

Passage 6: *Oedipus at Colonus* 1156-1210, 1254-1396

Theseus

They say a man—not from your city, yet of your race—has somehow thrown himself down, as a suppliant, at our altar of Poseidon, where I was sacrificing when I first set out here.

Oedipus

[1160] What land does he come from? What does he desire by his supplication?

Theseus

I know one thing only: they tell me he asks to speak briefly with you, a thing of no great burden.

Oedipus

On what topic? That suppliant state is of no small account.

Theseus

He asks, they say, no more than that he may confer with you, [1165] and return unharmed from his journey here.

Oedipus

Who can he be that implores the god in this way?

Theseus

Consider whether there is anyone in your race at Argos, who might desire this favor from you.

Oedipus

Dearest friend, say no more!

Theseus

What is wrong?

Oedipus

[1170] Do not ask me for—

Theseus

For what? Speak!

Oedipus

From hearing these things I know who the suppliant is.

Theseus

And who can he be, that I should have an objection to him?

Oedipus

My son, lord, a hated son whose words would vex my ear like the words of no man besides.

Theseus

[1175] What? Can you not listen, without doing what you do not wish to do? Why does it pain you to hear him?

Oedipus

Lord, that voice has become most hateful to his father. Do not constrain me to yield in this.

Theseus

But consider whether his suppliant state constrains you; [1180] what if you have a duty of respect for the god?

Antigone

Father, listen to me; I will offer counsel though I am young. Allow this man here to gratify his own feelings and the god as he wishes, and for your daughters' sake allow our brother to come. [1185] He will not tear you by force from your resolve—never fear—with such words as will not be for your good. What harm can there be in listening to words? Deeds wickedly devised, as you know, are betrayed by speech. You sired him, [1190] so, even if he wrongs you with the most impious of wrongs, father, it is not right for you to wrong him in return. Let him come! Other men too have evil offspring and a sharp anger, but they hear advice and are charmed from their mood by the gentle spells of friends. [1195] Look to the past, away from the present; consider all the pains that you have suffered through your father and mother. If you consider those things, I know well that you will perceive that what results from an evil anger is evil. Your reasons to reflect on this are not trivial, [1200] bereft of your unseeing eyes. Yield to us! It is not a fine thing for those seeking justice to keep asking; nor is it good that a man should be treated well, and thereafter not know how to requite it.

Oedipus

My child, by your pleading you overcome me; but your pleasure here is my grief. [1205] Still, let it be as is dear to you. Only, if that man is to come here, stranger, let no one ever become master over my soul.

Theseus

Once only do I need hear such words, and no more, old man. I do not want to boast, [1210] but you may feel sure that your life is safe, while any of the gods preserves mine. *Theseus exits.*

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Polynices

Ah, me, what should I do? Should I weep first [1255] for my own woes, sisters, or for those of my father here, in his old age? I have found him in a foreign land, here with you two as an exile, clad in such garments as these. Their unfriendly filth has resided with the old man for long, [1260] wasting his flesh; while above the sightless eyes the unkempt hair flutters in the breeze; and matching with these things, it seems, is the food that he carries, sustenance for his poor stomach.

Wretch that I am! I learn all this too late. [1265] And I bear witness that I have proved the worst of men in all that concerns care for you; from my own lips hear what I am. But seeing that Zeus himself in all his actions has Shame beside him to share his throne, may she come to your aid too, father. For the sins committed can be healed, [1270] but can never be made worse.

Why are you silent? Speak, father. Do not turn away from me. Do you not have any answer at all for me? Will you dismiss me without a word, dishonored, and not tell me why you are angry? [1275] Seed of this man, my sisters, you at least must try to move our father's implacable, inexorable silence, so that he may not send me away like this, dishonored and with no word in return, when I am the suppliant of the god.

Antigone

[1280] Tell him yourself, unhappy man, what you have come to seek. When words flow, you know, they may give joy, or incite anger or pity, and so they may give a voice to the mute.

Polynices

Then I will speak boldly, for you give me excellent guidance, [1285] first claiming the help of the god himself, from whose altar the king of this land raised me to come to you, with a guarantee to speak and hear, and go my way unharmed. And I wish these pledges, strangers, to be kept with me by you, and by my sisters here, and by my father. [1290] But now I want to tell you, father, why I came. I have been driven as an exile from my fatherland, because, as eldest-born, I thought it right to sit on your sovereign throne. [1295] Therefore Eteocles, though the younger, thrust me from the land, when he had neither defeated me by an argument of law, nor made a trial of might and deed. He brought over the city by persuasion. The cause of this, I claim, is most of all the curse on your house; [1300] I also hear this from soothsayers. For when I came to Dorian Argos, I made Adrastus my father-in-law. And I bound to me by oath all men of the Apian land who are foremost in their renown for war, [1305] so that with their aid I might collect the seven armies of spearmen against Thebes, and die in a just cause, or drive the doers of this wrong from the land. All right then, why have I come to you now? Bearing prayers of supplication, father, in person to you, [1310] my own prayers and those of my allies, who now with seven armies behind their seven spears have set their blockade around the plain of Thebes. One such is swift-speared Amphiarus, a matchless warrior, and a matchless diviner; [1315] then comes the son of Oeneus, Aetolian Tydeus; Eteocles is third, of Argive birth; the fourth, Hippomedon, is sent by Talaos, his father; while Capaneus, the fifth, boasts that he will burn Thebes to the ground with fire; and sixth, Arcadian Parthenopaeus rushes to the war. [1320] He is named for that virgin of long ago from whose marriage in later time he was born, the trusty son of Atalanta. Last come I, your son—or if not yours, then the offspring of an evil fate, but yours at least in name— [1325] leading the fearless army of Argos to Thebes. It is we who implore you, father, every one of us, by your daughters here and by your soul, begging you to forgo your fierce anger against me, as I go forth to punish my brother, [1330] who has expelled me and robbed me of my fatherland. For if anything trustworthy comes from oracles, they said that whoever you join with in alliance will have victorious strength. Then, by the streams of water and gods of our race, I ask you to listen and to yield. [1335] I am a beggar and a stranger, as you are yourself; by paying court to others both you and I have a home, obtaining by lot the same fortune. But he is tyrant at home—wretched me!—and in his pride laughs at you and me alike. [1340] But if you join as ally to my purpose, with little trouble or time I will scatter his strength to the winds, so that I will bring you home and set you in your own house, and set me in mine, when I have cast him out by force. If you are with me, then I can make this boast; but without you [1345] I cannot even return alive.

Chorus

For the sake of him who has sent this man, Oedipus, speak what seems good to you, before you send him away.

Oedipus

Guardians of this land, if it were not Theseus who had sent him here to me, thinking it just that he should hear my response, [1350] then never would he have heard my voice of prophecy. But now he will be graced with it, before he goes, and hear from me such words as never will gladden his life. [1355] Worst of men, when you had the scepter and the throne, which now your brother has in Thebes, you drove me, your own father, into exile; and by making me an exile you caused me to wear this clothing at whose sight you weep, now that you have come to the same state of misery as I. [1360] The time for tears is past. I must bear this burden as long as I live, and keep you before my mind as a murderer. For it is you that have made me

subject to this anguish; it is you that have thrust me out, and because of you I wander, begging my daily bread from strangers. [1365] And had these daughters not been born to me to be my comfort, in truth I would be dead, for lack of help from you. But now these girls preserve me; they are my nurses; they are men, not women, in sharing my toil. But you are from another and are no sons of mine. [1370] Therefore the divinity looks upon you—not yet as he soon will look, if indeed those armies of yours are moving against Thebes. There is no way in which you can ever overthrow that city. Before that you will fall, polluted by bloodshed, and so too your brother. [1375] Such curses as my heart before now sent up against you both, I now invoke to fight for me, in order that you may think it fit to revere your parents and not to dishonor your father utterly, because he who begot such sons is blind. For my daughters here did not act in this way. [1380] This supplication of yours, and this throne of yours, will lie in the power of my curses, if indeed Justice, revealed long ago, sits beside Zeus, to share his throne through sanction of primordial laws. But off to damnation with you, abhorred by me and disowned! [1385] Take these curses which I call down on you, most evil of evil men: may you never defeat your native land, and may you never return to the valley of Argos; I pray that you die by a related hand, and slay him by whom you have been driven out. This is my prayer. [1390] And I call on the hateful darkness of Tartarus that your father shares, to take you into another home; and I call on the divinities of this place, and I call on the god of war, who has set dreadful hatred in you both. Go with these words in your ear; [1395] go and announce to all the Cadmeans, and to your own faithful allies, that Oedipus has distributed such portions to his sons.