

Oedipus at Colonus



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SOPHOCLES

Considered one of the three greatest playwrights of classical Greek theater, Sophocles was a friend of Pericles and Herodotus, and a respected citizen who held political and military offices in fifth-century B.C.E. Athens. He won fame by defeating the playwright Aeschylus for a prize in tragic drama at Athens in 468 B.C.E. Only seven of his complete plays have survived to reach the modern era, but he wrote more than 100 and won first prize in 24 contests. Best known are his three Theban plays, [Antigone](#), [Oedipus Rex](#), and [Oedipus at Colonus](#). Sophocles's other complete surviving works are [Electra](#), [Philoctetes](#), and [Trachinian Women](#). He is credited with changing Greek drama by adding a third actor, reducing the role of the chorus, and paying greater attention to character development.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Sophocles completed *Oedipus at Colonus* and passed away in 405–406 B.C.E., just before the utter defeat of Athens by Sparta at the end of the Peloponnesian War. The defeat led to the replacement of Athenian democracy by a harsh, Spartan-controlled dictatorship known as the Thirty Tyrants. When *Oedipus at Colonus* was first performed, four years later, at the festival of Dionysus in 401 B.C.E., the Athenian audience may have watched the play's celebration of the glory of Athens through misty eyes. Theseus, in the play, is the mythical founder and reformer of the Athenian state, and Oedipus, through his death, offers the city protection. The audience would have been painfully aware that Athens's golden period had just ended.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Of Sophocles's surviving dramatic works, [Antigone](#), [Oedipus Rex](#), and *Oedipus at Colonus* treat different episodes of the same legend, using many of the same characters. Sophocles's writing career overlapped with that of Aeschylus and Euripedes, the other great tragic playwrights of fifth-century Athens. Among Aeschylus's best-known tragedies are *Seven Against Thebes*, [Agamemnon](#), [The Libation Bearers](#), and [The Fumenides](#). Euripedes's most influential works include [Medea](#), [Electra](#), and [The Bacchae](#).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Oedipus at Colonus*
- **When Written:** 405–406 B.C.

- **Where Written:** Athens, Greece
- **Literary Period:** Classical
- **Genre:** Tragic drama
- **Setting:** The sacred grove of the Furies at Colonus, outside of Athens
- **Climax:** The death of Oedipus
- **Antagonist:** Creon

EXTRA CREDIT

Sophocles's Home Town: Sophocles was born at Colonus, and lived his life in Athens during the city-state's golden years. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, his final play, he has adapted the Oedipus legend to intersect with Athens' origins and provide a mythical foundation for Athens' glory. Sadly, Athens fell from power just a few years after Sophocles's death.



PLOT SUMMARY

The play begins in the **grove of the Furies** at Colonus, near Athens. It is several years after Oedipus was banished from Thebes, the city he once ruled. He is now a sorry sight, blind and hobbled, dressed in rags, led by his daughter Antigone. The two stop to rest in the grove. A citizen of Colonus passes by and tells them they need to move—they're on the sacred ground of the Furies. Oedipus, however, believes that this grove was prophesied as the location of his life's final chapter. More citizens (the chorus) come, and Oedipus asks them to send for Theseus, king of Athens. When the chorus learns who Oedipus is, they're frightened and tell him to leave before he brings ruin to their city. Oedipus appeals to their humanity and explains that his famous acts, although terrible, were committed unknowingly. The chorus agrees to wait for Theseus.

Before the king arrives, Oedipus's other daughter, Ismene, brings news from Thebes. Oedipus's two sons are fighting for control of the city. Polynices has been banished by his younger brother Eteocles, but has raised an army in Argos and is preparing to attack Thebes. She says the leaders of Thebes want Oedipus to return, but want to keep him at the border of the city, because the oracles say his presence there would protect Thebes. Oedipus is furious that the Thebans desire to use him in this way. While they wait for the king, he very reluctantly tells the chorus about his famous deeds—killing his father and marrying his mother. He again defends himself, saying that he did none of these awful deeds knowingly.

When Theseus arrives, he is kind to Oedipus. Oedipus says that if Theseus allows him to stay under the protection of Athens and be buried at Colonus, his tomb will bless and protect

Athens. Theseus welcomes Oedipus to stay and guarantees that no one will take him away against his will. Once Theseus leaves, Creon arrives from Thebes. He claims to have suffered at the thought of Oedipus's misfortunes and now hopes to persuade Oedipus to return to Thebes. Oedipus furiously refuses. He states that he's being used as a pawn in the Theban power struggle, and is not truly welcomed by the people who have ignored his suffering for years. Creon's guards take Antigone and Ismene as hostages to try to force Oedipus to come with them. When Creon then tries to seize Oedipus himself by force, the chorus cries for help. Theseus arrives in time to stop Creon from taking Oedipus, and sends his army after the kidnappers. Theseus soon returns with Oedipus's daughters unharmed, and receives Oedipus's gratitude.

Oedipus's son Polynices comes to see his father. Oedipus doesn't want to speak to him but is persuaded to listen by Antigone and Theseus. Polynices says he's miserable that he neglected his father for so long. He adds that the oracles have decreed that whichever side of the upcoming battle Oedipus supports will win, and asks for his father's help. Oedipus curses Polynices for failing to come to his aid when he was in exile and sends him away with a prophecy: Polynices's attack on Thebes will fail, and that the two brothers will kill each other in battle. Before he leaves, Polynices asks his sisters to give him a proper burial should Oedipus's prophecy come to pass.

A thunderstorm begins, signalling to Oedipus that his time to die has arrived. He sends for Theseus, and when the king arrives, he tells Theseus that if the king keeps Oedipus's burial place a secret, then Oedipus's presence there will be a great defense for the city of Athens. Oedipus leads the king, his daughters, and a small group of attendants out of the grove. Not long after, a messenger returns with an account of Oedipus's death. After his daughters mourned him and received his blessing, he told everyone but Theseus to leave. When they looked back, Oedipus had simply vanished, and Theseus was covering his eyes as if he'd witnessed something supernatural. Antigone and Ismene return to the grove, mourning their father. Although he will not tell them the location of their father's tomb, Theseus agrees to send them back to Thebes, where they hope to stop the upcoming battle.

younger man, Oedipus struggled against the terrible fate that had been prophesied for him. Now, as his life nears its end, he struggles no longer and is ready to fulfill the final chapter of this prophecy and find his last resting place. Although he is a pitiful figure, Oedipus is still an eloquent and convincing speaker.

Antigone – Oedipus's daughter and guide in his blind wanderings. Although she has not been banished from Thebes, she suffers the same hardships as her father out of her love for him. When her brother Polynices visits in a failed attempt to gain Oedipus's blessing, he asks Antigone to give him a proper burial if he should die in battle (these efforts are the subject of Sophocles's [Antigone](#)).

The Chorus – In this play, the chorus represents the elder citizens of Colonus. Sophocles's choruses react to the events of the play. The chorus speaks as one voice, or sometimes through the voice of its leader. It praises, damns, cowers in fear, asks or offers advice, and generally helps the audience interpret the play.

Creon – Oedipus's brother-in-law (and uncle), Creon comes to Colonus to persuade Oedipus to return to Thebes. When Oedipus refuses, Creon has his men kidnap the old man's daughters. Creon tries to take Oedipus by force, but Theseus prevents him. While Oedipus tends to give long and dramatic speeches, Creon is direct and to-the-point.

Polynices – Eldest son of Oedipus and brother of Antigone. When he was in power, Polynices helped to drive his father into exile from Thebes. By the time of *Oedipus at Colonus*, Polynices had been overthrown by his younger brother, Eteocles, and had himself been banished. Polynices then moved to the city of Argos, married there, and now has raised an army to attack Thebes. He comes to Oedipus asking for forgiveness for his previous sins, but also because the oracles have declared that the side that Oedipus favors will win the battle. Oedipus curses Polynices and predicts that his two sons will kill each other in the battle. Creon's refusal to allow Polynices a proper burial is the conflict at the heart of Sophocles's play [Antigone](#).

MINOR CHARACTERS

Theseus – The just and brave king of Athens who welcomes Oedipus and promises to protect him. When the men from Thebes kidnap Oedipus's daughters, Theseus and his army rescue the girls. Theseus is a familiar figure in Greek mythology and is the legendary hero and founder of Athens.

A Citizen – The citizen of Colonus who first encounters Oedipus in the sacred grove of the Furies.

Ismene – Daughter of Oedipus and sister of Antigone. She brings the news from Thebes about the conflict between her brothers.

A Messenger – The messenger gives an eyewitness account of the miraculous death of Oedipus.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Oedipus – The protagonist of *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus is feeble and impoverished, wandering in exile, and known throughout Greece as the man who killed his father and married his mother (events covered in more detail in Sophocles's play [Oedipus Rex](#)). Oedipus gouged out his own eyes when he discovered the truth about his actions, and now his faithful daughter Antigone leads him in his wanderings. As a

Eteocles – Oedipus's younger son, who overthrew Polynices to take the throne and rule Thebes jointly with Creon. He never appears onstage in the play.



GUILT

Oedipus lives with the guilt and remorse for having violated two of the most severe taboos of civilized society—incest and the killing of one's parents. His overwhelming guilt at his actions caused him to blind himself and to beg to be banished from Thebes.

Yet Oedipus's sense of guilt for his famous crimes is more complicated in *Oedipus at Colonus* than it is in [Oedipus Rex](#). He's a man who has suffered much for what he's done. He still feels guilt and revulsion, and he's still too ashamed to speak freely of his past when asked by the citizens of Colonus. However, with time has come some perspective. He realizes that he never intended to commit the acts he is infamous for committing. He killed his father in self-defense, he tells the citizens of Colonus, and without knowing what was happening. "Look through all humanity," he tells his listeners, "you'll never find a man on earth, if a god leads him on, who can escape his fate." Oedipus's guilt has diminished. At the same time, others who once shunned him and who now need his favor seek him out to express their own guilt at having cast him away before.



OLD AGE, WISDOM, AND DEATH

Oedipus at Colonus is Sophocles' last play, written when he was 90 years old. As such, it should come as no surprise that one of the play's major themes is old age and the end of life. Through Oedipus, who himself is about to die, and to a lesser extent through Creon, the play examines the question of whether or not old age brings wisdom. When Oedipus tells Antigone early in the play that he has learned to accept his suffering the answer appears to be a resounding "Yes." And in his conduct regarding the gods, Oedipus unfailingly accepts the gods' dictates, a profound change from his youthful attempts to thwart the prophecies of the Delphic oracle. Yet in his dealings with other people, Oedipus is still prone to outbursts of holy rage. The subject of one such outburst, Creon responds that "not even the years can bring you to your senses. Must you disgrace old age?" Yet Creon himself seems no wiser, responding to a challenge from Theseus by saying: "But opposing you, old as I am, I'll stop at nothing, match you blow for blow. A man's anger can never age and fade away, not until he dies. The dead alone feel no pain." Creon's comment seems to point to the play's larger point about old age: that it is awful, full of pain, envy, and loneliness that is only relieved by death. Perhaps, ultimately, that is the wisdom that Oedipus has learned. He does not fight death, as he used to fight the prophecies of the gods. He accepts his coming death, and so his last moments of life, as described by the messenger, are of love, calm, and acceptance. Although his life was one of misery and infamy, in his final hours Oedipus becomes a model of how to die.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



FATE AND PROPHECY

The ancient Greeks believed that their gods could see the future, and that certain people could access this information. Independent prophets, called seers, saw visions of things to come. Oracles, priests who resided at the temples of gods—such as the oracle to Apollo at Delphi—were also believed to be able to interpret the gods' visions and give prophecies to people who sought to know the future. Oracles were an accepted part of Greek life—famous leaders and common people alike consulted them for help with making all kinds of decisions. Long before the beginning of *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus has fulfilled one of the most famous prophecies in world literature—that he would kill his father and marry his mother (these events are covered in detail in Sophocles's [Oedipus Rex](#)). Despite his efforts to avoid this terrible fate, it came to pass. When Oedipus learned what he had inadvertently done, he gouged out his own eyes, and was banished from Thebes.

As *Oedipus at Colonus* begins, Oedipus is nearing the end of his life. When he arrives at the **grove of the Furies** at Colonus, he realizes that in the same prophecy that foretold his fate, the oracle said that this grove would be the spot where he would die. No longer one to question the power of fate, Oedipus refuses to leave the area of the grove. He convinces Theseus, king of Athens, that an oracle has predicted that Oedipus's tomb will serve as a great defense for Athens if Theseus protects Oedipus at the end of his life. Theseus accepts this version of fate, and the supernatural way in which Oedipus dies suggests that the gods have, in fact, afforded the old man some power in death. Based on the predictions of another oracle, both Polynices and Creon come to find Oedipus and try to win his favor—by persuasion or by force—to their respective causes, knowing that whoever has Oedipus on their side is destined to win. But Oedipus has become something of a prophet himself—he predicts the miserable death of Polynices, and Polynices leaves, knowing he cannot avoid his fate. Theseus keeps his word, and Oedipus's death occurs just as he predicted it would.



REDEMPTION AND ATONEMENT

Oedipus killed his father and married his mother, driving his mother to suicide, causing his exile, and ensuring a miserable life for his daughter and traveling companion, Antigone. And yet, Oedipus didn't knowingly commit these acts, didn't wish to commit them, and punished himself harshly by gouging out his eyes and wandering the land as an outcast and beggar.

By accepting his fate and punishment in *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus has atoned for his guilt. He is at peace in the **grove of the Furies**, the avenging spirits of Greek mythology who punished those who killed a parent or sibling—or who broke their oaths. In addition, in his blindness, he now has powers of prophecy, as well as the power to offer eternal protection to a deserving leader of a just city. *Oedipus at Colonus* shows Oedipus's final transformation from an outcast in life to a hero in death—a redemption earned through years of hardship and remorse. His miraculous death proves that the gods who brought on his awful fate feel that he has suffered enough and has earned a kind of immortality. They welcome him to the underworld so that he may at last rest in peace.



JUSTICE

After years of reflection, Oedipus realizes he was not treated fairly by the people of Thebes, by his own sons, and by Creon in particular. They took advantage of his misery and banished him forever—in his moment of greatest agony he let them, even asked them to banish him. Now, stung and angered by Creon's insults, Oedipus turns to the question of justice: "Come, tell me: if, by an oracle of the gods, some doom were hanging over my father's head that he should die at the hands of his own son, how, with any justice, could you blame *me*?" Oedipus killed a man in self-defense, not knowing that man was his father. So how, he asks, could Creon condemn such an unwitting act with any real sense of justice.

Oedipus finds the justice he was denied by his own family and city of Thebes in Theseus and Athens. At last, Oedipus has found a ruler and a people who will not torment him for things he didn't mean to do. Theseus himself makes this plain to Creon when Creon tries to kidnap Oedipus: "You have come to a city that practices justice, that sanctions nothing without law." Unlike the Thebans, who seem caught in an endless cycle of vengeance, Athens is held up as an ideal city, founded on the rule of law.



THE GROVE OF THE FURIES

The Furies were the avenging spirits of Greek mythology who punished those who broke the laws of nature or of the gods—such as killing a parent or sibling—or who broke their oaths. The fact that Oedipus is at peace in the grove that is sacred to the Furies suggests that he is no longer being persecuted for his past deeds. The grove represents Oedipus's atonement and redemption.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *The Three Theban Plays* published in 1984.

Lines 1-576 Quotes

Off and gone from the land—before you fix some greater penalty on our city.

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), Oedipus

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 250-251

Explanation and Analysis

The Chorus speaks these lines to Oedipus shortly after his arrival at Colonus, near Athens, and after he has just revealed his identity.

The tale of Oedipus's past – what takes place in *Oedipus Rex* – is a tragic one, and well-known by people from places far beyond Thebes. Thebes was the city Oedipus once ruled, but from which he was exiled after it was revealed that he had unknowingly killed his father, married his mother, and in doing so brought the wrath of the gods against Thebes. Aware of Oedipus's history, the Chorus wants to make sure that Athens is not affected by the fate which plagues Oedipus. This scene reveals a key belief about fate and guilt – that it travels with a person and can even 'infect' their surroundings and the people around them, like a virus. There's a sense that Oedipus's fate can be exchanged with others, with the inhabitants of Colonus or Athens. Oedipus has already disturbed Colonus by directly addressing the area's goddesses, the Furies – and the Chorus wants to resist acquiring any more negative effects that might stem from Oedipus's fate and guilt.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

☛ Look through all humanity: you'll never find a man on earth, if a god leads him on, who can escape his fate.

Related Characters: Oedipus (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 266-268

Explanation and Analysis

After the Chorus tells Oedipus to leave Colonus, he tries to explain how he's innocent, to a certain extent, of his past crimes, and why the inhabitants of Colonus shouldn't fear him.

The quote is one of Oedipus's pleas to the Chorus to empathize with his situation. Here, we get a subtle glimpse at how Oedipus is beginning to accept the passive nature of his role in the unfolding of his tragic fate. By appealing to the inescapable nature of fate – by describing fate as something that is fulfilled unavoidably and beyond the control of the person it involves – Oedipus reveals how he has begun to view himself as not entirely responsible for his past crimes (parricide and incest), but as simply being the tool of the gods. By appealing to "all humanity," he absolves himself of any special circumstances that would make him more in control of his fate/actions than others – and thus alleviates some of his guilt, and makes his excessive punishment seem unjust.

☛ Never honor the gods in one breath and take the gods for fools the next

Related Characters: Oedipus (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 298-299

Explanation and Analysis

Oedipus speaks these lines in response the Chorus's demand that he leave Colonus at once.

Here, Oedipus displays a degree of wisdom – wisdom gained from his tragic downfall. To honor the gods at one moment and dishonor them the next is to not fully accept the unfolding of one's fate. To fully accept fate requires a person to affirm the gods and the divine structure of fate's unraveling. Abstaining from fate involves flipping back and forth between affirming and denying the gods. By affirming his fate, Oedipus sacrifices his identity and free will (which

is propped up by denying the uncontrollable nature of fate), at the same time that he affirms his self-worth – fate uncontrollably played a role in his past actions, and so he cannot accept full responsibility for his crimes.

Lines 577-1192 Quotes

☛ Never, I tell you, I will never shrink from a stranger, lost as you are now, or fail to lend a hand to save a life. I am only a man, well I know, and I have no more power over tomorrow, Oedipus, than you.

Related Characters: Theseus (speaker), Oedipus

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 636-641

Explanation and Analysis

Theseus speaks these lines when he first enters the play and greets Oedipus.

Theseus is showing a lot of empathy for Oedipus's situation here, putting himself on equal footing with the infamous exile. He claims to "have no more power over tomorrow"--over the future unfolding of fate--than Oedipus. Further, he suggests that this powerlessness is a condition of his being "only a man." In this way, he does not merely sympathize with Oedipus out of pity, but rather empathizes with him out of a sense of being equally susceptible to tragedy and the whims of the gods--as if such susceptibility is a condition of all humanity. In the same speech as these lines, Theseus explains that he has also experienced exile and isolation in foreign lands.

In this scene, Theseus reveals the selflessness of his character, despite being a person of great importance and authority, as well as his hesitance towards judging strangers--qualities which, for him, seem to constitute the backbone of justice. He is not corrupt and motivated by personal gain, like--as we later discover--Creon and Polynices.

☛ Oh Athens, praised above any land on earth, now turn your glowing praises into action!

Related Characters: Antigone (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 818-819

Explanation and Analysis

Antigone says this in response to the Chorus's high praise of Athens as a place to live. Immediately after, Oedipus questions her about why she made this remark, but Creon enters the scene before she can answer. It's somewhat ambiguous whether Antigone genuinely believes that Athens will fit the Chorus's description (which would fit with Sophocles' consistent praise of his home city), or whether she's mocking their praise and finds it boastful--one can imagine that the trials of wandering from place to place have left her jaded. Either way, Antigone's plea brings out a distinction between thought/words and action, description and actual reality. This distinction is developed throughout the play in relation to the theme of justice: Oedipus finds Polynices unjust, because he covers up his real, political motivations with good-sounding talk about concerns for his father's well-being. Oedipus finds Theseus just, however, because he is a man of his word--he promises to protect Oedipus and reflects his words in his actions.

☝ Now, by our fathers' gods, listen to me,
hide your own disgrace, consent--
return to Thebes, the house of your fathers!

Related Characters: Creon (speaker), Oedipus

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 859-861

Explanation and Analysis

Creon, having arrived at Colonus, speaks these lines to Oedipus, demanding him to return to Thebes.

By appealing to "our fathers' gods," Creon invokes the highest of authorities. This allows him to frame Oedipus's refusal to come home as a disgrace against the gods, as a deviation from divine law. This subsequently paints Oedipus's prospective return to Thebes as a duty of fate--it makes Thebes into a home where Oedipus *belongs*, and to which he must therefore return in order to appease the gods and conform to his fate. In this way, Creon uses the concept

of fate in order to provoke guilt in Oedipus--as if the feeling of guilt could be achieved by making Oedipus think he is wrong for not returning to where he is fated to be. This is a persuasive tactic that might strike at the core of Oedipus's sense of judgment and guilt (he is perhaps history's most famous example of a victim of inevitable fate) and convince him to return to Thebes.

☝ That's precisely how your offers strike me now:
your words like honey--your actions, drawn swords.

Related Characters: Oedipus (speaker), Creon

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 890-891

Explanation and Analysis

Oedipus speaks these lines to Creon after he tries to convince Oedipus to return to Thebes. Oedipus senses cunning in Creon's invitation to return to Thebes; Creon says that he has no bad intentions, but has taken pity on Oedipus, and just wants--along with the rest of Thebes--him to return home. But Oedipus knows that there is an ulterior motive to Creon's invitation.

Here, the distinction between words and actions, truth and conceit--a distinction explored by the play in relation to the theme of justice--surfaces again. Creon's words are honey-like in the promises they make and the sense of sympathy they exude, but they cover up the reality of Creon's motivations--as well as the fact that Oedipus would not be allowed to be buried *inside* Thebes, but only on the outskirts. In this way, Creon is unjust--he does not deal with Oedipus fairly, but lies and makes false promises in order to achieve spiritual-political advantages (the benefits of possessing Oedipus's corpse) that he never discloses in his words.

☝ Given time, you'll see this well, I know:
you do yourself no good, not now, not years ago,
indulging your rage despite the pleas of loved ones--
blind rage has always been your ruin.

Related Characters: Creon (speaker), Oedipus

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 973-976

Explanation and Analysis

Creon speaks these lines to Oedipus during their ongoing dialogue about Oedipus returning to Thebes. Creon claims that "blind rage" has always been the downfall of Oedipus, a claim that covers up the fact that Oedipus played no conscious or intentional role in his downfall, and tries to pass Oedipus's tragedy off as a necessary result of his personality. Creon's claim does not acknowledge the passive and unintentional aspect of Oedipus's involvement in his ruin--the fact that Oedipus unwittingly killed his father out of self-defense, and was unaware that his wife was his mother. (Of course, hubris and this "blind rage" was certainly an aspect of Oedipus's fate, but certainly not the sole reason for such a horrific outcome.)

"Blind rage" also plays on Oedipus' literal blindness--not only the fact that he has no eyes, but also that he led the very investigation that, unknowingly, would be responsible for his ruin.

☛ You have come to a city that practices justice, that sanctions nothing without law, but you, you flout our authorities, make your inroads, seize your prizes, commandeer at will! Tell me, did you imagine Athens stripped of men, peopled by slaves? Myself worth nothing?

Related Characters: Theseus (speaker), Creon

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 1040-1045

Explanation and Analysis

Theseus speaks these lines after he has encountered Creon, who has stated his purpose for being in Colonus: to take Oedipus back to Thebes.

Theseus is shocked by Creon's brashness and sense of self-righteous authority, and here we see the justice of Theseus clash with Creon's injustice. Creon assumes he has the right to mete out his own laws and pursue Theban interests in a foreign land; he assumes that Athens is a space where his own political interests can go unchecked. In this, he implicitly devalues, from the moment he arrives at Colonus, the entire government and rule of Athens. This infuriates Theseus, who is taken aback by Creon's unruly commandeering.

Though Creon previously accused Oedipus of having "blind rage," Theseus points out, in this scene, that Creon is the one possessed by blind rage. Without any regard for Athenian governance--blind to Athenian rule and order--he enacts his own anger within a territory in which he is a total stranger.

Theseus reveals Creon's sense of justice as bogus and flimsy--a 'justice' constantly improvised in order to fulfill his own agendas, to right his previous wrongs without taking ownership of them. Having wronged Oedipus, and needing the benefits of Oedipus's corpse, Creon tries to fix the situation by making Oedipus feel he is in the wrong--by making Oedipus feel guilty for not returning to Thebes. Creon's only sense of remorse is the fact that Oedipus is now refusing to conform to his plan, a plan supported by his cunningly engineered form of 'justice.'

☛ My isolation leaves me weak, however just my cause. But opposing you, old as I am, I'll stop at nothing, match you blow for blow. A man's anger can never age and fade away, not until he dies. The dead alone feel no pain.

Related Characters: Creon (speaker), Theseus

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 1089-1094

Explanation and Analysis

Creon speaks these lines upon encountering Theseus, who opposes Creon's plan to take Oedipus back to Thebes.

Creon's extreme confidence in his ability and in the justness of his cause is befitting of his bold, rash, and reckless character--he will not step back and see the injustice in his mistreatment of Oedipus.

Creon also comments on death in a way that parallels the Chorus's later evaluation of death as the end of suffering and pain. Creon claims that anger--a reaction to pain--can never fade, implying a view similar to the Chorus's thinking about pain: it just keeps accumulating throughout life and cannot be stopped.

☛ And if,
once I'd come to the world of pain, as come I did,
I fell to blows with my father, cut him down in blood—
blind to what I was doing, blind to whom I killed—
how could you condemn that involuntary act
with any sense of justice?

Related Characters: Oedipus (speaker), Creon

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 1112-1117

Explanation and Analysis

Oedipus speaks these lines to Creon, who has implied that Oedipus willfully killed his father.

Here, we see Oedipus assert confidence in defending his past actions--we see that Oedipus' view about his responsibility for his crimes has evolved since *Oedipus Rex*. He acknowledges the full extent of his innocence in the parricide (the killing of one's father)--that the murder was justified with regard to self-defense, as well as the fact that its turning out to be parricidal was something out of his control.

Further, the ironic word-play on Oedipus's blindness continues in these lines. Blindness, here, connotes an innocent sense of ignorance and involuntariness--'ignorance' not in the sense of a willful evasion of the truth, but rather a total lack of being able to know the truth, to know beforehand that it was his father whom Oedipus killed. This understanding of ignorance propels Oedipus's confident questioning of Creon's condemnation. For Oedipus, Creon's sense of justice is twisted--all that matters for him is the bare fact that Oedipus committed parricide; Creon refuses to acknowledge the true complexity of the circumstances. He is incapable of empathizing with Oedipus as intensely as Theseus is.

☛ So now I cry to those Great Goddesses,
I beg them, I storm them with my prayers—
Come to the rescue, fight for me, my champions!
So you can learn your lesson, Creon, learn
what breed of men stands guard around this city.

Related Characters: Oedipus (speaker), Creon

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 1155-1159

Explanation and Analysis

Oedipus speaks these lines shortly after Creon has seized Antigone (Ismene has already been seized). Here, Oedipus appeals to those "Great Goddesses"--likely referring to the Furies he directly addressed upon arriving at the Grove of the Furies in Colonus--and asks them to support him in opposing Creon.

Oedipus equates the "lesson" he wants Creon to learn with comprehending "what breed of men stands guard around this city." This "breed," represented by someone such as Theseus, stands for and upholds a sense of justice that, for Oedipus, is much more virtuous than Creon's (and that Sophocles clearly intends to praise and valorize, as he himself is a citizen of Colonus and Athens). If Creon could come to understand this sense of justice, then his entire project--his corrupt way of trying to manipulate Oedipus into returning to Thebes--would lose its value, since his entire mission is based on self-interest and the gaining of power. Unlike Theseus, Creon gives no regard for whether Oedipus is treated justly or not.

Lines 1193-1645 Quotes

☛ Like a seer I sense the glory in these struggles—
Rush me, wing me into the whirlwind, O dear god,
like a dove at the thunderheads of heaven I'd look down
I'd scan these struggles, I would see their glory.

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), Theseus

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 1226-1229

Explanation and Analysis

The Chorus speaks these lines after Creon escorts Theseus to the site where Antigone and Ismene are being held.

Here, the Chorus describes its desire to observe the microscopic level of human struggles--between Oedipus, Theseus, and Creon--from a divinely aerial perspective, from a macroscopic view that might allow them to witness the very unfolding of human fate. In witnessing the structure to the divine unfolding of those struggles, the Chorus "would see their glory." There's a sense that there's something glorious about the very nature of human affairs--the way they are structured and how they proceed. Though the Chorus envisions the Athenians winning the struggle,

this glory also seems to be something not entirely attributable to one side of the struggle, but to the struggle as a whole--as if the struggle was itself the product of a divine configuration of fate.

☞ May the gods reward you just as I desire,
you and your great country. Here among you,
you alone of all mankind—
I have discovered reverence, humanity
and lips that never lie.

Related Characters: Oedipus (speaker), Theseus

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 1275-1279

Explanation and Analysis

Oedipus speaks these lines to Theseus, after Ismene and Antigone have been rescued.

When everyone but his daughters have deserted or cheated him, Oedipus finds he can trust Theseus. Theseus's empathy and levelheadedness in dealing with the plight of Oedipus show a restraint and concern for justice that is uncharacteristic of Creon and Polynices. Oedipus finally encounters someone with a selflessness that stems from a higher principle--justice--as opposed to the self-interested and power-hungry men of Thebes. Oedipus and Theseus are therefore beginning to form a very close bond--and Oedipus wants the boon of his death to reward his new friend.

☞ And how the fight was won—
why fill the air with empty boasting?

Related Characters: Theseus (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 1303-1304

Explanation and Analysis

Theseus speaks these lines in response to Oedipus, who, after having Antigone and Ismene returned to him, asks Theseus how went the battle to rescue them from Creon's men.

Theseus's response demonstrates his commitment to the

actions required for the promotion and maintenance of justice, and his disregard for any superficial banter that only *describes* justice, but doesn't act to implement it (and furthers Sophocles' portrayal of him as an idealized, almost unrealistically-just ruler). The fight has been won--and that's all the needs to be said in order to to communicate this particular instance of justice. The outcome of any pursuit for justice is the most important information; any description of the process of attaining justice risks being "empty boasting," a social triviality that has nothing to do with any actual efforts to preserve justice.

☞ It isn't good for men with a decent cause
to beg too long, or a man to receive help,
then fail to treat a fellow victim kindly.

Related Characters: Antigone (speaker), Oedipus

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 1366-1368

Explanation and Analysis

Antigone speaks these lines to Oedipus after he (initially) refuses to speak with Polynices.

Antigone believes that Oedipus should give Polynices a chance; considering that Oedipus just received help (having his daughters returned) from Theseus, Antigone feels that Oedipus should heed Polynices' request. In this way, Antigone likens Polynices to a potential victim whom Oedipus might help by speaking with him. Even though Polynices has wronged his father, Antigone seems to think that ignoring him would be an act of injustice by Oedipus; permitting Polynices to speak and have a chance to atone for his wrongdoing would be an act of justice. Further, Antigone reiterates here the logic of Oedipus's former claim to "never honor the gods in one breath / and take the gods for fools the next." To fully honor the justice of Theseus's actions, she feels, would be to honor Polynices' request to speak--this would affirm justice by paying Theseus's help forward.

☞ Show me a man who longs to live a day beyond his time
who turns his back on a decent length of life,
I'll show the world a man who clings to folly.

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker)

Related Themes: **Page Number:** 1378-1380**Explanation and Analysis**

The Chorus speaks these lines shortly before Polynices arrives and speaks with Oedipus.

In this pessimistic speech, the Chorus denounces any person who would desire to live longer than the average life span (or the life span he or she's fated to have), thinking such a person to be foolish. To desire to live longer than a "decent length of life," for the Chorus, must mean that one is out of touch with the reality of life's never-ceasing pain. To not feel the constant pelting and accumulation of pain, to not recognize how age constantly strips humans of what little unspoiled joy remains--this person "clings to folly," and lacks the sensibility to recognize life for what it truly is.

☞ Not to be born is best when all is reckoned in, but once a man has seen the light the next best thing, by far, is to go back back where he came from, quickly as he can.

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker)**Related Themes:** **Page Number:** 1388-1391**Explanation and Analysis**

The Chorus speaks this lines shortly before Polynices arrives and speaks with Oedipus.

Evolving the pessimism of the previous quote, these lines reinforce the Chorus's total distaste for life--their sense that life is a joyless succession of pain that is better avoided altogether. The best thing, they say, is to simply not be born at all; however, if one does have the misfortune of being born, then the next best thing is to realize how painful life truly is and return to the void of lifelessness--to die--as quickly as possible. This theme is repeated elsewhere in Greek literature, and is generally considered the "wisdom of Silenus" (Silenus was a companion to the god Dionysus): "It is best not to be born at all; and next to that, it is better to die than to live." Thus to "see the light" in life is not to recognize the good in it, but to realize how the world ultimately lacks the kind of goodness humans desire in order to bear their lives.

☞ *You—die!*
Die and be damned!

I spit on you! Out!—
your father cuts you off! Corruption—scum of the earth!—
out!—and pack these curses I call down upon your head:
never to win you mother-country with your spear,
never return to Argos ringed with hills—
Die!
Die by your own blood brother's hand—die!—
killing the very man who drove you out!
So I curse your life out!

Related Characters: Oedipus (speaker), Polynices**Related Themes:**   **Page Number:** 1567-1574**Explanation and Analysis**

Oedipus speaks these lines in reply to Polynices' request that Oedipus favor his army in the war against Eteocles (Oedipus's second son and Polynices' brother), who has ousted Polynices from Thebes and taken the throne.

Polynices has failed to be loyal to his father; in the past, he abandoned Oedipus by exiling him, yet now Polynices is in dire need of his father's help. Polynices has only sought his father out for his own political gains, since having Oedipus's favor is prophesied to guarantee military victory. This political motivation repulses Oedipus, who refuses to grant Polynices' wish. Oedipus's hatred of Polynices does not budge, and he doesn't sympathize with his son's plea for a second.

Here, we witness a radical severing of the familial bond. The father-son relationship has entirely eroded, as Oedipus curses his son and condemns him to death, instead of forgiving him. Oedipus inflicts a severe form of "tough love" on Polynices, invoking a primeval justice that will teach Polynices to never again commit such a wrong as exiling one's own father (perhaps in an ironic comparison to Oedipus's murder of his own father). But Polynices will never be able to apply this lesson--he is to die in battle with his brother, and his attempt to reclaim Thebes will fail.

Oedipus therefore enacts his newly-evolved sense of justice--that words should match one's actions. The sympathy Polynices requests of Oedipus does not match the brashness with which he formerly exiled Oedipus.

☞ Goodbye, dear ones.
You'll never look on me again, alive.

Related Characters: Polynices (speaker), Antigone, Ismene

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 1631-1632

Explanation and Analysis

Polynices speaks these lines to Antigone and Ismene after he is condemned by Oedipus.

Polynices accepts Oedipus's curse--that he will die in battle at the hands of his brother. He has no doubt that the curse will come true. Here, we see the real power of prophecy--Polynices has total faith in Oedipus's words, and entirely changes how he thinks about the future. From now on, he will not go into battle with any hope of winning. Polynices has begun to directly live towards his death, and his death alone--there is nothing for him to do or hope for, except to regret the way he has treated his father in the past.

protection upon Athens, so he asks Theseus to remember his death as the source of Athens' prosperity. That Oedipus equates himself with death: "me, the dead," shows how he is identifying with the very act of his death--it is at once the alleviation of his suffering, yet the very source of his power. He was to be remembered as his death, for, in dying, his divine power, his fateful blessing, is released (a blessing that Sophocles patriotically emphasizes as making Athens full of "greatness.")

Fate and the power of the gods have led Oedipus to this secret deathbed on their own, as he did not require assistance from his daughters or Theseus in arriving at it. This shows that the gods are on Oedipus's side now--he has suffered enough for his fate, and now is allowed to die in peace.

☞☞ God of eternal sleep, I call to you,
let Oedipus rest forever.

Lines 1646-2001 Quotes

☞☞ Dearest friend,
you and your country and your loyal followers,
may you be blessed with greatness,
and in your great day remember me, the dead,
the root of all your greatness, everlasting, ever-new.

Related Characters: Oedipus (speaker), Theseus

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 1761-1765

Explanation and Analysis

Oedipus speaks these lines to Theseus shortly before he dies. Theseus has very quickly become Oedipus's best of friends. He has deeply empathized with Oedipus's situation and defended him and his daughters against Creon. Now, as a final goodbye, Oedipus bestows his blessing upon Theseus and Athens. Dying, he will confer a magical power of

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), Oedipus

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 1788-1789

Explanation and Analysis

Wishing Oedipus an eternally undisturbed death, the Chorus speaks these lines shortly before Oedipus' death.

Oedipus has lived an incredibly tragic, unfortunate and unlucky life--death will at once bring an end to all of that as well as unleash Oedipus' divine power: the boon to be bestowed on Athens. As long as Oedipus remains at rest, this boon will serve Athens. The Chorus's wish, then, is at once a wish for Oedipus' suffering to subside, as well as a desire to tap into Oedipus' divine boon. Oedipus almost *becomes* his death; for Athenians, the memory of Oedipus will be a memory of his death--for, at the point of his death, Oedipus gains his greatest identity. At death, Oedipus at once atones for his crimes and acquires his greatest power.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

LINES 1-576

It is several years after Oedipus was banished from Thebes, the city he once ruled. The play begins in the **grove of the Furies** at Colonus, which is close to and ruled by the great city of Athens. Oedipus is now a sorry sight, blind and hobbled, dressed in rags, led by his daughter Antigone.

Oedipus tells Antigone that acceptance is the lesson taught by his suffering. He then asks Antigone to find a place for them to rest, and wonders where they are. Antigone recognizes Athens in the distance, though she doesn't recognize their precise location. But from the landscape she believes they are on holy ground. They decide to rest.

A citizen of Colonus approaches and demands that they move from their resting place, because it is holy ground, **the grove of the Furies**. Oedipus responds that this is a sign and that in fact he must not move from this place, which will be his refuge. He asks the citizen to send for the king, Theseus, and promises that if Theseus does Oedipus a small service, great good will come of it. The citizen leaves. Oedipus prays to the Furies. In his prayer, he says that, in the same prophecy in which the god Apollo foretold Oedipus's terrible fate, the god also spoke of the grove of the Furies as a place where Oedipus could rest, and where the last chapter of Oedipus's life would take place.

More citizens (the chorus) come looking for the stranger who has dared to set foot on the sacred ground of the terrible Furies. When Oedipus speaks to them, they tell him he must step out of the **grove of the Furies**. He does, with Antigone's help, and sits on a rocky area just outside the grove. The chorus ask his name and background. Reluctantly, Oedipus identifies himself. Upon hearing his name, the chorus shrinks back in terror and commands him to leave before he brings ruin to their city.

Antigone appeals to the citizens' pity and humanity. Oedipus says they should not drive him out just because of his name. He admits that his acts caused terrible suffering, but says that he committed them unknowingly. He appeals to the honor of Athens as a just city and a protector of the weak. Moved by his speech, the chorus agrees to let the king of Athens decide what should be done.

The oracle in Oedipus Rex demanded that Oedipus be punished for killing his father and marrying his mother. Now a blind old man in rags who needs his daughter to guide him, Oedipus has been punished for his misdeeds.



Oedipus's remarks about acceptance suggest that his suffering has made him a wiser man than he was as the headstrong leader in Oedipus Rex. In his past, he tried to fight the fate ordered for him by the gods. Now he accepts his suffering and his fate.



The Furies were avenging spirits of Greek mythology who punished those, like Oedipus, who broke natural law, such as by committing incest or killing a parent. That this grove is prophesied to be Oedipus's final resting place suggests that through suffering—blindness and banishment—Oedipus has atoned for his actions and has been granted redemption by the Furies and the gods. Also, notice how Oedipus now pays strict attention to the prophecy, rather than trying to fight it.



This scene suggests that Oedipus's fame—or rather, his infamy—was widespread even in his own time. Everywhere he went, he could not escape his outcast status. The citizens of Colonus react to him as a cursed man whose presence may bring misfortune to them if they harbor or help him.



Oedipus's acceptance of his fate seems to have lessened his guilt—he realizes now that he never had a role in determining his actions or his fate. Sophocles's Athenian audience would have appreciated Oedipus's appeal to the reputation of Athens as a place of justice.



A rider approaches—it is Ismene, Oedipus's other daughter. Oedipus, Antigone, and Ismene have a heartfelt reunion, and then Ismene delivers her news: Oedipus's two sons are engaged in a power struggle for control of Thebes. The younger son, Eteocles, seized the throne from and exiled the elder son, Polynices. Polynices fled to Argos and now is raising an army to attack Thebes, where Eteocles and Creon rule jointly.

Ismene then tells Oedipus the latest prophecies from the oracle: the men of Thebes, who cast Oedipus out, will soon try to bring him back. According to the oracle, Oedipus's presence just outside a city would protect that city. So the Thebans will want him to settle near Thebes, but not within the city itself. Oedipus asks whether the Thebans would give him a proper Theban burial after he died. Ismene reports that because Oedipus killed his own father, they would not. Ismene then adds that Oedipus's sons already know of the prophecy.

Oedipus is furious, and promises never to return to Thebes. He vents his rage against his sons, who never tried to rescue him, bring him back, or protect him after his downfall. He praises his two daughters for their devotion to him, but says he will never help his sons. He tells the chorus that if they help defend him against the men from Thebes who will try to take him away, they will gain a savior for their land.

The leader of the chorus is moved by Oedipus's request. He tells Oedipus the ritual that must be performed to appease the Furies, whose sacred ground Oedipus has stepped on and violated. Ismene exits to visit a nearby spring and perform the proper rituals.

LINES 577-1192

The chorus surrounds Oedipus and presses him to hear the true story of his suffering. Oedipus doesn't want to talk about it, but the chorus has only heard rumors about Oedipus and wants to hear his story from his own lips. Oedipus reluctantly and painfully tells them that his daughters are also his sisters, that he married his mother and killed his father. But he defends his actions: he killed in self-defense, without knowing who his father was, and he likewise did not know his wife was also his mother.

Oedipus's daughters are faithful and loving. But his sons rejected their father after his banishment and are now fighting each other for control of Thebes. The sons's actions are also violations of natural law, and Oedipus himself is proof that such actions are punished by the gods.



By accepting and enduring his punishment, Oedipus seems to have earned more than just forgiveness for his terrible actions—his presence has now become a powerful blessing that can safeguard Thebes. Though Creon and Eteocles are eager to exploit Oedipus's newfound power, they still would refuse to accept him as a Theban citizen after his death.



The rage Oedipus displays here resembles the rage he showed as a younger man in Oedipus Rex. Yet his rage now is justified because it is directed at those who have legitimately wronged him. In Oedipus Rex, he raged at the innocent and at the gods.



Oedipus again displays his obedience to the gods by having Ismene perform the rites to appease the Furies. He doesn't fear other people and may rage at them, but he does fear the gods.



In Oedipus Rex, Oedipus is his own harshest critic—he gouged out his eyes to punish himself for his crimes. Now, time has passed and Oedipus has accepted that his misdeeds resulted from fate, not from actions he committed knowingly. Since he did not know he was committing these crimes, he no longer feels guilty.



Theseus, king of Athens, arrives. He knows Oedipus's story and asks kindly why Oedipus has come. Oedipus thanks Theseus for not asking him to tell his story once again, and then says he comes bearing a gift. If Theseus agrees to let him be buried at Colonus, Oedipus will fulfill a prophecy and protect Athens. Theseus agrees.

Oedipus warns Theseus that he will have to defend Oedipus against the Thebans, who will try to capture him. Theseus wonders why Oedipus does not want to return to his home of Thebes if they apparently want him to return so badly. In response, Oedipus describes his harsh exile and explains how quickly bonds of love can fail and nations can turn from friends to enemies. Oedipus finishes by saying that only the gods can be trusted, and they have promised to protect the city that hosts his grave.

Theseus welcomes Oedipus to live in Athens or to remain at Colonus. Theseus then guarantees that he will protect Oedipus and that no one will be allowed take Oedipus away against his will. Theseus exits.

The chorus gathers around Oedipus and chants in praise of his new home, the city of Athens, and of Colonus in particular. The chant specifies some of the appealing aspects of Athens, such as its horses and natural beauty, and mentions the favor that the gods (especially Poseidon) have bestowed upon it.

Just then, Antigone gives an alarm that Creon is approaching. Creon enters and says he has come not with force but to persuade Oedipus to come home. He says he has grieved for Oedipus as much as any other man and asks him to return to Thebes.

Oedipus responds with an impassioned angry speech. According to Oedipus, Creon would not exile him when he first wanted exile, and then when Oedipus changed his mind and decided he wanted to live out his days at home, Creon banished him from Thebes. Now, when Oedipus is finally settled and welcome in Athens, Creon comes to take him away again—but not into Thebes, but just to its border, and not out of love, but to keep Thebes safe from Athens. He tells Creon to leave.

Theseus is an ideal leader, a wise, brave, and just protector of the weak. Notice the contrast: he agrees to let Oedipus be buried in Colonus, a part of Athens, while the Thebans would only bury Oedipus outside the city.



Oedipus knows all too well that things can change very quickly. One day he was the powerful king of Thebes, the next he was a blind homeless outcast. The Thebans want to exploit him, not accept him as one of their own. Oedipus's advice to trust the gods, rather than other men or nations, is the wisdom he gained from his suffering.



By welcoming Oedipus, Theseus upholds Athens's reputation as a just protector of the weak. Oedipus is no longer in exile, no longer a man without a home.



Sophocles was Athenian, and Oedipus at Colonus was performed in Athens. The Athenian audience would have enjoyed this lyrical bit of patriotism.

Creon is lying. As Ismene has already told Oedipus, the Thebans want to use Oedipus to protect their city. They did not grieve for him, will not fully welcome him back, or honor him in death.



Oedipus's rage surfaces again. Yet as with his rage at the Thebans earlier, his anger is justified. He accepts that fate and the gods might be unfair, but he does not have to accept the injustice imposed on him by other people.



Creon responds that Oedipus is a disgrace to old age. He orders his guards to take Oedipus's two daughters away, toward Thebes. As the guards seize Antigone and Ismene, the chorus condemns this action but is unable to stop them. When Creon tries to leave, however, the chorus blocks his way. His anger grows and he threatens now to take Oedipus away by force, as well. He grabs Oedipus. The chorus calls for help.

Creon implies that Oedipus is just as unreasonable now as he was as king, before his misfortunes. In Creon's view, experience and suffering haven't given Oedipus wisdom in his old age. Yet it appears to be Creon who now fails to make the distinction between accepting the will of the gods and the will of other people.



Theseus arrives with an armed escort. He demands to know why he has been summoned with such urgency. Oedipus explains what happened. Theseus immediately sends soldiers to rouse his troops and chase after the kidnapers.

Theseus acts quickly and decisively, and upholds his oath to protect Oedipus. Theseus has truly welcomed Oedipus as a fellow Athenian.



Theseus refuses to let Creon leave until the girls are returned safely. He says that Creon has shamed Thebes with his violent actions. He adds that Thebes has laws, like Athens, and wouldn't condone Creon's kidnapping of the girls. Finally, Theseus says that he would never presume to go to Thebes and take someone without permission of the Theban king.

Theseus draws a distinction between acting justly, according to laws, and using to force to take what you want. He not only denounces Creon's actions as illegal, but connects that illegality to shame and guilt.



Creon doesn't back down. He says that he didn't expect the people of Athens to protect a father-killing, incestuous exile like Oedipus because it would be wrong to do so. For that reason, he decided to take Oedipus by force. Creon admits that he is in a weak position, but says he will oppose Theseus as long as he can, because, although he is old, his anger "can never age and fade away."

Creon thinks Oedipus can never atone for his sins. But by taking this position, Creon denies the will of the gods. Only they can decide who has or has not atoned.



Oedipus lets loose another forceful speech against Creon and in defense of himself—his own terrible deeds were done unknowingly, without intent to harm. He praises Athens and calls on the Furies to fight for his cause.

No longer guilty for violating natural law, Oedipus now feels so certain that he is the wronged party that he calls on the Furies to avenge him.



Theseus orders Creon to take him to where Oedipus's daughters are being held. Creon submits, but remains defiant—things will be different, he says, when he's back in Thebes and can raise troops. Theseus promises to return the children safely to Oedipus, for which Oedipus blesses him. Theseus, his guard, and Creon exit.

Creon doesn't back down, even when he's surrounded and on foreign soil. And he still insists on the power of force over law. This stubbornness is his undoing in Sophocles's play Antigone.



LINES 1193-1645

The chorus imagines a battle between Theseus and his men and Creon's guards, who took Antigone and Ismene. They foresee Theseus and his men winning a glorious victory. The chorus offers a prayer to the gods Zeus, Athena, Apollo, and Artemis, to bring victory.

As usual in Greek drama, the action takes place offstage. Sophocles uses the device of having the chorus "imagine" what the battle looks like, which helps the audience do the same.



Theseus returns with his attendants, escorting Antigone and Ismene. Overjoyed and relieved to see his daughters, Oedipus thanks Theseus profusely and asks what happened. Theseus responds that he has kept his promise to Oedipus but doesn't want to boast about the battle, because he would rather win fame through deeds rather than words.

Theseus then reports that a man claiming to be related to Oedipus but now living in Argos has come to ask for help Poseidon's altar. He adds that the man has now requested a brief audience with Oedipus. Oedipus realizes that the man must be his son, Polynices.

Oedipus doesn't want to see his son, but Antigone and Theseus argue that there's no harm in listening. Oedipus agrees to see Polynices, and Theseus exits.

The chorus surrounds Oedipus and chants about the miseries of life and the certainty of death. The chorus says that the luckiest man is one who has never been born, and of those that are born the luckiest are those with short lives. Once a person leaves youth behind, the chorus continues, life is full of pain, envy, and loneliness.

Antigone says a man is approaching, alone, in tears. Polynices enters. He is miserable, and weeps at the pitiable state in which he finds his father and his family. He calls himself "the worst man alive" for not coming to the aid of his exiled father and asks for mercy. Oedipus does not respond. Polynices turns to Antigone and Ismene for help. Antigone tells him to tell their father why he has come.

Polynices says his younger brother, Eteocles, seized power in Thebes by bribing people, and then banished Polynices. Polynices fled to Argos, where he married, made connections, and raised an army. This army is now poised to attack Thebes. Polynices asks his father to let go of his rage toward him and to support his cause. He adds that the oracles have claimed that whatever side Oedipus supports will win.

Polynices says that he is a beggar and an exile, like Oedipus, while Eteocles is a tyrant. Polynices finishes by promising that with Oedipus's support, he will defeat Eteocles, regain the throne, and bring Oedipus home to live in his own house. Oedipus refuses to respond, but the chorus prods him to speak.

Theseus has kept his oath to Oedipus. Theseus's refusal to boast is further proof that he is a good king. Theseus's humility stands in stark contrast to Creon's earlier boasting about his military power.



A major change has occurred in Oedipus's status. In addition to Creon, Polynices is the second person who has now traveled great distances in an attempt to win his favor



Oedipus has hardened his heart against his sons for not helping him in his exile and poverty.



The chorus's statement suggests that it's better not to be born than to suffer at the whims of gods and fate, as Oedipus has. Its observation that the best lives are short ones highlights the horrors of old age.



Polynices does seem genuinely sorry for his past actions, as his description of himself shows. Though Oedipus seems to have hardened his heart against Polynices, Antigone still has a sisterly affection for her eldest brother.



Polynices feels sorry for himself for losing the throne of Thebes to his younger brother. Attacking his home city at the head of a foreign army, however, is a drastic response. Oedipus's role here is like that of the Furies—he gets to choose who is punished and who is not.



Polynices makes an unfortunate comparison between himself and his father. While he has married well and made alliances in Argos, his father suffered blindness and banishment.



Oedipus unleashes a flood of insults and curses at Polynices. Oedipus says that he is glad that Polynices is an exile, since Polynices helped drive Oedipus when he in power in Thebes. Oedipus promises that Thebes will not fall to Argos, and that Polynices and Eteocles will both kill each other in the battle. Oedipus tells Polynices to leave with these curses and the assurance of his doom still ringing in his ears.

Before he goes, Polynices asks his sisters to give him a proper burial if Oedipus's curses come true. Antigone begs Polynices to call off the attack on Thebes. Polynices refuses—he has been humiliated by his younger brother, and his honor compels him to fight. He says he won't report Oedipus's prophecies to his men, and the attack will go on. He and Antigone share a mournful farewell. She begs him again not to go, but his mind is made up. He prays that Zeus bring her happiness as long as she fulfills her promise to give him a proper burial. He then leaves for Thebes, certain he is heading toward his own doom.

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Thunder crashes, terrifying the chorus. Oedipus, sensing his imminent death, asks for someone to bring Theseus. The thunder sounds again and the chorus cries out in terror. As the thunder and lightning continue, Oedipus tells his children that his end has come and he may die at any minute.

The chorus calls for Theseus to come quickly. When the king arrives, Oedipus says that he wants to fulfill the pledge he made to Theseus. Theseus asks what he needs to do. Oedipus responds that he will lead Theseus to the place where Oedipus will die. Only Theseus will know where it is, and he must never reveal the secret for as long as he lives. Upon his deathbed, the Theseus and each of his descendants may pass along the secret of Oedipus's grave site. If this is done, the presence of Oedipus's burial place near Athens will bless and defend the city.

Oedipus rises to his feet on his own power and motions for his children to follow him. Without their aid, the blind man moves toward his final resting place. His daughters, Theseus, and Theseus's attendants exit with him.

The chorus remains onstage. It gathers at an altar and prays to the gods of the dead, to the Furies, to the gatekeeper of Hades, to make Oedipus's passage to the underworld an easy one, and to let him rest at last.

Oedipus's suffering has made him powerful and prophetic. And like the gods, Oedipus shows no mercy. Just as he was punished for committing actions he regretted and could not control, he now sentences Polynices to be punished, even though Polynices clearly regrets what he has done.



Polynices seems to accept that Oedipus's prophecy will come true. His stubbornness ensures that this prophecy will come true, just Oedipus's own stubbornness led to his downfall in Oedipus Rex. Fate doesn't just happen to Sophocles's characters, it works through them, using their own traits against them. Antigone's promise to bury Polynices sets the stage for the conflicts in Sophocles's Antigone.



The thunder signals that the gods themselves are involved in Oedipus's fate. Oedipus has become like a prophet—he knows the hour of his death and what he must do when that time comes.



The powerful Theseus has recognized the importance of Oedipus as a protector of Athens. Theseus has been good to his word in his dealings with Oedipus, so Oedipus trusts Theseus to keep the secret of his burial place. A closeness seems to have developed between the two men—it is Theseus, after all, who will be with Oedipus in his final moments.



Oedipus is inspired with new strength and stamina, as well as an ability to sense where he is going, despite his blindness. These changes show that he is now favored by the gods.



Oedipus is no longer a cursed man to be feared, but a man whose suffering has earned him a peaceful eternal rest.



A messenger enters with the news that Oedipus is dead. He gives an account of what happened. The whole party followed Oedipus down a steep descent to a place where Oedipus stopped. His daughters then bathed him in spring water and dressed him in linen. Thunder boomed, and Oedipus embraced his weeping daughters and told them of his boundless love for them. Then the voice of a god cried out from the sky that it was time for Oedipus to fulfill his task.

Oedipus asked Theseus to swear to watch over his daughters. Theseus pledged to do so. Oedipus then gave a final blessing to his children and told them and everyone besides Theseus to go. The party moved away, and when they looked back, Oedipus had vanished and Theseus stood covering his eyes as if he'd seen something terrible and amazing. Then Theseus knelt and prayed to the gods.

As the messenger stops speaking, Antigone and Ismene enter, chanting a funereal dirge. Answering questions from the chorus, Antigone confirms the miraculous nature of Oedipus's death. Overcome by grief, Antigone says that now, without their father, she does not know where she and her sister will go, or to whom they can turn.

Theseus enters and tells the daughters to dry their tears, since to grieve too much after Oedipus received such a blessing might anger the gods. Antigone begs to see her father's tomb, but Theseus says he cannot allow it, citing his oath to Oedipus to keep the location secret. Antigone accepts his decision and ceases her grieving, but asks that she and her sister be sent back to Thebes to try to prevent the war between their brothers. Theseus agrees to do this and to help in whatever way he can. The chorus tells the daughters not to weep any more, for everything has been set right.

The prayers of the chorus appear to have been answered—the gods were personally monitoring the rituals of Oedipus's death, moving the process along. Oedipus is depicted as being at peace with his death—he does not fight it, he accepts it. He has been granted a peaceful death with his daughters at his side.



It's common for dramatic events to happen offstage in Greek theater and then be reported onstage by a messenger. But in this case, whatever happened was so awesome that even the messenger wasn't allowed to see it. Oedipus's death is a kind of supernatural miracle.



Antigone has supported and advised her father up until now. In her grieving, Antigone reveals her forceful and passionate personality. She and Ismene are now orphans without a home.



Oedipus's transformation into a heroic protector of Athens is now complete. Antigone accepts Theseus's refusal because she knows it follows her father's wishes, and because she, too, has learned to obey the gods. In Sophocles's Antigone, which takes place after Antigone has returned to Thebes, she does not accept Creon's refusal when it goes against her promise to bury Polynices, because she knows that breaking an oath is an offense to the gods.





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