Reading Guide – Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*

*Brief Synopsis:* Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus* was performed around 401 BC, after Sophocles’ death and the end of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and the Spartan league. For a summary of these events, read pp. 255-58 of Fagles’s Penguin edition. 

*Oedipus at Colonus* takes place several years after the end of the events described in *Oedipus the King*, as Oedipus is now in exile and the war between Eteocles (supported by Creon) and Polynices for control of Thebes has begun. The play opens as the blinded Oedipus and his daughter Antigone make their way on stage into the sacred garden of the Eumenides (or the Furies, now called the “Kindly Ones”) outside of Colonus, near Athens. When a citizen and the chorus (made up of the men of Colonus) beg Oedipus to leave, they soon discover who he is – the man of legend, a figure of great horror. Oedipus reveals that Apollo’s original prophecy was that he would end his days in the sanctuary of the “Awesome goddessess,” and that his remains would bring a blessing to the city that harbors him. Ismene arrives, having traveled from Thebes, to tell Oedipus and Antigone that his sons and Creon are seeking to take him captive for this very reason. Oedipus convinces Theseus, the king of Athens, to guard him against his captors, promising great advantage if he does so. Theseus not only receives him as a suppliant but as an honorary citizen of Athens. When Creon arrives and attempts to kidnap Ismene and Antigone, Theseus’s men rebut the Theban forces; so too, Polynices arrives seeking his father’s blessing, but Oedipus curses the son for his infidelity. At his death, Oedipus leaves the stage on his own volition, and bids Theseus to come with him, who is the only person to see the place of his death – a secret that must be passed down from one ruler of Athens to the next. The play ends with Theseus ensuring Antigone and Ismene’s safe return to Thebes.

*Reading Questions:*

1. The entire action of this play takes place in the garden of the “awesome goddessess,” the Furies. What is the reason for this setting? What connection does the play suggest between Oedipus and the Furies? Why are the two associated with each other? In thinking about these questions, find a passage in the play that offers a point of comparison or contrast with Aeschylus’s *The Furies*.

2. Why has the body of Oedipus now become sacred in *Oedipus at Colonus*? What does it have to do with his identity, suggested in *Oedipus the King*, as a figure of both innocence and guilt, purity and impurity? Find three passages that offer a reason why, according to Oedipus or the other characters of the play, his body has attained such sacred status.

3. Think about the image of Athens – its politics, its virtues, and its future – as imagined in this play. Why might Sophocles wish to associate the destiny of the Athenian *polis* with Oedipus? How does the play manage to turn Oedipus, in all of his ugliness, into a heroic legend? And why do the events of the play occur *outside* the city walls of Athens?