

ANTIGONE

for Clarissa
ΤΟ ΠΡΙΝ ΔΟΜΩΝ ΑΓΑΛΜΑ
(to prin domōn aga(ma)

THE CHARACTERS

ANTIGONE, daughter of Oedipus and sister of Polyneices and Eteocles

ISMENE, sister of Antigone

CHORUS of Citizens of Thebes

CREON, king of Thebes and uncle of Antigone and Ismene

A SENTRY

HAEMON, son of Creon and betrothed to Antigone

TIRESIAS, a blind prophet

EURYDICE, wife of Creon and mother of Haemon

FIRST MESSENGER

Guards, Ladies-in-waiting, and a Boy

TIME AND SETTING

After the death of OEDIPUS, his two sons contend for the throne of Thebes. POLYNEICES, leading the Seven Champions, attacks from Argos and batters at the seven gates of Thebes. ETEOCLES defends the city, supported by CREON, who appears to have been acting as regent. In a great battle the two brothers meet face to face and kill each other. The Argive forces retreat. It is the morning after the battle. The dead still lie on the field, including POLYNEICES and ETEOCLES. CREON, once again the undisputed master of Thebes, proclaims that POLYNEICES, because he died fighting against his own city, shall be left to rot on the battlefield—the most ignominious of ends for any Greek. ANTIGONE, caught in a conflict of loyalties, to her dead brother and to the State, decides to defy CREON's edict. It is daybreak. She calls her sister out from the palace.

Antigone

PROLOGUE

ANTIGONE

Come, Ismene, my own dear sister, come!
What more do you think could Zeus require of us
to load the curse that's on the House of Oedipus?
There is no sorrow left, no single shame,
no pain, no tragedy,
which does not hound us, you and me, towards our
end.

And now,
what's this promulgation which they say
our ruler has made to all the state?
Do you know? Have you heard?
Or are you sheltered from the news
that deals a deathblow to our dearest?

ISMENE

Our dearest, Antigone? I've heard no news
either good or bad,
ever since we two were stripped
of two brothers in a single day,
Each dismissing each by each other's hand.
And since the Argive army fled last night,
I've heard no more—either glad or sad.

ANTIGONE

That's what I thought,
that's why I've brought you here beyond the gates
that you may hear my news alone.

ISMENE

What mischief are you hinting at?

ANTIGONE

I think you know . . . Our two dear brothers:
Creon is burying one to desecrate the other.
Eteocles, they say, he has dispatched with proper rites
as one judged fit to pass in glory to the shades.
But Polyneices, killed as piteously,
an interdict forbids that anyone should bury him
or even mourn.

He must be left unwept, unsepulchered,
a vulture's prize,
sweetly scented from afar.

That's what they say our good and noble Creon plans:
plans for you and me, yes me;
And now he's coming here to publish it and make it
plain

to those who haven't heard.
Anyone who disobeys will pay no trifling penalty
but die by stoning
before the city walls.
There's your chance to prove your worth,
or else a sad degeneracy.

ISMENE

You firebrand! Could I do a thing
to change the situation as it is?

ANTIGONE

You could. Are you willing
to share danger and suffering and . . .

ISMENE

Danger? What are you scheming at?

ANTIGONE

. . . take this hand of mine to bury the dead?

ISMENE

What! Bury him and flout the interdict?

ANTIGONE

He is my brother still, and yours;
though you would have it otherwise,
but I shall not abandon him.

ISMENE

What! Challenge Creon to his face?

ANTIGONE

He has no right to keep me from my own.

ISMENE

Sister, please, please!
Remember how our father died:
hated, in disgrace,
self-dismantled in horror of himself,
his own hand stabbing out his sight.
And how his mother-wife in one
twisted off her earthly days with cord;
And thirdly how our two brothers in a single day
each achieved for each a suicidal nemesis.
And now, we two are left.
Think how much worse our end will be than all the rest
if we defy our sovereign's edict and his power.
Remind ourselves that we are women
and as such are not made to fight with men.
For might unfortunately is right
and makes us bow to things like this and worse.
Therefore shall I beg the shades below
to judge me leniently as one who kneeled to force.
It's madness to meddle.

ANTIGONE

I will not press you any more.
 I would not want you as a partner if you asked.
 Go to what you please. I go to bury him.
 How beautiful to die in such pursuit!
 To rest loved by him whom I have loved,
 sinner of a holy sin,
 With longer time to charm the dead than those who live,
 for I shall abide forever there.
 So go. And please your fantasy
 and call it wicked what the gods call good.

ISMENE

You know I don't do that.
 I'm just not made to war against the state.

ANTIGONE

Make your apologies!
 I go to raise a tomb above my dearest brother.

ISMENE

You foolhardy thing! You frighten me.

ANTIGONE

Don't fear for me. Be anxious for yourself.

ISMENE

At least tell no one what you do, but keep it dark,
 and I shall keep it secret too.

ANTIGONE

Oh tell it, tell it, shout it out!
 I'd hate your silence more than if you told the world.

ISMENE

So fiery—in a business that chills!

ANTIGONE

Perhaps, but I am doing what I must.

ISMENE

Yes, more than must. And you are doomed to fail.

ANTIGONE

Why then, I'll fail, but not give up before.

ISMENE

Don't plunge into such a hopeless enterprise.

ANTIGONE

Urge me so, and I shall hate you soon.
 He, the dead, will justly hate you too.
 Say that I'm mad, and madly let me risk
 The worst that I can suffer and the best:
 A death that martyrdom can render blest.

ISMENE

Go then, if you must toward your end:
 Fool, wonderful fool, and loyal friend.

[ISMENE watches ANTIGONE walk away, then she goes
 into the palace]

ENTRY ODE

[The CHORUS in a march-dance files into the theater, singing
 a hymn of triumph. They celebrate the defeat of the invading
 Polyneices and the victory of Thebes over Argos.]

Strophe I

CHORUS

Sunshaft of the sun
 Most resplendent sun
 That ever shone on Thebes
 The Seven Gates of Thebes:
 Epiphany, you broke
 Eye of the golden day
 Marching over Dirce's streams
 At dawn to drive in headlong flight
 The warrior who came with shields
 All fulminant as snow
 In Argive stand at arms
 Scattered now before the lancing sun.

LEADER

Propelled against our land
 By Polyneices's claims
 This screaming eagle circled round
 Caparisoned with arms he swooped
 His wings their shields of snow. His crest
 Their helmets in the sun.

Antistrophe I

CHORUS

He stooped above our towers
 Gaped above our gates
 His hungry spears hovered
 Then before he gorged
 And glutted on our blood
 Before Hephaestus hot
 With pitch and flame had seized
 Our crown of towers, all the din
 That Ares loves burst around
 Their rear, and panic turned
 His flank. The fight came on
 Behind their backs: a dragon-breathing foe.

LEADER

The braggart's pompous tongue
 Is hated most by Zeus
 And seeing them advance superb
 In clank of gold, he struck their first
 Man down with fire before he yelled
 Triumph from the walls.

Strophe II

CHORUS

Thundering down to the ground with his torch
 Knocked from his hands, this bacchanalian
 Passionate lunatic breathing out hate
 In hurricanes, fell in a flaming arc
 His brandished torch all quenched, and great
 Ares like a war horse wheeled:
 Ubiquitous his prancing strength
 Trampling in the dust
 Havoc that he dealt with several dooms.

LEADER

Seven champions dueled
 With seven at the Seven
 Gates and gave their panoplies
 To Zeus, save two, the fatal two
 Who sharing parents shared their fall,
 Brother killing brother.

Antistrophe II

CHORUS

But now that this triumph, the loudest of triumphs,
 Oh joy-bearing triumph! has come to our Thebes
 The proud city of chariots, why
 Now let us chase the memory far
 Away of the wars that are blessedly past.
 Come call on the gods with song and with dance

All through the night at the groves and the shrines,
And Bacchus shall lead the round—
Shouting and shaking all Thebes with his revels.

LEADER

But look who comes, the lucky
Son of Menoeceus:
The man the gods have made our king.
What new vicissitudes of state
Vex him now? Why has he sent
A herald to our summons?

[CREON has entered from the palace, surrounded by soldiers. He addresses the CHORUS]

FIRST EPISODE

CREON

Gentlemen, the gods have graciously
steadied our ship of state, which storms
have terribly tossed.
And now I have called you here privately
because of course I know
your loyalty to the House of Laius.
How again, when Oedipus was king,
your duty never faltered,
and when he fell you still upheld his sons.
But now that they have gone,
sharing their double end on a single day,
(mutual murder, mutual recompense!),
I nearest in line enjoy the scepter and the throne.

Now, naturally, there is no way
to tell the character and mettle of a man
until you've seen him govern.
Nevertheless, I want to make it plain:
I am the kind of man who can't and never could
abide the tongue-tied ruler who through fear
backs away from sound advice.

And I find intolerable the man who puts his country
second to his friends.
For instance, if I saw ruin and danger
heading for the state,
I would speak out.
Never could I make my country's enemy my private
friend,
knowing as I do,
she is the good ship that bears us safe.

So there you have my principles by which I govern.
In accord with them, I made the proclamation
that you heard just now:
Eteocles, who died in arms for Thebes,
shall have a glorious funeral
as befits a hero going to join the noble dead.
But his brother Polyneices,
he who came from exile breathing fire
against this city of his fathers and its shrines;
The man who came all thirsting for his country's blood
to drag the rest of us away as slaves—
I've sent the edict out
that none shall bury him or even mourn.
He must be left all ghastly where he fell,
a corpse for dogs to maul and vultures pick his bones.

You see the kind of man I am!
You'll not catch me putting traitors up on pedestals
beside the loyal and true.
I'll honor him alone, alive or dead, who honors Thebes.

LEADER

Your disposition is quite clear,
son of Menoeceus, Creon,
touching friend or enemy of this our city.
We know you have the power too
to wreak your will upon the living and the dead.

CREON

Then see to it my injunctions are performed.

LEADER

Put the burden on some younger men.

CREON

No. Sentries are already posted on the corpse.

LEADER

Then what exactly do you want us to do?

CREON

Merely see there're no infringements of the law.

LEADER

No man is mad enough to welcome death.

CREON

And death it is. But greed of gain
has often made men fools.

[A SENTRY, *disheveled and distraught, comes stumbling
in towards the King*]

SENTRY

King, I won't pretend I come at breakneck speed,
all out of breath.
I kept on stopping in my tracks . . . to think . . .
and turning back.
I held committee meetings with myself:
"You fool," I said,
"you're heading straight for the lion's mouth,"
then, "Blockhead, what're you waiting for?
if Creon gets the news from someone else, you're done!"

So I've come scurrying at a snail's pace
by the long shortcut,
the "forward" voice in charge.
And 'ere I am, with a tale to tell that makes no sense,
which any'ow I'll tell, cos I do believe
nothing bad can 'appen that isn't on one's ticket.

CREON

Come to the point, man! What are you dithering about?

SENTRY

First, sir, if I may slip in a word about miself.
It in't me that done it,
and I dunno who darned done it neither;
so it in't fair to make me take the rap.

CREON

Done it? Done it? You're a great marksman—
hit the target first time!
You must have something very odd to say.

SENTRY

It's awfully off-putting, sir, to bring bad news—
especially to you, sir.

CREON

Then get on with it and go.

SENTRY

Right! I'll tell you straight. The body—it's buried like.
I mean someone's just gorne and sprinkled dust on it—
right proper thirsty dust—and gorne . . .
done the ritual, sir, you see.

CREON

What are you saying, man? Who would have dared?

SENTRY

Don't ask me, sir!
 There ain't no mark of pick or mattock,
 ground's all 'ard, unbroken,
 no wheel tracks neither:
 Not a sign of 'uman 'ands.
 When the sentry of the morning watch pointed to it,
 there it was at dawn, the corpse,
 an ugly mystery that struck us dumb.
 T'weren't exactly buried,
 just sprinkled with earth ritual like
 as if someone wanted to set it free.
 No marks of dog or jackal neither—not a scratch.
 Then we flew at one another, guard accusing guard.
 It came near to blows.
 There weren't no clue to clinch the quarrel.
 Any one of us coulda done it. See!
 No evidence to disprove any one of us—not a shred.
 So we dared one another to pick up red-'ot iron,
 walk through fire, and swear by all the gods
 He neither done the deed nor 'ad the slightest inkling
 who 'ad.

Well, one of us cut through the deadlock, saying . . .
 (We went weak as straws when we 'eard it,
 cos there weren't no denying,
 nor coming out of it in one piece neither.) ^{sad} ^{face!}
 This fella there and then blurts out: "We gotta tell the
 King.

There ain't no way to cover up."
 He convinced the lot of us, so we drew straws.
 And 'oo should be the unlucky one to win the prize
 but yours truly.
 So 'ere I am, unwelcome I can tell, and un'appy too,
 For there ain't no one likes the bringer of bad news.

LEADER

Sire, I've had misgivings from the first:
 could this be more than purely natural work?

CREON

Enough! You make me furious with such senile dod-
 dering remarks.
 It's quite insufferable.
 You really think they give a damn, the gods, about this
 corpse?
 Next you'll say they make it a priority to bury him in state,
 and thank him for his burning down their altars,
 sacking shrines, scouting laws, and raping all the land.
 Or are the gods these days considerate to criminals?
 Far from it! No, from the first,
 there's been a group of grumblers in this town:
 men who can hardly abide my rule,
 who nod and whisper, chafing beneath my law,
 who are not in love with it at all.
 These are the ones, I'll warrant,
 who have suborned my guards with bribes.
 Ah, Money! Money is a currency that's rank.
 Money topples cities to the ground,
 seduces men away from happy homes,
 corrupts the honest heart to shifty ways,
 makes men crooked connoisseurs of vice.
 But these plotters who have sold themselves,
 every man jack of them,
 Will end up, gentlemen,
 with much more than he's bargained for.

[He turns on the SENTRY]

You there! Get this straight:
 I swear by almighty Zeus whom I revere and serve,
 that either you find the man who did this burial
 and stand him here before my eyes,
 or Hades itself will be too good for you
 until you've first confessed to everything—
 yes, hanging from a cross.
 That perhaps will teach you, soldier,
 where to look for profit
 and that gold can glisten from an evil source.
 Ah! Money never makes as many as it mars.

SENTRY

Am I allowed a word, sir? Or do I just go?

CREON

Can't you see your very voice gets on my nerves?

SENTRY

'urts your ears, does it, sir? Or kinda your conscience?

CREON

What business of yours is it to diagnose my pain?

SENTRY

Because I only affect your ears; the culprit, your brain.

CREON

By God, what a born chatterer you are!

SENTRY

Maybe, but it weren't me that did the burying.

CREON

No, you just sold yourself for silver.

SENTRY

Oh, what a crying shame, when right reason reasons
wrong!

CREON

A logic-chopper and a wit! But don't imagine *that*
will save your skin.

If you fail to stand the man before my face,
you'll find that dirty money pays in hurt.

[CREON *strides into the palace*]

SENTRY

Well, let's 'ope he's found. But caught or not
(and only chance can tell), one thing's for sure:
you won't catch me coming back again.
It's a goddam miracle I got out of 'ere alive.

[SENTRY *runs off*]

FIRST CHORAL ODE

[*The CHORUS of Citizens, in an intuitive foreshadowing of both Creon's and Antigone's fate, contrast the prowess and glory of human kind with the tragedy of their downfall when they overstep the mark. There is a veiled warning to Creon not to exceed humane bounds, but also, by their listing all the predominantly masculine occupations (sailing, plowing, hunting, fishing, domesticating animals, verbal skills, building, making laws), they are advising women like Antigone to beware of taking on what they consider male roles.*]

Strophe I

Creation is a marvel and
Man its masterpiece. He scuds
Before the southern wind, between
The pounding white-piling swell.
He drives his thoroughbreds through Earth
(Great goddess inexhaustible)
And overturns her with the plow
Unfolding her from year to year.

Antistrophe I

The light-balanced light-headed birds
He snares; wild beasts of every kind.
In his nets the deep sea fish
Are caught. Oh, mastery of man!

The free forest animal
 He herds; the roaming upland deer.
 The shaggy horse he breaks to yoke
 The unflagging mountain bull.

Strophe II

Training his agile thoughts
 volatile as air
 He's civilized the world
 of words and wit and law.
 With a roof against the sky,
 the javelin crystal frosts
 The arrow-lancing rains;
 he's fertile in resource
 Provident for all,
 healing all disease:
 All but death, and death—
 death he never cures.

Antistrophe II

Beyond imagining wise:
 his cleverness and skills
 Through labyrinthine ways
 for good and also ill.
 Distinguished in his city
 when law-abiding, pious
 But when he promulgates
 unsavory ambition,
 Citiless and lost.
 And then I will not share
 My hearth with him; I want
 no parcel of his thoughts.

SECOND EPISODE

[The SENTRY returns, leading ANTIGONE]

CHORUS

What visitation do I see from heaven?
 And one I wish I could deny.
 I am amazed. It is Antigone.
 What! They bring you here in charge?
 Poor Antigone, daughter of unlucky Oedipus.
 Were you rash enough to cross the King?
 And did they take you in your folly?

SENTRY

'ere she is, the culprit: caught red'anded
 in the very act of burying 'im.
 But where is Creon?

CHORUS

Coming from the house, and just in time.

[Enter CREON]

CREON

Just in time for what?

SENTRY

King, it's most unwise, I find,
 ever to promise not to do a thing.
 Now look at me! I could 'ave sworn
 I'd not come scurrying back,
 After being almost skinned alive by all your flailing
 threats.
 Yet 'ere I am against my oath, bringing in this girl,
 and all because beyond my wildest dreams,
 in fact with quite a thrill,
 I caught 'er at it—actually at the burying.

No drawing straws this time—I'll say not!
So grab 'er, King, she's yours.
And I'm scot-free, or I should 'ope,
quit of this 'ole goddam thing.

CREON

Tell me first when and how you found her.

SENTRY

She was burying the man. There ain't nothing more to tell.

CREON

Are you rambling? Do you know what you are saying?

SENTRY

Sir, I saw 'er in the act
of burying that forbidden corpse.
Is that plain and clear?

CREON

But how actually was she surprised and taken?

SENTRY

Well it was like this.
We 'ad returned to the spot,
our ears ringing with all your nasty threats,
and 'ad brushed the earth from off the body
to make it bare again
(it was all soft and clammy),
And were squatting there windward of the stench,
keeping each other up to the mark
And rounding 'ard on anybody that nodded . . .
Watching we were, till the midday sun,
a great blazing ball
bashed down on us something fierce,

he doesn't
want to go
with the
punishment

When suddenly came this right twisting squall,
sweeping across the plain,
tearing the leaves off trees,
buffeting 'eaven itself.

We 'ad to shut our eyes against this god-sent blight.

When at last it cleared
there was this vision of this girl,

Standing there she was,
giving out little shrill-like sobs:
'eartrending as a mother bird's
what 'as seen its nest pillaged
and its bairns all gone.

That's 'ow she was wailing
and calling curses down
on them what done it
when she saw the body bared.

Immediately she scoops up earth—a dry 'andful like—
and sprinkles it. Then 'olding up
a shapely brazen urn, she pours
three libations for the dead.

That's when we swooped and closed upon our quarry.

She didn't flinch, and when we charged 'er
with what she'd gorne and done,
and done before, she just admitted it.

It made me glad and sad:
bliss to get myself out of trouble,
distress to bring it on a friend.

When all's said and done, 'owever,
the safety of one's own sweet skin comes first.

CREON

Come girl, you with downcast eyes,
did you, or did you not, do this deed?

ANTIGONE

I did. I deny not a thing.

CREON

You, soldier, you can go—be off wherever you please—
Free of any serious charge.

[*The SENTRY stands for a moment, smiles, then bounds away*]

Now tell me, Antigone, a straight yes or no:
Did you know an edict had forbidden this?

ANTIGONE

Of course I knew. Was it not publicly proclaimed?

CREON

So you chose flagrantly to disobey my law?

ANTIGONE

Naturally! Since Zeus never promulgated such a law,
Nor will you find that Justice,
Mistress of the world below,
publishes such laws to humankind.
I never thought your mortal edicts had such force
they nullified the laws of heaven,
which unwritten, not proclaimed,
can boast a currency that everlastingly is valid,
an origin beyond the birth of man.
And I, whom no man's frown can frighten,
Am far from risking heaven's frown by flouting these.
I need no trumpeter from you to tell me I must die,
we all die anyway
And if this hurries me to death before my time,
why, such a death is gain. Yes, surely gain
to one whom life so overwhelms.
Therefore, I can go to meet my end
without a trace of pain.
But had I left the body of my mother's son unburied,
lying where he lay,
ah, that would hurt!
For this, I feel no twinges of regret.

balance

And if you judge me fool, perhaps it is
because a fool is judge.

LEADER

My word! The daughter is as headstrong as the father.
Submission is a thing she's never learned.

CREON

You wait and see! The toughest will
is first to break: like hard untempered steel
which snaps and shivers at a touch
when hot from off the forge.
And I have seen high-mettled horses curbed
by a little scrap of bit.
One who has no more authority than a common slave
can ill afford to put on airs.
And yet, this girl, already versed in disrespect
the first time she disobeyed my law,
Now adds a second insult, has done it again,
and vaunts it to my face.
Oh, she's the man, not I,
if she can flout authority and walk away unscathed.
I swear I hardly care
if she be my sister's child
or linked to me by blood more closely
than any member of my hearth and home;
She and her sister will not now escape
the utmost penalty.
I say the sister too.
I charge her as accomplice of this burial.
Call her forth.
I saw her whimpering in there just now, all gone to
pieces.
So does remorse blurt out the secret sin . . .
Although its opposite is even worse:
crime detected glorifying crime.

ANTIGONE

Is there something more you want? Or just my life?

CREON

Not a thing, by God! It gives me what I want.

ANTIGONE

Why dawdle, then? Your conversation
is hardly something I enjoy, or ever could,
nor mine be more acceptable to you.
And yet it ought to be.
Where could I win respect and praise more validly than
this:

burial of my brother?
Not a man here would say the opposite,
were his tongue not locked in fear.
Unfortunately, tyranny (blessed in so much else besides)
can lay the law down any way it wants.

CREON

Your view is hardly shared by all these Thebans here.

ANTIGONE

They think as I, but trim their tongues to you.

CREON

Are you not ashamed to differ from such men?

ANTIGONE

There is no shame to reverence relatives.

CREON

And the other duelist who died—was he no relative?

ANTIGONE

He was. And of the same father and same mother.

CREON

So, slighting one, you would salute the other?

ANTIGONE

The dead man would not agree with you on this.

CREON

Surely! If you make the hero honored with the black-
guard.

ANTIGONE

It was his brother not his slave that died.

CREON

Yes, ravaging our land, while *he* fell as its champion.

ANTIGONE

Hades makes no distinction in its rites and honors.

CREON

The just and unjust do not urge an equal claim.

ANTIGONE

The "crime" (who knows?) may be called a virtue there.

CREON

Not even death can metamorphose hate to love.

ANTIGONE

No, nor decompose my love to hate.

CREON

Curse you! Find the outlet for your love down there.
No woman while I live shall govern me.

[ISMENE is brought in under guard]

LEADER OF CHORUS

See where Ismene comes,
Crying from the palace gates,
Her face all flushed.
A sister's tears are breaking rains
Upon her cheeks, and from her eyes,
Her loveliness, a shadow.

CREON

[Turning viciously towards ISMENE]

Come, you serpent, secret lurker in my home,
who sucked my blood
Even while I nurtured you two sister vipers at my
throne—

Speak. Confess your part in burying him.
Or do you dare deny complicity?

ISMENE

I did it too. If she'll allow my claim.
I share with her the credit and the blame.

ANTIGONE

That is not true. You do not share with me,
nor did I grant you partnership.

ISMENE

But now that your poor ship is buffeted,
I'm not ashamed to sail the voyage at your side.

← does not want
Ismene to
"take her
credit"

ANTIGONE

The dead of Hades know whose act it was.
I do not take to those who take to talk.

ISMENE

Sister, do not scorn me; let me share
your death and holy homage to the dead.

ANTIGONE

No share in work, no share in death,
and I must consummate alone what I began.

ISMENE

Then what is left of life to me when you are gone?

ANTIGONE

Ask Creon. You and he are friends.

ISMENE

Ah! Must you jeer at me? It does not help.

ANTIGONE

You are right. It is a joyless jeering.

ISMENE

Tell me, even now: how can I help?

ANTIGONE

Save yourself. I shall not envy you.

ISMENE

Poor dear sister—let me suffer with you!

ANTIGONE

No. For you choose life, and I chose death.

ISMENE

When all my protests were of no avail.

ANTIGONE

We played our different parts, with different acclaim.

ISMENE

But now we share and equal share of blame.

ANTIGONE

Look up! You live! And I died long ago,
when I gave my life to serve the dead.

CREON

These girls, I swear, are crazed: one mad by birth,
the other by attainment.

ISMENE

Yes, my lord, for when misfortune comes,
he sends our reason packing out of doors.

CREON

And yours went flying fast
when you chose damnation with the damned.

ISMENE

Yet, with her gone, what portion had I left?

CREON

Do not mention *her*. She does not still exist.

ISMENE

You would not kill your own son's bride?

CREON

Let him sow his seed in other furrows.

ISMENE

A match like theirs will *not* repeat itself.

CREON

I shudder at the jades who court our sons.

ANTIGONE

My darling Haemon, how your father heaps disgrace on you!

CREON

Damn you and damn your cursed marriage!

LEADER

You would not tear your own son's bride from him?

CREON

Let us say that Death is going to come between.

LEADER

I fear, I fear it's fixed. Her death is sealed.

CREON

Yes, let us both be quite assured of *that*.
Guards, take them away and lock them up.
No more roaming. They are women now.
The breath of Hades pressing close to kill
Can make the bravest turn, and turn the bravest will.

[ANTIGONE and ISMENE are led away. CREON stays]

SECOND CHORAL ODE

[The CHORUS cries out in an ode which begins by being both a lament for the past victimization of the House of Oedipus and an omen for the present, and then goes on to warn all those who think they can live their lives apart from the universal providence of Zeus.]

Strophe I

Happy the man who has not sipped the bitter day,
Whose house is firm against divine assault.
No planted curse creeps on and on
Through generations like the dark and driven surge
Booming from the bosom of the sea while Thracian gales
Churn perpetually the ooze in waves that throw
Down upon the headlands swept and carded by the storm
Their thunderous mass.

Antistrophe I

So do I see the house of Labdacus struck down,
In all its generations victimized by some
Pursuing deity. Its useless dead.
Its never-ending doom. And now once more the sun
Gone down in blood: the final hope of Oedipus
Felled to the root, put out in smoke and Hades' dust,
And all because of headlong folly and the reckless speech
Of a frenzied heart.

Strophe II

O Zeus, what creature pits himself against thy power?
Not Sleep encumbrous with his sublet net
And not the menstrual cycle
Of the tireless moon.
Thou in ancient splendors still art young
When worlds are old
On Mount Olympus.
Everything past, everything present,

And everything still to come
Is thy domain
No mortal thing however vast can steal
Outside thy grasp.

Antistrophe II

Hope, eternally gadding, alights on many with nothing
But bliss, but just as blithely brings to others
Delusions and seething ambition.
No man can tell
What has come stealthily creeping over his life
Until too late
Hot ashes and pain
Sear his feet . . . Once long ago
A sage famously said:
"If evil good appear
To any, the gods are near. Unscathed he'll go,
And then they'll bring him low."

[HAEMON is seen approaching]

LEADER

Here Haemon comes, your youngest son,
Driven perhaps by pangs of grief
For Antigone his sentenced bride:
A bitter groom, a marriage marred.

CREON

We shall see in a moment, and without the need of seers.

THIRD EPISODE

[HAEMON enters. The men stare warily at each other for a few seconds]

CREON

Son, do you come provoked against your father
for the death warrant of your would-be bride,
or still my loving son, whatever I may do?

HAEMON

Father, I am your loving son and you the wise
preceptor of my ways, whom I must follow.
No marriage I could make would ever match
the good of your abiding counsel.

CREON

Well spoken son!
Just what a right-minded son should feel:
unremitting deference to his father's will.
Such is a parent's prayer, to see grow up
a race of filial sons to deck his home:
Ready always to avenge their father's wrongs,
and of course to give his friends
the selfsame honor that the father gives.
But a man who raises a batch of worthless boys,
what has he hatched for himself but nuisances,
and jubilant sneers from the ill-disposed!

Oh Haemon, don't lose your balance for a woman's sake!
Don't hug a joy that's cheap and cools:
an evil woman for your bed and board.
No wound is worse than counterfeited love.
She is poison. Spit her out.
Let her go and find a mate in Hades.
Why, I've just caught her in an open act of treason—
she alone of all the city.
I *will* not break my word to Thebes. She dies.
So let her plead to Zeus
the sanctity of kindred ties.

How can I, if I nurse sedition in my house,
not foster it outside?

No. If a man can keep his home in hand,
he proves his competence to keep the state.
But one who breaks the law and flouts authority,
I never will allow.

Unswerving submission
to whomsoever the state has put in charge
is what is asked: in little things as well as great,
in right and wrong.

And I am confident that one who thus obeys,
will make a perfect subject or a perfect king:
the kind of man who in the thick of flying spears
never flinches from his post
but stands dauntless at his comrade's side.

But as for anarchy,
there is no greater curse than anarchy.
It topples cities down, it crumbles homes,
it shatters allied ranks in broken flight
which discipline kept whole:
For discipline preserves and orders well.
Let us then defend authority
and not be ousted by a girl.
If yield we must, then let it be to men,
And never have it said we were worsted by a woman.

LEADER

What you say (unless my wits have run to seed)
sounds reasonable and makes good sense.

HAEMON

Yes, Father, reason: the gods' greatest gift to man.
I would not dream of criticizing yours
or saying you were wrong, even if I could.
But other men can reason rightly too.

As your son, you see, I find myself
 marking every word and act and comment of the crowd,
 to gauge the temper of the simple citizen,
 who dares not risk your scowl to speak his mind.

But I from the shadows hear them:
 hear a city's sympathy for this girl,
 because no woman ever faced
 so unreasonable, so cruel a death,
 for such a generous cause.

She would not leave her brother where he fell,
 for carrion birds and dogs to maul.
 "Should not her name be writ in gold?" they say,
 and so the whisper grows.

You know, my Father, how I prize
 your well-being and your name.
 For sons and father's crown each other's glory
 with each other's fame.

So I beg you Father,
 don't entrench yourself in your opinion
 as if everyone else was wrong.
 The kind of man who always thinks that he is right,
 that his opinions, his pronouncements,
 are the final word,
 is usually exposed as hollow as they come.

But a wise man is flexible, has much to learn
 without a loss of dignity.

See the trees in floodtime, how they bend
 along the torrent's course,
 and how their twigs and branches do not snap,
 but stubborn trees are torn up roots and all.

In sailing too, when fresh weather blows,
 a skipper who will not slaken sail, turns turtle,
 finishes his voyage beam-ends up.

So let your anger cool, and change your mind.
 I may be young but not without some sense.
 Let men be wise by instinct if they can,
 but when this fails and nature won't oblige,
 be wise by good advice.

LEADER

Sire, the young man speaks good sense: worth listening to.
 And you, son, too, should listen. You both speak to the
 point.

CREON

You mean that men of my years have to learn to think
 by taking notes from men of his?

HAEMON

In only what is right.
 It is my merit not my years that count.

CREON

Your merit is to foment lawlessness.

HAEMON

You know I do not plead for criminals.

CREON

So this creature is no criminal, eh?

HAEMON

The whole of Thebes says "no."

CREON

And I must let the mob dictate my policy?

HAEMON

See now who is speaking like a boy!

CREON

Do I rule this state, or someone else?

HAEMON

A one man state is no state at all.

CREON

The state is his who rules it. Is that plain?

HAEMON

The state that you should rule would be a desert.

CREON

This boy is hopelessly on the woman's side.

HAEMON

I'm on your side. Are you a woman then?

CREON

You reprobate! At open loggerheads with your father!

HAEMON

On the contrary: you at loggerheads with open justice!

CREON

My crime, of course, the discharge of my rule.

HAEMON

What rule—when you trample on the rule of heaven?

CREON

Insolent pup! A woman's lackey!

HAEMON

Lackey to nothing of which I am ashamed.

CREON

Not ashamed to be the mouthpiece for that trollop?

HAEMON

I speak for you, for me, and for the holy spirits of the dead.

CREON

The dead? Precisely—you'll never marry her alive.

HAEMON

Well then, dead—one death beckoning to another.

CREON

So it's come to that—you threaten me?

HAEMON

One cannot threaten empty air!

CREON

My word, what wisdom! How you'll regret dispensing it!

HAEMON

If you weren't my father, I'd say your mind had gone.

CREON

You woman's slave! Don't come toadying to me!

HAEMON

Go on—make remarks and never listen to an answer!

CREON

Is that so? Then by Olympus be quite sure of this:
You shall not rant and jeer at me without reprisal.
Off with the wretched girl! I say she dies
In front of him, before her bridegroom's eyes.

HAEMON

She shall not die—don't think it—
 in my sight or by my side.
 And you shall never see my face again.
 I commit you raving to your chosen friends.

[HAEMON *rushes out*]

LEADER

Gone, your Majesty, but gone distraught.
 He is young, his rage will make him desperate.

CREON

Let him do or dream up acts as murderous as a fiend's,
 these girls, he shall not snatch from death.

LEADER

You do not mean to kill them both?

CREON

You are right. Not the one who did not meddle.

LEADER

What kind of death do you plan?

CREON

I'll take her down a path untrod by man.
 I'll hide her living in a rock-hewn vault,
 With ritual food enough to clear the taint
 Of murder from the City's name.
 I'll leave her pleading to her favorite god,
 Hades. He may charm her out a way to life.
 Or perhaps she'll learn though late the cost
 Of homage to the dead is labor lost.

[CREON *walks away into the palace*]

THIRD CHORAL ODE

[The CHORUS, apprehensive of the fate of the young lovers, sings of the desperately destructive power of love. Their words also veil a condemnation of men like CREON, who overvalue the so-called masculine qualities of the soul and fail to realize the duality of male and female within the person.]

Strophe I

Love, unquelled in battle
 Love, making nonsense of wealth
 Pillowed all night on the cheek of a girl
 You roam the seas, pervade the wilds
 And in a shepherd's hut you lie.
 Shadowing immortal gods
 You dog ephemeral man—
 Madness your possession.

Antistrophe I

Turning the wise into fools
 You twist them off their course
 And now you have stung us to this strife
 Of father fighting son . . . Oh, Love,
 The bride has but to glance
 With the lyrical light of her eyes
 To win you a seat in the stars
 And Aphrodite laughs.

[End of Choral Ode and beginning of Choral Dialogue
 which continues through FOURTH EPISODE]

SOPHOCLES
FOURTH EPISODE

[ANTIGONE is led in under guard]

LEADER

And now you turn on me
Unman my loyalty
Loose my tears to see
You Antigone
Pass your wedding bower
Death's chamber, pass
So easily.

Strophe I

[ANTIGONE and the CHORUS chant alternately]

ANTIGONE

See me, friends and citizens,
Look on this last walk—
The sun's light snuffed out with my dower
And Death leading me to Acheron
Alive, where all must sleep.
No wedding march, no bridal song
Cheer me on my way,
I whom Hades Lord of the dark lake weds.

CHORUS

Yet you walk with fame, bedecked
In praise towards the dead man's cave.
No sickness severed you
No sword incited struck.
All mistress of your fate you move
Alive, unique, to Hades Halls.

Antistrophe I

ANTIGONE

Oh, but I have heard what happened
To that Phrygian girl, poor foreigner
(The child of Tantalus), who clings
Like ivy on the heights of Sipylus
Captured in stone, petrified
Where all the rains, they say, the flying snow,
Waste her form away which weeps
In waterfalls. I feel her trance,
Her lonely exodus, in mine.

CHORUS

And she a goddess born of gods
While we are mortals born of men.
What greater glory for a woman's end
To partner gods in death
Who partnered them in life!

Strophe II

ANTIGONE

Ah! Now you laugh at me.
Thebes, Thebes, by all our father's gods
You my own proud chariot city
Can you not wait till I am gone?
And you sweet Dirce's stream and Theban groves
You at least be witnesses to me with love
Who walk in dismal passage to my heavy tomb
Unwept, unjustly judged
Displaced from every home
Disowned by both the living and the dead.

Strophe III

CHORUS

Perhaps you aimed too high
 You dashed your foot on Fate
 Where Justice sits enthroned.
 You fall a plummet fall
 To pay a father's sin.

Antistrophe II

ANTIGONE

You touch my wounds, my memories
 Make fresh again my tears: the triple curse
 That haunts the House of Labdacus:
 The spilt and tainted blood, the horrid bed,
 My fated mother sleeping with her son
 To father me in incest . . . Parents here I come,
 Home at last, not wed, no broken spell.
 Brother when you made
 Your blindfold match, you made
 Your death and mine—mine to come.

Antistrophe III

CHORUS

Pious is as pious does
 But where might is right
 It's reckless to do wrong.
 Self-propelled to death
 You go with open eyes.

Epode

ANTIGONE

Unwept, unwedded, unloved I go
 On this last journey of all.
 Eye of the blessed sun—

I shall miss you soon.
 No tears will mourn me dead.
 No friend to cry.

[*End of Choral Dialogue. CREON has entered*]

CREON

Listen you!
 Panegyrics and dirges go on forever
 if given the chance.
 Dispatch her at once, I say. Seal up the tomb.
 Let her choose a death at leisure—or perhaps,
 in her new home,
 An underground life forlorn.
 We wash our hands of this girl—
 except to take her from the light.

ANTIGONE

Come tomb, my wedding chamber, come!
 You sealed off habitations of the grave!
 My many family dead, finished, fetched
 in final muster to Persephone.
 I am last to come, and lost the most of all,
 my life still in my hands.
 And yet I come (I hope I come) toward a father's love,
 beloved by my mother,
 And by you, my darling brother, loved.
 Yes, all of you,
 Whom these my hands have washed, prepared and sped
 with ritual to your burials.
 And now, sweet Polyneices, dressing you,
 I've earned this recompense,
 though richly honored you the just will say.
 No husband dead and gone, no children lispig "mother"
 ever could have forced me to withstand
 the city to its face.
 By what law do I assert so much? Just this:

A husband dead, another can be found,
 a child replaced, but once a brother's lost
 (mother and father dead and buried too)
 No other brother can be born or grows again.
 That is my principle,
 which Creon stigmatized as criminal,
 my principle for honoring you, my dearest brother.

So taken, so am I led away:
 a virgin still, no nuptial song, no marriage-bed,
 no children to my name.
 An outcast stripped of sympathy,
 I go alive toward these sepulchers of death.
 What ordinance, what law of heaven broken,
 what god left for me to cast my eyes toward,
 when sacraments must now be damned as sacrilege?
 And if these things be smiled upon by heaven,
 why, when I'm dead I'll know I sinned.
 But if I find the sin was theirs,
 may Justice then mete out no less to them
 than what injustice now metes out to me—my doom.

LEADER

See how she goes, headlong driven
 By the capricious gusts of her own will!

CREON

Putting to disgrace her loitering guards.
 Who shall be paid their just rewards.

ANTIGONE

Ah, Death comes nearer with those words!

CREON

There is no comfort I can offer
 Nor this damnation can I alter.

ANTIGONE

See me, Thebes, I am going, now going!
 See me, divine ancestral Thebes!
 Cast but a glance, you her princes,
 On this last and lonely royal scion,
 See what I suffer from these men
 For reverencing the rights of man.

[ANTIGONE is led away]

FOURTH CHORAL ODE

[The CHORUS, in an attempt to comfort ANTIGONE, recall situations of fate similar to her own. First there was Danæe, shut up by her father in a brazen tower because an oracle had foretold that she would bear a son who would kill him. Zeus, however, had access to her prison and impregnated her in a shower of gold. The resulting offspring, Perseus, did indeed later kill his grandfather (accidentally). Next, there was Lycurgus, son of Dryas king of Thrace: punished by Dionysus for insulting him and abolishing the cult of the vine in his kingdom. Lastly, there was Phineus, who, suspicious of his two sons by his first wife (daughter of Boreas, the north wind), prompted his second wife to blind them in a fit of jealousy.*]

Strophe I

Hidden from the sun
 Housed behind brass doors
 Danæe's beauty too was locked away
 Her nuptial cell a tomb
 And she, my child, yes she
 A royal daughter too:

*It must be borne in mind that there are contradictory versions of these stories in Greek mythology. Here, for instance, Sophocles's account scrambles or conflates several others.

The rare receptacle of Zeus's golden seed.
 O Destiny, marked mysterious force!
 No mound of coins
 No panoplies of war
 No ramparts keep you out
 And through the dark sea looming
 No ship escapes.

Antistrophe I

The savage son of Dryas
 That Edonian king
 Was pent by Dionysus in a prison
 Clamped within a rocky cavern.
 There his jeering changing
 Changing into howling
 Faded into echoes till he came at last
 To know the godhead whom his madness
 Baited when he tried
 To quench the god-possessed
 Flaring Bacchantes
 And offended all the Muses
 Who love the flute.

Strophe II

Once in primitive Thrace near Salmydessus
 Where twin black doom-ridden crags
 Sever two seas, along the vicious
 Lonely shores of the Bosphorus,
 War-loving Ares
 Witnessed a nightmare scene:
 The bride of Phineus, jealous, frenzied,
 Plunging the dagger of her spindle
 Into the princely eyes of his two sons . . .
 Saw their vacant scream for vengeance
 Plead in pools of socket-bloody staring.

Antistrophe II

Wasting in agony, doomed so cruelly
 They lamented their mother's fatal mating
 From which even her noble birthline
 From Erechtheus could not save her—
 And she a daughter cradled
 By Boreas in the caverns
 Born amid her father's tempests
 Bolting like a colt from heaven
 Over the uplands—child of the gods—

Even she, Antigone, they had her,
 The ageless gray-grim Fates they struck her down.

FIFTH EPISODE

[*The blind prophet TIRESIAS, led by a boy, announces his arrival in a quavering, chanting voice*]

TIRESIAS

Rulers of Thebes, here we come: one pair of eyes for
 On a single road, and the blind man led by another. ^{two}

CREON

What news, venerable Tiresias?

TIRESIAS

I shall tell you, and you must listen hard.

CREON

Have I ever failed to listen to you?

TIRESIAS

And therefore have you safely piloted the state.

CREON

Gladly do I own my debt to you.

TIRESIAS

Then beware, you're standing once again upon the
razor's edge.

CREON

How so? Your words and aspect chill.

TIRESIAS

Listen, I'll read the signs and make them plain.
I was sitting by my ancient chair of augury,
the haunt of every kind of bird,
When suddenly a noise not heard before
assaults my ears:
A panic screeching and a pandemonium deafening jargon:
beaks and bloody talons tearing—I could tell it—
pinions whirring,
all shocked me as a portent.
At once I kindled sacrifice to read by fire,
but Hephaestus fanned no leaping flame.
Instead, a sort of sweat distilled from off the thigh fat,
slid in smoke upon the sputtering fire.
The gallbladders burst and spurted up.
The grease oozed down and left the thighbones bare.
These were the signs I learnt from off this boy,
omens of a ruined sacrifice:
he is my eyes as I am yours.

See it—how the city sickens, Creon,
these the symptoms, yours the fanatic will that caused
them:

Dogs and crows all gluttoned carrying
desecrated carrion to the hearths and altars—
carrion from the poor unburied son of Oedipus.
Burnt offerings go up in stench. The gods are dumb.
The birds of omen cannot sing.
But obscene vultures flap away
with crops all gorged on human flesh.

Think, son, think! To err is human, true,
and only he is damned who having sinned
will not repent, will not repair.
He is a fool, a proved and stubborn fool.
Give death his due, and do not kick a corpse.
Where is renown to kill a dead man twice?
Believe me, I advise you well.
It should be easy to accept advice
— so sweetly tuned to your good use.

CREON

Old man,
you pot away at me like all the rest
as if I were a bull's-eye,
And now you aim your seer craft at me.
Well, I'm sick of being bought and sold
by all your soothsaying tribe.
Bargain away! All the silver of Sardis,
all the gold of India
is not enough to buy this man a grave;
Not even if Zeus's eagles come, and fly away
with carrion morsels to their master's throne.
Even such a threat of such a taint
will not win this body burial.
It takes much more than human remains
to desecrate the majesty divine.
Old man Tiresias,
The most reverend fall from grace when lies are sold
Wrapped up in honeyed words—and all for gold.

TIRESIAS

Creon! Creon!
Is no one left who takes to heart that . . .

CREON

Come, let's have the platitude!

TIRESIAS

. . . That prudence is the best of all our wealth.

CREON

As folly is the worst of all our woes?

TIRESIAS

Yes, infectious folly! And you are sick with it.

CREON

I'll not exchange a fish-wife's set-to with a seer.

TIRESIAS

Which is what you do when you say I sell my prophecies.

CREON

As prophets do—a money-grubbing race.

TIRESIAS

Or as kings, who grub for money in the dung.

CREON

You realize this is treason—lese majesty?

TIRESIAS

Majesty? Yes, thanks to me you are savior of Thebes.

CREON

And you are not without your conjuring tricks. But still
a crook.

TIRESIAS

Go on! You will drive me to divulge something that . . .

CREON

Out with it! But not for money, please.

TIRESIAS

Unhappily for you this can't be bought.

CREON

Then don't expect to bargain with my wits.

TIRESIAS

All right then! Take it if you can.
A corpse for a corpse the price, and flesh for flesh,
one of your own begotten.
The sun shall not run his course for many days
before you pay.
You plunged a child of light into the dark;
entombed the living with the dead; the dead
Dismissed unmourned, denied a grave—a corpse
Unhallowed and defeated of his destiny below.
Where neither you nor gods must meddle,
you have thrust your thumbs.
Do not be surprised that heaven—yes, and hell—
have set the Furies loose to lie in wait for you,
Ready with the punishments you engineered for others.

Does this sound like flattery for sale?
Yet a little while and you shall wake
to wailing and gnashing of teeth in the house of Creon.

Lashed to a unison of rage, they'll rise,
 those other cities,
 whose mangled sons received their obsequies
 from dogs and prowling jackals—
 from some filthy vulture flapping to alight
 before their very hearths to bring them home—
 desecration reeking from its beak.

There! You asked, and I have shot my angry arrows.
 I aimed at your intemperate heart. I did not miss.
 Come, boy, take me home.
 Let him spew his cholera over younger men.
 He'll learn a little modesty in time,
 a little meekness soon.

[TIRESIAS is led out by his boy. CREON stands motionless,
 visibly shaken]

LEADER

There's fire and slaughter for you, King!
 The man has gone,
 but my gray hairs were long since shining black
 before he ever stirred the city to a false alarm.

CREON

I know. You point the horns of my dilemma.
 It's hard to eat my words, but harder still
 to court catastrophe through overriding pride.

LEADER

Son of Menœceus, be advised in time.

CREON

To do what? Tell me, I shall listen.

LEADER

Go free the maiden from her vault.

Then entomb the lonely body lying stark.

CREON

You really mean it—that I must yield?

LEADER

Must, King, and quickly too.
 The gods, provoked, never wait to mow men down.

CREON

How it goes against the grain
 to smother all one's heart's desire!
 But I cannot fight with destiny.

CHORUS

Quickly, go and do it. Don't trust to others.

CREON

Yes, I go at once.
 Servants, servants—on the double!
 You there, fetch the rest. Bring axes all
 and hurry to the hill.
 My mind's made up. I'll not be slow
 to let her loose myself
 who locked her in the tomb.
 In the end it is the ancient codes—oh my regrets!—
 that one must keep:
 To value life then one must value law.

[CREON and servants hurry away in all directions]

FIFTH CHORAL ODE

[The CHORUS sings a desperate hymn to Bacchus, begging
 him to come and save the city of Thebes and the stricken
 House of Oedipus]

Strophe I

Calling you by a hundred names
 Jewel and flower of Semele's wedding
 Son of Zeus and son of thunder
 Singer of sweet Italy!
 Calling you in world communion
 In the bowery lap of Dio's glades
 Close by Ismenus's quicksilver stream:
 You the Bacchus haunting Thebes
 (Mother of the Bacchanals)
 Hard by the very fields where once
 The dragon's teeth were sown.

Antistrophe I

Bacchus and your nymphs Bacchantes
 Dancing in the hills and valleys:
 Dots of fire and wreathing torches
 Curling smoke above the crested
 Forks (Castalia fled Apollo
 Plunging into the spring-fed pool there)
 Calling you from the slopes of Nyssa
 Dripping ivy down to the seashore
 Green with vineyards, while your Maenads
 Storm ecstatic shouting "Bacchus"
 On your march to Thebes.

Strophe II

Calling you to your favorite city
 Sacred city of your mother
 (Ravished by a lightning bolt)
 Calling you to a city dying—
 People shadowed by the plague
 Calling you to leave the high-spots
 Leaping fleet-foot down to cross
 The moaning waters. Oh come quickly
 Hurry from Parnassus..

Antistrophe II

Come you master of the dancing
 Fiery-breathing pulsing stars
 Steward of the midnight voices
 Son of Zeus, O Prince appear!
 Bring your train of Maenads raving
 Swirling round you, round you dancing
 Through the night, and shouting "Bacchus.
 Giver of all blessings, Bacchus!"
 Bacchus, oh come!

[*There is a pause, while the strains of the CHORUS die away. A MESSENGER enters*]

EPILOGUE

MESSENGER

Men of the House of Cadmus and of Amphion,
 how rash it is to envy others or despair!
 The luck we adulate in one today,
 tomorrow is another's tragedy.
 There is no stable horoscope for man.
 Take Creon:
 he if anyone, I thought was enviable.
 He saved this land from all our enemies,
 attained the pomp and circumstance of king,
 his children decked like olive branches round his
 throne.

And now it is undone, all finished.
 And what is left is not called life but death alive.
 His kingly state is nothing to him now
 with gladness gone:
 Vanity of vanities—the shadow of a shade.

LEADER

What fresh news do you bring of royal ruin?

MESSENGER

Death twice over, and the living guilty for the dead.

LEADER

Who struck and who is stricken? Say.

MESSENGER

Haemon's gone. Blood spilt by his own hand.

LEADER

By his own hand? Or by his father's?

MESSENGER

Both. Driven to it by his father's murdering.

LEADER

Oh Prophet, your prophecy's come true!

MESSENGER

So stands the case. Make of it what you will.

LEADER

Look, I see Eurydice approach,
 Creon's unhappy queen.
 Is it chance or has she heard the deathknell of her son?
 [EURYDICE staggers in, supported by her maids]

EURYDICE

Yes, good citizens, all of you, I heard:
 Even as I went to supplicate
 the goddess Pallas with my prayers.

Just as I unloosed the bolt that locks the door,
 the sound of wailing struck my ears,
 the sound of family tragedy.

I was stunned—

and fell back fainting into my ladies' arms.
 But tell me everything however bad;
 I am no stranger to the voice of sorrow.

MESSENGER

Dear Mistress, I was there.
 I shall not try to glaze the truth;
 for where is there comfort in a lie,
 so soon found out? The truth is always best
 In attendance on your Lord,
 I took him deep into the plain
 where Polyneices lay
 abandoned still—all mauled by dogs.
 And there with humble hearts
 we prayed to Hecate, goddess of the Great Divide.
 to Hades too, and begged their clemency.
 Then we sprinkled him with holy water,
 lopped fresh branches down
 and laid him on a funeral pyre
 to burn away his poor remains.
 Lastly, we heaped a monument to him,
 a mound of his native earth, then turned away
 to unseal the vault in which there lay
 a virgin waiting on a bed of stone
 for her bridegroom—Death.

And one of us, ahead,
 heard a wail of deep despair
 echoing from that hideous place of honeymoon.
 He hurried back and told the King,
 who then drew near
 and seemed to recognize those hollow sounds.
 He gave a bleat of fear:
 "Oh, are my heart's forebodings true?
 I cannot bear to tread this path.

My son's voice strikes my ears.
 Hurry, hurry, servants, to the tomb,
 And through those stones once pried away peer down
 into that cadaverous gap
 and tell me if it's Haemon's voice.
 Oh, tell me I am heavenly deceived!"

His panic sent us flying to the cave,
 and in the farthest corner we could see her
 hanging with a noose of linen round her neck,
 and leaning on her,
 hugging his cold lover lost to Hades,
 Haemon, bridegroom, broken,
 cursed the father who had robbed him,
 pouring out his tears of sorrow.

A groan agonized and loud—
 broke from Creon when he saw him.
 "You poor misguided boy!" he sobbed,
 staggering forward,
 "What have you done? What were you thinking of?
 And now, come to me, my son. Your father begs you."
 But the boy glared at him with flaming eyes,
 spat for answer in his face,
 and drawing a double-hilted sword,
 lunged but missed
 as his father stepped aside and ran.
 Then, the wretched lad,
 convulsed with self-hatred and despair,
 pressed against that sword and drove it home,
 halfway up the hilt into his side.
 And conscious still but failing, limply folded
 Antigone close into his arms—
 Choking blood in crimson jets upon her waxen face.
 Corpse wrapped in love with corpse he lies,
 married not in life but Hades:
 Lesson to the world that inhumane designs
 Wreak a havoc immeasurably inhumane.

[EURYDICE is seen moving like a sleepwalker into the
 palace]

LEADER

What does her exit mean?
 The Queen has gone without a word of comfort or of
 sorrow.

MESSENGER

I am troubled too. And yet I hope
 the reason is she shrinks from public sorrow for her son,
 And goes into the house to lead her ladies
 in the family dirge.
 She will not be unwise. She is discreet.

LEADER

You may be right, but I do not trust
 extremes of silence or of grief.

MESSENGER

Let me go into the house and see.
 Extremes of silence, as you say, are sinister.
 Her heart is broken and can hide
 some sinister design.

[As the MESSENGER hurries into the palace through a side
 door, the great doors open and a procession carrying the
 dead body of HAEMON on a bier approaches, with CREON
 staggering behind]

CHORUS

Look, the King himself draws near, his load
 in a kind of muteness crying out his sorrow
 (Dare we say it?) from a madness of misdoing
 started by himself and by no other.

CHORAL DIALOGUE

Strophe I

CREON

Purblind sin of mine!
 There is no absolution
 For perversity that dragged
 A son to death:
 Murdered son, father murdering.
 Son, my son, cut down dead!
 New life that's disappeared
 And by no youthful foolishness
 But by my folly.

CHORUS

Late, too late, your reason reasons right!

Strophe II

CREON

Yes, taught by bitterness.
 Some god has cast his spell,
 Has hit me hard from heaven,
 Let my cruelty grow rank;
 Has slashed me down, my joys
 Trodden in the earth.
 Man, man, oh how you suffer!

[Enter the MESSENGER]

MESSENGER

Sire, you are laden,
 You the author loading:
 Half your sorrow in your hands,
 The other half still in your house
 Soon to be unhidden.

CREON

What half horror coming?

MESSENGER

Your queen is dead:
 Mother for her son;
 The suicidal thrust:
 Dead for whom she lived.

Antistrophe I

CREON

Oh, Death, pitiless receiver!
 Kill me? Will you kill me?
 Your mercy dwindles does it?
 Must you bring me words
 That crush me utterly.
 I was dead and still you kill me.
 Slaughter was piled high,
 Ah then, do not tell me
 You come to pile it higher:
 A son dead, then a wife.

CHORUS

Look! Everything is open to full view.

[The scene suddenly opens by a movement of the *ekuklema** to reveal EURYDICE lying dead, surrounded by her attendants]

Antistrophe II

CREON

Oh, oh! A second deathblow.
 Fate, my bitter cup

*The *ekuklema* was a theatrical machine which could open up the stage to an inner scene: frequently a murder or a suicide.

Should have no second brimming,
 Yet the sight I see laid out
 Compels a second sorrow:
 My son just lifted up
 A corpse, and now a corpse his mother.

MESSENGER

Her heart was shattered
 And her hand drove keen the dagger.
 At the altar there she fell
 And darkness swamped her drooping eyes
 As with cries she sobbed her sorrow
 For her hero son Megareus—
 Long since nobly dead—
 And for this son her other,
 Mingling with her dying gasp
 Curses on you—killer.

Strophe III

CREON

My heart is sick with dread.
 Will no one lance a two-edged sword
 Through this bleeding seat of sorrow?

MESSENGER

She charged you, yes,
 With both their deaths—
 This lifeless thing
 As double filicidal killer!

CREON

Tell me, how did she go?

MESSENGER

Self-stabbed to the heart;
 Her son's death ringing
 New dirges in her head.

Strophe IV

CREON

I killed her, I
 Can own no alibi:
 The guilt is wholly mine.
 Take me quickly, servants,
 Take me quickly hence.
 Let this nothing be forgotten.

CHORUS

Good advice, at last,
 If anything be good
 In so much bad.
 Such evils need quick riddance.

Antistrophe III

CREON

Oh, let it come! Let it break!
 My last and golden day:
 The best, the last, the worst
 To rob me of tomorrow.

LEADER

Tomorrow is tomorrow
 And we must mind today.

CREON

All my prayers are that:
 The prayer of my desires.

LEADER

Your prayers are done.
 Man cannot flatter Fate,
 And punishments must come.

SOPHOCLES
Antistrophe IV

CREON

Then lead me please away,
 A rash weak foolish man,
 A man of sorrows,
 Who killed you, son, so blindly
 And you my wife—so blind.
 Where can I look?
 Where hope for help,
 When everything I touch is lost
 And death has leapt upon my life?

CHORUS

Where wisdom is, there happiness will crown
 A piety that nothing will corrode.
 But high and mighty words and ways
 Are flogged to humbleness, till age,
 Beaten to its knees, at last is wise.

Appendix

PRODUCTION AND ACTING

There are two main dangers in the production of a Greek play: one is to overplay the dignity; the other is not to be aware of that dignity at all. The first becomes a desperate and futile endeavor to recapture the externals of the Greek theater. It is arty and self-conscious and, in battenning on period effects (we are being Greeks, boys and girls—is my mask on straight?), destroys the very humanity and timelessness it seeks to promote. The second, confusing the Greek idealization and simplification of human nature with unreality, and seeking to redress the balance, tries to turn the heroic figures of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides into everyday nonentities. It attempts the prosaic, trivial, chatty, and obliterates the heights and depths of tragedy.

These are the two chief false principles. Occasionally they are blended and a third type of mistake is hatched, inheriting the artiness of one parent and the lack of restraint of the other. Professor J. T. Sheppard, the great Sophoclean scholar, well describes it in a production of *Oedipus the King* which he had the discomfort of witnessing: “. . . [the] actors, not altogether, I suspect, of their own free will, raged and fumed and ranted, rushing hither and thither with a violence of gesticulation which, in spite of all their effort, was eclipsed and rendered insignificant by the yet more violent rushes, screams, and contortions of a quite gratuitous crowd.” (Introduction to *The Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles*, Cambridge, 1920.)

What then is the enlightened producer to aim for? Let him first of all remember that these plays were performed before enormous audiences, perhaps up to 30,000