE. How do you know it? What have you heard or seen?

OEDIPUS. Enough that I know it. Let a man go quickly and bring the lord of this country.

[Thunder. 436

CHORUS.

Once more that dreadful sound. God pity us
When all is finished on the bed of earth,
Nor hold us all unclean for Oedipus.
Whatever fate maternal sky bring forth,
Pity Colonus, nor lay us under ban
Because of Oedipus the beggar-man.

OEDIPUS. Has Theseus come? Will he find me living, children? and with all my wits?

ANTIGONE. What would you say to him? What are you afraid of forgetting?

OEDIPUS. He has heaped benefits upon me. The time has come to pay for all.

CHORUS.

Come, King of Athens, father of the land--
Whether at Poseidon's altars and the still
Unfinished sacrifice, or close at hand--
A blind old beggar-man proclaims God's will,
Proclaims a blessing on the land and us;
Come, King of Athens, come, King Theseus.

Enter Theseus

THESEUS. Why this sudden clamour? Why am I called hither, called as it seems by this stranger and by my own people alike? Have you been terrified by the thunder? No wonder indeed if you are terrified by such a storm.

OEDIPUS. Welcome! God has sent you, King; good fortune waits you here.

THESEUS. What has happened, son of Laius?

OEDIPUS. I am about to die, and before I die I would accomplish for you and for this city what has been foretold.

THESEUS. Why do you say you are about to die?

OEDIPUS. The Gods have sent the signs that they promised.

THESEUS. What signs, old man?

OEDIPUS. Prolonged loud thunder and abundant lightning. 437

THESEUS. You have foretold many things, and what you have foretold has come true. Therefore I believe your words and I ask what I must do.

OEDIPUS. Son of Aegeus, I shall expound a mystery and give your city that which time shall never take away. First I shall lead you to my place of death, and though blind I shall need no

guiding hand. But that place you must never show to any living man, for it shall be, while it stays hidden, more protection than a multitude of Athenian shields or than the borrowed might of an ally; and there by that place mysteries shall be revealed, revealed to you alone, things that I dare not speak to my own daughters, much as I love them, things it is not lawful to put into words; and these you must guard in your heart and reveal to your successor, and then only upon your deathbed, that they may be revealed to his successor in turn and so through all time. So shall this city and countryside be kept unharmed from the dragon's teeth and from the men of Thebes, but keep it secret: while you keep all secret you shall be safe from your own citizens as from the enemy. Even the best-governed cities are turbulent, and though the Gods punish turbulence they are slow to act. But why should I warn you? the son of Aegeus knows how to guard himself. Now let us hurry to that place, for the heavens call and I dare not linger. Follow me, children, though but for a portion of the way. It is my turn to guide those that long have been their father's guide; come, come, but lay no hand upon me; all unhelped I shall discover my predestined plot of ground, my sacred tomb. Come this way, this way; Hermes guides and the Goddess of the Dead. O light bathing my body for the last time; O light, my light long ago, I tread the road to Hades; blessed be this land, blessed be its people, you, best of friends, be blessed, and when your fortune mounts, remember me in the tomb.

[He goes out, followed by his daughters, Theseus, and attendants.]

CHORUS.

I call upon Persephone, queen of the dead,
And upon Hades, king of night, I call;
Chain all the Furies up that he may tread
The perilous pathway to the Stygian hall
And rest among his mighty peers at last,
For the entanglements of God are past.

Nor may the hundred-headed dog give tongue
Until the daughter of Earth and Tartarus
That even bloodless shades call Death has sung
The travel-broken shade of Oedipus
438 Through triumph of completed destiny
Into eternal sleep, if such there be.

Enter Messenger

MESSENGER. Fellow-countrymen, three words can sum up all I have to say--Oedipus is dead. But it all took time to happen and it will take time in the telling.

CHORUS. So that unhappy man is dead.

MESSENGER. He is dead indeed.

CHORUS. How? In a God-appointed, painless way?

MESSENGER. There indeed you touch upon the wonder of it. You saw with your own eyes how

the man went out from here, none to show him where to set his feet, but he the guide of all. We followed to the sacrificial hollow in the rock where the foot-paths cross and to the sacred threshold where brazen steps go down into the earth, and there, midway between the four sacred things, the basin of brass, the hollow pear-tree, the marble tomb, the stone from Thoricus, he sat upon the ground and began to loosen his miserable rags. Then he bade his children find spring water for washing and libation, and they climbed the neighbouring hill, found spring water there, and brought it to their father. They washed and dressed him as we wash and dress the dead, and no sooner had all been done according to his commands than there came from under our feet, as if from the place of shades, a sound of thunder. The two children trembled, threw themselves down at their father's knees, beat upon their breasts, wept and cried aloud. And thereupon he cast his arms about them and said, 'From this day you are left without a father, and all that is mine comes to an end. Your attendance upon me has been a heavy burden, children; I know how heavy, and yet it seemed to you light. A word, a solitary word tells all, and that word is love. No living man could have loved as I have loved. But now I go, and never again shall you look upon me through all your days of life.' After he had spoken all three clung to one another, sobbing and crying out; but presently they ceased to sob and to cry out and there was silence, and then a voice spoke and summoned Oedipus, and the hair stood up upon our heads, for it was a God that spoke. It summoned Oedipus not once but many times. 'Oedipus, Oedipus,' it said, 'what keeps you there? We must set out upon our journey.' He, knowing what voice had spoken, called King Theseus to his side and said, 'best of friends, put your right hand into the hands of my daughters; promise to be their guardian and never forsake them.' King Theseus, that most magnanimous man, 439 promised and swore an oath, and yet fearing to wring the children's hearts anew spoke no word of grief. That oath being sworn, Oedipus groped for his daughters with blind hands and said, 'My children, be brave and go from this place, for there are things it is not lawful for you to see or hear. Go quickly, and let these others go, but let King Theseus stay and hear and see everything, for that is his right.' When he had spoken the children left and we followed with streaming eyes, but after a little time turned our heads. Oedipus had gone and the King stood there, a hand raised to shade his eyes as from some dreadful sight. Then, after a little, he bent down and kissed the earth, and after raised his arms to heaven praying, as it seemed, to heaven and earth in the same prayer. But by what death Oedipus died no man can say but Theseus. Neither did thunderbolt descend nor storm come up out of the sea, but some messenger carried him away or the foundations of the earth were riven to receive him, riven not by pain but by love. For I affirm, and care not if my words seem folly, that this man has gone without the pang of death and in a manner altogether wonderful.

CHORUS. But where are the others? And where are the two girls?

MESSENGER. That sound of mourning tells where they are.

Enter Antigone, Ismene, and attendants

ISMENE. Where shall we wander, where find our daily bread? I dread what is to come.

CHORUS. Why should you, remembering the bitterness of your past, dread the future?

ISMENE. Things that were most bitter can seem most sweet in memory. How should those days seem bitter when we could take him in our arms? Our beloved is gone down under the earth.

CHORUS. He has found a blessed end.

ANTIGONE. Sister, I will go back there.

ISMENE. Why?

ANTIGONE. I have a great longing.

ISMENE. For what?

ANTIGONE. To find a bed under the earth.

ISMENE. What bed? 440

ANTIGONE. Our father's bed.

ISMENE. I thought you understood.

ANTIGONE. Understood what?

ISMENE. That he had no tomb, that nobody can tell where he lies, that he went alone to his death.

ANTIGONE. Bring me to where we saw him last and kill me there.

ISMENE. But if you died I should be friendless.

CHORUS. Do not be afraid, my children.

ANTIGONE. What refuge have we but our father's tomb?

CHORUS. A refuge has been found.

Enter Theseus

THESEUS. Your father is with the Powers under the earth; you have his promise and their protection. Do not vex them with lamentation. I bring you the protection of Athens.

ANTIGONE. Promise me, son of Aegeus.

THESEUS. What must I promise?

ANTIGONE. To bring me to my father's tomb.

THESEUS. The law forbids.

ANTIGONE. But you are King of Athens.

THESEUS. He laid a charge upon me that never human foot approach that place.

ANTIGONE. If that be my father's will I must obey.

THESEUS. In all else it shall be as you will. I will omit nothing that can profit you or gratify the

dead.

CHORUS. Raise no funeral song. God's will has been accomplished.

The End 441