

Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*
(translations by Richard Jebb)

Passage I: *Oedipus at Colonus* 229-295

Chorus

No man is visited by the punishment of fate if he requites deeds which were first done to himself. [230] Deceit on the one part matches deceits on the other, and gives pain instead of pleasure for reward. And you—back with you! Out from your seat! [235] Away from my land with all speed, that you may not fasten some heavier burden on my city!

Antigone

Reverent strangers, since you have not endured my aged father—knowing, as you do, [240] the rumor of his unintended deeds—pity at least my poor self, I implore you, who supplicate you for my father alone. I beg you with eyes that can still look [245] on your own, like one sprung from your own blood, that this sufferer may meet with reverent treatment. On you, as on a god, we depend in our misery. But come, grant the favor for which we hardly dare hope! [250] I implore you by everything that you hold dear at home: by child, by wife, or treasure, or god! Look well and you will not find the mortal who, if a god should lead him on, could escape.

Chorus

Feel sure, daughter of Oedipus, that we pity you and him alike [255] for your misfortune; but dreading the punishment of the gods, we could not say anything beyond what we have now said to you.

Oedipus

What help comes, then, of repute or fair fame, if it ends in idle breath; [260] seeing that Athens, as men say, is god-fearing beyond all, and alone has the power to shelter the outraged stranger, and alone the power to help him? And where are these things for me, when, after making me rise up from this rocky seat, you then drive me from the land, afraid of my name alone? [265] Not, surely, afraid of my person or of my acts; since my acts, at least, have been in suffering rather than doing—if I must mention the tale of my mother and my father, because of which you fear me. That know I full well. [270] And yet how was I innately evil? I, who was merely requiting a wrong, so that, had I been acting with knowledge, even then I could not be accounted evil. But, as it was, all unknowing I went where I went—while they who wronged me knowingly sought my ruin. [275] Therefore, strangers, I beseech you by the gods: just as you made me leave my seat, so protect me, and do not, while you render honor to the gods, consider those gods to be fools. But rather consider that they look on the god-fearing man [280] and on the godless, and that never yet has an impious man found escape. With the help of those gods, do not becloud the prosperity of Athens by paying service to unholy deeds. As you have received the suppliant under your pledge, [285] rescue me and guard me to the end; nor dishonor me when you look on this face unlovely to behold, for I have come to you as one sacred and pious, bearing comfort for this people. But when the master has come, [290] whoever is your leader, then you will hear and know all; meanwhile show yourselves in no way evil.

Chorus

The thoughts you urge, old man, must move awe; they have been set forth in grave words. [295] But I am content that the rulers of our country should judge in this case.

Passage 2: *Oedipus at Colonus* 421-460

Oedipus

Then may the gods not quench their fated strife, and may it fall to me to decide this war on which they are now setting their hands, raising spear against spear! [425] For then neither would he who now holds the scepter and the throne survive, nor would the exile ever return; seeing that when I, their father, was being thrust without honor from my country, they did not stop or defend me. No, they saw me sent forth homeless, [430] and heard the crier proclaim my sentence of exile. Perhaps you will say that that was my own wish then, and that the city fittingly granted me that gift. Not so! For on that first day, when my heart seethed, [435] and my sweetest wish was for death—indeed, death by stoning—no one was found to help me in that desire. But after a time, when all my anguish was now softened, and when I began to feel that my heart had been excessive in punishing those past errors, [440] then it was that the city set about to drive me by force from the land, after all that time. And my sons, when they had the strength to bring help—sons to their own father—they would not do it. For lack of one little word from them, I was left to wander, an outcast and a beggar forever. [445] Instead, it is from these, maidens as they are, insofar as nature enables them, that I obtain my daily food, and a shelter in the land, and the aid of family. Their brothers have bartered their father for the throne, the scepter of power, and the rule of the realm. [450] No, never will they win Oedipus for an ally, nor will good ever come to them from this reign at Thebes; that I know, when I hear this maiden's oracles and reflect on the old prophecies stored in my own mind, which Phoebus has fulfilled for me at last. [455] Therefore let them send Creon to seek me—or whoever else is mighty in Thebes. For if you, strangers, with the help of the dread goddesses who reign among your district, are willing to defend me, you will obtain a great savior for this city, [460] and troubles for my enemies.

Passage 3: *Oedipus at Colonus* 551-643

Theseus

Through hearing from many in the past about the bloody marring of your sight, I recognized it was you, son of Laius; and now on coming here, through sight I am more fully certain. [555] For your clothing and that heart-rending face alike assure me that it is you. And in all compassion I ask you, ill-fated Oedipus, with what petition to the city and to me have you taken your place here, you and the poor maiden at your side. Declare it. Dire indeed must be the fortune which you tell, [560] for me to stand aloof from it; since I know that I myself also was reared in exile, just as you, and that in foreign lands I wrestled with perils to my life, like no other man. [565] Never, then, would I turn aside from a stranger, such as you are now, or refuse to help in his deliverance. For I know well that I am a man, and that my portion of tomorrow is no greater than yours.

Oedipus

Theseus, in a few words your nobleness has come to such a point [570] that I need make only a brief reply. You have said who I am, from what father I am sprung, and from what land I have come; and so nothing else remains for me but to speak my wish, and the tale is told.

Theseus

[575] Then inform me of this very thing, so that I may learn it.

Oedipus

I come to offer you my care-worn body as a gift—not one fine to look on, but the gains from it are better than beauty.

Theseus

And what gain do you claim to have brought?

Oedipus

[580] Later you may learn it—but not yet.

Theseus

At what time, then, will the benefit become clear?

Oedipus

When I am dead, and you have given me burial.

Theseus

You crave life's last service; but for all between you have no memory, or no care.

Oedipus

[585] Indeed, for by that service I gather in all the rest.

Theseus

Well then, this favor you crave from me is brief indeed.

Oedipus

Yet take care; the struggle here is no light one. No, indeed.

Theseus

Do you mean in respect to your sons, or to me?

Oedipus

They will compel you to convey me there to Thebes.

Theseus

[590] But if you are willing, then exile is not becoming.

Oedipus

No, when I was willing, they refused.

Theseus

Foolish man, anger amidst woes is not suitable.

Oedipus

When you have heard my story, admonish; till then, forbear.

Theseus

Speak. I must not pronounce without knowledge.

Oedipus

[595] I have suffered, Theseus, terrible woes upon woes.

Theseus

Will you speak of the ancient trouble of your race?

Oedipus

No, indeed; all Greeks speak of that.

Theseus

How, then, do you suffer beyond what is mortal?

Oedipus

The circumstance is this: from my country I have been driven by my own sons; [600] and I may not return, since I am guilty of a father's blood.

Theseus

Why would they have you brought back, if you must dwell apart?

Oedipus

The word of the god will compel them.

Theseus

What suffering do they fear from the oracles?

Oedipus

[605] That they must be struck down in this land.

Theseus

And how should bitterness come between them and me?

Oedipus

Dearest son of Aegeus, to the gods alone old age and death never come, but everything else sinks into chaos from time which overpowers all. [610] Earth's strength decays, and so too the strength of the body; trust dies; distrust is born; and the same spirit is never steadfast among friends, or between city and city. For some now, for others tomorrow, sweet feelings turn to bitter, and then once more to being dear. [615] And if now the sun shines brightly between Thebes and you, yet time in his course gives birth to days and nights untold, in which from a small cause they will [620] scatter with the spear today's pledges of concord. Then one day my slumbering and buried corpse, cold in death, will drink their warm blood, if Zeus is still Zeus, and Phoebus, the son of Zeus, speaks clear. But, since I would not break silence concerning words that must not spoken, allow me to cease where I began. [625] Only keep your own pledge good, and never will you say that in vain you welcomed Oedipus to dwell in this land—if indeed the gods do not deceive me.

Chorus

Lord, from the first this man has shown a [630] will to bring these words, or similar ones, to completion for our land.

Theseus

Who, then, would reject the goodwill of such a one? To whom, first, the hearth of a spear-friend is always available on our side, by reciprocal right; then too he has come as a suppliant to our gods, [635] paying no small recompense to this land and to me. In reverence for these claims, I will never spurn his favor, and I will establish a dwelling for him as a citizen in the land. And if it is the pleasure of the stranger to remain here, I will command you to [640] protect him; or, if it pleases him, to come with me. This choice or that, Oedipus, you may take; your desire will be mine.

Oedipus

O Zeus, may you be good to men such as these!

Passage 4: *Oedipus at Colonus* 728-

Creon

Gentlemen, noble dwellers in this land, I see from your eyes that a sudden fear has troubled you at my coming; [730] but do not shrink back from me, and let no evil word escape you. I am here with no thought of force; I am old, and I know that the city to which I have come is mighty, if any in Hellas has might. [735] No, I have been sent, aged as I am, to plead with this man to return with me to the land of Cadmus. I am not one man's envoy, but have a mandate from all our people; since it belonged to me, by family, beyond all other Thebans to mourn his woes. [740] Unhappy Oedipus, hear us, and come home! Justly are you summoned by all the Cadmeans, and most of all by me, since I—unless I am the worst of all men born—feel most sorrow for your woes, old man, [745] when I see you, unhappy as you are, a stranger and a wanderer evermore, roaming in beggary, with one handmaid for your support. Ah, me, I had not thought that she could fall to such a depth of misery as that to which she has fallen— [750] this poor girl!—as she tends forever your dark life amid poverty; in ripe youth, but unwed: a prize for the first passerby to seize. Is it not a cruel reproach—alas!—that I have cast at you, and me, and all our race? [755] But indeed an open shame cannot be hidden. Oedipus, in the name of your ancestral gods, listen to me! Hide it, and consent to return to the city and the house of your ancestors, after bidding a kind farewell to this city. Athens is worthy; yet your own city has the first claim on your reverence, [760] since it was Thebes that nurtured you long ago.

Oedipus

You who will dare anything, who from any just plea would derive a crafty trick, why do you make this attempt on me, and seek once more to snare me in your trap where I would feel most grief? [765] Long ago, when I labored under the sickness of my self-made evils, and I yearned to be cast out of the land, you refused to grant the favor. But when my fierce anger had spent its force, and seclusion in the house was sweet to me, [770] it was then that you thrust me from the house and cast me from the land. And this common race that you mention—that was not at all dear to you then. Now, in turn, when you see that I have a kindly welcome from this city and all its race, you try to pluck me away, wrapping your cruel thoughts in soft words. [775] And yet what pleasure do you find in this, in treating me as dear against my will? As if a man should refuse you a gift, bring you no aid, when you continually begged for it; but after your heart was sated with your desires, he should grant it then, when the favor could bring no joy [780] —would you not find your delight in this empty? Yet such is the nature of your own offers to me: noble in appearance, but in substance base. And I will declare it to these men too, to show you up as base. You have come to get me, [785] not to bring me home, but to plant me near your borders, so that your city might escape uninjured by evils from this land. That fate is not for you, but this one: the brooding of my vengeful spirit on your land forever; and for my sons, this heirloom: [790] just so much soil in my realm in which to die. Am I not wiser than you in the fortunes of Thebes? Yes, far wiser, by as much as the sources of my knowledge are truer: Phoebus I mean, and his father, Zeus himself. But you have come here with fraud on your lips, yes, [795] and with a tongue keener than the edge of a sword; yet by their use you may well reap more sorrow than salvation. Still, since I know that I cannot persuade you of this, go! Allow us to live on here; for even in this plight our life would not be bad, if we should be content with it.

Passage 5: *Oedipus at Colonus* 897-1013

Theseus

Hurry, one of you attendants, to the altars there, and order the people to leave the sacrifice [900] and race on foot and by horse full speed, to the region where the two highways meet, so that the maidens may not pass, and I not become a mockery to this stranger as one worsted by force. Quick, I say, away with you!

As for this man, if my [905] anger went as far as he deserves, I would not let him go uninjured from my hand. But now, just such law as he himself has brought will be the rule for his correction.

You will never leave this land [910] until you bring those maidens and produce them in my sight. For your action is a disgrace to me, and to your own ancestors, and to your country. You have come to a city that practices justice and sanctions nothing without law, [915] yet you have spurned her lawful authorities and made this violent assault. You are taking captives at will and subjugating them by force, as if you believed that my city was void of men, or manned by slaves, and that I counted for nothing. Yet it was not Thebes that trained you to be evil. Thebes is not accustomed to rearing unjust men;— [920] nor would she praise you, if she learned that you are despoiling me, and despoiling the gods, when by force you drive off their unfortunate suppliants. If my foot were upon your land, never would I drag off or lead away someone [925] without permission from the ruler of the land, whoever he might be—no, even if my claim were the most just of all. I would know how a stranger ought to live among citizens. But you are disgracing a city that does not deserve it: your own, [930] and your years, despite their fullness, bring you an old age barren of sense. Now, I have said before, and I say it once again: let the maidens be brought here speedily, unless you wish to be an unwilling immigrant to this country by force. [935] These are the words of my lips; my mind is in accord.

Chorus

Do you see your plight, stranger? You are judged to be just by where you are from, but your deeds are found to be evil.

Creon

It is not because I thought this city void of men, son of Aegeus, or of counsel, as you say, [940] that I have done this deed; but because I judged that its people could never be so zealous for my relatives as to support them against my will. And I knew that this people would not receive a parricide and a polluted man, [945] a man whose unholy marriage—a marriage with children—had been found out. Such wisdom, I knew, was immemorial on the Areopagus, which does not allow such wanderers to dwell within this city. Trusting in that, I sought to take this prize. [950] And I would not have done so, had he not been calling down bitter curses on me and on my race. As I was wronged in this way, I judged that I had a right to this requital. For anger knows no old age, until death comes; [955] the dead alone feel no galling pain. In response to this, you will do what pleases you; for, though my case is just, the lack of aid makes me weak. Yet in the face of your actions, despite my age, I will endeavor to pay you back.

Oedipus

[960] Shameless arrogance, where do you think this outrage falls—on my old age, or on your own? Bloodshed, incest, misery—all this your tongue has launched against me, and all this I have borne in my wretchedness by no choice of mine. [965] For this was dear to the gods, who were angry, perhaps, with my race from of old. Taking me alone, you could not find a reproach for any crime, in retribution for which I was driven to commit these sins against myself and against my kin. Tell me now: if, by the voice of an oracle, some divine doom was coming on my father, [970] that he should die by a son's hand, how could you justly reproach me with this, when I was then unborn, when no father had yet begotten me, no mother's womb conceived me? But if, having been born to misery—as I was born—I came to blows with my father and slew

him, ignorant of what [975] I was doing and to whom, how could you reasonably blame the unwitting deed? And my mother—wretch, do you feel no shame in forcing me to speak of her marriage, when she was your sister, and when it was such as I will now tell? [980] For I will not be silent, when you have gone so far in impious speech.

Yes, she was my mother, yes—alas, for my miseries! I did not know it, nor did she, and to her shame she bore children to the son whom she had borne. [985] But one thing, at least, I know: that you willingly revile her and me, but I did not willingly marry her, and I do not willingly speak now. No, I will not be called evil on account of this marriage, nor in the slaying of my father, which you charge me with again and again in bitter insult. [990] Answer just one thing of those I ask. If, here and now, someone should come up and try to murder you—you, the just one—would you ask if the murderer was your father, or would you revenge yourself on him straightaway? [995] I think that if your life is dear to you, you would requite the criminal, and not look around for a justification. Such then were the evils into which I came, led by the gods; and in this, I think, my father's soul, could it come back to life, would not contradict me. [1000] But you are not just; you are one who considers it a fine thing to utter every sort of word, both those which are sanctioned and those which are forbidden—such are your taunts against me in the presence of these men. And to you it seems a fine thing to flatter the renowned Theseus, and Athens, saying how well it is governed. [1005] Yet while giving such generous praise, you forget that if any land knows how to worship the gods with honors, this land excels in that. It is from her that you had planned to steal me, a suppliant and an old man, and tried to seize me, having already carried off my daughters. [1010] Therefore I now call on the goddesses here, I supplicate them, I beseech them with prayers, to bring me help and to fight on my behalf, that you may learn well what kind of men this city is guarded by.