**Oedipus at Colonus: The Legend Continues by Sophocles**

This play is being read aloud in class. The notes will aid in understanding of the play.

Comprehension questions are expected to be completed during the adequate class time provided.

Readings will go as follows: For the week of Feb. 11-22 (weather permitting)

pages 69-84, questions to complete

pages 82 (back track) - 88, questions to complete

pages 88-93, questions to complete

**Summary and Analysis: Oedipus at Colonus**

**Lines 1-141 [pages 69-75, this includes the prologue]**

**Summary**

The play opens several years after Oedipus' banishment from Thebes. The aged, blind Oedipus, led by his daughter Antigone, arrives in a sacred grove at Colonus, outside Athens.

**Analysis**

From his entrance, Oedipus shows a clear change of character from the passionate, willful hero of *Oedipus the King*. Older, worn by years of wandering, Oedipus now accepts his fate with resignation, just as he accepts the scraps he begs with patience and humility.

But Oedipus springs to life with the news that he is sitting in a grove sacred to the Eumenides, the sometimes terrible, sometimes kindly spirits who rule over unavenged crimes, especially within families. Oedipus has reason to believe that the Eumenides have taken pity on him. According to the oracle, this grove will be his resting place. In a wild eagerness for release from his suffering, Oedipus refuses to move, despite a citizen's warning that he is trespassing. In this, he shows the willfulness of the old Oedipus.

His renewed spirit also emerges in his command that the citizen bring Theseus, king of Athens, to the grove to hear what blessings Oedipus might bring the city. Here the old, blind man speaks not only with the authority of a king, but also as a messenger of the gods themselves.

**Glossary**

- **Furies** the three terrible female spirits with snaky hair who punish the doers of unavenged crimes.
- **Colonus** a village to the north of Athens. Here, the setting for the tragedy.
- **Thebes** chief city of ancient Boeotia, in eastern central Greece. Here, the kingdom that Oedipus once ruled.
- **Terrible Goddesses** another name for the Furies.
- **Eumenides, the Kindly Ones** other names for the Furies.
- **Poseidon** god of the sea and of horses.
- **Prometheus** a Titan who steals fires from heaven for the benefit of mankind; in punishment, Zeus chains him to a rock where a vulture (or eagle) comes each day to eat his liver, which grows back each night.
Theseus the principal hero of Attica, son of Aegeus and king of Athens, famed especially for his killing of the Minotaur. Here, Oedipus' chief ally.
Aegeus a king of Athens who drowns himself when he thinks his son Theseus is dead.
Apollo the god of music, poetry, prophecy, and medicine in Greek and Roman mythology. Here, Apollo is most important as the source of the prophecies of the oracle.
Athena the goddess of wisdom, skills, and warfare.

Summary and Analysis: Oedipus at Colonus Lines 142-268 [pages 75-80]

Summary

The chorus of elders enters, searching for the man who trespasses in the sacred grove. Oedipus offers to come out of the sacred precinct if they promise not to harm him, and they agree.

In the conversation that follows, Oedipus reveals his identity. Sympathetic, but still horrified, the elders urge Oedipus to leave town.

Analysis

Note that Sophocles shapes this scene with an emphasis on hurried exchanges and outbursts, expressing the confusion and then the anxiety of the elders of Colonus.

The chorus begins their chant with the energy of pursuit — "Look for the man! Who is he? Where's he hiding?" (142). Later, their exchanges with Oedipus tend to be short and directed, as they shout instructions about where he may sit.

The chorus even peppers Oedipus' retelling of his fate with sudden outbursts. The whole effect of the rapid exchanges quickens the scene, introducing necessary plot summary economically, while also emphasizing that the panicked elders are rushing to judgment of Oedipus out of fear of the gods' fury.

Their final order for Oedipus to leave Colonus, therefore, constitutes a snap decision — one they will think through more carefully over the course of the play.

Glossary

libation the ritual of pouring out wine or oil upon the ground as a sacrifice to a god. Here it refers to the sacrifice that must be made to please the Furies, to whom the grove is sacred.
Laius king of Thebes before his son, Oedipus. Killed by Oedipus before the action of the tragedy Oedipus the King.
Thebes chief city of ancient Boeotia, in eastern central Greece. Here, the city from which Oedipus was banished.
Argos ancient city-state in the northeast Peloponnesus from the seventh century B.C. until the rise of Sparta. Here, the location of Oedipus' son Polynices.
oracle among the ancient Greeks and Romans, the place where or the medium by which deities were consulted. Also, the revelation or response of a medium or priest.
Delphi a town in ancient Phocis, on the slopes of Mount Parnassus; seat of the famous ancient oracle of Apollo.
Summary and Analysis: *Oedipus at Colonus*  
Lines 269-576 [pages 80-86]

**Summary**

Oedipus persuades the elders to take no action until Theseus, king of Athens, arrives.

Suddenly Ismene, Oedipus' daughter, enters, having come on horseback from Thebes. She tells Oedipus about his sons, Eteocles and Polynices, who are fighting over Thebes. Ismene also tells her father that the oracle at Delphi has made another prophecy — a curse will fall on the Thebans the day that they stand on Oedipus' tomb.

Ismene warns Oedipus that his sons and Creon know of the prophecy and will try to bring him back to Thebes. They plan to keep Oedipus just outside the city — where he will stay under their control without polluting Thebes — and then leave his body unburied at death.

Oedipus curses his sons and praises his faithful daughters for their sacrifice. He tells the elders that he does not want to return to Thebes, and if they help him, he will give his blessing to Athens. The elders accept his proposal and advise him to make an offering to the Eumenides for trespassing on their ground. Ismene leaves to perform the ritual for her father.

**Analysis**

This episode sets up the problem of the play — a family's fight over their father's dead body, even while he still lives.

The conflict in Thebes — Polynices' battle to take the city by force from Creon and Eteocles — arises from the power vacuum created by Oedipus' downfall. The crisis itself is the subject of Aeschylus' play *Seven Against Thebes* (467 B.C.).

Long ago, Creon banished an unwilling Oedipus, and Eteocles and Polynices did nothing to stop Creon or help Oedipus. Now, because of the prophecy, all want him back to avoid the curse. Paradoxically, the Theban curse will be a blessing of victory to those from another city who will offer Oedipus burial. In this, as Ismene points out, Oedipus' fortune as a pariah (recluse) has been reversed.

Note that Oedipus' present misery as a blind beggar reflects the condition of Athens itself at the end of the fifth century — weakening, under siege, about to accept defeat as the long Peloponnesian War draws to a close. Yet Oedipus refers to Athens as a powerful city, the shelter of all who seek her help. This nostalgic note represents Sophocles' tribute to his once great polis(*ancient Greek city state form of government)*. Note, too, the purification ritual that the elders explain to Oedipus. Such rites were common in ancient Athens, echoing the mysteries of *Eleusis*, an initiation into the truth of death and eternal life. The ritual also looks forward to Oedipus' transformation upon his death at the end of the play.

**Glossary**

*Zeus* the chief deity of Greek mythology, son of Chronus and Rhea and husband of Hera.
Summary and Analysis: *Oedipus at Colonus*  
Lines 577-616 [pages 86-88]

**Summary**

When the elders question Oedipus about his past, he at first refuses to answer, but finally consents. He admits his wrongdoing, but insists that he killed his father in self-defense and married his mother in ignorance.

**Analysis**

The elders here seem strident, even prurient, in their questioning. Their unkindness to the aged, blind beggar deepens the audience's sympathy for Oedipus as he explains his crimes — and his sufferings — from his own point of view.

In essence, this dialogue represents another kind of purification ritual — a painful confession — paralleling the ritual Ismene carries out offstage.

Summary and Analysis: *Oedipus at Colonus*  
Lines 617-761 [pages 88-92]

**Summary**

When Theseus arrives, he immediately recognizes Oedipus, who is famous for his guilt and suffering. The Athenian king offers the blind beggar his help. Oedipus thanks Theseus and asks to stay in Athens until his death, promising that Athens will be rewarded. He warns that the peace between Athens and Thebes will be ended if Theseus helps him.

Despite this warning, Theseus promises his aid. He grants Oedipus Athenian citizenship, and leaves him under the protection of the elders while he returns to Athens.

**Analysis**

In his respect for Oedipus and his acknowledgment of the old man's sufferings, Theseus reinforces the sympathetic view of the exiled former king that Oedipus' speeches created in the previous dialogue with the elders. This respectful approach toward Oedipus, in turn, establishes Theseus as a character commanding respect and sympathy. In fact, Oedipus himself praises Theseus, calling the king "so magnanimous, so noble!" (641-642).

This episode includes one of the most famous speeches written by Sophocles (685-712). To Theseus' question about why Thebes and Athens should ever come to war, Oedipus answers with all the authority of his own horrendous experience, describing the instability of life and earthly circumstances.

**Glossary**

**Dionysus** the god of wine and revelry.

**Great Goddesses** here, a term to refer to Demeter, the goddess of agriculture, and her daughter Persephone, the goddess of the underworld and the spring. They are the deities of the Eleusian Mysteries, which granted initiates the hope of life after death.

**Cephisus** a river of Attica.
**Muses** the nine goddesses who preside over literature and the arts and sciences: Calliope, Clio, Euterpe, Melpomene, Terpsichore, Erato, Polyhymnia, Urania, and Thalia.

**Aphrodite** the goddess of love and beauty.

**Pelops' broad Dorian island** here, a reference to the Peloponnesus, a peninsula forming the southern part of the mainland in Greece.

**Summary and Analysis: Oedipus at Colonus** Lines 762-817 [page 92-93]

**Summary**

The chorus sings a lyrical ode praising the natural beauties of the Athenian countryside.

**Analysis**

Theseus' conferral of citizenship upon Oedipus inspires the elders' celebratory ode to the glories of Athens and its surrounding lands.

Sophocles offers this evocation of natural beauty at a time when Athens was brought low by war, and so the description is of an idyllic (peaceful) place, still fresh from creation. The poetic emphasis is on the divinity that enlivens the landscape. Horses, for instance, represent the power of Poseidon, and olives, the sheltering genius of Athena.

Note, too, that the ode pays particular attention to the narcissus, a flower associated with Demeter and Persephone, who went down among the dead and returned to life. The narcissus is also associated with the Eleusian Mysteries, a ritual of death and rebirth. Again, the reference looks forward to Oedipus' approaching death and his transformation into a spirit with a god's power.

**Glossary**

**Mount of Ares** a hill in Athens, the site of the first court of law.

**Narcissus** in Greek mythology, a youth who was punished for repulsing Echo's love by being made to fall in love with his own reflection in a pool. He died gazing at his own image, and was turned into a flower.