

The Oedipus Trilogy: Still Relevant Today?

An Abridged and Adapted Version of Sophocles' Play* by Nick Bartel, 1999
(Intended for use as Readers' Theater in the Junior - Senior High School Classroom)

Characters:

Oedipus, King of Thebes
Jocasta, His Wife
Creon, His Brother-in-Law
Teiresias, an Old Blind Prophet
A Priest
First Messenger
Second Messenger
A Herdsman
A Chorus of Old Men of Thebes (three or more chorus members)
[Non-Speaking Parts] Servants of Oedipus (2)
Children and young priests who pray; one leads Teiresias
Antigone and Ismene, daughters of Oedipus

Scene: In front of Oedipus' palace in Thebes. To the right is an altar where a priest stands with a crowd of children in sorrowful prayer. Oedipus emerges from the palace door. The chorus is on the left.

Oedipus: Children, why do you sit here with such sorrow, crying out to the gods? The town is filled with the sounds of hymns and smells of incense! I, whom all men call the Great, came out to learn of this myself. [He turns to the priest.] You're old and they are young. Come, speak for them. What do you fear or want that you sit here crying out? I'm willing to give all that you may need.

Priest: Lord Oedipus, these innocent children and I, the priest of Zeus, we come to pray at your altars. King, you have seen our city tossing like a wrecked ship in a storm. It can scarcely lift its prow out of the depths, out of the bloody surf. A disease is upon the plants of the earth and on the cattle in our fields. A blight is on our women that no children are born to them. Our city is emptied of its people while black Death reaps the harvest of our tears. We have come to speak to you, o king. You came and saved our city, and freed us from the monster Sphinx who enslaved us. This you did by your wisdom; some God was by your side. Oedipus, greatest in all men's eyes, we pray, find some strength again and rescue our city. Perhaps you'll hear a wise word whispered by some God, or in any human way you know. Noblest of men, keep our city from sinking. This land of ours calls you its savior since you saved it once. Before you brought us luck; help us again in this misfortune.

Oedipus: I pity you, children. I know you all are sick, yet not one of you suffers as much as I. My heart grieves and I have wept many tears due to this. I have thought of only one hope, one remedy: I sent Creon, my brother-in-law, to ask Apollo at his temple how I could save this city. He is gone far longer than he needed for the journey. But when he comes, then I shall do all the God commands.

Priest: Thank you for your kind words. Look, your servants signal that Creon is coming now.

Oedipus: His face is bright! O holy Lord Apollo, grant that his news will also be bright and will bring us comfort! [Creon enters.] Lord Creon, my good brother, what is the word you bring us from the God?

Creon: A good word. Apollo commanded us to drive out a pollution from our land, a pollution that is nourished here. Drive it out and we are saved.

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Oedipus: How shall it be done?

Creon: By banishing a man or by taking blood, for it is a murder's guilt that holds our city in this destructive storm.

Oedipus: Who is this man whose fate the God reveals?

Creon: My lord, before you came to guide us, we had a king called Laius. Apollo commanded that someone punish this dead man's murderers.

Oedipus: Where are they? Where would a trace of this old crime be found?

Creon: The clue is in this land, so said the God.

Oedipus: Where did this murder take place?

Creon: The king was on a trip, but never returned.

Oedipus: Was there no messenger, no fellow traveler who knew what happened?

Creon: They were all killed, except one. He fled in fear and he could tell us nothing in clear terms of what he knew. Nothing, but one thing.

Oedipus: What was that? If we had a clue, we might discover more.

Creon: This man said that the robbers were many; it was not a single man's doing. Because of the riddling Sphinx, we neglected the mysterious crime and sought a solution to the troubles before us. That was long ago, before you came.

Oedipus: I swear by Apollo that I will bring this to light again. Whoever he was that killed the king may readily wish to kill me with his murderous hand! Children, go now. I will do what is needed. God will decide whether we prosper or remain in sorrow.
[Exit all but the chorus.]

Chorus: [Original text, lines 150 - 204.]

What is the sweet voice from the shrine of Apollo, rich in gold, that I have heard?

I am wracked with doubt and fear, and in trembling hold my heart, and

I worship full of fears for what will pass throughout the years.

No spear have we to drive away the plague; no children are begotten.

Our sorrows are without number; mighty Zeus, are we forgotten?

In unnumbered deaths dies the city; those children born lie dead on naked earth without pity.

Gray haired mothers and wives stand at the altar with hymns to Father Zeus to spare our lives.

[Oedipus returns.]

Oedipus: [Original text, lines 205 - 265.]

Hear my words, citizens of Thebes, for in them you will find strength. I command that whoever among you knows the murderer of Laius, tell everything. In telling there shall be no punishment, but the murderer shall be banished to save our land. Or if you know the murderer, speak the truth, for I will pay and be grateful, too. But if you keep silent, beware! I forbid any to welcome him or let him join in sacrifice or offering to the gods, or give him water. I command all to drive him from your homes, since he is our pollution. I stand as champion of the God and of the man who

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died. Upon the murderer I invoke this curse: may he live out his life in misery to miserable doom! A good man is dead. Since I am now the holder of his office and have his bed and wife that once was his, I will defend him as I would my own father. Those who do not obey me, may the Gods grant no crops springing from the ground they plow nor children to their women! May a fate like this, or one still worse, consume them!

Chorus: I neither killed the king, nor know the killer. But since Apollo set the task, it is his part to tell who the man is. Blind old Teiresias can see what Apollo sees. If you inquire of him, you might find out most clearly.

Oedipus: Yes! I have already sent for the prophet.

Chorus: Look. Here comes the godly prophet guided by your men.
[Teiresias enters led by a little boy. - Original text, line 289.]

Oedipus: Teiresias, you know much - things teachable and things not to be spoken, things of the heavens and earth. You have no eyes, but in your mind you know what a plague holds our city. My lord, you alone can rescue us. We should learn the names of those who killed King Laius and kill them or expel them from our country. Do not withhold from us the oracles from birds, or any other way of prophecy within your skill; save yourself and the city, and save me. End this pollution that lies on us because of this dead man. We are in your hands.

Teiresias: Alas, how terrible is wisdom when it turns against you! Let me go home. It will be easiest for us both to go no further in this.

Oedipus: You would rob us of your gift of prophecy? Do you have no care for law nor love of your city Thebes who reared you?

Teiresias: Yes, but I see that your own words lead you to error. Therefore I must fear for mine.

Oedipus: For God's sake, if you know anything, do not turn from us.

Teiresias: All of you here know nothing. I will not bring our troubles to the light of day.

Oedipus: What do you mean? You know something and refuse to speak! Would you betray us and destroy the city?

Teiresias: I will not bring this pain upon us both.

Oedipus: Tell us, you villain!

Teiresias: Of themselves things will come, even if I breathe no word of them.

Oedipus: Since they will come, tell them to me.

Teiresias: I will say nothing further. Let your temper rage as wildly as you will.

Oedipus: Indeed I am angry. You must be a conspirator in the deed. If you had eyes, I would have said that you alone murdered him!

Teiresias: Yes? Then I warn you faithfully to keep your word and from this day forth to speak no

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word of greeting to these people nor me. You are the land's pollution.

Oedipus: How shamelessly you taunt me. Do you think you will escape?

Teiresias: You have made me speak against my will.

Oedipus: Speak what? Tell me again that I may learn it better.

Teiresias: Did you not understand before? Would you provoke me into speaking? You are the murderer of the king.

Oedipus: You shall not lie like this and stay unpunished.

Teiresias: I say that with those you love best you live in foulest shame and do not see where you are wrong.

Oedipus: Do you think you can talk like this and live to laugh at it hereafter? You are blind in mind and ears as well as in your eyes.

Teiresias: You are a poor wretch to pile upon me insults which everyone soon will heap upon you.

Oedipus: Was this your own design or was it Creon's?

Teiresias: Your ruin comes not from Creon, but from yourself.

Oedipus: My one-time friend Creon attacks me secretly for wealth and power. He wants to drive me out and devises this trick with this beggar who has only eyes for his own gains, but blindness in his skill. Before I defeated the Sphinx by answering its riddle. Where was your gift of prophecy then? I came and stopped her. Mine was no knowledge got from birds. And now you expel me, because you think that you will find a place by Creon's throne!

Chorus: We look on this man's words and yours, and find you have both spoken in anger.

Teiresias: I have the right to speak in my defense against you. I live in the service of Apollo, not in yours nor Creon's. Listen to me. You have called me blind, but you have your eyes but see not where you are in sin. Do you know who your parents are? And of the multitude of other evils between you and your children, you know nothing.

Oedipus: Go out of my house at once and be damned! I did not know you would talk like a fool.

Teiresias: I am a fool, then, but to your parents, wise. This day will show you your birth and will destroy you. [To the audience] In name he is an outsider, but soon he will be shown to be a citizen, a true native of Thebes. And he'll have no joy in the discovery. He will exchange blindness for sight and poverty for riches. He shall be proved father and brother both to his own children in his house. To the one who gave him birth, a son and a husband both. [Teiresias and Oedipus exit separately. - Original Text, line 452]

Chorus:

By Delphi's oracle, who is proclaimed
The doer of deeds that remains unnamed?

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Now is the time for him to run,
The prophet has spread such confusion.
Truly Zeus and Apollo are wise,
But amongst men there is no judgment of truth or lies.
I'll find no fault with the king till proven beyond a doubt,
For he saved us from the Sphinx and helped us out. [Creon enters.]

Creon: Citizens, I have come because I heard scandalous words spread about me by the king. I am no traitor to my city nor to my friends.

Chorus: Perhaps it was a burst of anger with no judgment. Here comes the king now.
[Oedipus enters . - Original text, line 493.]

Oedipus: You dare come here after you tried to rob me of my crown? What made you lay a plot like this against me? Did you think a criminal would not be punished because he is my kinsman?

Creon: Will you listen to words and then pass judgment? Of what offense am I guilty?

Oedipus: Did you or did you not urge me to send for this prophetic mumbler?

Creon: I did.

Oedipus: How long ago is it since Laius vanished - died - was murdered?

Creon: It was long, a long, long time ago.

Oedipus: Did the prophet ever say a word about me then? Why didn't our wise friend say something then?

Creon: I don't know. When I know nothing, I usually hold my tongue.

Oedipus: As my brother-in-law, you have had a share in ruling of this country. And you have proven yourself a false friend. I should kill you!

Creon: [Original text, line 564.] Consider this. Would any man be king in constant fear, when he could live in peace and quiet, and have no less power? I have no desire to have the responsibilities of a king. Now I am carefree. You give me all I want. The prizes are all mine: riches, respect and honor, and without fear. Why should I let all this go? I would never dare to join a plot. Do you look for proof? Then go to the oracle and ask if they are as I told you. If you discover I plotted together with the seer, sentence me to death, not by your vote alone, but by my own as well. Don't throw away an honest friend. In time you will know all with certainty; time is the only test of honest men. In one day you can know a villain.

Chorus: His words are wise, king. Those who are quick of temper are not safe. But stop, my lords! Here just in time I see Jocasta coming from the house. With her help you can settle the quarrel that now divides you. [Enters Jocasta, queen and wife of Oedipus. - Original text, line 614.]

Jocasta: Are you not ashamed to start a private feud when the country is suffering?

Creon: My sister, your husband thinks he has the right to do me wrong. He has but to choose

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how to make me suffer: by banishing me or killing me.

Jocasta: I beg you, Oedipus, trust him. Spare him for the sake of his oath to God, for my sake.

Chorus: Be gracious, be merciful, we beg of you. Respect him. He has been your friend for years.

Oedipus: This request of yours really requests my death or banishment. Well, let him go then. Wherever he is, I shall hate him.

Creon: I'll go, and they have known my innocence. Your temper is your own worst enemy.
[Creon exits. - Original text, line 655.]

Chorus: Quickly, lady, take him inside.

Jocasta: Yes, when I've found out what was the matter. What was the story that angered the king so?

Chorus: I think it best, in the interest of the country, to leave this alone.

Jocasta: Tell me, my lord, I beg of you. What was it that roused your anger so?

Oedipus: It was Creon and the plots he laid against me. Creon says that I am the murderer of Laius.

Jocasta: Does he speak from knowledge or hearsay?

Oedipus: He sent this rascal prophet to me. He keeps his own mouth clean of any guilt.

Jocasta: [Original text, line 680.] Then you have no need to worry about this matter. Listen, and learn from me: no human being is gifted in the art of prophecy. Of that I'll offer you proof. There was an oracle once that came to Laius, and it told him that it was fate that he should die a victim at the hands of his own son, a son to be born of Laius and me. But, see, the king was killed by foreign highway robbers at a place where three roads meet - so the story goes. And for the son, before three days were out after his birth King Laius pierced his ankles and had him cast out upon a hillside to die. So Apollo failed to fulfill his oracle to the son, that he should kill his father. And to Laius also prophecy proved false: the thing he feared, death at his son's hands, never came to pass. So clear and false were the oracles. Give them no heed, I say.

Oedipus: O dear Jocasta, as I hear this from you, I could go mad.

Jocasta: What makes you speak like this?

Oedipus: I thought I heard you say that Laius was killed at a crossroads.

Jocasta: That was the story.

Oedipus: Where is this place?

Jocasta: In the country where the road splits, one road from Delphi, another to Daulia.

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Oedipus: How long ago was this?

Jocasta: It was just before you came to our city to rule us. What is it, Oedipus, that's on your mind?

Oedipus: What is it Zeus, that you do with me? Tell me, Jocasta, of Laius. How did he look? How old or young was he?

Jocasta: He was a tall man and his hair was gray, nearly white. He looked a lot like you.

Oedipus: I think I have called curses on myself in ignorance.

Jocasta: What do you mean? I am terrified when I look at you!

Oedipus: Tell me one more thing. Did he travel with many servants, or a few?

Jocasta: There were five. Laius rode in a carriage with a coachman.

Oedipus: It's plain - it's plain - who told you of what happened?

Jocasta: The only servant that escaped safely home.

Oedipus: Is he part of the household now?

Jocasta: No. When he came home again and saw you king and Laius was dead, he begged that I should send him to the fields to be my shepherd. So I sent him away.

Oedipus: O, how I wish that he could come back quickly!

Jocasta: He can. Why is your heart so set on this?

Oedipus: O dear Jocasta, I am full of fears that I have spoken far too much; and therefore wish to see this shepherd.

Jocasta: He will come. But Oedipus, let me know what bothers you.

Oedipus: [Original text, lines 742 - 805] Polybus was my father, king of Corinth. I was respected by the citizens in Corinth and had a good life. And then a strange thing happened. There was a dinner and at it a drunken man accused me of being a bastard. I was furious, but held my temper. The next day I asked my parents about it. They were insulted by it, as was I. I went to the Oracle to learn more, and Apollo foretold of horrors to befall me: that I was doomed to lie with my mother and be the murderer of my father. When I heard this I fled so that the terrible prophecies would not come true. As I journeyed, I came to the place where, as you tell me, Laius met with his death. Wife, I will tell you the whole truth. When I was near the crossroads going on foot, I encountered a servant and a carriage with a man in it, just like you told me. The one who led the way, and the old man himself, wanted to push me out of the road by force. I became angry and struck the coachman who was pushing me. When the old man saw this he struck me on the head from his carriage with a two-pointed staff. I struck him back and he rolled out. And then I killed them all. Was there any tie between this man and Laius? It is I who have cursed myself and pollute the bed of him I killed. O no, no, no - O holy God on high, may I never see that day!

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Chorus: Sir, we too fear these things. But until you see this man face to face and hear his story, have hope.

Jocasta: And when he comes, what do you want with him?

Oedipus: If I find that his story is the same as yours, I at least will be clear of this guilt. You said that he spoke of highway robbers who killed Laius. Now if he used the plural number, it was not I who killed him. One man cannot be the same as many. But if he speaks of a man traveling alone, then guilt points to me.

Jocasta: I will send for him quickly. But he cannot prove the prophecy, for that poor creature did not kill him surely, for he died himself first on the hillside. So as far as prophecy goes, don't be worried about it. [They exit. - Original text, line 835.]

Chorus: I pray that I may keep pure in word and deed and follow the laws made in the clear air of heaven.

Out of pride is born the tyrant.

The man who is arrogant and does not fear the gods

And blasphemes in the holy places

Must fall to an evil fate.

I shall not cease to hold the God as my champion!

O Zeus, if you are rightly called the Almighty, the ruler of mankind, look to these things.

If the oracles are forgotten and slighted,

Apollo is diminished

And man turns his face away from heaven, not raising his voice in prayerful song. [Jocasta enters carrying garlands of flowers. She is with a servant.]

Jocasta: Princes of the land, I will go to the God's temples, bringing garlands and gifts of incense. Oedipus excites himself too much. May they grant that we escape free of the curse. Now when we look to him we are all afraid; he's captain of our ship and he is frightened. [Messenger enters. - Original text, line 888.]

Messenger: God bless you, lady.

Jocasta: God bless you, sir. What do you want of us? What have you to tell us?

Messenger: Good news, lady. Good for your household and for your husband.

Jocasta: What is your news? Who sent you to us?

Messenger: I come from Corinth and the news I bring will please you. Perhaps pain you a little, too.

Jocasta: What is this news with a double meaning?

Messenger: King Polybus is dead. The people there want Oedipus to be their king.

Jocasta [to the servant]: Be quick and run to the King with the news! Oracles of the Gods, where are you now? It was from this man Oedipus fled, and now he is dead - and not killed by Oedipus! [Oedipus enters. - Original text, line 915.]

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Oedipus: Dearest Jocasta, why have you sent for me?

Jocasta: This man is from Corinth and he tells that your father Polybus is dead and gone.

Oedipus: What's this you say? Is he dead by foul play or sickness?

Messenger: A small thing will put old bodies to rest. He died of old age.

Oedipus: [Original text, line 930.] Ha! O dear Jocasta, why should one believe in prophecies? Why look to the birds screaming overhead. They prophesied that I should kill my father! But he is dead and buried deep in the earth. And I stand here never having raised a hand against him. The oracles, they are worthless!

Jocasta: That I told you before now. What has a man to fear when life is ruled by chance, and the future is unknowable? The best way is to take life as it comes.

Oedipus: But surely I must fear my mother's bed?

Messenger: Who is the woman that makes you afraid?

Oedipus: Once a prophecy said that I should lie with my own mother and take the blood of my own father. So for these long years I've lived away from Corinth. How I missed my parents.

Messenger: This was the fear that drove you out of Corinth?

Oedipus: I did not wish to kill my father.

Messenger: It's plain that all your fears are empty. Polybus was no kin to you in blood.

Oedipus: What? Was not Polybus my father?

Messenger: No more than I!

Oedipus: Why then did he call me son?

Messenger: He took you as a gift from these hands of mine.

Oedipus: Was I a child you bought or found when I was given to him?

Messenger: On the slopes outside of town you were found. I was shepherd then, and the man that saved your life, son.

Oedipus: What was wrong with me when you took me in your arms?

Messenger: Your ankles should be witnesses.

Oedipus: Why do you speak of that old pain?

Messenger: I loosed you; the tendons of your feet were pierced and tied together... But the man who gave you to me has more knowledge than I.

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Oedipus: Then you yourself did not find me? You took me from someone else?

Messenger: Yes, from another shepherd. He was Laius' man.

Oedipus: Do any of you know about this man? Jocasta, do you know about this man whom we have sent for? Is he the man he mentions?

Jocasta: Why ask of whom he spoke? Don't pay it any attention. I beg you - do not hunt this out - I beg you, if you have any care for your own life. What I am suffering is enough.

Oedipus: Take courage. If my mother was a slave... I must know the truth.

Jocasta: My Oedipus, God help you! Keep from you the knowledge of who you are!

Oedipus: Here, someone go and fetch the shepherd for me.

Jocasta: O Oedipus, unhappy Oedipus! That is all I can call you... The last thing I shall ever call you. [Jocasta exits. - Original text, line 1038.]

Chorus: Why has the queen gone in wild grief, Oedipus, rushing from us? I fear that from her silence will break a storm.

Oedipus: Let break what will, but find the secret of my birth. Was my mother a humble slave, or... [Enter an old man, led by Oedipus' servants.]

Oedipus: I think this is the herdsman we were seeking.

Messenger: This is he.

Oedipus: Old man, look at me and tell me what I ask you. Were you ever a servant of King Laius?

Herdsman: I was. Most of my life was spent among the flocks.

Oedipus: This man here, have you had any dealings with him?

Herdsman: No, not that I call to mind.

Messenger: Do you remember giving me a child to bring up as my foster child?

Herdsman: Why do you ask this question?

Messenger: Look, old man, here he is - here's the man who was that child!

Herdsman: Damn you! Hold your tongue you meddling fool!

Oedipus: No, no, old man. Don't find fault with him.

Herdsman: He speaks out of ignorance.

Oedipus: If you won't talk, pain will encourage your tongue.

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Herdsmen: O please, sir, don't hurt an old man, sir.

Oedipus [to his servants]: Here, twist his hands behind him.

Herdsmen: Why? What do you want to know?

Oedipus: You gave him a child...?

Herdsmen: I did. I wish I'd died that day.

Oedipus: You will die now unless you tell me the truth!

Herdsmen: And I'll die far worse if I should tell you.

Oedipus: Where did you get this child from? Was it your own or did you get it from another?

Herdsmen: Not my own. I beg you, master, please don't ask me more.

Oedipus: You're a dead man if I ask you again.

Herdsmen: It was from the house of Laius.

Oedipus: A slave? Or born in wedlock?

Herdsmen: O God, I am on the brink of frightful speech.

Oedipus: And I of frightful hearing. But I must hear!

Herdsmen: The child was his child, but your wife would tell you best how all this was.

Oedipus: She gave it to you?

Herdsmen: Yes, my lord.

Oedipus: Its mother was so hard-hearted?

Herdsmen: Aye, my lord, through fear of evil oracles. They said that he should kill his parents.

Oedipus: How was it that you gave it away to this old man?

Herdsmen: I pitied it, and thought I could send it off to another country. But he saved it for the most terrible troubles. If you are the man he says you are, you were born to misery.

Oedipus: O, O, O, Light of the sun, let me look upon you no more. Cursed is my life.
[Exit all but the Chorus. A messenger enters. - Original text, line 1182.]

Second messenger: O princes, our glorious queen Jocasta is dead.

Chorus: Unfortunate woman! How?

Second Messenger: By her own hand. The worst of what was done you cannot know. When she

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came raging into the house she went straight to her marriage bed tearing her hair with both hands and crying to Laius. Then Oedipus burst upon us shouting and he begged us, "Give me a sword!" Into the room he rushed and saw his wife hanging, the twisted rope around her neck. He cried out fearfully and cut the dangling noose. Then, as she lay on the ground, ... what happened after was terrible to see. He tore the brooches from her and lifted them up high and dashed them into his own eyeballs, shrieking out such things as: "They will never see the crime I have committed. Dark eyes, now in the days to come look on forbidden faces, do not recognize those whom you long for." And he struck his eyes again and again. With every blow blood spurted down his cheeks.

Chorus: How is he now? Is he now at peace from his pain?

Second Messenger: He shouts for someone to show him to the men of Thebes - his father's killer, and his mother's - no I cannot say the forbidden word. [The blinded Oedipus enters. - Original text, line 1255.]

Chorus: This is a terrible sight. Wretched king, what madness came upon you! I pity you, but I cannot look in your face. I shudder at the sight of you.

Oedipus: O, O the pain! Where do my poor legs take me? Darkness! Horror of darkness enfolding, madness and stabbing pain and guilt for my evil deeds!

Chorus: What demon urged you to stab into your own eyes?

Oedipus: It was Apollo that brought my ruin to completion. But the hand that struck was my own. Why should I see when vision shows me nothing sweet to see? Curse the man who rescued me as I lay cast out on the hillside. He stole me from death. I wish I had died then.

Chorus: You would be far better off dead than living still and blind

Oedipus: Do not tell me I am wrong. What I have done is best, so give me no more advice. My sufferings are all my own.

Chorus: Here comes Creon. [Creon enters. - Original text, line 1374.]

Creon: Oedipus, I've come not to jeer at you nor taunt you with your past actions. Come inside. You should not be made a public spectacle.

Oedipus: Creon, most noble spirit, I have treated you so badly. Yet I beg you -

Creon: What do you need from me?

Oedipus: Drive me from here with all speed to where I may not hear a human voice. Let me live in the mountain which would have been my tomb so long ago.

Creon: For that, you must ask of the God.

Oedipus: But I am hated by the Gods. The will of the gods is clear enough already.

Creon: It is better to seek their guidance. I will go in your place to seek their help.

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Oedipus: I urge other duties on you. Bury your sister who lies inside the house and perform the rites for her. I must go from here to the hill where my parents tried to kill me. Nothing can kill me now. I would not have been saved from death, unless it were for some strange destiny. Let my destiny go where it will. As for my children - Creon, do not worry about my two sons. They are men and can take care of themselves. But I beg you, look after my poor unhappy daughters. Let me touch them and weep with them. [Enter Antigone and Ismene, Oedipus' two daughters, crying. - Original text, line 1423.] Oh my lord! Is it my daughters I hear sobbing? My two darlings. Come to these hands of mine, your brother's hands. Creon has had pity and has sent me what I loved most!

Creon: I brought them to you because I know how you love them.

Oedipus: Bless you for it. O children, I weep for you - I cannot see your faces-I weep when I think of the bitterness there will be in your lives. When you're ready for marriage, who'll take the child of such infamy? Such insults you will hear. Creon, since you are the only father left for these two girls, do not allow them to wander like beggars, poor and husbandless.

Creon: Come along. Soon you will leave the city, but let the children stay.

Oedipus: Do not take them from me!

Creon: Do not ask to have everything your way. Your time for giving orders has passed. [Creon and Oedipus go out. His daughters help lead him. - Original text, line 1478.]

Chorus: Behold Oedipus, he who knew the famous riddle and rose to greatness. His good fortune was the envy of all. See him now and see how the waves of disaster have swallowed him! Look upon the last day always. Count no mortal happy till he has passed the final limit of his life without calamity.

*This Readers' Theater Adapted Version used a few texts for guidance: Greek Tragedies, Vol. 1: Oedipus the King, translated by David Grene, University of Chicago Press, 1991; Sophocles' Oedipus the King, Translated and edited by Peter Arnott, Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., N.Y., 1960; and Knox, Bernard M. W., Oedipus at Thebes, Sophocles Tragic Hero and His Time, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966. Limited use was also made of the online version at Perseus Site edited with introduction and notes by Sir Richard Jebb, Cambridge University Press, 1887, updated. It is approximately 1/3 of any complete translation of the original version and is designed as an introduction to the great work by Sophocles for junior and senior high school students.

Writing Tasks for *Oedipus*

Who Are the Chorus?

Are the chorus right about the gods and Oedipus? Does the chorus (townspeople) get anything exactly right in the whole play? If they are not spokespersons for the playwright, what kind of portrayal of human beings are they?

Is Oedipus Selfless or Self-Centered?

Look for indications of Oedipus' selflessness and self-centeredness in his words, To what extent is Oedipus acting as a savior, for the benefit of his people, in this play, and to what extent is he acting on his own behalf? Consider his reasons for fleeing Corinth and Delphi, his accusations

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against Creon, his reasons for wanting to talk to the survivor of the attack on Laius and other actions he has taken in his life.

The Punishment Fits the Crime?

Note the details of the plague in the Priest's description of it, which uses some powerful poetic imagery. State these lines in plain English; then, once you see what he's saying, tell your reaction to these lines. Do you feel disgusted by them, intrigued or curious, horrified, amused--what? and why?

Oedipus vs. Creon

What sources of conflict or jealousy might there have been between Creon and Oedipus before this day? How do you think Creon felt about Oedipus' getting the throne after Laius was reported dead (he would have been next in line for the throne after Laius, wouldn't he)? Oedipus apparently trusted him enough to send him to Delphi; does Oedipus accuse Creon of not reporting the gods' message accurately or just of trying to take advantage of it to get Oedipus ousted? How does Creon seem to feel about becoming king at the end of the play?

Is Oedipus a True Leader?

Oedipus was born a prince, raised to be a king. What does this play tell us about the nature of leadership and the qualities of a great leader? Does Oedipus possess the sort of concern for downtrodden that Princess Diana Windsor tried to instill in her sons, or is he the sort of king who is more concerned with outer image than the substance of his rule? Does Oedipus have a "messiah complex," or is he justifiably taking on the role of savior of Thebes?

Is Oedipus a Free Man or a Fool of the Gods?

Irony and coincidence also influence our view of Oedipus as a tragic protagonist. To what extent is Oedipus a fool of the gods, and to what extent is he free to choose his own way? In other words, do the gods simply know what Oedipus will do in a given situation because they know human nature, or do they actually manipulate events beyond likelihood and mere coincidence? Mention several incidents or decision points for Oedipus in your answer.

Jocasta's Shame

Is Jocasta actually willing to live in incest with her son as long as the information isn't public? Since it was Jocasta, according to the herdsman in the next scene, who actually gave the baby to him and commanded him to abandon it on the mountainside, does Jocasta kill herself because she can't face Oedipus or because she can't face the public shame of their incest?

Regicide or Incest?

Which seems to bother the chorus (elders of Thebes) more--the killing of the king or the incest? To answer, review "stasimon 1"--the chorus' response to Oedipus and Tiresias making accusations against each other. That is, contrast how the chorus feels about incest vs. how they feel about the assassin of Laius.

Theme

Check the last statements of the chorus and of Creon to see if they tell the theme of this tragedy. Is this a story of personal tragedy? Is it a religious story, justifying the gods?

Oedipus vs. Hamlet

Compare and contrast Oedipus and Hamlet. Is Oedipus more a man of action? Or is he more a man driven by whim and sudden, rash decisions? Which character is more selfless? Does Hamlet show any signs of selfish motives in his actions or inactions? Which protagonist seems more

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learned? wiser? more religious? more loving? more incestuous? Which seems to be a better murder investigator? Does Oedipus have any of Claudius' motives when he kills the king, Laius? Then which murderer is more blameworthy--Oedipus or Claudius?

Oedipus Agree/Disagree questions

Directions: Read the statement in the center column. Decide if you **strongly agree** (SA), **agree** (A), **disagree** (D), or **strongly disagree** (SD) with the statement. Circle your response and **write a reason or reasons in the statement box**. (You may use the back of the paper if you need more room.) Be prepared to discuss your opinion on the statements.

before you read	Statements	after you read
SA A D SD	1. Violence never solves anything.	SA A D SD
SA A D SD	2. If we sin, we should be punished.	SA A D SD
SA A D SD	3. You can't escape your fate.	SA A D SD
SA A D SD	4. Strong family ties can survive any attack.	SA A D SD
SA A D SD	5. What goes around comes around.	SA A D SD
SA A D SD	6. Man is responsible for his own downfall or success.	SA A D SD
SA A D SD	7. Man's life is governed by chance.	SA A D SD
SA A D SD	8. Pride is the catalyst for catastrophe.	SA A D SD
SA A D SD	9. Ignorance and bliss are better than knowledge and pain.	SA A D SD
SA A D SD	10. If someone prophesied you would become someone of importance (i.e.-President, Homecoming King/Queen, etc), you would try to make it happen.	SA A D SD
SA A D SD	11. It is never right to kill another person.	SA A D SD
SA A D SD	12. A guilty act requires a guilty mind.	SA A D SD
SA A D SD	13. No cause, political or otherwise, is worth dying for.	SA A D SD
SA A D SD	14. Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.	SA A D SD

The Gospel at Colonus

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The Gospel at Colonus- a reconceived approach to Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* as parable-like sermons on the ways of fate and particularly a happy death. It is set in an African-American Pentecostal church. The congregation performs the invocation ("Live Where You Can") and as the Ministers narrate, portions of the story come to life.

The Story

After years of wandering with his daughter Antigone, suffering for the sins he committed in innocence, Oedipus comes to Colonus ("Fair Colonus"), the holy resting place he has been promised for his death. At first, the citizens of Colonus turn him away ("Stop! Do Not Go On!") and interrogate him ("Who is This Man?"). His second daughter, Ismene, finds them there, rejected. She has come, however, to bring Oedipus the prophecy that he shall now be blessed, and that those he blesses shall also be so ("How Shall I See You Through My Tears?"). She tells him to pray to the gods he once offended ("A Voice Foretold [Prayer]"). Theseus, King of Athens, hears his prayer and is touched by his story, and the outcasts are welcomed to Colonus ("Never Drive You Away [Jubilee]"). Creon, King of Thebes, comes to bring Oedipus back to that city. But Oedipus refuses to go, and Creon kidnaps the daughters ("You Take Me Away"). Theseus returns them. At his death, Oedipus passes on to Theseus alone his knowledge of life and his blessing ("Sunlight of No Light/Eternal Sleep"). The final sermon is delivered, reminding the congregation to mourn no more, for Oedipus has found redemption at his death ("Lift Him Up/Lift Me Up"). Indeed, his end was wonderful, if mortal's ever was ("Now Let the Weeping Cease").

Cast

Narrator / MinisterMorgan Freeman
Oedipus Clarence Fountain
Antigone Isabell Monk
Chorus Leader Martin Jacox
Ismene Jevetta Steele
Theseus Carl Lumbly
Creon Robert Earl Jones
Polyneices Kevin Davis
Citizens of Colonus:
. Willie Rogers
. Five Blind Boys of Alabama
. Sam Butler (guitar/vocals)
. The J.D. Steele Singers
. The Institutional Radio Choir
. The Original Soul Stirrers

THE INVOCATION: LIVE WHERE YOU CAN

CHOIR:

Don't go... away

O Father... won't you stay?

SOLOIST:

Let every man consider his last day
When youthful pleasures have faded away
Can he look at his life without pain?
Let every child remember how to pray
For the lost of the earth to find the way
And the kingdom of Heaven to reign.

CHOIR (Rising):

Live where you can
Be happy as you can
Happier than God has made your father.
Live where you can
Be happy as you can
For you may not be here tomorrow.

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SOLOIST:

O Father, let the singer sing for thee
Let word and song and harmony
Be mightier than the sword
O vision holy vision come to me
Let word and song and harmony
Be a sound like the voice of the Lord.

CHOIR:

Live where you can
Be happy as you can
Happier than God has made your father.
Live where you can
Be happy as you can
For you may not be here tomorrow.
Don't go... away O Father... won't you stay?
RECAPITULATION FROM *OEDIPUS THE KING*
Men of Thebes: Look upon Oedipus.
This is the king who solved the famous riddle
And towered up, most powerful of men.
No mortal eyes but looked on him with envy,
Yet in the end, ruin swept over him.

Let every man in mankind's frailty
Consider his last day; and let none
Presume on his good fortune until he find
Life, at his death, a memory without pain. Amen

ODE TO COLONUS: "FAIR COLONUS"

THE FRIEND (Falsetto, without accompaniment):

Fair Colonus
Land of running horses
Where leaves and berries throng
And wine-dark ivy climbs the bough
The sweet sojourning nightingale
Murmurs all night long.

Here with drops of Heaven's dews
At daybreak all the year,
The clusters of narcissus bloom
Time-hallowed garlands for the brows
Of those great ladies whom we fear.

Fair Colonus
Land of running horses
Where leaves and berries throng
And wine-dark ivy climbs the bough
The sweet sojourning nightingale
Murmurs all night long.

SONG: "STOP DO NOT GO ON"

CHORAGOS QUINTET AND BALLADEER:

Stop! Do not go on
This place is holy!
Stop! Do not go on
You cannot walk this ground!

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Stop! Do not go on
Daughters of Darkness bar the way
Saying, "Stop!
Do not go on!"

They confront Antigone and Oedipus

Stop! Do not go on
This place is holy
Stop! Do not go on
First you must kneel down and pray.
Stop! Do not go on
Till the Gods answer "Yes, you may!"
Saying, "Stop!
Do not go on!"

Oedipus is now joined by his own Quintet, all old men and blind

SINGER OEDIPUS WITH QUINTET:

Here I stand a wanderer
On life's journey
At the close of the day
Hungry and tired
Beaten by the rain;

Won't you give me shelter
All I need is a resting place
Promised so long ago.

The blind men force their way into the church. The two Quintets face off.

CHORAGOS QUINTET AND BALLADEER:

Stop! Do not go on
This place is holy!
Stop! Do not go on
You cannot walk this ground!
Stop! Do not go on
Daughters of Darkness bar the way
Saying, "Stop!
Do not go on!"

CHORAL DIALOGUE: "WHO IS THIS MAN?"

CHORAGOS (Tunes up with organ):

Who is this man?
What is his name?
Where does he come from?

PREACHER:

And when he heard that, he was afraid,
And he turned to his daughter and said:
"God in Heaven, what will become of me now, child?"

EVANGELIST:

And she said:
"Tell them, Father, you cannot hide."

CHORAGOS:

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Who is this man?
What is his name?
Where does he come from?
What is his race?
Who was his father?

THE SEIZURE OF THE DAUGHTERS

SINGER OEDIPUS:

When I was sick with my own life's evil
When I would—

QUINTET:

--gladly have left the earth

SINGER:

You had no mind to—

QUINTET:

--give me what I wanted!

SINGER:

You see a City and all its people

Being kind to me, so you

Take me away!

QUINTET:

Evil kindness!

SINGER:

Evil kindness!

That's the kind of kindness you—

QUINTET:

--offer me!

CHOIR:

You'd take him away

But you would not take him home

You'd take him away

To a prison outside the walls.

SINGER:

You'd take me away

To a prison outside the walls.

SINGER:

Creon! You have taken them

Who served my naked eyeballs as eyes

On you and yours forever

May God, watcher of all the world,

Confer on you such days as I have had

And such age as mine!

CHORAL ODE FROM ANTIGONE: "NUMBERLESS ARE THE WORLD'S WONDERS"

QUARTET (With the Choir):

Numberless are the world's wonders

But none more wonderful than man

The storm gray sea yields to his prows

Huge crests bear him high

Earth, holy and inexhaustible,

Is graven where his plows have gone

Numberless are the world's wonders

But none more wonderful than man

The lightboned birds clinging to cover

Lithe fish darting away

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All are taken, tamed in the net of his mind
The wild horses resign to him

Numberless are the world's wonders
But none more wonderful than man
Words and thought rapid as air
He fashions for his use
And his the skill that deflects the arrows of snow
The spears of winter rain

From every wind he has made himself secure
From every wind he has made himself secure
From all but one...all but one
In the late wind of death he cannot stand

Antigone Ode – Fitts and Fitzgerald

ODE 1

CHORUS: [STROPHE 1
Numberless are the world's wonders, but none
More wonderful than man; the stormgray sea
Yields to his prows, the huge crests bear him high;
Earth, holy and inexhaustible, is graven
With shining furrows where his plows have gone
Year after year, the timeless labor of stallions.

[ANTISTROPHE 1

The lightboned birds and beasts that cling to cover,
The lithe fish lighting their reaches of dim water,
All are taken, tamed in the net of his mind;
The lion on the hill, the wild horse windy-maned,
Resign to him; and his blunt yoke has broken
The sultry shoulders of the mountain bull.

[STROPHE 2

Words also, and thought as rapid as air,
He fashions to his good use; statecraft is his,
And his the skill -that deflects the arrows of snow,
The spears of winter rain: from every wind
He has made himself secure—from all but one:
In the late wind of death he cannot stand.

[ANTISTROPHE 2

O clear intelligence, force beyond all measure!
O fate of man, working both good and evil!
When the laws are kept, how proudly his city stands!
When the laws are broken, what of his city then?
Never may the anarchic man find rest at my hearth,
Never be it said that my thoughts are his thoughts.

Note: Choral songs were divided into stanzas: strophe (turn), antistrophe (turn the other way), and epode (added song) that were sung while the chorus moved (danced). While singing the strophe

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an ancient commentator tells us they moved from left to right; while singing the antistrophe they moved from right to left.

Questions to consider as you read/watch *Antigone*

Please answer the questions in the back of your journal.

The drama begins at dawn, after a night in which there has been a war in Thebes between armies led by the two sons of Oedipus. Keep in mind that the Greek theater was in the open air, and that the first performances of the day would begin at daybreak. Thus, imagine that the time of day of the setting would be identical to the performance time.

Overview points to note:

As you read/watch the first scene, consider the gravity of the city's condition and how aware Antigone seems of it.

Throughout the play, Antigone and Creon will talk much about friends and enemies. Think about what each means by these terms. You will find, in general, Antigone and Creon tend to use the same words but mean different things by them.

Questions/Considerations

Why does Antigone assume that Creon's order is directed against her and Ismene? When Creon appears later, consider whether his conduct and language in fact supports her assumption.

Do you sympathize at all with Ismene's caution? Does Antigone treat her fairly?

Why is Antigone so concerned with glory? Should she be?

After the initial dialogue the Chorus emerges for their first choral ode (*stasimon*), which concerns the previous night's battle. Contrast the picture of Polynices drawn there with Antigone's earlier discussion of her brother; does your opinion of him, and of Antigone's position, change at all?

The chorus evokes Dionysus (handout), the first of several times this god is mentioned. Why should the chorus call upon Dionysus?

Creon enters. It is very important that you do not project Creon's later conduct back into his first speech. Read this speech carefully, consider his values and beliefs, and ask yourself whether there is anything wrong with his principles, whether in Greek terms or your own. Later, compare Creon's subsequent actions with the principles he articulates here.

Throughout this scene, pay close attention to the assumptions Creon makes about gender.

When Creon talks about the gods and the law, is he talking about the same types of gods as Antigone does?

Second stasimon, perhaps the most famous choral ode in Greek tragedy. What image of man does this ode present? In this vision, what is human greatness? What are the limits of human ability and action? When can a daring man get into trouble?

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Choral odes often generalize a given problem specific to the play's action into a statement about human life as a whole. Is that the case here? If so, then is the chorus alluding to Antigone, or to Creon, or to both?

Why is Creon so surprised when the Sentry brings in Antigone?

Antigone is compared to a mother bird, not the last time she is referred to as maternal in this play. Is there anything strange or ironic about Antigone being represented as a mother?

Antigone's defense to Creon is very important, so read/watch it carefully.

Ismene defends Antigone and asks Creon how he could kill his own son's bride. Has there been any reference to this relationship before?

Contrast this *stasimon* with the previous one. Is this ode's thought and tone similar or different? What, if anything, has changed?

Compare the Creon in this scene with the one who first entered the play. Has he changed at all in language or conduct?

To what does Haemon appeal in his attempt to save Antigone?

Does Haemon threaten his father, as Creon thinks?

Why does Creon chose the particular method of execution that he does? What does it say about him?

The ancient Greeks had two words for "love"; *philia*, meaning something like "friendship", and *eros*, which has more to do with passion. When the chorus talks about "love" in the ode, which of the two do they mean? And why is the chorus generalizing about love here?

Note the chorus' reference to Antigone's "bridal vault". What do they mean by referring to a wedding chamber? This will be an important image in the last part of the play. Antigone becomes a "Bride of Death" (or "Bride of Hades"). To understand the importance of this metaphor, you might benefit from reading the Hymn to Demeter, which tells the story of Demeter and Persephone. (handout about Demeter) Strangely, the maternal imagery continues with Antigone as well, as she tries to compare herself with Niobe (handout about Niobe). After reading about Niobe, consider what Antigone does and does not share with that mythical figure?

How would you characterize the chorus' exchange with Antigone here?

Consider Antigone's speech. Is this speech consistent with what she has argued before?

Is Antigone's faith in the gods wavering here?

Consider what these myths have in common with each other, and with the story of the play at this point.

What does the failure of Tiresias' sacrifice have to do with Polynices and Antigone?

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What, specifically, in Tiresias' warnings leads Creon to change his mind?

Why does the chorus call on Dionysus in this ode?

Why does Antigone chose to commit suicide? Does it suggest her mother's death, or is there an important difference?

Creon's wife is only on stage momentarily, yet she plays a key role in Creon's disaster. What does her suicide mean to him?

Is Creon a tragic figure? Do you feel sympathy for him at the end as someone who initially tried to do good yet was overwhelmed by circumstance, or do you believe that he is a bullying, misogynistic control-freak who gets what he deserves? Try to come up with arguments for both sides. Could the play have been called *Creon*, instead?

Conversely, what, specifically, makes Antigone a tragic figure? Think about what, exactly, you mean by such words as "tragedy" and "tragic".

Antigone and Ismene Argument

ANTIGONE: The same blood

Flows in both our Veins, doesn't it, my sister,
The blood of Oedipus. And suffering,
Which was his destiny, is our punishment too,
The sentence passed on all his children.
Physical pain, contempt, insults,
Every kind of dishonour: we've seen them all,
And endured them all, the two of us.
But there's more to come. Now, today...
Have you heard it, this new proclamation,
Which the king has made to the whole city?
Have you heard how those nearest to us
Are to be treated, with the contempt
We reserve for traitors? People we love!

ISMENE: No one has told me anything, Antigone,
I have heard nothing, neither good nor bad
About anyone we love...

ANTIGONE: I thought you hadn't. That's why I asked you
To meet me here, where I can tell you everything
Without any risk of being overheard.

ISMENE: What is it then? More terrible news?
Something black and frightening, I can see that.

ANTIGONE: Well, what do you think, Ismene? Perhaps
You can guess. We have two brothers,
Both of them dead. And Creon has decreed
That a decent burial shall be given to one,

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But not to the other. Eteocles, apparently,
Has already been buried, with full military honours,
And all the formalities due to the dead
Meticulously observed. So that his rest
In the underworld among the heroes is assured.
But Polynices, who died in agony
Just as certainly as his brother did,
Is not to be buried at all. The decree
Makes that quite plain. He is to be left
Lying where he fell, with no tears,
And no ceremonies of mourning, to stink
In the open: till the kites and vultures
Catch the scent, and tear him to pieces
And pick him to the bone. Left unburied
There is no rest for him in the underworld,
No more than here. What a great king
Our Creon is, eh Sister? . . . The punishment
For anyone who disobeys the order
Is public stoning to death. So that's the news,
And you know it now. The time has come
For you too to stand up and be counted
With me: and to show whether you are worthy
Of the honour of being Oedipus' daughter.

ISMENE: Wait a minute Antigone, don't be so headstrong!
If all this is as you say it is,
What can I do, one way or the other?

ANTIGONE: Just say you will help me. Commit yourself.

ISMENE: To do what? Something dangerous?

ANTIGONE: Just to give me a hand to lift the body.
It's too heavy for me to move on my own.

ISMENE: To bury him you mean? In spite of the decree?

ANTIGONE: He is my brother. And like it or not
He's yours too. I won't betray him
Now that he's dead. No one will ever
Throw that in my face.

ISMENE: You must be mad!
Creon has publicly forbidden it.

ANTIGONE: He can't forbid me to love my brother.
He has neither the right nor the power to do that.

ISMENE: Have you forgotten what happened to our father?
Contempt and loathing from everyone,
Even from himself, that was his reward
Think for a moment Antigone, please!
We are women, that's all. Physically weaker —

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And barred from any political influence.
How can we fight against the institutionalised strength
Of the male sex? They are in power,
And we have to obey them — this time
And maybe in worse situations than this.
May God forgive me, and the spirits of the dead,
I have no choice! State power
Commands, and I must do as I am told.

When you are powerless, wild gestures
And heroic refusals are reserved for madmen!
ANTIGONE: Don't say any more. I won't ask again.
In fact, if you were to offer help now,
I would refuse it. Do as you please.
I intend to bury my brother,
And if I die in the attempt, I shall die
In the knowledge that I have acted justly.
Do as you please. Live, by all means.

The laws *you* will break are not of man's making.

ISMENE: I reverence them. But how can I defy
The unlimited power of the State? What weapons
Of mine are strong enough for that?

ANTIGONE: Fine. That's a good excuse. I'll go
And shovel the earth on my brother's body.

ISMENE: I'm frightened, Antigone. I'm frightened for you.

ANTIGONE: Don't be frightened for me. Fear for yourself.

ISMENE: For God's sake, keep it quiet. Don't tell anyone.
I'll keep our meeting secret.

ANTIGONE: Don't you dare!
You must tell everybody, shout it in the streets.
If you keep it secret, I shall begin to hate you.

ISMENE: There's a fire burning in you Antigone,
But it makes me go cold just to hear you!

ANTIGONE: I'm not doing it to please you. It's for him.

ISMENE: This obsession will destroy you! You're certain to fail!

ANTIGONE: I shall fail when I have failed. Not before.

ISMENE: But you know it's hopeless. Why begin
When you know you can't possibly succeed!

ANTIGONE: Be quiet, before I begin to despise you
For talking so feebly! *He* will despise you
Too, and justly. You can go now. Go!

If I'm mad, you can leave me here with my madness
Which will doubtless destroy me soon enough.
Death is the worst thing that can happen,
And some deaths are more honourable than others.

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ISMENE: If you've made your mind up. . . Antigone, it's madness...

Remember, I love you . . . whatever happens...

Exit Antigone and Ismene in opposite directions

Haemon and Creon argument

HAEMON: Father, the most enviable of a man's gifts
Is the ability to reason clearly,
And it's not for me to say you are wrong,
Even if I were clever enough, or experienced enough,
Which I'm not. But it's also true to say
That some men think differently about these things,
And as your son, my most useful function,
It seems to me, is to keep you in touch
With what other people are thinking,
What they say, and do, and approve or disapprove of,
And sometimes what they leave unsaid.
The prospect of your disapproval is great
Silence of most men's tongues, and some things
Are never said, for fear of the consequences.
But I can sometimes hear what people whisper
Behind their hands: and everywhere, I hear sympathy
Expressed for this unfortunate girl,
Condemned, as she is, to a horrifying death
That no woman has ever suffered before,
And unjustly, in most people's eyes.
In burying her brother, who was killed
In action, she did something most people consider
Decent and honourable — rather than leaving him
Naked on the battlefield, for the dogs to tear at
And kites and scavengers to pick to the bone.
She should be given a medal for it,
Those same people say, and her name inscribed
On the roll of honour. Such things are whispered
In secret, Father, and they have reached my ears.
Sir, your reputation matters to me
As much as your good health and happiness do,
Indeed, your good name matters more.
What can a loving son be more jealous of
Than his father's reputation, and what could please
A father more than to see his son's concern
That people will think well of him?
Then let me beg you to have second thoughts,
And not be certain that your own opinion

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Is the only right one, and that all men share it.
A man who thinks he has the monopoly
Of wisdom, that only what *he* says
And what *he* thinks are of any relevance,
Reveals his own shallowness of mind
With every word he says. The man of judgement
Knows that it is a sign of strength,
Not weakness, to value other opinions,
And to learn from them: and when he is wrong,
To admit it openly and change his mind.
You see it when a river floods, the trees
That bend, survive, those whose trunks
Are inflexible, are snapped off short
By the weight of the water. And a sailor in a storm
Who refuses to reef his sail, and run
With the wind, is likely to end up capsized.
I beg you Father, think twice about this.
Don't let your anger influence you. If a man
Of my age may lay some small claim
To common sense, let me say this:
Absolute certainty is fine, if a man
Can be certain that his wisdom is absolute.
But such certainty and such wisdom
Is rare among men: and that being so,
The next best, is to learn to listen,
And to take good advice when it is offered.
CHORUS: There's a lot of sense, my Lord Creon,
In what this young man has said: as indeed,
There was in everything that you said too.
The fact is, you are both in the right,
And there's a good deal to be said for either.
CREON: Is there indeed? Am I expected to listen
And take lessons in political tactics
At my age, from a mere boy?
HAEMON: I'm a man, Father, and my arguments are just.
They stand upon their merits, not my age.
CREON: Oh, they stand upon their merits do they? What merit
Is there, please tell me, in breaking the law?
HAEMON: If she'd done something shameful I wouldn't defend her.
CREON: She has brought the law into contempt! That's shameful!
HAEMON: Listen to the people in the street, Father,
The ordinary Thebans! They say she hasn't!
CREON: I have never based my political principles
On the opinions of people in the Street!

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HAEMON: Now you're the one who's speaking like a boy!

CREON: I'm speaking like a king. It's my responsibility,
And I will act according to my own convictions!

HAEMON: When the State becomes one man it ceases to be a State!

CREON: The State is the statesman who rules it, it reflects
His judgement, it belongs to him!

HAEMON: Go and rule in the desert then! There's nobody there
To argue with you! What a king you'll be there!

CREON: This boy of mine is on the woman's side!

HAEMON: Yes, if *you* are a woman, I am.

I'm on your side Father, I'm fighting for you.

CREON: You damned impertinent devil! Every word
You say is against me. Your own father!

HAEMON: When I know you are wrong, I have to speak.

CREON: How am I wrong? By maintaining my position
And the authority of the State? Is that wrong?

HAEMON: When position and authority
Ride roughshod over moral feeling...

CREON: You're weak, and uxorious, and contemptible,
With no will of your own. You're a woman's mouthpiece!

HAEMON: I'm not ashamed of what I'm saying.

CREON: Every word you have said pleads for her cause.

HAEMON: I plead for you, and for myself,

And for common humanity, respect for the dead!

CREON: You will never marry that woman, she won't
Live long enough to see that day!

HAEMON: If she dies,
She won't die alone. There'll be two deaths, not one.

CREON: Are you threatening me? How dare you threaten...

HAEMON: No, that's not a threat. I'm telling you
Your policy was misbegotten from the beginning.

CREON: Misbegotten! Dear God, if anything's misbegotten
Here, it's my son. You'll regret this, I promise you.

HAEMON: If you weren't my father, I'd say you were demented.

CREON: Don't father me! You're a woman's plaything,
A tame lap dog!

HAEMON: Is anyone else
Allowed to speak? Must you have the last word
In everything, must all the rest of us be gagged?

CREON: I must, and I will! And you, I promise you,
Will regret what you have spoken here

Today. I will not be sneered at or contradicted

By anyone. Sons can be punished too.

Bring her out, the bitch, let her die here and now,

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In the open, with her bridegroom beside her

As a witness! You can watch the execution!

HAEMON: That's one sight I shall never see!

Nor from this moment, Father, will you

Ever see me again. Those that wish

To stay and watch this disgusting spectacle

In company with a madman, are welcome to it!

Exit Haemon.