

Oedipus at Colonus

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SOPHOCLES

RYERSON UNIVERSITY
TORONTO



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- Relevance to post-secondary courses taught in Ontario
- Frequency of appearance on syllabi listed in the [Open Syllabus Project](#)
- Proposed usage in open assignments in courses at Ryerson and Brock universities during the Fall 2021 semester
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Introduction to the Book

PUBLIC DOMAIN CORE COLLECTION TEAM

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PUBLIC DOMAIN CORE COLLECTION TEAM

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Acknowledgements

PUBLIC DOMAIN CORE COLLECTION TEAM

The Public Domain Core Collection Project would not have been possible without the enthusiastic collaboration between staff, faculty members and students at Ryerson and Brock universities. We came together with a shared desire to make commonly used public domain texts more accessible to instructors and students in our institutions, Ontario and beyond. We also wanted to encourage instructors to use the texts as a basis for open pedagogy assignments with the aim of empowering students to become knowledge creators rather than just knowledge consumers.

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Argument

Oedipus, the blind and banished King of Thebes, has come in his wanderings to Colonus, a deme of Athens, led by his daughter Antigone. He sits to rest on a rock just within a sacred grove of the Furies and is bidden depart by a passing native. But Oedipus, instructed by an oracle that he had reached his final resting-place, refuses to stir, and the stranger consents to go and consult the Elders of Colonus (the Chorus of the Play). Conducted to the spot they pity at first the blind beggar and his daughter, but on learning his name they are horror-stricken and order him to quit the land. He appeals to the world-famed hospitality of Athens and hints at the blessings that his coming will confer on the State. They agree to await the decision of King Theseus. From Theseus Oedipus craves protection in life and burial in Attic soil; the benefits that will accrue shall be told later. Theseus departs having promised to aid and befriend him. No sooner has he gone than Creon enters with an armed guard who seize Antigone and carry her off (Ismene, the other sister, they have already captured) and he is about to lay hands on Oedipus, when Theseus, who has heard the tumult, hurries up and, upbraiding Creon for his lawless act, threatens to detain him till he has shown where the captives are and restored them. In the next scene Theseus returns bringing with him the rescued maidens. He informs Oedipus that a stranger who has taken sanctuary at the altar of Poseidon wishes to see him. It is Polyneices who has come to crave his father's forgiveness and blessing, knowing by an oracle that victory will fall to the side that Oedipus espouses. But Oedipus spurns the hypocrite, and invokes a dire curse on both his unnatural sons. A sudden clap of thunder is heard, and as peal follows peal, Oedipus is aware that his hour is come and bids Antigone summon Theseus. Self-guided he leads the way to the spot where death should overtake him, attended by Theseus and his daughters. Halfway he bids his daughters farewell, and what

followed none but Theseus knew. He was not (so the Messenger reports) for the gods took him.

Dramatis Personae

Oedipus, banished King of Thebes.

Antigone, his daughter.

Ismene, his daughter.

Theseus, King of Athens.

Creon, brother of Jocasta, now reigning at Thebes.

Polyneices, elder son of Oedipus.

Stranger, a native of Colonus.

Messenger, an attendant of Theseus.

Chorus, citizens of Colonus.

Oedipus at Colonus

Enter the blind OEDIPUS led by his daughter, ANTIGONE.

OEDIPUS

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

ANTIGONE

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

OEDIPUS

Guide these dark steps and seat me there secure.

ANTIGONE

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

OEDIPUS

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

ANTIGONE

Athens I recognize, but not the spot.

OEDIPUS

That much we heard from every wayfarer.

ANTIGONE

Shall I go on and ask about the place?

OEDIPUS

Yes, daughter, if it be inhabited.

ANTIGONE

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

OEDIPUS

What, moving hitherward and on his way?

ANTIGONE

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

[Enter STRANGER]

OEDIPUS

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

STRANGER

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

OEDIPUS

What is the site, to what god dedicate?

STRANGER

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

OEDIPUS

Tell me the awful name I should invoke?

STRANGER

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

OEDIPUS

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

STRANGER

What word is this?

OEDIPUS

The watchword of my fate.

STRANGER

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

OEDIPUS

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

STRANGER

Ask; your request shall not be scorned by me.

OEDIPUS

How call you then the place wherein we bide?

STRANGER

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

OEDIPUS

Thou sayest there are dwellers in these parts?

STRANGER

Surely; they bear the name of yonder god.

OEDIPUS

Ruled by a king or by the general voice?

STRANGER

The lord of Athens is our over-lord.

OEDIPUS

Who is this monarch, great in word and might?

STRANGER

Theseus, the son of Aegeus our late king.

OEDIPUS

Might one be sent from you to summon him?

STRANGER

Wherefore? To tell him aught or urge his coming?

OEDIPUS

Say a slight service may avail him much.

STRANGER

How can he profit from a sightless man?

OEDIPUS

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

STRANGER

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

[Exit STRANGER]

OEDIPUS

Tell me, my daughter, has the stranger gone?

ANTIGONE

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

OEDIPUS

Stern-visaged queens, since coming to this land
First in your sanctuary I bent the knee,
Frown not on me or Phoebus, who, when erst
He told me all my miseries to come,
Spake of this respite after many years,
Some haven in a far-off land, a rest
Vouchsafed at last by dread divinities.
“There,” said he, “shalt thou round thy weary life,
A blessing to the land wherein thou dwell'st,

But to the land that cast thee forth, a curse.”
And of my weird he promised signs should come,
Earthquake, or thunderclap, or lightning flash.
And now I recognize as yours the sign
That led my wanderings to this your grove;
Else had I never lighted on you first,
A wineless man on your seat of native rock.
O goddesses, fulfill Apollo’s word,
Grant me some consummation of my life,
If haply I appear not all too vile,
A thrall to sorrow worse than any slave.
Hear, gentle daughters of primeval Night,
Hear, namesake of great Pallas; Athens, first
Of cities, pity this dishonored shade,
The ghost of him who once was Oedipus.

ANTIGONE

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

OEDIPUS

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

[Enter CHORUS]

CHORUS

(Str. 1)

Ha! Where is he? Look around!
Every nook and corner scan!
He the all-presumptuous man,
Whither vanished? search the ground!
A wayfarer, I ween,
A wayfarer, no countryman of ours,
That old man must have been;
Never had native dared to tempt the Powers,
Or enter their demesne,

The Maids in awe of whom each mortal cowers,
Whose name no voice betrays nor cry,
And as we pass them with averted eye,
We move hushed lips in reverent piety.
But now some godless man,
'Tis rumored, here abides;
The precincts through I scan,
Yet wot not where he hides,
The wretch profane!
I search and search in vain.

OEDIPUS

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

CHORUS

O dread to see and dread to hear!

OEDIPUS

Oh sirs, I am no outlaw under ban.

CHORUS

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

OEDIPUS

No favorite of fate,

That ye should envy his estate,
O, sirs, would any happy mortal, say,
Grope by the light of other eyes his way,
Or face the storm upon so frail a stay?

CHORUS

(Ant. 1)

Wast thou then sightless from thy birth?
Evil, methinks, and long
Thy pilgrimage on earth.
Yet add not curse to curse and wrong to wrong.
I warn thee, trespass not
Within this hallowed spot,
Lest thou shouldst find the silent grassy glade
Where offerings are laid,

Bowls of spring water mingled with sweet mead.
Thou must not stay,
Come, come away,
Tired wanderer, dost thou heed?
(We are far off, but sure our voice can reach.)
If aught thou wouldst beseech,
Speak where 'tis right; till then refrain from speech.

OEDIPUS

Daughter, what counsel should we now pursue?

ANTIGONE

We must obey and do as here they do.

OEDIPUS

Thy hand then!

ANTIGONE

Here, O father, is my hand,

OEDIPUS

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

CHORUS

(Str. 2)

Against thy will no man shall drive thee hence.

OEDIPUS

Shall I go further?

CHORUS

Aye.

OEDIPUS

What further still?

CHORUS

Lead maiden, thou canst guide him where we will.

ANTIGONE

* * * * *

1. The Greek text for the passages marked here and later in the text using ***** have been lost.

OEDIPUS

* * * * *

ANTIGONE

* * * * *

Follow with blind steps, father, as I lead.

OEDIPUS

* * * * *

CHORUS

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

OEDIPUS

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

CHORUS

(Ant. 2)

Halt! Go no further than that rocky floor.

OEDIPUS

Stay where I now am?

CHORUS

Yes, advance no more.

OEDIPUS

May I sit down?

CHORUS

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

ANTIGONE

This is my office, father, O incline—

OEDIPUS

Ah me! ah me!

ANTIGONE

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

OEDIPUS

Woe on my fate unblest!

CHORUS

Wanderer, now thou art at rest,
Tell me of thy birth and home,
From what far country art thou come,
Led on thy weary way, declare!

OEDIPUS

Strangers, I have no country. O forbear—

CHORUS

What is it, old man, that thou wouldst conceal?

OEDIPUS

Forbear, nor urge me further to reveal—

CHORUS

Why this reluctance?

OEDIPUS

Dread my lineage.

CHORUS

Say!

OEDIPUS

What must I answer, child, ah welladay!

CHORUS

Say of what stock thou comest, what man's son—

OEDIPUS

Ah me, my daughter, now we are undone!

ANTIGONE

Speak, for thou standest on the slippery verge.

OEDIPUS

I will; no plea for silence can I urge.

CHORUS

Will neither speak? Come, Sir, why dally thus!

OEDIPUS

Know'st one of Laius'—

CHORUS

Ha? Who!

OEDIPUS

Seed of Labdacus—

CHORUS

Oh Zeus!

OEDIPUS

The hapless Oedipus.

CHORUS

Art he?

OEDIPUS

Whate'er I utter, have no fear of me.

CHORUS

Begone!

OEDIPUS

O wretched me!

CHORUS

Begone!

OEDIPUS

O daughter, what will hap anon?

CHORUS

Forth from our borders speed ye both!

OEDIPUS

How keep you then your troth?

CHORUS

Heaven's justice never smites

Him who ill with ill requites.

But if guile with guile contend,

Bane, not blessing, is the end.

Arise, begone and take thee hence straightway,

Lest on our land a heavier curse thou lay.

ANTIGONE

O sirs! ye suffered not my father blind,

Albeit gracious and to ruth inclined,

Knowing the deeds he wrought, not innocent,

But with no ill intent;

Yet heed a maiden's moan

Who pleads for him alone;
My eyes, not reft of sight,
Plead with you as a daughter's might
You are our providence,
O make us not go hence!
O with a gracious nod
Grant us the nigh despaired-of boon we crave?
Hear us, O hear,
But all that ye hold dear,
Wife, children, homestead, hearth and God!
Where will you find one, search ye ne'er so well.
Who 'scapes perdition if a god impel!

CHORUS

Surely we pity thee and him alike
Daughter of Oedipus, for your distress;
But as we reverence the decrees of Heaven
We cannot say aught other than we said.

OEDIPUS

O what avails renown or fair repute?
Are they not vanity? For, look you, now
Athens is held of States the most devout,
Athens alone gives hospitality
And shelters the vexed stranger, so men say.
Have I found so? I whom ye dislodged
First from my seat of rock and now would drive
Forth from your land, dreading my name alone;
For me you surely dread not, nor my deeds,
Deeds of a man more sinned against than sinning,
As I might well convince you, were it meet
To tell my mother's story and my sire's,
The cause of this your fear. Yet am I then
A villain born because in self-defense,
Striken, I struck the striker back again?
E'en had I known, no villainy 'twould prove:
But all unwitting whither I went, I went—

To ruin; my destroyers knew it well,
Wherefore, I pray you, sirs, in Heaven's name,
Even as ye bade me quit my seat, defend me.
O pay not a lip service to the gods
And wrong them of their dues. Bethink ye well,
The eye of Heaven beholds the just of men,
And the unjust, nor ever in this world
Has one sole godless sinner found escape.
Stand then on Heaven's side and never blot
Athens' fair scutcheon by abetting wrong.
I came to you a suppliant, and you pledged
Your honor; O preserve me to the end,
O let not this marred visage do me wrong!
A holy and god-fearing man is here
Whose coming purports comfort for your folk.
And when your chief arrives, who'er he be,
Then shall ye have my story and know all.
Meanwhile I pray you do me no despite.

CHORUS

The plea thou urgest, needs must give us pause,
Set forth in weighty argument, but we
Must leave the issue with the ruling powers.

OEDIPUS

Where is he, strangers, he who sways the realm?

CHORUS

In his ancestral seat; a messenger,
The same who sent us here, is gone for him.

OEDIPUS

And think you he will have such care or thought
For the blind stranger as to come himself?

CHORUS

Aye, that he will, when once he learns thy name.

OEDIPUS

But who will bear him word!

CHORUS

The way is long,
And many travelers pass to speed the news.
Be sure he'll hear and hasten, never fear;
So wide and far thy name is noised abroad,
That, were he ne'er so spent and loth to move,
He would bestir him when he hears of thee.

OEDIPUS

Well, may he come with blessing to his State
And me! Who serves his neighbor serves himself. ²

ANTIGONE

Zeus! What is this? What can I say or think?

OEDIPUS

What now, Antigone?

ANTIGONE

I see a woman

Riding upon a colt of Aetna's breed;
She wears for headgear a Thessalian hat
To shade her from the sun. Who can it be?
She or a stranger? Do I wake or dream?
'This she; 'tis not—I cannot tell, alack;
It is no other! Now her bright'ning glance
Greets me with recognition, yes, 'tis she,
Herself, Ismene!

OEDIPUS

Ha! what say ye, child?

ANTIGONE

That I behold thy daughter and my sister,
And thou wilt know her straightway by her voice.

[Enter ISMENE]

2. To avoid the blessing, still a secret, he resorts to a commonplace; literally, "For what generous man is not (in befriending others) a friend to himself?"

ISMENE

Father and sister, names to me most sweet,
How hardly have I found you, hardly now
When found at last can see you through my tears!

OEDIPUS

Art come, my child?

ISMENE

O father, sad thy plight!

OEDIPUS

Child, thou art here?

ISMENE

Yes, 'twas a weary way.

OEDIPUS

Touch me, my child.

ISMENE

I give a hand to both.

OEDIPUS

O children—sisters!

ISMENE

O disastrous plight!

OEDIPUS

Her plight and mine?

ISMENE

Aye, and my own no less.

OEDIPUS

What brought thee, daughter?

ISMENE

Father, care for thee.

OEDIPUS

A daughter's yearning?

ISMENE

Yes, and I had news

I would myself deliver, so I came

With the one thrall who yet is true to me.

OEDIPUS

Thy valiant brothers, where are they at need?

ISMENE

They are—enough, 'tis now their darkest hour.

OEDIPUS

Out on the twain! The thoughts and actions all
Are framed and modeled on Egyptian ways.
For there the men sit at the loom indoors
While the wives slave abroad for daily bread.
So you, my children—those whom I behooved
To bear the burden, stay at home like girls,
While in their stead my daughters toil and drudge,
Lightening their father's misery. The one
Since first she grew from girlish feebleness
To womanhood has been the old man's guide
And shared my weary wandering, roaming oft
Hungry and footsore through wild forest ways,
In drenching rains and under scorching suns,
Careless herself of home and ease, if so
Her sire might have her tender ministry.
And thou, my child, whilom thou wentest forth,
Eluding the Cadmeians' vigilance,
To bring thy father all the oracles
Concerning Oedipus, and didst make thyself
My faithful lieger, when they banished me.
And now what mission summons thee from home,
What news, Ismene, hast thou for thy father?
This much I know, thou com'st not empty-handed,
Without a warning of some new alarm.

ISMENE

The toil and trouble, father, that I bore
To find thy lodging-place and how thou farest,
I spare thee; surely 'twere a double pain
To suffer, first in act and then in telling;
'Tis the misfortune of thine ill-starred sons
I come to tell thee. At the first they willed

To leave the throne to Creon, minded well
Thus to remove the inveterate curse of old,
A canker that infected all thy race.
But now some god and an infatuate soul
Have stirred betwixt them a mad rivalry
To grasp at sovereignty and kingly power.
Today the hot-branded youth, the younger born,
Is keeping Polyneices from the throne,
His elder, and has thrust him from the land.
The banished brother (so all Thebes reports)
Fled to the vale of Argos, and by help
Of new alliance there and friends in arms,
Swears he will stablish Argos straight as lord
Of the Cadmeian land, or, if he fail,
Exalt the victor to the stars of heaven.
This is no empty tale, but deadly truth,
My father; and how long thy agony,
Ere the gods pity thee, I cannot tell.

OEDIPUS

Hast thou indeed then entertained a hope
The gods at last will turn and rescue me?

ISMENE

Yea, so I read these latest oracles.

OEDIPUS

What oracles? What hath been uttered, child?

ISMENE

Thy country (so it runs) shall yearn in time
To have thee for their weal alive or dead.

OEDIPUS

And who could gain by such a one as I?

ISMENE

On thee, 'tis said, their sovereignty depends.

OEDIPUS

So, when I cease to be, my worth begins.

ISMENE

The gods, who once abased, uplift thee now.
OEDIPUS
Poor help to raise an old man fallen in youth.
ISMENE
Howe'er that be, 'tis for this cause alone
That Creon comes to thee—and comes anon.
OEDIPUS
With what intent, my daughter? Tell me plainly.
ISMENE
To plant thee near the Theban land, and so
Keep thee within their grasp, yet now allow
Thy foot to pass beyond their boundaries.
OEDIPUS
What gain they, if I lay outside?
OEDIPUS
Thy tomb,
If disappointed, brings on them a curse.
OEDIPUS
It needs no god to tell what's plain to sense.
ISMENE
Therefore they fain would have thee close at hand,
Not where thou wouldst be master of thyself.
OEDIPUS
Mean they to shroud my bones in Theban dust?
ISMENE
Nay, father, guilt of kinsman's blood forbids.
OEDIPUS
Then never shall they be my masters, never!
ISMENE
Thebes, thou shalt rue this bitterly some day!
OEDIPUS
When what conjunction comes to pass, my child?
ISMENE

Thy angry wraith, when at thy tomb they stand.³
 OEDIPUS
 And who hath told thee what thou tell'st me, child?
 ISMENE
 Envoys who visited the Delphic hearth.
 OEDIPUS
 Hath Phoebus spoken thus concerning me?
 ISMENE
 So say the envoys who returned to Thebes.
 OEDIPUS
 And can a son of mine have heard of this?
 ISMENE
 Yea, both alike, and know its import well.
 OEDIPUS
 They knew it, yet the ignoble greed of rule
 Outweighed all longing for their sire's return.
 ISMENE
 Grievous thy words, yet I must own them true.
 OEDIPUS
 Then may the gods ne'er quench their fatal feud,
 And mine be the arbitrament of the fight,
 For which they now are arming, spear to spear;
 That neither he who holds the scepter now
 May keep this throne, nor he who fled the realm
 Return again. *They* never raised a hand,
 When I their sire was thrust from hearth and home,

3. Creon desires to bury Oedipus on the confines of Thebes so as to avoid the pollution and yet offer due rites at his tomb. Ismene tells him of the latest oracle and interprets to him its purport, that some day the Theban invaders of Athens will be routed in a battle near the grave of Oedipus.

When I was banned and banished, what recked they?
Say you 'twas done at my desire, a grace
Which the state, yielding to my wish, allowed?
Not so; for, mark you, on that very day
When in the tempest of my soul I craved
Death, even death by stoning, none appeared
To further that wild longing, but anon,
When time had numbed my anguish and I felt
My wrath had all outrun those errors past,
Then, then it was the city went about
By force to oust me, respited for years;
And then my sons, who should as sons have helped,
Did nothing: and, one little word from them
Was all I needed, and they spoke no word,
But let me wander on for evermore,
A banished man, a beggar. These two maids
Their sisters, girls, gave all their sex could give,
Food and safe harborage and filial care;
While their two brethren sacrificed their sire
For lust of power and sceptred sovereignty.
No! me they ne'er shall win for an ally,
Nor will this Theban kingship bring them gain;
That know I from this maiden's oracles,
And those old prophecies concerning me,
Which Phoebus now at length has brought to pass.
Come Creon then, come all the mightiest
In Thebes to seek me; for if ye my friends,
Championed by those dread Powers indigenous,
Espouse my cause; then for the State ye gain
A great deliverer, for my foemen bane.

CHORUS

Our pity, Oedipus, thou needs must move,
Thou and these maidens; and the stronger plea
Thou urgest, as the savior of our land,
Disposes me to counsel for thy weal.

OEDIPUS

Aid me, kind sirs; I will do all you bid.

CHORUS

First make atonement to the deities,
Whose grove by trespass thou didst first profane.

OEDIPUS

After what manner, stranger? Teach me, pray.

CHORUS

Make a libation first of water fetched
With undefiled hands from living spring.

OEDIPUS

And after I have gotten this pure draught?

CHORUS

Bowls thou wilt find, the carver's handiwork;
Crown thou the rims and both the handles crown—

OEDIPUS

With olive shoots or blocks of wool, or how?

CHORUS

With wool from fleece of yearling freshly shorn.

OEDIPUS

What next? how must I end the ritual?

CHORUS

Pour thy libation, turning to the dawn.

OEDIPUS

Pouring it from the urns whereof ye spake?

CHORUS

Yea, in three streams; and be the last bowl drained
To the last drop.

OEDIPUS

And wherewith shall I fill it,

Ere in its place I set it? This too tell.

CHORUS

With water and with honey; add no wine.

OEDIPUS

And when the embowered earth hath drunk thereof?

CHORUS

Then lay upon it thrice nine olive sprays
With both thy hands, and offer up this prayer.

OEDIPUS

I fain would hear it; that imports the most.

CHORUS

That, as we call them Gracious, they would deign
To grant the suppliant their saving grace.
So pray thyself or whoso pray for thee,
In whispered accents, not with lifted voice;
Then go and look back. Do as I bid,
And I shall then be bold to stand thy friend;
Else, stranger, I should have my fears for thee.

OEDIPUS

Hear ye, my daughters, what these strangers say?

ANTIGONE

We listened, and attend thy bidding, father.

OEDIPUS

I cannot go, disabled as I am
Doubly, by lack of strength and lack of sight;
But one of you may do it in my stead;
For one, I trow, may pay the sacrifice
Of thousands, if his heart be leal and true.
So to your work with speed, but leave me not
Untended; for this frame is all too weak
To move without the help of guiding hand.

ISMENE

Then I will go perform these rites, but where
To find the spot, this have I yet to learn.

CHORUS

Beyond this grove; if thou hast need of aught,
The guardian of the close will lend his aid.

ISMENE

I go, and thou, Antigone, meanwhile

Must guard our father. In a parent's cause
Toil, if there be toil, is of no account.

[Exit ISMENE]

CHORUS

(Str. 1)

Ill it is, stranger, to awake
Pain that long since has ceased to ache,
And yet I fain would hear—

OEDIPUS

What thing?

CHORUS

Thy tale of cruel suffering
For which no cure was found,
The fate that held thee bound.

OEDIPUS

O bid me not (as guest I claim
This grace) expose my shame.

CHORUS

The tale is bruited far and near,
And echoes still from ear to ear.
The truth, I fain would hear.

OEDIPUS

Ah me!

CHORUS

I prithee yield.

OEDIPUS

Ah me!

CHORUS

Grant my request, I granted all to thee.

OEDIPUS

(Ant. 1)

Know then I suffered ills most vile, but none
(So help me Heaven!) from acts in malice done.

CHORUS

Say how.

OEDIPUS

The State around
An all unwitting bridegroom bound
An impious marriage chain;
That was my bane.

CHORUS

Didst thou in sooth then share
A bed incestuous with her that bare—

OEDIPUS

It stabs me like a sword,
That two-edged word,
O stranger, but these maids—my own—

CHORUS

Say on.

OEDIPUS

Two daughters, curses twain.

CHORUS

Oh God!

OEDIPUS

Sprung from the wife and mother's travail-pain.

CHORUS

(Str. 2)

What, then thy offspring are at once—

OEDIPUS

Too true.

Their father's very sister's too.

CHORUS

Oh horror!

OEDIPUS

Horrors from the boundless deep
Back on my soul in refluent surges sweep.

CHORUS

Thou hast endured—

OEDIPUS

Intolerable woe.

CHORUS

And sinned—

OEDIPUS

I sinned not.

CHORUS

How so?

OEDIPUS

I served the State; would I had never won
That graceless grace by which I was undone.

CHORUS

(Ant. 2)

And next, unhappy man, thou hast shed blood?

OEDIPUS

Must ye hear more?

CHORUS

A father's?

OEDIPUS

Flood on flood

Whelms me; that word's a second mortal blow.

CHORUS

Murderer!

OEDIPUS

Yes, a murderer, but know—

CHORUS

What canst thou plead?

OEDIPUS

A plea of justice.

CHORUS

How?

OEDIPUS

I slew who else would me have slain;
I slew without intent,
A wretch, but innocent
In the law's eye, I stand, without a stain.

CHORUS

Behold our sovereign, Theseus, Aegeus' son,
Comes at thy summons to perform his part.

[Enter THESEUS]

THESEUS

Oft had I heard of thee in times gone by—
The bloody mutilation of thine eyes—
And therefore know thee, son of Laius.
All that I lately gathered on the way
Made my conjecture doubly sure; and now
Thy garb and that marred visage prove to me
That thou art he. So pitying thine estate,
Most ill-starred Oedipus, I fain would know
What is the suit ye urge on me and Athens,
Thou and the helpless maiden at thy side.
Declare it; dire indeed must be the tale
Whereat I should recoil. I too was reared,
Like thee, in exile, and in foreign lands
Wrestled with many perils, no man more.
Wherefore no alien in adversity
Shall seek in vain my succor, nor shalt thou;
I know myself a mortal, and my share
In what the morrow brings no more than thine.

OEDIPUS

Theseus, thy words so apt, so generous
So comfortable, need no long reply
Both who I am and of what lineage sprung,
And from what land I came, thou hast declared.
So without prologue I may utter now
My brief petition, and the tale is told.

THESEUS

Say on, and tell me what I fain would learn.

OEDIPUS

I come to offer thee this woe-worn frame,
A gift not fair to look on; yet its worth
More precious far than any outward show.

THESEUS
What profit dost thou proffer to have brought?
OEDIPUS
Hereafter thou shalt learn, not yet, methinks.
THESEUS
When may we hope to reap the benefit?
OEDIPUS
When I am dead and thou hast buried me.
THESEUS
Thou cravest life's last service; all before—
Is it forgotten or of no account?
OEDIPUS
Yea, the last boon is warrant for the rest.
THESEUS
The grace thou cravest then is small indeed.
OEDIPUS
Nay, weigh it well; the issue is not slight.
THESEUS
Thou meanest that betwixt thy sons and me?
OEDIPUS
Prince, they would fain convey me back to Thebes.
THESEUS
If there be no compulsion, then methinks
To rest in banishment befits not thee.
OEDIPUS
Nay, when I wished it *they* would not consent.
THESEUS
For shame! such temper misbecomes the faller.
OEDIPUS
Chide if thou wilt, but first attend my plea.
THESEUS
Say on, I wait full knowledge ere I judge.
OEDIPUS
O Theseus, I have suffered wrongs on wrongs.
THESEUS

Wouldst tell the old misfortune of thy race?

OEDIPUS

No, that has grown a byword throughout Greece.

THESEUS

What then can be this more than mortal grief?

OEDIPUS

My case stands thus; by my own flesh and blood
I was expelled my country, and can ne'er
Thither return again, a parricide.

THESEUS

Why fetch thee home if thou must needs obey.

THESEUS

What are they threatened by the oracle?

OEDIPUS

Destruction that awaits them in this land.

THESEUS

What can beget ill blood 'twixt them and me?

OEDIPUS

Dear son of Aegeus, to the gods alone
Is given immunity from eld and death;
But nothing else escapes all-ruinous time.
Earth's might decays, the might of men decays,
Honor grows cold, dishonor flourishes,
There is no constancy 'twixt friend and friend,
Or city and city; be it soon or late,
Sweet turns to bitter, hate once more to love.
If now 'tis sunshine betwixt Thebes and thee
And not a cloud, Time in his endless course
Gives birth to endless days and nights, wherein
The merest nothing shall suffice to cut
With serried spears your bonds of amity.
Then shall my slumbering and buried corpse
In its cold grave drink their warm life-blood up,
If Zeus be Zeus and Phoebus still speak true.
No more: 'tis ill to tear aside the veil

Of mysteries; let me cease as I began:
Enough if thou wilt keep thy plighted troth,
Then shall thou ne'er complain that Oedipus
Proved an unprofitable and thankless guest,
Except the gods themselves shall play me false.

CHORUS

The man, my lord, has from the very first
Declared his power to offer to our land
These and like benefits.

THESEUS

Who could reject
The proffered amity of such a friend?
First, he can claim the hospitality
To which by mutual contract we stand pledged:
Next, coming here, a suppliant to the gods,
He pays full tribute to the State and me;
His favors therefore never will I spurn,
But grant him the full rights of citizen;
And, if it suits the stranger here to bide,
I place him in your charge, or if he please
Rather to come with me—choose, Oedipus,
Which of the two thou wilt. Thy choice is mine.

OEDIPUS

Zeus, may the blessing fall on men like these!

THESEUS

What dost thou then decide—to come with me?

OEDIPUS

Yea, were it lawful—but 'tis rather here—

THESEUS

What wouldst thou here? I shall not thwart thy wish.

OEDIPUS

Here shall I vanquish those who cast me forth.

THESEUS

Then were thy presence here a boon indeed.

OEDIPUS

Such shall it prove, if thou fulfill'st thy pledge.

THESEUS

Fear not for me; I shall not play thee false.

OEDIPUS

No need to back thy promise with an oath.

THESEUS

An oath would be no surer than my word.

OEDIPUS

How wilt thou act then?

THESEUS

What is it thou fear'st?

OEDIPUS

My foes will come—

THESEUS

Our friends will look to that.

OEDIPUS

But if thou leave me?

THESEUS

Teach me not my duty.

OEDIPUS

'Tis fear constrains me.

THESEUS

My soul knows no fear!

OEDIPUS

Thou knowest not what threats—

THESEUS

I know that none

Shall hale thee hence in my despite. Such threats

Vented in anger oft, are blusterers,

An idle breath, forgot when sense returns.

And for thy foemen, though their words were brave,

Boasting to bring thee back, they are like to find

The seas between us wide and hard to sail.

Such my firm purpose, but in any case

Take heart, since Phoebus sent thee here. My name,
Though I be distant, warrants thee from harm.

CHORUS

(Str. 1)

Thou hast come to a steed-famed land for rest,
O stranger worn with toil,
To a land of all lands the goodliest
Colonus' glistening soil.
'Tis the haunt of the clear-voiced nightingale,
Who hid in her bower, among
The wine-dark ivy that wreathes the vale,
Trilleth her ceaseless song;
And she loves, where the clustering berries nod
O'er a sunless, windless glade,
The spot by no mortal footstep trod,
The pleasance kept for the Bacchic god,
Where he holds each night his revels wild
With the nymphs who fostered the lusty child.

(Ant. 1)

And fed each morn by the pearly dew
The starred narcissi shine,
And a wreath with the crocus' golden hue
For the Mother and Daughter twine.
And never the sleepless fountains cease
That feed Cephisus' stream,
But they swell earth's bosom with quick increase,
And their wave hath a crystal gleam.
And the Muses' quire will never disdain
To visit this heaven-favored plain,
Nor the Cyprian queen of the golden rein.

(Str. 2)

And here there grows, unpruned, untamed,
Terror to foemen's spear,
A tree in Asian soil unnamed,
By Pelops' Dorian isle unclaimed,

Self-nurtured year by year;
'Tis the grey-leaved olive that feeds our boys;
Nor youth nor withering age destroys
The plant that the Olive Planter tends
And the Grey-eyed Goddess herself defends.

(Ant. 2)

Yet another gift, of all gifts the most
Prized by our fatherland, we boast—
The might of the horse, the might of the sea;
Our fame, Poseidon, we owe to thee,
Son of Kronos, our king divine,
Who in these highways first didst fit
For the mouth of horses the iron bit;
Thou too hast taught us to fashion meet
For the arm of the rower the oar-blade fleet,
Swift as the Nereids' hundred feet
As they dance along the brine.

ANTIGONE

Oh land extolled above all lands, 'tis now
For thee to make these glorious titles good.

OEDIPUS

Why this appeal, my daughter?

ANTIGONE

Father, lo!

Creon approaches with his company.

OEDIPUS

Fear not, it shall be so; if we are old,
This country's vigor has no touch of age.

[Enter CREON with attendants]

CREON

Burghers, my noble friends, ye take alarm
At my approach (I read it in your eyes),
Fear nothing and refrain from angry words.
I come with no ill purpose; I am old,
And know the city whither I am come,

Without a peer amongst the powers of Greece.
It was by reason of my years that I
Was chosen to persuade your guest and bring
Him back to Thebes; not the delegate
Of one man, but commissioned by the State,
Since of all Thebans I have most bewailed,
Being his kinsman, his most grievous woes.
O listen to me, luckless Oedipus,
Come home! The whole Cadmeian people claim
With right to have thee back, I most of all,
For most of all (else were I vile indeed)
I mourn for thy misfortunes, seeing thee
An aged outcast, wandering on and on,
A beggar with one handmaid for thy stay.
Ah! who had e'er imagined she could fall
To such a depth of misery as this,
To tend in penury thy stricken frame,
A virgin ripe for wedlock, but unwed,
A prey for any wanton ravisher?
Seems it not cruel this reproach I cast
On thee and on myself and all the race?
Aye, but an open shame cannot be hid.
Hide it, O hide it, Oedipus, thou canst.
O, by our fathers' gods, consent I pray;
Come back to Thebes, come to thy father's home,
Bid Athens, as is meet, a fond farewell;
Thebes thy old foster-mother claims thee first.

OEDIPUS

O front of brass, thy subtle tongue would twist
To thy advantage every plea of right
Why try thy arts on me, why spread again
Toils where 'twould gall me sorest to be snared?
In old days when by self-wrought woes distraught,
I yearned for exile as a glad release,
Thy will refused the favor then I craved.

But when my frenzied grief had spent its force,
And I was fain to taste the sweets of home,
Then thou wouldst thrust me from my country, then
These ties of kindred were by thee ignored;
And now again when thou behold'st this State
And all its kindly people welcome me,
Thou seek'st to part us, wrapping in soft words
Hard thoughts. And yet what pleasure canst thou find
In forcing friendship on unwilling foes?
Suppose a man refused to grant some boon
When you importuned him, and afterwards
When you had got your heart's desire, consented,
Granting a grace from which all grace had fled,
Would not such favor seem an empty boon?
Yet such the boon thou profferest now to me,
Fair in appearance, but when tested false.
Yea, I will proved thee false, that these may hear;
Thou art come to take me, not to take me home,
But plant me on thy borders, that thy State
May so escape annoyance from this land.
That thou shalt never gain, but *this* instead—
My ghost to haunt thy country without end;
And for my sons, this heritage—no more—
Just room to die in. Have not I more skill
Than thou to draw the horoscope of Thebes?
Are not my teachers surer guides than thine—
Great Phoebus and the sire of Phoebus, Zeus?
Thou art a messenger suborned, thy tongue
Is sharper than a sword's edge, yet thy speech
Will bring thee more defeats than victories.
Howbeit, I know I waste my words—begone,
And leave me here; whate'er may be my lot,
He lives not ill who lives withal content.

CREON

Which loses in this parley, I o'erthrown
By thee, or thou who overthrow'st thyself?

OEDIPUS

I shall be well contented if thy suit
Fails with these strangers, as it has with me.

CREON

Unhappy man, will years ne'er make thee wise?
Must thou live on to cast a slur on age?

OEDIPUS

Thou hast a glib tongue, but no honest man,
Methinks, can argue well on any side.

CREON

'Tis one thing to speak much, another well.

OEDIPUS

Thy words, forsooth, are few and all well aimed!

CREON

Not for a man indeed with wits like thine.

OEDIPUS

Depart! I bid thee in these burghers' name,
And prowl no longer round me to blockade
My destined harbor.

CREON

I protest to these,
Not thee, and for thine answer to thy kin,
If e'er I take thee—

OEDIPUS

Who against their will
Could take me?

CREON

Though untaken thou shalt smart.

OEDIPUS

What power hast thou to execute this threat?

CREON

One of thy daughters is already seized,
The other I will carry off anon.

OEDIPUS

Woe, woe!

CREON

This is but prelude to thy woes.

OEDIPUS

Hast thou my child?

CREON

And soon shall have the other.

OEDIPUS

Ho, friends! ye will not surely play me false?

Chase this ungodly villain from your land.

CHORUS

Hence, stranger, hence avaunt! Thou doest wrong
In this, and wrong in all that thou hast done.

CREON (to his guards)

'Tis time by force to carry off the girl,
If she refuse of her free will to go.

ANTIGONE

Ah, woe is me! where shall I fly, where find
Succor from gods or men?

CHORUS

What would'st thou, stranger?

CREON

I meddle not with him, but her who is mine.

OEDIPUS

O princes of the land!

CHORUS

Sir, thou dost wrong.

CREON

Nay, right.

CHORUS

How right?

CREON

I take but what is mine.

OEDIPUS

Help, Athens!
CHORUS
What means this, sirrah? quick unhand her, or
We'll fight it out.
CREON
Back!
CHORUS
Not till thou forbear.
CREON
'Tis war with Thebes if I am touched or harmed.
OEDIPUS
Did I not warn thee?
CHORUS
Quick, unhand the maid!
CREON
Command your minions; I am not your slave.
CHORUS
Desist, I bid thee.
CREON (to the guard)
And O bid thee march!
CHORUS
To the rescue, one and all!
Rally, neighbors to my call!
See, the foe is at the gate!
Rally to defend the State.
ANTIGONE
Ah, woe is me, they drag me hence, O friends.
OEDIPUS
Where art thou, daughter?
ANTIGONE
Haled along by force.
OEDIPUS
Thy hands, my child!
ANTIGONE
They will not let me, father.

CREON

Away with her!

OEDIPUS

Ah, woe is me, ah woe!

CREON

So those two crutches shall no longer serve thee
For further roaming. Since it pleaseth thee
To triumph o'er thy country and thy friends
Who mandate, though a prince, I here discharge,
Enjoy thy triumph; soon or late thou'lt find
Thou art an enemy to thyself, both now
And in time past, when in despite of friends
Thou gav'st the rein to passion, still thy bane.

CHORUS

Hold there, sir stranger!

CREON

Hands off, have a care.

CHORUS

Restore the maidens, else thou goest not.

CREON

Then Thebes will take a dearer surety soon;
I will lay hands on more than these two maids.

CHORUS

What canst thou further?

CREON

Carry off this man.

CHORUS

Brave words!

CREON

And deeds forthwith shall make them good.

CHORUS

Unless perchance our sovereign intervene.

OEDIPUS

O shameless voice! Would'st lay an hand on me?

CREON

Silence, I bid thee!

OEDIPUS

Goddesses, allow

Thy suppliant to utter yet one curse!

Wretch, now my eyes are gone thou hast torn away

The helpless maiden who was eyes to me;

For these to thee and all thy cursed race

May the great Sun, whose eye is everywhere,

Grant length of days and old age like to mine.

CREON

Listen, O men of Athens, mark ye this?

OEDIPUS

They mark us both and understand that I

Wronged by the deeds defend myself with words.

CREON

Nothing shall curb my will; though I be old

And single-handed, I will have this man.

OEDIPUS

O woe is me!

CHORUS

Thou art a bold man, stranger, if thou think'st

To execute thy purpose.

CREON

So I do.

CHORUS

Then shall I deem this State no more a State.

CREON

With a just quarrel weakness conquers might.

OEDIPUS

Ye hear his words?

CHORUS

Aye words, but not yet deeds,

Zeus knoweth!

CREON

Zeus may haply know, not thou.

CHORUS

Insolence!

CREON

Insolence that thou must bear.

CHORUS

Haste ye princes, sound the alarm!

Men of Athens, arm ye, arm!

Quickly to the rescue come

Ere the robbers get them home.

[Enter THESEUS]

THESEUS

Why this outcry? What is forward? wherefore was I called away

From the altar of Poseidon, lord of your Colonus? Say!

On what errand have I hurried hither without stop or stay.

OEDIPUS

Dear friend—those accents tell me who thou art—

Yon man but now hath done me a foul wrong.

THESEUS

What is this wrong and who hath wrought it? Speak.

OEDIPUS

Creon who stands before thee. He it is
Hath robbed me of my all, my daughters twain.

THESEUS

What means this?

OEDIPUS

Thou hast heard my tale of wrongs.

THESEUS

Ho! hasten to the altars, one of you.
Command my liegemen leave the sacrifice
And hurry, foot and horse, with rein unchecked,
To where the paths that packmen use diverge,
Lest the two maidens slip away, and I
Become a mockery to this my guest,
As one despoiled by force. Quick, as I bid.
As for this stranger, had I let my rage,

Justly provoked, have play, he had not 'scaped
Scathless and uncorrected at my hands.
But now the laws to which himself appealed,
These and none others shall adjudicate.
Thou shalt not quit this land, till thou hast fetched
The maidens and produced them in my sight.
Thou hast offended both against myself
And thine own race and country. Having come
Unto a State that champions right and asks
For every action warranty of law,
Thou hast set aside the custom of the land,
And like some freebooter art carrying off
What plunder pleases thee, as if forsooth
Thou thoughtest this a city without men,
Or manned by slaves, and me a thing of naught.
Yet not from Thebes this villainy was learnt;
Thebes is not wont to breed unrighteous sons,
Nor would she praise thee, if she learnt that thou
Wert robbing me—aye and the gods to boot,
Haling by force their suppliants, poor maids.
Were I on Theban soil, to prosecute
The justest claim imaginable, I
Would never wrest by violence my own
Without sanction of your State or King;
I should behave as fits an outlander
Living amongst a foreign folk, but thou
Shamest a city that deserves it not,
Even thine own, and plentitude of years
Have made of thee an old man and a fool.
Therefore again I charge thee as before,
See that the maidens are restored at once,
Unless thou would'st continue here by force
And not by choice a sojourner; so much
I tell thee home and what I say, I mean.

CHORUS

Thy case is perilous; though by birth and race
Thou should'st be just, thou plainly doest wrong.

CREON

Not deeming this city void of men
Or counsel, son of Aegeus, as thou say'st
I did what I have done; rather I thought
Your people were not like to set such store
by kin of mine and keep them 'gainst my will.
Nor would they harbor, so I stood assured,
A godless parricide, a reprobate
Convicted of incestuous marriage ties.
For on her native hill of Ares here
(I knew your far-famed Areopagus)
Sits Justice, and permits not vagrant folk
To stay within your borders. In that faith
I hunted down my quarry; and e'en then
I had refrained but for the curses dire
Wherewith he banned my kinsfolk and myself:
Such wrong, methought, had warrant for my act.
Anger has no old age but only death;
The dead alone can feel no touch of spite.
So thou must work thy will; my cause is just
But weak without allies; yet will I try,
Old as I am, to answer deeds with deeds.

OEDIPUS

O shameless railer, think'st thou this abuse
Defames my grey hairs rather than thine own?
Murder and incest, deeds of horror, all
Thou blurtest forth against me, all I have borne,
No willing sinner; so it pleased the gods
Wrath haply with my sinful race of old,
Since thou could'st find no sin in me myself
For which in retribution I was doomed
To trespass thus against myself and mine.
Answer me now, if by some oracle

My sire was destined to a bloody end
By a son's hand, can this reflect on me,
Me then unborn, begotten by no sire,
Conceived in no mother's womb? And if
When born to misery, as born I was,
I met my sire, not knowing whom I met
or what I did, and slew him, how canst thou
With justice blame the all-unconscious hand?
And for my mother, wretch, art not ashamed,
Seeing she was thy sister, to extort
From me the story of her marriage, such
A marriage as I straightway will proclaim.
For I will speak; thy lewd and impious speech
Has broken all the bonds of reticence.
She was, ah woe is me! she was my mother;
I knew it not, nor she; and she my mother
Bare children to the son whom she had borne,
A birth of shame. But this at least I know
Wittingly thou aspersest her and me;
But I unwitting wed, unwilling speak.
Nay neither in this marriage or this deed
Which thou art ever casting in my teeth—
A murdered sire—shall I be held to blame.
Come, answer me one question, if thou canst:
If one should presently attempt thy life,
Would'st thou, O man of justice, first inquire
If the assassin was perchance thy sire,
Or turn upon him? As thou lov'st thy life,
On thy aggressor thou would'st turn, no stay
Debating, if the law would bear thee out.
Such was my case, and such the pass whereto
The gods reduced me; and methinks my sire,
Could he come back to life, would not dissent.
Yet thou, for just thou art not, but a man
Who sticks at nothing, if it serve his plea,

Reproachest me with this before these men.
It serves thy turn to laud great Theseus' name,
And Athens as a wisely governed State;
Yet in thy flatteries one thing is to seek:
If any land knows how to pay the gods
Their proper rites, 'tis Athens most of all.
This is the land whence thou wast fain to steal
Their aged suppliant and hast carried off
My daughters. Therefore to yon goddesses,
I turn, adjure them and invoke their aid
To champion my cause, that thou mayest learn
What is the breed of men who guard this State.

CHORUS

An honest man, my liege, one sore bestead
By fortune, and so worthy our support.

THESEUS

Enough of words; the captors speed amain,
While we the victims stand debating here.

CREON

What would'st thou? What can I, a feeble man?

THESEUS

Show us the trail, and I'll attend thee too,
That, if thou hast the maidens hereabouts,
Thou mayest thyself discover them to me;
But if thy guards outstrip us with their spoil,
We may draw rein; for others speed, from whom
They will not 'scape to thank the gods at home.
Lead on, I say, the captor's caught, and fate
Hath ta'en the fowler in the toils he spread;
So soon are lost gains gotten by deceit.
And look not for allies; I know indeed
Such height of insolence was never reached
Without abettors or accomplices;
Thou hast some backer in thy bold essay,
But I will search this matter home and see

One man doth not prevail against the State.
Dost take my drift, or seem these words as vain
As seemed our warnings when the plot was hatched?

CREON

Nothing thou sayest can I here dispute,
But once at home I too shall act my part.

THESEUS

Threaten us and—begone! Thou, Oedipus,
Stay here assured that nothing save my death
Will stay my purpose to restore the maids.

OEDIPUS

Heaven bless thee, Theseus, for thy nobleness
And all thy loving care in my behalf.

[Exeunt THESEUS and CREON]

CHORUS

(Str. 1)

O when the flying foe,
Turning at last to bay,
Soon will give blow for blow,
Might I behold the fray;
Hear the loud battle roar
Swell, on the Pythian shore,
Or by the torch-lit bay,
Where the dread Queen and Maid
Cherish the mystic rites,
Rites they to none betray,
Ere on his lips is laid
Secrecy's golden key
By their own acolytes,
Priestly Eumolpidae.
There I might chance behold
Theseus our captain bold
Meet with the robber band,
Ere they have fled the land,

Rescue by might and main
Maidens, the captives twain.

(Ant. 1)

Haply on swiftest steed,
Or in the flying car,
Now they approach the glen,
West of white Oea's scaur.
They will be vanquished:
Dread are our warriors, dread
Theseus our chieftain's men.
Flashes each bridle bright,
Charges each gallant knight,
All that our Queen adore,
Pallas their patron, or
Him whose wide floods enring
Earth, the great Ocean-king
Whom Rhea bore.

(Str. 2)

Fight they or now prepare
To fight? a vision rare
Tells me that soon again
I shall behold the twain
Maidens so ill bestead,
By their kin buffeted.
Today, today Zeus worketh some great thing
This day shall victory bring.
O for the wings, the wings of a dove,
To be borne with the speed of the gale,
Up and still upwards to sail
And gaze on the fray from the clouds above.

(Ant. 2)

All-seeing Zeus, O lord of heaven,
To our guardian host be given
Might triumphant to surprise
Flying foes and win their prize.

Hear us, Zeus, and hear us, child
Of Zeus, Athene undefiled,
Hear, Apollo, hunter, hear,
Huntress, sister of Apollo,
Who the dappled swift-foot deer
O'er the wooded glade dost follow;
Help with your two-fold power
Athens in danger's hour!
O wayfarer, thou wilt not have to tax
The friends who watch for thee with false presage,
For lo, an escort with the maids draws near.

[Enter ANTIGONE and ISMENE with THESEUS]

OEDIPUS

Where, where? what sayest thou?

ANTIGONE

O father, father,

Would that some god might grant thee eyes to see
This best of men who brings us back again.

OEDIPUS

My child! and are ye back indeed!

ANTIGONE

Yes, saved

By Theseus and his gallant followers.

OEDIPUS

Come to your father's arms, O let me feel
A child's embrace I never hoped for more.

ANTIGONE

Thou askest what is doubly sweet to give.

OEDIPUS

Where are ye then?

ANTIGONE

We come together both.

OEDIPUS

My precious nurslings!

ANTIGONE

Fathers aye were fond.

OEDIPUS

Props of my age!

ANTIGONE

So sorrow sorrow props.

OEDIPUS

I have my darlings, and if death should come,
Death were not wholly bitter with you near.
Cling to me, press me close on either side,
There rest ye from your dreary wayfaring.
Now tell me of your ventures, but in brief;
Brief speech suffices for young maids like you.

ANTIGONE

Here is our savior; thou should'st hear the tale
From his own lips; so shall my part be brief.

OEDIPUS

I pray thee do not wonder if the sight
Of children, given o'er for lost, has made
My converse somewhat long and tedious.
Full well I know the joy I have of them
Is due to thee, to thee and no man else;
Thou wast their sole deliverer, none else.
The gods deal with thee after my desire,
With thee and with this land! for fear of heaven
I found above all peoples most with you,
And righteousness and lips that cannot lie.
I speak in gratitude of what I know,
For all I have I owe to thee alone.
Give me thy hand, O Prince, that I may touch it,
And if thou wilt permit me, kiss thy cheek.
What say I? Can I wish that thou should'st touch
One fallen like me to utter wretchedness,
Corrupt and tainted with a thousand ills?
Oh no, I would not let thee if thou would'st.
They only who have known calamity

Can share it. Let me greet thee where thou art,
And still befriend me as thou hast till now.

THESEUS

I marvel not if thou hast dallied long
In converse with thy children and preferred
Their speech to mine; I feel no jealousy,
I would be famous more by deeds than words.
Of this, old friend, thou hast had proof; my oath
I have fulfilled and brought thee back the maids
Alive and nothing harmed for all those threats.
And how the fight was won, 'twere waste of words
To boast—thy daughters here will tell thee all.
But of a matter that has lately chanced
On my way hitherward, I fain would have
Thy counsel—slight 'twould seem, yet worthy thought.
A wise man heeds all matters great or small.

OEDIPUS

What is it, son of Aegeus? Let me hear.
Of what thou askest I myself know naught.

THESEUS

'Tis said a man, no countryman of thine,
But of thy kin, hath taken sanctuary
Beside the altar of Poseidon, where
I was at sacrifice when called away.

OEDIPUS

What is his country? what the suitor's prayer?

THESEUS

I know but one thing; he implores, I am told,
A word with thee—he will not trouble thee.

OEDIPUS

What seeks he? If a suppliant, something grave.

THESEUS

He only waits, they say, to speak with thee,
And then unharmed to go upon his way.

OEDIPUS

I marvel who is this petitioner.
THESEUS
Think if there be not any of thy kin
At Argos who might claim this boon of thee.
OEDIPUS
Dear friend, forbear, I pray.
THESEUS
What ails thee now?
OEDIPUS
Ask it not of me.
THESEUS
Ask not what? explain.
OEDIPUS
Thy words have told me who the suppliant is.
THESEUS
Who can he be that I should frown on him?
OEDIPUS
My son, O king, my hateful son, whose words
Of all men's most would jar upon my ears.
THESEUS
Thou sure mightest listen. If his suit offend,
No need to grant it. Why so loth to hear him?
OEDIPUS
That voice, O king, grates on a father's ears;
I have come to loathe it. Force me not to yield.
THESEUS
But he hath found asylum. O beware,
And fail not in due reverence to the god.
ANTIGONE
O heed me, father, though I am young in years.
Let the prince have his will and pay withal
What in his eyes is service to the god;
For our sake also let our brother come.
If what he urges tend not to thy good
He cannot surely wrest perforce thy will.

To hear him then, what harm? By open words
A scheme of villainy is soon bewrayed.
Thou art his father, therefore canst not pay
In kind a son's most impious outrages.
O listen to him; other men like thee
Have thankless children and are choleric,
But yielding to persuasion's gentle spell
They let their savage mood be exorcised.
Look thou to the past, forget the present, think
On all the woe thy sire and mother brought thee;
Thence wilt thou draw this lesson without fail,
Of evil passion evil is the end.
Thou hast, alas, to prick thy memory,
Stern monitors, these ever-sightless orbs.
O yield to us; just suitors should not need
To be importunate, nor he that takes
A favor lack the grace to make return.

OEDIPUS

Grievous to me, my child, the boon ye win
By pleading. Let it be then; have your way
Only if come he must, I beg thee, friend,
Let none have power to dispose of me.

THESEUS

No need, Sir, to appeal a second time.
It likes me not to boast, but be assured
Thy life is safe while any god saves mine.

[Exit THESEUS]

CHORUS

(Str.)

Who craves excess of days,
Scorning the common span
Of life, I judge that man
A giddy wight who walks in folly's ways.
For the long years heap up a grievous load,
Scant pleasures, heavier pains,

Till not one joy remains
For him who lingers on life's weary road
And come it slow or fast,
One doom of fate
Doth all await,
For dance and marriage bell,
The dirge and funeral knell.
Death the deliverer freeth all at last.

(Ant.)

Not to be born at all
Is best, far best that can befall,
Next best, when born, with least delay
To trace the backward way.
For when youth passes with its giddy train,
Troubles on troubles follow, toils on toils,
Pain, pain for ever pain;
And none escapes life's coils.
Envy, sedition, strife,
Carnage and war, make up the tale of life.
Last comes the worst and most abhorred stage
Of unregarded age,
Joyless, companionless and slow,
Of woes the crowning woe.

(Epode)

Such ills not I alone,
He too our guest hath known,
E'en as some headland on an iron-bound shore,
Lashed by the wintry blasts and surge's roar,
So is he buffeted on every side
By drear misfortune's whelming tide,
By every wind of heaven o'erborne
Some from the sunset, some from orient morn,
Some from the noonday glow.
Some from Rhiplean gloom of everlasting snow.

ANTIGONE

Father, methinks I see the stranger coming,
Alone he comes and weeping plenteous tears.

OEDIPUS

Who may he be?

ANTIGONE

The same that we surmised.

From the outset—Polyneices. He is here.

[Enter POLYNEICES]

POLYNEICES

Ah me, my sisters, shall I first lament
My own afflictions, or my aged sire's,
Whom here I find a castaway, with you,
In a strange land, an ancient beggar clad
In antic tatters, marring all his frame,
While o'er the sightless orbs his unkept locks
Float in the breeze; and, as it were to match,
He bears a wallet against hunger's pinch.
All this too late I learn, wretch that I am,
Alas! I own it, and am proved most vile
In my neglect of thee: I scorn myself.
But as almighty Zeus in all he doth
Hath Mercy for co-partner of this throne,
Let Mercy, father, also sit enthroned
In thy heart likewise. For transgressions past
May be amended, cannot be made worse.
Why silent? Father, speak, nor turn away,
Hast thou no word, wilt thou dismiss me then
In mute disdain, nor tell me why thou art wrath?
O ye his daughters, sisters mine, do ye
This sullen, obstinate silence try to move.
Let him not spurn, without a single word
Of answer, me the suppliant of the god.

ANTIGONE

Tell him thyself, unhappy one, thine errand;
For large discourse may send a thrill of joy,

Or stir a chord of wrath or tenderness,
And to the tongue-tied somehow give a tongue.

POLYNEICES

Well dost thou counsel, and I will speak out.
First will I call in aid the god himself,
Poseidon, from whose altar I was raised,
With warrant from the monarch of this land,
To parley with you, and depart unscathed.
These pledges, strangers, I would see observed
By you and by my sisters and my sire.
Now, father, let me tell thee why I came.
I have been banished from my native land
Because by right of primogeniture
I claimed possession of thy sovereign throne
Wherefrom Etocles, my younger brother,
Ousted me, not by weight of precedent,
Nor by the last arbitrament of war,
But by his popular acts; and the prime cause
Of this I deem the curse that rests on thee.
So likewise hold the soothsayers, for when
I came to Argos in the Dorian land
And took the king Adrastus' child to wife,
Under my standard I enlisted all
The foremost captains of the Apian isle,
To levy with their aid that sevenfold host
Of spearmen against Thebes, determining
To oust my foes or die in a just cause.
Why then, thou askest, am I here today?
Father, I come a suppliant to thee
Both for myself and my allies who now
With squadrons seven beneath their seven spears
Beleaguer all the plain that circles Thebes.
Foremost the peerless warrior, peerless seer,
Amphiaraiis with his lightning lance;
Next an Aetolian, Tydeus, Oeneus' son;

Eteoclus of Argive birth the third;
The fourth Hippomedon, sent to the war
By his sire Talaos; Capaneus, the fifth,
Vaunts he will fire and raze the town; the sixth
Parthenopaeus, an Arcadian born
Named of that maid, longtime a maid and late
Espoused, Atalanta's true-born child;
Last I thy son, or thine at least in name,
If but the bastard of an evil fate,
Lead against Thebes the fearless Argive host.
Thus by thy children and thy life, my sire,
We all adjure thee to remit thy wrath
And favor one who seeks a just revenge
Against a brother who has banned and robbed him.
For victory, if oracles speak true,
Will fall to those who have thee for ally.
So, by our fountains and familiar gods
I pray thee, yield and hear; a beggar I
And exile, thou an exile likewise; both
Involved in one misfortune find a home
As pensioners, while he, the lord of Thebes,
O agony! makes a mock of thee and me.
I'll scatter with a breath the upstart's might,
And bring thee home again and stablish thee,
And stablish, having cast him out, myself.
This will thy goodwill I will undertake,
Without it I can scarce return alive.

CHORUS

For the king's sake who sent him, Oedipus,
Dismiss him not without a meet reply.

OEDIPUS

Nay, worthy seniors, but for Theseus' sake
Who sent him hither to have word of me.
Never again would he have heard my voice;
But now he shall obtain this parting grace,

An answer that will bring him little joy.
O villain, when thou hadst the sovereignty
That now thy brother holdeth in thy stead,
Didst thou not drive me, thine own father, out,
An exile, cityless, and make we wear
This beggar's garb thou weepest to behold,
Now thou art come thyself to my sad plight?
Nothing is here for tears; it must be borne
By me till death, and I shall think of thee
As of my murderer; thou didst thrust me out;
'Tis thou hast made me conversant with woe,
Through thee I beg my bread in a strange land;
And had not these my daughters tended me
I had been dead for aught of aid from thee.
They tend me, they preserve me, they are men
Not women in true service to their sire;
But ye are bastards, and no sons of mine.
Therefore just Heaven hath an eye on thee;
Howbeit not yet with aspect so austere
As thou shalt soon experience, if indeed
These banded hosts are moving against Thebes.
That city thou canst never storm, but first
Shall fall, thou and thy brother, blood-imbrued.
Such curse I lately launched against you twain,
Such curse I now invoke to fight for me,
That ye may learn to honor those who bear thee
Nor flout a sightless father who begat
Degenerate sons—these maidens did not so.
Therefore my curse is stronger than thy "throne,"
Thy "suppliance," if by right of laws eterne
Primeval Justice sits enthroned with Zeus.
Begone, abhorred, disowned, no son of mine,
Thou vilest of the vile! and take with thee
This curse I leave thee as my last bequest:—
Never to win by arms thy native land,

No, nor return to Argos in the Vale,
But by a kinsman's hand to die and slay
Him who expelled thee. So I pray and call
On the ancestral gloom of Tartarus
To snatch thee hence, on these dread goddesses
I call, and Ares who incensed you both
To mortal enmity. Go now proclaim
What thou hast heard to the Cadmeians all,
Thy staunch confederates—this the heritage
that Oedipus divideth to his sons.

CHORUS

Thy errand, Polyneices, liked me not
From the beginning; now go back with speed.

POLYNEICES

Woe worth my journey and my baffled hopes!
Woe worth my comrades! What a desperate end
To that glad march from Argos! Woe is me!
I dare not whisper it to my allies
Or turn them back, but mute must meet my doom.
My sisters, ye his daughters, ye have heard
The prayers of our stern father, if his curse
Should come to pass and ye some day return
To Thebes, O then disown me not, I pray,
But grant me burial and due funeral rites.
So shall the praise your filial care now wins
Be doubled for the service wrought for me.

ANTIGONE

One boon, O Polyneices, let me crave.

POLYNEICES

What would'st thou, sweet Antigone? Say on.

ANTIGONE

Turn back thy host to Argos with all speed,
And ruin not thyself and Thebes as well.

POLYNEICES

That cannot be. How could I lead again
An army that had seen their leader quail?

ANTIGONE

But, brother, why shouldst thou be wroth again?
What profit from thy country's ruin comes?

POLYNEICES

'Tis shame to live in exile, and shall I
The elder bear a younger brother's flouts?

ANTIGONE

Wilt thou then bring to pass his prophecies
Who threatens mutual slaughter to you both?

POLYNEICES

Aye, so he wishes:—but I must not yield.

ANTIGONE

O woe is me! but say, will any dare,
Hearing his prophecy, to follow thee?

POLYNEICES

I shall not tell it; a good general
Reports successes and conceals mishaps.

ANTIGONE

Misguided youth, thy purpose then stands fast!

POLYNEICES

'Tis so, and stay me not. The road I choose,
Dogged by my sire and his avenging spirit,
Leads me to ruin; but for you may Zeus
Make your path bright if ye fulfill my hest
When dead; in life ye cannot serve me more.
Now let me go, farewell, a long farewell!
Ye ne'er shall see my living face again.

ANTIGONE

Ah me!

POLYNEICES

Bewail me not.

ANTIGONE

Who would not mourn
Thee, brother, hurrying to an open pit!

POLYNEICES

If I must die, I must.

ANTIGONE

Nay, hear me plead.

POLYNEICES

It may not be; forbear.

ANTIGONE

Then woe is me,

If I must lose thee.

POLYNEICES

Nay, that rests with fate,

Whether I live or die; but for you both

I pray to heaven ye may escape all ill;

For ye are blameless in the eyes of all.

[Exit POLYNEICES]

CHORUS

(Str. 1)

Ills on ill! no pause or rest!

Come they from our sightless guest?

Or haply now we see fulfilled

What fate long time hath willed?

For ne'er have I proved vain

Aught that the heavenly powers ordain.

Time with never sleeping eye

Watches what is writ on high,

Overthrowing now the great,

Raising now from low estate.

Hark! How the thunder rumbles! Zeus defend us!

OEDIPUS

Children, my children! will no messenger

Go summon hither Theseus my best friend?

ANTIGONE

And wherefore, father, dost thou summon him?

OEDIPUS

This winged thunder of the god must bear me
Anon to Hades. Send and tarry not.

CHORUS

(Ant. 1)

Hark! with louder, nearer roar
The bolt of Zeus descends once more.
My spirit quails and cowers: my hair
Bristles for fear. Again that flare!
What doth the lightning-flash portend?
Ever it points to issues grave.
Dread powers of air! Save, Zeus, O save!

OEDIPUS

Daughters, upon me the predestined end
Has come; no turning from it any more.

ANTIGONE

How knowest thou? What sign convinces thee?

OEDIPUS

I know full well. Let some one with all speed
Go summon hither the Athenian prince.

CHORUS

(Str. 2)

Ha! once more the deafening sound
Peals yet louder all around
If thou darkenest our land,
Lightly, lightly lay thy hand;
Grace, not anger, let me win,
If upon a man of sin
I have looked with pitying eye,
Zeus, our king, to thee I cry!

OEDIPUS

Is the prince coming? Will he when he comes
Find me yet living and my senses clear!

ANTIGONE

What solemn charge would'st thou impress on him?

OEDIPUS

For all his benefits I would perform
The promise made when I received them first.

CHORUS

(Ant. 2)

Hither haste, my son, arise,
Altar leave and sacrifice,
If haply to Poseidon now
In the far glade thou pay'st thy vow.
For our guest to thee would bring
And thy folk and offering,
Thy due guerdon. Haste, O King!

[Enter THESEUS]

THESEUS

Wherefore again this general din? at once
My people call me and the stranger calls.
Is it a thunderbolt of Zeus or sleet
Of arrow hail? a storm so fierce as this
Would warrant all surmises of mischance.

OEDIPUS

Thou com'st much wished for, Prince, and sure some god
Hath bid good luck attend thee on thy way.

THESEUS

What, son of Laius, hath chanced of new?

OEDIPUS

My life hath turned the scale. I would do all
I promised thee and thine before I die.

THESEUS

What sign assures thee that thine end is near?

OEDIPUS

The gods themselves are heralds of my fate;
Of their appointed warnings nothing fails.

THESEUS

How sayest thou they signify their will?

OEDIPUS

This thunder, peal on peal, this lightning hurled
Flash upon flash, from the unconquered hand.

THESEUS

I must believe thee, having found thee oft
A prophet true; then speak what must be done.

OEDIPUS

O son of Aegeus, for this state will I
Unfold a treasure age cannot corrupt.
Myself anon without a guiding hand
Will take thee to the spot where I must end.
This secret ne'er reveal to mortal man,
Neither the spot nor whereabouts it lies,
So shall it ever serve thee for defense
Better than native shields and near allies.
But those dread mysteries speech may not profane
Thyself shalt gather coming there alone;
Since not to any of thy subjects, nor
To my own children, though I love them dearly,
Can I reveal what thou must guard alone,
And whisper to thy chosen heir alone,
So to be handed down from heir to heir.
Thus shalt thou hold this land inviolate
From the dread Dragon's brood.⁴ The justest State
By countless wanton neighbors may be wronged,
For the gods, though they tarry, mark for doom
The godless sinner in his mad career.
Far from thee, son of Aegeus, be such fate!
But to the spot—the god within me goads—
Let us set forth no longer hesitate.
Follow me, daughters, this way. Strange that I
Whom you have led so long should lead you now.

4. The Thebans sprung from the Dragon's teeth sown by Cadmus.

Oh, touch me not, but let me all alone
Find out the sepulcher that destiny
Appoints me in this land. Hither, this way,
For this way Hermes leads, the spirit guide,
And Persephassa, empress of the dead.
O light, no light to me, but mine erewhile,
Now the last time I feel thee palpable,
For I am drawing near the final gloom
Of Hades. Blessing on thee, dearest friend,
On thee and on thy land and followers!
Live prosperous and in your happy state
Still for your welfare think on me, the dead.

[Exit THESEUS followed by ANTIGONE and ISMENE]

CHORUS

(Str.)

If mortal prayers are heard in hell,
Hear, Goddess dread, invisible!
Monarch of the regions drear,
Aidoneus, hear, O hear!
By a gentle, tearless doom
Speed this stranger to the gloom,
Let him enter without pain
The all-shrouding Stygian plain.
Wrongfully in life oppressed,
Be he now by Justice blessed.

(Ant.)

Queen infernal, and thou fell
Watch-dog of the gates of hell,
Who, as legends tell, dost glare,
Gnarling in thy cavernous lair
At all comers, let him go
Scathless to the fields below.
For thy master orders thus,
The son of earth and Tartarus;

In his den the monster keep,
Giver of eternal sleep.

[Enter MESSENGER]

MESSENGER

Friends, countrymen, my tidings are in sum
That Oedipus is gone, but the event
Was not so brief, nor can the tale be brief.

CHORUS

What, has he gone, the unhappy man?

MESSENGER

Know well

That he has passed away from life to death.

CHORUS

How? By a god-sent, painless doom, poor soul?

MESSENGER

Thy question hits the marvel of the tale.
How he moved hence, you saw him and must know;
Without a friend to lead the way, himself
Guiding us all. So having reached the abrupt
Earth-rooted Threshold with its brazen stairs,
He paused at one of the converging paths,
Hard by the rocky basin which records
The pact of Theseus and Peirithous.
Betwixt that rift and the Thorician rock,
The hollow pear-tree and the marble tomb,
Midway he sat and loosed his beggar's weeds;
Then calling to his daughters bade them fetch
Of running water, both to wash withal
And make libation; so they clomb the steep;
And in brief space brought what their father bade,
Then laved and dressed him with observance due.
But when he had his will in everything,
And no desire was left unsatisfied,
It thundered from the netherworld; the maids
Shivered, and crouching at their father's knees

Wept, beat their breast and uttered a long wail.
He, as he heard their sudden bitter cry,
Folded his arms about them both and said,
“My children, ye will lose your sire today,
For all of me has perished, and no more
Have ye to bear your long, long ministry;
A heavy load, I know, and yet one word
Wipes out all score of tribulations—*love*.
And love from me ye had—from no man more;
But now must live without me all your days.”
So clinging to each other sobbed and wept
Father and daughters both, but when at last
Their mourning had an end and no wail rose,
A moment there was silence; suddenly
A voice that summoned him; with sudden dread
The hair of all stood up and all were ‘mazed;
For the call came, now loud, now low, and oft.
“Oedipus, Oedipus, why tarry we?
Too long, too long thy passing is delayed.”
But when he heard the summons of the god,
He prayed that Theseus might be brought, and when
The Prince came nearer: “O my friend,” he cried,
“Pledge ye my daughters, giving thy right hand—
And, daughters, give him yours—and promise me
Thou never wilt forsake them, but do all
That time and friendship prompt in their behoof.”
And he of his nobility repressed
His tears and swore to be their constant friend.
This promise given, Oedipus put forth
Blind hands and laid them on his children, saying,
“O children, prove your true nobility
And hence depart nor seek to witness sights
Unlawful or to hear unlawful words.
Nay, go with speed; let none but Theseus stay,
Our ruler, to behold what next shall hap.”

So we all heard him speak, and weeping sore
We companied the maidens on their way.
After brief space we looked again, and lo
The man was gone, vanished from our eyes;
Only the king we saw with upraised hand
Shading his eyes as from some awful sight,
That no man might endure to look upon.
A moment later, and we saw him bend
In prayer to Earth and prayer to Heaven at once.
But by what doom the stranger met his end
No man save Theseus knoweth. For there fell
No fiery bold that reft him in that hour,
Nor whirlwind from the sea, but he was taken.
It was a messenger from heaven, or else
Some gentle, painless cleaving of earth's base;
For without wailing or disease or pain
He passed away—and end most marvelous.
And if to some my tale seems foolishness
I am content that such could count me fool.

CHORUS

Where are the maids and their attendant friends?

MESSENGER

They cannot be far off; the approaching sound
Of lamentation tells they come this way.

[Enter ANTIGONE and ISMENE]

ANTIGONE

(Str. 1)

Woe, woe! on this sad day
We sisters of one blasted stock
must bow beneath the shock,
Must weep and weep the curse that lay
On him our sire, for whom
In life, a life-long world of care
‘Twas ours to bear,
In death must face the gloom

That wraps his tomb.
What tongue can tell
That sight ineffable?

CHORUS

What mean ye, maidens?

ANTIGONE

All is but surmise.

CHORUS

Is he then gone?

ANTIGONE

Gone as ye most might wish.

Not in battle or sea storm,
But reft from sight,
By hands invisible borne
To viewless fields of night.
Ah me! on us too night has come,
The night of mourning. Wither roam
O'er land or sea in our distress
Eating the bread of bitterness?

ISMENE

I know not. O that Death
Might nip my breath,
And let me share my aged father's fate.
I cannot live a life thus desolate.

CHORUS

Best of daughters, worthy pair,
What heaven brings ye needs must bear,
Fret no more 'gainst Heaven's will;
Fate hath dealt with you not ill.

ANTIGONE

(Ant. 1)

Love can turn past pain to bliss,
What seemed bitter now is sweet.
Ah me! that happy toil is sweet.
The guidance of those dear blind feet.

Dear father, wrapt for aye in nether gloom,
E'en in the tomb
Never shalt thou lack of love repine,
Her love and mine.

CHORUS

His fate—

ANTIGONE

Is even as he planned.

CHORUS

How so?

ANTIGONE

He died, so willed he, in a foreign land.

Lapped in kind earth he sleeps his long last sleep,
And o'er his grave friends weep.

How great our loss these streaming eyes can tell,
This sorrow naught can quell.

Thou hadst thy wish 'mid strangers thus to die,
But I, ah me, not by.

ISMENE

Alas, my sister, what new fate

* * * * *

* * * * *

Befalls us orphans desolate?

CHORUS

His end was blessed; therefore, children, stay
Your sorrow. Man is born to fate a prey.

ANTIGONE

(Str. 2)

Sister, let us back again.

ISMENE

Why return?

ANTIGONE

My soul is fain—

ISMENE

Is fain?

ANTIGONE

To see the earthy bed.

ISMENE

Sayest thou?

ANTIGONE

Where our sire is laid.

ISMENE

Nay, thou can'st not, dost not see—

ANTIGONE

Sister, wherefore wroth with me?

ISMENE

Know'st not—beside—

ANTIGONE

More must I hear?

ISMENE

Tombless he died, none near.

ANTIGONE

Lead me thither; slay me there.

ISMENE

How shall I unhappy fare,

Friendless, helpless, how drag on

A life of misery alone?

CHORUS

(Ant. 2)

Fear not, maids—

ANTIGONE

Ah, whither flee?

CHORUS

Refuge hath been found.

ANTIGONE

For me?

CHORUS

Where thou shalt be safe from harm.

ANTIGONE

I know it.

CHORUS

Why then this alarm?

ANTIGONE

How again to get us home

I know not.

CHORUS

Why then this roam?

ANTIGONE

Troubles whelm us—

CHORUS

As of yore.

ANTIGONE

Worse than what was worse before.

CHORUS

Sure ye are driven on the breakers' surge.

ANTIGONE

Alas! we are.

CHORUS

Alas! 'tis so.

ANTIGONE

Ah whither turn, O Zeus? No ray

Of hope to cheer the way

Whereon the fates our desperate voyage urge.

[Enter THESEUS]

THESEUS

Dry your tears; when grace is shed

On the quick and on the dead

By dark Powers beneficent,

Over-grief they would resent.

ANTIGONE

Aegeus' child, to thee we pray.

THESEUS

What the boon, my children, say.

ANTIGONE

With our own eyes we fain would see
Our father's tomb.

THESEUS

That may not be.

ANTIGONE

What say'st thou, King?

THESEUS

My children, he
Charged me straitly that no mortal
Should approach the sacred portal,
Or greet with funeral litanies
The hidden tomb wherein he lies;
Saying, "If thou keep'st my hest
Thou shalt hold thy realm at rest."
The God of Oaths this promise heard,
And to Zeus I pledged my word.

ANTIGONE

Well, if he would have it so,
We must yield. Then let us go
Back to Thebes, if yet we may
Heal this mortal feud and stay
The self-wrought doom
That drives our brothers to their tomb.

THESEUS

Go in peace; nor will I spare
Ought of toil and zealous care,
But on all your needs attend,
Gladdening in his grave my friend.

CHORUS

Wail no more, let sorrow rest,
All is ordered for the best.

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