

# Sophocles: from *Antigone*

Though it was the first of the Oedipus, or Theban, trilogy to be composed, *Antigone* deals with the fortunes of Oedipus's children: sisters Antigone and Ismene and twin brothers Eteocles and Polyneices.

The brothers had shared rule of Thebes, but Polyneices quarreled with his brother and eventually betrayed his city, siding with Argos against Thebes; the brothers killed each other in battle. Creon, who then became king, lost the first of his two sons in the fight, and begrudged Polyneices, decreeing that he be neither buried nor mourned.

Antigone's story was told by others, including Aeschylus; but unlike Aeschylus's heroine, who is supported by friends and even half of the chorus, Sophocles's Antigone stands alone, with a dreadful death explicitly before her in consequence of her defiance, a heightening of the tragic situation characteristic of Sophocles.<sup>1</sup>

*[In Thebes, directly in front of the royal palace, which stands in the background, its main doors facing the audience. Enter Antigone leading Ismene away from the palace.]*

ANTIGONE

Now, dear Ismene, my own blood sister,  
do you have any sense of all the troubles  
Zeus keeps bringing on the two of us,  
as long as we're alive? All that misery  
which stems from Oedipus? There's no suffering,  
no shame, no ruin—not one dishonour—  
which I have not seen in all the troubles  
you and I go through. What's this they're saying now,  
something our general has had proclaimed  
throughout the city? Do you know of it?  
Have you heard? Or have you just missed the news?  
Dishonours which better fit our enemies  
are now being piled up on the ones we love. [10]

ISMENE

I've had no word at all, Antigone,  
nothing good or bad about our family,  
not since we two lost both our brothers,  
killed on the same day by a double blow.  
And since the Argive army, just last night,  
has gone away, I don't know any more  
if I've been lucky or face total ruin.

ANTIGONE

I know that. That's why I brought you here,  
outside the gates, so only you can hear.

ISMENE

What is it? The way you look makes it seem [20]  
you're thinking of some dark and gloomy news.

ANTIGONE

Look—what's Creon doing with our two brothers?  
He's honouring one with a full funeral  
and treating the other one disgracefully!  
Eteocles, they say, has had his burial  
according to our customary rites,  
to win him honour with the dead below.  
But as for Polyneices, who perished  
so miserably, an order has gone out  
throughout the city—that's what people say.

He's to have no funeral or lament,  
but to be left unburied and unwept,  
a sweet treasure for the birds to look at,  
for them to feed on to their heart's content. [30]  
That's what people say the noble Creon  
has announced to you and me—I mean to me—  
and now he's coming to proclaim the fact,  
to state it clearly to those who have not heard.

For Creon this matter's really serious.  
Anyone who acts against the order  
will be stoned to death before the city.  
Now you know, and you'll quickly demonstrate  
whether you are nobly born, or else  
a girl unworthy of her splendid ancestors.

ISMENE

O my poor sister, if that's what's happening,  
what can I say that would be any help  
to ease the situation or resolve it? [40]

ANTIGONE

Think whether you will work with me in this  
and act together.

<sup>1</sup> Source: Translation by Ian Johnston, 2005. <https://johnstoniatexts.x10host.com/sophocles/antigonehtml.html>

ISMENE

In what kind of work?  
What do you mean?

ANTIGONE

Will you help these hands  
take up Polyneices' corpse and bury it?

ISMENE

What? You're going to bury Polyneices,  
when that's been made a crime for all in Thebes?

ANTIGONE

Yes. I'll do my duty to my brother—  
and yours as well, if you're not prepared to.  
I won't be caught betraying him.

ISMENE

You're too rash.  
Has Creon not expressly banned that act?

ANTIGONE

Yes. But he's no right to keep me from what's mine.

ISMENE

O dear. Think, Antigone. Consider  
how our father died, hated and disgraced, [50]  
when those mistakes which his own search revealed  
forced him to turn his hand against himself  
and stab out both his eyes. Then that woman,  
his mother and his wife—her double role—  
destroyed her own life in a twisted noose.  
Then there's our own two brothers, both butchered  
in a single day—that ill-fated pair  
with their own hands slaughtered one another  
and brought about their common doom.  
Now, the two of us are left here quite alone.

Think how we'll die far worse than all the rest,  
if we defy the law and move against [60]  
the king's decree, against his royal power.  
We must remember that by birth we're women,  
and, as such, we shouldn't fight with men.  
Since those who rule are much more powerful,  
we must obey in this and in events  
which bring us even harsher agonies.

So I'll ask those underground for pardon—  
since I'm being compelled, I will obey  
those in control. That's what I'm forced to do.  
It makes no sense to try to do too much.

ANTIGONE

I wouldn't urge you to. No. Not even  
if you were keen to act. Doing this with you  
would bring me no joy. So be what you want. [70]

I'll still bury him. It would be fine to die  
while doing that. I'll lie there with him,  
with a man I love, pure and innocent,  
for all my crime. My honours for the dead  
must last much longer than for those up here.  
I'll lie down there forever. As for you,  
well, if you wish, you can show contempt  
for those laws the gods all hold in honour.

ISMENE

I'm not disrespecting them. But I can't act  
against the state. That's not in my nature.

ANTIGONE

Let that be your excuse. I'm going now [80]  
to make a burial mound for my dear brother.

ISMENE

O poor Antigone, I'm so afraid for you.

ANTIGONE

Don't fear for me. Set your own fate in order.

ISMENE

Make sure you don't reveal to anyone  
what you intend. Keep it closely hidden.  
I'll do the same.

ANTIGONE

No, no. Announce the fact—  
if you don't let everybody know,  
I'll despise your silence even more.

ISMENE

Your heart is hot to do cold deeds.

ANTIGONE

But I know  
I'll please the ones I'm duty bound to please.

ISMENE

Yes, if you can. But you're after something [90]  
which you're incapable of carrying out.

ANTIGONE

Well, when my strength is gone, then I'll give up.

ISMENE

A vain attempt should not be made at all.

ANTIGONE

I'll hate you if you're going to talk that way.  
And you'll rightly earn the loathing of the dead.  
So leave me and my foolishness alone—  
we'll get through this fearful thing. I won't suffer  
anything as bad as a disgraceful death.

ISMENE

All right then, go, if that's what you think right.  
But remember this—even though your mission  
makes no sense, your friends do truly love you.

*[Exit Antigone away from the palace. Ismene watches her  
go and then turns slowly into the palace.]*

• • •

*Antigone proceeds with her plan and is  
apprehended after having buried Polyneices.*

*[Enter the Guard, bringing Antigone with him. She is not  
resisting.]*

CHORUS LEADER

What this? I fear some omen from the gods.  
I can't deny what I see here so clearly—  
that young girl there—it's Antigone.  
O you poor girl, daughter of Oedipus,  
child of a such a father, so unfortunate,  
what's going on? Surely they've not brought you here  
because you've disobeyed the royal laws,  
because they've caught you acting foolishly? [380]

GUARD

This here's the one who carried out the act.  
We caught her as she was burying the corpse.  
Where's Creon?

*[The palace doors open. Enter Creon with attendants.]*

CHORUS LEADER

He's coming from the house—  
and just in time.

CREON

Why have I come "just in time"?  
What's happening? What is it?

GUARD

My lord,  
human beings should never take an oath  
there's something they'll not do—for later thoughts  
contradict what they first meant. I'd have sworn [390]  
I'd not soon venture here again. Back then,  
the threats you made brought me a lot of grief.  
But there's no joy as great as what we pray for  
against all hope. And so I have come back,  
breaking that oath I swore. I bring this girl,  
captured while she was honouring the grave.  
This time we did not draw lots. No. This time  
I was the lucky man, not someone else.  
And now, my lord, take her for questioning.

Convict her. Do as you wish. As for me,  
by rights I'm free and clear of all this trouble. [400]

CREON

This girl here—how did you catch her? And where?

GUARD

She was burying that man. Now you know  
all there is to know.

CREON

Do you understand  
just what you're saying? Are your words the truth?

GUARD

We saw this girl giving that dead man's corpse  
full burial rites—an act you'd made illegal.  
Is what I say simple and clear enough?

CREON

How did you see her, catch her in the act?

GUARD

It happened this way. When we got there,  
after hearing those awful threats from you,  
we swept off all the dust covering the corpse,  
so the damp body was completely bare. [410]  
Then we sat down on rising ground upwind,  
to escape the body's putrid rotting stench.  
We traded insults just to stay awake,  
in case someone was careless on the job.  
That's how we spent the time right up 'til noon,  
when the sun's bright circle in the sky  
had moved half way and it was burning hot.

Then suddenly a swirling windstorm came,  
whipping clouds of dust up from the ground,  
filling the plain—some heaven-sent trouble.  
In that level place the dirt storm damaged  
all the forest growth, and the air around [420]  
was filled with dust for miles. We shut our mouths  
and just endured this scourge sent from the gods.  
A long time passed. The storm came to an end.  
That's when we saw the girl. She was shrieking—  
a distressing painful cry, just like a bird  
who's seen an empty nest, its fledglings gone.

That's how she was when she saw the naked corpse.  
She screamed out a lament, and then she swore,  
calling evil curses down upon the ones  
who'd done this. Then right away her hands  
threw on the thirsty dust. She lifted up  
a finely made bronze jug and then three times [430]  
poured out her tributes to the dead.  
When we saw that, we rushed up right away  
and grabbed her. She was not afraid at all.

We charged her with her previous offence  
as well as this one. She just kept standing there,  
denying nothing. That made me happy—  
though it was painful, too. For it's a joy  
escaping troubles which affect oneself,  
but painful to bring evil on one's friends.  
But all that is of less concern to me  
than my own safety. [440]

CREON

You there—you with your face  
bent down towards the ground, what do you say?  
Do you deny you did this or admit it?

ANTIGONE

I admit I did it. I won't deny that.

CREON [*to the Guard*]

You're dismissed—go where you want. You're free—  
no serious charges made against you.

[*Exit the Guard. Creon turns to interrogate Antigone.*]

Tell me briefly—not in some lengthy speech—  
were you aware there was a proclamation  
forbidding what you did?

ANTIGONE

I'd heard of it.  
How could I not? It was public knowledge.

CREON

And yet you dared to break those very laws?

ANTIGONE

Yes. Zeus did not announce those laws to me. [450]  
And Justice living with the gods below  
sent no such laws for men. I did not think  
anything which you proclaimed strong enough  
to let a mortal override the gods  
and their unwritten and unchanging laws.  
They're not just for today or yesterday,  
but exist forever, and no one knows  
where they first appeared. So I did not mean  
to let a fear of any human will  
lead to my punishment among the gods.

I know all too well I'm going to die— [460]  
how could I not?—it makes no difference  
what you decree. And if I have to die  
before my time, well, I count that a gain.  
When someone has to live the way I do,  
surrounded by so many evil things,

how can she fail to find a benefit  
in death? And so for me meeting this fate  
won't bring any pain. But if I'd allowed  
my own mother's dead son to just lie there,  
an unburied corpse, then I'd feel distress.  
What's going on here does not hurt me at all.  
If you think what I'm doing now is stupid,  
perhaps I'm being charged with foolishness [470]  
by someone who's a fool.

CHORUS LEADER

It's clear enough  
the spirit in this girl is passionate—  
her father was the same. She has no sense  
of compromise in times of trouble.

CREON [*to the Chorus Leader*]

But you should know the most obdurate wills  
are those most prone to break. The strongest iron  
tempered in the fire to make it really hard—  
that's the kind you see most often shatter.  
I'm well aware the most tempestuous horses  
are tamed by one small bit. Pride has no place  
in anyone who is his neighbour's slave. [480]  
This girl here was already very insolent  
in contravening laws we had proclaimed.  
Here she again displays her proud contempt—  
having done the act, she now boasts of it.  
She laughs at what she's done. Well, in this case,  
if she gets her way and goes unpunished,  
then she's the man here, not me. No. She may be  
my sister's child, closer to me by blood  
than anyone belonging to my house  
who worships Zeus Herkeios in my home,  
but she'll not escape my harshest punishment—  
her sister, too, whom I accuse as well.<sup>2</sup> [490]  
She had an equal part in all their plans  
to do this burial. Go summon her here.  
I saw her just now inside the palace,  
her mind out of control, some kind of fit.

[*Exit attendants into the palace to fetch Ismene.*]

When people hatch their mischief in the dark  
their minds often convict them in advance,  
betraying their treachery. How I despise  
a person caught committing evil acts  
who then desires to glorify the crime.

ANTIGONE

Take me and kill me—what more do you want?

<sup>2</sup>Zeus Herkeios refers to Zeus of the Courtyard, a patron god of  
worship within the home.

CREON

Me? Nothing. With that I have everything.

ANTIGONE

Then why delay? There's nothing in your words  
that I enjoy—may that always be the case! [500]  
And what I say displeases you as much.  
But where could I gain greater glory  
than setting my own brother in his grave?  
All those here would confirm this pleases them  
if their lips weren't sealed by fear—being king,  
which offers all sorts of various benefits,  
means you can talk and act just as you wish.

CREON

In all of Thebes, you're the only one  
who looks at things that way.

ANTIGONE

They share my views,  
but they keep their mouths shut just for you.

CREON

These views of yours—so different from the rest—  
don't they bring you any sense of shame? [510]

ANTIGONE

No—there's nothing shameful in honouring  
my mother's children.

CREON

You had a brother  
killed fighting for the other side.

ANTIGONE

Yes—from the same mother and father, too.

CREON

Why then give tributes which insult his name?

ANTIGONE

But his dead corpse won't back up what you say.

CREON

Yes, he will, if you give equal honours  
to a wicked man.

ANTIGONE

But the one who died  
was not some slave—it was his own brother.

CREON

Who was destroying this land—the other one  
went to his death defending it.

ANTIGONE

That may be,  
but Hades still desires equal rites for both.<sup>3</sup>

CREON

A good man does not wish what we give him [520]  
to be the same an evil man receives.

ANTIGONE

Who knows? In the world below perhaps  
such actions are no crime.

CREON

An enemy  
can never be a friend, not even in death.

ANTIGONE

But my nature is to love. I cannot hate.

CREON

Then go down to the dead. If you must love,  
love them. No woman's going to govern me—  
no, no—not while I'm still alive.

*[Enter two attendants from the house bringing Ismene to Creon.]*

CHORUS LEADER

Ismene's coming. There—right by the door.  
She's crying. How she must love her sister!  
From her forehead a cloud casts its shadow  
down across her darkly flushing face—  
and drops its rain onto her lovely cheeks. [530]

CREON

You there—you snake lurking in my house,  
sucking out my life's blood so secretly.  
I'd no idea I was nurturing two pests,  
who aimed to rise against my throne. Come here.  
Tell me this—do you admit you played your part  
in this burial, or will you swear an oath  
you had no knowledge of it?

ISMENE

I did it—  
I admit it, and she will back me up.  
So I bear the guilt as well.

ANTIGONE

No, no—  
justice will not allow you to say that.  
You didn't want to. I did not work with you.

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<sup>3</sup>Hades, a brother of Zeus, is god of the underworld, lord of the dead.

ISMENE  
But now you're in trouble, I'm not ashamed [540]  
of suffering, too, as your companion.

ANTIGONE  
Hades and the dead can say who did it—  
I don't love a friend whose love is only words.

ISMENE  
You're my sister. Don't dishonour me.  
Let me respect the dead and die with you.

ANTIGONE  
Don't try to share my death or make a claim  
to actions which you did not do. I'll die—  
and that will be enough.

ISMENE  
But if you're gone,  
what is there in life for me to love?

ANTIGONE  
Ask Creon. He's the one you care about.

ISMENE  
Why hurt me like this? It doesn't help you. [550]

ANTIGONE  
If I am mocking you, it pains me, too.

ISMENE  
Even now is there some way I can help?

ANTIGONE  
Save yourself. I won't envy your escape.

ISMENE  
I feel so wretched leaving you to die.

ANTIGONE  
But you chose life—it was my choice to die.

ISMENE  
But not before I'd said those words just now.

ANTIGONE  
Some people may approve of how you think—  
others will believe my judgment's good.

ISMENE  
But the mistake's the same for both of us.

ANTIGONE  
Be brave. You're alive. But my spirit died  
some time ago so I might help the dead [560]

CREON  
I'd say one of these girls has just revealed

how mad she is—the other's been that way  
since she was born.

ISMENE  
My lord, whatever good sense  
people have by birth no longer stays with them  
once their lives go wrong—it abandons them.

CREON  
In your case, that's true, once you made your choice  
to act in evil ways with wicked people.

ISMENE  
How could I live alone, without her here?

CREON  
Don't speak of her being here. Her life is over.

ISMENE  
You're going to kill your own son's bride?

CREON  
Why not? There are other fields for him to plough.

ISMENE  
No one will make him a more loving wife  
than she will.

CREON  
I have no desire my son  
should have an evil wife.

ANTIGONE  
Dearest Haemon,  
how your father wrongs you.

CREON  
I've had enough of this—  
you and your marriage.

ISMENE  
You really want that?  
You're going to take her from him?

CREON  
No, not me.  
Hades is the one who'll stop the marriage.

CHORUS LEADER  
So she must die—that seems decided on.

CREON  
Yes—for you and me the matter's closed.

[*Creon turns to address his attendants.*]

No more delay. You slaves, take them inside.  
From this point on they must act like women

and have no liberty to wander off.  
Even bold men run when they see Hades [580]  
coming close to them to snatch their lives.

[The attendants take Antigone and Ismene into the palace,  
leaving Creon and the Chorus on stage.]

• • •  
*Haemon, son of Creon and Euridice and  
Antigone's fiancé, hears what has happened.*

[The palace doors open.]

CHORUS LEADER

Here comes Haemon,  
your only living son. Is he grieving  
the fate of Antigone, his bride,  
bitter that his marriage hopes are gone? [630]

CREON

We'll soon find out—more accurately  
than any prophet here could indicate.

[Enter Haemon from the palace.]

My son, have you heard the sentence that's been passed  
upon your bride? And have you now come here  
angry at your father? Or are you loyal to me,  
on my side no matter what I do?

HAEMON

Father, I'm yours. For me your judgments  
and the ways you act on them are good—  
I shall follow them. I'll not consider  
any marriage a greater benefit  
than your fine leadership.

CREON

Indeed, my son,  
that's how your heart should always be resolved,  
to stand behind your father's judgment [640]  
on every issue. That's what men pray for—  
obedient children growing up at home  
who will pay back their father's enemies,  
evil to them for evil done to him,  
while honouring his friends as much as he does.

A man who fathers useless children—  
what can one say of him except he's bred  
troubles for himself, and much to laugh at  
for those who fight against him? So, my son,  
don't ever throw good sense aside for pleasure,

for some woman's sake. You understand  
how such embraces can turn freezing cold [650]  
when an evil woman shares your life at home.  
What greater wound is there than a false friend?  
So spit this girl out—she's your enemy.  
Let her marry someone else in Hades.

Since I caught her clearly disobeying,  
the only culprit in the entire city,  
I won't perjure myself before the state.  
No—I'll kill her. And so let her appeal  
to Zeus, the god of blood relationships.  
If I foster any lack of full respect  
in my own family, I surely do the same [660]  
with those who are not linked to me by blood.  
The man who acts well with his household  
will be found a just man in the city.<sup>4</sup>  
I'd trust such a man to govern wisely  
or to be content with someone ruling him.

And in the thick of battle at his post [670]  
he'll stand firm beside his fellow soldier,  
a loyal, brave man. But anyone who's proud  
and violates our laws or thinks he'll tell  
our leaders what to do, a man like that  
wins no praise from me. No. We must obey  
whatever man the city puts in charge,  
no matter what the issue—great or small,  
just or unjust. For there's no greater evil  
than a lack of leadership. That destroys  
whole cities, turns households into ruins,  
and in war makes soldiers break and run away.  
When men succeed, what keeps their lives secure  
in almost every case is their obedience.  
That's why they must support those in control  
and never let some woman beat us down.

If we must fall from power, let that come  
at some man's hand—at least, we won't be called [680]  
inferior to any woman.

CHORUS LEADER

Unless we're being deceived by our old age,  
what you've just said seems reasonable to us.

HAEMON

Father, the gods instill good sense in men—  
the greatest of all the things which we possess.  
I could not find your words somehow not right—  
I hope that's something I never learn to do.  
But other words might be good, as well.

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<sup>4</sup>Following common editorial practice, the lines of the Greek  
have been rearranged here, so that 663-7 come after 671, hence  
the apparently odd numbering of the lines.

Because of who you are, you can't perceive  
all the things men say or do—or their complaints.  
Your gaze makes citizens afraid—they can't [690]  
say anything you would not like to hear.

But in the darkness I can hear them talk—  
the city is upset about the girl.  
They say of all women here she least deserves  
the worst of deaths for her most glorious act.  
When in the slaughter her own brother died,  
she did not just leave him there unburied,  
to be ripped apart by carrion dogs or birds.  
Surely she deserves some golden honour?  
That's the dark secret rumour people speak. [700]  
For me, father, nothing is more valuable  
than your well being. For any children,  
what could be a greater honour to them  
than their father's thriving reputation?  
A father feels the same about his sons.

So don't let your mind dwell on just one thought,  
that what you say is right and nothing else.  
A man who thinks that only he is wise,  
that he can speak and think like no one else,  
when such men are exposed, then all can see  
their emptiness inside. For any man, [710]  
even if he's wise, there's nothing shameful  
in learning many things, staying flexible.  
You notice how in winter floods the trees  
which bend before the storm preserve their twigs.

The ones who stand against it are destroyed,  
root and branch. In the same way, those sailors  
who keep their sails stretched tight, never easing off,  
make their ship capsize—and from that point on  
sail with their rowing benches all submerged.

So end your anger. Permit yourself to change.  
For if I, as a younger man, may state  
my views, I'd say it would be for the best [720]  
if men by nature understood all things—  
if not, and that is usually the case,  
when men speak well, it good to learn from them.

CHORUS LEADER  
My lord, if what he's said is relevant,  
it seems appropriate to learn from him,  
and you too, Haemon, listen to the king.  
The things which you both said were excellent.

CREON  
And men my age—are we then going to school  
to learn what's wise from men as young as him?

HAEMON  
There's nothing wrong in that. And if I'm young,  
don't think about my age—look at what I do.

CREON  
And what you do—does that include this, [730]  
honouring those who act against our laws?

HAEMON  
I would not encourage anyone  
to show respect to evil men.

CREON  
And her—  
is she not suffering from the same disease?

HAEMON  
The people here in Thebes all say the same—  
they deny she is.

CREON  
So the city now  
will instruct me how I am to govern?

HAEMON  
Now you're talking like someone far too young.  
Don't you see that?

CREON  
Am I to rule this land  
at someone else's whim or by myself?

HAEMON  
A city which belongs to just one man  
is no true city.

CREON  
According to our laws,  
does not the ruler own the city?

HAEMON  
By yourself you'd make an excellent king  
but in a desert.

CREON  
It seems as if this boy [740]  
is fighting on the woman's side.

HAEMON  
That's true—  
if you're the woman. I'm concerned for you.

CREON  
You're the worst there is—you set your judgment up  
against your father.



HAEMON

No, not when I see  
you making a mistake and being unjust.

CREON

Is it a mistake to honour my own rule?

HAEMON

You're not honouring that by trampling on  
the gods' prerogatives.

CREON

You foul creature—  
you're worse than any woman.

HAEMON

You'll not catch me  
giving way to some disgrace.

CREON

But your words  
all speak on her behalf.

HAEMON

And yours and mine—  
and for the gods below.

CREON

You woman's slave—  
don't try to win me over.

HAEMON

What do you want—  
to speak and never hear someone reply?<sup>5</sup>

CREON

You'll never marry her while she's alive. [750]

HAEMON

Then she'll die—and in her death kill someone else.

CREON

Are you so insolent you threaten me?

HAEMON

Where's the threat in challenging a bad decree?

CREON

You'll regret parading what you think like this—  
you—a person with an empty brain!

HAEMON

If you were not my father, I might say  
you were not thinking straight.

CREON

Would you, indeed?

Well, then, by Olympus, I'll have you know  
you'll be sorry for demeaning me  
with all these insults.

[*Creon turns to his attendants.*]

Go bring her out—

[760]

that hateful creature, so she can die right here,  
with him present, before her bridegroom's eyes.

HAEMON

No. Don't ever hope for that. She'll not die  
with me just standing there. And as for you—  
your eyes will never see my face again.  
So let your rage charge on among your friends  
who want to stand by you in this.

[*Exit Haemon, running back into the palace.*]

CHORUS LEADER

My lord, Haemon left in such a hurry.  
He's angry—in a young man at his age  
the mind turns bitter when he's feeling hurt.

CREON

Let him dream up or carry out great deeds  
beyond the power of man, he'll not save these girls—  
their fate is sealed.

CHORUS LEADER

Are you going to kill them both? [770]

CREON

No—not the one whose hands are clean. You're right.

CHORUS LEADER

How do you plan to kill Antigone?

CREON

I'll take her on a path no people use,  
and hide her in a cavern in the rocks,  
while still alive. I'll set out provisions,  
as much as piety requires, to make sure  
the city is not totally corrupted.<sup>6</sup>  
Then she can speak her prayers to Hades,  
the only god she worships, for success  
avoiding death—or else, at least, she'll learn,

<sup>5</sup>Following the suggestion of Andrew Brown and others, I have moved lines 756-7 in the Greek text so that they come right after line 750.

<sup>6</sup>The killing of a family member could bring on divine punishment in the form of a pollution involving the entire city (as in the case of Oedipus). Creon is, one assumes, taking refuge in the notion that he will not be executing Antigone directly.

although too late, how it's a waste of time  
to work to honour those whom Hades holds. [780]

•        •        •

*Antigone is led to her execution, reproached by the chorus (representing the rich men of Thebes).  
Antigone castigates them for their lack of respect for the gods. Creon intercedes.*

CREON

Don't you know that no one faced with death  
would ever stop the singing and the groans,  
if that would help? Take her and shut her up,  
as I have ordered, in her tomb's embrace.

And get it done as quickly as you can.  
Then leave her there alone, all by herself—  
she can sort out whether she wants suicide  
or remains alive, buried in a place like that.  
As far as she's concerned, we bear no guilt.  
But she's lost her place living here with us.<sup>7</sup> [890]

ANTIGONE

O my tomb and bridal chamber—  
my eternal hollow dwelling place,  
where I go to join my people. Most of them  
have perished—Persephone has welcomed them  
among the dead.<sup>8</sup> I'm the last one, dying here  
the most evil death by far, as I move down  
before the time allotted for my life is done.  
But I go nourishing the vital hope  
my father will be pleased to see me come,  
and you, too, my mother, will welcome me,  
as well as you, my own dear brother.

When you died, with my own hands I washed you. [900]  
I arranged your corpse and at the grave mound  
poured out libations. But now, Polyneices,  
this is my reward for covering your corpse.<sup>9</sup>  
However, for wise people I was right  
to honour you. I'd never have done it  
for children of my own, not as their mother,  
nor for a dead husband lying in decay—  
no, not in defiance of the citizens.

What law do I appeal to, claiming this?  
If my husband died, there'd be another one,

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<sup>7</sup>Creon's logic seems to suggest that because he is not executing Antigone directly and is leaving her a choice between committing suicide and slowly starving to death in the cave, he has no moral responsibility for what happens.

<sup>8</sup>Persephone is the wife of Hades and thus goddess of the underworld.

<sup>9</sup>In these lines Antigone seems to be talking about both her brothers, first claiming she washed and dressed the body of Eteocles and then covered Polyneices. However, the pronoun

and if I were to lose a child of mine  
I'd have another with some other man. [910]  
But since my father and my mother, too,  
are hidden away in Hades' house,  
I'll never have another living brother.  
That was the law I used to honour you.

But Creon thought that I was in the wrong  
and acting recklessly for you, my brother.  
Now he seizes me by force and leads me here—  
no wedding and no bridal song, no share  
in married life or nurturing children.  
Instead I go in sorrow to my grave,  
without my friends, to die while still alive. [920]  
What holy justice have I violated?  
In my wretchedness, why should I still look  
up to the gods? Which one can I invoke  
to bring me help, when for my reverence  
they charge me with impiety? Well then,  
if this is something fine among the gods,  
I'll come to recognize that I've done wrong.

But if these people here are being unjust  
may they endure no greater punishment  
than the injustices they're doing to me.

CHORUS LEADER

The same storm blasts continue to attack  
the mind in this young girl. [930]

CREON

Then those escorting her  
will be sorry they're so slow.

ANTIGONE

Alas, then,  
those words mean death is very near at hand.

CREON

I won't encourage you or cheer you up,  
by saying the sentence won't be carried out.

ANTIGONE

O city of my fathers  
in this land of Thebes—  
and my ancestral gods,

references in the Greek are confusing. Lines 904 to 920 in the Greek text have prompted a great deal of critical debate, since they seem incompatible with Antigone's earlier motivation and do not make much sense in context (in addition most of them appear closely derived from Herodotus 3.119). Hence, some editors insist that the lines (or most of them) be removed. Brown provides a useful short summary of the arguments and some editorial options (199-200).

I am being led away.  
No more delaying for me.

Look on me, you lords of Thebes, [940]  
the last survivor of your royal house,  
see what I have to undergo,  
the kind of men who do this to me,  
for paying reverence to true piety.

[*Antigone is led away under escort.*]

. . .  
*Warned of dire consequences for himself and  
Thebes by the seer Tiresias for his unholy  
treatment of Polyneices's body, Creon is prevailed  
upon by the chorus to free Antigone and entomb  
her brother.*

[*Enter a Messenger.*]

MESSENGER  
All you here who live beside the home  
of Amphion and Cadmus—in human life  
there's no set place which I would praise or blame.<sup>10</sup>  
The lucky and unlucky rise or fall  
by chance day after day—and how these things  
are fixed for men no one can prophesy. [1160]  
For Creon, in my view, was once a man  
we all looked up to. For he saved the state,  
this land of Cadmus, from its enemies.

He took control and reigned as its sole king—  
and prospered with the birth of noble children.  
Now all is gone. For when a man has lost  
what gives him pleasure, I don't include him  
among the living—he's a breathing corpse.  
Pile up a massive fortune in your home,  
if that's what you want—live like a king.  
If there's no pleasure in it, I'd not give  
to any man a vapour's shadow for it, [1170]  
not compared to human joy.

CHORUS LEADER  
Have you come with news of some fresh trouble  
in our house of kings?

MESSENGER  
They are dead—  
and those alive bear the responsibility  
for those who've died.

CHORUS LEADER  
Who did the killing?  
Who's lying dead? Tell us.

MESSENGER  
Haemon has been killed.  
No stranger shed his blood.

CHORUS LEADER  
At his father's hand?  
Or did he kill himself?

MESSENGER  
By his own hand—  
angry at his father for the murder.

CHORUS LEADER  
TEIRESIAS, how your words have proven true!

MESSENGER  
That's how things stand. Consider what comes next.

CHORUS LEADER  
I see Creon's wife, poor Eurydice— [1180]  
she's coming from the house—either by chance,  
or else she's heard there's news about her son.

[*Enter Eurydice from the palace with some attendants.*]

EURYDICE  
Citizens of Thebes, I heard you talking,  
as I was walking out, going off to pray,  
to ask for help from goddess Pallas.  
While I was unfastening the gate,  
I heard someone speaking of bad news  
about my family. I was terrified.  
I collapsed, fainting back into the arms  
of my attendants. So tell the news again— [1190]  
I'll listen. I'm no stranger to misfortune.

MESSENGER  
Dear lady, I'll speak of what I saw,  
omitting not one detail of the truth.  
Why should I ease your mind with a report  
which turns out later to be incorrect?  
The truth is always best. I went to the plain,  
accompanying your husband as his guide.  
Polyneices' corpse, still unlamented,  
was lying there, the greatest distance off,  
torn apart by dogs. We prayed to Pluto  
and to Hecate, goddess of the road,  
for their good will and to restrain their rage. [1200]

<sup>10</sup>Amphion was legendary king of Thebes, husband of Niobe.

We gave the corpse a ritual wash, and burned  
what was left of it on fresh-cut branches.

We piled up a high tomb of his native earth.  
Then we moved to the young girl's rocky cave,  
the hollow cavern of that bride of death.  
From far away one man heard a voice  
coming from the chamber where we'd put her  
without a funeral—a piercing cry.  
He went to tell our master Creon,  
who, as he approached the place, heard the sound,  
an unintelligible scream of sorrow.

He groaned and then spoke out these bitter words, [1210]  
"Has misery made me a prophet now?  
And am I travelling along a road  
that takes me to the worst of all disasters?  
I've just heard the voice of my own son.  
You servants, go ahead—get up there fast.  
Remove the stones piled in the entrance way,  
then stand beside the tomb and look in there  
to see if that was Haemon's voice I heard,  
or if the gods have been deceiving me."  
Following what our desperate master asked,  
we looked. In the furthest corner of the tomb [1220]  
we saw Antigone hanging by the neck,  
held up in a noose—fine woven linen.

Haemon had his arms around her waist—  
he was embracing her and crying out  
in sorrow for the loss of his own bride,  
now among the dead, his father's work,  
and for his horrifying marriage bed.

Creon saw him, let out a fearful groan,  
then went inside and called out anxiously,  
"You unhappy boy, what have you done?  
What are you thinking? Have you lost your mind?  
Come out, my child—I'm begging you—please come."  
[1230]

But the boy just stared at him with savage eyes,  
spat in his face and, without saying a word,  
drew his two-edged sword. Creon moved away,  
so the boy's blow failed to strike his father.  
Angry at himself, the ill-fated lad  
right then and there leaned into his own sword,  
driving half the blade between his ribs.  
While still conscious he embraced the girl  
in his weak arms, and, as he breathed his last,  
he coughed up streams of blood on her fair cheek.  
Now he lies there, corpse on corpse, his marriage [1240]  
has been fulfilled in chambers of the dead.  
The unfortunate boy has shown all men

how, of all the evils which afflict mankind,  
the most disastrous one is thoughtlessness.

[*Eurydice turns and slowly returns into the palace.*]

CHORUS LEADER

What do you make of that? The queen's gone back.  
She left without a word, good or bad.

MESSENGER

I'm surprised myself. It's about her son—  
she heard that terrible report. I hope  
she's gone because she doesn't think it right  
to mourn for him in public. In the home,  
surrounded by her servants, she'll arrange  
a period of mourning for the house.  
She's discreet and has experience—  
she won't make mistakes. [1250]

CHORUS LEADER

I'm not sure of that.  
to me her staying silent was extreme—  
it seems to point to something ominous,  
just like a vain excess of grief.

MESSENGER

I'll go in.  
We'll find out if she's hiding something secret,  
deep within her passionate heart. You're right—  
excessive silence can be dangerous.

[*The Messenger goes up the stairs into the palace. Enter  
Creon from the side, with attendants. Creon is holding the  
body of Haemon.*]

CHORUS LEADER

Here comes the king in person—carrying  
in his arms, if it's right to speak of this,  
a clear reminder that this evil comes  
not from some stranger, but his own mistakes. [1260]

CREON

Aaiai—mistakes made by a foolish mind,  
cruel mistakes that bring on death.  
You see us here, all in one family—  
the killer and the killed.  
O the profanity of what I planned!  
Alas, my son, you died so young—  
a death before your time.  
Aaiai . . . aaiai . . . you're dead . . . gone—  
not your own foolishness but mine.

CHORUS LEADER

Alas, it seems you've learned to see what's right—  
but far too late. [1270]

CREON

Aaiiii . . . I've learned it in my pain.  
Some god clutching a great weight struck my head,  
then hurled me onto pathways in the wilderness,  
throwing down and casting underfoot  
what brought me joy.

Sad . . . so sad . . .  
the wretched agony of human life.

[*The Messenger reappears from the palace.*]

MESSENGER

My lord, you come like one who stores up evil,  
what you hold in your arms and what you'll see  
before too long inside the house. [1280]

CREON

What's that?  
Is there something still more evil than all this?

MESSENGER

Your wife is dead—blood mother of that corpse—  
killed with a sword—her wounds are new, poor lady.

CREON

Aaiiii . . . a gathering place for death . . .  
no sacrifice can bring this to an end.  
Why are you destroying me? You there—  
you bringer of this dreadful news, this agony,  
what are you saying now? Aaiiii . . .  
You kill a man then kill him once again.  
What are you saying, boy? What news?  
A slaughter heaped on slaughter— [1290]  
my wife, alas . . . she's dead?

MESSENGER

[*opening the palace doors, revealing the body of Eurydice*]  
Look here. No longer is she hidden in the house.

CREON

Alas, how miserable I feel—to look upon  
this second horror. What remains for me,  
what's Fate still got in store? I've just held  
my own son in my arms, and now I see  
right here in front of me another corpse.  
Alas for this suffering mother. [1300]  
Alas, my son . . .

MESSENGER

Stabbed with a sharp sword at the altar,  
she let her darkening eyesight fail,  
once she had cried out in sorrow

for the glorious fate of Megareos,  
who died some time ago, and then again  
for Haemon, and then, with her last breath,  
she called out evil things against you,  
the killer of your sons.<sup>11</sup>

CREON

Aaiii . . . My fear now makes me tremble.  
Why won't someone now strike out at me,  
pierce my heart with a two-edged sword?  
How miserable I am . . . aaiii . . . [1310]  
how full of misery and pain . . .

MESSENGER

By this woman who lies dead you stand charged  
with the deaths of both your sons.

CREON

What about her?  
How did she die so violently?

MESSENGER

She killed herself,  
with her own hands she stabbed her belly,  
once she heard her son's unhappy fate.

CREON

Alas for me . . . the guilt for all of this is mine—  
it can never be removed from me or passed  
to any other mortal man. I, and I alone . . .  
I murdered you . . . I speak the truth.  
Servants—hurry and lead me off, [1320]  
get me away from here, for now  
what I am in life is nothing.

CHORUS LEADER

What you advise is good—if good can come  
with all these evils. When we face such things  
the less we say the better.

CREON

Let that day come, O let it come,  
the fairest of all destinies for me, [1330]  
the one which brings on my last day.  
O let it come, so that I never see  
another dawn.

CHORUS LEADER

That's something for the times ahead.  
Now we need to deal with what confronts us here.  
What's yet to come is the concern of those  
whose task it is to deal with it.

<sup>11</sup>Megareos was Haemon's brother, who, we are to understand on the basis of this reference, died nobly some time before the play begins. It is not clear how Creon might have been responsible

for his death. In another version of the story, Creon has a son Menoeceus, who kills himself in order to save the city.

CREON

In that prayer  
I spoke of everything I long for.

CHORUS

Pray for nothing.  
There's no release for mortal human beings,  
not from events which destiny has set.

CREON

Then take this foolish man away from here.  
I killed you, my son, without intending to, [1340]  
and you, as well, my wife. How useless I am now.

I don't know where to look or find support.  
Everything I touch goes wrong, and on my head  
fate climbs up with its overwhelming load.

*[The Attendants help Creon move up the stairs into the  
palace, taking Haemon's body with them.]*

CHORUS

The most important part of true success  
is wisdom—not to act impiously  
towards the gods, for boasts of arrogant men [1350]  
bring on great blows of punishment—  
so in old age men can discover wisdom.