A March afternoon, the Theater of Dionysus, twenty-five hundred years ago. From the audience’s left, two figures appear, making their slow and careful way down the eisodos in the slanting sunlight. His staff and shuffling gait identify one as the aged Oedipus, blind and leaning on his daughter Antigone. The old man speaks:

Antigone, child of this blind old man, what land have we reached, whose city? Who will receive the wandering Oedipus with paltry gifts today? Seeking a pittance, I have even less, and that is enough for me. Suffering and time, long my companion, and nobility too, teach me to be content with these gifts. But do you see a place to rest, my child, on unhallowed ground or in the grove of the gods? Stop and sit me down there, so we may learn where we are. For we have come as strangers to learn from citizens and do what they say.

(1–13)

Those sitting on the slope of the Acropolis might well have wondered if the actors were performing the play backwards. The hero—an unlikely one in any
event—enters proclaiming that he intends to take instruction from the locals. He has learned patience and asks for little. A Sophoclean hero might eventually arrive at this abject state after failing to impose his or her will on others (though a noble suicide would usually preclude this scene of self-abasement), but we do not expect him to make his first appearance in this condition.³ That the play opens thus begs a question: where will the plot go from here? If the hero enters already broken by his/her life, it would seem that the usual emotional arc of a tragic story—arrogant overreaching fed by pride leads to crisis, wherein the hero must choose to bend his/her will to forces beyond mortal control or face destruction, at his/her own hands or by others—is not available. Oedipus will seek his own death, we soon learn, but not out of despair. It has been prophesied, like many a hero’s death, but he will go to meet it triumphantly. By obeying the will of the gods, he will be awarded a “great consummation” (perasín . . . katastrophēn, 103) to end his life.⁴

Viewed through the lens we have been using in the previous chapters, this hero looks somewhat more familiar. Blind and physically frail, Oedipus, like Philoctetes, lacks the usual heroic agency for imposing his will. Like both Electra and Philoctetes, he is immobile, while travelers with self-serving agendas try to use him for their own purposes. He, meanwhile, remains detached from their imperatives, which reflect the urgencies of traditional myths. Though disabled, his body, like those of the earlier two heroes, will exert power over others and be a conduit for the will of the gods. Much will depend, as in Philoctetes, on the location of his body, which the various travelers work to move. And as they do so, the Theater of Dionysus will become a landscape symbolizing various geographies, physical and spiritual. In his last play, we will see Sophocles gathering the threads of his new conception of heroic agency into a final tapestry, his own great consummation.

**Mapping the Past and Future**

Recent work on the staging of Sophoclean drama has provided new dimensions for the study of the plays.⁵ David Wiles has noted that *Oedipus at Colonus* in particular seems to be articulated in the theater by what he calls “lateral opposition.”⁶ That is, horizontal movement by the actors can be understood to mark various kinds of polarities—temporal, geographical, and spiritual.⁷ The consen-
already we can see various levels of meaning in this allotment of space. Thebes will, as usual in Athenian tragedy, represent the “anti-Athens,” repository of dark, disturbing desires and base motivations. Athens, meanwhile, will hold out the promise of sanctuary for a wandering, needy suppliant, a locus for compassion and hope, as embodied in its noble king, Theseus. Moving toward Thebes takes Oedipus back to his ruinous past, while Athens beckons him toward future redemption. The left exit leads offstage into the country, toward not only Thebes but Mount Cithaeron, site of Oedipus’s infant exposure—his
“mountain mother,” as the chorus of *Oedipus Tyrannos* calls it (1091)—the place where he begs to be left again at the end of that play, a wild venue for his monstrous condition. To the right lies Athens with its great civilization, a bulwark against the unnatural forces released by Oedipus’s past behavior.

Finally, as others try to pull him back and forth across the stage, Oedipus veers between anger and defiance—the result of contact with his past—and the meek, frail passivity he displays in the opening scenes. That he opts in the end to be buried near Athens has him moving in concert with the path of the sun across the Theater of Dionysus. His final exit through the central doors of the *skêné* marks his transcendence of the tension between these extremes, as he taps the power of the gods to lead the way into the grove and his mysterious disappearance.

Antigone eases Oedipus onto the ledge in front of the *skêné*. As they reconnoiter, recognizing Athens in the distance, a citizen of Colonus (ironically called *xenos*, “stranger”) enters from the audience’s right. He dismisses Oedipus’s initial question:

**Oedipus**

Stranger, I hear from this girl, who sees for me and for herself, that you have come to question us at the right time to clear things up . . .

**Stranger**

Before you inquire further, leave this seat!

You occupy ground on which it is unholy to walk.

(33–37)

A further exchange affords details about the immediate area: Oedipus sits on the “Brazen-footed Threshold,” on the edge of a grove sacred to the Eumenides, “dread goddesses, daughters of Earth and Darkness” (39–40); Oedipus declares that he will not ever leave the place, which he says rather cryptically is the “sign of my destiny” (46); the entire place is sacred (*hieros*, 54) to Poseidon and to Prometheus; the equestrian statue is of Colonus, eponymous founder of the nearby community.

Now the *skêné* and its mysterious interior are marked, a further articulation of the spiritual geography on stage. Oedipus sits on the edge of eternity in more than
one way. He straddles the boundary of space controlled by immortals and so fos-
ters anxiety in the locals; at the same time, he himself is approaching the end of his 
mortal existence and has been invited by prophecy to cross over into the undiscover-
ered country of the dead. Finally, like all Greek tragic heroes, he functions for us as 
the agent for exploring the boundaries that define human existence.

**Back from the Edge**

The citizen bustles off to find other locals, who will decide if the blind stranger 
should be allowed to remain. As soon as he is gone, Oedipus launches into a 
passionate prayer to the Eumenides, begging for their sympathy. Apollo, it 
seems, has told him in a prophecy that he is to end his wanderings in their 
grove, the “final place” (*chōran termian*, 89) where he will find rest and shelter, 
the goal of his long-suffering life. By doing so, he will bring “profit” (*kerdē*, 92) 
for those who receive him and destruction for those who sent him away. The 
gods will send signs of this destiny, an earthquake, thunder, or lightning. He 
concludes with exhortations to the “sweet daughters of ancient darkness” and 
to Athens, “the most honored of cities” (106–10).

The chorus, old men from Colonus, make their initial entrance down the 
right *eisodos*. Antigone spies them, quickly leading Oedipus through the doors 
of the *skēnē* and out of sight for the moment. The elders are agitated:

```
Look! Who was he? Where does he live?  
Where has he rushed off to, most  
shameless of all, of all?  
Look! Speak out!  
Seek him out everywhere! A wanderer,  
the old man is a wanderer, not a  
native!  
```

(118–25)

They have been told that this stranger has transgressed the ground sacred to the 
Eumenides and has broken the silence that must surround the site. Oedipus 
and Antigone emerge from beside the entrance to the grove at the end of the 
first strophe, causing further upset:
The word for “terrible” here is *deinos*, a richly suggestive adjective the full impact of which is not easy to reproduce in English.\(^{10}\) Certainly the old stranger looks and sounds bad: years of wandering have taken their toll on his body; his voice we imagine to be thin and reedy. But this context imbues the chorus’ words with much greater weight. To be *deinos* is to inspire awe, to take others aback. Such a person is dangerous, to be handled with great care. (We are reminded of the sailors’ fear of encountering Philoctetes, another frightening creature, for the first time.) The word is used of Achilles, of Medea, angry, numinous creatures.\(^{11}\) Oedipus will be all of this and more before he walks through those doors again.

Oedipus begs them not to see him as *anomos*, “lawless,” but the chorus remains skeptical. Who is this old man? Oedipus assures them that he is not one to be envied, blind and depending as he does on a small girl (142–49). In the first antistrope, the chorus’ alarm increases. While they pity the stranger’s sad life, they worry that he may bring down curses on them by transgressing on sacred ground. He “goes too far, too far” (*peras gar/peras*, 155–56). If he wants to speak to them, he may do so, but first he must leave the grove.

Now begins the painstaking process of moving Oedipus across the stage:

**ANTIGONE**
Father, we must share the cares of the citizens, yielding and obeying when necessary.

**OEDIPUS**
Now put your hand on mine.

**ANTIGONE**
Yes, I am touching you.

**OEDIPUS**
Oh strangers, let me not suffer wrong, trusting in you as I move.
CHORUS
Never, old man, will anyone lead you
from this seat against your will.

OEDIPUS
Further then?

CHORUS
Still further forward.

OEDIPUS
Further?

(171–80)

The laborious process goes on for another twenty-two lines, until the chorus and Antigone finally get Oedipus to the rock at the center of the orchestra. The entire second strophe and antistrophe are contained within this anxious exchange, with the chorus, Oedipus, and Antigone sharing the lines in a complex lyric dialogue. A long epode follows (207–36), sung by Oedipus and chorus, and finally a lyric solo by Antigone (237–55). Sophocles continues the practice he began in Electra, of a parodos shared by the chorus with one or more actors. The combined effect of physical motion and lyrical singing would be striking, drawing the audience’s attention to the old man’s slow progress across the stage, freighted with meaning on various levels.12

First Reckoning

Now that Oedipus is safely removed from sacred space, the chorus gets down to business: Who is he? Where is he from? Oedipus tries to deflect their curiosity: “Oh strangers, I am an exile (apoptolis), but do not . . .” (207). The chorus persists, and he becomes increasingly desperate:

No, no, do not ask me who I
am; do not seek to examine me further!

(210–11)
After further prodding, it all comes out:

**Oedipus**
Do you know a son of Laius?

**Chorus**
Oh! Ah, ah!

(220)

The chorus is reduced to inarticulate groaning by this news and orders him to leave immediately. When Oedipus reminds the old men of their earlier pledge not to drive him away against his will, they reply that things have changed. By deceiving them about his identity and origins, he has forfeited their protection. He must “leap forth” (*ekt hose*, 234) from their land, before he brings some further burden on their city. In the eyes of these earnest citizens, Oedipus is the same man he was at the end of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, a onetime hero stained with patricide and incest. As far as they are concerned, contact with him can only bring harm to Athens.

This moment is Oedipus’s first contact in the play with his past. He will not be able, it seems, to remain anonymous if he is to be taken in by Athens as a suppliant. Other Greek heroes rely on their past histories to provide them leverage in the form of *kleos*. For them, being known by others usually brings power. When Odysseus announces his name in the *Odyssey*, his status always rises. In this, as in other ways, the old Oedipus departs from the normal pattern of Greek heroism. Past deeds will afford no relief to the old wanderer. Nor will running away suffice. He will have to face the horrors in order to finally transcend them. In doing so, he will be drawn back toward Thebes, tugged at by its representatives, Creon and then Polyneices. Facing them will bring out a different Oedipus, angry and defiant, not passive and meek.

After Antigone pleads for mercy, Oedipus revisits his past with a spirited self-defense. What good is Athens’ fine reputation for reverence to the gods and kindness to strangers, if they now drive him away simply out of fear of his name? They surely cannot be afraid of his physical body (*sôma*, 266) or his actions. In the matter of his parents, he did not act but rather was acted upon; he only struck in self-defense, so even if he had known they were his parents, he would still not be evil by nature (*kakos phusin*, 270); as it is, he was entirely ignorant, while those who knew better destroyed him.
We return here to the issues crucial to the moral universe of Oedipus Tyrannus. Viewed now from some remove, Oedipus’s past acts, however appalling in their implications, carry less of the visceral horror that dominates the end of that play. His self-defense here is at least plausible—though not surprisingly, the arrogance that fueled his youthful decisions goes unremarked. But finally, however knotty the moral and ethical problems raised by Oedipus’s past are, they will not be the principal focus of this play. As in Electra, the central character, by force of personality, pulls our attention away from familiar issues found in traditional stories. We will see that Oedipus eventually steps away from the entire context of the Theban stories, breaking his attachment to his dark past and moving confidently into the undiscovered country of the dead.\(^\text{13}\)

Having offered his self-defense, Oedipus urges the chorus to shift its attention away from his terrible history. As representatives of Athens, the old citizens must honor the gods, whose gaze falls upon the pious and the impious man alike. No unholy man (phōtos anousiou, 281) has ever escaped judgment. They have received him as a suppliant and must not dishonor him when they look on his unsightly face. Now comes a startling claim:

> For I have come as a reverent and sacred man (hieros eusebēs), bearing profit (onēsin) for the citizens here; and whenever the man in power arrives, whoever is your ruler, then you will hear and understand everything. Meanwhile, by no means be cruel.

\(^{(287–91)}\)

That Oedipus, an incestuous parricide, can claim to be sacred\(^\text{14}\) alerts us that something extraordinary is afoot. And what profit could such a man offer to a city like Athens? By the end of the play, Oedipus will demonstrate the truth of both claims, embodying a kind of heroic persona not seen before in the Theater of Dionysus.

Sophocles heads into new territory in these first scenes, but he travels as usual with material from his earlier plays. We note, for instance, some parallels with Philoctetes: a sacred precinct transgressed; the disabled hero’s shunning and exile; the chorus’ anxious desire to avoid contact with a man who appears to be dangerous to its members, balanced by their curiosity about him; the hero’s subsequent attempt to rehabilitate himself in the eyes of others who could release him from his suffering. For both men, others’ perception of the past is
crucial for reestablishing some sense of self-respect. Philoctetes hopes that by invoking his former friendship with various men who fought at Troy, he can make Neoptolemus see him as a fellow warrior, not as a repellant, disabled creature. For Oedipus, invoking the past will only prolong his exile. His goal is to convince the citizens that though he seems repulsive they should ignore his history and concentrate on the present, his status as suppliant, and the future, when the “profit” he promises can be realized.\footnote{15}

The chorus’ visceral revulsion at discovering Oedipus’s identity and ruined condition, combined with his surprising claim to be “sacred,” form the matrix of Sophocles’s evolving paradigm for heroism. The blind old man has become something of a holy monster, his tainted past and physical decrepitude belying the fact that he has been singled out by the gods to be the vehicle for their power, a shattered yet mysteriously potent vessel. We saw in Electra the beginnings of this new conception, a bitter, worn-out woman whose physical appearance horrifies her brother. The opening scenes of Philoctetes, invoking the Cyclops episode from the Odyssey, continue the paradigm, as the chorus fears the return to its lair of the primitive, foul-smelling creature. Nevertheless, as we soon learn there, this unlikely hero has been chosen by the gods to be the instrument for the fall of Troy. We have traveled far from Achilles, physically beautiful and semidivine, the obvious representative of heroic excellence. To accept this new kind of hero will require us to expand our understanding of the sources of human excellence and its place in the larger play of forces in the tragic universe.

**Turning toward Thebes**

Another traveler appears, who will pull Oedipus back toward his past. Antigone spots Ismene off in the distance in a Thessalian sun hat, riding toward them from Thebes. She enters with news of his sons, for whom things are bad. Oedipus replies that they are unworthy, living like Egyptian men, who sit at home while their wives go out to work. While they fight over the kingship, his two daughters have taken up the responsibility of caring for him, Antigone wandering with him, Ismene serving as his source for news from Thebes (339–60). Ismene reports that Eteocles, the younger son, has ousted Polyneices and seized the throne. The latter has married and raised an army in Argos, preparing to attack his brother. Amid all this bad news there is one ray of hope:
Oedipus at Colonus

Oedipus
Have you found any hope that the gods will look at me, so I might be saved someday?

Ismene
I have, father, from the newest prophecies.

Oedipus
What prophecies? What has been foretold, child?

Ismene
That you will one day be sought by those people there, in death and in life, for the sake of their salvation.

Oedipus
Who would do well through such a man as I am?

Ismene
They say that their power will rest with you.

Oedipus
When I no longer exist, then am I a man?

Ismene
Yes, because now the gods lift you up, who destroyed you before.

(385–94)

Creon, Ismene goes on to say, will come soon to try to move him back near Thebes. Not inside the city, since he is still ritually unclean, but close by so they can watch him: if something goes wrong with his tomb, it will be trouble for them. This “trouble” (kaka) will come “from your anger, when they encounter your tomb” (411).

The struggle to move Oedipus’s body comes to the fore again. Creon will embody the dark pull of Oedipus’s Theban past, realized by leftward movement across the stage, to be counterbalanced by the rightward tug of Theseus, noble king of Athens. And in the middle of the skēnē, the mysterious consummation that beckons from the grove. The opening of the play, as we will see, offers a
symbolic representation of the entire drama: Antigone carefully bringing her father on stage and seating him at the entrance to the grove, then the laborious process of moving him again, away from his eventual salvation, vulnerable again to the pull of those forces that seek to control him. It will be a long journey back to the threshold, encompassing the old man’s dark past, anxious present, and mysterious future.¹⁶

Oedipus continues to fill in his past history, while venting his anger at his sons. He hopes the gods will not end their quarrel, that he may be granted the decision as to its outcome: let Eteocles be ousted from the throne and Polynices remain in exile, a fit reward for their abandoning of him. Right after discovering the truth of his identity and its horrifying consequences, he wanted only to be stoned to death; time passed and his self-loathing eased, but then the city decided to drive him out and his sons did nothing to help him! Only his daughters were loyal, following him into exile and caring for him while his sons fought for power. But there will be a reckoning:

They will gain nothing from me as an ally,
 nor get any profit (onēsis) from the Theban kingship.
I know this, from hearing this girl’s prophecies
 and from interpreting the ancient oracles
 that Apollo has at last fulfilled.

(450–54)

He ends defiantly with a pledge: let Creon come or anyone else they choose. If the Athenians are willing, with the help of the dread goddesses of the grove, to give him protection, they will win a great protector (sōtēr, 460) and bring trouble to his enemies.

A different version of Oedipus is emerging from the frail, passive old man who entered with Antigone. He claims to be “sacred” and promises to become a “savior” for Athens, who will bring “profit” (kerdē, 92) to them if they will give him sanctuary. The source of his new leverage will be the gods, of whose power his shattered body will be the unlikely vehicle. We noted that from his first entrance in the play, Oedipus presents an atypical profile for tragic heroes, marked by patient acceptance rather than the usual expression of heroic will in defiance of larger forces. Now we begin to see that far from being powerless, the old man has been chosen, for mysterious reasons, to channel the force of divine will.¹⁷
The full impact of this numinous persona will be fully realized, it seems, only after Oedipus’s death, when the profit he promises will be awarded. Meanwhile, turning toward Thebes and his troubled past animates the old man. At the grove’s edge he was awaiting instructions from other mortals, happy to be given even less than he already had, meek and passive. News about his sons and their quarrel brings not paternal solicitude but angry denunciation, as the heroic will so prominently on display in *Oedipus Tyrannus* reappears.

The chorus draws Oedipus’s attention back to the grove of the Eumenides and his present situation. If he is truly to be the city’s protector, they suggest that he perform a purification ritual (*katharmon*, 466) for the deities of the grove. He eagerly asks for more guidance and there follows another outpouring of minute instructions from the citizens: libations from a stream, poured with pure hands from approved basins, the fleece of sheared lambs, facing east, and so forth. Oedipus enlists his daughters to perform the rites, as his frailty and blindness prevent him from doing so. But they must not leave him entirely alone:

> For my body (*demas*) lacks the strength
> To move alone or without a guide.

(501–2)

The acquiescent stranger, ready to follow the lead of others, has returned for the moment, supplanting the angry father.

**Kings Bearing Gifts**

Ismene exits to perform the necessary ritual acts, leaving Oedipus, Antigone, and the chorus on stage. Moving the action offstage after such an elaborate build-up makes this moment feel like an interlude, the obvious time for a choral stasimon. Instead, there follows a complex lyric dialogue in strophic form between Oedipus and the chorus. Short phrases and emotive outbursts from both sides are fitted into the strophic structure, with some single lines of verse shared (*antilabē*), a technique first used, as we noted, in *Electra* (*El*. 823–70). The chorus, sensing that they have the old man at their disposal while the rituals are performed offstage, prod for more details about his past:
It is terrible (deinon) to stir up evil long dormant, oh stranger, but all the same I’d like to know . . .

(510–11)

Oedipus begs them in the name of hospitality not to press him, but the elders persist: the story is everywhere anyway, so why not give us your version? Oedipus is at first reduced to cries of anguish but then stiffens, laying out his self-defense in response to the chorus’ relentless prodding. He endured evil by his own will, but none of it was by his own choice (authaireton ouden, 522). The city “bound” him (enedēsen), ignorant though he was, in an evil wedlock (525–26). The murder of his father and incestuous begetting of his children were likewise done in ignorance. He suffered evil but did not do evil (epathon . . . ouk ereksa, 538–39). He elaborates on this last distinction:

I received
a gift (dōron), wretch that I was, which I
never should have taken.

(539–41)

Gifts, as we will see, figure largely in the articulation of Oedipus’s legacy to Athens.

Here, as in his earlier self-defense, Oedipus’s claims of innocence before the law rest on his past ignorance, a poignant admission for the onetime king so proud of his intellectual gifts. But though the thrust of his argument is the same as before, the form it takes, the vivid, rapid-fire nature of this sung dialogue increases the emotive force of his claims. Rather than lowering the dramatic tension with a more detached choral song, Sophocles increases it with this virtuoso passage. Beginning with his first self-justification to the chorus, continuing in the reports about his sons’ predicament, and now in this intense dialogue, the presence onstage of Oedipus’s problematic past has grown. As he struggles to move toward the final destiny the oracles have predicted, his old heroic existence, with all its ambiguous moral baggage, threatens to pull him back. At the same time, his obvious pain at recalling it all, and the mix of shame and defiance he exhibits in the face of it, bind the story’s past inextricably to the battered figure presently onstage before us. Sophocles invites us to revisit the wrenching conflicts of his earlier play, but not in order to settle, once and for all,
the moral tangles of that work. Rather, their meaning in this play is always as a part of the presentation of this Oedipus in this dramatic moment.

Theseus finally arrives and recognizes Oedipus immediately from his shabby appearance and unhappy face. As someone who himself was raised in exile and struggled against dangers throughout his life, he feels a connection with the old man and is inclined to grant whatever Oedipus asks:

\[
\text{... since} \\
\text{I know I am a man, and have no more} \\
\text{power over what tomorrow brings than you.}
\]

(566–68)

The humility and compassion Theseus shows here confirm his role as the embodiment of Athenian greatness, with its admirable record of receiving and protecting suppliants.\(^{19}\) Thebes and its discontents have grown more visible on-stage, but now a powerful ally from the present appears. Though the chorus of elders has treated the wandering stranger with watchful courtesy, Theseus now supplies the necessary authority to shore up the defenses against aggressive agents from abroad, soon to appear.

Oedipus returns Theseus’s generosity with appropriate deference. (Is there perhaps a hint of humor in his declaration that Theseus’s display of his own nobility has left Oedipus with nothing to add?) Encouraged by his host, he proceeds briskly to the main business:

\[
\text{I have come to offer this my wretched body (demas, 576)} \\
\text{to you, a gift (dōron) not comely to look at; but from it will come} \\
\text{benefits (kerdē) that are better than a beautiful form.}
\]

(576–78)

Oedipus is a suppliant, who must depend on the kindness of strangers.\(^{20}\) The gift he offers in return, however, would seem not to be especially valuable. What profit will your gift bring, Theseus politely inquires. He will have to wait to learn, until they bury Oedipus’s dead body. In response to further questioning, Oedipus reveals the full story: the Thebans’ need to control his body and grave so as to ward off future destruction, the gods’ role in compelling them, his own sons’ treacherous complicity in his exile from Thebes. Theseus, though sympa-
thetic, cannot see how the Thebans and his sons can cause bitterness for him (579–606).

In answer, Oedipus delivers a lyrical meditation on the irresistible power of “all-conquering time” in the affairs of mortals:

The power of the land withers, like the strength of bodies; trust dies and treachery is born; the same spirit endures between neither men nor cities, since sweet agreement turns to bitterness, then is restored, for some who live now and others later.

If all is fair weather now, for you and the Thebans, yet time runs on without end, giving birth to days and nights in which they will shred with spears your harmonious pledges, and for petty reasons.

Then my buried corpse, cold and slumbering, will drink their hot blood down . . .

(607–22)

The lines are reminiscent of Ajax’s beautiful but deceptive speech before killing himself, where heroic defiance seems to have yielded finally to the overpowering forces of time and nature (Aj. 646–77). There the sentiments mark only an apparent turnabout. Not so here. Oedipus has waited long for his life’s fulfillment, suffering loneliness and exile. Not for him the search for kairos, the right moment for heroic action. He has come to see time as punctuated not by the plans of mortals but by the slow, cyclical rhythms of nature, calling for endurance, not active assertion. Theseus, the benign exemplar of traditional heroism in the play, thinks in terms of being thwarted in the expression of his will as protector. Oedipus, denied the usual heroic agency, focuses instead on the extra-human, transcendent forces that will finally control what mortals like to think of as their self-expression. He too will be a protector for Athens, but as one part of a larger system in which he has a part to play.21

The exchange with Theseus brings together several qualities that link the old Oedipus to both Electra and Philoctetes. Both of the earlier heroes share his attitude toward time. All three endure the manipulation of others, waiting
for their lives to gain meaning through suffering. In regard to their bodies, there is in all three a sense of inwardness, latency, even gestation, which replaces the usual outward thrust of heroic will. Electra is said to “give birth to war in her soul” (El. 218–19); Philoctetes’s wound is always ready to burst forth with pus, oozing infection from inside; Oedipus, blind and led around by children, recalls Teiresias in Oedipus Tyrannus, who “nourishes” (trephō, OT 356) truth inside himself; like the prophet, he is the vehicle for giving birth to the will of the gods. In all three plays, the issue of “profit” (kerdos or onēsis) figures prominently. Orestes, Clytemnestra, Odysseus, Neoptolemus, and Oedipus all meditate frequently on what will bring profit or advantage to them or others. That Oedipus offers profit to the Athenians in the form of his dead body, which he sees as a gift guaranteed not by him but by the gods, suggests an entirely different conception of how mortals can contribute to their own and others’ well-being.

Despite Oedipus’s dire warnings about the seriousness of the struggle (agōn, 587) he is entering, Theseus promises that no one will harm the old man once he is under the protection of Athens. He may go with Theseus, or stay in the care of the locals. Oedipus opts for the latter, wanting to remain close to the grove. Theseus exits to perform a sacrifice and the chorus sings its first stasimon, one of Sophocles’s most famous odes, a song of praise for the natural beauty of Colonus and, indirectly, for Athenian greatness. Theseus’s treatment of Oedipus and promise of protection find their musical equivalent in the tranquility of the song and its emphasis on what will endure beyond the disputes of mortals—the Greek word aei, “always,” “forever,” appears frequently.22 Athens is called “the gift (dōron) of a great god” (710), echoing Oedipus’s own claims to Theseus earlier.23

**Attack on the Left Flank**

The mood is shattered immediately by the arrival, from the audience’s left, of Creon with his retinue. We have heard of this old man’s nefarious plans and expect a villain. Creon does not disappoint. Though presumably even older than Oedipus, he displays a vigorously malign attitude toward his nephew/brother-in-law.24 Beginning with smarmy praise of Athens’ greatness and phony solicitude for Oedipus, he moves swiftly to shaming:
It is painful to see your sorrows, old man, exiled as you are, a wandering beggar, indigent and stumbling, leaning on just one companion. And I am wretched seeing her, who I never thought would fall to such depths of misery, a miserable beggar herself. Always caring for you and your body (kara, 750), living a beggar’s life, knowing nothing of marriage—even at her age, prey to being snatched by a passerby.

(744–52)

Shame is the common coin of heroic culture. Appearing inadequate to one’s peers is to be avoided at all costs, as attested by Ajax’s suicide. This approach by Creon confirms again that Thebes is to be identified with Oedipus’s heroic past, tainted by willful arrogance and pride. In Theseus and now Creon, Sophocles has embodied each of the poles between which Oedipus’s destiny oscillates in the play. 25

Facing his past again animates Oedipus and he replies scornfully: why does Creon, who will stoop to any clever trick (mēchanēma poikilon, 762), try again to snare him in the kind of trap that would bring him the most pain? The Thebans only want him to avoid trouble for themselves, not out of any solicitude for him. He is a clever speaker whose words sound good, but in fact are evil (logoi men esthla, toisi d’ergoisin kaka, 782; see also glōssē . . . deinos, 806). 26 He ends with a threat: the Thebans want to escape harm by controlling his grave, but they will instead have his vengeful spirit (alastōr, 788) living near Athens forever; his sons can inherit only enough of his country to die in (785–90).

Familiar themes begin to surface here. Cast by Oedipus in the role of clever, deceptive speaker, Creon recalls Orestes and the Paedagogus in Electra and the Odysseus of Philoctetes, manipulating others for their own gain, depending on logoi, concealing the true nature and import of their erga. 27 The hunting imagery in Oedipus’s initial rhetorical questions echoes the opening scene of the latter play, where devious visitors plot to ensnare the repellent creature in the cave (cf. Phil. 1007). Like the choruses in the previous two plays, Creon suggests that the hero’s behavior is self-destructive: he is only hurting himself (El. 215–20; Phil. 1095–1100). The insults fly back and forth, until Creon plays his trump card: he has Ismene and will soon capture Antigone (819–20). Oedipus’s defiance vanishes, as he begs the chorus to help him.

The stand-off continues for seventy lines, with threats of violence and per-
haps some physical action, as the chorus tries unsuccessfully to prevent Creon’s henchmen from dragging Antigone away. As when Oedipus is moved slowly across the stage earlier, Sophocles here uses lyric dialogue, shared by Creon, Oedipus, Antigone, and the chorus, to increase the dramatic energy onstage. Lines 833–43 form a strophe, answered by the antistrophe at 876–86. The meter is a mix of dochmiacs, always associated with high emotion, and iambic trimeters. Between are thirty-two lines of spoken dialogue in iambic trimeters. The entire passage is articulated through short, staccato phrases, with speakers sharing lines, representing anger, fear, and mounting panic. The old men cannot protect Antigone, and Creon is about to have his men drag Oedipus away when Theseus returns to restore order.

**Athens to the Rescue**

Theseus enters somewhat agitated: What is this shouting about? What scared you into disturbing my sacrifice to Poseidon? I’ve hurried over here faster than is enjoyable for my feet (886–90). There is a hint of something like parental reproof in the king’s words. The arguing has taken him away from serious duties, and it had better be over something important. The effect would be to undermine the status of both Creon and Oedipus, making their quarrel appear to be more like ill-tempered bickering between siblings. (Those familiar with Sophocles’s earlier plays might see a parallel with Jocasta’s rebuke of Oedipus and Creon at *OT* 634–38.) How much weight this tone might have here, or how it is meant to influence our perception of the two combatants, is hard to judge. Certainly it increases Theseus’s stature and authority, as he imperiously dispatches troops to guard the crossroads where the two daughters would pass on their way to Thebes. Creon he will not release until the old man brings the girls back. He condemns Creon’s behavior but exempts the city of Thebes from his criticism: Theban training did not make him evil; that city does not breed lawless men and would not praise him for stealing his property and that of the gods. The king’s return carries something of the fragrance of melodrama. Though nothing in the text suggests it, we could well imagine him riding in on a white horse. He forebears to unleash his righteous anger by physically harming the old man and will deal with him according to the law (905–8). His scrupulous treatment of Creon, combined with noble sentiments about Athenian reverence for justice, reaffirm his and Athens’ position in the play as the ex-
treme opposite of Creon and, despite Theseus’s diplomatic distinction, Thebes. Both portraits seem exaggerated: if Theseus wears the white hat, Creon we may easily imagine twirling his mustache; he is, by any measure, a thoroughly nasty old man. Neither figure has anything like the depth and complexity of Oedipus. In this respect, it is useful to think of both as part of the spiritual geography we have seen Sophocles establishing: left, right; Thebes, Athens; past, present; black, white. Anchoring either end of this kind of schema does not require a subtly shaded character like Oedipus. He is destined for the Eumenides’ grove, a site of unfathomable mystery identified with neither side, the gateway for Oedipus to transcendence of all mortal struggles.

Bolstered by Theseus’s support, Oedipus launches a long rebuke to Creon, his final self-defense in the play. Calling him “shameless, arrogant” (lēm’ anaides, 960), he once again denies any responsibility for the outcome of others’ acts or of his own committed in ignorance. It is Creon who should be ashamed, for forcing him to talk about his incestuous marriage. He will now speak openly, since Creon has opened his “unholy mouth” (anosion stoma, 981). Creon has covered both Theseus and Athens with false flattery, as if that city did not know how to reverence the gods, while trying to snatch him and his daughters, an old man and his helpless children! He finishes with a prayer:

On account of these things, I call on these goddesses with prayers of supplication to come to me as my helpers and allies, that you may learn what kind of men guard this city!

(1010–13)

Creon continues to bluster ineffectually, but Theseus has matters in hand and forces him to lead the way to where he has Oedipus’s daughters, leaving the stage to their father and the chorus.

In place of a messenger speech, what we might expect in response to events offstage, the chorus now sings its second stasimon, a rousing description of the battle the elders imagine to be taking place between the supporters of Athens and Thebes. The old men yearn to be where the armies wheel around to join the battle, to see Theseus victorious. They can picture the troops racing on horse-back or in chariots:

Terrible the warcraft of the armies of Colonus, terrible the strength of the sons of Thebes!

(1065–66)
They predict that the girls will be saved, calling on Zeus and Apollo to help their cause. The tone here fits with the melodrama preceding. The chorus’ high-flown language seems excessive for portraying a minor border skirmish to prevent a sleazy kidnapping. In any event, being wholly imaginary, the song is not really commensurate with a messenger speech but is more akin in some ways to the “escape” lyrics that appear in later Euripides. The focus is not so much on what Theseus and his troops are actually doing as on the fevered minds of the elders, carried away by their patriotic fervor.

**Happiness Postponed**

As the chorus prophesied, Theseus now returns with Ismene and Antigone. An ecstatic reunion ensues. Oedipus issues a handsome speech of thanks to Theseus, praising him and Athens:

> Since I have received from you alone among mortals piety, fairness, and an aversion to speaking falsely.

(1125–27)

So transported is Oedipus that he asks if he might touch Theseus’s hand and kiss him, only to recoil in horror, remembering that he is not someone that the king could touch. This reminder of Oedipus’s tainted nature throws into further relief his mysterious new power, his status as “sacred” (287). Theseus acknowledges this speech graciously, allowing that he needn’t recount how he won the battle, since Ismene and Antigone will do so for him. But there is one thing: a man has arrived from Argos and sits as a suppliant beside the altar of Poseidon. He wishes to speak briefly to Oedipus.

The gallant rescue and joyous reunion seem to form a natural conclusion to the narrative arc that begins with Oedipus arriving as stranger, seeking and winning protection from Athens and warding off abduction by the Thebans. He has now, it appears, triumphed over those who would drag him back to (or near) Thebes. We can imagine the play—now over twelve hundred lines—wrapping up soon, perhaps with that “consummation” that Oedipus has been promised. Instead, this intrusion into the family reunion jars, breaking the mood of relief and gratitude, creating an edgy atmosphere colored by Oedipus’s abrupt refusal to see the stranger, who he is sure is his son, Polyneices. Though
he may prefer to move on, Oedipus has one more piece of business to do with his past before he can turn toward the grove.32

Theseus urges him to reconsider, gently suggesting that since the man is a suppliant at Poseidon’s altar, perhaps an audience would avoid angering the god. (And forbearing to draw the obvious parallel between Oedipus and his son as suppliants.) Antigone then takes up her brother’s cause: why not honor Theseus’s concern about the god and show mercy to his own son? She too suggests, ever so tactfully, that Oedipus might consider how unrestrained emotions have ruined his own earlier life: should he not restrain his anger and give Polyneices a hearing? Oedipus reluctantly agrees to let his son speak, but only if Theseus pledges not to let anyone “gain power over my life” (mêdeis krateitō tēs emēs psuchēs, 1207). The king agrees and exits to fetch the stranger.

Oedipus’s anger at Polyneices is not surprising, given the latter’s failure to help him when he faced exile. Still, we might expect that, having won his fight with Creon, he would now be disposed to show mercy to his own son. He has lived through a long struggle and presumably seen much of human frailty along the way. Why hang on to old grudges in the face of one’s own death? But Oedipus has never been a gentle old man. He is meek and passive only when he lacks the power to exert his will. As we have now seen more than once, exposure to his Theban past animates him and brings out the pride and touchiness that marked his behavior as a young man there. Polyneices has stoked that flame, and though he will get a hearing, it will be a grudging one.

The chorus now sings its third stasimon in three parts, strophe, antistrophe, and epode (1211–48). The tone is subdued throughout, with the strophe focusing on death as the ultimate leveler:

The same comrade comes for all alike,
when Hades’ destiny, without wedding songs,
with no lyre and no dancing, appears,
Death at the last.

(1220–23)

The antistrophe turns to old age: powerless, friendless, and unloved, the last stage in a life that has seen murders, civil wars, quarrels, battles, and resentment. Better not to be born, with the next best being a quick death (1224–38). In the epode, the old men of the chorus identify with Oedipus, who is like a headland battered by storms of ruin from all sides (1239–48). If the reunion of father and daughters brought a wave of joy and relief, this song washes it away.
The picture of old age here is consistent with the usual dismal portrait found in Athenian tragedy. The chorus’ song echoes the dark cosmic view Polynoeices has brought with him, so dominant in the Theban cycle of myths.

**Tragedy in Miniature**

Polyneices makes an unpromising start:

Alas, what will I do? Shall I weep
for my own evils, girls, or those of my father,
which I see here? I find him thrown out
in a strange land with you,

wearing clothes like these; their ancient,
ugly dirt has settled on my ancient father,
rotting his flesh, and the uncombed hair
on his sightless head flutters in the wind.

(1254–61)

Though his distress may be genuine, these words sound rather like the insulting portrait of Oedipus that Creon offered earlier. The latter meant to shame Oedipus into coming with him. Polynoeices seems more insensitive than malicious here, his own misery giving him something of a tin ear when it comes to the suffering of others. Though he does go on to admit that he has been a failure at supporting his father, he nonetheless expresses puzzlement at Oedipus’s stubborn refusal to answer him. After Antigone declines to intervene, he tries again, opening by invoking the aid of Poseidon and Theseus, then passing on to describe his recent troubles:

I have been driven from my fatherland, a fugitive,
because having been born first, I thought myself
worthy to sit on your throne, ruling over all.
For this Eteocles, younger than I, drove
me from my fatherland, not defeating me

with words nor entering a contest of strength
or action, but persuading the city. The reason for
this, I think, is your Erinyes.

(1292–99)
Again he fails to put his best foot forward, appearing initially not to notice that the wretched situation he finds himself in mirrors his father’s plight as an exile, driven from Thebes while his sons did nothing. Then almost as an aside, he blames all the trouble on Oedipus. The evil force of persuasion surfaces again, but in the present context it will be hard for Polynoeices to make his brother the villain. Sweeping on, he describes each of the seven champions he has recruited to attack Thebes, the ornamental epithets and catalog style giving the passage an epic flavor. The elevated style here accompanies direct reference to the traditional myth that lies on the margins of our play, recalling the opening of Electra, where the Paedagogus’s first speech invokes the mythical background for that play. In both works, the powerful portrait of an unconventional hero pushes the concerns of the myth to the margins of the drama. Polynoeices finishes with a report on yet another oracle, this one saying that whichever son Oedipus favors will win the battle.

Some scholars have tried to make Polynoeices a villain here, but he comes off as simply self-involved in a way typical of Greek heroes and consequently maladroit in his attempt to apologize to his father. In any event, he would have to appear much more dastardly than he does to account for what comes next. Oedipus unleashes a horrendous tirade against both sons, blaming them for his exile, calling Polynoeices kakiste, “the worst of men” (1354), who would have been the murderer of his own father had Antigone and Ismene not saved him. He declares that they are some other man’s sons, not his, predicting that Polynoeices will never destroy Thebes but die along with his brother. These are the curses he has pronounced on them in the past and he calls them forth again! If Zeus sits beside Justice, then his curses will vanquish all supplication and all mortal power. He rises to a hair-raising crescendo:

Get out! I spit on you and am your father no more, most evil of evil men! Carry with you these curses I call down on you, so that you never conquer your homeland by spear nor ever return home to low-lying Argos, but die instead by your brother’s hand and kill him who drove you out! These are my curses, and I call on the hateful fatherly gloom of Tartarus to give you a new home. I summon too these goddesses, and Ares, who has thrust this terrible hatred into your minds.
Hearing this, leave! Go tell all the Cadmeans and your trusted allies, that Oedipus has given prizes such as these to his own sons!

(1383–96)

Old age has not softened Oedipus’s feelings about his sons, it would appear. Indeed, these lines reflect an increase in his anger. Perhaps this is not surprising, since in Polyneices he confronts a tie to his past that is intensely personal and intimate. That Oedipus resorts to curses is also unsurprising, as they are a source of power for old men in traditional societies. Being closer to death, the old man is thought to be closer to the gods and thus able to tap their power. We may also see in Oedipus here some preview of the angry daemōn or supernatural spirit that Greeks believed to inhabit the graves of dead heroes, but to give this figure too much weight at this point would mask a crucial distinction. When he is dead, his power, however mysteriously, will flow from his status as a supernatural being. While he lives, the force of his curses—like the promise of his “gift” to Athens—is guaranteed by the gods, not by him. In this sense, Sophocles has created a hero whose power to influence people and events is not an aberrant form of the traditional model of the youthfully potent person but entirely characteristic of old men because of where they are in their lives. Sophocles presents, for the first and only time in tragedy, a paradigm for the aged hero.

Equally important for our purposes is the way that Oedipus echoes the parallels that Polyneices has unwittingly cited between the two men’s experience as exiles. Both are fugitives, driven out of their proper position in Thebes by those who should love and support them. It is as if Oedipus sees in Polyneices a version of his own younger self, which he then banishes to certain death. The intimacy of his connection to the dark power of Thebes is in this sense even greater than the link between father and son (a problematical enough relationship in the case of Oedipus and his children). The curses he rains down on his sons recall the scourge of his own evil destiny or “Erinyes,” as Polyneices calls it. As we will see, there is a kind of exorcism being performed here.

The chorus expresses sympathy for Polyneices and urges him to go back to Argos. He refuses, resigned now to his grim fate and determined to keep it a secret from his troops. He asks of his sisters that if Oedipus’s curses come to fruition they give him a proper burial—producing a shiver in those who had seen Antigone thirty-five years before—for which they will gain more praise in
addition to what they have won for looking after Oedipus. Antigone now tries to talk him out of proceeding to Thebes: he should take his army back to Argos. The exchange proceeds along lines familiar to Athenian theatergoers:

POLYNEICES
But that is impossible! For how could I lead them back having once flinched in a crisis?

ANTIGONE
Why must you be angry again, brother, what profit (kerdos) comes to you from ruining your country?

POLYNEICES
It is shameful to run away, and shameful to me, the elder, to be mocked for it by my younger brother.

ANTIGONE
Do you see how you are carrying out this man’s prophecies, who foretold that you two would die at each other’s hands?

POLYNEICES
He wants this, yes. Must we not comply?

ANTIGONE
Oh, I am wretched! Who would dare follow prophecies such as this man has uttered?

POLYNEICES
We will not report ugly news; it is right for the commander to tell only better news, not what falls short.

(1418–30)

As Polyneices trudges off toward the left eisodos and Thebes, we are left to consider the meaning of what has just happened. It is not just that Oedipus has condemned his own sons, nor even that he has rejected Thebes and the version of himself that once lived there. Sophocles has gone to some trouble to bound off this episode, creating the expectation that the play was drawing to a close,
then bringing on Polyneices with a new agenda and rounding it off with his exit. The content itself contributes to our perception of the scene as a self-contained whole. As others have noted, what we witness here is an Athenian tragedy in miniature. Polyneices, confronted with an inalterable necessity enforced by transcendent forces, elects to go to certain death rather than incur shame before his fellow warriors. Here is where the importance of his identification with the younger Theban Oedipus becomes clear: by rejecting Polyneices’s plea for help and sending him to his death, Oedipus passes on to his son, as if it were a contagion, the tragic perspective that he himself held in his younger days, which has caused him and others so much misery.

In this scene, Sophocles has, then, staged a mini-tragedy for us. In doing so, he continues to use metatheatrical gestures, as he has in the previous two plays, to urge some detachment in the audience from the form itself. But now he takes a step further. In Electra and Philoctetes, characters on stage manipulate others by staging deceptive scenes, the Paedagogus playing the messenger for Clytemenestra, Neoptolemus and his sailors performing for Philoctetes. Here the recreation of a scene from tragedy is not part of a strategy by a character or characters to outwit anyone else on stage. Rather, the bounding-off and encapsulating of the exchange between Oedipus, Antigone, and Polyneices allows the playwright to portray his central character banishing entirely a vision of the world and the hero’s place in it that has informed tragedy on the Athenian stage. He is now ready to transcend the moral and ethical tangles that pervade traditional tragic stories and move to a mysterious vantage point wholly detached from them.

**Into the Grove**

Once Polyneices is offstage, the pace of events picks up. We are done with wrangling over Oedipus and the future site of his grave; forces tugging at the old man from the left and right disappear. The great consummation he has been promised is at hand, signaled by thunder and lightning from the gods. The chorus begins to sing anxiously, uncertain about whether the old man’s prophecies will now come to fruition. They are answered at the end of a short strophe by the first crash of thunder: “The heavens have sounded, Oh Zeus” (1456). Oedipus, speaking in trimeters, immediately sends for Theseus, explaining to Antigone that the “winged thunder of Zeus” (1460) is calling him to Hades. Another
crash of thunder punctuates the opening of the chorus’ antistrophe. The elders are terrified by the celestial display, begging Zeus for mercy. Oedipus again announces the “prophesied end of his life” (1472–73). He brushes aside Antigone’s doubts and calls a second time for someone to fetch Theseus. The chorus’ fear and anxiety fill its second strophe, which begins after another peal of thunder and is followed by the third exchange in trimeters between Oedipus and Antigone, as Oedipus finally specifies for his daughter why he needs Theseus: in return for what Theseus and Athens have done for him, he wants to deliver the gift he promised (telephoron charin/dounai, 1488–90). The chorus picks up again, calling now on Theseus to come and receive the gift.

Sophocles continues his flexible and inventive use of the chorus here. The high emotion prompted by the thunder—fear from the chorus, preemptive urgency in Oedipus—is articulated through a carefully balanced set of choral stanzas, punctuated by equally symmetrical exchanges between Oedipus and Antigone. The abrupt surge in dramatic energy is shaped by rhythmical symmetry and balance, as if to suggest that the seemingly chaotic forces of nature are themselves subject to the higher powers that will soon make their appearance. Meanwhile, Theseus again races onstage, and again demands to know why he has been summoned. The echoes from his earlier arrival mark a parallel: once again he is entrusted with duties that no one else can fulfill (1500–07; 887–90).

Those duties he and we now learn from Oedipus. While the daughters may go partway to his final resting place in the grove, Theseus alone may accompany him to the actual spot for his grave. Proximity to it will give Athens protection forever. Theseus must not reveal this location to anyone else until he himself is near death. He should then pass on the knowledge only to the most eminent man, who in turn will guard the secret and pass it on when he dies.

We might well imagine that Oedipus has been sitting on the rock in the center of the orchestra for one thousand lines. He now rises to lead Theseus and his daughters through the central doors of the skēnē and into the grove beyond:

Oh children, follow me. I am your new leader, as once you were for me.
Come now, and do not touch me, but let me find the sacred tomb where I am destined to be hidden in this earth.
This way, this way, come! For this way lead
Hermes the guide and the goddess of the Underworld.
O lightless light, you were mine before,
but now my body feels you for the last time.
For already I am going forth to hide in
Hades the end of my life. But come,
dearest of strangers, may you and your
attendants be blessed with good fortune,
and remember me for your unending success
when I am dead.

Sophocles has been preparing for this procession since the opening scene of
this play, when we saw Oedipus tottering down the eisodos on the arm of Anti-
gone. Frail there and utterly dependent on his daughter, he now leads everyone
toward the consummation of his extraordinary resurgence. The profound
change in him is marked by new perspectives on familiar themes: once the
thunder sounds, his view of time shifts, from unchanging cycles of suffering
and endurance to the urgency in finding kairos, the right time for action that
characterizes the masculine heroic persona of the other two plays (hős tachos,
1461; cf. El. 1487ff.); appropriately suspicious of persuasive speakers earlier, he
persuades Theseus to follow his lead (peitheis me, 1516).43

With stage to themselves, the chorus sings a gentle prayer in two stanzas,
the first to Hades and Persephone, the second to Demeter, Persephone, and the
Eumenides. They ask that Oedipus, at the end of his many troubles, have a safe
journey to the underworld (1556–78). After this brief interlude comes a mes-
enger from the grove to deliver the speech that the Athenian audience would
be expecting: Oedipus is dead; he “has left behind this ordinary life” (1583–84).
After he performed some ritual cleansing, thunder from Zeus prompted him to
summon his daughters to say goodbye. Tearful embraces were cut short by the
voice of a god, calling him often and from many places at once:

You there, Oedipus! Why do we delay
our departure? You have tarried for too long!

Oedipus called for Theseus, forbade his daughters to go further with him, and
the two men disappeared into the grove. When those left behind turned to look
back, Oedipus was gone and Theseus was kneeling on the ground, shading his eyes as if from something deinos, which he could not bear to look at. The king then touched the ground and reached skyward, as if to salute both sources of divine power (1586–1666).

Antigone and Ismene return to the stage and sing, along with the chorus, a long kommos, a shared lament in strophic form (1670–1747). Mysterious as it was, the departure of Oedipus marked the end of his tumultuous life with a mood of tranquility and wholeness, symbolized in Theseus’s final inclusive gesture to earth and sky. Now we return to the world of those he has left behind. Here there is only raw grief and anxiety for the future, as Sophocles creates his last complex lyrical ensemble. The girls exchange short phrases, often single words, with the chorus, feeding off each other’s emotions, building to abject despair and helplessness:

Alas, alas, where will we go, O Zeus?
to what expectations is the god now driving us?

(1748–50)

Theseus enters through the central doors and commands the daughters to cease their laments. Mourning is not appropriate for someone who goes to the underworld by the grace of the gods. We are familiar by now with the rhythm of this passage, mounting emotion and disorder quelled by the arrival of the masterful king. But this time Theseus cannot deliver relief. The girls ask to see their father’s tomb, but he refuses. The gift Oedipus has promised depends on Theseus keeping his secret. Antigone acquiesces in her father’s final command, heading off the left eisodos, toward Thebes and the miserable future that all in the audience know is coming for her and Ismene. Even though they were faithful helpmates for their father, they will be destroyed by the same tragic milieu as their brothers. Oedipus has passed into a new existence, but tragedy remains.44

**Conclusion: Into Mystery**

Oedipus at Colonus is the second-longest extant Athenian tragedy. Its episodic structure and melodramatic passages have not always pleased critics,45 but the articulation of the plot is always in the service of Sophocles’s thematic pur-
poses. Indeed, making us wait sometimes serves those purposes: he keeps us engaged by not fulfilling our expectations. We are looking eagerly for Theseus when Ismene arrives; Polyneices, having spoiled the celebration after Creon is defeated, then prolongs the play for almost two hundred lines as we await the great consummation promised in the opening scene. This last episode is in turn crucial for our understanding of how Sophocles pushes his paradigm for the hero’s life—with which he has already been exploring new territory in the previous two plays—to a new level of meaning in his last work.

Despite the many parallels between the old Oedipus and his heroic predecessors in Electra and Philoctetes, the story of the old man’s last day stands apart from the previous two works—and indeed most of Greek tragic literature—in its insistence on the need to transcend the tensions and struggles, the agônes, that dominate so much of ancient Greek culture. And this aspect of Sophocles’s last play is most evident in the placement and function of the Polyneices episode. By passing on his tragic curse to his son, who then carries it back to Thebes, its natural home, Oedipus prepares not to affirm his choice of Athens over Thebes but to move beyond that contest to another plane of existence. Thus the clever tongue (802) of Creon is finally less important than his connection to Oedipus’s doomed past; his principal tools are in fact bullying and shaming, part of the traditional heroic perspective, not tricky speaking. Polyneices resembles not Odysseus but Neoptolemus, a would-be tragic hero who is if anything too straightforward in speech. That he is dispatched just prior to the gods calling Oedipus to his destiny affirms his role as carrier of the self-destructive persona of tragic hero.

Oedipus’s new persona, the principal vehicle in the play for the movement toward transcendence, can be best understood through the function of gifts in the play. Defending himself against the old charges, Oedipus pleads that Jocasta was a “gift” (döron, 540) to him that he should never have accepted. Later, he pledges to Theseus his own wretched body as a gift, dōsôn hikanô toumon athion demas (576). Greek marriage practices would suggest that Jocasta was given as a body to be used, and, as we discover, Oedipus thinks of himself in a similar way. His ruined body can be used by the Athenians after he is dead. Proximity to his physical remains will bring power to his adopted city, especially in their struggles with Thebes. Oedipus speaks twice of the “profit” his corpse can bring to Athens (92, 288), again focusing on his physical being as object.

To those he would help, the hero usually offers himself as an active agent, perhaps using his body but always directing it by the exercise of his own will.
The old Oedipus’s body will also help others, but he will not use it to do so. The gods will use his body as the conduit for their power. Now instead of reciprocal, two-way giving, we have an expanded circle of givers and those who receive. Those who give are not to expect an immediate return from the ones to whom their gift passes. Rather, they must give and watch their gift pass out of their sight, trusting that it will circle back to them some other time from a place they cannot now see.

Lewis Hyde, in exploring the implications of such a “gift economy,” contrasts its operation and underlying assumptions to a market economy:

> It is this element of relationship which leads me to speak of gift exchange as an “erotic” commerce, opposing *eros* (the principle of attraction, union, involvement which binds together) to *logos* (reason and logic in general, the principle of differentiation in particular). A market economy is an emanation of *logos.*

Central to understanding how such a system works is the distinction Hyde draws between “profit” and “increase:"

> The increase begins when the gift has passed *through* someone, when the circle appears. But . . . “profit” is not the right word. Capital earns profit and the sale of a commodity turns a profit, but gifts that remain gifts do not *earn* profit, they give increase. The distinction lies in what we might call the vector of increase: in gift exchange it, the increase, stays in motion and follows the object, while in commodity exchange it stays behind as profit.

The “profit” (*kerdos, onēsis*) that Oedipus offers to the Athenians through the gift of his body is a part of Hyde’s “erotic commerce.” It will bind Oedipus, Athens, and the gods, bringing increase, not the residual profit of the market economy.

Because gifts that move in this way affirm connection, not the separation that a hero’s extraordinary abilities usually enforce, the pledge Oedipus makes to Athens is unique in Athenian tragedy. The fragile relationship between the hero and his or her community is always at the heart of Sophocles’s tragic stories. If the hero’s will is trained on goals that serve the community, much good can come from the relationship. But heroic will and communal well-being rarely coincide indefinitely, and once they diverge, only pain, for both sides, can ensue. In his earlier Oedipus play, Sophocles presents a particularly subtle ex-
ploration of this dynamic. The young Oedipus believes that he is serving the well-being of Thebes by pursuing, with all the force of his heroic will, the murderer of Laius. Once he succeeds, he destroys himself and also his community, which depends on its king to be its intermediary with the gods.

By expanding the relationship between Oedipus and Athens to include the gods, Sophocles obviates the usual clash between individual heroic will and the good of the community. Now Oedipus can serve his adopted home, but not through the expression of his own will. Rather, he will participate in a gift circle, in which he becomes a channel for the expression of divine will. And because the gods are part of the process, the struggles that dominate the earlier scenes of the play are made to seem small, as if seen through the wrong end of a telescope. Indeed, it may well be that the melodramatic aspects of the play—Theseus’s dismissive impatience with the arguing of Creon and Oedipus; the exaggerated black-and-white coloring of Creon and Theseus; the chorus’ overblown imagining of the border skirmish—are part of the playwright’s larger purpose. All of this intrigue, pain, and willful self-destructiveness recedes from the foreground, now taken up with Oedipus’s mysterious communion with the gods.

The old Oedipus stands apart from all other Sophoclean tragic heroes because finally he does not understand the meaning of his life as against the operation of larger, often mysterious forces in the universe. Rather, he is important precisely because he fits into a larger plan, much of which he can never understand, none of which is under the control of his will. That he simply disappears, gathered into the company of the gods, is an appropriate ending for his life as he comes to understand it on the last day of his life.

But startling as this new vision is, Oedipus at Colonus shares with every other example of Sophocles’s tragic art the insistent focus on what it means to be human. Though Oedipus breaks new ground because he achieves a level of transcendence, he and we always view the prospect the gods have spread before him from the perspective of a limited, mortal life. What does it mean, how does it inform the meaning of a human life, we are invited to ask, to be a person whom the gods have chosen to be the vehicle for carrying out their mysterious purposes?51