The Promethean Library



Antigone

Conscience and the City, with Seven Days of Reflection

Sophocles

Translated by Francis Storr

Greek Originals · No. 6

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With an introduction, notes, a glossary and seven days of reflection



The Promethean Library · Greek Originals · No. 6
Transatlantic Press

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Conscience and the City, with Seven Days of Reflection

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The text. Francis Storr's translation of the Antigone, first published in the Loeb Classical Library in 1912, reproduced from the Standard Ebooks edition, with Storr's own argument of the play. Line numbers count the lines of this translation. Storr died in 1919; the translation is in the public domain worldwide.

How this edition was made. The introduction, notes, glossary, practices, questions, chronology and reading list were drafted with the help of artificial intelligence and checked by hand against the text and against published sources. Every quotation in them matches the text printed in this book word for word, and every fact was checked against a published source before it was printed. The publisher keeps a record of the source checked for each fact. No quotation, fact or story was invented. The translation itself is unchanged.

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Many wonders there be, but naught more wondrous than man.

ANTIGONE, LINE 324

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Before You Begin

A city has just survived a war. Two brothers, sons of the dead king Oedipus, have killed each other in the fighting, one defending Thebes and one attacking it. The new ruler, their uncle Creon, orders that the defender be buried with honor and the attacker be left on the open ground for dogs and birds. Their sister Antigone decides to bury him anyway.

That is the whole situation of Sophocles' Antigone, and it has never stopped being argued over. Is Antigone a woman of conscience standing against a tyrant, or a proud and stubborn girl who would rather die than bend? Is Creon a monster, or a ruler trying to hold a shaken city together who cannot admit he is wrong? The play gives each of them strong speeches and does not let either off lightly.

The play is short. In this translation it runs to about ten thousand words, and most readers can finish it in a single evening of an hour and a half to two hours.

This edition is laid out for reading groups, classes and readers on their own. The Introduction gives the family history, the war and the burial customs the play takes for granted, and how later readers have taken it. After a note on the translation and a list of the characters comes the full text, with line numbers in the margin. The Notes on the Text are keyed to those numbers. A Glossary explains names and old words. Seven Days of Conscience offers a short daily reading and practice, and the Questions, Chronology and Further Reading close the book.

Introduction

Sophocles and His Athens

Sophocles was born about 496 BC at Colonus, a village just outside Athens, and he died in 406 BC. His father, Sophillus, was a wealthy man who made armor. As a youth of sixteen, in 480 BC, he was chosen to lead the song of thanksgiving after the Greek sea victory over the Persians at Salamis.

He was the most successful tragic poet of his age. He wrote 123 plays and won perhaps 24 victories in the dramatic competitions, against 13 for Aeschylus and 4 for Euripides. His first victory came in 468 BC, when he defeated Aeschylus himself. Only seven of his tragedies survive complete. He is credited with adding a third speaking actor to tragedy, which made scenes like the three-way clash of Creon, Antigone and Ismene possible, and with raising the size of the chorus from twelve to fifteen.

Sophocles was also a public man. In 442 BC he served as one of the treasurers who handled the tribute paid to Athens by its allies, and about 441 or 440 BC he was elected one of the ten generals, serving alongside Pericles during the revolt of Samos. Late in life, in 413 BC, after the disaster of the Athenian expedition to Sicily, he was one of ten commissioners appointed to guide the city's recovery. A writer of plays about kings and cities was himself trusted with a city's money and its wars.

Tragedies were performed in Athens at the Great Dionysia, a spring festival of the god Dionysus. Each competing poet offered three tragedies and a satyr play, a rowdy comic piece. Actors and chorus wore masks, women's parts were played by men, and the outdoor theaters held audiences of many thousands. Antigone was written for such an audience.

When Was Antigone Written?

No one knows for certain. Some evidence suggests that the play was first performed in 442 or 441 BC, and many modern accounts place it around 442 to 440 BC. An ancient summary of the play, traditionally attributed to the scholar Aristophanes of Byzantium, reports a story that Sophocles was judged worthy of the generalship at Samos because of the fame Antigone brought him. Modern scholars treat that story as unreliable: the play may simply have become linked with his election later. The same summary calls Antigone his thirty-second play, which could come from a list in order of composition, but that number cannot be turned into a year without knowing how evenly his plays were spread across his long career. Studies of his style also suggest that Antigone is relatively early among his surviving plays, though the scholars who make that case warn that the evidence is weak. The fairest statement is this: Antigone probably dates from about 442 to 440 BC, and it is probably among the earliest of the seven plays we have.

Antigone is often grouped with Oedipus the King and Oedipus at Colonus as the three Theban plays. They were not written as a trilogy. Antigone tells the last part of the story but was probably written first, and Oedipus at Colonus was produced only after Sophocles' death, in 401 BC.

The House of Oedipus

The play assumes that its audience knows the story of Thebes and its royal family. Laius, king of Thebes, was warned by an oracle that a son born to him and his wife Jocasta would kill him. When a son was born, Laius had the baby left on a mountainside to die. The child survived, was raised as a prince in Corinth, and grew up as Oedipus. Meeting Laius at a place where three roads met, without knowing who he was, Oedipus killed him. He then saved Thebes by answering the riddle of the Sphinx, became king, and married the widowed queen, his own mother. They had

four children: two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, and two daughters, Antigone and Ismene.

When the truth came out, Jocasta hanged herself and Oedipus blinded himself. Ismene recalls all of this in the play's first scene, in a few bitter lines about a father "Blinded, himself his executioner" and a mother-wife "Done by a noose herself had twined to death." Creon, the new ruler, is Jocasta's brother. That makes him uncle to all four children, and it is why he calls Antigone his "sister's child."

The Seven Against Thebes

The brothers' quarrel set the scene for the play. Cursed by their father, Eteocles and Polyneices agreed to rule Thebes in alternate years. When his year was over, Eteocles refused to give up the throne. Polyneices went to Argos, married Argeia, the daughter of King Adrastus, and came back with an Argive army led by seven champions, one for each of the seven gates of Thebes. The attack failed. At one gate the two brothers met and killed each other, fulfilling the curse. Aeschylus had put this war on stage in his Seven Against Thebes in 467 BC, about a generation before Antigone.

Antigone opens on the morning after that battle. The Argive army has fled in the night, Thebes is safe, and the Chorus of Theban elders greets the sunrise with a song of victory. Creon now holds the throne by right of kinship, and his first act is the decree about the brothers' bodies.

Why Burial Mattered

To ancient Greeks, a proper burial was something every dead person was owed. Greek literature treats leaving a body unburied as an insult to human dignity. The rites were carried out by relatives, mainly women: the body was washed, anointed with oil, dressed and laid out at home so that family and friends could mourn, then carried to the grave, where women later brought offerings and poured libations. When Antigone says that

she "laved and decked" the limbs of her parents and "poured libations" on their grave, she is describing exactly this work, the work of a daughter.

Even a token burial counted. The first report of Polyneices' burial in the play describes no grave at all, only a sprinkling of "thirsty dust," and it is treated as a real burial, enough to "avert the curse that haunts the unburied dead."

Creon's punishment was not unheard of. Athens itself, at least sometimes, refused burial in Attic soil to traitors and temple robbers, and an Athenian audience could see Polyneices, a citizen who marched on his own city, as that kind of traitor. But Creon goes further. He does not simply send the body beyond the border; he leaves it to be torn by animals in full view, in the old manner of epic warriors who mistreated an enemy's corpse. One modern scholar has argued that Sophocles presents the edict as both a civic penalty and an act of vengeance, and that the course of the play shows the refusal to be wrong. Keep both sides in mind as you read. Creon's edict would have sounded partly reasonable to the first audience, and partly shocking.

What Happens

The play moves in a series of confrontations, each followed by a song of the Chorus.

Antigone asks Ismene to help her bury their brother; Ismene refuses, out of fear and a sense that women cannot fight the state. Antigone goes alone. Creon announces his decree to the elders, and a frightened Guard arrives to report that someone has already scattered dust on the body. Creon suspects bribery and threatens the guards. The Chorus then sings its great ode on human ingenuity. The Guard returns with Antigone, caught in the act of a second burial. She admits everything and defends herself with the appeal to the "unwritten laws of Heaven." Creon condemns her, and condemns Ismene too, who now tries to share the blame.

Haemon, Creon's son and Antigone's betrothed, comes to plead with his father. He begins respectfully and ends in open defiance, and leaves

vowing that Creon will never see his face again. Creon changes Antigone's sentence from stoning to burial alive in a rock-cut tomb. Antigone is led away, singing her own lament, a bride whose only bridegroom will be Death.

Then the blind prophet Teiresias arrives. The birds are fighting, the sacrifices will not burn, and the altars are fouled by scraps from the unburied corpse. Creon accuses him of selling prophecy for money, and Teiresias answers with a terrible prediction: Creon will pay for the dead with the life of his own child. Shaken, Creon gives way. He buries Polyneices first and then hurries to the tomb, but he is too late. Antigone has hanged herself. Haemon, clinging to her body, tries to strike his father, then kills himself. When Creon's wife Eurydice hears the news, she kills herself as well, cursing her husband. The play ends with Creon calling himself his family's murderer, and the Chorus drawing its lesson about wisdom learned too late.

Antigone and Creon

It is easy to turn this play into a fable of a brave individual against a cruel state. The text resists that. Both chief characters have real principles, and both are flawed in ways the play makes plain.

Creon's first speech is not a tyrant's speech. He tells the elders that a man is only tested by power, that no ruler should keep silent out of fear, and that the city is "the good ship that holds our fortunes all." A ruler who treated traitors and patriots alike, he argues, would betray every citizen who fought. An Athenian audience, whose own city sometimes refused burial to traitors, would not have dismissed them.

But Creon cannot listen. He suspects bribery where there is none, calls the Chorus senile, calls his son a woman's slave and the prophet a profiteer. He boasts that he will not be beaten by a woman: "No woman shall be the master while I live." He insists that whoever the state appoints "must be obeyed in everything," whether just or unjust. Hae-

mon's reply, "A State for one man is no State at all," is the point at which Creon's order becomes something close to tyranny.

Antigone has her own fixed principle. She buries her brother because the gods' laws require it, and because family love requires it: "My nature is for mutual love, not hate." Her defense before Creon was already famous in antiquity. Yet she is also hard and proud. She scorns Ismene's later offer to die with her, tells her sister that she "chosed'st life," and seems almost eager for death. The Chorus calls her "A stubborn daughter of a stubborn sire." In her final lament she wavers, wondering whether the gods have abandoned her, and gives an odd argument for why a brother matters more than a husband or child could. Her greatness and her harshness come from the same root.

The play is also about family against city in a quieter sense. Creon places the city above kinship, yet the disaster falls on his own household: son and wife both dead. Antigone places kinship above the city, yet she dies cut off from all kin, "Unwept, unwed, unfriended." The sisters, the father and son, the husband and wife: almost every relationship in the play is tested and broken.

The Ode on Human Ingenuity

After the Guard's first report, while Creon is hunting for the person who buried the body, the Chorus sings the ode often called the Ode on Man. In the Greek it runs from line 332 to line 375; in this translation it is lines 324 to 345.

It begins: "Many wonders there be, but naught more wondrous than man." The Greek word behind "wonders" is *deinos*, which can mean wonderful, clever, awesome, strange or terrible. Translators must choose, and Storr chose the brighter sense. The ode then lists human achievements: sailing the stormy sea, plowing the earth, snaring birds and fish, taming the horse and the bull, inventing speech, thought and the life of cities, finding shelter from frost and cures for disease. Only death defeats us.

The last stanza turns. The same skill can lead "now to the light, but now to counsels of ill." Whoever honors the laws of the land and the gods of the city makes the city stand; whoever is bold in wrongdoing is "a cityless outcast." The Chorus means this about the unknown rule-breaker, and within moments Antigone is led in as the culprit. But by the end of the play the description fits Creon at least as well. The ode is a hymn to human power and a warning about it in the same breath.

How the Play Has Been Read

Antigone's appeal to unwritten law was famous in antiquity. Aristotle, in his Rhetoric, cites her as an example of someone appealing to a law that is common to all and accords with nature, against a written decree.

The German philosopher Hegel made the play central to his theory of tragedy. On his reading, Antigone and Creon each stand for a genuine ethical power, the family and the state, which ought to live in harmony. Each holds to one side so completely that both are destroyed, and in that destruction the audience sees a kind of justice restored. The German poet Goethe was troubled by Antigone's argument that a lost husband or child could be replaced but not a brother; in a conversation recorded by Johann Peter Eckermann he said it seemed unworthy of her and wished a scholar would prove the lines spurious. That passage (Greek lines 904 to 920; lines 846 to 857 here) closely resembles a story in the historian Herodotus about a Persian noblewoman who chose to save her brother, and most scholars think Sophocles borrowed it. Some editors and translators have bracketed or cut it; this translation keeps it.

Many of its modern revivals have come at moments of political crisis. Mendelssohn wrote music for a production at Potsdam in 1841. Jean Anouilh's Antigone was first staged in Paris in 1944, under the German occupation, and was widely taken as a comment on collaboration. Bertolt Brecht adapted the play in 1948 at Chur in Switzerland, just after the Second World War. On Robben Island in South Africa, political prisoners staged Antigone, and Nelson Mandela played Creon. In his autobio-

graphy he wrote that Creon's inflexibility made him unfit to lead, since a leader must temper justice with mercy, and he saw Antigone as a fighter against an unjust law. The Irish poet Seamus Heaney's version, The Burial at Thebes, appeared in 2004 and was staged at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin.

Modern thinkers keep returning to it. Martin Heidegger wrote an essay on the ode on man and its word *deinos*. The philosopher Judith Butler, in Antigone's Claim (2000), read Antigone as a challenge to settled ideas of kinship. Scholars have also long debated the play's puzzles, such as why the body is buried twice and who did it the first time.

Reading It Well Today

Read the play once straight through for the story, ideally aloud. Give the choral odes their full weight: they are not interruptions but the play's way of stepping back and asking what the action means.

Then read it again and resist choosing a side too soon. Notice how often each character is right about the other. Creon is right that Antigone is proud; Antigone is right that Creon has overreached. Ismene and Haemon are worth special attention, because each tries to stand between the extremes and each is brushed aside.

Finally, notice what the play says about listening. The Guard, the Chorus, Haemon and Teiresias all bring Creon warnings. He hears each of them too late, or not at all. The final words of the play are about wisdom, and about how often it comes only through suffering.

A Note on the Translation

Francis Storr (1839–1919) was an English schoolmaster and editor, educated at Trinity College, Cambridge. He taught at Marlborough College and became the first head of modern studies at Merchant Taylors' School, and he edited the Journal of Education. He translated widely, from Heine and Lermontov as well as from Greek and Latin. His Sophocles, with the Greek text facing the English, filled two of the earliest volumes of the Loeb Classical Library. The first volume, containing Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus and Antigone, appeared in 1912, and the second soon after.

Storr renders the spoken scenes in English blank verse, unrhymed lines of ten syllables, and the choral songs in rhymed stanzas of varying length. The effect is closer to older English poetic drama than to modern speech. You will meet "thou" and "thee," contractions like "'tis" and "'twas," and old words such as weird (fate), sooth (truth), ween and trow (think), liefest (most gladly), rede (counsel), gloze (flatter), anent (concerning) and nathless (nevertheless). The Glossary explains these. In return Storr gives the verse a strong rhythm and a high, formal tone that suits the play's kings and choruses.

Some spellings are his own: Persephassa for Persephone, Siphylus for Sipylus, Corisian for Corycian, Dircè beside Dirce. In the Introduction and Notes this edition uses the common modern forms. A few slips of setting or transcription have come down with the text: "he fellow" for his fellow at line 382, "a father's guild" at line 800, where the sense is guilt, and a speech at line 1038 labeled CHORUS that plainly belongs to Creon. They are left as printed and explained in the Notes.

The line numbers in the margin count the lines of this English translation, from 1 to 1279. They do not match the line numbers of the Greek text, which run higher, and which most scholars and other translations cite. The ode on man, for example, is Greek lines 332 to 375 but lines 324 to 345 here. All references in this edition use these English numbers.

This edition makes no change to the words of Storr's translation. His footnotes and the facing Greek text are left out.

Persons of the Play

Antigone: daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta, who buries her brother Polyneices against Creon's decree.

Ismene: her sister, who refuses to help but later asks to share her punishment.

Creon: brother of Jocasta and new ruler of Thebes after the deaths of Eteocles and Polyneices.

Haemon: son of Creon and Eurydice, betrothed to Antigone.

Eurydice: wife of Creon and mother of Haemon and Megareus.

Teiresias: the blind prophet of Thebes, led by a boy.

A Guard: one of the soldiers set to watch the body of Polyneices.

A Messenger: who reports the deaths of Antigone and Haemon.

A Second Messenger: who brings news of Eurydice's death.

Chorus: elders of Thebes, summoned by Creon as his council.

Antigone

Antigone and Ismene before the Palace gates.

Antigone

Ismene, sister of my blood and heart,
See'st thou how Zeus would in our lives fulfil
The weird of Oedipus, a world of woes!
For what of pain, affliction, outrage, shame,
Is lacking in our fortunes, thine and mine?
And now this proclamation of today
Made by our Captain-General to the State,
What can its purport be? Didst hear and heed,
Or art thou deaf when friends are banned as foes?

Ismene

To me, Antigone, no word of friends
Has come, or glad or grievous, since we twain
Were reft of our two brethren in one day
By double fratricide; and since i' the night
Our Argive leaguers fled, no later news
Has reached me, to inspirit or deject.

Antigone

I knew 'twas so, and therefore summoned thee
Beyond the gates to breathe it in thine ear.

Ismene

What is it? Some dark secret stirs thy breast.

Antigone

What but the thought of our two brothers dead,

The one by Creon graced with funeral rites,
The other disappointed? Eteocles
He hath consigned to earth (as fame reports)
With obsequies that use and wont ordain,
So gracing him among the dead below.
But Polyneices, a dishonoured corse,
(So by report the royal edict runs)
No man may bury him or make lament—
Must leave him tombless and unwept, a feast
For kites to scent afar and swoop upon.
Such is the edict (if report speak true)
Of Creon, our most noble Creon, aimed
At thee and me, aye me too; and anon
He will be here to promulgate, for such
As have not heard, his mandate; 'tis in sooth
No passing humour, for the edict says
Whoe'er transgresses shall be stoned to death.
So stands it with us; now 'tis thine to show
If thou art worthy of thy blood or base.

ISMENE

But how, my rash, fond sister, in such case
Can I do anything to make or mar?

ANTIGONE

Say, wilt thou aid me and abet? Decide.

ISMENE

In what bold venture? What is in thy thought?

ANTIGONE

Lend me a hand to bear the corpse away.

ISMENE

What, bury him despite the interdict?

ANTIGONE

My brother, and, though thou deny him, thine.
No man shall say that *I* betrayed a brother.

ISMENE

Wilt thou persist, though Creon has forbid?

ANTIGONE

What right has he to keep me from my own?

ISMENE

Bethink thee, sister, of our father's fate,
Abhorred, dishonoured, self-convinced of sin,
Blinded, himself his executioner.
Think of his mother-wife (ill-sorted names)
Done by a noose herself had twined to death.
And last, our hapless brethren in one day,
Both in a mutual destiny involved,
Self-slaughtered, both the slayer and the slain.
Bethink thee, sister, we are left alone;
Shall we not perish wretchedest of all.
If in defiance of the law we cross
A monarch's will?—weak women, think of that,
Not framed by nature to contend with men.
Remember this too that the stronger rules;
We must obey his orders, these or worse.
Therefore I plead compulsion and entreat
The dead to pardon. I perforce obey
The powers that be. 'Tis foolishness, I ween,
To overstep in aught the golden mean.

ANTIGONE

I urge no more; nay, wert thou willing still,
I would not welcome such a fellowship.
Go thine own way; myself will bury him.
How sweet to die in such employ, to rest—

Sister and brother linked in love's embrace—
A sinless sinner, banned awhile on earth,
But by the dead commended; and with them
I shall abide for ever. As for thee,
Scorn, if thou wilt, the eternal laws of Heaven.

ISMENE

I scorn them not, but to defy the State
Or break her ordinance I have no skill.

ANTIGONE

A specious pretext. I will go alone
To lap my dearest brother in the grave.

ISMENE

My poor, fond sister, how I fear for thee!

ANTIGONE

O waste no fears on me; look to thyself.

ISMENE

At least let no man know of thine intent,
But keep it close and secret, as will I.

ANTIGONE

O tell it, sister; I shall hate thee more
If thou proclaim it not to all the town.

ISMENE

Thou hast a fiery soul for numbing work.

ANTIGONE

I pleasure those whom I would liefest please.

ISMENE

If thou succeed; but thou art doomed to fail.

ANTIGONE

When strength shall fail me, yes, but not before.

ISMENE

But, if the venture's hopeless, why essay?

ANTIGONE

Sister, forbear, or I shall hate thee soon,
And the dead man will hate thee too, with cause.
Say I am mad and give my madness rein
To wreck itself; the worst that can befall
Is but to die an honourable death.

ISMENE

Have thine own way then; 'tis a mad endeavour,
Yet to thy lovers thou art dear as ever. *Exeunt.*

STROPHE 1

CHORUS

Sunbeam, of all that ever dawn upon
Our seven-gated Thebes the brightest ray,
O eye of golden day,
How fair thy light o'er Dircè's fountain shone,
Speeding upon their headlong homeward course,
Far quicker than they came, the Argive force;
Putting to flight
The argent shields, the host with scutcheons white.
Against our land the proud invader came
To vindicate fell Polyneices' claim.
Like to an eagle swooping low,
On pinions white as new fall'n snow,
With clanging scream, a horsetail plume his crest,
The aspiring lord of Argos onward pressed.

ANTISTROPHE 1

Hovering around our city walls he waits,
His spearmen raven at our seven gates.
But ere a torch our crown of towers could burn,
Ere they had tasted of our blood, they turn

Forced by the Dragon; in their rear
The din of Ares panic-struck they hear.
For Zeus who hates the braggart's boast
Beheld that gold-bespangled host;
As at the goal the paean they upraise,
He struck them with his forkèd lightning blaze.

STROPHE 2

To earthy from earth rebounding, down he crashed;
The fire-brand from his impious hand was dashed,
As like a Bacchic reveller on he came,
Outbreathing hate and flame,
And tottered. Elsewhere in the field,
Here, there, great Ares like a war-horse wheeled,
Beneath his car down thrust
Our foemen bit the dust.

Seven captains at our seven gates
Thundered; for each a champion waits,
Each left behind his armour bright,
Trophy for Zeus who turns the fight;
Save two alone, that ill-starred pair
One mother to one father bare,
Who lance in rest, one 'gainst the other
Drave, and both perished, brother slain by brother.

ANTISTROPHE 2

Now Victory to Thebes returns again
And smiles upon her chariot-circled plain.
Now let feast and festal shout
Memories of war blot out.
Let us to the temples throng,
Dance and sing the live night long.
God of Thebes, lead thou the round,
Bacchus, shaker of the ground!

Let us end our revels here;
Lo! Creon our new lord draws near,
Crowned by this strange chance, our king.
What, I marvel, pondering?
Why this summons? Wherefore call
Us, his elders, one and all,
Bidding us with him debate,
On some grave concern of State?

Enter Creon.

CREON

Elders, the gods have righted once again
Our storm-tossed ship of state, now safe in port.
But you by special summons I convened
As my most trusted councillors; first, because
I knew you loyal to Laius of old;
Again, when Oedipus restored our State,
Both while he ruled and when his rule was o'er,
Ye still were constant to the royal line.
Now that his two sons perished in one day,
Brother by brother murderously slain,
By right of kinship to the Princes dead,
I claim and hold the throne and sovereignty.
Yet 'tis no easy matter to discern
The temper of a man, his mind and will,
Till he be proved by exercise of power;
And in my case, if one who reigns supreme
Swerve from the highest policy, tongue-tied
By fear of consequence, that man I hold,
And ever held, the basest of the base.
And I contemn the man who sets his friend
Before his country. For myself, I call
To witness Zeus, whose eyes are everywhere,
If I perceive some mischievous design

To sap the State, I will not hold my tongue;
Nor would I reckon as my private friend
A public foe, well knowing that the State
Is the good ship that holds our fortunes all:
Farewell to friendship, if she suffers wreck.
Such is the policy by which I seek
To serve the Commons and conformably
I have proclaimed an edict as concerns
The sons of Oedipus; Eteocles
Who in his country's battle fought and fell,
The foremost champion—duly bury him
With all observances and ceremonies
That are the guerdon of the heroic dead.
But for the miscreant exile who returned
Minded in flames and ashes to blot out
His father's city and his father's gods,
And glut his vengeance with his kinsmen's blood.
Or drag them captive at his chariot wheels—
For Polyneices 'tis ordained that none
Shall give him burial or make mourn for him,
But leave his corpse unburied, to be meat
For dogs and carrion crows, a ghastly sight.
So am I purposed; never by my will
Shall miscreants take precedence of true men,
But all good patriots, alive or dead,
Shall be by me preferred and honourèd.

Chorus

Son of Menoeceus, thus thou will'st to deal
With him who loathed and him who loved our State.
Thy word is law; thou canst dispose of us
The living, as thou will'st, as of the dead.

Creon

See then ye execute what I ordain.

CHORUS
On younger shoulders lay this grievous charge.

CREON
Fear not, I've posted guards to watch the corpse.

CHORUS
What further duty would'st thou lay on us?

CREON
Not to connive at disobedience.

CHORUS
No man is mad enough to court his death.

CREON
The penalty *is* death: yet hope of gain
Hath lured men to their ruin oftentimes.

Enter Guard.

GUARD
My lord, I will not make pretence to pant
And puff as some light-footed messenger.
In sooth my soul beneath its pack of thought
Made many a halt and turned and turned again;
For conscience plied her spur and curb by turns.
"Why hurry headlong to thy fate, poor fool?"
She whispered. Then again, "If Creon learn
This from another, thou wilt rue it worse."
Thus leisurely I hastened on my road;
Much thought extends a furlong to a league.
But in the end the forward voice prevailed,
To face thee. I will speak though I say nothing.
For plucking courage from despair methought,
"Let the worst hap, thou canst but meet thy fate."

CREON

What is thy news? Why this despondency?

GUARD

Let me premise a word about myself.
I neither did the deed nor saw it done,
Nor were it just that I should come to harm.

CREON

Thou art good at parry, and canst fence about
Some matter of grave import, as is plain.

GUARD

The bearer of dread tidings needs must quake.

CREON

Then, sirrah, shoot thy bolt and get thee gone.

GUARD

Well, it must out; the corpse is buried; someone
E'en now besprinkled it with thirsty dust,
Performed the proper ritual—and was gone.

CREON

What say'st thou? Who hath dared to do this thing?

GUARD

I cannot tell, for there was ne'er a trace
Of pick or mattock—hard unbroken ground,
Without a scratch or rut of chariot wheels,
No sign that human hands had been at work.
When the first sentry of the morning watch
Gave the alarm, we all were terror-stricken.
The corpse had vanished, not interred in earth,
But strewn with dust, as if by one who sought
To avert the curse that haunts the unburied dead:
Of hound or ravening jackal, not a sign.
Thereat arose an angry war of words;

Guard railed at guard and blows were like to end it,
For none was there to part us, each in turn
Suspected, but the guilt brought home to none,
From lack of evidence. We challenged each
The ordeal, or to handle red-hot iron,
Or pass through fire, affirming on our oath
Our innocence—we neither did the deed
Ourselves, nor know who did or compassed it.
Our quest was at a standstill, when one spake
And bowed us all to earth like quivering reeds,
For there was no gainsaying him nor way
To escape perdition: *Ye are bound to tell*
The King, ye cannot hide it; so he spake.
And he convinced us all; so lots were cast,
And I, unlucky scapegoat, drew the prize.
So here I am unwilling and withal
Unwelcome; no man cares to hear ill news.

Chorus

I had misgivings from the first, my liege,
Of something more than natural at work.

Creon

O cease, you vex me with your babblement;
I am like to think you dote in your old age.
Is it not arrant folly to pretend
That gods would have a thought for this dead man?
Did they forsooth award him special grace,
And as some benefactor bury him,
Who came to fire their hallowed sanctuaries,
To sack their shrines, to desolate their land,
And scout their ordinances? Or perchance
The gods bestow their favours on the bad.
No! no! I long have noted malcontents,
Who wagged their heads, and kicked against the yoke,

Misliking these my orders, and my rule.
'Tis they, I warrant, who suborned my guards
By bribes. Of evils current upon earth
The worst is money. Money 'tis that sacks
Cities, and drives men forth from hearth and home;
Warps and seduces native innocence,
And breeds a habit of dishonesty.
But they who sold themselves shall find their greed
Out-shot the mark, and rue it soon or late.
Yea, as I still revere the dread of Zeus,
By Zeus I swear, except ye find and bring
Before my presence here the very man
Who carried out this lawless burial,
Death for your punishment shall not suffice.
Hanged on a cross, alive ye first shall make
Confession of this outrage. This will teach you
What practices are like to serve your turn.
There are some villainies that bring no gain,
For by dishonesty the few may thrive,
The many come to ruin and disgrace.

GUARD

May I not speak, or must I turn and go
Without a word?—

CREON

Begone! canst thou not see
That e'en this question irks me?

GUARD

Where, my lord?
Is it thy ears that suffer, or thy heart?

CREON

Why seek to probe and find the seat of pain?

GUARD

I gall thine ears—this miscreant thy mind.

CREON

What an inveterate babbler! get thee gone!

GUARD

Babbler perchance, but innocent of the crime.

CREON

Twice guilty, having sold thy soul for gain.

GUARD

Alas! how sad when reasoners reason wrong.

CREON

Go, quibble with thy reason. If thou fail'st
To find these malefactors, thou shalt own
The wages of ill-gotten gains is death. *Exit Creon.*

GUARD

I pray he may be found. But caught or not
(And fortune must determine that) thou never
Shalt see me here returning; that is sure.
For past all hope or thought I have escaped,
And for my safety owe the gods much thanks.

STROPHE 1

CHORUS

Many wonders there be, but naught more wondrous than man:
Over the surging sea, with a whitening south wind wan,
Through the foam of the firth, man makes his perilous way;
And the eldest of deities Earth that knows not toil nor decay
Ever he furrows and scores, as his team, year in year out,
With breed of the yokèd horse, the ploughshare turneth about.

ANTISTROPHE 1

The light-witted birds of the air, the beasts of the weald and the wood

He traps with his woven snare, and the brood of the briny flood.
Master of cunning he: the savage bull, and the hart
Who roams the mountain free, are tamed by his infinite art;
And the shaggy rough-maned steed is broken to bear the bit.

STROPHE 2

Speech and the wind-swift speed of counsel and civic wit,
He hath learnt for himself all these; and the arrowy rain to fly
And the nipping airs that freeze, 'neath the open winter sky.
He hath provision for all: fell plague he hath learnt to endure;
Safe whate'er may befall: yet for death he hath found no cure.

ANTISTROPHE 2

Passing the wildest flight thought are the cunning and skill,
That guide man now to the light, but now to counsels of ill.
If he honours the laws of the land, and reveres the Gods of the State
Proudly his city shall stand; but a cityless outcast I rate
Whoso bold in his pride from the path of right doth depart;
Ne'er may I sit by his side, or share the thoughts of his heart.
What strange vision meets my eyes,
Fills me with a wild surprise?
Sure I know her, sure 'tis she,
The maid Antigone.
Hapless child of hapless sire,
Didst thou recklessly conspire,
Madly brave the King's decree?
Therefore are they haling thee?

Enter Guard bringing Antigone.

Guard

Here is the culprit taken in the act
Of giving burial. But where's the King?

Chorus

There from the palace he returns in time.

Enter Creon.

CREON

Why is my presence timely? What has chanced?

GUARD

No man, my lord, should make a vow, for if
He ever swears he will not do a thing,
His afterthoughts belie his first resolve.
When from the hail-storm of thy threats I fled
I sware thou wouldst not see me here again;
But the wild rapture of a glad surprise
Intoxicates, and so I'm here forsworn.
And here's my prisoner, caught in the very act,
Decking the grave. No lottery this time;
This prize is mine by right of treasure-trove.
So take her, judge her, rack her, if thou wilt.
She's thine, my liege; but I may rightly claim
Hence to depart well quit of all these ills.

CREON

Say, how didst thou arrest the maid, and where?

GUARD

Burying the man. There's nothing more to tell.

CREON

Hast thou thy wits? Or know'st thou what thou say'st?

GUARD

I saw this woman burying the corpse
Against thy orders. Is that clear and plain?

CREON

But how was she surprised and caught in the act?

GUARD

It happened thus. No sooner had we come,

Driven from thy presence by those awful threats,
Than straight we swept away all trace of dust,
And bared the clammy body. Then we sat
High on the ridge to windward of the stench,
While each man kept he fellow alert and rated
Roundly the sluggard if he chanced to nap.
So all night long we watched, until the sun
Stood high in heaven, and his blazing beams
Smote us. A sudden whirlwind then upraised
A cloud of dust that blotted out the sky,
And swept the plain, and stripped the woodlands bare,
And shook the firmament. We closed our eyes
And waited till the heaven-sent plague should pass.
At last it ceased, and lo! there stood this maid.
A piercing cry she uttered, sad and shrill,
As when the mother bird beholds her nest
Robbed of its nestlings; even so the maid
Wailed as she saw the body stripped and bare,
And cursed the ruffians who had done this deed.
Anon she gathered handfuls of dry dust,
Then, holding high a well-wrought brazen urn,
Thrice on the dead she poured a lustral stream.
We at the sight swooped down on her and seized
Our quarry. Undismayed she stood, and when
We taxed her with the former crime and this,
She disowned nothing. I was glad—and grieved;
For 'tis most sweet to 'scape oneself scot-free,
And yet to bring disaster to a friend
Is grievous. Take it all in all, I deem
A man's first duty is to serve himself.

CREON

Speak, girl, with head bent low and downcast eyes,
Does thou plead guilty or deny the deed?

Antigone

Guilty. I did it, I deny it not.

Creon

Sirrah, begone whither thou wilt, and thank
Thy luck that thou hast 'scaped a heavy charge.

To Antigone.

Now answer this plain question, yes or no,
Wast thou acquainted with the interdict?

Antigone

I knew, all knew; how should I fail to know?

Creon

And yet wert bold enough to break the law?

Antigone

Yea, for these laws were not ordained of Zeus,
And she who sits enthroned with gods below,
Justice, enacted not these human laws.
Nor did I deem that thou, a mortal man,
Could'st by a breath annul and override
The immutable unwritten laws of Heaven.
They were not born today nor yesterday;
They die not; and none knoweth whence they sprang.
I was not like, who feared no mortal's frown,
To disobey these laws and so provoke
The wrath of Heaven. I knew that I must die,
E'en hadst thou not proclaimed it; and if death
Is thereby hastened, I shall count it gain.
For death is gain to him whose life, like mine,
Is full of misery. Thus my lot appears
Not sad, but blissful; for had I endured
To leave my mother's son unburied there,
I should have grieved with reason, but not now.

And if in this thou judgest me a fool,
Methinks the judge of folly's not acquit.

CHORUS

A stubborn daughter of a stubborn sire,
This ill-starred maiden kicks against the pricks.

CREON

Well, let her know the stubbornest of wills
Are soonest bended, as the hardest iron,
O'er-heated in the fire to brittleness,
Flies soonest into fragments, shivered through.
A snaffle curbs the fieriest steed, and he
Who in subjection lives must needs be meek.
But this proud girl, in insolence well-schooled,
First overstepped the established law, and then—
A second and worse act of insolence—
She boasts and glories in her wickedness.
Now if she thus can flout authority
Unpunished, I am woman, she the man.
But though she be my sister's child or nearer
Of kin than all who worship at my hearth,
Nor she nor yet her sister shall escape
The utmost penalty, for both I hold,
As arch-conspirators, of equal guilt.
Bring forth the older; even now I saw her
Within the palace, frenzied and distraught.
The workings of the mind discover oft
Dark deeds in darkness schemed, before the act.
More hateful still the miscreant who seeks
When caught, to make a virtue of a crime.

ANTIGONE

Would'st thou do more than slay thy prisoner?

Creon
Not I, thy life is mine, and that's enough.

Antigone
Why dally then? To me no word of thine
Is pleasant: God forbid it e'er should please;
Nor am I more acceptable to thee.
And yet how otherwise had I achieved
A name so glorious as by burying
A brother? so my townsmen all would say,
Where they not gagged by terror. Manifold
A king's prerogatives, and not the least
That all his acts and all his words are law.

Creon
Of all these Thebans none so deems but thou.

Antigone
These think as I, but bate their breath to thee.

Creon
Hast thou no shame to differ from all these?

Antigone
To reverence kith and kin can bring no shame.

Creon
Was his dead foeman not thy kinsman too?

Antigone
One mother bare them and the self-same sire.

Creon
Why cast a slur on one by honouring one?

Antigone
The dead man will not bear thee out in this.

CREON
Surely, if good and evil fare alike.

ANTIGONE
The slain man was no villain but a brother.

CREON
The patriot perished by the outlaw's brand.

ANTIGONE
Nathless the realms below these rites require.

CREON
Not that the base should fare as do the brave.

ANTIGONE
Who knows if this world's crimes are virtues there?

CREON
Not even death can make a foe a friend.

ANTIGONE
My nature is for mutual love, not hate.

CREON
Die then, and love the dead if thou must,
No woman shall be the master while I live.

Enter Ismene.

CHORUS
Lo from out the palace gate,
Weeping o'er her sister's fate,
Comes Ismene; see her brow,
Once serene, beclouded now,
See her beauteous face o'erspread
With a flush of angry red.

CREON
Woman, who like a viper unperceived

Didst harbour in my house and drain my blood,
Two plagues I nurtured blindly, so it proves,
To sap my throne. Say, didst thou too abet
This crime, or dost abjure all privity?

Ismene

I did the deed, if she will have it so,
And with my sister claim to share the guilt.

Antigone

That were unjust. Thou would'st not act with me
At first, and I refused thy partnership.

Ismene

But now thy bark is stranded, I am bold
To claim my share as partner in the loss.

Antigone

Who did the deed the under-world knows well:
A friend in word is never friend of mine.

Ismene

O sister, scorn me not, let me but share
Thy work of piety, and with thee die.

Antigone

Claim not a work in which thou hadst no hand;
One death sufficeth. Wherefore should'st thou die?

Ismene

What would life profit me bereft of thee?

Antigone

Ask Creon, he's thy kinsman and best friend.

Ismene

Why taunt me? Find'st thou pleasure in these gibes?

ANTIGONE

'Tis a sad mockery, if indeed I mock.

ISMENE

O say if I can help thee even now.

ANTIGONE

No, save thyself; I grudge not thy escape.

ISMENE

Is e'en this boon denied, to share thy lot?

ANTIGONE

Yea, for thou chosed'st life, and I to die.

ISMENE

Thou canst not say that I did not protest.

ANTIGONE

Well, some approved thy wisdom, others mine.

ISMENE

But now we stand convicted, both alike.

ANTIGONE

Fear not; thou livest, I died long ago,
Then when I gave my life to save the dead.

CREON

Both maids, methinks, are crazed. One suddenly
Has lost her wits, the other was born mad.

ISMENE

Yea, so it falls, sire, when misfortune comes,
The wisest even lose their mother wit.

CREON

I' faith thy wit forsook thee when thou mad'st
Thy choice with evil-doers to do ill.

Ismene
What, life for me without my sister here?

Creon
Say not thy sister *here*: thy sister's dead.

Ismene
What wilt thou slay thy own son's plighted bride?

Creon
Aye, let him raise him seed from other fields.

Ismene
No new espousal can be like the old.

Creon
A plague on trulls who court and woo our sons.

Antigone
O Haemon, how thy sire dishonours thee!

Creon
A plague on thee and thy accursed bride!

Chorus
What, wilt thou rob thine own son of his bride?

Creon
'Tis death that bars this marriage, not his sire.

Chorus
So her death-warrant, it would seem, is sealed.

Creon
By you, as first by me; off with them, guards,
And keep them close. Henceforward let them learn
To live as women use, not roam at large.
For e'en the bravest spirits run away
When they perceive death pressing on life's heels.

STROPHE 1

Chorus

Thrice blest are they who never tasted pain!
If once the curse of Heaven attaint a race,
The infection lingers on and speeds apace,
Age after age, and each the cup must drain.

So when Etesian blasts from Thrace downpour
Sweep o'er the blackening main and whirl to land
From Ocean's cavernous depths his ooze and sand,
Billow on billow thunders on the shore.

ANTISTROPHE 1

On the Labdacidae I see descending
Woe upon woe; from days of old some god
Laid on the race a malison, and his rod
Scourges each age with sorrows never ending.

The light that dawned upon its last born son
Is vanished, and the bloody axe of Fate
Has felled the goodly tree that blossomed late.
O Oedipus, by reckless pride undone!

STROPHE 2

Thy might, O Zeus, what mortal power can quell?
Not sleep that lays all else beneath its spell,
Nor moons that never tire: untouched by Time,
Throned in the dazzling light
That crowns Olympus' height,
Thou reignest King, omnipotent, sublime.

Past, present, and to be,
All bow to thy decree,
All that exceeds the mean by Fate
Is punished, Love or Hate.

ANTISTROPHE 2

Hope flits about never-wearying wings;
Profit to some, to some light loves she brings,
But no man knoweth how her gifts may turn,
Till 'neath his feet the treacherous ashes burn.
Sure 'twas a sage inspired that spake this word;
If evil good appear
To any, Fate is near;
And brief the respite from her flaming sword.

Hither comes in angry mood
Haemon, latest of thy brood;
Is it for his bride he's grieved,
Or her marriage-bed deceived,
Doth he make his mourn for thee,
Maid forlorn, Antigone?

Enter Haemon.

Creon

Soon shall we know, better than seer can tell.
Learning may fixed decree anent thy bride,
Thou mean'st not, son, to rave against thy sire?
Know'st not whate'er we do is done in love?

Haemon

O father, I am thine, and I will take
Thy wisdom as the helm to steer withal.
Therefore no wedlock shall by me be held
More precious than thy loving goverance.

Creon

Well spoken: so right-minded sons should feel,
In all deferring to a father's will.
For 'tis the hope of parents they may rear
A brood of sons submissive, keen to avenge
Their father's wrongs, and count his friends their own.

But who begets unprofitable sons,
He verily breeds trouble for himself,
And for his foes much laughter. Son, be warned
And let no woman fool away thy wits.
Ill fares the husband mated with a shrew,
And her embraces very soon wax cold.
For what can wound so surely to the quick
As a false friend? So spue and cast her off,
Bid her go find a husband with the dead.
For since I caught her openly rebelling,
Of all my subjects the one malcontent,
I will not prove a traitor to the State.
She surely dies. Go, let her, if she will,
Appeal to Zeus the God of Kindred, for
If thus I nurse rebellion in my house,
Shall not I foster mutiny without?
For whoso rules his household worthily,
Will prove in civic matters no less wise.
But he who overbears the laws, or thinks
To overrule his rulers, such an one
I never will allow. Whome'er the State
Appoints must be obeyed in everything,
But small and great, just and unjust alike.
I warrant such a one in either case
Would shine, as King or subject; such a man
Would in the storm of battle stand his ground,
A comrade leal and true; but Anarchy—
What evils are not wrought by Anarchy!
She ruins States, and overthrows the home,
She dissipates and routs the embattled host;
While discipline preserves the ordered ranks.
Therefore we must maintain authority
And yield to tittle to a woman's will.
Better, if needs be, men should cast us out

Than hear it said, a woman proved his match.

CHORUS

To me, unless old age have dulled my wits,
Thy words appear both reasonable and wise.

HAEMON

Father, the gods implant in mortal men
Reason, the choicest gift bestowed by heaven.
'Tis not for me to say thou errest, nor
Would I arraign thy wisdom, if I could;
And yet wise thoughts may come to other men
And, as thy son, it falls to me to mark
The acts, the words, the comments of the crowd.
The commons stand in terror of thy frown,
And dare not utter aught that might offend,
But I can overhear their muttered plaints,
Know how the people mourn this maiden doomed
For noblest deeds to die the worst of deaths.
When her own brother slain in battle lay
Unsepulchred, she suffered not his corse
To lie for carrion birds and dogs to maul:
Should not her name (they cry) be writ in gold?
Such the low murmurings that reach my ear.
O father, nothing is by me more prized
Than thy well-being, for what higher good
Can children covet than their sire's fair fame,
As fathers too take pride in glorious sons?
Therefore, my father, cling not to one mood,
And deem not thou art right, all others wrong.
For whoso thinks that wisdom dwells with him,
That he alone can speak or think aright,
Such oracles are empty breath when tried.
The wisest man will let himself be swayed
By others' wisdom and relax in time.

See how the trees beside a stream in flood
Save, if they yield to force, each spray unharmed,
But by resisting perish root and branch.
The mariner who keeps his mainsheet taut,
And will not slacken in the gale, is like
To sail with thwarts reversed, keel uppermost.
Relent then and repent thee of thy wrath;
For, if one young in years may claim some sense,
I'll say 'tis best of all to be endowed
With absolute wisdom; but, if that's denied,
(And nature takes not readily that ply)
Next wise is he who lists to sage advice.

CHORUS

If he says aught in season, heed him, King.

To Haemon.

Heed thou thy sire too; both have spoken well.

CREON

What, would you have us at our age be schooled,
Lessoned in prudence by a beardless boy?

HAEMON

I plead for justice, father, nothing more.
Weigh me upon my merit, not my years.

CREON

Strange merit this to sanction lawlessness!

HAEMON

For evil-doers I would urge no plea.

CREON

Is not this maid an arrant law-breaker?

HAEMON

The Theban commons with one voice say, No.

Creon
What, shall the mob dictate my policy?

Haemon
'Tis thou, methinks, who speakest like a boy.

Creon
Am I to rule for others, or myself?

Haemon
A State for one man is no State at all.

Creon
The State is his who rules it, so 'tis held.

Haemon
As monarch of a desert thou wouldst shine.

Creon
This boy, methinks, maintains the woman's cause.

Haemon
If thou be'st woman, yes. My thought's for thee.

Creon
O reprobate, would'st wrangle with thy sire?

Haemon
Because I see thee wrongfully perverse.

Creon
And am I wrong, if I maintain my rights?

Haemon
Talk not of rights; thou spurn'st the due of Heaven.

Creon
O heart corrupt, a woman's minion thou!

Haemon
Slave to dishonour thou wilt never find me.

CREON
Thy speech at least was all a plea for her.

HAEMON
And thee and me, and for the gods below.

CREON
Living the maid shall never be thy bride.

HAEMON
So she shall die, but one will die with her.

CREON
Hast come to such a pass as threaten me?

HAEMON
What threat is this, vain counsels to reprove?

CREON
Vain fool to instruct thy betters; thou shall rue it.

HAEMON
Wert not my father, I had said thou err'st.

CREON
Play not the spaniel, thou a woman's slave.

HAEMON
When thou dost speak, must no man make reply?

CREON
This passes bounds. By heaven, thou shalt not rate
And jeer and flout me with impunity.
Off with the hateful thing that she may die
At once, beside her bridegroom, in his sight.

HAEMON
Think not that in my sight the maid shall die,
Or by my side; never shalt thou again
Behold my face hereafter. Go, consort

With friends who like a madman for their mate. *Exit Haemon.*

CHORUS

Thy son has gone, my liege, in angry haste.
Fell is the wrath of youth beneath a smart.

CREON

Let him go vent his fury like a fiend:
These sisters twain he shall not save from death.

CHORUS

Surely, thou meanest not to slay them both?

CREON

I stand corrected; only her who touched
The body.

CHORUS

And what death is she to die?

CREON

She shall be taken to some desert place
By man untrod, and in a rock-hewn cave,
With food no more than to avoid the taint
That homicide might bring on all the State,
Buried alive. There let her call in aid
The King of Death, the one god she reveres,
Or learn too late a lesson learnt at last:
'Tis labour lost, to reverence the dead.

STROPHE

CHORUS

Love resistless in fight, all yield at a glance of thine eye,
Love who pillowed all night on a maiden's cheek dost lie,
Over the upland folds thou roam'st, and the trackless sea.
Love the gods captive holds. Shall mortals not yield to thee?

ANTISTROPHE

Mad are thy subjects all, and even the wisest heart
Straight to folly will fall, at a touch of thy poisoned dart.
Thou didst kindle the strife, this feud of kinsman with kin,
By the eyes of a winsome wife, and the yearning her heart to win.
For as her consort still, enthroned with Justice above,
Thou bendest man to thy will, O all invincible Love.

Lo I myself am borne aside,
From Justice, as I view this bride.
(O sight an eye in tears to drown)
Antigone, so young, so fair,
Thus hurried down
Death's bower with the dead to share.

STROPHE 1

Antigone

Friends, countrymen, my last farewell I make;
My journey's done.
One last fond, lingering, longing look I take
At the bright sun.
For Death who puts to sleep both young and old
Hales my young life,
And beckons me to Acheron's dark fold,
An unwed wife.
No youths have sung the marriage song for me,
My bridal bed
No maids have strewn with flowers from the lea,
'Tis Death I wed.

Chorus

But bethink thee, thou art sped,
Great and glorious, to the dead.
Thou the sword's edge hast not tasted,
No disease thy frame hath wasted.
Freely thou alone shalt go

Living to the dead below.

ANTISTROPHE 1

ANTIGONE

Nay, but the piteous tale I've heard men tell
Of Tantalus' doomed child,
Chained upon Siphylus' high rocky fell,
That clung like ivy wild,
Drenched by the pelting rain and whirling snow,
Left there to pine,
While on her frozen breast the tears aye flow—
Her fate is mine.

CHORUS

She was sprung of gods, divine,
Mortals we of mortal line.
Like renown with gods to gain
Recompenses all thy pain.
Take this solace to thy tomb
Hers in life and death thy doom.

STROPHE 2

ANTIGONE

Alack, alack! Ye mock me. Is it meet
Thus to insult me living, to my face?
Cease, by our country's altars I entreat,
Ye lordly rulers of a lordly race.
O fount of Dirce, wood-embowered plain
Where Theban chariots to victory speed,
Mark ye the cruel laws that now have wrought my bane,
The friends who show no pity in my need!
Was ever fate like mine? O monstrous doom,
Within a rock-built prison sepulchred,
To fade and wither in a living tomb,
And alien midst the living and the dead.

STROPHE 3

CHORUS

In thy boldness over-rash
Madly thou thy foot didst dash
'Gainst high Justice' altar stair.
Thou a father's guild dost bear.

ANTISTROPHE 2

ANTIGONE

At this thou touchest my most poignant pain,
My ill-starred father's piteous disgrace,
The taint of blood, the hereditary stain,
That clings to all of Labdacus' famed race.
Woe worth the monstrous marriage-bed where lay
A mother with the son her womb had borne;
Therein I was conceived, woe worth the day,
Fruit of incestuous sheets, a maid forlorn,
And now I pass, accursèd and unwed,
To meet them as an alien there below;
And thee, O brother, in marriage ill-bestead,
'Twas thy dead hand that dealt me this death-blow.

CHORUS

Religion has her claims, 'tis true,
Let rites be paid when rites are due.
Yet is it ill to disobey
The powers who hold by might the sway.
Thou hast withstood authority,
A self-willed rebel, thou must die.

ANTIGONE

Unwept, unwed, unfriended, hence I go,
No longer may I see the day's bright eye;
Not one friend left to share my bitter woe,
And o'er my ashes heave one passing sigh.

Creon

If wail and lamentation aught availed
To stave off death, I trow they'd never end.
Away with her, and having walled her up
In a rock-vaulted tomb, as I ordained,
Leave her alone at liberty to die,
Or, if she choose, to live in solitude,
The tomb her dwelling. We in either case
Are guiltless as concerns this maiden's blood.
Only on earth no lodging shall she find.

Antigone

O grave, O bridal bower, O prison house
Hewn from the rock, my everlasting home,
Whither I go to join the mighty host
Of kinsfolk, Persephassa's guests long dead,
The last of all, of all more miserable,
I pass, my destined span of years cut short.
And yet good hope is mine that I shall find
A welcome from my sire, a welcome too,
From thee, my mother, and my brother dear;
From with these hands, I laved and decked your limbs
In death, and poured libations on your grave.
And last, my Polyneices, unto thee
I paid due rites, and this my recompense!
Yet am I justified in wisdom's eyes.
For even had it been some child of mine,
Or husband mouldering in death's decay,
I had not wrought this deed despite the State.
What is the law I call in aid? 'Tis thus
I argue. Had it been a husband dead
I might have wed another, and have borne
Another child, to take the dead child's place.
But, now my sire and mother both are dead,

No second brother can be born for me.
Thus by the law of conscience I was led
To honour thee, dear brother, and was judged
By Creon guilty of a heinous crime.
And now he drags me like a criminal,
A bride unwed, amerced of marriage-song
And marriage-bed and joys of motherhood,
By friends deserted to a living grave.
What ordinance of heaven have I transgressed?
Hereafter can I look to any god
For succour, call on any man for help?
Alas, my piety is impious deemed.
Well, if such justice is approved of heaven,
I shall be taught by suffering my sin;
But if the sin is theirs, O may they suffer
No worse ills than the wrongs they do to me!

CHORUS

The same ungovernable will
Drives like a gale the maiden still.

CREON

Therefore, my guards who let her stay
Shall smart full sore for their delay.

ANTIGONE

Ah, woe is me! This word I hear
Brings death most near.

CHORUS

I have no comfort. What he saith,
Portends no other thing than death.

ANTIGONE

My fatherland, city of Thebes divine,
Ye gods of Thebes whence sprang my line,
Look, puissant lords of Thebes, on me;

The last of all your royal house ye see.
Martyred by men of sin, undone.
Such meed my piety hath won. *Exit Antigone.*

STROPHE 1

CHORUS

Like to thee that maiden bright,
Danaë, in her brass-bound tower,
Once exchanged the glad sunlight
For a cell, her bridal bower.
And yet she sprang of royal line,
My child, like thine,
And nursed the seed
By her conceived
Of Zeus descending in a golden shower.
Strange are the ways of Fate, her power
Nor wealth, nor arms withstand, nor tower;
Nor brass-prowed ships, that breast the sea
From Fate can flee.

ANTISTROPHE 1

Thus Dryas' child, the rash Edonian King,
For words of high disdain
Did Bacchus to a rocky dungeon bring,
To cool the madness of a fevered brain.
His frenzy passed,
He learnt at last
'Twas madness gibes against a god to fling.
For once he fain had quenched the Maenad's fire;
And of the tuneful Nine provoked the ire.

STROPHE 2

By the Iron Rocks that guard the double main,
On Bosporus' lone strand,
Where stretcheth Salmydessus' plain

In the wild Thracian land,
There on his borders Ares witnessèd
The vengeance by a jealous step-dame ta'en
The gore that trickled from a spindle red,
The sightless orbits of her step-sons twain.

ANTISTROPHE 2

Wasting away they mourned their piteous doom,
The blasted issue of their mother's womb.
But she her lineage could trace
To great Erecththeus' race;
Daughter of Boreas in her sire's vast caves
Reared, where the tempest raves,
Swift as his horses o'er the hills she sped;
A child of gods; yet she, my child, like thee,
By Destiny
That knows not death nor age—she too was vanquishèd.

Enter Teiresias and Boy.

Teiresias

Princes of Thebes, two wayfarers as one,
Having betwixt us eyes for one, we are here.
The blind man cannot move without a guide.

Creon

Why tidings, old Teiresias?

Teiresias

I will tell thee;
And when thou hearest thou must heed the seer.

Creon

Thus far I ne'er have disobeyed thy rede.

Teiresias

So hast thou steered the ship of State aright.

CREON
I know it, and I gladly own my debt.

TEIRESIAS
Bethink thee that thou treadest once again
The razor edge of peril.

CREON
What is this?
Thy words inspire a dread presentiment.

TEIRESIAS
The divination of my arts shall tell.
Sitting upon my throne of augury,
As is my wont, where every fowl of heaven
Find harbourage, upon mine ears was borne
A jargon strange of twitterings, hoots, and screams,
So knew I that each bird at the other tare
With bloody talons, for the whirr of wings
Could signify naught else. Perturbed in soul,
I straight essayed the sacrifice by fire
On blazing altars, but the God of Fire
Came not in flame, and from the thigh bones dripped
And sputtered in the ashes a foul ooze;
Gall-bladders cracked and spurted up: the fat
Melted and fell and left the thigh bones bare.
Such are the signs, taught by this lad, I read—
As I guide others, so the boy guides me—
The frustrate signs of oracles grown dumb.
O King, thy willful temper ails the State,
For all our shrines and altars are profaned
By what has filled the maw of dogs and crows,
The flesh of Oedipus' unburied son.
Therefore the angry gods abominate
Our litanies and our burnt offerings;

Therefore no birds trill out a happy note,
Gorged with the carnival of human gore.
O ponder this, my son. To err is common
To all men, but the man who having erred
Hugs not his errors, but repents and seeks
The cure, is not a wastrel nor unwise.
No fool, the saw goes, like the obstinate fool.
Let death disarm thy vengeance. O forbear
To vex the dead. What glory wilt thou win
By slaying twice the slain? I mean thee well;
Counsel's most welcome if I promise gain.

CREON

Old man, ye all let fly at me your shafts
Like anchors at a target; yea, ye set
Your soothsayer on me. Peddlers are ye all
And I the merchandise ye buy and sell.
Go to, and make your profit where ye will,
Silver of Sardis change for gold of Ind;
Ye will not purchase this man's burial,
Not though the wingèd ministers of Zeus
Should bear him in their talons to his throne;
Not e'en in awe of prodigy so dire
Would I permit his burial, for I know
No human soilure can assail the gods;
This too I know, Teiresias, dire's the fall
Of craft and cunning when it tries to gloss
Foul treachery with fair words for filthy gain.

TEIRESIAS

Alas! doth any know and lay to heart—

CREON

Is this the prelude to some hackneyed saw?

TEIRESIAS

How far good counsel is the best of goods?

CREON

True, as unwisdom is the worst of ills.

TEIRESIAS

Thou art infected with that ill thyself.

CREON

I will not bandy insults with thee, seer.

TEIRESIAS

And yet thou say'st my prophesies are frauds.

CREON

Prophets are all a money-getting tribe.

TEIRESIAS

And kings are all a lucre-loving race.

CREON

Dost know at whom thou glancest, me thy lord?

TEIRESIAS

Lord of the State and saviour, thanks to me.

CREON

Skilled prophet art thou, but to wrong inclined.

TEIRESIAS

Take heed, thou wilt provoke me to reveal
The mystery deep hidden in my breast.

CREON

Say on, but see it be not said for gain.

TEIRESIAS

Such thou, methinks, till now hast judged my words.

CREON

Be sure thou wilt not traffic on my wits.

TEIRESIAS

Know then for sure, the coursers of the sun
Not many times shall run their race, before
Thou shalt have given the fruit of thine own loins
In quittance of thy murder, life for life;
For that thou hast entombed a living soul,
And sent below a denizen of earth,
And wronged the nether gods by leaving here
A corpse unlaved, unwept, unsepulchred.
Herein thou hast no part, nor e'en the gods
In heaven; and thou usurp'st a power not thine.
For this the avenging spirits of Heaven and Hell
Who dog the steps of sin are on thy trail:
What these have suffered thou shalt suffer too.
And now, consider whether bought by gold
I prophesy. For, yet a little while,
And sound of lamentation shall be heard,
Of men and women through thy desolate halls;
And all thy neighbor States are leagues to avenge
Their mangled warriors who have found a grave
I' the maw of wolf or hound, or wingèd bird
That flying homewards taints their city's air.
These are the shafts, that like a bowman I,
Provoked to anger, loosen at thy breast,
Unerring, and their smart thou shalt not shun.
Boy, lead me home, that he may vent his spleen
On younger men, and learn to curb his tongue
With gentler manners than his present mood. *Exit Teiresias.*

CHORUS

My liege, that man hath gone, foretelling woe.
And, O believe me, since these grizzled locks

Were like the raven, never have I known
The prophet's warning to the State to fail.

Creon

I know it too, and it perplexes me.
To yield is grievous, but the obstinate soul
That fights with Fate, is smitten grievously.

Chorus

Son of Menoeceus, list to good advice.

Chorus

What should I do. Advise me. I will heed.

Chorus

Go, free the maiden from her rocky cell;
And for the unburied outlaw build a tomb.

Creon

Is that your counsel? You would have me yield?

Chorus

Yea, king, this instant. Vengeance of the gods
Is swift to overtake the impenitent.

Creon

Ah! what a wrench it is to sacrifice
My heart's resolve; but Fate is ill to fight.

Chorus

Go, trust not others. Do it quick thyself.

Creon

I go hot-foot. Bestir ye one and all,
My henchmen! Get ye axes! Speed away
To yonder eminence! I too will go,
For all my resolution this way sways.
'Twas I that bound, I too will set her free.
Almost I am persuaded it is best

To keep through life the law ordained of old. *Exit Creon.*

STROPHE 1

Chorus

Thou by many names adored,
Child of Zeus the God of thunder,
Of a Theban bride the wonder,
Fair Italia's guardian lord;

In the deep-embosomed glades
Of the Eleusinian Queen
Haunt of revellers, men and maids,
Dionysus, thou art seen.

Where Ismenus rolls his waters,
Where the Dragon's teeth were sown,
Where the Bacchanals thy daughters
Round thee roam,
There thy home;
Thebes, O Bacchus, is thine own.

ANTISTROPHE 1

Thee on the two-crested rock
Lurid-flaming torches see;
Where Corisian maidens flock,
Thee the springs of Castaly.

By Nysa's bastion ivy-clad,
By shores with clustered vineyards glad,
There to thee the hymn rings out,
And through our streets we Thebans shout,
All hail to thee
Evoë, Evoë!

STROPHE 2

Oh, as thou lov'st this city best of all,
To thee, and to thy Mother levin-stricken,

In our dire need we call;
Thou see'st with what a plague our townsfolk sicken.
Thy ready help we crave,
Whether adown Parnassian heights descending,
Or o'er the roaring straits thy swift was wending,
Save us, O save!

ANTISTROPHE 2

Brightest of all the orbs that breathe forth light,
Authentic son of Zeus, immortal king,
Leader of all the voices of the night,
Come, and thy train of Thyiads with thee bring,
Thy maddened rout
Who dance before thee all night long, and shout,
Thy handmaids we,
Evoë, Evoë!

Enter Messenger.

MESSENGER

Attend all ye who dwell beside the halls
Of Cadmus and Amphion. No man's life
As of one tenor would I praise or blame,
For Fortune with a constant ebb and rise
Casts down and raises high and low alike,
And none can read a mortal's horoscope.
Take Creon; he, methought, if any man,
Was enviable. He had saved this land
Of Cadmus from our enemies and attained
A monarch's powers and ruled the state supreme,
While a right noble issue crowned his bliss.
Now all is gone and wasted, for a life
Without life's joys I count a living death.
You'll tell me he has ample store of wealth,
The pomp and circumstance of kings; but if

These give no pleasure, all the rest I count
The shadow of a shade, nor would I weigh
His wealth and power 'gainst a dram of joy.

CHORUS
What fresh woes bring'st thou to the royal house?

MESSENGER
Both dead, and they who live deserve to die.

CHORUS
Who is the slayer, who the victim? speak.

MESSENGER
Haemon; his blood shed by no stranger hand.

CHORUS
What mean ye? by his father's or his own?

MESSENGER
His own; in anger for his father's crime.

CHORUS
O prophet, what thou spakest comes to pass.

MESSENGER
So stands the case; now 'tis for you to act.

CHORUS
Lo! from the palace gates I see approaching
Creon's unhappy wife, Eurydice.
Comes she by chance or learning her son's fate?

Enter Eurydice.

EURYDICE
Ye men of Thebes, I overheard your talk.
As I passed out to offer up my prayer
To Pallas, and was drawing back the bar
To open wide the door, upon my ears

There broke a wail that told of household woe.
Stricken with terror in my handmaids' arms
I fell and fainted. But repeat your tale
To one not unacquaint with misery.

MESSENGER

Dear mistress, I was there and will relate
The perfect truth, omitting not one word.
Why should we gloze and flatter, to be proved
Liars hereafter? Truth is ever best.
Well, in attendance on my liege, your lord,
I crossed the plain to its utmost margin, where
The corse of Polyneices, gnawn and mauled,
Was lying yet. We offered first a prayer
To Pluto and the goddess of cross-ways,
With contrite hearts, to deprecate their ire.
Then laved with lustral waves the mangled corse,
Laid it on fresh-lopped branches, lit a pyre,
And to his memory piled a mighty mound
Of mother earth. Then to the caverned rock,
The bridal chamber of the maid and Death,
We sped, about to enter. But a guard
Heard from that godless shrine a far shrill wail,
And ran back to our lord to tell the news.
But as he nearer drew a hollow sound
Of lamentation to the King was borne.
He groaned and uttered then this bitter plaint:
"Am I a prophet? miserable me!
Is this the saddest path I ever trod?
'Tis my son's voice that calls me. On press on,
My henchmen, haste with double speed to the tomb
Where rocks down-torn have made a gap, look in
And tell me if in truth I recognise
The voice of Haemon or am heaven-deceived."

So at the bidding of our distraught lord
We looked, and in the craven's vaulted gloom
I saw the maiden lying strangled there,
A noose of linen twined about her neck;
And hard beside her, clasping her cold form,
Her lover lay bewailing his dead bride
Death-wedded, and his father's cruelty.
When the King saw him, with a terrible groan
He moved towards him, crying, "O my son
What hast thou done? What ailed thee? What mischance
Has reft thee of thy reason? O come forth,
Come forth, my son; thy father supplicates."
But the son glared at him with tiger eyes,
Spat in his face, and then, without a word,
Drew his two-hilted sword and smote, but missed
His father flying backwards. Then the boy,
Wroth with himself, poor wretch, incontinent
Fell on his sword and drove it through his side
Home, but yet breathing clasped in his lax arms
The maid, her pallid cheek incarnadined
With his expiring gasps. So there they lay
Two corpses, one in death. His marriage rites
Are consummated in the halls of Death:
A witness that of ills whate'er befall
Mortals' unwisdom is the worst of all. *Exit Eurydice.*

Chorus

What makest thou of this? The Queen has gone
Without a word importing good or ill.

Messenger

I marvel too, but entertain good hope.
'Tis that she shrinks in public to lament
Her son's sad ending, and in privacy
Would with her maidens mourn a private loss.

Trust me, she is discreet and will not err.

CHORUS

I know not, but strained silence, so I deem,
Is no less ominous than excessive grief.

MESSENGER

Well, let us to the house and solve our doubts,
Whether the tumult of her heart conceals
Some fell design. It may be thou art right:
Unnatural silence signifies no good.

CHORUS

Lo! the King himself appears.
Evidence he with him bears
'Gainst himself (ah me! I quake
'Gainst a king such charge to make)
But all must own,
The guilt is his and his alone.

STROPHE 1

CREON

Woe for sin of minds perverse,
Deadly fraught with mortal curse.
Behold us slain and slayers, all akin.
Woe for my counsel dire, conceived in sin.
Alas, my son,
Life scarce begun,
Thou wast undone.
The fault was mine, mine only, O my son!

CHORUS

Too late thou seemest to perceive the truth.

STROPHE 2

CREON

By sorrow schooled. Heavy the hand of God,

Thorny and rough the paths my feet have trod,
Humbled my pride, my pleasure turned to pain;
Poor mortals, how we labour all in vain!

Enter Second Messenger.

SECOND MESSENGER

Sorrows are thine, my lord, and more to come,
One lying at thy feet, another yet
More grievous waits thee, when thou comest home.

CREON

What woe is lacking to my tale of woes?

SECOND MESSENGER

Thy wife, the mother of thy dead son here,
Lies stricken by a fresh inflicted blow.

ANTISTROPHE 1

CREON

How bottomless the pit!
Does claim me too, O Death?
What is this word he saith,
This woeful messenger? Say, is it fit
To slay anew a man already slain?
Is Death at work again,
Stroke upon stroke, first son, then mother slain?

CHORUS

Look for thyself. She lies for all to view.

ANTISTROPHE 2

CREON

Alas! another added woe I see.
What more remains to crown my agony?
A minute past I clasped a lifeless son,
And now another victim Death hath won.
Unhappy mother, most unhappy son!

SECOND MESSENGER

Beside the altar on a keen-edged sword
She fell and closed her eyes in night, but erst
She mourned for Megareus who nobly died
Long since, then for her son; with her last breath
She cursèd thee, the slayer of her child.

STROPHE 3

CREON

I shudder with affright
O for a two-edged sword to slay outright
A wretch like me,
Made one with misery.

SECOND MESSENGER

'Tis true that thou wert charged by the dead Queen
As author of both deaths, hers and her son's.

CREON

In what wise was her self-destruction wrought?

SECOND MESSENGER

Hearing the loud lament above her son
With her own hand she stabbed herself to the heart.

STROPHE 4

CREON

I am the guilty cause. I did the deed,
Thy murderer. Yea, I guilty plead.
My henchmen, lead me hence, away, away,
A cipher, less than nothing; no delay!

CHORUS

Well said, if in disaster aught is well:
His past endure demand the speediest cure.

ANTISTROPHE 3

CREON

Come, Fate, a friend at need,
Come with all speed!
Come, my best friend,
And speed my end!
Away, away!
Let me not look upon another day!

CHORUS

This for the morrow; to us are present needs
That they whom it concerns must take in hand.

CREON

I join your prayer that echoes my desire.

CHORUS

O pray not, prayers are idle; from the doom
Of fate for mortals refuge is there none.

ANTISTROPHE 4

CREON

Away with me, a worthless wretch who slew
Unwitting thee, my son, thy mother too.
Whither to turn I know not; every way
Leads but astray,
And on my head I feel the heavy weight
Of crushing Fate.

CHORUS

Of happiness the chiefest part
Is a wise heart:
And to defraud the gods in aught
With peril's fraught.
Swelling words of high-flown might
Mightily the gods do smite.
Chastisement for errors past

Wisdom brings to age at last.

Notes on the Text

1–9 The play opens at dawn before the palace of Thebes, the morning after the battle. "The weird of Oedipus" means the fate of Oedipus: weird is an old English word for destiny. "our Captain-General" at 7 is Creon; Antigone does not call him king.

12–14 "double fratricide" is the brothers' killing of each other. The "Argive leaguers" are the besieging army from Argos, which Adrastus, father-in-law of Polyneices, had raised against Thebes.

19–29 Eteocles receives full funeral honors; Polyneices is left "tombless and unwept, a feast For kites." Greek literature treats leaving a body unburied as a grave insult, and burying and mourning the family dead was above all women's work.

36 Stoning, the penalty first announced, would be a public death at the hands of many. Creon later changes the sentence (729–733).

49–56 Ismene's summary of the family history: Oedipus blinded himself, Jocasta hanged herself, and the two brothers killed each other in one day.

59–67 Ismene's case is fear, not cowardice alone: two women left alone against a ruler. "the golden mean" is Storr's phrase for keeping within limits, a value the Chorus also praises (573).

73 "A sinless sinner" compresses Antigone's paradox. By breaking Creon's law she believes she keeps a holier one.

76 "the eternal laws of Heaven" announces the theme she will defend before Creon at 417–424.

99–112 The Chorus enters singing a hymn to the sunrise and the city's deliverance. Its songs are arranged in strophes and antistrophes, stanzas that match each other in rhythm. Dirce's fountain is the spring of Thebes, named after Dirce, whose body, in legend, was thrown into

it. The "argent shields" are the silver-white shields of the Argive army, pictured as a white eagle screaming over the land.

117 "the Dragon" stands for Thebes. Its founder Cadmus killed a dragon and sowed its teeth, and armed men sprang from the ground, so Thebes is the Dragon's city (compare 1063).

119–127 One attacker, not named here, comes on boasting with a torch in his hand and is struck down by Zeus's lightning.

131–138 Seven captains attacked the seven gates of Thebes. Six were stopped by Theban champions; the seventh pairing was the two brothers, who killed each other.

145–146 Bacchus, also called Dionysus, is the god of Thebes, the son of Zeus and the Theban princess Semele. The last great choral song of the play (1054–1093) is a prayer to him.

155–156 The "ship of state" is Creon's favorite image (181–182). Teiresias turns it back on him at 931.

159–166 Creon claims the throne "By right of kinship": he is the brother of Jocasta and the nearest male relative of the dead princes.

174–182 Creon's principle: no friend before the country. Antigone will reverse it, putting kin before the city.

185–199 Athens itself sometimes refused burial in its soil to traitors and temple robbers, so the first audience could hear parts of this decree as lawful. Leaving the body for dogs and crows went further, in the manner of epic warriors abusing an enemy's corpse.

216–229 The Guard is the play's one comic voice, a plain soldier who argues with himself on the road. His humor makes the danger of Creon's temper clearer.

238–251 The first burial: only "thirsty dust," no tracks, no digging. A token covering with earth was enough to count as burial. Readers have long asked who did it, and why Antigone then returns (391–399).

270–281 The elders suggest the gods may be at work. Creon refuses to believe the gods could honor a man who came to burn their temples.

286–290 Creon blames money for every evil and assumes his guards were bribed. He will make the same charge against Teiresias, who throws it back at him (993–994).

315 "Alas! how sad when reasoners reason wrong." The Guard's retort is one of the play's sharpest lines on Creon's judgment.

324–345 The ode on human ingenuity (Greek lines 332–375). The Greek word translated "wonders" (*deinos*) can also mean terrible or strange, so the praise carries a shadow from the first line.

342–345 The ode's last turn: whoever honors "the laws of the land" keeps the city standing, while the bold wrongdoer is "a cityless outcast." It is aimed at the unknown rule-breaker, but by the end it fits Creon as well.

377–399 The second burial. A dust storm hides the sky; Antigone cries like a bird robbed of its nestlings, scatters dry dust and pours a "lustral stream," a purifying libation, three times over the body. "he fellow" at 382 is a slip for his fellow.

404–407 The Guard's closing words, "A man's first duty is to serve himself," give a frank, small-minded view of duty against which both Antigone and Creon stand out.

417–424 Antigone's defense. Laws that "were not born today nor yesterday" outrank a ruler's decree. Aristotle cited this speech as an appeal to a law common to all and grounded in nature. Justice herself is pictured seated among the gods of the dead (418–419).

437–438 "kicks against the pricks" is a proverb: an ox that kicks against the goad only hurts itself.

439–444 Creon answers with images of hardened iron and a curbed horse. Taming by the bit echoes the ode at 334.

449–450 "I am woman, she the man." Creon's fear of being beaten by a woman returns at 490 and 634–636.

451–452 Creon admits Antigone is his "sister's child," and speaks of all who worship at his own hearth, even as he condemns his kin.

488 "My nature is for mutual love, not hate." The line states her whole idea of family in a few words.

504–526 Antigone refuses to let Ismene share the blame. Her coldness can be read as pride, or as a way of saving her sister's life, and the lines support both.

535–540 The first mention that Antigone is betrothed to Haemon. Line 539 is the only time she speaks his name.

549–564 The Chorus sings of the curse that runs through generations. The Labdacidae are the descendants of Labdacus, grandfather of Oedipus. The Etesian winds are the steady northerly winds that blow over the Aegean in summer.

579–582 The words in italics are an old saying: when evil looks like good, ruin is near.

589–636 Creon's speech to his son. Order in the household proves fitness to rule the city, and "Anarchy" is the worst of evils. "Zeus the God of Kindred" (615), protector of family bonds, is invoked with contempt.

639–678 Haemon's speech is a model of tactful persuasion: he praises his father, reports what the city says, and asks him to bend like trees in a flood or a sailor in a gale.

681–720 The quick exchange of single lines shows the argument breaking down from reason into insult. At 692 Haemon names the charge of tyranny: "A State for one man is no State at all."

706 "one will die with her" is meant as a threat of suicide. Creon hears it as a threat against himself.

729–736 Creon changes the sentence from stoning to burial alive with a little food, so that the city avoids the taint of killing her directly. She will die, but no hand will strike her.

737–752 A short ode to Love, the power that drives Haemon against his father. The elders themselves are moved to tears as Antigone is led out.

753–764 Antigone's lament. Acheron, a river of the underworld, stands for the world of the dead. She mourns the wedding she will never have and calls Death her bridegroom.

771–778 Niobe, daughter of Tantalus, boasted that her children made her greater than the goddess Leto; Apollo and Artemis killed them all, and Niobe was turned to stone on Mount Sipylus, where the rock was said to weep.

797–800 The elders blame her boldness and her father's inheritance. "a father's guild" at 800 is a misprint; the sense is guilt.

801–812 Antigone faces her parents' incest. The brother "in marriage ill-bestead" is Polyneices, whose marriage to the daughter of Adrastus brought the Argive army and, at last, her death.

832–845 Antigone's last speech. Persephassa is Persephone, queen of the dead beside Hades. She recalls washing and burying her parents and Eteocles.

846–857 The much debated argument that a husband or child could be replaced but not a brother (Greek lines 904–920). It closely resembles a story in Herodotus, and Goethe wished it could be proved spurious.

862–869 Antigone's faith wavers. If the gods approve Creon's justice, she will learn her sin; if not, she wishes Creon the same suffering.

884–896 Danaë, shut by her father in a bronze chamber, was visited by Zeus as a shower of gold and bore the hero Perseus.

897–905 "Dryas' child" is Lycurgus, king of the Edonians in Thrace, who insulted Dionysus and was punished. In this telling he is shut in a rock; other versions give him a crueler end. The "tuneful Nine" are the Muses.

906–923 The story of Cleopatra, daughter of Boreas, the North Wind, and granddaughter of Erechtheus, an early king of Athens. After her husband Phineus remarried, her two sons were blinded. Here the stepmother does it with a spindle; in another version Phineus blinds them himself on her false accusation.

924–926 Teiresias, the blind prophet of Thebes, was famed for understanding the voices of birds. He is led by a boy, as he says, "As I guide others, so the boy guides me."

938–953 Two kinds of omen fail: the birds tear each other, and the sacrifice will not burn. The gods refuse the city's offerings.

962–966 Teiresias offers Creon an honorable way out: everyone errs, but only the obstinate fool refuses to repent.

976 Sardis, capital of the kingdom of Lydia, was known for the wealth of its kings and for early gold and silver coinage. Ind is India.

1003–1010 The prophecy: Creon will give "the fruit of thine own loins," his son, in return for the living girl he has entombed and the dead man he has left unburied. He has reversed the order of the living and the dead.

1020–1023 The other Argive dead also lie unburied, and their cities will seek revenge. In legend, the sons of the Seven later attacked Thebes again and took it.

1034–1053 Creon yields at last. The speech at 1038, printed with the label CHORUS, is plainly Creon's: he asks what to do. His order of action is telling: as the Messenger later reports (1135–1146), he buries the dead man first and only then goes to free the living.

1054–1067 A joyful hymn to Dionysus. His mother was the Theban princess Semele; the "Eleusinian Queen" is Demeter, honored at Eleusis near Athens; Ismenus is a river of Thebes; the Dragon's teeth recall Cadmus. "thy Mother levin-stricken" (1079) is Semele, killed by Zeus's lightning (levin) while carrying Dionysus.

1068–1077 These scenes lie on and around Parnassus near Delphi, named at 1083. "Corisian" is Storr's spelling for Corycian, the nymphs of a sacred cave on the mountain; Castaly is the Castalian spring. "Evoë" is the ritual cry of the god's worshipers. "All hall" at 1076 is a slip for all hail. The Thyiads (1089) were women who worshiped Dionysus in ecstatic rites.

1094–1111 The Messenger addresses the city of Cadmus, its founder, and Amphion, whose music was said to move the stones into place for its

walls. He begins with the thought that fortune raises and casts down every life, so no one can read what any life will bring.

1138–1144 Pluto is Hades, god of the dead. The "goddess of cross-ways" is Hecate, a goddess of the underworld worshiped where roads meet. Creon washes the body, burns it and raises a mound.

1160–1183 "craven's" at 1160 is a slip; the sense is cavern's. Antigone has hanged herself with a linen noose, as her mother did. Haemon spits in his father's face, strikes at him and misses, then turns the sword on himself.

1203–1215 Creon's lament. He takes the whole blame: "The fault was mine, mine only."

1237 Megareus was an elder son of Creon and Eurydice who died in the war against the Seven.

1254 The line is garbled in this text. The sense is that present troubles need the quickest cure.

1272–1279 The closing words of the Chorus. Wisdom is the chief part of happiness, but it comes to the proud only through suffering, and late.

Glossary

Acheron: a river of the underworld in Greek myth; its name can stand for the world of the dead.

Anent: concerning, about.

Antistrophe: the stanza of a choral song that answers a strophe and matches its rhythm.

Argive: from Argos, the city whose army attacked Thebes.

Augury: reading the future from the flight and cries of birds.

Bacchus: a name for Dionysus, god of wine and ecstasy and the god of Thebes.

Cadmus: founder of Thebes, who sowed a dragon's teeth from which armed men sprang.

Chorus: the group of singers and dancers in a Greek play; here, the elders of Thebes.

Corse: corpse.

Dirce: the spring of Thebes, named after Dirce, whose body in legend was thrown into it.

Edict: a public order issued by a ruler; Creon's decree forbidding burial.

Etesian winds: steady northerly summer winds over the Aegean Sea.

Evoë: the ritual cry of the worshipers of Dionysus.

Gloze: to flatter or explain away.

Guerdon: reward.

Hades: god of the dead, also called Pluto; also his kingdom.

Hecate: a goddess of the underworld, worshiped at crossroads.

Labdacidae: the royal house of Thebes, descendants of Labdacus, grandfather of Oedipus.

Levin: lightning.

Libation: a drink offering poured out to the gods or the dead.

Liefest: most willingly, most gladly.

Lustral: purifying, used in rites of cleansing.

Maenad: a frenzied woman worshiper of Dionysus.

Malison: a curse.

Muses: the nine goddesses of poetry, song and the arts, the "tuneful Nine."

Nathless: nevertheless.

Paean: a song of triumph or thanksgiving.

Parnassus: the mountain near Delphi, sacred to Apollo and the Corycian nymphs.

Persephassa: Storr's form of Persephone, queen of the underworld.

Rede: advice, counsel.

Seer: a prophet who reads the will of the gods.

Sooth: truth; "in sooth" means truly.

Strophe: a stanza of a choral song, answered by an antistrophe.

Thyiads: women who celebrated the ecstatic rites of Dionysus.

Trow: to believe or suppose.

Ween: to think or suppose.

Weird: fate, destiny.

Seven Days of Conscience

Day 1: Law

Read: 155–215

Practice: Write down three rules you follow at work or at home that you did not make yourself. Beside each, note who made it and what it protects.

Evening question: Which of those rules would you break, and what would it take?

Day 2: Conscience

Read: 408–436

Practice: Name one belief you hold so firmly that no order could change it. Write two sentences explaining where that belief came from.

Evening question: How do you tell the difference between conscience and simple stubbornness in yourself?

Day 3: Family

Read: 1–98

Practice: Think of a time when you and a brother, sister or close friend disagreed about what loyalty required. Write a short account from the other person's side.

Evening question: Was Ismene wrong to refuse, and was Antigone wrong to scorn her?

Day 4: The City

Read: 324–353

Practice: List five things your town or community has built that you rely on every day. Choose one and find out who keeps it running.

Evening question: What do you owe the community that makes your life possible, and where does that debt end?

Day 5: Pride

Read: 437–490

Practice: Recall a recent argument in which you held your ground. Write down the strongest point the other person made.

Evening question: When does holding firm become refusing to see?

Day 6: Listening

Read: 589–720

Practice: In one conversation today, let the other person finish completely before you answer, and repeat back what you heard before you give your view.

Evening question: What did Haemon say that Creon most needed to hear, and why could he not hear it?

Day 7: Grief

Read: 1184–1279

Practice: Write a few lines in honor of someone you have lost, or someone whose loss you fear, and say what they gave you.

Evening question: The last lines say wisdom comes late. What have you learned only through loss?

Questions for Reading Groups and Classes

1. Antigone calls her act a "sinless sinner" (73). Is it possible to be right and still be guilty?
2. Ismene says, "I perforce obey The powers that be" (65–66). Is her position cowardly, sensible, or something else?
3. Creon's first speech (155–203) makes the city "the good ship that holds our fortunes all." What is persuasive in it, and where does it begin to go wrong?
4. Why do you think Sophocles gives the Guard humor? What would the play lose without him?
5. The body is buried twice. Who do you think scattered the first dust, and does it matter?
6. Read the ode on human ingenuity (324–345). Does it praise humanity, warn it, or both? Whom does the last stanza fit best by the end of the play?
7. Antigone appeals to laws that "were not born today nor yesterday" (423). What might such laws be today, and who decides what they say?
8. Creon keeps returning to the fear of being beaten by a woman (450, 490, 634–636). How much of his decision is about law, and how much about pride?
9. Why does Antigone refuse to let Ismene share her death (504–526)? Is she cruel, protective or both?

10. Haemon argues that "A State for one man is no State at all" (692). How does the argument between father and son fall apart, line by line?
11. In her final speech Antigone says she would not have done this for a husband or a child (846–857). Does this weaken her case or reveal something true about her?
12. The Chorus moves from loyalty to Creon to pleading with him to yield. When does it change, and why?
13. Teiresias tells Creon that "the man who having erred Hugs not his errors, but repents" is not unwise (963–965). Why does Creon yield only after the prophecy, not after the argument?
14. Creon goes to bury Polyneices before freeing Antigone. What does that order of action tell us?
15. Eurydice speaks only once and then leaves in silence. What does her silence add to the ending?
16. Hegel saw the play as a clash of two legitimate claims. Mandela saw Antigone as a freedom fighter. Which reading persuades you more, and why?
17. Is there a hero in this play? If so, who, and what makes them one?

Chronology

c. 496 BC · Sophocles born at Colonus, near Athens.

480 BC · Aged about sixteen, Sophocles leads the song of thanksgiving after the Greek victory at Salamis.

468 BC · Sophocles wins his first victory at the Dionysia, defeating Aeschylus.

467 BC · Aeschylus presents Seven Against Thebes, the war that precedes Antigone.

442 BC · Sophocles serves as one of the treasurers of the allies' tribute to Athens.

c. 442–440 BC · Probable first performance of Antigone; the exact year is uncertain.

441/440 BC · Sophocles elected one of the ten generals, serving with Pericles in the Samian revolt.

413 BC · After the Sicilian disaster, Sophocles becomes one of ten commissioners for the city's recovery.

409 BC · Sophocles' Philoctetes performed, when he is about ninety.

406 BC · Death of Sophocles at Athens.

401 BC · Oedipus at Colonus produced after his death.

AD 1841 · Mendelssohn's music for Antigone performed at Potsdam.

AD 1891 · R. C. Jebb publishes his edition and prose translation of Antigone.

AD 1912 · Storr's translation appears in the first Sophocles volume of the Loeb Classical Library.

AD 1919 · Death of Francis Storr.

AD 1944 · Jean Anouilh's Antigone first staged in occupied Paris.

AD 1948 · Bertolt Brecht's adaptation premieres at Chur, Switzerland.

AD 2004 · Seamus Heaney's The Burial at Thebes published and staged at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin.

Further Reading

R. C. Jebb (ed. and tr.), Sophocles: The Antigone (1891). The great Victorian edition, with a close prose translation; free in the Perseus Digital Library.

Francis Storr (tr.), Oedipus the King and Oedipus at Colonus (1912). The other two Theban plays in the same translation, free at Project Gutenberg.

Aeschylus, Seven Against Thebes, tr. Herbert Weir Smyth (Loeb, 1922–1926). The war that leads to Antigone; free in the Perseus Digital Library.

Euripides, The Phoenician Women, tr. E. P. Coleridge (1891). Another version of the brothers' war and its aftermath; free in the Perseus Digital Library.

Edith Hamilton, The Greek Way (1930). A warm, readable introduction to the Greek outlook and its tragic poets.

Bernard Knox, The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy (1964). A classic study of the stubborn Sophoclean hero, Antigone included.

Robert Fagles (tr.), The Three Theban Plays (Penguin Classics, 1984). A modern verse translation with Bernard Knox's introductions and notes.

George Steiner, Antigones (1984). How the Antigone story has been retold and rethought in Western literature, art and thought.

Martha C. Nussbaum, The Fragility of Goodness (1986). A philosopher's study of luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy, with a chapter on Antigone and conflicting obligations.

Nelson Mandela, Long Walk to Freedom (1994). His autobiography, which recalls playing Creon on Robben Island.

Judith Butler, Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death (2000). A modern philosophical rethinking of Antigone and family.

Seamus Heaney, The Burial at Thebes (2004). A poet's vivid modern version of the play.

P. J. Finglass, Sophocles (2019). A short, current scholarly survey of the poet, his career and the dating of his plays.

Edition Notes

The text: Francis Storr's translation of the Antigone, first published in the Loeb Classical Library in 1912, reproduced from the Standard Ebooks edition, with Storr's own argument of the play. Line numbers count the lines of this translation. Storr died in 1919; the translation is in the public domain worldwide.

The apparatus: The introduction, notes, glossary, practices, questions, chronology and reading list were drafted with the help of artificial intelligence and checked by hand against the text and against published sources. Every quotation in them matches the text printed in this book word for word, and every fact was checked against a published source before it was printed. The publisher keeps a record of the source checked for each fact. No quotation, fact or story was invented. The translation itself is unchanged.

Locators: the numbers in the margin of the text are the numbers the notes, glossary, practice and questions refer to. They are explained in the note on the translation.

Corrections: readers who find an error are invited to report it to the publisher. Corrections will appear in later editions.