Oedipus at Colonus

SOPHOCLES

c. 497–406 BC

Oedipus at Colonus

Οἰδίπους ἐπὶ Κολωνῷ

Translated from the Greek with AI (Claude) and edited



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INTRODUCTION

Years after the events of Oedipus the King, the blind Oedipus, an exile and a beggar, arrives with his daughter Antigone at Colonus, a village just outside Athens. He sits down in a grove sacred to the Furies, and knows at once that this is where an old oracle said his life would end.

The locals are horrified to learn who he is, but Theseus, king of Athens, takes him under his protection. Then the past comes looking for him: his brother-in-law Creon tries to drag him back to Thebes by force, and his son Polynices begs for his blessing in a war against his own brother. Oedipus, who once thought himself guilty, now insists he sinned in ignorance, and he answers his son with a terrible curse.

Sophocles wrote the play near the end of his long life; it was staged after his death, in 401 BC. It is a meditation on old age, suffering and dignity, and it contains one of the most celebrated odes in Greek, the chorus's praise of Colonus, Sophocles' own birthplace.

Oedipus at Colonus

At the grove of the Furies at Colonus, near Athens.
The blind, exiled Oedipus finds the place where he is to die.

PROLOGUE

The blind Oedipus and Antigone reach a sacred grove at Colonus, and a local tells them where they are.

OEDIPUS [1] Antigone, child of a blind old man, what country have we come to? Whose city is this? Who will take in the wanderer Oedipus today, with a few meager gifts? I ask for little, and I get even less than that little, and it's enough for me. My sufferings have taught me to be content, and so have the long years that have kept me company, and, third, my own nobility. But child, if you see somewhere to sit, on common ground or by the groves of the gods, stop and settle me there, so we can find out where in the world we are. We've come as strangers to learn from the people of the place, and to do whatever we hear we must.

ANTIGONE [14] Poor father Oedipus, the towers that ring the city look, as far as my eyes can tell, a long way off. This place is sacred, it seems. It's thick with laurel, olive and vine, and deep inside it a throng of nightingales on beating wings is singing sweetly. Rest your limbs here on this rough, unhewn rock. You've traveled a long road for an old man.

OEDIPUS [21] Sit me down, then, and look after the blind man.

ANTIGONE [22] After all this time, I hardly need to be told that.

OEDIPUS [23] Can you tell me, then, where we've stopped?

ANTIGONE [24] Athens, at least, I recognize, but not this spot.

OEDIPUS [25] Yes, every traveler on the road told us that much.

ANTIGONE [26] Shall I go somewhere, then, and find out what this place is?

OEDIPUS [27] Yes, child—if anyone lives here, that is.

ANTIGONE [28] Oh, people live here, certainly. But I don't think I need to go: I see a man close by us.

OEDIPUS [30] Coming this way? Heading toward us?

ANTIGONE [31] He's here already. Say whatever the moment calls for—here he is.

OEDIPUS [33] Stranger, I hear from this girl, who sees for me as well as for herself, that you've come along, a welcome scout, to tell us what we don't know—

STRANGER [36] Before you ask any more, get up off that seat. You're on ground that isn't pure for anyone to tread.

OEDIPUS [38] What place is it? Which of the gods is it held sacred to?

STRANGER [39] It's not to be touched or lived on. The fearful goddesses hold it, the daughters of Earth and Darkness.

OEDIPUS [41] What is their holy name? Tell me, so I can pray to them.

STRANGER [42] The people here would call them the Kindly Ones, who see all things. Other places prefer other names.[1]

OEDIPUS [44] Then may they receive their suppliant graciously, because I will never leave my seat in this land again.

STRANGER [46] What do you mean by that?

OEDIPUS It's the sign of my destiny.

STRANGER [47] Well, I don't have the nerve to move you either, not without the city's say, until I've reported what I'm doing.

1 "Kindly Ones" (Eumenides) is a euphemistic name for the Furies, the dreaded avenging powers of the underworld.

OEDIPUS [49] Then for the gods' sake, stranger, don't refuse me—a wanderer like this—what I'm begging you to tell me.

STRANGER [51] Ask away. You won't be refused, not by me.

OEDIPUS [52] Then what is this place we've set foot in?

STRANGER [53] Everything I know myself, you'll hear and understand. This whole place is sacred. Holy Poseidon owns it, and the fire-bearing god is here too, the Titan Prometheus. The spot you're standing on is called the Bronze Threshold of this land, the bulwark of Athens. The fields round about claim the horseman Colonus here as their founder, and the people all share his name and are called after him. That's how things stand here, stranger: honored not so much in stories as in the life we live with them.[2]

OEDIPUS [64] So people do live in these parts?

STRANGER [65] They certainly do, and they take their name from this god here.

OEDIPUS [66] Does someone rule them, or does the say lie with the people?

STRANGER [67] They're ruled by the king in the city.

OEDIPUS [68] And who is he, who rules them in counsel and in strength?

STRANGER [69] His name is Theseus, son of Aegeus, who was king before him.

OEDIPUS [70] Could one of you go to him with a message?

STRANGER [71] To tell him something? Or to bring him here—for what?

OEDIPUS [72] So that by giving a little help he may gain a great deal.

STRANGER [73] And what help can come from a man who can't see?

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2 The Bronze Threshold was a steep spot at Colonus, Sophocles' own birthplace just north of Athens, believed to lead down to the underworld.

OEDIPUS [74] There'll be sight in every word I speak.

STRANGER [75] Do you know what to do now, stranger, so you don't come to grief? Since anyone can see you're of noble birth—apart from your fortune—stay right where you appeared, while I go and tell this to the people of the district here, not in the city. They'll decide for you whether you're to stay or go back the way you came.

OEDIPUS [81] Child, has the stranger gone?

ANTIGONE [82] He's gone, Father. You can say anything you like in peace; there's no one near but me.

OEDIPUS [84] Ladies of the dreadful gaze, since yours is the first seat in this land where I've bent my knees, don't be unkind to Phoebus or to me. When he foretold all those evils of mine, he spoke of this as my rest after long years: when I reached my journey's end in some country where I found a seat of the Holy Goddesses and a shelter for strangers, there I would round off my wretched life—a gain to those who took me in, by settling among them, and ruin to those who sent me off, who drove me out.[3] [94] And he promised me signs would come of this—an earthquake, or thunder, or the lightning of Zeus. Now I know it can only have been a trusty omen sent by you that led me down this road into this grove. Otherwise I would never have met you first of all in my wanderings—I, sober, and you who take no wine—or sat down on this holy seat of unhewn stone. Goddesses, as Apollo's voice foretold, grant me now at last some end to life, some close—unless I seem too low a thing for that, forever slaving at the worst miseries mortals know.[4] [106] Come, sweet daughters of ancient Darkness! Come, Athens, called the city of mighty Pallas, most honored of all cities! Pity this wretched ghost of the man Oedipus—for this is not the body he once had.

ANTIGONE [111] Quiet. Some men are coming this way, old men, to look over the place where you're sitting.

3 Phoebus is Apollo, whose oracle at Delphi had foretold Oedipus' fate.
4 Offerings to the Furies were made without wine.

OEDIPUS 113 I'll be quiet. And you, take me off the path and hide me in the grove, until I learn what these men will say. Knowing is what makes for caution in what we do.

PARODOS

Old men of Colonus find the stranger in the grove, learn he is Oedipus, and order him away.

CHORUS

117 Look! Who was he? Where is he staying?
Where has he rushed off to, out of the way,
of all men, of all men the most brazen?
Look for him, watch for him,
search on every side!
A wanderer, a wanderer, this old man,
not one of us. Otherwise he'd never have stepped
into the untrodden grove
of these maidens no one can withstand,
whom we tremble to name,
and pass by without a look,
without a sound, without a word,
moving our lips only in reverent thought.
But now the word is someone has come
who shows no awe,
and though I scan the whole precinct
I still can't make out
where he's hiding from me.

OEDIPUS 138 Here I am, that man—for I see by sound, / as the saying goes.

CHORUS 140 Oh! Oh! / Dreadful to see, dreadful to hear!

OEDIPUS 142 Don't, I beg you, look on me as a lawless man.

CHORUS 143 Zeus, protector, who can the old man be?

OEDIPUS

Not one whose fate you'd call
the happiest, guardians of this land.
I prove it plainly: I wouldn't otherwise be creeping
by another's eyes,
a grown man moored to one so slight.

CHORUS

Ah! Were your eyes
blind from your birth? Your life's been hard,
and long, too, as far as one can guess.
But not if I can help it
will you add these curses too.
You're going too far, too far! So that you don't stumble
into this grassy glade
where no voice speaks, where the bowl of water
runs together with the stream
of honeyed drink,
take good care, poor ill-fated stranger!
Move off, step back!
Keep a long road between us—/ do you hear, much-suffering
wanderer?
If you have anything to say
to us in our council, step off forbidden ground,
and where all may speak,
speak; until then, hold back.

OEDIPUS [170] Daughter, where should my thoughts turn now?

ANTIGONE [171] Father, we must act as the people here do, / giving way where we must, and listening.

OEDIPUS [173] Then take hold of me.

ANTIGONE There, I'm holding you.

OEDIPUS [174] Stranger, don't let me be wronged / for trusting you and leaving my seat.

CHORUS [176] No one, old man, will ever take you / from this resting place against your will.

OEDIPUS [178] Farther, then?

CHORUS Farther still, keep walking.

OEDIPUS [179] Farther?

CHORUS [180] Lead him on, girl, / farther—you can understand us.

ANTIGONE [181] ... / Come, follow, follow me this way on your darkened feet, Father, where I lead you.

CHORUS

[184] Bring yourself, a stranger in a strange land,
poor man, to hate
whatever this city has learned to hate,
and to revere what it loves.

OEDIPUS

[188] Lead me, then, child,
to where we can stand on ground reverence allows,
and speak, and listen,
and not fight against necessity.

CHORUS [192] There. Don't move your foot outside this ledge of natural rock.

OEDIPUS [193] Like this?

CHORUS That's enough, you hear.

OEDIPUS [195] May I sit?

CHORUS Yes, sideways, on the edge / of the rock, crouching low.

ANTIGONE [197] Father, leave this to me. Quietly, gently—

OEDIPUS [198] Oh, oh, oh!

ANTIGONE

[199] match your step to my step,
and lean your old body
on my loving arm.

OEDIPUS [202] Oh, no—my bitter ruin!

CHORUS

[203] Poor man, now that you're at rest,
tell us, who are you among mortals?
Who are you, led along in so much pain?
What country can I learn is yours?

OEDIPUS [207] Strangers, / I have no city. But don't—

CHORUS [209] What are you forbidding, old man?

OEDIPUS [210] Don't, don't, don't ask me who I am, / don't probe or search any further.

CHORUS [212] What's this?

OEDIPUS A dreadful birth.

CHORUS Speak.

OEDIPUS [213] Child—oh, no—what shall I say?

CHORUS [214] Whose seed are you, stranger? Tell us—who was your father?

OEDIPUS [215] Oh, no, what will become of me, my child?

ANTIGONE [216] Tell them, since you're already at the edge.

OEDIPUS [217] Then I'll speak. I can't keep it hidden.

CHORUS [218] You two are taking a long time—hurry!

OEDIPUS [220] Do you know of a son of Laius—[5]

CHORUS Oh! No, no!

OEDIPUS [221] and the race of the Labdacids?

CHORUS Oh, Zeus!

OEDIPUS [222] wretched Oedipus?

CHORUS You—you are he?

OEDIPUS [223] Don't be afraid of anything I say.

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5 Laius, king of Thebes, was Oedipus' father; the Labdacids are the house of Laius' father, Labdacus.

CHORUS [224] Oh, oh, oh!

OEDIPUS Ill-fated as I am.

CHORUS Oh, oh!

OEDIPUS [225] Daughter, what will happen now?

CHORUS [226] Out! Go far away from this land!

OEDIPUS [227] And what you promised—what will you make of that?

CHORUS

[228] No one is punished by fate
for paying back what he suffered first. One deceit
set against another deceit
pays back pain, not gratitude,
as its reward. You, get out of this seat again,
out and away from my land, go, leap clear,
before you fasten some further burden
on my city.

ANTIGONE

237 Strangers,
you whose hearts know reverence, since
you couldn't bear my old father here,
once you heard the story of the deeds
he never meant to do,
then pity me at least, poor girl, we beg you, strangers—/ me,
pleading for my father, for him alone,
pleading, as I look into your eyes with eyes
that aren't blind, as if I were someone sprung
from your own blood, that this wretched man
may meet with mercy. On you, as on a god,
we depend in our misery. Come, grant us this kindness we
never hoped for.
I beg you by all you hold dear at home,
your child or wife, your goods or your god.
Search as you will, you'll never see a mortal
who, if a god leads him on,
could get away.

FIRST EPISODE

Oedipus pleads to stay, Ismene brings new oracles, and Theseus takes him under Athens' protection.

CHORUS 254 Be sure of this, daughter of Oedipus: we pity you and him alike for your misfortune. But we fear what comes from the gods, and we couldn't say anything beyond what we've already said to you.

OEDIPUS 258 What use is a reputation, then, or a fine name that drifts away for nothing, if people say Athens is the most god-fearing of cities, the only one able to save a stranger in distress, the only one with the power to help him? Where is all that for me? You made me get up from this seat and now you're driving me away, afraid of nothing but a name. It can't be my person you fear, or my deeds. My deeds, at least, were suffered rather than done—if I had to tell you the story of my mother and my father,

269 which is why you're so terrified of me. I know that very well. And yet how am I evil by nature? I was wronged and struck back —so that even if I'd known what I was doing, I wouldn't have been evil even then. As it was, I knew nothing when I came where I came; but those who made me suffer knew, and they meant to destroy me. So I beg you by the gods, strangers: just as you made me move, now save me. Don't honor the gods and then treat the gods as nothing. Believe that they look upon the reverent among mortals, and look upon the irreverent too, and that no unholy man has ever yet escaped them. 282 With them in mind, don't darken the good name of fortunate Athens by lending yourselves to unholy acts. You accepted the suppliant on your pledge; now rescue me and guard me to the end. Don't look at this face, so hard to look on, and treat me with contempt. I come as one holy and reverent, bringing benefit to the people here. When the one with authority arrives, whoever your leader is, you'll hear it all and understand. Until then, don't play me false in any way.

CHORUS 292 Old man, I can't help standing in deep awe of your reasoning; it wasn't put in slight words. But it's enough for me that the rulers of this land should judge it.

OEDIPUS 296 And where is the ruler of this country, strangers?

CHORUS 297 He's in the city of his fathers here. The man who saw you, who sent me here too, has gone to bring him.

OEDIPUS 299 Do you really think he'll have any regard or concern for a blind man, enough to come here himself?

CHORUS 301 He certainly will, once he hears your name.

OEDIPUS 302 And who'll take him that word?

CHORUS 303 It's a long road, but travelers' talk tends to wander far. When he hears it, he'll be here, don't worry. Your name, old man, has reached everyone, so that even if he's lingering in bed, he'll hear of you and come here fast.

OEDIPUS 308 Well, may he come with good fortune for his own city and for me. What good man isn't his own friend?

ANTIGONE [310] Zeus! What can I say? What am I to think, Father?

OEDIPUS [311] What is it, Antigone, my child?

ANTIGONE I see a woman coming toward us, riding a colt from Etna. A Thessalian hat on her head shades her face from the sun. What can I say? Is it her? Isn't it? Is my mind playing tricks? I say yes, I say no, I don't know what to say. Oh, poor me! It's no one else. Her eyes are shining as she comes, she's greeting me, and it's plain this can be no one but Ismene herself.[6]

OEDIPUS [322] What did you say, child?

ANTIGONE That I see your daughter, my sister! You'll know her by her voice in a moment.

ISMENE [324] Father and sister—the two sweetest names for me to speak! How hard it was to find you, and how hard it is now, for grief, to look at you.

OEDIPUS [327] Child, you've come?

ISMENE Oh, Father, how sad you are to see!

OEDIPUS [328] Child, you're here?

ISMENE And not without hardship, for me.

OEDIPUS [329] Touch me, child.

ISMENE I'm touching you both at once.

OEDIPUS [330] Oh, my own seed, my own blood!

ISMENE Oh, what miserable lives!

OEDIPUS [331] Hers and mine?

ISMENE And mine, unhappy me, the third.

OEDIPUS [332] Child, why have you come?

ISMENE Because I was worried about you, Father.

OEDIPUS [333] Was it that you missed me?

6 Ponies from Etna in Sicily were prized; the Thessalian hat was a broad-brimmed traveler's hat.

ISMENE Yes, and to bring you news myself, with the one servant I still had whom I could trust.

OEDIPUS [335] And your brothers—where are those young men, when there's work to be done?

ISMENE [336] They are where they are. Things are terrible between them now.

OEDIPUS [337] Oh, those two! In their nature and their way of life they're the very image of the customs of Egypt! There the men sit at home working at the loom, while their wives go out and see to the needs of life, always. And with you two, my children: the ones who ought to be bearing this burden keep house at home like girls, while you two, in their place, labor at the troubles of my miserable life. One of you, ever since she outgrew a child's care and came into her strength, has wandered with me always, poor girl, leading an old man—often wandering through wild woods, hungry and barefoot, [350] often drenched by rain and scorched by the sun's heat, toiling, poor thing, and she counts the comforts of home as second, if only her father can be cared for. And you, child, came to your father before, bringing all the oracles given about me, without the Cadmeans knowing, and you became my faithful guardian when I was being driven from the land. And now what news are you bringing your father this time, Ismene? What mission brought you from home?[7] [359] You haven't come empty-handed, I know that well. You're bringing me something to fear.

ISMENE [361] What I went through, Father, searching for where you were living, I'll pass over and leave aside. I don't want to suffer it twice, once in the hardship and again in the telling. What I've come to tell you about are the troubles that beset your two ill-fated sons now. At first they were eager to leave the throne to Creon and not pollute the city, when they reflected on the ancient ruin of the family and how it gripped your unhappy house. [371] But now, driven by some god and by a sinful mind, the

7 The Cadmeans are the Thebans, named after Cadmus, the founder of Thebes.

two of them, thrice-wretched, have fallen into an evil quarrel, each grasping at rule and royal power. The younger, the one born later, has stripped Polynices, the firstborn, of the throne and driven him out of his country. And he, so the story that's going around among us says, has gone as an exile to hollow Argos, where he's taking on a new marriage alliance and comrades in arms—meaning that Argos will soon either win the land of the Cadmeans in glory or else lift that land's glory to the heavens. [382] These aren't just words, Father, they're terrible facts. And when the gods will take pity on your sufferings, I can't tell.

OEDIPUS [385] So you had some hope by now that the gods would give me a thought, that one day I'd be saved?

ISMENE [387] I do, Father, from the oracles that have come now.

OEDIPUS [388] What oracles? What has been prophesied, child?

ISMENE [389] That one day the people there will seek you out, dead or alive, for their own safety.

OEDIPUS [391] And who could prosper through a man like me?

ISMENE [392] They say their power comes to rest in you.

OEDIPUS [393] When I'm no longer anything, is that when I'm a man?

ISMENE [394] Yes, because now the gods are raising you up; before, they were destroying you.

OEDIPUS [395] It's a poor thing to raise up an old man who fell when he was young.

ISMENE [396] Still, you should know that Creon is coming to you for this very reason—and soon, not after any long time.

OEDIPUS [398] To do what, daughter? Explain it to me.

ISMENE [399] To settle you near the Cadmean land, so they can have you in their power, but you won't set foot inside its borders.

OEDIPUS [401] And what good am I to them lying outside their doors?

ISMENE [402] If your tomb is neglected, it will weigh heavily on them.

OEDIPUS [403] Anyone could work that out with common sense, without a god to tell him.

ISMENE [404] That's why they want to place you close to their country, and not where you'd be your own master.

OEDIPUS [406] Will they cover me in Theban dust, then?

ISMENE [407] No, Father. Your kindred blood that you shed won't allow it.

OEDIPUS [408] Then they will never have me in their power.

ISMENE [409] Then one day this will be a heavy burden for the Cadmeans.

OEDIPUS [410] When what turn of events comes about, child?

ISMENE [411] Through your anger, when they stand at your tomb.

OEDIPUS [412] And who did you hear all this from, child?

ISMENE [413] From envoys who came from the hearth at Delphi.

OEDIPUS [414] And Phoebus really said this about me?

ISMENE [415] So say the men who came back to the land of Thebes.

OEDIPUS [416] Did either of my sons hear it?

ISMENE [417] Both of them alike, and they know it well.

OEDIPUS [418] And then those vilest of men heard it, and put the throne before their longing for me?

ISMENE [420] It pains me to hear it, but I bear it all the same.

OEDIPUS [421] Then may the gods never quench their fated strife, and may the outcome of this battle they're locked in now, spears raised, come to rest with me! Then neither would the one who holds the scepter and throne now keep them, nor would the one who's gone ever come home again. When I, their own father, was being thrust out of my country so shamefully, they didn't stop it or stand up for me. I was sent off homeless and proclaimed an exile, for all they cared. You might say that I wanted

this at the time, and that the city granted me the favor, and with reason. [433] No, not at all. On that very first day, when my passion was boiling, and the sweetest thing to me was to die, to be stoned to death, no one came forward to help me have my wish. But in time, when all my anguish had mellowed, and I was coming to see that my passion had run too far, punishing me more than my past mistakes deserved—it was then, after all that time, that the city drove me out of the land by force. And they, my sons, who could have helped their father, wouldn't do it. For want of one small word from them, I've wandered ever since, an exile and a beggar. [445] From these two, girls as they are, I get, as far as their nature allows them, the means to live, a safe place to rest, and the help of family. But those two chose throne and scepter over their own father, to rule and be kings of the land. They'll never win me as an ally, and no good will ever come to them from ruling the Cadmeans. I know that, hearing this girl's oracles and thinking over the old prophecies about me that Phoebus has fulfilled at last. So let them send Creon to search for me, and anyone else who has power in the city. [457] For if you, strangers, along with the Holy Goddesses who guard your people, are willing to defend me, you'll win a great savior for this city, and troubles for my enemies.

CHORUS [461] You deserve pity, Oedipus, you and these girls with you. But since what you've said puts you forward as this land's savior, I want to give you some advice for your own good.

OEDIPUS [465] Dear friend, be my sponsor, then. I'll do everything you say.

CHORUS [466] Then perform a rite of purification to these goddesses, whose ground you came to first and trod on.

OEDIPUS [468] How? Teach me, strangers.

CHORUS [469] First bring holy libations from a spring that never stops flowing, and draw them with clean hands.

OEDIPUS [471] And when I have this untouched water?

CHORUS 472 There are mixing bowls there, the work of a skilled craftsman. Crown their rims and the handles on either side.

OEDIPUS 474 With fresh shoots, or with woolen threads, or how?

CHORUS 475 With wool newly shorn from a young ewe.

OEDIPUS 476 Very well. And after that, how am I to finish?

CHORUS 477 Pour your libations standing to face the first light of dawn.

OEDIPUS 478 Do I pour them from these vessels you speak of?

CHORUS 479 Yes, in three streams. And empty the last one completely.

OEDIPUS 480 What do I fill it with before I set it down? Tell me this too.

CHORUS 481 Water and honey. And bring no wine to it.

OEDIPUS 482 And when the dark-leaved earth has received all this?

CHORUS 483 Lay three times nine sprigs of olive on it with both your hands, and pray this prayer over them.

OEDIPUS 485 I want to hear it. This is what matters most.

CHORUS 486 That as we call them the Kindly Ones, so with kindly hearts they may receive the suppliant who brings salvation. Ask this yourself, or whoever does it in your place, speaking so no one can hear, and not raising your voice. Then walk away and don't turn back. If you do this, I'll stand by you with confidence. Otherwise, stranger, I'd fear for you.

OEDIPUS 493 Daughters, do you hear what these strangers who live here are saying?

ANTIGONE 494 We heard. Tell us what has to be done.

OEDIPUS 495 I can't make the journey. I fall short in two ways, two afflictions: I have no strength and no sight. Let one of you two go and do this. I think one soul is enough to pay this debt, even in place of ten thousand, if it comes in goodwill. But do it

quickly. Only don't leave me alone: my body hasn't the strength to move on its own, deserted, without someone to guide me.

ISMENE [503] Then I'll go and do it. But the place where I'm to find what's needed—that's what I want to know.

CHORUS [505] On the far side of this grove, stranger. If you're short of anything, there's someone living there who will tell you.

ISMENE [507] I'll go there, then. Antigone, you stay here and look after Father. When it's for our parents, even if it's hard work, we shouldn't keep count of the work.

CHORUS

[510] It is a terrible thing, stranger,
to wake an evil long since laid to rest.
And yet I long to learn—

OEDIPUS [512] What is it?

CHORUS

[513] —of that wretched pain,
found past all remedy,
that you have lived with.

OEDIPUS

[515] By the welcome you gave a guest,
don't lay open
the shameless things I've suffered.

CHORUS

[517] The story's told far and wide and never dies away.
I want to hear it, stranger,
told straight.

OEDIPUS [519] Oh, no.

CHORUS Bear with it, I beg you.

OEDIPUS Ah, ah.

CHORUS [520] Do as I ask; I did all you asked of me.

OEDIPUS 521 I bore an evil, strangers, / I bore it unwilling—/ let the god be my witness—/ and none of it was my own choice.

CHORUS 524 But in what way?

OEDIPUS

525 The city bound me, knowing nothing,
to an evil bed,
a marriage that was my ruin.

CHORUS

527 Is it true, as I hear,
that you shared your mother's bed,
a bed with a name unspeakable?

OEDIPUS 529 Oh, no—it is death to hear it, / stranger. And these two girls, from me—

CHORUS 531 What are you saying?

OEDIPUS 532 —two daughters, two ruins—

CHORUS 533 Zeus!

OEDIPUS 534 —sprang from the labor / of the mother we share.

CHORUS 535 Then they are your children, and also—

OEDIPUS 536 —yes, their own father's sisters.

CHORUS 537 Oh!

OEDIPUS Oh, yes—evils past counting, / come round again.

CHORUS 538 You suffered—

OEDIPUS I suffered things never to be forgotten.

CHORUS 539 You did—

OEDIPUS I did nothing.

CHORUS How so?

OEDIPUS
I received
a gift—and I wish, heartbroken as I am,
I had never taken it from the city
I had served.

CHORUS [542] Poor man, what then? You shed the blood—

OEDIPUS [543] What now? What do you want to learn?

CHORUS [544] —of your father?

OEDIPUS Oh, oh! You've struck me a second blow, wound upon wound.

CHORUS [545] You killed—

OEDIPUS I killed. But I have—

CHORUS [546] What?

OEDIPUS —some claim to justice.

CHORUS How so?

OEDIPUS
I'll tell you.
The men I killed would have killed me.
Clean before the law, not knowing, I came to this.

CHORUS [549] But look, here is our lord, Theseus son of Aegeus, come at your word on the errand he was sent for.[8]

THESEUS [551] I've heard from many people in the past about the bloody ruin of your eyes, and so I recognize you, son of Laius. And now, from what I heard on my way here, I'm sure of it. Your clothing and that afflicted face make it plain to us who you are. I pity you, ill-fated Oedipus, and I want to ask what plea you've come here to make to the city and to me—you and the unhappy girl at your side. [560] Tell me. It would take a dreadful thing, whatever you asked for, to make me turn away from it. I know that I too was raised in exile, as you were, and that I struggled

8 Theseus is the legendary king of Athens, son of King Aegeus.

through more dangers than any man in a foreign land, with my own life at stake. So I would never turn aside from any stranger, as you are now, and refuse to help bring him to safety. I know well that I'm a man, and that I have no greater share in tomorrow than you do.

OEDIPUS [569] Theseus, your nobility, in a few words, has spared me the need for more than a few of my own. You've said who I am, what father I was born from, and what land I came from. So nothing is left for me but to say what I want, and my speech is done.

THESEUS [575] Then tell me exactly that, so I may know it.

OEDIPUS [576] I've come to give you my wretched body as a gift. It isn't much to look at, but the gains it brings are worth more than a fine shape.

THESEUS [579] And what gain do you claim to bring?

OEDIPUS [580] In time you'll learn. Not now, I think.

THESEUS [581] When, then, will your gift be shown?

OEDIPUS [582] When I'm dead and you have buried me.

THESEUS [583] You're asking for the last things of life. What lies between, you either forget or count as nothing.

OEDIPUS [585] Yes—because in that one thing all the rest is gathered up for me.

THESEUS [586] Then it's a small favor you ask of me.

OEDIPUS [587] Be careful, though. This is no small struggle—no.

THESEUS [588] Do you mean between your sons and me?—

OEDIPUS [589] My lord, they will want to carry me back there.

THESEUS [590] But if they'd take you back willingly, staying in exile does you no credit either.

OEDIPUS [591] But when I wanted it myself, they wouldn't allow it.

THESEUS [592] You foolish man, anger does no good when you're in trouble.

OEDIPUS [593] Rebuke me when you've heard me out. For now, let it be.

THESEUS [594] Tell me. I shouldn't speak without knowing.

OEDIPUS [595] Theseus, I've suffered terrible things, evil on evil.

THESEUS [596] Do you mean the old misfortune of your family?

OEDIPUS [597] No, not that—every Greek talks of that.

THESEUS [598] Then what is this affliction of yours, greater than a man can bear?

OEDIPUS [599] Here is how things stand with me. I was driven from my own land by my own offspring, and I can never go back, because I killed my father.

THESEUS [602] Then why would they send for you, if you're to live apart?

OEDIPUS [603] The voice of the god will force them.

THESEUS [604] What harm do the oracles make them afraid of?

OEDIPUS [605] That it is their fate to be struck down in this land.

THESEUS [606] And how could bitterness come between me and them?

OEDIPUS [607] Dearest son of Aegeus, only to the gods comes neither old age nor death, ever. Everything else is confounded by all-powerful time. The strength of the earth wastes away, the strength of the body wastes away; trust dies, distrust springs up; and the same spirit never stays steady, not between friends, nor between city and city. For some now, for others later, what was sweet turns bitter, and then dear again. [616] And if all is fair weather now between Thebes and you, endless time, as it goes on, gives birth to endless nights and days, in which they will scatter with the spear the handclasps that are in harmony now, over some small word. Then my sleeping, hidden corpse, cold as it is, will one day drink their warm blood—if Zeus is still Zeus, and Zeus's son Phoebus speaks true. But since it's no pleasure to speak words that should be left undisturbed, let me stop where I began. Only keep your own pledge, and you will never say that

you took in Oedipus as a useless dweller in this place—unless the gods deceive me.

CHORUS 629 My lord, this man has long been making it plain that he'd fulfill these promises, and others like them, for this land.

THESEUS 631 Then who could cast away the goodwill of such a man? First, the hearth of allies in arms is always open to him among us. Then, he has come as a suppliant of the gods, and he pays no small tribute to this land and to me. I honor this, and I will never reject his favor; I will settle him in this country as a citizen. If the stranger would like to stay here, I'll put you in charge of guarding him; or if he'd rather come with me—Oedipus, I give you the choice of which to take. I'll go along with whatever you decide.[9]

OEDIPUS 642 Zeus, grant every blessing to men like this!

THESEUS 643 So what do you want? To come to my house?

OEDIPUS 644 If it were right for me. But this is the place—

THESEUS 645 Where you'll do what? I won't stand in your way.

OEDIPUS 646 —where I will prevail over those who threw me out.

THESEUS 647 That's a great gift you speak of, in return for your coming to live with us.

OEDIPUS 648 Yes, if what you say holds firm, and you see it through for me.

THESEUS 649 Don't worry about me. I will never betray you.

OEDIPUS 650 I won't bind you with an oath, as if you were a bad man.

THESEUS 651 Well, you'd get nothing more from an oath than from my word.

OEDIPUS 652 How will you act, then?

THESEUS What is it you fear most?

OEDIPUS 653 Men will come—

9 A "hearth of allies in arms" alludes to a hereditary bond of hospitality and military alliance between royal houses.

THESEUS These men here will see to that.

OEDIPUS 654 Be careful, if you leave me—

THESEUS Don't teach me what I have to do.

OEDIPUS 655 A man who's afraid has to.

THESEUS My heart isn't afraid.

OEDIPUS 656 You don't know the threats—

THESEUS I know that no one is going to take you away from here against my will. Many threats have uttered many empty words in anger; but when the mind comes back to itself, the threats are gone. As for them, even if they've grown bold enough to talk dreadful talk about carrying you off, I know the sea between here and there will prove wide and hard to sail. Now, I urge you to take heart even without my decision, if Phoebus sent you here. Still, even when I'm not here, I know my name will guard you from harm.

FIRST STASIMON

The chorus praises Colonus and Attica: nightingales, narcissus, crocus, the olive, horses and the sea.

CHORUS

668 Stranger, in this land of fine horses
you have come to earth's finest home,
to white Colonus,
where the nightingale,
most at home here,
trills her clear song
in the green glades,
dwelling in the wine-dark ivy
and in the god's untrodden leaves,
with its countless fruits,
sheltered from the sun,
sheltered from the wind
of every storm;
where Dionysus the reveler
walks forever,
keeping company with the goddesses
who nursed him.

681 And fed by heaven's dew
the narcissus blooms in lovely clusters
day after day,
ancient crown of the two Great Goddesses,
and the crocus gleaming gold.
Nor do the sleepless springs
that feed the wandering streams of the Cephisus
ever dwindle,
but every day
he moves over the plains
of the broad-breasted earth
with his pure water,
quickening them to birth.
Nor have the dancing choirs of the Muses
turned in loathing from this place, nor has—[10]

693 —Aphrodite of the golden reins.
And there is a thing—I have never heard
of such a thing growing in the land of Asia,
nor in the great Dorian island of Pelops—/ a tree
unconquered, self-renewing,
terror to the spears of enemies,
that flourishes greatest in this land:
the leaf of the gray-green olive, nurse of children.
No one, young, or living with old age,
will lay it waste and destroy it with his hand;
for the ever-watchful eye
of Zeus of the Sacred Olives looks on it,
and gray-eyed Athena.[11]

10 The two Great Goddesses are Demeter and Persephone; the Cephisus is a river of Attica.
11 The "Dorian island of Pelops" is the Peloponnese. Zeus Morios guarded Attica's sacred olive trees, said to descend from Athena's own olive.

707 And I have another praise for this mother-city, the greatest,
a gift of the great god, the land's proudest boast:
its horses, its colts, its sea.
Son of Cronus, it was you who set her
on this height of pride, lord Poseidon,
when you first fashioned, in these streets,
the bit that tames horses.
And the oar, well fitted to the rower's hands,
leaps marvelously over the sea,
following the Nereids
with their hundred feet.[12]

SECOND EPISODE

Creon tries to coax Oedipus home, seizes his daughters, and is stopped by Theseus.

ANTIGONE 720 Land praised above all others, now it is your part to make these shining words shine out.

OEDIPUS 722 What's happening, child?

ANTIGONE Creon is coming toward us, Father—and not without attendants.

OEDIPUS 724 Dearest old men, now is the time for you to make my safety good.

CHORUS 726 Take heart, you'll have it. Even if I'm old, the strength of this country hasn't grown old.

CREON 728 Noble men who dwell in this land, I can see from your eyes that my arrival has given you a sudden fright. Don't shrink from me, and don't let loose any harsh word. I haven't come here meaning to use force: I'm an old man, and I know I've come to a city that is mighty, if any in Greece is. No, I've been sent, old as I am, to persuade this man to follow me to the land of the Cadmeans. It wasn't one man who sent me; I was ordered by all the citizens, since it fell to me, as his kin, to grieve for his sufferings

12 The Nereids are sea nymphs, the daughters of Nereus, imagined dancing in great numbers.

more than anyone in the city. [740] Come, unhappy Oedipus, listen to me and come home. All the people of Cadmus call you, and rightly—and I most of all, because, unless I'm the vilest man alive, I grieve most at your troubles, old man. I see you, poor wretch, a stranger, forever wandering, going about with nothing to live on and a single attendant. And she—wretched me, I would never have thought she could fall so low into misery as this unhappy girl has fallen, always tending you, living a beggar's life, at her age, unmarried, at the mercy of the first man who comes along to seize her. [753] Isn't this a wretched disgrace—oh, my misery—that I've flung at you and me and our whole family? But since what's out in the open can't be hidden, you, Oedipus—by the gods of our fathers, listen to me—you hide it. Agree to come back to the city and the house of your fathers, and say a friendly farewell to this city; it deserves it. But your home has a juster claim to your reverence, since long ago she nursed you.

OEDIPUS [761] You who will dare anything, who would make a cunning device out of any just plea—why are you trying this? Why do you want to catch me a second time in the trap where being caught would hurt me most? Before, when I was sick with the evils of my own house and it would have been a joy to be thrown out of the country, you refused me the favor I wanted. But when my rage had run its course at last, and living at home had become sweet, then you thrust me out and cast me away. This kinship of ours meant nothing at all to you then. [772] And now again, when you see this city and all its people kindly disposed to me, you try to drag me away, saying hard things softly. Yet what pleasure is there in befriending people against their will? It's as if, when you begged for something, someone gave you nothing and refused to help, but when your heart was full of what you wanted, then gave it, when the favor could bring no favor. Wouldn't that be an empty pleasure? That is just the kind of thing you're offering me: good in word, bad in deed. [783] I'll tell these men too, so as to show you up for what you are. You've come to take me, not to bring me home, but to settle me at your border, so that your city may escape unharmed by troubles from

this land. That is not for you. This is for you: my avenging spirit, dwelling there in that country forever. And my sons will get just this much of my land—enough to die in. Don't I understand affairs in Thebes better than you? Far better, since I hear from clearer sources: from Phoebus, and from Zeus himself, his father. [794] That mouth of yours has come here as a forgery, with a hard, keen edge on it. But by talking you'd win more harm than safety. Still, I know I can't persuade you of this. Go. Let us live here. Even as we are, our lives wouldn't be bad, if we were content.

CREON [800] In this argument, do you think it's my fortunes that suffer from your stand, or rather your own?

OEDIPUS [802] Nothing would please me more than for you to persuade neither me nor these men here.

CREON [804] Poor wretch, won't you show, even with time, that you've grown some sense? Are you nursing a disgrace to your old age?

OEDIPUS [806] You're clever with your tongue. But I know no just man who can make a good case out of anything.

CREON [808] Saying a lot and saying what's to the point are two different things.

OEDIPUS [809] As if what you say is brief, and to the point!

CREON [810] Not to anyone with sense like yours.

OEDIPUS [811] Go away—I say it for these men as well—and stop blockading me, keeping watch on the place where I'm meant to live.

CREON [813] I call these men to witness, not you, to the way you answer your own flesh and blood. If I ever get hold of you—

OEDIPUS [815] And who could take me by force, with these allies here?

CREON [816] I swear you'll have grief enough even without that.

OEDIPUS [817] What deed is there to back that threat?

CREON [818] Of your two girls, one I've just now seized and sent off; the other I'll take shortly.

OEDIPUS [820] Oh, no.

CREON Soon you'll have more to cry out about.

OEDIPUS [821] You have my daughter?

CREON And this one too, before long.

OEDIPUS [822] Oh, strangers, what will you do? Will you betray me, and not drive this godless man out of your land?

CHORUS [824] Get out, stranger, quickly. What you're doing now isn't just, and neither is what you've done before.

CREON [826] Now's your moment to take this girl away against her will, if she won't come willingly.

ANTIGONE [828] Oh, no, poor me, where can I run? What help can I find from gods or men?

CHORUS [829] What are you doing, stranger?

CREON [830] I won't touch this man; but I will touch what's mine.

OEDIPUS [831] Lords of this land!

CHORUS Stranger, what you're doing isn't just.

CREON [832] It is just.

CHORUS How is it just?

CREON I'm taking my own.

OEDIPUS [833] Oh, my city!

CHORUS [834] What are you doing, stranger? Won't you let her go? Soon you'll be put to the test of our hands.

CREON [835] Keep back.

CHORUS Not from you, not when this is what you intend.

CREON [836] If you harm me, you'll be at war with my city.

OEDIPUS [837] Didn't I tell you this would happen?

CHORUS Take your hands off the girl, quickly.

CREON [838] Don't give orders where you have no power.

CHORUS [840] Let go, I tell you.

CREON And I tell you to be on your way.

CHORUS

[841] Come here, come, come, people of this place!
The city is being slain, my city, by force!
Come here to me!

ANTIGONE [843] They're dragging me away, poor me—strangers, strangers!

OEDIPUS [844] Where are you, child?

ANTIGONE I'm being taken by force.

OEDIPUS [845] Reach out your hands, my child!

ANTIGONE I can't—I have no strength.

CREON [846] Take her away, won't you?

OEDIPUS Oh, my misery, my misery!

CREON [848] Well, you'll never walk again with these two to lean on. But since you want to defeat your own country and your own people—on whose orders I'm doing this, king though I am—then win. In time, I know, you'll come to see that neither now nor before have you done yourself any good, defying your own flesh and blood to indulge your anger. It is your anger that always ruins you.

CHORUS [856] Stop where you are, stranger.

CREON Don't touch me, I tell you.

CHORUS [857] I won't let you go, not when you've robbed me of these girls.

CREON [858] Then you'll soon be handing my city a bigger prize to seize. I won't lay hands on these two alone.

CHORUS [860] Why, what will you turn to?

CREON This man. I'll seize him and take him away.

CHORUS [861] That's a dreadful thing you're saying.

CREON It will be done, here and now.

CHORUS [862] Unless the man who rules this land stops you.

OEDIPUS [863] Shameless voice! Will you actually lay hands on me?

CREON [864] Be silent, I tell you.

OEDIPUS No—may these goddesses not make me speechless until I've spoken this curse! You, vilest of men, have torn away the one helpless eye I had left, besides the eyes I lost before, and you're gone with it by force. For this, may Helios, the Sun, the god who sees all things, give you yourself and your whole family a life like mine, to grow old in as I have.

CREON [871] Do you see this, people of this land?

OEDIPUS [872] They see me and they see you, and they understand: I've been wronged in deeds, and I defend myself with words.

CREON [874] I won't hold back my anger. I'll take him by force, even if I'm alone and slow with age.

OEDIPUS [876] Oh, my misery!

CHORUS [877] What arrogance you came here with, stranger, if you think you'll carry this out!

CREON [878] I do.

CHORUS [879] Then I'll no longer count this a city.

CREON [880] With justice on his side, you know, even a small man beats a great one.

OEDIPUS [881] Do you hear the way he talks?

CHORUS Talk he'll never make good.

CREON [883] Zeus may know that. You don't.

CHORUS [884] Isn't this outrage?

CREON Outrage, yes, but you'll have to put up with it.

CHORUS

Help, all you people! Help, first men of the land!
Come quickly, come!
They're crossing over, they're getting away!

THESEUS What's this shouting? What's going on? What fear made you stop me at the altar, as I was sacrificing oxen to the god of the sea, the guardian of this Colonus? Tell me, so I know the whole of it. That's why I've rushed here, faster than my feet would like.

OEDIPUS Dearest friend, I know your voice. I've just been terribly wronged by this man.

THESEUS Wronged how? And who has hurt you? Tell me.

OEDIPUS Creon here, the man you see, has torn my children away from me, the only pair I had, and gone.

THESEUS What are you saying?

OEDIPUS You've heard what's been done to me.

THESEUS Then won't one of my attendants go to the altars there as fast as he can? Make all the people, on foot and on horseback, leave the sacrifice and race at full gallop to the place where the two highways that travelers use come together. The girls mustn't get past, and I mustn't become a laughingstock to this stranger, overpowered by force. Go, as I've ordered, and quickly. As for this man, if I'd come in the anger he deserves, he wouldn't have left my hands unhurt. But as it is, he'll be dealt with by the very laws he brought in with him, and by no others. You'll never leave this country until you bring those girls back and set them here before my eyes. What you've done disgraces me, and your own ancestors, and your country. You came into a city that practices justice and decides nothing without law, and then you brushed aside the authorities of this land, burst in like this, took whatever you wanted and carried it off by force. You thought my city was empty of men, or some slave state, and that I was as good as nothing. And yet it wasn't Thebes that taught you to be base; she doesn't like to raise lawless men. Nor

would she praise you if she learned you were plundering what is mine and what is the gods', dragging off by force helpless people who came as suppliants. If I set foot in your country, even with the most just claim in the world, I would never drag or carry anyone away without the consent of whoever ruled that land. I'd know how a stranger ought to behave among its citizens. But you are shaming a city that doesn't deserve it, your own; and the fullness of your years is making you an old man and an empty-headed one at the same time. 932 So I said it before and I say it now: someone is to bring the girls here as fast as possible, unless you want to become a resident alien in this country, by force and against your will. And I mean what I say, in my mind as much as on my tongue.

CHORUS 937 You see where you've ended up, stranger? To judge by where you come from you seem a just man, but you're caught doing wrong.

CREON 939 I didn't do this, son of Aegeus, because I thought this city lacked men, or lacked counsel, as you say. I did it because I knew that no zeal for my kin would ever take hold of your people so strongly that they would keep them against my will. And I knew they would never take in a man who had killed his father, an impure man, a man found living in an unholy marriage and fathering children by it. I knew they had the Areopagus here in their land, the wise Hill of Ares, which doesn't allow wanderers like that to live in the same city with them.[13] 950 It was trusting in this that I set about taking this prize. And I wouldn't have done it if he hadn't called down bitter curses on me and on my family. After what he did to me, I thought it right to pay him back in kind. Anger has no old age except death; the dead feel no pain. So do whatever you like. I'm alone, and that makes me weak, however just my case. But even so, old as I am, I'll try to answer action with action.

OEDIPUS 960 Shameless arrogance! Whom do you think you're insulting with this, me, an old man, or yourself? You've let pour

from your mouth the killing, the marriage, the disasters that I bore, poor wretch, against my will. That was how the gods wanted it, angry, perhaps, with my family long ago. In myself you couldn't find any sin to reproach me with, for which I might have done these wrongs against myself and my own. [969] Tell me this. If some oracle came to my father, prophesying that he would die at his son's hands, how could you justly blame that on me? I wasn't yet begotten by my father or conceived by my mother; I was still unborn. And if then, born to misery as I was born, I came to blows with my father and killed him, understanding nothing of what I was doing or to whom, how could you reasonably condemn an act done unwillingly? And my mother, you wretch: aren't you ashamed to force me to speak of her marriage, when she was your own sister? I'll tell you about that marriage right now. I won't keep silent, not when you've gone this far in your unholy talk. [981] She bore me, yes, she bore me, oh, the misery of it, neither of us knowing; and having borne me, she gave me children, to her own disgrace. But one thing I know for certain: you slander her and me like this willingly, while I married her unwillingly, and unwillingly I speak of it now. No, I won't be judged guilty for this marriage, or for my father's murder, which you keep hurling at me with your bitter taunts. Just answer me one thing that I ask you. [992] If someone came up to you, here and now, and tried to kill you, you, the just man, would you ask whether the man killing you was your father, or would you pay him back at once? I think, if you love your life, you'd pay back the man responsible, and not look around to see what was lawful. Into evils like these I walked myself, with the gods leading me; and I don't think even my father's soul, if it came back to life, would contradict me. But you, you are not just. You think it fine to say anything at all, speakable or unspeakable, and you throw these things in my face in front of these men. [1003] You think it fine to flatter Theseus' name, and Athens, praising how well it is governed. And while

13 The Areopagus, the "Hill of Ares" in Athens, was the seat of an ancient council that judged cases of homicide.

you praise it so lavishly, you forget this: if any land knows how to honor the gods with worship, this one surpasses all. And from this land you tried to steal me, an old man and a suppliant; you laid hands on me, and you went off with my daughters. So now I call on these goddesses here; I beg them and implore them with prayers to come as my helpers and allies, so that you may learn what sort of men guard this city.

CHORUS 1014 This stranger is a good man, my lord. His misfortunes are devastating, and they deserve our help.

THESEUS 1016 Enough talk. The men who did it are hurrying away, and we who suffered it are standing still.

CREON 1018 Then what do you order a man with no strength to do?

THESEUS 1019 To lead the way there, with me as your escort, so that if you're holding the girls somewhere around here, you can show them to me yourself. But if your men are fleeing with them in their grip, we needn't trouble. Others are on the chase, and those men will never escape this land to thank their gods for it. Go on, lead. And understand that you have taken and are taken: fortune has caught you as you hunted. What's won by unjust trickery isn't kept. 1028 And you'll have no one else to help you in this. I know very well you didn't come to such a pitch of arrogance, to this daring you show now, unarmed and unequipped. There's someone you were relying on when you did this. I must look into that, and not let this city be made weaker than one man. Do you take in any of this? Or does it seem as idle to you now as what you were told when you were plotting all this?

CREON 1036 While you're here, you'll say nothing I'll object to. But at home, I too will know what I have to do.

THESEUS 1038 Threaten as you go, then. And you, Oedipus, stay here at your ease, and rest assured: unless I die first, I won't stop until I've put your children back in your hands.

OEDIPUS 1042 Blessings on you, Theseus, for your nobility and for the just care you've taken of us.

SECOND STASIMON

The chorus imagines Theseus' horsemen catching Creon's men on the road and freeing the girls.

CHORUS

Oh, to be where the enemy
soon will wheel and turn
and join in the bronze-voiced clash of Ares,
by the Pythian shore
or the torch-lit shore,
where the Two Queens tend their holy rites
for mortals,
rites whose golden key
is laid on the tongues
of their ministers, the Eumolpidae.
There, I think, Theseus,
who rouses the battle,
and the two maiden sisters,
still unharmed,
will soon meet
in a war-cry that's all the help they need,
here within our borders.[14]

14 The torch-lit shore is Eleusis, where Demeter and Persephone ("the Two Queens") had their Mysteries, kept secret by the priestly clan of the Eumolpidae; the Pythian shore is the coast by a shrine of Apollo, god of Pytho (Delphi), on the road there.

1059 Or perhaps they're nearing the pastures
west of the snowy rock
of Oea,
fleeing on colts
or in racing chariots.
He'll be caught! Terrible is the Ares of our people,
terrible the strength of Theseus' men.
Every bridle flashes,
every horseman charges,
reins slack on the bits,
all who honor Athena of the horses
and the sea god who holds the earth,
Rhea's dear son.[15]

1074 Are they fighting, or about to?
My mind
foretells that soon they'll be given back to us,
the girls who have endured terrible things,
met terrible suffering at their own kinsman's hands.
Zeus is bringing, bringing something to pass this very day.
I am a prophet of a fight well won.
If only I were a dove, swift and strong as the storm wind,
to reach a cloud high in the air
and lift my eyes above the struggle!

15 Oea was a district of Attica on the road from Colonus toward Thebes.

1085 Zeus, ruler of all the gods,
all-seeing Zeus,
grant to the guardians of this land
the strength of victory
to bring off the ambush that takes its prey,
and you too, his holy child, Pallas Athena.
And Apollo the hunter
and his sister, who follows
the dappled, swift-footed deer:
I pray they come, a double help,
to this land and its people.
Wandering stranger, you won't say
your lookout is a false prophet.
I see the girls,
coming close again with an escort.

THIRD EPISODE

Theseus brings the daughters back and reports that Polynices waits at an altar to speak with Oedipus.

OEDIPUS 1098 Where? Where? What are you saying? What did you say?

ANTIGONE 1099 Father, oh Father, if only some god would let you see this man, the best of men, who has brought us back here to you!

OEDIPUS 1102 My child, are you both here?

ANTIGONE Yes. These hands saved us, Theseus' hands and those of his dear companions.

OEDIPUS 1104 Come close, children. Let your father hold you, though he never hoped you'd come back.

ANTIGONE 1106 You'll have what you ask. What you ask is what we long for.

OEDIPUS 1107 Where, then? Where are you?

ANTIGONE Here, we're both coming near.

OEDIPUS [1108] My dearest young shoots!

ANTIGONE To a father, all his own are dear.

OEDIPUS [1109] My staffs to lean on!

ANTIGONE Ill-fated staffs of an ill-fated man.

OEDIPUS [1110] I have what I love most. If I died now, I wouldn't be utterly wretched, with you two standing beside me. Press close against my sides, children, one on each side; grow close to the man who gave you life, and give me rest from the lonely, miserable wandering I had before. And tell me what happened, as briefly as you can. For girls your age, a short account is enough.

ANTIGONE [1117] Here's the man who saved us. You should hear it from him, Father, since the deed is his. That way my part will be short.

OEDIPUS [1119] Stranger, don't be surprised if I go on and on to my children, now that they've appeared beyond all hope. I know that this joy in them has come to me from no one else. You saved them, no other mortal. May the gods give you what I wish for you, you and this land, since among you alone of all mankind I have found reverence, fairness and tongues that do not lie. [1128] I know it, and I repay your kindness with these words: what I have, I have through you and no other mortal. Reach out your right hand to me, so I may touch it, and kiss your head, if that is allowed. And yet what am I saying? Wretch that I've become, how could I want you to touch a man in whom every stain of evil makes its home? No, I won't, and I won't let you. Only those mortals who have lived through it can share such misery. [1137] Accept my greeting from where you stand, and go on caring for me rightly, as you have until today.

THESEUS [1139] I'm not surprised if you went on rather long in your joy at these children, nor if you took their words before mine. None of that weighs on me. We aren't as eager to make our lives glorious with words as with deeds. [1145] And I'm proving it. I haven't broken my word in anything I swore to you, old man. Here I am, bringing these girls back alive, untouched by the

threats made against them. As for how the fight was won, why should I boast idly, when you'll learn it from them yourself as you spend time with them? But a report has just reached me on my way here, and I'd like your thoughts on it. It's a small thing to tell, but worth wondering at; [1153] and a man shouldn't treat anything lightly.

OEDIPUS [1154] What is it, son of Aegeus? Tell me. I know nothing myself of what you're asking about.

THESEUS [1156] They tell me a man, not from your city but a kinsman of yours, has somehow thrown himself down at the altar of Poseidon, where I was sacrificing when I set out here, and is sitting there.

OEDIPUS [1160] From where? What does he want, sitting there as a suppliant?

THESEUS [1161] I don't know, except one thing. He's asking you, so they say, for a few words, nothing much.

OEDIPUS [1163] What sort of words? Sitting at that altar is no small request.

THESEUS [1164] They say he asks only to come and talk with you, and then to go back safely from his journey here.

OEDIPUS [1166] Who could it be, sitting there as a suppliant?

THESEUS [1167] Think whether you have any kinsman in Argos who might want this from you.

OEDIPUS [1169] Dearest friend, stop there.

THESEUS What's wrong?

OEDIPUS [1170] Don't ask me—

THESEUS Ask you what? Tell me.

OEDIPUS [1171] From what you've said, I know who the suppliant is.

THESEUS [1172] And who is he, that I should find fault with him?

OEDIPUS [1173] My son, my hateful son. His words would be more painful to me to hear than any man's.

THESEUS [1175] Why? Can't you listen without doing what you don't want to do? Why should it hurt you to hear him?

OEDIPUS [1177] That voice is the most hateful sound a father could hear. Don't force me to give in on this.

THESEUS [1179] But if his place as a suppliant compels it, consider whether you must respect the god.

ANTIGONE [1181] Father, listen to me, though I'm young to be advising you. Let this man here satisfy his own conscience and give the god what the god wants; and for our sake, let our brother come. Don't worry, he won't drag you by force from your judgment with anything he says that isn't good for you. What harm is there in hearing words? Deeds wickedly plotted are exposed in the telling. [1190] You fathered him. So even if he did you the most impious wrongs the worst of men could do, Father, it isn't right for you to wrong him in return. Let him come. Other people have bad children too, and quick tempers, but when their loved ones counsel them, their charms charm the anger out of their nature. Look back, not at the present, but at the sufferings you went through because of your father and mother. If you look at those, I know you'll see what an evil end evil anger comes to. [1200] You have no small reminders of it, robbed of your eyes that can no longer see. Give in to us. It isn't right that people with just requests should have to keep on begging, or that a man should be treated well and then not know how to repay it.

OEDIPUS [1205] Child, it's a heavy pleasure you win from me with your pleading. Well, let it be as you wish. Only, stranger, if he's coming here, let no one ever become master of my life.

THESEUS [1209] I need to hear that sort of thing once, not twice, old man. I don't want to boast. But know that you are safe, as long as some god keeps me safe.

THIRD STASIMON

The chorus reflects that long life brings sorrow and that it is best never to be born.

CHORUS

Whoever craves the larger share of life
and scorns a moderate span
is clinging to folly:
that's plain to me.
For the long days lay up
many things that lie nearer to grief,
and you will look in vain for joy
once a man has fallen into more
than is his due.
But the helper comes to all alike,
when Hades' portion appears,
with no wedding song, no lyre, no dancing:
death at the last.

Never to be born is best,
past all reckoning.
But once a man has come into the light,
to go back where he came from
as quickly as he can
is next best by far.
For once youth has come,
bringing its light-headed follies,
what heavy blow is out of reach?
What hardship isn't there?
Envy, factions, strife, battles
and killing. And last of all his lot is
old age, reviled,
powerless, unsociable,
friendless, where every
evil of evils lives.

1239 In it this sufferer lives, not I alone.
As some north-facing headland,
lashed by waves, is battered by winter storms on every side,
so this man too
is battered from top to bottom
by terrible ruin breaking over him like waves,
never leaving him,
some from the setting sun,
some from the rising,
some from the noonday rays,
some from the night-dark Rhipaean mountains.[16]

FOURTH EPISODE

Polynices begs his father's support for his war on Thebes, and Oedipus curses both his sons.

ANTIGONE 1249 Look, Father, here's the stranger coming toward us, it seems, alone, with no men with him, tears streaming from his eyes as he walks.

OEDIPUS 1252 Who is it?

ANTIGONE The one we've had in our minds for some time. Polynices is here.

POLYNICES 1254 Oh, no, what shall I do? Shall I weep first for my own troubles, sisters, or for my old father's, now that I see them? I've found him in a foreign land, cast out here with you two, in clothes like these. The foul old filth has settled into them, aging along with the old man, wasting his flesh; and on his eyeless head his uncombed hair flutters in the breeze. And the food he carries, it seems, goes with all this, to feed his miserable belly. Wretch that I am, I learn all this too late. 1265 And I bear witness that I have been the worst of men in caring for you. Don't learn about me from others. But Mercy shares Zeus' throne in all he does; let her stand by you too, Father. For the wrongs that have

16 The Rhipaean mountains were imagined at the far north of the world.

been done there are cures, but there's no making them worse. Why are you silent? Say something, Father. Don't turn away from me. Won't you answer me at all? Will you dishonor me and send me away without a word, without even telling me why you're angry? 1275 You children of this man, my own sisters, you at least, try to move our father's mouth, so hard to approach and so hard to address, so that he won't send me off dishonored like this, without a word in reply, though I'm the god's suppliant.

ANTIGONE 1280 Tell him yourself, poor brother, what you've come for. Many words, by giving a little pleasure, or by giving offense, or by stirring pity somehow, have given a voice to those who had none.

POLYNICES 1284 Then I'll speak out; you guide me well. First I'll make the god himself my helper, from whose altar the lord of this land raised me up to come here, granting me the right to speak and to listen and to leave in safety. And I'll want the same from you, strangers, and from my two sisters here, and from my father. Now, Father, I want to tell you why I've come. I've been driven out of my homeland, an exile, because I claimed the right, as the elder born, to sit on your sovereign throne. 1295 For that, Eteocles, though he's the younger by birth, thrust me out of the land, not by beating me in argument, nor by putting it to the test of strength or action, but by winning over the city. Of all this I say your Fury is most of all the cause; and that's what I hear from the seers too. When I came to Dorian Argos, I took Adrastus as my father-in-law, and I bound to myself by oath all the men in the land of Apia who are called foremost and honored for the spear. With them I would gather the expedition of seven spears against Thebes, and either die with justice on my side or drive out of the land the men who did this to me.[17] 1308 Well then, why have I come here now? I bring suppliant prayers to you, Father, for myself and for my allies, who now with seven armies and seven spears surround the whole plain of Thebes. There is Amphiaraus, hurler of the spear, foremost with the

17 Adrastus was king of Argos; Apia is an old name for the Peloponnese.

spear and foremost in reading the paths of birds; second, the Aetolian son of Oeneus, Tydeus; third, Eteoclus, born in Argos; fourth, Hippomedon, sent by his father Talaus; the fifth, Capaneus, boasts that he will raze the town of Thebes to the ground and burn it;[18] 1320 sixth, Parthenopaeus the Arcadian rushes into battle, named for his mother, the maiden who stayed unwed so long before she bore him, Atalanta's true son. And I, your son, or if not yours, then the offspring of an evil fate, but called yours at least, I lead the fearless army of Argos against Thebes. All of us, Father, by these children and by your soul, beg and implore you to let go of your heavy anger against this man, as I set out to punish my brother, who thrust me out and robbed me of my fatherland.[19] 1331 For if anything in oracles can be trusted, they said that those you side with will have the power. So now, by the springs and the gods of our race, I ask you to listen and give way. We are beggars and strangers, and you're a stranger too. We both live by flattering others, you and I, since we've drawn the same lot from fate. Meanwhile the man who rules in our house, oh, my misery, laughs at us both and lives in luxury; 1340 and if you stand with me in my purpose, I'll scatter him with little trouble and in little time. Then I'll bring you back and set you in your own house, and set myself there too, once I've thrown him out by force. With you on my side, I can boast of this; without you, I haven't even the strength to survive.

CHORUS 1346 Oedipus, for the sake of the one who sent him, tell this man whatever seems right, and then send him on his way.

OEDIPUS 1348 Men who keep this land: if it weren't Theseus who sent him here to me, thinking it right that he should hear me speak, he would never have heard my voice. But since he's been granted that, he'll go, and go having heard from me things that will never gladden his life. You villain! When you held the scepter and the throne your brother now holds in Thebes, you

18 These are the Seven against Thebes, the legendary Argive champions; Amphiaraus was a seer as well as a warrior.
19 His name echoes *parthenos*, "maiden".

drove out your own father, me, and made me a man without a city, and made me wear these clothes you weep to see now, now that you find yourself in the same misery as I am. 1360 This is nothing to weep over. I must bear it for as long as I live, and remember you as my murderer. It was you who made this hardship my way of life. You drove me out. Because of you I wander, begging strangers for my bread from day to day. If I hadn't fathered these girls to look after me, I'd be dead, for all you did. As it is, they keep me alive. They look after me. When it comes to sharing my hardship, they are men, not women. 1369 But you two are some other man's sons, not mine. That's why fate has its eye on you, though not yet as it soon will, if those companies of yours are really on the march toward Thebes. There's no way you'll bring that city down. Before that you'll fall, stained with blood, and your brother with you, the two of you alike. Curses like these I let loose on you both before, and now I call on them to come and fight at my side, so that you two learn it's right to honor the parents who gave you life, and not to treat your father with contempt because he's blind, sons like you. These girls never did such things. 1380 So my curses have the mastery over your suppliant's seat and your throne, if Justice, proclaimed from long ago, sits beside Zeus by the ancient laws. As for you, get out! I spit on you, I disown you, vilest of the vile! And take with you these curses I call down on you: never to conquer your native land with the spear, never to return to Argos in its hollow plain, but to die by a kinsman's hand and to kill the man who drove you out. That is my curse. And I call on the hateful darkness of Tartarus, where our fathers lie, to give you a new home. I call on these goddesses here. I call on Ares, who has cast this terrible hatred between you two. 1393 Now that you've heard this, go. Go and announce it to all the people of Cadmus, and to your own loyal allies too: these are the portions Oedipus has dealt out to his sons.

CHORUS 1397 Polynices, I took no pleasure in the journeys you made before, and now go back, as fast as you can.

POLYNICES [1399] Oh, no—my journey, my failure! Oh, no—my comrades! What an end to the road we set out on from Argos—what misery for me! An end I can't even speak of to any of my comrades, or turn them back from, but must meet this fate in silence. You, his daughters, my sisters, you've heard the hard curses our father is calling down. For the gods' sake, you two at least: if his curses are fulfilled and you ever find your way home, don't dishonor me. Lay me in a grave, and give me the rites of the dead. [1411] Then the praise you two win from him now for the hardships you bear for his sake will be joined by another, no smaller, for what you've done for me.

ANTIGONE [1414] Polynices, I beg you, listen to me in one thing.

POLYNICES [1415] Antigone, my dearest, what is it? Tell me.

ANTIGONE [1416] Turn your army back to Argos, as quickly as you can, and don't destroy yourself and the city.

POLYNICES [1418] That's impossible. How could I ever lead the same army out again, once I'd shown I was afraid?

ANTIGONE [1420] But why must you rage all over again, my dear? What do you gain by tearing down your own country?

POLYNICES [1422] Running away is shameful—and so is being laughed at like this by my brother, when I'm the elder.

ANTIGONE [1424] Then don't you see you're carrying his prophecies straight to their fulfillment? He foretells death for you both, each at the other's hand.

POLYNICES [1426] Yes, because that's what he wants. But I can't give way.

ANTIGONE [1427] Oh, no, poor me! But who will dare to follow you once they hear what this man has prophesied?

POLYNICES [1429] We won't report bad news. A good general tells the better side, not what's lacking.

ANTIGONE [1431] So you've really made up your mind, my dear?

POLYNICES [1432] Yes, and don't hold me back. This road will be my concern, doomed and evil as my father here and his Furies

have made it. But may Zeus be good to you two, if you do this for me when I'm dead, since you'll never do anything for me alive again. Now let me go, and goodbye. You'll never see me alive again.

ANTIGONE 1438 Oh, I'm so wretched.

POLYNICES 1439 Don't mourn for me.

ANTIGONE And who wouldn't grieve for you, brother, when you're rushing into a death you can see in front of you?

POLYNICES 1441 If I must, I'll die.

ANTIGONE No, don't! Listen to me.

POLYNICES 1442 Don't urge me to do what I mustn't.

ANTIGONE Then I'm utterly wretched, if I lose you.

POLYNICES 1443 That lies with fate, whether it turns out this way or another. As for you two, I pray to the gods you never meet with harm. In everyone's eyes, you don't deserve misfortune.

FIFTH EPISODE

Thunder announces Oedipus' end; he tells Theseus the secret of his grave and leads the way to it.

CHORUS

1447 New troubles, newly come,
have reached me, heavy with doom,
from the blind stranger—
unless it is fate that is finding its mark.
For I cannot say that any decree of the gods is ever in vain.
Time watches, watches these things forever,
casting some down,
and on the next day raising others up again.
The sky has thundered. Zeus!

OEDIPUS 1457 Children, children, is there anyone from this place nearby who could bring Theseus here, the best of men in every way?

ANTIGONE 1459 Father, why are you calling for him?

OEDIPUS [1460] This winged thunder of Zeus will soon lead me down to Hades. Send for him—quickly!

CHORUS

[1462] Look, look—here it crashes down,
huge, unspeakable, the thunder hurled by Zeus!
Terror has crept
to the very ends of my hair.
My heart cowers:
the lightning blazes from the sky again.
What end will it let loose? I'm afraid:
it never rushes out for nothing,
never without disaster.
Great sky! Zeus!

OEDIPUS [1472] Children, the end of life foretold for the man before you has come, and there's no turning it away now.

ANTIGONE [1474] How do you know? What sign made you put this together?

OEDIPUS [1475] I know it well. But someone go, as quickly as you can, and bring me the king of this land.

CHORUS

[1477] Ah, ah! Look, again it rings all around us,
that piercing roar!
Be gracious, god, be gracious,
if you are bringing something without light
to the earth, our mother.
May I find you kindly,
and not, because I have looked on a man accursed,
somehow share in a reward that brings no gain.
Lord Zeus, to you I cry!

OEDIPUS [1486] Is the man near? Children, will he find me still alive, and my mind still clear?

ANTIGONE [1488] What pledge do you want to plant in his mind?

OEDIPUS 1489 In return for the kindness they've shown me, I want to give them the favor I promised when I received it, and bring it to fulfillment.

CHORUS

1491 Oh, oh, son! Come, come!
Even if at the far end of the glen
you are hallowing the altar
with sacrifice of oxen
to Poseidon, god of the sea,
come!
For the stranger thinks it right
to give you, your city, and your people
a just return for the kindness he received.
Hurry, my lord!

THESEUS 1500 What's this shout ringing out from all of you again —clear from your citizens, plain from the stranger? Was it a thunderbolt from Zeus, or a storm of hail bursting down? When a god is storming like this, you can imagine anything.

OEDIPUS 1505 You've come just when I longed for you. Some god has given you good fortune on this journey.

THESEUS 1507 Son of Laius, what's happened now that's new?

OEDIPUS 1508 The scale of my life has tipped. And I want to die without breaking my promises to you and to this city.

THESEUS 1510 What sign has convinced you that your death is near?

OEDIPUS 1511 The gods themselves are my heralds and bring me the news. They falsify none of the signs foretold to me.

THESEUS 1513 How do you mean, old man, that these things are being shown to you?

OEDIPUS 1514 The thunder that rolls on and on, and the many bolts of lightning flung by that unconquerable hand.

THESEUS 1516 You've convinced me. I see you've prophesied a great deal, and nothing false. Tell me what has to be done.

OEDIPUS [1518] I'll teach you, son of Aegeus, what will lie in store for this city, a treasure that age will never harm. I myself, with no guide's hand to touch me, will lead the way to the place where I must die. Never tell anyone about it, neither where it's hidden nor in what region it lies, so that it may always be your defense, better than many shields or the spear of allies brought in from your neighbors. The things too sacred to be stirred by speech you'll learn for yourself, when you come there alone. [1528] For I wouldn't reveal them to any of these citizens, or even to my own children, much as I love them. Keep them to yourself always, and when you come to the end of your life, reveal them only to the foremost man, and let him show them in turn to the one who comes after him. In this way you'll keep this city safe from ravage by the Sown Men. Countless cities, even when a man governs them well, slip easily into outrage. For the gods see clearly, but late, when someone casts off what is divine and turns to madness.[20] [1538] Don't wish that on yourself, son of Aegeus. But I'm teaching you what you know already. Now to the place—the god's presence is urging me on—let us go now and hesitate no longer. Children, follow me this way. Now, strangely, I've turned out to be your guide, as you two were your father's. Go on, and don't touch me. Let me find for myself the sacred grave where it is my fate to be hidden in this earth. This way—this way—come this way. This is the way Hermes the Guide is leading me, and the goddess below.[21] [1549] Light that is no light to me—once, long ago, you were mine; now my body feels you for the last time. For now I go to hide the last of my life with Hades. But you, dearest of strangers—you, this land, and your people—may you be blessed, and in your prosperity remember me when I am dead, and be fortunate forever.

20 The Sown Men sprang from the dragon's teeth that Cadmus planted; the Thebans claimed descent from them.

21 Hermes the Guide escorts the souls of the dead to the underworld; the goddess below is Persephone.

FOURTH STASIMON

The chorus prays to the gods below to grant Oedipus a painless passage to the dead.

CHORUS

If it is right for me to honor with prayers
the unseen goddess,
and you, lord of those who dwell in night,
Aidoneus, Aidoneus, I pray:
let the stranger come, without pain,
by no death heavy with groaning,
to the plain of the dead below that hides all
and the house of the Styx.
For many sorrows came upon him,
and for no cause;
now let a just god lift him up again.[22]

Goddesses of the earth below,
and you, monstrous form of the unconquered beast,
who, as the story always tells,
lie in your lair by the gates
where so many guests pass through,
and snarl from your cave,
the untamed guard at the door of Hades:
child of Earth and Tartarus,
I pray that he stand clear
of the stranger's path
as he sets out
for the plains of the dead below.
On you I call, lord of the everlasting sleep.[23]

22 Aidoneus is a poetic name for Hades; the Styx is the river of the underworld.
23 The beast is Cerberus, the watchdog of Hades; the "child of Earth and Tartarus" called on to restrain him is probably Death himself.

EXODOS

A messenger tells how Oedipus vanished; his daughters mourn and ask to go back to Thebes.

MESSENGER [1579] Citizens, I could put it most briefly by saying that Oedipus is dead. But what happened can't be told in a few words, and the things done there were not few.

CHORUS [1583] Is he dead, then, poor man?

MESSENGER Know for certain that he has left life behind for good.

CHORUS [1585] How? Poor man—was it a heaven-sent end, and painless?

MESSENGER [1586] Now that's where it truly becomes a thing to wonder at. How he went from here you know, I think, since you were here: none of his loved ones guided him, but he himself led the way for all of us. When he came to the sheer threshold, rooted in the earth with steps of bronze, he stopped on one of the many branching paths, near the hollow basin where the pledges of Theseus and Pirithous, faithful forever, are laid. He stood midway between that and the Thorician rock, the hollow pear tree, and the stone tomb, and sat down. Then he undid his filthy clothes.[24] [1598] Then he called to his daughters and told them to bring water from a flowing stream for washing and for libations. They went to the hill of Demeter of the green shoots, there in plain view, and quickly brought back what their father had asked. Then they washed him and dressed him as custom requires. When he was content with all that had been done and nothing he wanted was left undone, Zeus of the earth below thundered, and the girls shuddered as they heard it. They fell at their father's knees and wept, and would not stop beating their breasts or their long, long wailing. [1610] As soon as he heard their sudden, bitter cry, he folded his arms around them and said:

24 Theseus and his friend Pirithous were said to have sworn their pact here before going down to the underworld; the "sheer threshold" is the Bronze Threshold.

"Children, from this day you no longer have a father. Everything that was mine is gone, and you won't have the hard work of caring for me anymore—hard, I know it was, my children. But one word alone undoes all those hardships. Love: you had more of it from no one than from this man, and now you must live the rest of your lives without him."

1620 So, clinging to one another, they all sobbed and wept. When they had come to the end of their weeping and no cry rose any longer, there was silence. Then suddenly a voice called out to him, so that all of us felt our hair stand on end with sudden fear. For the god was calling him, many times, from every side: "You there, you there, Oedipus, why are we waiting to go? You've been holding us back too long." And when he understood that the god was calling him, he asked for Theseus, the king of the land, to come to him. 1631 And when he came, Oedipus said: "Dear friend, give my children the pledge of your hand as an oath—and you, children, give him yours. Promise never to betray them willingly, and always to do whatever your good judgment tells you will be for their good." And Theseus, noble man that he is, without lamenting, promised on oath to do this for the stranger. As soon as he'd done so, Oedipus touched his children with his blind hands and said: 1640 "Children, you must bear this with noble hearts and leave this place. Don't ask to see what isn't lawful to see, or to hear what isn't lawful to hear. Go as quickly as you can. Only Theseus, who has the right, must stay and learn what is done." Those were his words, and all of us heard them. Weeping without end, we went along with the girls. When we had gone a little way, we turned, and from far off we saw that the man was no longer there anywhere, and the king himself was holding his hand before his face to shade his eyes, as if something terrifying had appeared, too dreadful to look at. 1653 Then, a moment later, in hardly any time at all, we saw him bowing down to the earth and to Olympus of the gods, both in the same prayer. But by what death that man passed away, no mortal could tell, except Theseus. No fiery thunderbolt of the god carried him off, no whirlwind rising from the sea at that

moment, but either some escort sent from the gods, or the foundation of the earth, the realm of the dead, opened for him in kindness, without pain. 1663 The man was sent on his way without groaning, without the pain of sickness, in a way to wonder at, if any mortal's ever was. And if anyone thinks I'm talking nonsense, I wouldn't bother pleading with those who think I have no sense.

CHORUS 1667 And where are his daughters, and the friends who escorted him?

MESSENGER 1668 They're not far off. The sound of their weeping, clear enough, tells us they're on their way here.

ANTIGONE

1670 Ah, ah! Oh! Now it is ours, it is ours,
not in part but wholly,
ill-fated as we are, to mourn
the cursed blood we were born with from our father.
For him we bore our long hardship steadfastly
all the time before;
now at the last we will carry with us
things beyond all reckoning,
that we have seen and suffered.

CHORUS 1677 What is it?

ANTIGONE You can guess, friends.

CHORUS 1678 He's gone?

ANTIGONE

Gone, just as you'd most wish.
How else, when neither war
nor sea came against him,
but the unseen plains seized him,
swept off in some hidden doom?
Poor me—a deadly night
has come down over our eyes.
For how, wandering in some far-off land
or over the waves of the sea,
will we find bread for our hard lives?

ISMENE

I don't know. Let murderous Hades
take me down to die with my old father,
poor me, since the life ahead of me
is not worth living.

CHORUS

Best of daughters, both of you,
bear what the god brings;
don't let your grief burn so fiercely.
The path you've walked deserves no blame.

ANTIGONE

So there can be longing even for sorrows.
What was never dear at all was dear
while I still held him in my arms.
Father, my dear one,
wrapped forever in the darkness under the earth,
even down there you will never
be without love, from me and from her.

CHORUS He met his end—?

ANTIGONE He met the end he wanted.

CHORUS What end?

ANTIGONE

He died in the foreign land
he longed for; he has his bed
below, in shadow forever,
and the mourning he left is not unwept.
For this eye of mine, Father,
weeps for you, grieving, and I don't know
how, in my misery, I am to wipe away
such sorrow for you.
Oh, no—you wanted to die on foreign soil,
but you died like this, alone, away from me.

ISMENE

Oh, poor me, what fate is it, then, that from now on like this
...
...
awaits me, and you, my dear,
left like this, without our father?

CHORUS

But since he ended his life
in blessedness, my dears,
let this grief go. No one is beyond the reach of trouble.

ANTIGONE Let's hurry back, sister.

ISMENE To do what?

ANTIGONE A longing has hold of me—

ISMENE For what?

ANTIGONE to see the hearth beneath the earth

ISMENE Whose?

ANTIGONE Our father's—poor me!

ISMENE But how can that be lawful? Don't you / see?

ANTIGONE Why do you reproach me like this?

ISMENE And this, too—that

ANTIGONE What is this, again?

ISMENE [1732] he fell without a grave, apart from everyone.

ANTIGONE [1733] Take me there, and then kill me too.

ISMENE

[1734] Ah, ah, poor me! Where, then,
alone like this and helpless,
am I to live out my wretched life?

CHORUS [1737] My dears, don't be afraid.

ANTIGONE But where can I escape to?

CHORUS [1738] Before this, too, it escaped—

ANTIGONE What did?

CHORUS [1740] your fortune, from falling into disaster.

ANTIGONE [1741] I'm thinking—

CHORUS Thinking what?

ANTIGONE [1742] how we'll get home, / I don't know.

CHORUS [1743] Don't even look for a way.

ANTIGONE [1744] Trouble has hold of me.

CHORUS It had hold of you before.

ANTIGONE [1745] Then it was hopeless; now it's beyond even that.

CHORUS [1746] It's a vast sea, then, that you two have drawn as your lot.

ANTIGONE [1747] Yes, yes.

CHORUS I say so too.

ANTIGONE

[1748] Ah, ah! Where are we to go, Zeus?
Toward what hope
is fate driving me now?

THESEUS

1751 Stop your lament, children.
Where the kindness of the dead below
is laid up as a blessing shared,
there should be no mourning:
it would bring down the gods' anger.

ANTIGONE 1754 Son of Aegeus, we fall at your feet.

THESEUS 1755 What do you need from me, children?

ANTIGONE 1756 We want to see our father's tomb with our own eyes.

THESEUS 1757 That isn't permitted.

ANTIGONE 1758 What do you mean, my lord, ruler of Athens?

THESEUS

1760 Children, he forbade me
to let anyone come near this place,
or let any mortal at all
speak a word to the sacred tomb where he lies.
And he told me that if I did this rightly
I would keep my land free of pain forever.
The god heard me promise this,
and Oath, the servant of Zeus, who hears all things.

ANTIGONE

1768 If this is what he wished,
it will have to be enough. But send us
to ancient Thebes, in case somehow
we can stop the slaughter
that is coming for our brothers.

THESEUS

I'll do that, and all else
I can do that will serve you
and please him beneath the earth,
who has just now passed away.
I must not grow weary.

CHORUS

Come, stop now, and stir up
your lament no longer:
all this is settled, and stands fast.