

### 3. ANTIGONE

SOPHOCLES

Sophocles (496–406) was born in Athens to aristocratic parents, and he retained the taste for public life so characteristic of Athenian democracy in the fifth century. Much of his life was devoted to public service—he was twice elected a general—and it is important to see his plays as an extension of that service.

In 468 he entered his first tragedy in a drama competition, defeating Æschylus for the prize. In all he wrote 123 plays; 96 of them won a first-prize, the remainder second. Only seven of his plays survive, though there are fragments of others, as well as parts of poems, odes, and hymns.

*Antigone* was first performed in 441. The story was familiar enough: Œdipus' two sons, Polynices and Eteocles, died fighting one another at Thebes; Eteocles fought to defend his city, Polynices to capture it. From this simple legend Sophocles addresses a topic that had become a subject for debate among the philosophers of his time: what happened when different kinds of laws conflicted? The philosophers had dealt with the possibility of a clash between natural law and human law; Sophocles raised the stakes by casting the issue as a contest between divine law and public law. In *Antigone*, then, you can see different perspectives on a central problem: what was the role of the individual in the state?

#### Introduction

When Laius, King of Thebes, planned to marry Jocasta, the oracle at Delphi foretold that if they had a son he would live to kill his father and marry his mother. In fear of this prediction, when the baby was born the king ordered that he should be exposed on the mountains and left to die. He was, however, found by a shepherd and taken to the King and Queen of Corinth, who adopted him and brought him up as their son. They called him Oedipus ("swollen-feet") because his feet had been pierced and tied together.

Though Oedipus did not know he had been adopted, it was known in the palace, and the destiny which the oracle had foretold about him. Overhearing some gossip one day, but believing that the King and Queen of Corinth were his father and mother, he decided to flee from Corinth, never to return, and so prevent this

disaster. On the way, however, he met Laius, who was his real father, although Oedipus did not know this; they quarreled, and Laius was slain.

He then went on to Thebes, and after ridding the city of a terrible monster which had been plaguing the city for years, was chosen as King and married the widowed Queen, not knowing she was his real mother. They had two sons, Eteocles and Polynices, and two daughters, Ismene and Antigone. After some years the ghastly truth came out. The Queen killed herself, and Oedipus put out his own eyes.

This is the plot of *Oedipus Rex* of Sophocles.

Oedipus was banished and, attended by his two daughters, wandered to Colonus near Athens, where he died. His two sons agreed to share the throne, each ruling in turn for one year. Eteocles, ruling first, refused to hand over the throne to his brother when his year of kingship was over. Polynices in the meantime had been staying at the court of Adrastus, the King of Argos, and had married his daughter. Adrastus then collected an army in support of Polynices and attacked Thebes, led by the famous Seven Champions. In the battle outside the walls the army of Adrastus was routed and the two brothers killed.

Creon, brother of Jocasta and uncle of the four children, became King of Thebes and ordered that the bodies of the enemy, especially that of Polynices, should be refused burial on the grounds that he was a traitor, having led an army against his own city. This was a terrible wrong, not only because Polynices was partly right, since his brother had broken his promise, but much more because the Greeks believed that if a corpse were left unburied its spirit became earthbound and haunted the neighborhood.

The essential part of the burial ceremony was the sprinkling of a handful or two of earth on the corpse. Sometimes libations also were poured in the form of a drink offering. Antigone decides to defy her uncle's edict. At this point the play begins.

#### DRAMATIS PERSONAE

ANTIGONE, daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta, late King and Queen of Thebes

ISMENE, her sister

CREON, their uncle, brother of Jocasta, now Ruler of Thebes

HAEMON, Creon's son, betrothed to Antigone

EURYDICE, wife of Creon, mother of Haemon

TIRESIAS, a blind prophet

A SENTRY

Two MESSENGERS

CHORUS of Theban Elders

LEADER of the Chorus

*Scene: Early morning, courtyard of the Royal Palace at Thebes. There are three entrances—one into either wing, and central doors into the palace. Enter Antigone and Ismene from the palace door. Time: early morning.*

ANTIGONE: Ismene, my own sweet sister, can you imagine any suffering, any humiliation worse than we have already endured together? Of all the curses heaped upon the house of Oedipus, do you think there is a single curse that the gods will not work out upon us before we die?

And now comes this new edict which I hear our king has issued to the whole city. Surely you have heard that the punishment which our enemies have brought upon themselves is threatening those we love?

ISMENE: No, Antigone, I have heard no news—good or bad—about anyone we love, since the day our brothers killed each other.

Nothing since the Argive<sup>1</sup> army fled last night—nothing to bring me either joy or sorrow.

ANTIGONE: So I thought; and that is why I have been trying to bring you outside to talk to you alone.

ISMENE: What is it? What dark thought thunders in your mind?

ANTIGONE: You know that Creon has granted one of our brothers the honor of a state funeral, but has insulted the other by denying him the right of burial? They say that Creon buried Eteocles with all traditional ceremonies so that he should be honored by the dead. But he has decreed that the wretched

Polynices (looks to right) must not be mourned, but shall be left, unwept, unburied, for vultures to batten upon.

This is the order of our gracious King—an order that binds you, yes—and binds me too. And should anyone not have heard it, he is on his way now to proclaim it, as he counts it no light matter.

Anyone who dares to disobey shall die—die by stoning in the market-place. There! Now is your chance to show the mettle of your royal blood.

ISMENE: If things are as bad as this, how could my meddling help them now?

ANTIGONE: Are you prepared to help?

ISMENE: What is it? Is it dangerous? What do you mean?

ANTIGONE: Will you help to give Polynices—

ISMENE: You mean—bury him (looking in the direction of the corpse). In defiance of the order?

ANTIGONE: He is my brother—and yours—unless you disown him. I cannot be false to him.

ISMENE: You are mad. Creon has forbidden it.

ANTIGONE: But he has no right to shut me away from what is mine.

ISMENE: Think back, ANTIGONE: Think how our father died, detested and disgraced. Think how he stabbed out his eyes with his own hands, when he discovered the full horror of his guilt. Then his mother who became his wife—his mother-wife—one person—took a rope and hanged herself in shame. And now, our two brothers—poor wretched men—have died on the same day, each at the other's hand.

We two that alone are left, how much more dishonorable will be our end if we break the law and defy the King's decree! We must remember that we are women, and women are not meant to fight with men. Our rulers are

<sup>1</sup> Argives, i.e., men of Argos, a town in Southern Greece.

stronger than ourselves, and we must obey them in this, and in things more bitter still.

And so I shall obey those in power, since I am forced to do so, and can only ask the dead to pardon me, since there is no wisdom at all in going too far.

ANTIGONE: I will not press you to do it. Even if you should decide to help me, you would not do it with a good grace, nor would your help be welcome to me. Be true to yourself. I shall bury him. I could not die better than in doing this. Resting with the one I love, who loves me, I shall be a criminal most holy.

I owe a longer allegiance to the dead than to the living; for with them I shall sleep for all eternity. But you, dishonor the laws of heaven if you must.

ISMENE: I am not dishonoring them, but defy the country's laws I cannot.

ANTIGONE: Make this your excuse, if you wish. I am going to bury the brother that I love.

ISMENE: Poor girl—how I fear for you!

ANTIGONE: Don't fear for me. Look to your own fate.

ISMENE: At least, Antigone, tell no one of this. Breathe no word of it, and neither will I.

ANTIGONE: Oh! shout it from the rooftops! They'll hate you all the more, if you keep it quiet.

ISMENE: You are all on fire to do a deed that chills my blood.

ANTIGONE: But I know, Ismene, I am only serving where my duty lies.

ISMENE: If you can, then do. But you are in love with the impossible.

ANTIGONE: I shall only give up when my strength fails.

ISMENE: Why pursue the impossible at all?

ANTIGONE: Say that, and I shall hate you. The dead will hate you too—and justly. Go, leave me and my folly to suffer what you fear. That way I shall not die in disgrace.

ISMENE: Do it, if you must. But remember this at least, that foolish though you are, there'll be some who still will love you.

*(Antigone goes right to bury the corpse. Ismene pauses and returns into the palace.)*

*(CHORUS of Theban Elders enters from left and takes up position in front of the stage.)*

CHORUS: Ray of the sun, the fairest light  
That ever shone on the gates of Thebes  
We hail you, eye of the golden day,  
Rising over Dirce's<sup>1</sup> streams  
You have scattered in flight the Argive foe  
The panoplied hosts with their long white  
shields  
You have driven away in galloping rout.

LEADER: Polynices led this host  
Angered by the claim refused him.  
Down they swooped like screaming eagles  
Shielded with wings as white as snow,  
Tossing their crests of horsehair plumes  
That fluttered from a thousand helms  
They swooped upon our land.

CHORUS: Over our roofs he paused  
Flashing spears athirst for blood,  
Ravening round our seven gates.  
But ere the torch had burnt our towers,  
Or his jaws with our blood were glutted,  
He fled, and loud was the roar of war  
Of the Theban dragon<sup>2</sup> behind him.

LEADER: Zeus, who hates a braggart's  
tongue,  
Saw that mighty host approaching  
In the pride of clanging gold.  
One he struck with lightning bolt,  
As he scaled the wall and moved his lips  
To raise the shout of "Victory."

CHORUS: Down he swung to earth with a  
crash,  
With torch ablaze—madman! to breathe  
Against us blasts of flaming hate.  
In vain his threats! And thousands more  
Were sent to their deaths

<sup>1</sup> Dirce, a fountain west of Thebes.

<sup>2</sup> Cadmus, the founder of Thebes, killed a dragon there. The Goddess Athena told him to sow its teeth. Soldiers sprang up from the soil and became the ancestors of the Theban race.

By the havoc-making War-god, our Protector.

LEADER: Their seven chiefs at our seven  
gates  
Stood matched with ours, but they left to  
Zeus

The tribute of their brazen arms;  
All save two brothers,  
Who face to face, and spear to spear,  
Went down in a common death.

CHORUS: The Goddess of Victory has come  
To share the joy of glorious Thebes.  
Let us now, the war forgotten,  
Thank our gods with dance and song.  
All night long let Bacchus<sup>1</sup> lead us,  
Lead the dance till he shake the earth.

LEADER: Look! the King of our land is  
here—King Creon, newly crowned by the new  
fortunes that the gods have sent. What  
thoughts are in his mind, that he has sum-  
moned us to this conference?

*(Enter Creon from the center door of the palace. He is  
dressed as a king and preceded by attendants.)*

CREON: My friends, the gods have brought  
our ship of state safely to port after wild toss-  
ing on the stormy seas. We have summoned  
you here, of all our people, because we know  
how firm was your allegiance to King Laius,  
and how loyal you were to his successor,  
Oedipus, and when he died, to his children  
after him. As you know, his two sons killed  
each other, staining their hands with a  
brother's blood. So we now hold the throne  
and the supreme power as kinsman of the  
dead.

A man's character and ability can only be  
judged when he has been tried as a ruler. Him  
we will hold base, and always have done so,  
who when in charge of the state spurns the  
best advice, and through fear closes his lips.  
And if he puts his friends before his country,  
we have for him nothing but contempt.

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<sup>1</sup> Bacchus, or Dionysus (he had many names),  
was the god, originally of the vine, and so of  
vegetation, and all the green life that bursts  
forth in spring. An annual spring festival of  
drama was held at Athens in his honor. He was  
specially connected with Thebes, because he was  
the son of Zeus and Semele, the daughter of  
Cadmus.

Zeus, who sees all, knows that we cannot be  
silent, if we see our country heading for disas-  
ter. Our country's enemy could never be our  
friend. For we know well that this country is a  
ship that bears us safely, and, only if we steer  
her straight, shall we make real friends.

By such principles we will make this city great,  
and in accordance with them we have pub-  
lished a decree about the sons of Oedipus.  
Eteocles, who died fighting for his country,  
shall be given a soldier's funeral and honored  
with all the ceremony that the brave and glo-  
rious deserve.

But his brother Polynices, that runaway who  
came back to destroy with fire and sword the  
city of his fathers and our ancient shrines, who  
came to taste his brother's blood and make our  
people slaves, this man, we have decreed, shall  
be left unburied and unmourned. His corpse  
shall lie without a grave, for dogs and vultures  
to mangle and devour.

This is our decision. Never through act of ours  
shall a traitor share the honors of the brave.  
But whoever loves his country, him will we  
honor in life or death.

LEADER: If this is your decision, King  
Creon, about our country's friend and our  
country's enemy, we must accept it. you have  
the power to order what you will, both for the  
dead and for us, the living.

CREON: See then that you keep well our  
commands.

LEADER: Give that responsibility to younger  
men.

CREON: We have already chosen sentries to  
guard the body.

LEADER: What further order do you wish to  
give?

CREON: To give no ear to anyone who breaks  
my law.

LEADER: No one but a fool would want to  
die.

CREON: Yes, death will be his wages. But  
bribes have often led men to disaster.

*(A Sentry enters from right.)*

SENTRY: Please sir, it is not from running that I am out of breath—no, I am not, for I've stopped lots of times to think, and I kept looking back and wondering if I should come at all. I kept saying to myself, "Don't be a fool! Why go and look for trouble?" I said. And then again, "Why stand there like a fool?" says I, "if this gets round to Creon before you get there, you'll pay for it."

What with worrying over all this I dawdled, and a short road turned into a long one. In the end I made up my mind to come, and here I am, and even if I've nothing to say, I'll say it. I've come hanging on to the hope that ...after all, as I said to myself, what's coming to me is coming.

CREON: Yes—yes—but what is the trouble.

SENTRY: First let me speak for myself. I didn't do it—I didn't see who did it. It isn't right that this should get me into trouble.

CREON: How cleverly you hedge! You cover yourself well. You must have something very strange to say.

SENTRY: I have, sir. A man does not rush into trouble.

CREON: Well, let me hear it, and then be off.

SENTRY: Right, I'll tell you—it's the body—someone has just buried it and gone off—he sprinkled dust on it, and performed the rites.

CREON: What did you say? What living man would dare to do such a thing?

SENTRY: I don't know, sir. There was no mark of a pick-axe, or earth thrown up by a spade. The ground was hard and dry, unbroken, and there were no wheel tracks. Whoever did it left no clue.

When the first day-sentry showed us this, we were all too stunned to speak. The body was concealed not by a mound, but by a light layer of dust thrown on it, as if someone wanted to escape the curse of leaving a corpse unburied. There was no sign that any dog or wild animal had been near to maul it.

Then we started arguing—each sentry accused the other. We nearly came to blows, as there was no one there to stop us. We all blamed

each other, and we couldn't prove who had done it; each one said that he knew nothing about it. We were ready to take red-hot iron in our hands, or to walk through fire, or to swear by all the gods in heaven that none of us had either done it or had any part in it.

In the end, when all our questions got us nowhere, one of us said something, and after what he said, we didn't dare look up. We didn't know how to contradict him, nor, if we followed his advice, how we could escape trouble. His advice was to report the matter to you and not to hush it up.

So we drew lots to decide who should tell you, and my luck was out. So here I bring you the news, which I do not want to tell, nor you to hear. No one likes a man who brings bad news.

LEADER: O King, I have been wondering, could this not be the work of the gods?

CREON: Enough! before I burst with rage, and you show yourselves foolish old men. Your suggestion is fantastic! That the gods should care about this corpse, that they should bury and honor as a patriot—a man who came to burn their temples, to destroy their sacred treasures, to scorch their land, and tear up their laws! Have you ever known the gods to honor evil men?

I have long known there are men in the city who murmur against me, shaking their heads in secret, and chafing with discontent under my yoke. These are the men, I know, who have bribed my guards to do this deed.

Nothing has brought more evil to mankind than money. Money brings cities to the dust and drives men from their homes. Money corrupts honest souls and lures them on to wickedness. Money leads men to crime and to every kind of sin.

But the men who have been hired for this deed have made their death inevitable.

Therefore, as Zeus lives, the god in whom I trust, I swear, that unless you find the man who carried out this burial and bring him here before my eyes, death alone will not be punishment for you. You shall be strung up alive, and left hanging until you reveal the author of

this monstrous outrage. You shall learn the folly of hoping to profit from evil-doing and of seeking wealth by shameful practice. Ill-gotten gains bring not happiness but misery.

SENTRY (*subdued*) May I speak, or shall I go now?

CREON: Do you not see that every word you speak is torture to me?

SENTRY: Torture to your ears, or your conscience?

CREON: It is no concern of yours where my trouble lies.

SENTRY: The one who did it troubles your mind, I only offend your ears.

CREON: You are a born chatterer.

SENTRY: That may be so, but I am innocent of this charge.

CREON: Indeed! When you have sold yourself for money!

SENTRY: It is a pity that your opinion of me is so mistaken.

CREON: Quibble about opinions if you will, but if you fail to discover the culprit, you shall find that treachery leads only to disaster.

*(Creon goes into the palace.)*

SENTRY: I hope they find him, but whether he is caught or not (fate will settle that), you may be sure you won't see me here again. And now I thank the gods I am still alive, I never expected it.

*(Sentry goes out right.)*

CHORUS: Wonders are many, but the greatest of all is man.  
The foaming windswept sea is his conquest.  
His ships cleave through engulfing waves.  
He has conquered the earth,  
Earth, the unwearied and everlasting,  
With ploughs that never rest from year to year.  
He ensnares the careless birds, and nets the fishes of the deep,  
And traps the savage beast.  
Man, the ingenious,  
Has mastered the mountain beat,  
Has bridled the rough-maned horse,

And yoked the mighty bull.  
He has found wind-swift thought,  
He has learnt speech,  
And taught himself to live with other men.  
He has sheltered himself from frost,  
And the shafts of rain.  
Man, always resourceful,  
Can escape all—but death.  
Even disease he can master.  
He has science beyond his dreams,  
Which he uses for good or ill.  
And when he lives by the laws of gods and men,  
His country prospers.  
But if he chooses evil  
And defies the gods,  
He destroys his country.  
Such a man shall never cross my threshold,  
Never shall I share his thoughts.

*(The Sentry re-enters with Antigone as a prisoner.)*

LEADER: What devil's work is this? I do not understand. It cannot surely be Antigone? How comes she to be under arrest, unhappy girl? She could not be so foolish as to defy the King's decree?

SENTRY: Here's the one who did it. I caught her at it. Where's Creon?

*(Creon appears, preceded by soldiers.)*

LEADER: Here he comes—just when we need him.

CREON: What is this? What has happened that my return should be so opportune?

SENTRY: Your majesty, there is nothing a man should ever swear he will not do, for often second thoughts belie the first. I vowed it would be long time before I ever came here again, buffeted by your threats as I was before.

But there's nothing like an unexpected success. And so I've come—although I swore I wouldn't—with this girl I found preparing a burial. We didn't draw lots this time. It was my own find, no one else's. And now, your majesty, cross-examine her, and deal with her as you will. But I am cleared now. You cannot charge me with this crime again.

CREON: Where did you find her? How? Where did you catch her?

SENTRY: She was burying the body. That's all there is to it.

CREON: Do you know what you're saying? Is it the truth?

SENTRY: To put it plainly—I saw her burying the body which you said was not be touched.

CREON: How did you come to see her? Did you catch her in the act?

SENTRY: It happened like this. When I got back to my companions with those terrible threats of yours still in my ears, we brushed away all the dust that covered the corpse, and laid the clammy body quite bare. Then we sat down on some high rocks out of the wind, away from the smell. There we were, nagging each other to keep awake, in case any of us should neglect his watch.

So we stayed until the sun was at its highest, and its heat grew fierce. Then suddenly a whirlwind raised a mighty storm from the earth, which blotted out the sky, swept the plain, and stripped the low-lying wood bare of its foliage. The wide expanse of heaven was black with dust. We shut our eyes to avoid this affliction sent by the gods.

And when at last the storm was over, we saw this girl. She was uttering shrill cries, as a bird in pain when it sees its nest empty and robbed of its young. When she saw the bared corpse, she sobbed bitterly and cursed the one who had done it. Then at once she brought dry sand in her hands, and three times poured a libation on the body from a bronze pitcher.

The moment we saw it, we dashed forward and caught her. She was calm and not afraid. We cross-examined her about the burial, and also about the first one. At this she stood her ground and denied nothing. In a way I glad to see this, in a way I was sorry—glad to get myself out of trouble, sorry to lead others into it. But what did all this matter as long as I could save my own skin?

CREON (*to Antigone*). Do you deny or admit this? Look up and answer me.

ANTIGONE: I admit it. I will not deny it.

CREON (*to the Sentry*). You may go where you like—you are cleared from blame.

CREON (*to Antigone*). Tell me at once, and keep to the point. Did you, or did you not know that my order had forbidden this?

ANTIGONE: I knew it well enough. The whole city knew.

CREON: And yet you dared to disobey my law?

ANTIGONE: It was not the gods who made that edict; this is not the kind of law that divine Justice,<sup>1</sup> who rules among the dead, ordains for men. I did not think that a mere mortal could make decrees of such power that they could override the unwritten and eternal laws of heaven. For these live not today nor yesterday, but for all time, and no man knows when first they came.

I could not bring myself, through fear of one man and one man's pride, to incur the punishment that falls on those who break the laws of Heaven.

That I must die sometime I knew—edict or no edict. And if I am to die before my time, that I count a gain. When one lives, as I do, in the midst of sorrow, surely one were better dead.

So this fate is no calamity to me. But if I had allowed my own brother to lie in death unburied, that would indeed have been sorrow beyond words. This brings me no sorrow. And if what I do now seems foolishness to you, perhaps he who condemns my folly is ... a fool?

LEADER: The girl is as headstrong as her father. She does not know how to bend before misfortunes.

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<sup>1</sup> The Greeks believed there were gods in two places, under the earth and above it. Their belief must not be confused with the Christian heaven and hell. Those in the nether world looked after the spirits of the dead. Their king was Pluto, sometimes called Hades. "That divine Justice who rules among the dead" is the personification of the right of the gods of the nether world to claim funeral offerings and ceremonies from the living.

CREON: Do you not know that stubborn spirits are most often broken? The toughest steel, hardened in the fire, is most often snapped. I have seen the wildest horses tamed by the lightest grip.

Proud thoughts are not for slaves. This girl was already a practiced hand in insolence when she transgressed my established law, but this is insolence redoubled when she laughs and gloats over what she's done.

Now she will be the man, not I, if she wins this victory and goes unpunished. Though she is my niece, and bound to me more close than all who worship at our family hearth, she shall not escape a death most shameful—no, nor her sister either. I accuse her, too, of plotting this burial.

Go, bring her out. I saw her just now, within, hysterical and wild beyond control. When men plot evil in the dark, their thoughts often convict them before the deed is done. How I abhor the man who, when caught in evil-doing, tries to glorify his crime.

ANTIGONE: Now that you have caught me, do you want to do more than kill me?

CREON: Nothing more. Having that, I have everything.

ANTIGONE: Why delay then? Your words are as displeasing to me as mine must be to you. God forbid this should ever be otherwise. And yet, how could I have won greater glory than by burying my own brother? All here would admit this, if their mouths were not gagged by fear. But kings are most fortunate. They can say and do what they like.

CREON: No one in Thebes but you holds this opinion.

ANTIGONE: Oh yes, they do. But they cower before you and curb their tongues.

CREON: Do you presume to ignore their wisdom?

ANTIGONE: There is nothing shameful in honoring a dead brother.

CREON: Was not the one who died for Thebes your brother, too?

ANTIGONE: Yes, they both had the same mother and father.

CREON: Then why insult the one by honoring the other?

ANTIGONE: Eteocles in his grave would not think that I insulted him.

CREON: Indeed he would, if you pay the same honor to a traitor.

ANTIGONE: Polynices was his brother, not his slave.

CREON: He attacked his country. Eteocles gave his life for it.

ANTIGONE: May be, but there are rights that every dead man is entitled to.

CREON: Yes, but not the same for traitors as for patriots.

ANTIGONE: Who knows what the gods regard as good, and what is evil?

CREON: A traitor is a traitor, even in death.

ANTIGONE: To those who love me I give love, to those who hate me I return not hate.

CREON: If love you must, then go and love them in the world below. No woman shall rule me while I'm alive.

*(Enter Ismene from the palace under escort.)*

LEADER: See! here Ismene comes.

Her clouded eyes drop tears—tears of a sister's love.

Those cheeks are deeply flushed that were just now so fair.

CREON: You viper! lurking secretly in my house, sucking my life-blood! Little I knew that I was nurturing two pests—rebels against my throne. Answer me—do you admit you took a share in this burial, or will you swear on oath that you knew nothing of it?

ISMENE: I did it ...*(aside)* if she will let me stand with her.

Part of the blame is mine, and I will bear it.

ANTIGONE: You? Truth will not allow you to say that. You never offered, nor did I ask for your help.

ISMENE: But now that you are in this trouble, I am not ashamed to brave the tempest at your side.

ANTIGONE: The dead know, and the gods who rule the dead know, whose deed it was. A friend who only talks is no friend of mine.

ISMENE: Sister, don't turn away from me. Let me but die with you and pay honor to the dead.

ANTIGONE: Die with me? Never! How dare you claim a deed you've never done. My death will be enough.

ISMENE: What life is worth living for me when you are dead?

ANTIGONE: Ask CREON: (Sarcastically) He's the one you really care for.

ISMENE: Antigone, why do you laugh? Why hurt me so? It does you no good.

ANTIGONE: I hurt myself, Ismene, if I laugh at you.

ISMENE: Then tell me how I can help you even now.

ANTIGONE: Save yourself. I don't grudge you your escape.

ISMENE: I beg you, Antigone, I beg you, let me share your fate.

ANTIGONE: No. You chose to live, I chose to die.

ISMENE: I did all I could to warn you first.

ANTIGONE: Warn me? Well, some may think you the wiser, but others will think I am.

ISMENE: But the guilt falls equally upon us both.

ANTIGONE: Take heart! You are alive, I died long since when I gave my life to help the dead.

CREON: These women are both mad; one has just become so, the other has been mad since she was born.

ISMENE: Misfortune makes fools of us all, O King, even the wisest.

CREON: A fool of you, when you chose to join criminals in crime.

ISMENE: But how could I go on living, were she not here?

CREON: "She"—"here?" Enough! She is as good as dead.

ISMENE: Will you kill the girl your own son loves?

CREON: My son can find another field to plough.

ISMENE: No, not another love like his and hers.

CREON: I want no shameless woman to wed my son.

ANTIGONE: Haemon, dearest! How your father wrongs you!

CREON: Enough of you and your marriage!

LEADER: Will you really rob your own son of his bride?

CREON: No, not I, but Death himself will end for me this love affair.

LEADER: So her death-warrant, it seems, is signed.

CREON: Yes, by you, as much as by me. (To the sentries) You men there, quick! take them inside and put them in chains. Women like these must not go out into the streets. When death comes near, even the brave are apt to run.

*(The sentries take Antigone and Ismene into the palace. Creon stays thinking.)*

CHORUS: Blest are they whose days have never tasted sorrow.

When a house quakes that the gods have shaken,

The curse never leaves it.

Like a mountainous surging wave,

Rolled on by blasts from Thrace<sup>1</sup>  
 Over the darkness of the deep,  
 It passes to each generation.  
 While the ooze is stirred from the ocean bed,  
 And the billows break on the wind-swept  
 cliffs,  
 And the headlands echo the roar.  
 Mine eyes have seen from ages past  
 The curse on the house of Oedipus  
 Mounting woe upon woe from the dead.  
 No generation can free the next,  
 But each is stricken by heaven,  
 And no respite comes to the race.  
 A ray of hope shone in that house  
 As the last shoot quickened,  
 But the light has been quenched by the gods  
 below,  
 By a sprinkle of dust, and a foolish tongue,  
 And a mind deranged.  
 Thy power, O Zeus, no pride of man can  
 shake;  
 'Tis stronger than sleep that ensnareth all,  
 More tireless than moons that wax and wane.  
 Age cannot touch thee, King enthroned  
 In the dazzling light of Olympus<sup>2</sup>  
 Thy law prevails till the end of time  
 "The over-proud and the over-great  
 Are caught in the end in the toils of Fate."  
 Hope roaming afar to some brings blessings,  
 But others it tempts with vain desires,  
 And a man walks blindly  
 Till his feet are caught in the flame.  
 Wise was he of old who said:  
 "He whom the gods draw on to ruin  
 sees good as evil, evil good."  
 Few are his days without sorrow.

LEADER: See, Haemon comes, the last of  
 your sons. Does he come in grief for the doom  
 of Antigone? Is he angry at being cheated of  
 his promised bride?

*(Enter HAEMON from left.)*

CREON: We shall soon know—more surely  
 than any prophecy could tell us. You may have

<sup>1</sup> Thrace, a part of northern Greece, now  
 Macedonia.

<sup>2</sup> Olympus, a mountain in Northern Greece, on  
 the summit of which the gods were thought to  
 dwell. The word is sometimes used to denote  
 the region of the sky where they were also  
 believed to live.

heard, my son, that your bride is sentenced to  
 death. Have you come to rail against your father?  
 Or can I trust you to be loyal whatever I  
 do?

HAEMON: Sir, I am yours and I will follow  
 the wise guidance which you, my father, have  
 always put before me. No marriage could ever  
 mean as much to me as your good opinion.

CREON: Well said, my son! For a man's most  
 heart-felt wish should be to bow before his father's  
 judgment. It is for this that a father prays to  
 have obedient children, who will strike his  
 enemies blow for blow, and honor the same  
 friends. The man who begets worthless children,  
 what has he gained but trouble for himself and  
 derision from his enemies?

Oh my son, do not abandon reason through a  
 passing fancy for a woman. Remember that the  
 embraces of a worthless wife soon grow cold.  
 Wickedness in one you love rankles more  
 deeply than any running sore. So send away  
 this girl as one you loath, to find herself a  
 husband in hell. She alone of all the city  
 defied my decree. I will not betray my people.  
 She shall die.

No prayer to God, no tie of family, will help  
 her. She can expect no mercy from me. How  
 can I expect obedience from my subjects if I  
 nurse rebellion in my own house? Surely the  
 man who deals justly with his household will  
 also be found just in affairs of state. He, I am  
 sure, would acquit himself well as ruler or as  
 subject, and, amid the hail of spears, would  
 stand his ground, a good soldier and a loyal  
 comrade. I have no patience with a man who  
 breaks the law and tells his rulers how to rule.  
 The man whom the people put in power must  
 be obeyed in matters great and small, just or  
 unjust.

What evil is greater than anarchy? Anarchy  
 destroys cities; anarchy desolates homes; anarchy  
 breaks up armies in the stress of battle.  
 Good lives are only made and saved by discipline.

So we must defend the laws with all our  
 strength and not allow ourselves to be flaunted  
 by a woman. If fall I must, then let it be a man

that casts me down. Never let it be said of me that I was conquered by a woman.

LEADER: I am old; my age confuses me; yet I feel that there is wisdom in your words.

HAEMON: Father, the greatest gift that the gods implant in man is reason. I would not dare—far be it from me—to deny that all you say is right, and yet another's counsel might be of value. Your part is not to keep watch on what men say or do, and what they find to criticize. Your dread frown deters the citizens from speaking words that would not please your ear.

But I hear whispers in the dark, murmurs among the people in pity for this girl. "No woman," they say, "ever less deserved such a doom. None was ever condemned to die so shamefully for a deed so noble."

When her own brother fell in battle, she would not leave him unburied for carrion crows and vultures to devour. Is that a crime? "Does she not rather deserve," they say, "a crown of gold?"

Such are the dark rumors that are spreading secretly through the city. No treasure, father, is more precious to me than your welfare. What pleases a son more than his father's good name, or what delights a father more than his son's reputation?

*(Creon sneers. Haemon changes his tone—finding every appeal useless.)*

Must you always nurse this one idea in your heart, that what you think, and nothing else, is right? If you look into the heart of a man who thinks that he alone is wise, wise in all his thoughts and words, wise above all others, you will find nothing but emptiness.

It is no disgrace even for a wise man to be willing to learn and yield at times to reason. Look at trees in a wintry torrent, how those that bend keep safe every bough and twig, but those that resist the raging flood are destroyed root and branch. So, too, a sailor who keeps his sheet taut and never slackens it ends his voyage by capsizing.

So, father, stay your anger. Allow your mood to change. Though a younger man, may I offer

you my counsel? I say that best by far is that in all things man should avoid folly. But if he cannot always be wise (and who of us always can?) it is good to learn from those who speak wisdom.

LEADER: Sir, it is right that you should profit by your son's words, if he has something opportune to say. And for you too, Haemon, to listen to your father. For in both there is good sense.

CREON: Am I, at my age, to be taught by a youngster like this?

HAEMON: Only if what he says is right. If I am young, you should consider not my years, but the merits of what I have to say.

CREON: Merit, is it, to respect law-breakers?

HAEMON: God forbid that anyone should respect a scoundrel.

CREON: But that is precisely what she is.

HAEMON: The people of Thebes think otherwise.

CREON: Shall Thebes dictate to me how I shall rule?

HAEMON: Who is talking like a youngster now?

CREON: Am I to rule at another's dictation?

HAEMON: A city is no city that is ruled by one man.

CREON: Does not the city belong to the ruler? I am the city.

HAEMON: A one-man city! It's a desert you should be ruling.

CREON: Champion a woman, would you, boy?

HAEMON: Who's the woman? You? It's you I have at heart.

CREON: Villain, how dare you wrangle with your father?

HAEMON: Only because I see you sinning against the light.

CREON: Against the light! A sin! To respect my own prerogative?

HAEMON: Respect! You talk of respect when you trample underfoot the reverence due to the gods!

CREON: You poor fool! You woman's slave!

HAEMON: You will never find me a slave to what is base.

CREON: In every word you utter, you plead for her.

HAEMON: Yes, and for you too, and for myself, and for the gods below.

CREON: Never shall you marry that girl in this life.

HAEMON (*thinking of himself, but Creon misunderstands him*) If she dies, her death will cause ...another's death.

CREON: How dare you threaten me? What insolence!

HAEMON: Threaten? Is it a threat to oppose your nonsense?

CREON: You shall pay for this—daring to teach me wisdom.

HAEMON: In another man I should have counted it madness—but—you are my father.

CREON: You woman's plaything! Don't try and wheedle me.

HAEMON: Do you want to do all the talking, and hear nothing in reply?

CREON: Indeed? By all he gods on Olympus, you shall pay for your jeering. (To the guards) Bring out that hateful thing, that she may die before her bridegroom's eyes, nay, at his very side.

HAEMON: Before my eyes! no, never! My face you shall never see again. Go, rave among your friends, if they can endure a madman.

(*Haemon goes out right, unseen by Creon.*)

LEADER: See King, your son has gone in anger.

Beware a young mind brooding on its pain.

CREON: Gone? Let him go, and try to do what no man can. He shall not save these girls from their fate.

LEADER: Do you intend to them both to death?

CREON: No, not the one who took no part. You are right.

LEADER: And what death do you intend for the other?

CREON: I will take her to a desolate spot where man's foot never treads, and there seal her up alive in a rocky cavern, with only as much food as custom<sup>1</sup> prescribes to absolve the city of her death. There let her pray to the gods below, the only ones she worships, and (sarcastically) maybe they will rescue her from death. And if they do not, she may learn at last, though late, that to revere the dead is wasted toil.

(*Creon goes out left.*)

CHORUS: Love invincible, love irresistible,  
Matchless in fight,  
Love that sleeps in a girl's soft cheek,  
Keeping vigil,  
Love that riots among the flocks,  
Over the sea Love seeks his prey,  
In lonely cabins among the hills,  
None can escape you—god or man—  
Not deathless gods nor mortal man,  
And he you enslave is mad.  
You warp the minds of the good to sin,  
And lure them to disaster.  
Strife you sow in peaceful homes,  
Embroidering sons and fathers.  
The shaft of desire from a maiden's eyes  
Who can resist? She sits enthroned  
Beside the eternal laws triumphant—  
Man-mocking Aphrodite.<sup>2</sup>

(*Enter Antigone under escort. Quiet music is heard.*)

LEADER. Now this tempts me beyond the  
law,  
And I can scarce hold back my tears,  
When I behold Antigone  
Going to Death's bridal-bower  
Where all must sleep a sleep unending.

<sup>1</sup> The Greeks thought it wrong to starve a person to death, and therefore supplied a little food, so that if death ensued, it would be the work of Nature and not Man.

<sup>2</sup> Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love, called by the Romans Venus.

ANTIGONE: Behold me, citizens of my land,  
 Going upon my last journey,  
 Never shall I see the sun again,  
 The King of Death, who puts all to sleep,  
 Leads me alive to Acheron's<sup>1</sup> cold shore.  
 No marriage-song for me,  
 No wedding-marches there  
 For the bride of Death.

CHORUS: With honor and praise you go  
 To the dark, deep vault of the dead,  
 Smitten not by wasting disease,  
 Tasting not the sword's keen edge.  
 'Tis of your own free will you go—  
 No other mortal has gone this way  
 Alive.

ANTIGONE: I have heard men tell of  
 Niobe,<sup>2</sup>  
 Daughter of Tantalus, Queen of Thebes,  
 Turned to stone on Phrygia's mount.  
 Stone grew round her like ivy clinging.  
 From her eyelids drop sad tears,  
 Tears of everlasting rain—  
 On her frozen bosom lie  
 Drifts of ever-clinging snow.  
 So must I lie,  
 Turning to weeping stone like Niobe.

CHORUS: Yet she was a goddess and a child  
 of a god,  
 While we are mortal, mere children of men.  
 Glorious is the name of woman  
 Who shares in life and shares in death  
 The lot of a suffering god.

ANTIGONE: Ah, you mock me—to my face.  
 Can you not wait till I am dead?  
 City mine, and your mighty sons,  
 Springs of Dirce, bear witness all!  
 Thou sacred plain where chariots race,  
 Bear witness, by what cruel law  
 Unwept by friends  
 I go condemned to a prison-tomb—

<sup>1</sup> Acheron, a river in the lower world.

<sup>2</sup> Niobe, the wife of Amphion, and early king of Thebes, who boasted that she had more children than Leto, the mother of Apollo and Artemis. Leto therefore persuaded her children to kill all Niobe's. Niobe went to her old home on Mount Sipylus, near Smyrna, and was turned into stone. The rock, which can still be seen, looks from a distance in heavy rain like a woman sitting on a throne and weeping.

A prison strange—a rock-built tomb—  
 An outcast among the living,  
 Homeless among the dead.

CHORUS: In daring you climbed to the ut-  
 most height,  
 Climbed too high,  
 Before the altar-steps of Justice  
 You fell, my child, and lost and lay.  
 It must be for your father's sin  
 That you are paying now.

ANTIGONE: You have touched my most  
 bitter pain—  
 My father's sin, and the doom it brought  
 On whole of our ancient house.  
 Oh! the horror of the incestuous bed  
 Where my mother slept in her son's em-  
 brace—  
 Her son ... my father! Where I was conceived,  
 I and my hell! To them I must go  
 Accursed, unmarried, a homeless girl  
 To share their home in the world below.  
 Oh brother, ill-starred in your marriage,  
 'Tis your dead hand that has murdered me.

CHORUS: Respect should be paid where re-  
 spect is due,  
 But he who rules must guard his laws  
 And punish the transgressor.  
 But you—your ruin springs from your own  
 self-will.

ANTIGONE: I am ready. No tear, no friend,  
 no marriage-hymn,  
 To cheer me on my miserable road.  
 On me no more the sun will shed his holy  
 light.  
 Alone I go—no friend, no tears.

*(Creon returns impatient.)*

CREON: Would men ever cease moaning and  
 wailing, if moans and wails could postpone  
 death? (To the guard) Take her away at once.  
 Wall her up, as I have told you, in the vault,  
 and leave her there alone, to die if she likes, or  
 go on loving in a tomb. Our hands are clean of  
 this girl's blood. But all I deny her is the right  
 to live on this earth.

*(Creon goes into the palace.)*

ANTIGONE: O grave, my bridal-chamber!  
 O rock-prison, my eternal home! To you I go, to  
 meet again mine own, all those whom Perse-

phone<sup>1</sup> has welcomed among the dead. Of them I am the last, and the most miserable of all, taken before my life's allotted span. But as I come, one hope sustains me that my coming will be dear to my father, and dear to you, mother, and dear to my brother Eteocles. For with my own hands I washed your dead bodies and shrouded them, and poured libations on your graves.

And yet I honored you as those that are wise will agree. For never, if I had been the mother of children or if I had had a husband mouldering in death, would I have chosen this task against the will of the people. To satisfy what law do I say this? If my husband had died, I might have had another and a child from another if I had lost one, but since both my mother and father lie in Hades, no other brother could ever be born to me. That was the law that led me to honor you before all others. Yet Creon thought I did wrong in this, daring a deed so evil, ah brother mine! And now he has taken me captive and is leading me away unwed, unsung, robbed of the joy of marriage and the bringing up of children. Thus bereft of my friends I go unhappy, alive, to the vaults of the dead.

And now, Polynices, for tending your dead body my reward is death.

Yet against what law of God have I offended? Why should I in my sorrow look to heaven again? To what friend can I appeal, when I am condemned as unholy for doing a holy deed?

If my doom is held among the gods to be right, when I have suffered death, I shall become conscious of my sin. But if the sin is with my judges, may nothing worse befall them than the wrong they do me.

*(Creon returns.)*

CHORUS: Look! the storm still rages in her soul.

CREON: Those who are guarding her shall pay for this delay.

ANTIGONE: Ah! those words bring death very near.

<sup>1</sup> Persephone, stolen from earth by Pluto, became the queen of the nether world.

CREON: Yes, there shall be no reprieve.

ANTIGONE: (as the guards lead her away) O city of Thebes, my native land! Ye gods of my ancestors, see! They take me away! My hour has come! Look on me, princes of Thebes, the last of the royal house, see what I suffer, and at whose hands, because I gave the gods their due and would not disobey the laws of heaven.

*(Exit Antigone and guards.)*

CHORUS: So too, the lovely Danae<sup>2</sup>  
Was hidden from the light of day,  
Imprisoned in a brazen room  
For a bridal bower.  
Yet she came of a royal line  
Like yours, my child, my child  
And in her womb was the seed of Zeus  
That fell in the golden rain.  
Terrible is the power of Destiny,  
Mysterious, invincible,  
Man cannot escape it.  
No wealth, nor arms, nor guarded tower,  
Nor dark-prowed ship that fights the sea  
Can save him when Fate calls.

And the hot-tempered son of Dryas, King of the Edonians, was brought under the yoke for his bursts of anger, being shut up by Dionysus in a rocky prison. Thus the terrible outbursts of his madness gradually diminished. He came to know the god whom he had provoked in his madness with taunts and mockery. For he tried to stop the god-possessed women and the Bacchanalian fire, and he insulted the Muses who love the flute.

There are also, near the Cyanean rocks of the double sea, the shores of the Bosphorus and the town of Thracian Salmydessus, where Ares, who dwells near them, saw the accursed blinding wound inflicted on the two sons of Phineus by his savage wife, making sightless their revengeful eyes, torn out by her bloody hands and the sharp point of a shuttle. And they, pining in their misery, wept for their wretched fate, having been born from an unhappily married mother. But she was de-

<sup>2</sup> Danae was shut up in a brazen tower by her father, the King of Argos, because the Delphic oracle had told him that he would be killed by his grandson. Zeus visited her in the likeness of a shower of golden rain. Her son was called Perseus.

scended from the ancient line of Erechtheus, and in far distant caves she was bred among her father's storms, that daughter of Boreas, swift as a steed over hills, a child of the gods; but on her also did the long-lived Fates press hard, O my daughter.

*(The blind prophet, Tiresias, enters from left, led by a boy.)*

TIRESIAS: Rulers of Thebes, we have come, with one to see for both of us, for this is the way the blind walk, with the help of a guide.

CREON: Aged Tiresias, what news have you brought?

TIRESIAS: Harken, my son, and mark well the prophet's words.

CREON: Have I ever in the past spurned your counsel?

TIRESIAS: That is why thou steerest aright this ship of state.

CREON: Your help I know, and will admit as much.

TIRESIAS: Know that once more thou standest on the razor-edge of doom.

CREON: What is that? Your words make me shudder.

TIRESIAS: Thou shalt learn all as thou hearest the warnings that my art reveals. As I took my place at the ancient seat of augury<sup>1</sup> where all the birds gather round me, I heard a strange noise among them, a weird and horrible jangle. As they screeched in frenzy, I knew that they were tearing at each other with murderous claws, for the whirring of their wings made it plain.

Straightaway in fear I made trial by sacrifice on an altar full kindled, but no flame rose from my offerings, Only a dripping moisture oozed from the thigh bones and smoked and sputtered among the embers. The gall shot into the air, and the streaming bones lay bare of the fat that covered them. But no flame!

So failed the rites by which I vainly sought a sign. I have it from this boy, for he is guide to me as I am to others. The state I say is sick,

<sup>1</sup> In ancient times the flight and cries of birds were interpreted by the augurs (or "prophets") as omens.

sick though your folly. All our shrines and altars are tainted and polluted by vultures and dogs with carrion flesh torn from the corpse of the ill-fated son of Oedipus. No longer do the gods accept our prayers and sacrifices. Our burnt offerings abominate. No more does a bird's clear note give a fair omen, for all are gorged with the thick blood of a slain man.

Ponder then on these things, my son. All men at times do wrong, but wrongs can be repaired, if men will overcome the folly of their stubborn wills. For obstinacy often proclaims the fool.

So give the dead his due, and do not stab a corpse. Is it bravery to kill a man who is dead?

I have sought thy good, and for thine own good speak. 'Tis sweet to learn from one who brings good counsel—the more so, if therein lies gain.

CREON: Aged priest, you and your kind shoot at me like archers at a target, and now you dare to try your fortune-telling on me. For years I have been bought and sold like merchandise by your tribe of prophets. Go, do your trading, drive your bargains in silver from Sardis or gold from India, but that man's burial you shall never buy, no, not even if the eagles<sup>2</sup> of Zeus should bear him morsel by morsel to their master's throne. No, not even fear of such a pollution will make me bury him. For I know full well that no mortal man can pollute the gods. Terrible is the fall, aged Tiresias, of even the wisest of men, when he disguises wicked thoughts in eloquence for the sake of gain.

TIRESIAS: Oh! does no man know, does no man pause to think ...

CREON: What platitude is this?

TIRESIAS: How precious beyond gold is good counsel?

CREON: As much as folly is the worst of evils.

TIRESIAS: That is the very disease thou art tainted with.

<sup>2</sup> The eagle as sacred to Zeus and Apollo.

CREON: I do not wish to cast your insults in your teeth.

TIRESIAS: But thou dost, when thou sayest that my prophecies are lies.

CREON: The prophet tribe is always out for gold.

TIRESIAS: Ill-gotten lucre is the curse of tyrants.

CREON: Do you know you are speaking of your king?

TIRESIAS: I know it. For 'tis through my counsel thou hast kept thy kingdom safe.

CREON: Wise you may be in counsel, but treacherous at heart.

TIRESIAS: Take heed, lest I reveal the locked secret in my soul.

CREON: Out with it! Speak, but let not bribery sway you!

TIRESIAS: Bribery! Is this your thought of me?

CREON: Know this. You cannot make me sell my fixed resolve.

TIRESIAS: Now hear the truth and mark it well. Thou shalt not see many more courses of the chariot of the sun before one born from thine own loins shall be sent to death, a life for a life, a corpse for a corpse, paid in due requital, for the life thou didst deny told still live—thou who didst so shamefully entomb her, a living soul.

Nay more, there is another whose soul thou keepest imprisoned on this earth, whose corpse lies naked, unblessed, without a tomb. Thou hast no right to keep him so. Wouldst thou set thyself up as a god? For this affront to heaven, the Avenging Furies lie in wait for thee to entrap thee in the net that thou hast spread for others.

Now consider well whether I have been bribed to speak these words. Before many days have passed, thy palace will re-echo to the cries of men and women's wailings. Already a league of hate is formed against thee of all those cities whose mangled sons were not buried save by dogs or beasts, or by some winged bird

that brought pollution to the dead men's hearths and homes.

These barbs I discharge against thy heart, for thou hast provoked my wrath; yea and they fly true; thou shalt not escape their sting.

*(To the boy.)*

Boy, lead me home, that this man may vent his wrath on younger men, and learn to keep a tongue more bridled, and in his breast to nurse better thoughts than now he holds.

*(Tiresias goes out right, led by the boy.)*

LEADER: O King, the man has gone. His prophecies affright me.

Through all the years in which my hair has turned from dark to grey, I have never known him prophesy falsely to this city.

CREON: I know that, too, and am troubled. My pride forbids me to yield, but if I stand by my decision and so bring ruin on my head.... To have to make the choice is terrible.

LEADER: Creon, son of Menoeceus, listen to wise counsel.

CREON: What would you have me do? Tell me. I will listen.

LEADER: Go, free the girl from her rocky prison, and make a tomb for the outcast dead.

CREON: Is this your counsel? You would have me yield?

LEADER: Yes, King, and at once. Swift are the feet of the gods upon the path of foolish men.

CREON: Ah me! 'tis hard. I will give up my heart's resolve. It is vain to fight with destiny.

LEADER: Go now, and do these things yourself. Leave them not to others.

CREON: I will go as I am. Quick, my servants, wherever you are, take axes in your hands, and hasten to that hill that you see yonder (pointing).

I have reversed my will. I imprisoned her; I will set her free. Fear impels me, for 'tis best to keep the eternal laws, even to the last day of life.

*(Creon goes out right.)*

CHORUS (*joyfully*). Dionysus, god of many names,  
 Child of loud-thundering Zeus,  
 The pride of Theban Semele,  
 Thou guardest Italy's famous land,  
 And hast thy throne beside Eleusis bay  
 That welcomes all to Queen Demeter's shrine.  
 This is thy city, where thy Maenads dwell,  
 And Ismenus' stream glides softly,  
 Where the dragon's teeth were sown.  
 Where the smoking torches glare  
 Above the double crested rock,  
 The nymphs have seen thee, as they dance  
 Above Castalia's spring.  
 From Nysa's ivy-mantled slopes  
 Thou camest, from Euboea's shore  
 Green with many-clustered vines,  
 Thou art hymned with strains divine  
 Though the streets of thy city.  
 As of old thou lov'dst this city,  
 Thou and thy mother whom the lightning  
 slew,  
 Come thou to succor us plague-stricken,  
 Come with healing feet from Parnassus's  
 height,  
 Fly over the moaning strait.  
 Thou leader of the stars whose breath is fire,  
 Lord of wild voices of the night,  
 Appear, O Zeus-born, King;  
 Come with thy frenzied Maenad band,  
 Who dance before thee all night long,  
 Giver of life, Iacchus, come.

(*Enter Messenger from right.*)

MESSENGER. Listen, you who dwell beside the palaces of Cadmus and Amphion. There is no condition of human life which I would consider fixed or stable, be it good or bad, for fortune raises up and fortune throws down the prosperous and unfortunate alike. There is no sure way for a man to foretell his destiny. Once I thought Creon a King to be envied, when he saved this land of Cadmus from its foes, and took into his hands the rule of the city, absolute and supreme. Proud father, too, was he of noble children. And now he has lost all. When life is robbed of joy, I count it but as living death. Even if a man amasses in his house great wealth, and lives in royal pomp—if gladness once is gone, the rest compared with it is but a puff of smoke.

LEADER: What further evil has beset our royal house?

MESSENGER. They are dead. The guilty still live.

LEADER: Dead? Who? At whose hand? Speak!

MESSENGER. Haemon is dead, and by a hand he knew too well.

LEADER: What mean you? By his father's or his own?

MESSENGER. By his own, in anger at his father's murderous deed.

LEADER: Oh prophet! how fearfully your words have come true.

MESSENGER. These are the facts. The rest must lie with you.

(*Enter Eurydice from the palace.*)

LEADER: I see Eurydice, the Queen, coming forth from the palace. Is it by chance, or has she heard about her son?

EURYDICE. Citizens of Thebes, I was on my way to pray in Athena's temple, when I overheard your words. As I drew back the bolt to open the door, news of evil to our house fell upon my ears. Terrified, I reeled into my servants' arms and swooned. Tell me again what the news is—my ears are used to sorrow.

MESSENGER. Look, Madam, I will tell you the whole truth. I was there and saw it all... why should I comfort you by saying things that may prove to be untrue. The truth is always best. I attended your lord as his guide to the edge of the plain, where the corpse of Polynices lay unpitied, mangled by dogs. We bathed it in holy water. We prayed to Pluto, and the Goddess of the Crossways to be merciful, and restrain their wrath. Then we cut fresh wood and burnt his poor remains, and over his ashes we built a high mound of his native earth. This done, we went straight to the vault, Antigone's stony bridal-bower. From afar we heard a noise of wailing from the unhallowed chamber, and ran to tell the King. As he drew near, there reached him faint sounds of a bitter cry. At this he groaned and cried aloud, "Ah me! can my fears be true? Am I treading the most unhappy road of all

that I have ever trod? It is my son's voice that greets me. Haste my servants, go near, past the place where the stones are torn away. Look into the mouth of the vault and tell me, if it is Haemon's voice I hear, or if some god is cheating me."

We looked, as the unhappy king bade us, and saw Antigone at the far end of the tomb, a noose of fine linen about her neck. Haemon lay embracing her, mourning his dead love, the bride of Death, and cursing his father's cruel deed. When his father saw him, he uttered a terrible cry, and went in and called to him. "What have you done, my son? Why have you done it? What calamity has unhinged your mind? Come forth, my child, I beg, I implore you." But the boy stared at him, glowering with angry eyes, he spat in his face, and without a word drew his double-edged sword, and made to strike his father. But he ran out and escaped the blow. The Haemon, angry with himself, drove the sword into his own side, and as he breathed his life away, his red blood gushed forth and splashed upon her white cheek.

There they lie, two bodies side by side, wedded in death, witnesses before all mankind, that of all the curses that can fall on man, the worst curse is his own folly.

*(Eurydice retires into the palace.)*

LEADER: What do you understand by this? The Queen has gone inside again, without a word.

MESSENGER. I, too, am troubled, but I hope she has only gone within to share her bitter sorrow with her women beneath her roof, rather than make a public show of grief for a death so tragic. She is not without wisdom, and will do nothing that is not fitting.

LEADER: I do not know, but to me this silence is not natural. 'Tis more ominous than the sound of wailing.

MESSENGER. Yes, you are right. Unnatural silence may bode no good. I will go in, and find out if in her distraction she conceals within her heart some secret purpose.

*(Messenger goes into the palace.)*

*(The body of Haemon is brought in. Creon walks by its side.)*

LEADER: Lo! here comes the King himself. This burden tells too clear a tale. This deed of frenzy is no stranger's doing: nay—dare I say it?—the crime is his and his alone.

CREON: Alas for the sin of a blinded soul,  
A deadly, stubborn sin.  
Here you see a murdered son,  
The murderer his father.  
Oh! the blindness of all my wisdom!  
Alas, my son, so young to die.  
The guilt is mine, not yours, but mine.

LEADER: Too late, too late, you see the right.

Creon: Yea, taught by bitter sorrow,  
On my head has fallen  
A crushing blow from heaven,  
God drives me along a cruel road,  
Trampling on what I hold most dear,  
Heavy are the sufferings of mortal man.

*(Enter Second Messenger from the palace.)*

MESSENGER: Sir, sorrow enough your hands bear already, but you are soon to find more within your house.

CREON: What is this? Can anything be more cruel than what is now cruel enough?

Messenger. The Queen is dead—your dead son's mother has stabbed herself.

Creon. Oh! jaws of Death! inexpiable,  
Will you engulf me now?

*(Turning to the Messenger)*

Thou herald of evil,  
What new tale of woe is this?  
I was as dead—would'st kill me again?  
What sayest thou, boy? My wife dead?  
Death heaped on death?

LEADER: See for yourself.

*(The doors of the palace are opened, disclosing the body of the Queen within.)*

CREON: Oh! agony still greater.  
What further woe can yet await me.  
My son, my wife! Oh son, your mother!

MESSENGER: There at the altar she fell  
upon a sword,  
And closed her eyes in darkness,  
Crying aloud for her elder son  
Long dead, and then for Haemon,  
And lastly on you—the slayer of her child—

She breathed a curse.

CREON (*groaning and terror-struck*): Will no  
one draw a sword and strike me to the  
heart?

My cup is full.

MESSENGER: Yes, she who lies here laid all  
the blame on you,  
For the deaths of both.

CREON: Tell me how she died.

MESSENGER: When she learned her dear  
son's fate,  
With her own hand she stabbed herself in the  
heart.

CREON: Ah me! the guilt is mine, I know it.  
I blame no other.  
Lead me away servants, away with all speed.  
My life is now as death.

LEADER. You speak rightly, if there can be  
any right  
'Mid so much wrong.  
Briefest is best, when ills are past enduring.

CREON: Let it come, ay, let it come—  
Death, the blessed doom to end my suffer-  
ings—  
Let it come, that I may never see the sun  
again.

LEADER: Let be what may be.  
The present concerns is now.

CREON: That prayer of mine holds all that I  
could wish.

LEADER: Then pray no more. Man has no  
escape from destiny.

CREON: Lead me away, a poor, rash, fool.  
Who killed his son unwittingly, and killed his  
wife.

I know not where to look, or where to turn.  
All is gone amiss. A fate intolerable has leapt  
upon my head.

*(As Creon is being led into the palace, the CHORUS  
speaks the closing lines to the audience.)*

LEADER: Wisdom is the key to happiness,  
The wise know how to bow the will to God.  
Proud men, chastened, pay the price for their  
proud words.  
And in old age alone do they learn wisdom.