

Cambridge University Press  
 978-1-107-63428-2 - Sophocles: *Oedipus at Colonus*  
 Translated by R. C. Trevelyan  
 Excerpt  
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## INTRODUCTION

Sophocles died at the age of 90 in the year 406 B.C. The *Oedipus at Colonus* is generally considered to have been written in his old age, and according to one ancient authority it was first produced by the poet's grandson four years after his death.

I cannot hope to give any account of this difficult and much discussed play that has not already been better given by others; so I will quote a few sentences written by Dr J. T. Sheppard, with which I find myself in complete sympathy.

'The *Oedipus at Colonus* is a patriotic and religious mystery. The hero, after a life of shame and persecution, is received by Athens, welcomed in spite of his past, defended against the enemies of his own household, and vindicated in the end by the gods. Throughout the play there grows on the hero and the audience a sense that his tragic life has not been altogether without purpose. There is no shallow explanation, and not even the suggestion that the fires of passion have been purged by suffering. Oedipus curses his sons: Antigone, not Oedipus, was born for love. Oedipus is no saint, no Christian hero, but a man who feels himself abnormal, charged by his tragedy with a mysterious potency for good and evil to friends and foes. Athens receives him when the rest of the world rejects him. She defends him in his weakness. She shall find safety from his strength. The drama culminates in his majestic passage from the life of men.'\*

It may also be of interest to transcribe the following note which was pencilled by Macaulay in the Sophocles which he took with him to India in 1834.

'I cannot quite agree with Schlegel in putting this play at the head of Sophocles's plays. There is great sweetness both of sentiment and style, great and noble national enthusiasm, and a fine religious solemnity thrown over the whole. Theseus is the model of ancient heroes; Antigone and Ismene are most touch-

\* *Aeschylus and Sophocles, their work and influence*, by J. T. Sheppard, Litt.D. George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd.

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ingly represented. But from a boy I always found the play a little languid, particularly the scenes with Creon and Polyneices.'

I do not myself find the Creon and Polyneices episodes to be 'languid'. Lengthy, no doubt, they are; and neither of them lead up to a momentous dramatic crisis, as such scenes generally do in the other works of Sophocles. But the unity of this play is not that of a close-knit plot ruthlessly developing step by step towards disastrous catastrophe. Here the sequence of incidents, exciting and picturesque, passionate and pathetic, are all parts of the leisurely movement towards the mysterious passing of Oedipus, which is one of the greatest things in dramatic poetry.

In no other play has Sophocles shown himself a greater master of poetic expression and atmosphere. The characters, Oedipus and Polyneices, Theseus and Creon, are convincingly portrayed and contrasted; and there is a beautiful delicacy in the relations of Antigone with her father, brother, and sister, of a kind that may hardly be found elsewhere in Greek drama.

In Greek poetry the metrical design is determined by the length and shortness of the syllables, not by the stress, as in English verse. If we wish to reproduce a Greek rhythmical phrase in English, we must, as it were, translate quantity into stress. At the same time, where possible, long and short English syllables must correspond to long and short Greek syllables. When translating the lyrics and anapaests of Greek plays, I have hitherto attempted to imitate as closely as possible the metrical pattern and phrasing of the original; and such had been my intention when I began to translate the *Oedipus at Colonus*. But in several of the choruses I found the Greek rhythms so difficult to reproduce in English verse that it seemed better here to give up the attempt, rather than do violence to the phrasing and diction for the sake of a theory. The choruses which I have rendered into freer verse-forms are the last two stanzas of the first stasimon, lines 694–719; the second stasimon, lines 1044–1095; and the fourth stasimon, lines 1556–1578.

I have translated from the text published by Professor Jebb in 1900, and have numbered the lines in accordance with that edition.

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## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

OEDIPUS

ANTIGONE, *his daughter*

A STRANGER

ISMENE, *daughter of Oedipus*THESEUS, *King of Athens*CREON, *King of Thebes*POLYNEICES, *son of Oedipus*

A MESSENGER

CHORUS of *Elders of Colonus*

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## OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

OEDIPUS

Child of the blind old man, Antigone,  
 To what land have we come? Whose city is this?  
 Who is it that today shall entertain  
 The wanderer Oedipus with niggard gifts?  
 Little do I beg for; and less than that little  
 Do I obtain; but that suffices me:  
 For sufferings and the schooling of long years,  
 And lastly pride of birth have taught me patience.  
 Now, child, if any resting-place you see,  
 Whether on profane ground or in some God's grove, 10  
 Lead me and seat me there, that we may enquire  
 Where we are; for we needs must learn as strangers  
 From denizens, and act as they may bid.

ANTIGONE

Father, long-suffering Oedipus, the towers  
 That guard the city appear far distant still.  
 And holy, it seems, this place must be, thick-set  
 With laurel, olive, vine: and nightingales  
 Thronging within it make sweet melody.  
 Here rest your limbs upon this unhewn stone.  
 For one so old a long way have you journeyed. 20

OEDIPUS

Then seat me here, and watch over my blindness.

ANTIGONE

That task after so long I need not learn.

OEDIPUS

Can you now tell me whither we are come?

ANTIGONE

Athens yonder I know, but not this place.

OEDIPUS

So much we learnt from every passer-by.

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ANTIGONE

Then shall I go and learn how the place is called?

OEDIPUS

Do so, my child, if it be inhabited.

ANTIGONE

It must be.—But I think there is no need. . .  
 For yonder not far off I see a man.

OEDIPUS

Someone coming towards us from the village? 30

ANTIGONE

Already he stands beside us. You must speak  
 Whatever the moment prompts; for the man is here.

*Enter STRANGER, a man of Colonus*

OEDIPUS

Sir, warned by her who sees both for herself  
 And me, that you have come thus opportunely  
 To make enquiry and to resolve our doubts. . .

STRANGER

Before you question further, quit this seat.  
 You have entered ground 'tis sacrilege to tread.

OEDIPUS

What ground is this? held sacred to what deity?

STRANGER

None may enter nor dwell there; for those dread  
 Goddesses hold it, daughters of Earth and Darkness. 40

OEDIPUS

Say by what awful name should I invoke them.

STRANGER

The all-seeing Eumenides the folk here  
 Would call them: other names elsewhere seem best.

OEDIPUS

Now graciously may they receive their suppliant;  
 For my seat in this land never will I quit.

STRANGER

What means this?

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OEDIPUS

'Tis the watchword of my fate.

STRANGER

Well, hence I dare not drive you, till I report  
 My purpose, and receive the city's sanction.

OEDIPUS

Now by the Gods, kind Sir, refuse me not  
 That knowledge I, sad wanderer, crave of thee. 50

STRANGER

What would you know? Speak; I will not refuse you.

OEDIPUS

What then is the place called that we have entered?

STRANGER

Listen, and you shall learn all that I know.  
 Sacred is this whole place. Revered Poseidon  
 Holds it, and the fire-breathing God, the Titan  
 Prometheus. But the spot whereon you tread  
 Is called the Brazen Threshold of this land,  
 The stay of Athens; and the neighbouring fields  
 Make it their boast that their primordial lord  
 Was yonder knight Colonos, and all the folk 60  
 Yet bear his name in common for their own.  
 Such, stranger, are these haunts, less famed in story  
 Than honoured by the love of those who dwell there.

OEDIPUS

Then there are folk inhabiting this place?

STRANGER

Aye, called by yonder divine hero's name.

OEDIPUS

Have they a king? or does the whole people rule?

STRANGER

This region is governed by the city's king.

OEDIPUS

Who is sovereign here in counsel and in might?

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STRANGER

Theseus, son to Aegeus, who once reigned.

OEDIPUS

Could a messenger be sent by you to find him? 70

STRANGER

For what purpose? To urge him to come hither?

OEDIPUS

That by small service he may win great gain.

STRANGER

What benefit can come from one who sees not?

OEDIPUS

In all that I shall speak there will be vision.

STRANGER

Mark me now, friend, lest you should come to harm—  
 For despite evil fortune you seem noble—  
 Stay here, where I first found you, till I go  
 And make report to the demesmen of this village,  
 Not in the city. They it is must decide  
 Whether you should remain here or depart. *Exit.* 80

OEDIPUS

Are we alone, my child? Has the man gone?

ANTIGONE

He is gone; so with a tranquil mind, father,  
 You may speak what you will. I only am near you.

OEDIPUS

Holy Powers of dread aspect, since you first  
 Have given me a seat to rest on in this land,  
 To Phoebus and to me prove not ungracious.  
 When he announced my doom of countless woes,  
 This resting place after long years he promised.  
 Reaching my goal in a land where the Awful Goddesses  
 Would grant me shelter and hospitality, 90  
 There I should close my miserable life,  
 With benefits for those who welcomed me,  
 But ruin for them who drove me forth an outcast.



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And of these things, signs, so he warned, would come,  
 Earthquake, or thunder and lightning from the sky.  
 Now I perceive that it can be naught else  
 Than some truthful omen from you, which thus  
 Has led me to this grove. How else could I  
 Have met with you first in my wanderings—  
 I, the austere, with you that love not wine— 100  
 Or have set me down upon this holy seat  
 Shaped by no tool of man? Then, Goddesses,  
 According to Apollo's word, grant me  
 Some way to close my course and end my life,  
 If I seem not beneath such grace, enslaved  
 To the worst miseries mortals can endure.  
 Hear, kindly daughters of primeval Darkness!  
 Hear, thou who art called the dwelling of great Pallas,  
 Athens, among all cities first in honour!  
 Pity this wretched ghost of Oedipus;  
 For he, the man who once was, is no more. 110

ANTIGONE

Silence! Some aged men I see coming  
 To seek you out here in your resting-place.

OEDIPUS

I will be silent. But lead me from the road  
 And hide me in the wood, till I have heard  
 What the men may be saying. For us strangers  
 It were but prudent first to learn their mood.

*They retire into the wood. Enter CHORUS.*

CHORUS

Search—who was he? Where does he lurk? *Strophe 1*  
 Where has he stolen away, this wretch, of all men  
 The most shameless and insolent? 120  
 On all sides scan the grove;  
 With keen eyes peer around.  
 A wanderer  
 That old man—from afar he comes—  
 A stranger; for he ne'er had else  
 Dared approach the untrodden wood

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Where the terrible maidens dwell,  
 Whose very name we dread to speak:  
 With averted eyes we pass by, 130  
 With lips moving without a sound,  
 No word spoken, in silent awe  
 Of worship. Now we are told that one  
 Is come who reveres them in no wise.  
 But of him naught yet can I see, though I search  
 Far and wide through the grove.  
 I know not where he is hiding.

OEDIPUS, *coming forward with* ANTIGONE  
 I am he that you seek. By sound do I see,  
 As they say of the blind.

CHORUS  
 O! O! 140  
 Dread sight to behold, voice fearful to hear!

OEDIPUS  
 Nay, I beseech you, deem me not lawless.

CHORUS  
 Zeus warder of evil! who is this old man?

OEDIPUS  
 One not so fortunate as to deserve  
 Your envy, O guardians of this land.  
 'Tis plain: else ne'er by another's eyes  
 Thus were I walking,  
 Nor supporting strength upon weakness.

CHORUS  
 Alas, can it be? Wert thou indeed *Antistrophe 1*  
 Born into life with unseeing eyes?—a curst life, 150  
 A long life, so it must have been.  
 But a new curse shalt thou not  
 To old curses add today.  
 So halt there.  
 No further! nor intrude within  
 The silent depth of the grassy lawns  
 Of yonder glade where the bowl of pure