

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

by

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Oedipus at Colonus

ARGUMENT

Oedipus, the blind and banished King of Thebes, has come in his wanderings to Colonus, a deme of Athens, led by his daughter Antigone. He sits to rest on a rock just within a sacred grove of the Furies and is bidden depart by a passing native. But Oedipus, instructed by an oracle that he had reached his final resting-place, refuses to stir, and the stranger consents to go and consult the Elders of Colonus (the Chorus of the Play). Conducted to the spot they pity at first the blind beggar and his daughter, but on learning his name they are horror-stricken and order him to quit the land. He appeals to the world-famed hospitality of Athens and hints at the blessings that his coming will confer on the State. They agree to await the decision of King Theseus.

From Theseus Oedipus craves protection in life and burial in Attic soil; the benefits that will accrue shall be told later. Theseus departs having promised to aid and befriend him. No sooner has he gone than Creon enters with an armed guard who seize Antigone and carry her off (Ismene, the other sister, they have already captured) and he is about to lay hands on Oedipus, when Theseus, who has heard the tumult, hurries up and, upbraiding Creon for his lawless act, threatens to detain him till he has shown where the captives are and restored them. In the next scene Theseus returns bringing with him the rescued maidens. He informs Oedipus that a stranger who has taken sanctuary at the altar of Poseidon wishes to see him. It is Polyneices who has come to crave his father's forgiveness and blessing, knowing by an oracle that victory will fall to the side that Oedipus espouses. But Oedipus spurns the hypocrite, and invokes a dire curse on both his unnatural sons. A sudden clap of thunder is heard, and as peal follows peal, Oedipus is aware that his hour is come and bids Antigone summon Theseus. Self-guided he leads the way to the spot where death should overtake him, attended by Theseus and his daughters. Halfway he bids his daughters farewell, and what followed none but Theseus knew. He was not (so the Messenger reports) for the gods took him.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

OEDIPUS, banished King of Thebes.
ANTIGONE, his daughter.
ISMENE, his daughter.
THESEUS, King of Athens.
CREON, brother of Jocasta, now reigning at Thebes.
POLYNEICES, elder son of Oedipus.
STRANGER, a native of Colonus.
MESSENGER, an attendant of Theseus.
CHORUS, citizens of Colonus.

Scene: In front of the grove of the Eumenides.

Enter the blind OEDIPUS led by his daughter, ANTIGONE.

OEDIPUS

Child of an old blind sire, Antigone,
What region, say, whose city have we reached?
Who will provide today with scant dole
This wanderer? 'Tis little that he craves,
And less obtains--that less enough for me;
For I am taught by suffering to endure,
And the long years that have grown old with me,
And last not least, by true nobility.
My daughter, if thou seest a resting place
On common ground or by some sacred grove,
Stay me and set me down. Let us discover
Where we have come, for strangers must inquire
Of denizens, and do as they are bid.

ANTIGONE

Long-suffering father, Oedipus, the towers
That fence the city still are faint and far;
But where we stand is surely holy ground;
A wilderness of laurel, olive, vine;
Within a choir or songster nightingales
Are warbling. On this native seat of rock
Rest; for an old man thou hast traveled far.

OEDIPUS

Guide these dark steps and seat me there secure.

ANTIGONE

If time can teach, I need not to be told.

OEDIPUS

Say, prithee, if thou knowest, where we are.

ANTIGONE

Athens I recognize, but not the spot.

OEDIPUS

That much we heard from every wayfarer.

ANTIGONE

Shall I go on and ask about the place?

OEDIPUS

Yes, daughter, if it be inhabited.

ANTIGONE

Sure there are habitations; but no need
To leave thee; yonder is a man hard by.

OEDIPUS

What, moving hitherward and on his way?

ANTIGONE

Say rather, here already. Ask him straight
The needful questions, for the man is here.
[Enter STRANGER]

OEDIPUS

O stranger, as I learn from her whose eyes
Must serve both her and me, that thou art here
Sent by some happy chance to serve our doubts--

STRANGER

First quit that seat, then question me at large:
The spot thou treadest on is holy ground.

OEDIPUS

What is the site, to what god dedicate?

STRANGER

Inviolable, untrod; goddesses,
Dread brood of Earth and Darkness, here abide.

OEDIPUS

Tell me the awful name I should invoke?

STRANGER

The Gracious Ones, All-seeing, so our folk
Call them, but elsewhere other names are rife.

OEDIPUS

Then may they show their suppliant grace, for I
From this your sanctuary will ne'er depart.

STRANGER

What word is this?

OEDIPUS

The watchword of my fate.

STRANGER

Nay, 'tis not mine to bid thee hence without
Due warrant and instruction from the State.

OEDIPUS

Now in God's name, O stranger, scorn me not
As a wayfarer; tell me what I crave.

STRANGER

Ask; your request shall not be scorned by me.

OEDIPUS

How call you then the place wherein we bide?

STRANGER

Whate'er I know thou too shalt know; the place
Is all to great Poseidon consecrate.
Hard by, the Titan, he who bears the torch,
Prometheus, has his worship; but the spot
Thou treadest, the Brass-footed Threshold named,
Is Athens' bastion, and the neighboring lands
Claim as their chief and patron yonder knight
Colonus, and in common bear his name.
Such, stranger, is the spot, to fame unknown,
But dear to us its native worshipers.

OEDIPUS

Thou sayest there are dwellers in these parts?

STRANGER

Surely; they bear the name of yonder god.

OEDIPUS

Ruled by a king or by the general voice?

STRANGER

The lord of Athens is our over-lord.

OEDIPUS

Who is this monarch, great in word and might?

STRANGER

Theseus, the son of Aegeus our late king.

OEDIPUS

Might one be sent from you to summon him?

STRANGER

Wherefore? To tell him aught or urge his coming?

OEDIPUS

Say a slight service may avail him much.

STRANGER

How can he profit from a sightless man?

OEDIPUS

The blind man's words will be instinct with sight.

STRANGER

Heed then; I fain would see thee out of harm;
For by the looks, marred though they be by fate,
I judge thee noble; tarry where thou art,
While I go seek the burghers--those at hand,
Not in the city. They will soon decide
Whether thou art to rest or go thy way.
[Exit STRANGER]

OEDIPUS

Tell me, my daughter, has the stranger gone?

ANTIGONE

Yes, he has gone; now we are all alone,
And thou may'st speak, dear father, without fear.

OEDIPUS

Stern-visaged queens, since coming to this land
First in your sanctuary I bent the knee,
Frown not on me or Phoebus, who, when erst
He told me all my miseries to come,
Spake of this respite after many years,
Some haven in a far-off land, a rest
Vouchsafed at last by dread divinities.
"There," said he, "shalt thou round thy weary life,
A blessing to the land wherein thou dwell'st,
But to the land that cast thee forth, a curse."
And of my weird he promised signs should come,
Earthquake, or thunderclap, or lightning flash.
And now I recognize as yours the sign
That led my wanderings to this your grove;
Else had I never lighted on you first,
A wineless man on your seat of native rock.
O goddesses, fulfill Apollo's word,
Grant me some consummation of my life,
If haply I appear not all too vile,
A thrall to sorrow worse than any slave.
Hear, gentle daughters of primeval Night,
Hear, namesake of great Pallas; Athens, first
Of cities, pity this dishonored shade,
The ghost of him who once was Oedipus.

ANTIGONE

Hush! for I see some grey-beards on their way,
Their errand to spy out our resting-place.

OEDIPUS

I will be mute, and thou shalt guide my steps
Into the covert from the public road,
Till I have learned their drift. A prudent man
Will ever shape his course by what he learns.
[Enter CHORUS]

CHORUS

(Str. 1)

Ha! Where is he? Look around!
Every nook and corner scan!
He the all-presumptuous man,
Whither vanished? search the ground!
A wayfarer, I ween,
A wayfarer, no countryman of ours,
That old man must have been;

Never had native dared to tempt the Powers,
Or enter their demesne,
The Maids in awe of whom each mortal cowers,
Whose name no voice betrays nor cry,
And as we pass them with averted eye,
We move hushed lips in reverent piety.
But now some godless man,
'Tis rumored, here abides;
The precincts through I scan,
Yet wot not where he hides,
The wretch profane!
I search and search in vain.

OEDIPUS

I am that man; I know you near
Ears to the blind, they say, are eyes.

CHORUS

O dread to see and dread to hear!

OEDIPUS

Oh sirs, I am no outlaw under ban.

CHORUS

Who can he be--Zeus save us!--this old man?

OEDIPUS

No favorite of fate,
That ye should envy his estate,
O, Sirs, would any happy mortal, say,
Grove by the light of other eyes his way,
Or face the storm upon so frail a stay?

CHORUS

(Ant. 1)

Wast thou then sightless from thy birth?
Evil, methinks, and long
Thy pilgrimage on earth.
Yet add not curse to curse and wrong to wrong.
I warn thee, trespass not
Within this hallowed spot,
Lest thou shouldst find the silent grassy glade
Where offerings are laid,
Bowls of spring water mingled with sweet mead.
Thou must not stay,
Come, come away,

Tired wanderer, dost thou heed?
(We are far off, but sure our voice can reach.)
If aught thou wouldst beseech,
Speak where 'tis right; till then refrain from speech.

OEDIPUS

Daughter, what counsel should we now pursue?

ANTIGONE

We must obey and do as here they do.

OEDIPUS

Thy hand then!

ANTIGONE

Here, O father, is my hand,

OEDIPUS

O Sirs, if I come forth at your command,
Let me not suffer for my confidence.

CHORUS

(Str. 2)

Against thy will no man shall drive thee hence.

OEDIPUS

Shall I go further?

CHORUS

Aye.

OEDIPUS

What further still?

CHORUS

Lead maiden, thou canst guide him where we will.

ANTIGONE [1]

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OEDIPUS

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ANTIGONE

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Follow with blind steps, father, as I lead.

OEDIPUS

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CHORUS

In a strange land strange thou art;
To her will incline thy heart;
Honor whatso'er the State
Honors, all she frowns on hate.

OEDIPUS

Guide me child, where we may range
Safe within the paths of right;
Counsel freely may exchange
Nor with fate and fortune fight.

CHORUS

(Ant. 2)
Halt! Go no further than that rocky floor.

OEDIPUS

Stay where I now am?

CHORUS

Yes, advance no more.

OEDIPUS

May I sit down?

CHORUS

Move sideways towards the ledge,
And sit thee crouching on the scarped edge.

ANTIGONE

This is my office, father, O incline--

OEDIPUS

Ah me! ah me!

ANTIGONE

Thy steps to my steps, lean thine aged frame on mine.

OEDIPUS

Woe on my fate unblest!

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