

# OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

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Oedipus at Colonus by Sophocles

## Story

The narrative of Sophocles' Theban plays—*Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Antigone*—deflects attention from the ultimate nature of *Oedipus at Colonus*, which is in some sense the capstone of the entire sequence. It is the moment of transcendence for the hero!

After leaving Thebes, blinded and transformed by the fearful self-knowledge he has revealed, Oedipus makes his way with his two daughters to the neighboring village of Colonus. He is asked to leave, because he has entered an area sacred to the Furies—the Erinyes of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*—yet in his heart he knows that he has come to a fated spot, where he will be a blessing to the land in which he is buried. Though the indigene elders of the place are horrified to learn that Oedipus is the son of Laius, Oedipus justifies his story to them, asserting that he is not guilty of murder, because he killed his father in self-defence. He asks for an interview with Theseus, the king of the town.

At this point Ismene, Oedipus' younger daughter, arrives on horseback, rejoining her father and sister, Antigone, and reporting that Creon will soon be coming to take possession of the body of Oedipus, which will serve Thebes as a sacred power in its current power struggle—between Eteocles and Polyneices. Oedipus is horrified at the thought that his body will be a political football, in this sense, and he pledges his allegiance to the people of Colonus, asking them to protect him against Creon. The villagers agree, but insist that, because Oedipus has trespassed on holy land, he will need to carry through some ritual purifications.

Theseus enters, immediately indicating his sympathy with Oedipus, and gratefully accepting Oedipus' proposal: to offer up his own burial site, a blessing for Thebes, to Theseus and Athens—Colonus being the appendage deme to Athens. The chorus and Oedipus praise Athens, whereupon Creon himself arrives, (hypocritical) praising Oedipus and his children, and urging him to return to Thebes. There follows an extended contention between Creon and Theseus—each seeking the support of the holy but polluted wise man, Oedipus—and in the end, though siding with Theseus, Oedipus concedes that he in indeed still polluted and requires purification. Still, the play refuses to plateau out, at this stage, onto a mellower Oedipus, and instead introduces a suppliant visitor from Thebes, Oedipus's son Polyneices, who argues that Oedipus should return to Thebes, to protect his exiled son from the wrath of Creon. Increasingly pissed off, by the conflicts over his potentially saving body, Oedipus rains curses on his son Polyneices, and drives him away.

Immediately after this bitter argument a loud thunderclap is heard, a sign from Zeus, Oedipus believes, of his coming death. Oedipus tells his daughters and Theseus to follow him, while he walks off stage. A messenger appears, with the announcement of the death of Oedipus, and a brief account: Oedipus bathed himself, poured libations, then sent away his daughters, whose burden of caring was over, while Theseus alone was permitted to see the spot where the transfiguration took place. Though Antigone longs to see her father's burial site, only Theseus is permitted to know that secret, for in so doing he will be able to keep his people free.

## Characters

**Oedipus** is in this play no longer the impetuous inquirer of *Oedipus the King*, though he is still temperamental and irascible. He deeply appreciates the sympathy of Theseus, and has great scorn for his son, Polyneices, who tries to woo him over.

**Theseus** is the dignified ruler of Athens, who remains faithful to Oedipus, despite the pollution that follows the old man.

**Antigone** is, as always, the traditionally loyal one, true to her father despite his downfall, and heartbroken that she cannot see the old man's burial site. We see the foreshadowing, in this play, of the insatiably loyal Antigone of the play of her name, which follows in the narrative sequence.

### **Themes**

**Pollution vs. purification** Oedipus has polluted himself by the acts of parricide and incest, as Oedipus the King. He cannot bring the power of his experience to bear, for its value to others, until he has been cleansed. It is characteristically archaic Greek, however, to claim that tragic experience, like that of Oedipus, is necessary before one reaches the great-souled condition.

**Paternal fidelity** Antigone's fidelity to her father meets the highest standards of Athenian family loyalty. In her behavior toward her dying father, she shows us the character she will bring to the play to which she gives her name.