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978-1-107-42910-9 - The Oedipus Coloneus of Sophocles: With a Commentary,  
Abridged from the Large Edition of Sir Richard C. Jebb

E. S. Shuckburgh

Frontmatter

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OF  
SIR RICHARD C. JEBB

BY  
E. S. SHUCKBURGH

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

## PREFACE.

SIR Richard Jebb observed in his preface to the large edition of the Play that “The *Oedipus Coloneus* has its share of textual problems; but, for the modern student, it is more especially a play which demands exegesis.” In making my selection from the notes in that edition I have kept this in mind. I have retained discussions on the text when they seemed to be absolutely necessary or to involve important points, whether in Grammar or in the development of the Fable: but I have made it my chief aim to omit nothing which would help the student to realise the scene presented in the play, the coherence and artistic purpose of the plot, or the poet’s conception of the dramatic situation and moral standpoint of the characters. For fuller discussion on textual difficulties and controverted interpretation, the advanced student must still go to the larger edition and translation. The work as it now stands is almost wholly Sir Richard Jebb’s, though not the whole that he has done for the play. I have in some few instances made obvious corrections, and added a few illustrations, but I have little more credit to claim for the work than that of an arranger and epitomator.

E. S. SHUCKBURGH.

J. C.

*b*

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E. S. Shuckburgh

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## CONTENTS.

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION . . . . .	vii
MANUSCRIPTS, EDITIONS, AND COMMENTARIES . . . . .	xxxiv
METRICAL ANALYSIS . . . . .	xxxviii
DRAMATIS PERSONAE; STRUCTURE . . . . .	1
TEXT . . . . .	I
NOTES . . . . .	65
GREEK INDEX . . . . .	283
GRAMMATICAL INDEX . . . . .	295
MAPS :	
I. Map to illustrate Note on vv. 1059 ff. . . . .	279
II. Colonus and its neighbourhood, with some of its ancient roads . . . . .	281

Cambridge University Press

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Abridged from the Large Edition of Sir Richard C. Jebb

E. S. Shuckburgh

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION.

§ 1. At the close of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* the situation is briefly this. By the fact of the guilt which has been brought home to him Oedipus is tacitly considered to have forfeited the throne. His two sons being still young boys, their maternal uncle, Creon, succeeds to the direction of affairs. The self-blinded Oedipus, in his first agony of horror and despair, beseeches Creon to send him away from Thebes. Let him no longer pollute it by his presence: let him perish in the wilds of Cithaeron, as his parents would have had it. Creon replies that he cannot assume the responsibility of acceding to the wish of Oedipus: the oracle at Delphi must be consulted. If Apollo says that Oedipus is to be sent away from Thebes, then it shall be done.

Sophocles supposes a long interval—some twenty years, perhaps—between the two dramas of which Oedipus is the hero. As the exile himself says, ‘Tis little to uplift old age, when youth was ruined.’ We have to make out the events of this interval, as best we can, from stray hints in the *Coloneus*<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The Greek title of the play is *Oιδίπους ἐπὶ Κολωνῶν*,—the prep. meaning ‘at,’ as in such phrases as *ἐπ’ ἐσχάτῃ* (*Od.* 7. 160), *ἐπὶ θύραις*, etc. It is cited by the authors of the Greek Arguments as *ὁ ἐπὶ Κολωνῶν Οιδίπους*. The earlier play was doubtless called simply *Oιδίπους* by Sophocles,—*Τύραννος* having been a later addition (cp. *O. T.* p. 4): but the second play required a distinguishing epithet, and the words *ἐπὶ Κολωνῶν* must be ascribed to the poet himself. The traditional Latin title, ‘Oedipus Coloneus,’ is from Cic. *De Sen.* 7, § 21, where it occurs in the accus., *Oedipum Coloneum*.

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Frontmatter[More information](#)

The promise with which Creon pacified Oedipus at the end of the *Tyrannus* does not appear to have been fulfilled. The oracle was not consulted as to whether Oedipus should remain at Thebes. He remained there; and, as the lapse of time softened his anguish, the blind and discrowned sufferer learned to love the seclusion of the house in which he had once reigned so brilliantly. Creon continued to act as regent. But at last a change took place in the disposition of the Thebans, or at least in Creon's. A feeling grew up that Thebes was harbouring

Expulsion of Oedipus. a defilement, and it was decided to expel Oedipus. There is no mention of an oracle as the cause; indeed, the idea of a divine mandate is incompatible with the tenor of the story, since Oedipus could not then have charged the whole blame on Thebes. One circumstance of his expulsion was bitter to him above the rest. His two sons, who had now reached manhood, said not a word in arrest of his doom.

But his two daughters were nobly loyal. Antigone went forth from Thebes with her blind father,—his sole attendant,—and thenceforth shared the privations of his lot, which could now be only that of a wandering mendicant. Ismene stayed at Thebes, but it was in order to watch the course of events there in her father's interest. We hear of one occasion, at least, on which she risked a secret journey for the purpose of acquainting him with certain oracles which had just been received. The incident marks the uneasy feeling with which the Thebans still regarded the blind exile, and their unwillingness that he should share such light on his own destiny as they could obtain from Apollo.

Oedipus had now grown old in his destitute wanderings, when a sacred mission sent from Thebes to Delphi brought back an oracle concerning him which excited a lively interest in the minds of his former subjects. It was to the effect that the welfare of Thebes depended on Oedipus, not merely while he lived, but also after his death.

The new oracle.



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Abridged from the Large Edition of Sir Richard C. JebbE. S. Shuckburgh  
Frontmatter[More information](#)*Introduction*

ix

The Thebans now conceived the desire of establishing Oedipus somewhere just beyond their border. In this way they thought that they would have him under their control, while at the same time they would avoid the humiliation of confessing themselves wrong, and receiving him back to dwell among them. Their main object was that, on his death, they might secure the guardianship of his grave.

The new oracle obviously made an opportunity for the sons of Oedipus at Thebes, if they were true to their banished father. They could urge that Apollo, by this latest utterance, had condoned any pollution that might still be supposed to attach to the person of Oedipus, and had virtually authorised his recall to his ancient realm. Thebes could not be defiled by the presence of a man whom the god had declared to be the arbiter of its fortunes.

Unhappily, the sons—Polyneices and Eteocles—were no longer in a mood to hear the dictates of filial piety. When they had first reached manhood, they had been oppressed by a sense of the curse on their family, and the taint on their own birth. They had wished to spare Thebes the contamination of their rule; they had been desirous that the regent,—their uncle Creon,—should become king. But presently,—‘moved by some god, and by a sinful mind,’—compelled by the inexorable Fury of their house,—they renounced these intentions of wise self-denial. Not only were they fired with the passion for power, but they fell to striving with each other for the sole power. Eteocles, the younger<sup>1</sup> brother, managed to win over the citizens. The elder brother, Polyneices, was driven out of Thebes. He went to Argos, where he married the daughter of king Adrastus. All the most renowned warriors of the Peloponnesus became his allies, and he made ready to lead a great host against Thebes. But, while the mightiest chieftains were marshalling their followers in his cause, the

The strife  
between  
the sons.

<sup>1</sup> See note on v. 375.

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E. S. Shuckburgh

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

voices of prophecy warned him that the issue of his mortal feud depended on the blind and aged beggar whom, years before, he had coldly seen thrust out from house and home. That side would prevail which Oedipus should join.

§ 2. This is the moment at which our play begins. The

**Analysis of the play.** action falls into six principal divisions or chapters, marked off, as usual, by choral lyrics.

The scene, which remains the same throughout the play, is

**I. Prologue:** at Colonus, about a mile and a quarter north-west of Athens. We are in front of a grove

sacred to the Furies,—here worshipped under a propitiatory name, as the Eumenides or Kindly Powers. While the snow still lingers on distant hills (v. 1060), the song of many nightingales is already heard from the thick covert of this grove in the Attic plain; we seem to breathe the air of a bright, calm day at the beginning of April<sup>1</sup>. The blind Oedipus, led by Antigone, enters on the left hand of the spectator. He is in the squalid garb of a beggar-man,—carrying a wallet, wherein to put alms (v. 1262); the wind plays with his unkempt white hair; the wounds by which, in the prime of manhood, he had destroyed his sight, have left ghastly traces on the worn face; but there is a certain nobleness in his look and bearing which tempers the beholder's sense of pity or repulsion. The old man is tired with a long day's journey; they have heard from people whom they met

<sup>1</sup> The dates of the nightingale's arrival in Attica, for the years indicated, are thus given by Dr Krüper, the best authority on the birds of Greece ('*Greichische Jahrzeiten*' for 1875, Heft III., p. 243):—March 29 (1867), April 13 (1873), April 6 (1874). For this reference I am indebted to Professor Alfred Newton, F.R.S., of Cambridge. The male birds (who alone sing) arrive some days before the females, as is usually the case with migratory birds, and sing as soon as they come. Thus it is interesting to notice that the period of the year at which the nightingale's song would first be heard in Attica coincides closely with the celebration of the Great Dionysia, in the last days of March and the first days of April. If the play was produced at that festival, the allusions to the nightingale (vv. 18, 671) would have been felt as specially appropriate to the season.

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E. S. Shuckburgh

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

xi

on the way that they are near Athens, but they do not know the name of the spot at which they have halted. Antigone seats her father on a rock which is just within the limits of the sacred grove. As she is about to go in search of information, a man belonging to Colonus appears. Oedipus is beginning to accost him, when the stranger cuts his words short by a peremptory command to come off the sacred ground. 'To whom is it sacred?' Oedipus asks. To the Eumenides, is the reply. On hearing that name, Oedipus invokes the grace of those goddesses, and declares that he will never leave the rest which he has found. He begs the stranger to summon Theseus, the king of Athens, 'that by a small service he may find a great gain.' The stranger, who is struck by the noble mien of the blind old man, says that he will go and consult the people of Colonus; and meanwhile he tells Oedipus to stay where he is.

Left alone with Antigone, Oedipus utters a solemn and very beautiful prayer to the Eumenides, which discloses the motive of his refusal to leave the sacred ground. In his early manhood, when he inquired at Delphi concerning his parentage, Apollo predicted the calamities which awaited him; but also promised him rest, so soon as he should reach '*a seat of the Awful Goddesses.*' There he should close his troubled life; and along with the release, he should have his reward,—power to benefit the folk who sheltered him, and to hurt the folk who had cast him out. And when his end was near, there should be a sign from the sky. Apollo and the Eumenides themselves have led him to this grove: he prays the goddesses to receive him, and to give him peace.

Hardly had his prayer been spoken, when Antigone hears footsteps approaching, and retires with her father into the covert of the grove.

The elders of Colonus, who form the Chorus, now enter the orchestra. They have heard that a wanderer has entered the grove, and are in eager search for the perpetrator of so daring an impiety. Oedipus, led by

Parados:  
117—253.

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Frontmatter[More information](#)

Antigone, suddenly discovers himself. His appearance is greeted with a cry of horror from the Chorus; but horror gradually yields to pity for his blindness, his age, and his misery. They insist, however, on his coming out of the sacred grove. If he is to speak to them, it must be on lawful ground. Before he consents, he exacts a pledge that he shall not be removed from the ground outside of the grove. They promise this. Antigone then guides him to a seat beyond the sacred precinct. The Chorus now ask him who he is. He implores them to spare the question; but their curiosity has been aroused. They extort an answer. No sooner has the name OEDIPUS passed his lips, than his voice is drowned in a shout of execration. They call upon him to leave Attica instantly. He won their promise by a fraud, and it is void. They refuse to hear him. Antigone makes an imploring appeal.

In answer to her appeal, the Chorus say that they pity both father and daughter, but fear the gods still more; the wanderers must go.

II. First  
episode:  
254-667.

Oedipus now speaks with powerful eloquence, tinged at first with bitter scorn. Is this the traditional compassion of Athens for the oppressed? They have lured him from his sanctuary, and now they are driving him out of their country,—for fear of what? Simply of his name. He is free from moral guilt. He brings a blessing for Athens. What it is, he will reveal when their king arrives. The Chorus agree to await the decision of Theseus. He will come speedily, they are sure, when he hears the name of Oedipus.

At this moment, Antigone describes the approach of her sister Ismene, who has come from Thebes with tidings for her father. Ismene tells him of the fierce strife which has broken out between her brothers,—and how Polyneices has gone to Argos. Then she mentions the new oracle which the Thebans have just received,—that their welfare depends on him, in life and death. Creon will soon come, she adds, in the hope of enticing him back.

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Abridged from the Large Edition of Sir Richard C. JebbE. S. Shuckburgh  
Frontmatter[More information](#)*Introduction*

xiii

Oedipus asks whether *his sons* knew of this oracle. 'Yes,' she reluctantly answers. At that answer the measure of his bitterness is full: he breaks into a prayer that the gods may hear him, and make this new strife fatal to both brothers alike. And then, turning to the Chorus, he assures them that he is destined to be a deliverer of Attica: for his mind is now made up; he has no longer any doubt where his blessing, or his curse, is to descend. The Chorus, in reply, instruct him how a proper atonement may be made to the Eumenides for his trespass on their precinct; and Ismene goes to perform the prescribed rites in a more distant part of the grove.

Here follows a lyric dialogue between the Chorus and  
(*Kommos*: Oedipus. They question him on his past deeds,  
510—548.) and he pathetically asserts his moral innocence.

Theseus now enters, on the spectator's right hand, as coming from Athens. Addressing Oedipus as 'son of Laïus,' he assures him, with generous courtesy, of protection and sympathy; he has himself known what it is to be an exile. Oedipus explains his desire. He craves to be protected in Attica while he lives, and to be buried there when he is dead. He has certain benefits to bestow in return; but these will not be felt until after his decease. He fears that his sons will seek to remove him to Thebes. If Theseus promises to protect him, it must be at the risk of a struggle. Theseus gives the promise. He publicly adopts Oedipus as a citizen. He then leaves the scene.

Oedipus having now been formally placed under the protection of Athens, the Chorus appropriately celebrate the land which has become his home.

Beginning with Colonus, they pass to themes of honour for Attica at large,—the olive, created by Athena and guarded by Zeus,—the horses and horsemanship of the land, gifts of Poseidon,—and his other gift, the empire of the sea. Of all the choral songs in extant Greek drama, this short ode is perhaps the most widely famous; a distinction partly due,

First  
stasimon:  
668—719.

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Abridged from the Large Edition of Sir Richard C. JebbE. S. Shuckburgh  
Frontmatter[More information](#)

xiv

*Oedipus at Colonus*

no doubt, to the charm of the subject, and especially to the manifest glow of a personal sentiment in the verses which describe Colonus; but, apart from this, the intrinsic poetical beauty is of the highest and rarest order.

As the choral praises cease, Antigone exclaims that the moment has come for proving that Athens deserves them. Creon enters, with an escort of guards.

III. Second  
episode:  
720—1043.

His speech, addressed at first to the Chorus, is short, and skilfully conceived. They will not suppose that an old man like himself has been sent to commit an act of violence against a powerful State. No: he comes on behalf of Thebes, to plead with his aged kinsman, whose present wandering life is truly painful for everybody concerned. The honour of the city and of the family is involved. Oedipus should express his gratitude to Athens, and then return to a decent privacy 'in the house of his fathers.'

With a burst of scathing indignation, Oedipus replies. They want him now; but they thrust him out when he was longing to stay. 'In the house of his fathers!' No, that is not their design. They intend to plant him somewhere just beyond their border, for their own purposes. 'That portion is not for thee,' he tells Creon, 'but this,—my curse upon your land, ever abiding therein;—and for my sons, this heritage—room enough in my realm, wherein—to die.'

Failing to move him, Creon drops the semblance of persuasion. He bluntly announces that he already holds one hostage;—Ismene, who had gone to perform the rites in the grove, has been captured by his guards;—and he will soon have a second. He lays his hand upon Antigone. Another moment, and his attendants drag her from the scene. He is himself on the point of seizing Oedipus, when Theseus enters,—having been startled by the outcry, while engaged in a sacrifice at the neighbouring altar of Poseidon.

On hearing what has happened, Theseus first sends a

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Abridged from the Large Edition of Sir Richard C. JebbE. S. Shuckburgh  
Frontmatter[More information](#)*Introduction*

xv

message to Poseidon's altar, directing the Athenians who were present at the sacrifice to start in pursuit of Creon's guards and the captured maidens.—Then, turning to Creon, he upbraids him with his lawless act, and tells him that he shall not leave Attica until the maidens are restored. Creon, with ready effrontery, replies that, in attempting to remove a polluted wretch from Attic soil, he was only doing what the Areiopagus itself would have wished to do; if his manner was somewhat rough, the violence of Oedipus was a provocation. This speech draws from Oedipus an eloquent vindication of his life, which is more than a mere repetition of the defence which he had already made to the Chorus. Here he brings out with vivid force the helplessness of man against fate, and the hypocrisy of his accuser.—Theseus now calls on Creon to lead the way, and show him where the captured maidens are,—adding a hint, characteristically Greek, that no help from Attic accomplices shall avail him. Creon sulkily submits, —with a muttered menace of what he will do when he reaches home. *Exeunt* Theseus and his attendants, with Creon, on the spectator's left.

The Chorus imagine themselves at the scene of the coming fray, and predict the speedy triumph of the rescuers,—invoking the gods of the land to help. A beautiful trait of this ode is the reference to the 'torch-lit strand' of Eleusis, and to the mysteries which the initiated poet held in devout reverence.

At the close of their chant the Chorus give Oedipus the welcome news that they see his daughters approaching, escorted by Theseus and his followers. The first words of Antigone to her blind father express the wish that some wonder-working god could enable him to see their brave deliverer; and then, with much truth to nature, father and daughters are allowed to forget for a while that anyone else is present. When at last Oedipus turns to thank Theseus, his words are eminently noble, and

Second  
stasimon:  
1044—1095.

IV. Third  
episode:  
1096—1210.

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Abridged from the Large Edition of Sir Richard C. JebbE. S. Shuckburgh  
Frontmatter[More information](#)

also touching. His impulse is to salute his benefactor by kissing his cheek, but it is quickly checked by the thought that this is not for him; no, nor can he permit it, if Theseus would. The line drawn by fate, the line which parts him and his from human fellowship, is rendered only more sacred by gratitude.

When Antigone is questioned by her father as to the circumstances of the rescue, she refers him to Theseus; and Theseus says that it is needless for *him* to vaunt his own deeds, since Oedipus can hear them at leisure from his daughters.

There is a matter, Theseus adds, on which he should like to consult Oedipus. A stranger, it seems, has placed himself as a suppliant at the altar of Poseidon. This happened while they were all away at the rescue, and no one knows anything about the man. He is not from Thebes, but he declares that he is a kinsman of Oedipus, and prays for a few words with him. It is only guessed whence he comes; can Oedipus have any relations at Argos? Oedipus remembers what Ismene told him; he knows who it is; and he implores Theseus to spare him the torture of hearing *that* voice. But Antigone's entreaties prevail. Theseus leaves the scene, in order to let the suppliant know that the interview will be granted.

The choral ode which fills the pause glances forward rather than backward, though it is suggested by the presage of some new vexation to Oedipus. It serves to turn our thoughts towards the approaching end.—Not to be born is best of all; the next best thing is to die as soon as possible. And the extreme of folly is the desire to outlive life's joys. Behold yon aged and afflicted stranger,—lashed by the waves of trouble from east and west, from south and north! But there is one deliverer, who comes to all at last.

Third  
stasimon  
1211—1248.

Polyneices now enters,—not attended, like Creon, by guards, but alone. He is shedding tears; he begins by uttering the deepest pity for his father's plight, and the bitterest self-reproach.—Oedipus,

V. Fourth  
episode:  
1249—1555.



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Frontmatter[More information](#)*Introduction*

xvii

with averted head makes no reply.—Polyneices appeals to his sisters; will they plead for him? Antigone advises him to state in his own words the object of his visit.—Then Polyneices sets forth his petition. His Argive allies are already gathered before Thebes. He has come as a suppliant to Oedipus, for himself, and for his friends too. Oracles say that victory will be with the side for which Oedipus may declare. Eteocles, in his pride at Thebes, is mocking father and brother alike. ‘If thou assist me, I will soon scatter his power, and will stablish thee in thine own house, and stablish myself, when I have cast him out by force.’

Oedipus now breaks silence; but it is in order to let the Chorus know why he does so. His son, he reminds them, has been sent to them by their king.—Then, suddenly turning on Polyneices, he delivers an appalling curse, dooming both his sons to die at Thebes by each other’s hands. In concentrated force of tragic passion this passage has few rivals. The great scene is closed by a short dialogue between Polyneices and his elder sister,—one of the delicate links between this play and the poet’s earlier *Antigone*. She implores him to abandon his fatal enterprise. But he is not to be dissuaded; he only asks that, if he falls, she and Ismene will give him burial rites; he disengages himself from their embrace, and goes forth, under the shadow of the curse.

A lyric passage now follows, which affords a moment of relief to the strained feelings of the spectators, and also serves (like a similar passage before, vv. 510—548) to separate the two principal situations comprised in this chapter of the drama.—The Chorus are commenting on the dread doom which they have just heard pronounced, when they are startled by the sound of thunder. As peal follows peal, and lightnings glare from the darkened sky, the terror-stricken elders of Colonus utter broken prayers to averting gods. But for Oedipus the storm has another meaning; it has filled him with a strange eagerness. He prays Antigone to summon Theseus.

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Abridged from the Large Edition of Sir Richard C. JebbE. S. Shuckburgh  
Frontmatter[More information](#)

As Theseus had left the scene in order to communicate with the suppliant at Poseidon's altar, no breach of probability is involved in his timely re-appearance. Oedipus announces that, by sure signs, he knows his hour to have come. Unaided by human hand, he will now show the way to the spot where his life must be closed. When he arrives there, to Theseus alone will be revealed the place appointed for his grave. At the approach of death, Theseus shall impart the secret to his heir alone; and, so, from age to age, that sacred knowledge shall descend in the line of the Attic kings. While the secret is religiously guarded, the grave of Oedipus shall protect Attica against invading foemen; Thebes shall be powerless to harm her.—'And now let us set forth, for the divine summons urges me.' As Oedipus utters these words, Theseus and his daughters become aware of a change; the blind eyes are still dark, but the moral conditions of blindness have been annulled; no sense of dependence remains, no trace of hesitation or timidity; like one inspired, the blind man eagerly beckons them on; and so, followed by them, he finally passes from the view of the spectators.

This final exit of Oedipus is magnificently conceived. As the idea of a spiritual illumination is one which pervades the play, so it is fitting that, in the last moment of his presence with us, the inward vision should be manifest in its highest clearness and power.

The elders of Colonus are now alone; they have looked their last on Oedipus; and they know that the time of his end has come. The strain of their chant is in harmony with this moment of suspense and stillness. It is a choral litany for the soul which is passing from earth. May the Powers of the unseen world be gracious; may no dread apparition vex the path to the fields below.

A Messenger, one of the attendants of Theseus, relates what befell after Oedipus, followed by his daughters and the king, arrived at the spot where he was destined to depart. Theseus

Fourth  
stasimon:  
1556—1578.

VI. Ex-  
odos: 1579  
—1779.

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Abridged from the Large Edition of Sir Richard C. Jebb

E. S. Shuckburgh

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

xix

was then left alone with him, and to Theseus alone of mortals the manner of his passing is known.

The daughters enter. After the first utterances of grief, one feeling is seen to be foremost in Antigone's mind,—the longing to see her father's grave. She cannot bear the thought that it should lack a tribute from her hands. Ismene vainly represents that their father's own command makes such a wish unlawful,—impossible. Theseus arrives, and to him Antigone urges her desire. In gentle and solemn words he reminds her of the pledge which he had given to Oedipus. She acquiesces; and now prays that she and Ismene may be sent to Thebes: perhaps they may yet be in time to avert death from their brothers. Theseus consents: and the elders of Colonus say farewell to the Theban maidens in words which speak of submission to the gods: 'Cease lamentation, lift it up no more; for verily these things stand fast.'

§ 3. In the *Oedipus Tyrannus* a man is crushed by the discovery that, without knowing it, he has committed two crimes, parricide and incest. At the moment of discovery he can feel nothing but the double stain: he cries out that 'he has become most hateful to the gods.' He has, indeed, broken divine laws, and the divine Power has punished him by bringing his deeds to light. This Power does not, in the first instance, regard the intention, but the fact. It does not matter that his unconscious sins were due to the agency of an inherited curse, and that he is morally innocent. He has sinned, and he must suffer.

In the *Oedipus Coloneus* we meet with this man again, after the lapse of several years. In a religious aspect he still rests under the stain, and he knows this. But, in the course of time, he has mentally risen to a point of view from which he can survey his own past more clearly. Consciousness of

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Abridged from the Large Edition of Sir Richard C. JebbE. S. Shuckburgh  
Frontmatter[More information](#)

xx

*Oedipus at Colonus*

the stain is now subordinate to another feeling, which in his first despair had not availed to console him. He has gained a firm grasp, not to be lost, on the fact of his moral innocence. He remembers the word of Apollo long ago, which coupled the prediction of his woes with a promise of final rest and reward; and he believes that his moral innocence is recognised by the Power which punished him. Thinking, then, on the two great facts of his life, his defilement and his innocence, he has come to look upon himself as neither pure nor yet guilty, but as a person set apart by the gods to illustrate their will,—as sacred. Hence that apparently strange contrast which belongs to the heart of the *Oedipus Coloneus*. He declines to pollute his benefactor, Theseus, by his touch,—describing himself as one with whom ‘all stain of sin hath made its dwelling’ (1133). Yet, with equal truth and sincerity, he can assure the Athenians that he has come to them ‘as one sacred and pious,’—the suppliant of the Eumenides, the disciple of Apollo (287).

When eternal laws are broken by men, the gods punish the breach, whether wilful or involuntary; but their ultimate judgment depends on the intent. That thought is dominant in the *Oedipus Coloneus*. The contrast between physical blindness and inward vision is an under-note, in harmony with the higher distinction between the form of conduct and its spirit.

§ 4. The Oedipus whom we find at Colonus utters not a word of self-reproach, except on one point; he regrets the excess of the former self-reproach which stung him into blinding himself. He has done nothing else that calls for repentance; he has been the passive instrument of destiny. It would be a mistake to aim at bringing the play more into harmony with modern sentiment by suffusing it in a mild and almost Christian radiance, as though Oedipus had been softened, chastened, morally purified by suffering. Suffering has, indeed, taught him endurance (*στέργειν*), and

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978-1-107-42910-9 - The Oedipus Coloneus of Sophocles: With a Commentary,  
Abridged from the Large Edition of Sir Richard C. JebbE. S. Shuckburgh  
Frontmatter[More information](#)*Introduction*

xxi

some degree of caution; he is also exalted in mind by a new sense of power; but he has not been softened. Anger, 'which was ever his bane,' blazes up in him as fiercely as ever. The unrestrained anger of an old man may easily be a very pitiful and deplorable spectacle; it requires the touch of a powerful dramatist to deal successfully with a subject so dangerously near to comedy, and to make a choleric old man tragic; Shakspeare has done it, with pathos of incomparable grasp and range; Sophocles, in a more limited way, has done it too. But probably the chief danger which the *Oedipus Coloneus* runs with modern readers is from the sense of repulsion apt to be excited by this inexorable resentment of Oedipus towards his sons. It is not so when Lear cries—

'No, you unnatural hags,  
I will have such revenges on you both,  
That all the world shall—I will do such things,—  
What they are yet, I know not; but they shall be  
The terrors of the earth. You think I'll weep;  
No, I'll not weep.'

Sophocles has left it possible for *us* to abhor the implacable father more than the heartless children. The ancient Greek spectator, however, would have been less likely to experience such a revulsion of sympathy. Nearer to the conditions imagined, he would more quickly feel all that was implied in the attitude of the sons at the moment when Oedipus was expelled from Thebes; his religious sense would demand a nemesis, while his ethical code would not require forgiveness of wrongs; and, lastly, he would feel that the implacability of Oedipus was itself a manifestation of the Fury which pursued the house.

§ 5. On the part of the gods there is nothing that can properly be called 'tenderness' for Oedipus; we should not convey a true impression if we spoke of him as attaining to final pardon and peace, in the full sense

<sup>1</sup> εὐνοῖαν in 1662, and χάρις in 1752, refer mainly to the painless death.

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Abridged from the Large Edition of Sir Richard C. JebbE. S. Shuckburgh  
Frontmatter[More information](#)

which a Christian would attach to those words. The gods, who have vexed Oedipus from youth to age, make this amend to him,—that just before his death he is recognised by men as a mysteriously sacred person, who has the power to bequeath a blessing and a malison. They further provide that his departure out of his wretched life shall be painless, and such as to distinguish him from other men. But at the very moment when he passes away, the Fury is busy with his sons. The total impression made by the play as a work of art depends essentially on the manner in which the scene of sacred peace at Colonus is brought into relief against the dark fortunes of Polyneices and Eteocles.

In the epic version of this story, as also in the versions adopted by Aeschylus and Euripides, Oedipus cursed his sons at Thebes, before the strife had broken out between them. He doomed them to divide their heritage with the sword. Their subsequent quarrel was the direct consequence of their father's curse. But, according to Sophocles, the curse had nothing to do with the quarrel. The strife which broke out between the sons was inspired by the evil genius of their race, and by their own sinful thoughts<sup>1</sup>. At that time Oedipus had uttered no imprecation. His curse was pronounced, *after* the breach between them, because they had preferred their selfish ambitions to the opportunity of recalling their father (421)<sup>2</sup>. There is a twofold dramatic advantage in the modification thus introduced by Sophocles. First, the two sons no longer appear as helpless victims of fate; they have incurred moral blame, and are just objects of the paternal anger. Secondly, when Polyneices—on the eve of combat with his brother—appeals to Oedipus, the outraged father still holds the weapon with which to smite him. The curse descends at the supreme crisis, and with more terrible effect because it has been delayed.

<sup>1</sup> See vv. 371, 421, 1299.<sup>2</sup> See note on v. 1375.

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978-1-107-42910-9 - The Oedipus Coloneus of Sophocles: With a Commentary,  
Abridged from the Large Edition of Sir Richard C. Jebb

E. S. Shuckburgh

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

xxiii

§ 6. The secondary persons, like the hero, are best interpreted by the play itself; but one or two traits **The other characters.** may be briefly noticed. The two scenes in which the removal of Oedipus is attempted are contrasted not merely in outward circumstance—Creon relying on armed force, while Polyneices is a solitary suppliant—but also in regard to the characters of the two visitors. It is idle to look for the Creon of the *Tyrannus* in the Creon of the *Coloneus*: they are different men, and Sophocles has not cared to preserve even a semblance of identity. The Creon of the *Tyrannus* is marked by strong self-respect, and is essentially kind-hearted though undemonstrative; the Creon of this play is a heartless and hypocritical villain. A well-meaning but wrong-headed martinet, such as the Creon of *Antigone*, is a conceivable development of the *Tyrannus* Creon, but at least stands on a much higher level than the Creon of the *Coloneus*. Polyneices is cold-hearted, selfish, and of somewhat coarse fibre, but he is sincere and straightforward; in the conversation with Antigone he evinces real dignity and fortitude. In the part of Theseus, which might so easily have been commonplace, Sophocles has shown a fine touch; this typical Athenian is more than a walking king; he is a soldier bred in the school of adversity, loyal to gods and men, perfect in courtesy, but stern at need. Comparing the representation of the two sisters in the *Antigone* with that given in this play, we may remark the tact with which the poet has abstained here from tingeing the character of Ismene with anything like selfish timidity. At the end of the play, where the more passionate nature of the heroic Antigone manifests itself, Ismene is the sister whose calm common-sense is not overpowered by grief; but she grieves sincerely and remains, as she has been throughout, entirely loyal.

A word should be added on the conduct of the Chorus in regard to Oedipus. Before they know who he **Attitude of the Chorus.** is, they regard him with horror as the man who

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978-1-107-42910-9 - The Oedipus Coloneus of Sophocles: With a Commentary,  
Abridged from the Large Edition of Sir Richard C. JebbE. S. Shuckburgh  
Frontmatter[More information](#)

xxiv

*Oedipus at Colonus*

has profaned the grove ; but their feeling quickly changes to compassion on perceiving that he is blind, aged, and miserable. Then they learn his name, and wish to expel him because they conceive his presence to be a defilement. They next relent, not simply because he says that he brings benefits for Athens,—though they take account of that fact, which is itself a proof that he is at peace with the gods,—but primarily because he is able to assure them that he is ‘sacred and pious’ (287). They then leave the matter to Theseus. Thus these elders of Colonus represent the conflict of two feelings which the situation might be supposed to arouse in the minds of ordinary Athenians,—fear of the gods, and compassion for human suffering,—the two qualities which Oedipus recognises as distinctly Athenian (260 n.).

§ 7. The topography of the play, in its larger aspects, is illustrated by the accompanying map<sup>1</sup>. The knoll of whitish earth known as Colonus Hippius, which gave its name to the deme or township of Colonus, was about a mile and a quarter N.W.N. from the Dipylon gate of Athens. The epithet Hippius belonged to the god Poseidon, as horse-creating and horse-taming (see on 715); it was given to this place because Poseidon Hippius was worshipped there, and served to distinguish this extramural Colonus from the Colonus Agoraeus, or ‘Market Hill,’ within the walls of Athens<sup>2</sup>. In the absence of a distinguishing epithet, ‘Colonus’ would usually mean Colonus Hippius; Thucydides calls it simply Colonus, and describes it as ‘a sanctuary (*ιερόν*) of Poseidon.’ The altar of Poseidon in this precinct is not visible to the spectators of our play, but is sup-

<sup>1</sup> See p. 281. Reduced, by permission, from part of Plate II. in the ‘Atlas von Athen: im Auftrage des Kaiserlich Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts herausgegeben von E. Curtius und J. A. Kaupert’ (Berlin, 1878, Dietrich Reimer).

<sup>2</sup> In the district of Melitè, see map II.



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978-1-107-42910-9 - The Oedipus Coloneus of Sophocles: With a Commentary,  
Abridged from the Large Edition of Sir Richard C. JebbE. S. Shuckburgh  
Frontmatter[More information](#)*Introduction*

xxv

posed to be near. When Pausanias visited Colonus (c. 180 A.D.), he saw an altar of Poseidon Hippius and Athene Hippiia. A grove and a temple of Poseidon had formerly existed there, but had perished long before the date of his visit. He found, too, that divine honours were paid at Colonus to Peirithous and Theseus, to Oedipus and Adrastus: there were perhaps two shrines or chapels (ἡρώα), one for each pair of heroes<sup>1</sup>. He does not mention the grove of the Eumenides, which, like that of Poseidon, had doubtless been destroyed at an earlier

**Demeter** period. About a quarter of a mile N.E.N. of the  
**Euchloüs.** Colonus Hippius rises a second mound, identified by E. Curtius and others with the 'hill of Demeter Euchloüs' (1600). When Oedipus stood at the spot where he finally disappeared, this hill was 'in full view' (προσόψιος). Traces of an ancient building exist at its southern edge. Similar traces exist at the N.W. edge of the Colonus Hippius. If, as is likely, these ancient buildings were connected with religious purposes, it is possible that the specially sacred region of the ancient Colonus lay between the two mounds.

§ 8. The grove of the Eumenides may have been on the N. or N.E. side of the Colonus Hippius. But the only condition fixed by the play fails to be precise, viz. that a road, passing by Colonus to Athens, skirted the grove,—the inner or most sacred part of the grove being on the side farthest from the road. The roads marked on our map are the ancient roads<sup>2</sup>. It will be observed that one of them passes between Colonus Hippius and the hill of Demeter Euchloüs, going in the direction of Athens. There is no reason why the wandering Oedipus should not be conceived as entering Attica from the N.W.; i.e., as having passed into the Attic plain round the

<sup>1</sup> His use of the singular is ambiguous, owing to its place in the sentence: ἡρώων δὲ Πειρίθου καὶ Θησέως Οἰδίποδος τε καὶ Ἀδράστου (I. 30. 4).

<sup>2</sup> On these, see the letter-press by Prof. Curtius to the 'Atlas von Athen,' pp. 14 f.

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978-1-107-42910-9 - The Oedipus Coloneus of Sophocles: With a Commentary,  
Abridged from the Large Edition of Sir Richard C. Jebb

E. S. Shuckburgh

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xxvi

*Oedipus at Colonus*

**n.** end of Aegaleos. And, in that case, the road in question might well represent the route by which Sophocles, familiar with the local details of Colonus in his own day, imagined Oedipus as arriving. Then Oedipus, moving towards Athens, would have the grove of the Eumenides on his right hand<sup>1</sup>, if, as we were supposing, this grove was on the n. side of the Colonus Hippius. The part of the grove farthest from him (τοῦκείθεν ἄλσους 505) would thus be near the remains of the ancient building at the n.w. edge. When Ismene is sent to that part of the grove, she is told that there is a guardian of the place (ἑπαικος 506), who can supply her with anything needful for the rites.

The present aspect of Colonus is thus described by an accomplished scholar, Mr George Wotherspoon (Longman's Magazine, Feb. 1884):—

Was this the noble dwelling-place he sings,  
Fair-steeded glistening land, which once t' adorn  
Gold-reinèd Aphroditè did not scorn,  
And where blithe Bacchus kept his revellings?  
Oh, Time and Change! Of all those goodly things,  
Of coverts green by nightingales forlorn  
Lov'd well; of flow'r-bright fields, from morn to morn  
New-water'd by Cephissus' sleepless springs,  
What now survives? This stone-capt mound, the plain  
Sterile and bare, these meagre groves of shade,  
Pale hedges, the scant stream unfed by rain:  
No more? The genius of the place replied,  
'Still blooms inspirèd Art tho' Nature fade;  
The memory of Colonus hath not died.'

<sup>1</sup> It is scarcely necessary to say that no objection, or topographical inference of any kind, can be drawn from the conventional arrangement of the Greek stage by which Oedipus (as coming from the country) would enter on the spectator's left, and therefore have the scenic grove on his left.

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978-1-107-42910-9 - The Oedipus Coloneus of Sophocles: With a Commentary,  
Abridged from the Large Edition of Sir Richard C. JebbE. S. Shuckburgh  
Frontmatter[More information](#)*Introduction*

xxvii

§ 9. When Oedipus knows that his end is near, he leads his friends to a place called the *καταρράκτης ὁδός*, the ‘sheer threshold,’ ‘bound by brazen steps to earth’s roots.’ There can be no doubt that this ‘threshold’ denotes a natural fissure or chasm, supposed to be the commencement of a passage leading down to the nether world. Such a chasm exists at the foot of the Areiopagus, where Pausanias saw a tomb of Oedipus in the precinct of the Eumenides. But Sophocles adopts the Colonus-myth unreservedly; nor can I believe that he intended, by any deliberate vagueness, to leave his hearers free to think of the Areiopagus. The chasm called the *καταρράκτης ὁδός* must be imagined, then, as not very distant from the grove. No such chasm is visible at the present day in the neighbourhood of Colonus. But this fact is insufficient to prove that no appearance of the kind can have existed there in antiquity.

§ 10. Sophocles accurately defines the position of the ‘sheer threshold’ by naming certain objects near it, familiar, evidently, to the people of the place, though unknown to us<sup>1</sup>. Here it was that Oedipus disappeared. But the place of his ‘sacred *tomb*’ (1545) was to be a secret, known only to Theseus. The tomb, then, was not at the spot where he disappeared, since that spot was known to all. The poet’s conception appears to have been of this kind. At the moment when Oedipus passed away, in the mystic vision which left Theseus dazzled, it was revealed to the king of Athens where the mortal remains of Oedipus would be found. The soul of Oedipus went down to Hades, whether ushered by a conducting god, or miraculously drawn to the embrace of the spirits below (1661); the tenantless body left on earth was wafted by a supernatural agency to the secret tomb appointed for it. When Theseus rejoins the desolate daughters, he already knows where the tomb is, though he is not at liberty to divulge the place (1763).

<sup>1</sup> See on vv. 1593—1595.

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978-1-107-42910-9 - The Oedipus Coloneus of Sophocles: With a Commentary,  
Abridged from the Large Edition of Sir Richard C. JebbE. S. Shuckburgh  
Frontmatter[More information](#)

xxviii

*Oedipus at Colonus*

§ 11. The ground on which the grove of the Eumenides at Colonus stands is called ‘the Brazen Threshold, the stay of Athens’ (57). How is this name related to that of the spot at which Oedipus disappeared, — ‘the sheer threshold’ (1590)? One view is that the same spot is meant in both cases. We have then to suppose that in verses 1—116 (the ‘prologue’) the scene is laid at the *καταρράκτης ὁδός*, ‘the sheer threshold’; and that at v. 117 the scene changes to another side of the grove, where the rest of the action takes place. This supposition is, however, extremely improbable, and derives no support from any stage arrangements which the opening scene implies. Rather the ‘Brazen Threshold’ of v. 57 was a name derived from the particular spot which is called the ‘sheer threshold,’ and applied in a larger sense to the immediately adjacent region, including the ground on which the grove stood. The epithet ‘brazen’ properly belonged to the actual chasm or ‘threshold,’—the notion being that a flight of brazen steps connected the upper world with the Homeric ‘brazen threshold’ of Hades. In its larger application to the neighbouring ground ‘brazen’ was a poetical equivalent for ‘rocky,’ and this ground was called the ‘stay’ or ‘support’ (*ἔρεισμα*) of Athens, partly in the physical sense of ‘firm basis,’ partly also with the notion that the land had a safeguard in the benevolence of those powers to whose nether realm the ‘threshold’ led.

§ 12. In order to understand the opening part of the play (as far as v. 201), it is necessary to form some distinct notion of the stage arrangements. It is of comparatively little moment that we cannot pretend to say exactly how far the aids of scenery and carpentry were actually employed when the play was first produced at Athens. Without knowing this, we can still make out all that is needful for a clear comprehension of the text. First, it is evident that the back-scene (the palace-front of so many plays) must here have been supposed to represent a land-

Stage ar-  
rangements  
in the opening  
scene.

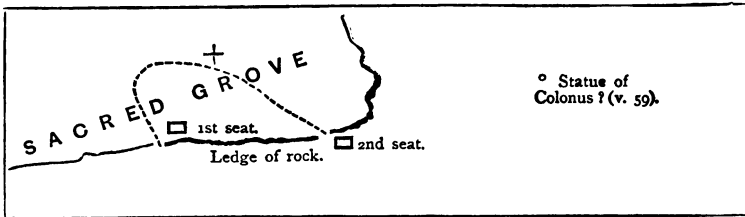
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978-1-107-42910-9 - The Oedipus Coloneus of Sophocles: With a Commentary,  
Abridged from the Large Edition of Sir Richard C. JebbE. S. Shuckburgh  
Frontmatter[More information](#)*Introduction*

xxix

scape of some sort,—whether the acropolis of Athens was shown in the distance, or not. Secondly, the sacred grove on the stage must have been so contrived that Oedipus could retire into its covert, and then show himself (138) as if in an opening or glade, along which Antigone gradually leads him until he is beyond the precinct. If one of the doors in the back-scene had been used for the exit of Oedipus into the grove, then it would at least have been necessary to show, within the door, a tolerably deep vista. It seems more likely that the doors of the back-scene were not used at all in this play. I give a diagram to show how the action as far as v. 201 might be managed.

Antigone leads in her blind father on the spectators' left. She places him on a seat of natural rock (the '1st seat' in the



1st seat of Oedipus,—a rock just within the grove (verse 19).—2nd seat (v. 195), outside the grove, on a low ledge of rock (v. 192). + marks the point at which Oedipus discovers himself to the Chorus (v. 138), by stepping forward into an open glade of the grove. His gradual advance in verses 173—191 is from this point to the 2nd seat.

diagram). This rock is just within the bounds of the grove; which evidently was not surrounded by a fence of any kind, ingress and egress being free. When the Chorus approach, Antigone and her father hide in the grove, following the left of the two dotted lines (113). When Oedipus discloses himself to the Chorus (138), he is well within the grove. Assured of safety, he is gradually led forward by Antigone (173—191), along the right-hand dotted line. At the limit of the grove, in this part, there is a low ledge of natural rock, forming a sort of

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978-1-107-42910-9 - The Oedipus Coloneus of Sophocles: With a Commentary,  
Abridged from the Large Edition of Sir Richard C. JebbE. S. Shuckburgh  
Frontmatter[More information](#)

xxx

*Oedipus at Colonus*

threshold. When he has set foot on this ledge of rock,—being now just outside the grove,—he is told to halt (192). A low seat of natural rock,—the outer edge (*ἄκρον*) of the rocky threshold,—is now close to him. He has only to take a step sideways (*λέχριος*) to reach it. Guided by Antigone, he moves to it, and she places him on it (the ‘2nd seat’ in the diagram: v. 201).

§ 13. The general voice of ancient tradition attributed the *Oedipus Coloneus* to the latest years of Sophocles, who is said to have died at the age of ninety, either at the beginning of 405 B.C., or in the latter half of 406 B.C. According to the author of the second Greek argument to the play, it was brought out, after the poet’s death, by his grandson and namesake, Sophocles, the son of Ariston, in the archonship of Micon, Ol. 94. 3 (402 B.C.). The ancient belief is expressed by the well-known story for which Cicero is our earliest authority:—

‘Sophocles wrote tragedies to extreme old age; and as, owing to this pursuit, he was thought to neglect his property, he was brought by his sons before a court of law, in order that the judges might declare him incapable of managing his affairs,—as Roman law withdraws the control of an estate from the incompetent head of a family. Then, they say, the old man recited to the judges the play on which he was engaged, and which he had last written,—the *Oedipus Coloneus*; and asked whether that poem was suggestive of imbecility. Having recited it, he was acquitted by the verdict of the court.’

Plutarch specifies the part recited,—viz. the first stasimon, —which by an oversight he calls the parodos,— quoting vv. 668—673, and adding that Sophocles was escorted from the court with applauding shouts, as from a theatre in which he had triumphed. The story should not be too hastily rejected because, in a modern estimate, it may seem melo-

The story  
of the  
recitation  
—not im-  
possible.