

Sophocles: Antigone

The F. Storr translation (1912) for the Loeb Classical Library
Edited with introduction and footnotes by E. E. Garvin (2013).

Introduction

Sophocles

Sophocles was born at Colonus, a small village just to the north-west of Athens, in 496/5 BC. The details of his family and his youth are obscure, but it seems probable that his father, Sophilus (or Sophilus) operated factories or hired out skilled slaves. What is certain is that his family was not aristocratic but was well off; certain only because Sophocles was afforded the best education as a youth. He was only fifteen when he and his family fled to Salamis to witness the occupation of Athens by Xerxes, and after the Battle of Salamis Sophocles was a member of a boys' chorus which performed at the dedication of the trophy celebrating the victory.

His first of eighteen victories in the City Dionysia came in 468 with a play now lost, possibly called *Triptolemus*. Of his one hundred and twenty three productions only seven survive.

Sophocles' most famous plays are often grouped under the epithet 'The Theban Plays' and include (in the chronology of the myths themselves) *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*. While these plays appear to form a trilogy, each is the sole surviving play from three separate trilogies - nine plays in all, six of which are lost. The earliest of these trilogies was produced in 440 and featured *Antigone*.

The Thebaid:

The Thebaid, or Theban Cycle, is as complex a series of myths as any: The context of the play *Antigone* is as follows:

Diodorus iv.64.1 - 65.9

[64.1] Laius the king of Thebes,¹ having married Iocasta the daughter of Creon,² and for a long time being without children, at length consulted the oracle whether he ever should have any issue. Pythia the priestess³ gave this answer from the oracle; that it would be unfortunate for him to have a son because any son that he should afterwards beget would kill him, and involve his whole family in most dreadful calamities. But somewhat forgetful of what the oracle had declared, he afterwards begat a son, but bored his feet through with an iron, and ordered him to be exposed in the open fields; [2] and for that reason he was afterwards called Oedipus. The servants that took him into their custody for that purpose were unwilling to leave him so to the wide world, but gave him to Polybus' wife,⁴ who was barren.

When Oedipus had grown to adulthood, Laius decided to inquire of the oracle, to know what had become of the exposed infant; and Oedipus at the same time being by someone informed of the design against him when he was so very young, took a journey to Delphi, to inquire of the Oracle who were his true parents: it so fell out, that both of them meeting one another upon the road in Phocis, Laius in a proud and haughty manner commanded Oedipus to get out of the way; who thereupon was so enraged, that he fell upon Laius and killed him, not knowing him to be his father.

[3] About that time they report that Sphinx, a double shaped monster, came to Thebes, and put forth a riddle to be resolved by any that could: which none being able to do, by reason of the difficulty of the thing, she destroyed many: at length she became more moderate, and offered a reward to such as should unfold it, that he should marry Iocasta, and with her enjoy the kingdom of Thebes.⁵ When none else could expound the riddle, Oedipus was the only man that did it. The riddle propounded by Sphinx was this: what creature is that which is two-footed, three-footed and four-footed? [4] When all others were puzzled, Oedipus interpreted it to be a man; who when he is an infant, creeps upon all-fours; when he grows older, goes upright upon his two feet; but when he is old, he is three-footed, using a staff to support him, by reason of his weakness. Whereupon Sphinx, (as it is reported), threw herself down headlong from the top of the rock: and Oedipus married his mother unknown to him, and begat of her two sons, Eteocles and Polynices, and two daughters, Antigone and Ismene.

[65.1] The sons being grown up to man's estate, came to the knowledge of the wickedness committed in their family, and therefore, for the foulness of the deed, confined Oedipus, so that he should not stir abroad; and his sons took upon them the government, first

¹ Laius was the son of Labdacus and great-great grandson of Cadmus.

² An error: Iocaste, sometimes called Epicaste, was the daughter of Menoeceus and the sister of Creon.

³ The Pythia is the priestess of Apollo at Delphi.

⁴ Polybus was the king of Corinth, his wife was Merope.

⁵ A better description of the Sphinx is offered by Apollodorus (iii.5.8).

agreeing together to rule yearly one after another by turns. Eteocles, the elder brother, reigned first, but when his year was out, he refused to give way to his brother: [2] Polynices demanded the government according to the covenant between them, but his brother turned to him the deaf ear; upon which Polynices fled to Adrastus king of Argos. At this time Tydeus the son of Oeneus, king of Calydonia, had fled out of Aetolia to Argos, for killing his nephews Alcahous and Lycopous.

[3] Adrastus kindly entertained them both, and by command of the oracle, gave his daughter Argeia in marriage to Polynices, and Deipyle to Tydeus, The young men being both in great honour and esteem, and highly approved of by the king for their virtuous qualifications, Adrastus promised to restore them both to their own countries. [4] Resolving therefore first to restore Polynices, he sent Tydeus on an embassy to Eteocles to debate the matter with him: in his return, it is said, he was set upon by fifty men, employed by Eteocles to way-lay him; all whom, notwithstanding, he slew, and came safe, beyond all seeming probability to Argos. Adrastus being informed of this piece of treachery, prepared all things necessary for the war, and procured Capaneus,⁶ Hippomedon,⁷ and Parthenopaus, the son of Atalanta, the daughter of Schoineus, to join with him. [5] Polynices also endeavoured to persuade Amphiaraus the soothsayer, to go along with them to the war against Thebes; but he, foreknowing he should fall in that war if he went, refused. Polynices therefore presented Amphiaraus's wife with a golden chain, (which, as is reported, was bestowed upon Harmonia by Aphrodite), to persuade her husband to join with them as one of their confederates. [6] There being some controversy about that time between Adrastus and Amphiaraus concerning the kingdom, they agreed to refer the whole matter in difference, both as to the kingdom and the war, to the decisive judgment of Eriphyle the sister of Adrastus, and wife to Amphiaraus. Hereupon she gave judgment for Adrastus, and that her husband should join with the rest in the war against Thebes. Amphiaraus, (although he thought he had been betrayed by his wife), yet prepared to go along with the other captains: but before he went, commanded his son Alcmaon, that after he was dead, he should kill Eriphyle [7] who afterwards executed his father's commands, by murdering his mother; but was some time after so terrified in conscience with the horridness of the fact, that he went stark mad. But to proceed; Adrastus, Polynices, and Tydeus, together with four other captains, Amphiarius, Capaneus, Hippomedon, and Parthenopaus, with a great army, marched against Thebes; [8] where Eteocles and Polynices killed each other. Capaneus, in attempting to scale the walls, was likewise slain. The earth opened and swallowed up Amphiaraus and his chariot together, and so he was never more seen. [9] All the rest of the generals likewise perished in this war except Adrastus, and a great slaughter there was among the soldiers, whom the Thebans would not suffer to be carried off the ground; so that Adrastus was forced to leave them unburied and return to Argos. The bodies of the slain thus lying unhurried at Cadmeia, none daring to inter them, the Athenians (always commendable above others for their humanity) took care of this matter, and buried them all.

⁶ Capaneus of Argos, The son of Hipponous and Laodice.

⁷ The son of Aristomachus.

Antigone

Prologos (1 -99):

Outside the Gates of Thebes.

ANTIGONE:

Ismene, sister of my blood and heart,
 Do you see how Zeus would in our lives fulfil
 The Fate of Oedipus, a world of heartache!
 For what of pain, affliction, outrage, shame, 5⁸
 Is lacking in our fortunes, yours and mine?
 And now this proclamation of to-day
 Made by our Captain-General to the State,
 What can its purport be? Did you hear and heed,
 Or are you deaf when friends are banned as foes? 10

ISMENE:

To me, Antigone, no word of friends
 Has come, or glad or grievous, since we two
 Were deprived of both our brothers in one day
 By double fratricide; and since in the night
 Our Argive leaguers fled, no later news 15
 Has reached me, to inspire or deject.

ANTIGONE:

I knew it was so, and that is why I asked you here
 Beyond the gates, to whisper it in your ear.

ISMENE:

What is it? Some dark secret troubles you? 20

ANTIGONE:

What but the thought of our two brothers dead,
 The one by Creon graced with funeral rites,
 The other disappointed? Eteocles
 He has consigned to earth (as rumour has it)
 With obsequies that use and wont ordain, 25
 So gracing him among the dead below.
 But Polyneices, a dishonoured corpse,
 (So by report the royal edict runs)
 No man may bury him or make lament
 But must leave him tombless and unwept, a feast

⁸ Line numbers are close approximations - the English translation does not, and cannot, conform strictly to the Greek simply because it is not possible to translate poetry in one language to poetry in another without taking some license.

For vultures to scent and swoop upon. 30
 Such is the edict (if report speak true)
 Of Creon, our most noble Creon, aimed
 At you and me, yes me too; and soon
 He will be here to promulgate, for such
 As have not heard, his mandate; it is in truth 35
 No passing mood, for the edict says
 Whoever transgresses shall be stoned to death.
 So stands it with us; now it is up to you to show
 If your actions match a noble birth.

ISMENE:
 But how, my rash, fond sister, in such case
 Can I do anything to help or harm? 40

ANTIGONE:
 Tell me now, will you help me or not. Decide!

ISMENE:
 In what bold venture? What are you planning?

ANTIGONE:
 Will you help me recover the corpse?

ISMENE:
 You would bury him even when it is forbidden to the city?

ANTIGONE:
 Yes. He is my bother and, even if you deny him, yours. 45
 No one will say that *I* betrayed my brother!

ISMENE:
 Will you persist, though Creon has forbid?

ANTIGONE:
 What right has he to keep me from my own?

ISMENE:
 Remind yourself, sister, of our father's fate,
 Abhorred, dishonoured, self-convinced of sin, 50
 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, 55
 Self-slaughtered, both the slayer and the slain.
 Remind yourself, sister, we are left alone;
 Shall we not perish most wretched of all,
 If in defiance of the law we cross
 A monarch's will? Weak women, think of that 60
 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 65
 The dead to pardon. I perforce obey
 The powers that be. It is foolishness, I believe,
 To overstep one's place in anything.

ANTIGONE:
 I will ask no more; indeed, even if you were willing, 70
 I would not welcome such a fellowship.
 Go your own way; I will bury him myself.
 How sweet to die in such employ, to rest,
 Sister and brother linked in sibling devotion,
 A sinless sinner, banned awhile on earth,
 But by the dead commended; and with them 75
 I shall abide for ever. As for you,
 Scorn, if you will, 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 80
 To lay my dearest brother in the grave.

ISMENE:
 My poor, dear sister, how I fear for you!

ANTIGONE:
 Oh, waste no fears on me; look to yourself.

ISMENE:
 At least let no one learn of your intent,
 But keep it secret, and so will I. 85

ANTIGONE:

No! Tell it, sister; you will be the more despised
If you fail to proclaim it to all the town.

ISMENE:

Your heart is hot for cold work.

ANTIGONE:

I please those whom it is most fitting to please.

ISMENE:

If you succeed; but you are doomed to fail. 90

ANTIGONE:

When strength fails me, yes, but not before.

ISMENE:

But, if the venture is hopeless, why try?

ANTIGONE:

Sister, be quiet, or I shall hate you soon,
And the dead will hate you too, with cause.
Say I am mad and give my madness rein 95
To wreck itself; the worst that can befall
Is but to die an honourable death.

ISMENE:

Have your own way then; it is a mad endeavour,
Yet to those who love you, you are dear as ever.

Exit both: Ismene to the palace, Antigone stage right.

Parodos: Ode to Thebes (100 - 161)

CHORUS (Strophe⁹ 1):

Sunbeam, of all that ever dawned upon 100
Our seven-gated Thebes the brightest ray,
Oh eye of golden day,
How fair your light over Dirce's fountain shone,
Speeding upon their headlong homeward course,
Far quicker than they came, the Argive force;

⁹ A Strophe is, literally, a *turn*. In theatre the *strophe* is the 'turn' the chorus takes around the stage as they sing their part.

Putting to flight
 The warriors of the white shield.¹⁰
 Against our land the proud invader came 110
 To vindicate fell Polyneices' claim.
 Like to an eagle swooping low,
 On wings white as new fallen snow,
 With clanging armour, a horsetail plume his crest, 115
 The aspiring lord of Argos onward pressed.

CHORUS (Antistrophe¹¹ 1)
 Hovering around our city walls he waits,
 His spearmen raven at our seven gates,
 But before a torch our crown of towers could burn, 120
 Before they had tasted of our blood, they turn
 Forced by the Dragon; in their rear
 The din of Ares panic-struck they hear. 125
 For Zeus who hates the braggart's boast
 Beheld that gold-bespangled host;
 As at the goal the paeon they upraise,
 He struck them with his forked lightning blaze. 130

CHORUS (Strophe 2)
 To earth from earth rebounding, down he crashed;
 The fire-brand from his impious hand was dashed, 135
 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; 140
 Beneath his car down thrust
 Our foemen bit the dust.

Seven captains at our seven gates
 Thundered; for each a champion waits,
 For each left behind his armour bright,
 Trophy for Zeus who turns the fight;
 Save two alone, that ill-starred pair 145
 One mother to one father bare,
 Who lance in rest, one against the other
 Drove and both perished, brother slain by brother.

¹⁰ See Aeschylus, *Seven against Thebes* 89, where the Argives are also referred to as holding white shields.

¹¹ The Antistrophe is the 'turn back'.

CHORUS (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. 150
 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! 155
 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, 160
 Bidding us with him debate,
 On some grave concern of State?

1st Episode (162 - 331)

Enter Creon

CREON:
 Elders, the gods have righted once again 162
 Our storm-tossed ship of state, now safe in port.
 But you by special summons I convened 165
 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 over,
 You still were constant to the royal line.
 Now that his two sons perished in one day, 170
 Both polluted by a brother's murder,¹²
 By right of kinship to the Princes dead,
 I claim and hold the throne and sovereignty.
 Yet, it is no easy matter to discern
 The temper of a man, his mind and character, 175
 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, 180
 And ever held, the basest of the base.
 And I condemn the man who sets his friend

¹² This line was changed by the editor, deeming it important to maintain *miasmati* in the translation.

Before his country. For myself, I call
 To witness Zeus, whose eyes are everywhere,
 If I perceive some mischievous design 185
 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,
 And only by sailing straight are true friends made.¹³ 190
 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, 195
 The foremost champion - duly bury him
 With all observances and ceremonies
 That are the recompense for the heroic dead.
 But for Polyneices, the miscreant exile who returned
 Minded in flames and ashes to blot out 200
 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 it is ordained that none
 Shall give him burial or make mourn for him,
 But leave his corpse unburied, to be meat 205
 For Dogs and carrion crows, a ghastly sight.
 So am I purposed; never by my will
 Shall traitors take precedence over honest men,
 But all good patriots, alive or dead,
 Shall be by me preferred and honoured. 210

CHORUS:
 Son of Menoeceus, thus is your will, to deal
 With him who loathed and him who loved our State.
 Your word is law; you can dispose of us
 The living, as you will, as of the dead.

CREON:
 See then, that you execute what I ordain. 215

CHORUS:
 On younger shoulders lay this grievous charge.

¹³ The retranslation here is to maintain the 'ship of state' metaphor.

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

CHORUS:
What further duty would you lay on us?

CREON:
Not to connive at disobedience.

CHORUS:
No man is mad enough to court his death. 220

CREON:
The penalty is death: yet hope of gain
Has lured men to their ruin often enough.

Enter Guard

GUARD:
My lord, I will not make pretence to pant
And puff as some light-footed messenger.
In truth, my soul beneath its pack of thought 225
Made many a halt and turned and turned again;
For conscience plied her spur and curb by turns.
"Why hurry headlong to your fate, poor fool!"
She whispered. Then again, "If Creon learns
This from another, you will regret it more." 230
And so a quick trip I completed at a slow pace;
And that is how a short road becomes a long journey.
But in the end the forward voice prevailed,
To face you. I will speak, even if my report brings ill.
For plucking courage from despair I thought, 235
'Let the worst happen, you can but meet your fate.'

CREON:
What is your news? Why this despondency?

GUARD:
Let me premise a word about myself.
I neither did the deed nor saw it done,
Nor would it be just that I should come to harm. 240

CREON:
 You stammer, it seems, to shield you from your task
 So it must be something important.

GUARD:
 So important that it is a burden to deliver.

CREON:
 Then, sir, unload it and be free.

GUARD:
 Okay, I'll just say it; someone has correctly 245
 sprinkled the corpse with dry dust,
 Performed the proper ritual - and was gone.

CREON:
 What are you saying? Who has dared to do this thing?

GUARD:
 I cannot tell, for there was never a trace
 Of pick or shovel, the ground unblemished, 250
 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 was hidden, not interred in earth, 255
 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.¹⁴
 Thereat arose an angry war of words;
 Guard railed at guard and blows were like to end it, 260
 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 265
 Our innocence-we neither did the deed
 Ourselves, nor know who did or compassed it.
 Our quest was at a standstill, when one spoke
 And bowed us all to earth like quivering reeds, 270
 For there was no gainsaying him nor way
 To escape perdition: You are bound to tell

¹⁴ Adams (1955: 51-2) suggests that this "first burial" could not have been done by Antigone and that Sophocles had deliberately set the impression that the gods have intervened.

The King, you cannot hide it; so he spoke.
 And he convinced us all; so lots were cast,
 And I, unlucky scapegoat, drew the prize. 275
 So here I am unwilling and withal
 Unwelcome; no man cares to hear bad news.

CHORUS:
 My king, whether this be divinely motivated
 I have wondered from the outset.

CREON:
 Be quiet, before your talk drives me to anger
 I am inclined to think you dote in your old age. 280
 Is it not arrant folly to pretend
 That gods would have a thought for this dead man?
 Did they really 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 perhaps
 The gods bestow their favours on the wicked.
 No! No! From the beginning I noticed some citizens
 Who voiced their objections and questioned my edict 290
 Refusing even, to submit to my rule.
 It is they, I warrant, who suborned my guards
 By bribes. But they who sold themselves shall find their greed
 Out-shot the mark, and rue it soon or late.
 Of evils current upon earth 295
 The worst is money.¹⁵ Money it is that sacks
 Cities, and drives men forth from hearth and home:
 Warps and seduces native innocence, 300
 And breeds a habit of dishonesty.
 Yea, as I still revere the dread of Zeus,
 By Zeus I swear, unless you find and bring
 Before my presence here the very man 305
 Who carried out this lawless burial,
 Death for your punishment shall not suffice.
 Hanged on a cross, alive you first shall make
 Confession of this outrage. This will teach you
 What practices are like to serve your turn. 310
 There are some villainies that bring no gain,
 For by dishonesty the few may thrive,

¹⁵ The editor has rearranged the lines of the translation such that line 295 of the Greek original, "Of evils current upon earth/ The worst in money" appears in the correct location.

The many come to ruin and disgrace.

GUARD:

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

315

CREON:

Go! The sound of your voice pains me!

GUARD:

Is the pain in your ears, or your heart?

CREON:

Why seek to probe and find the seat of pain?

GUARD:

I hurt your ears; the culprit hurts your heart.

CREON:

What an inveterate babbler! Go!

320

GUARD:

Babbler perhaps, but innocent of the crime.

CREON:

Twice guilty, having sold your soul for gain!

GUARD:

How sad it is when the judge wrongly judges.

CREON:

Go, and toy with reason all you want.
But if you don't find these malefactors, you will know
The profit from dishonest pay is death.
[Exit Creon]

325

GUARD:

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

330

First Stasimon: the Ode to Man (332 - 383)

CHORUS (Strophe 1)

There are many wonders, but none such as man: 332
 Who overcomes waves driven by the south wind,
 To extend his dominion across the seas; 335
 Even the eldest of the gods, Earth
 Immortal and unwearied, she too
 Man bends to his service
 Year after year with horse and plough 340

CHORUS (Antistrophe 1)

The birds of the air,
 The beasts of the wood and fish in the sea 345
 He traps with his woven snare.
 He masters with art and cunning
 The dear who roam the mountains 350
 He tames the wild horse and breaks it to the bit,
 Even the mountain bull he masters with his wit.

CHORUS (Strophe 2)

Speech and the wind-swift speed of counsel and 355
 civic wit,
 He has learnt for himself all these; and the arrowy
 rain to fly
 And the nipping airs that freeze, 'neath the open
 winter sky.
 He has provision for all: Fell plague he has 360
 learned to endure;
 Safe whatever may befall: yet for death he has
 found no cure.

CHORUS (Antistrophe 2)

Passing the wildest flight of thought are the cunning 365
 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 370
 Whoso bold in his pride from the path of right dose
 depart;
 Ne'er may I sit by his side, or share the thoughts of
 his heart. 375

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 Oedipus, 380
 Did you recklessly conspire,
 Madly brave the King's decree?
 Therefore are they haling thee?

2nd Episode (384 - 582)

Enter Guard bringing Antigone

GUARD:
 Here is the culprit taken in the act
 Of giving burial. But where's the King: 385

CHORUS:
 There from the palace he returns in time.

Enter Creon.

CREON:
 Why is my presence timely? What has happened?

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. 390
 When from the hail-storm of your threats I fled
 I swore you would not see me here again;
 But the wild rapture of a glad surprise
 Intoxicates, and so I'm here forsworn. 395
 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 you will.
 She's thine, my king; but I may rightly claim
 Hence to depart well quit of all these ills. 400

CREON:
 Say, how did you arrest the girl, and where?

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

CREON:

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

GUARD:

I saw this woman burying the corpse
Against your orders. Is that clear and plain? 405

CREON:

But how was she surprised and caught in the act?

GUARD:

It happened thus. No sooner had we come,
Driven from your presence by those awful threats,
Than straight we swept away all trace of dust, 410
And bared the clammy body. Then we sat

High on the ridge to windward of the stench,
While each man kept his fellow alert and rated
Roundly the sluggard if he chanced to nap.

So all night long we watched, until the sun 415
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 420
And waited till the heaven-sent plague should pass.
At last it ceased, and lo! there stood this girl.

A piercing cry she uttered, sad and shrill,
As when the mother bird beholds her nest 425
Robbed of its nestlings; even so the girl

Wailed as she saw the body stripped and bare,
And cursed the ruffians who had done this deed.
Quickly she gathered handfuls of dry dust,

Then, holding high a well-wrought brazen urn, 430
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, 435
She disowned nothing. I was glad - and grieved;

For it is most sweet to escape 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. 440

CREON:
Speak, girl, with head bent low and downcast eyes,
Do you plead guilty or deny the deed?

ANTIGONE:
Guilty. I did it, I deny it not.

CREON (to the Guard):
You, sir, can go where you like, and thank
Your luck that you have escaped a heavy charge. 445

(to Antigone)
Now answer this plain question, yes or no,
Did you know about my decree?

ANTIGONE:
I knew. Everyone knew; how could I not have?

CREON:
And yet you were bold enough to break the law?

ANTIGONE:
Yes, for these laws were not ordained by Zeus, 450
And she who sits enthroned with gods below,
Justice, enacted not these human laws.
Nor did I deem that you, a mortal man,
Could by a breath annul and override
The immutable unwritten laws of Heaven. 455
They were not born to-day nor yesterday;
They die not; and none knows 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 know that I must die, 460
Even had you 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 465
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 you judge me a fool,
I think it is a fool who judges. 470

CHORUS:

A stubborn daughter of a stubborn sire,
She knows not to yield to trouble.

CREON:

Well, let her know the most stubborn of wills
Are soon bent, as the hardest iron, 475
Over-heated in the fire to brittleness,
Flies soonest into fragments, shivered through.
A bit will tame the wildest horse, and he
Who in subjection lives must be meek.
But this proud girl, in insolence well-schooled, 480
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 485
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. 490
Bring forth the other; even now I saw her
Within the palace, frenzied and distraught.
The workings of the mind often discover
Dark deeds in darkness schemed, before the act. 495
More hateful still the miscreant who seeks
When caught, to make a virtue of a crime.

ANTIGONE:

Would you do more than slay your prisoner?

CREON:

Not I; your life is mine, and that's enough.

ANTIGONE:

Why dally then? To me no word of yours
Is pleasant: God forbid it ever should please; 500
Nor am I more acceptable to you.
And yet how otherwise had I achieved
A name so glorious as by burying
A brother? So my townsmen all would say,
Were they not gagged by terror. Manifold 505

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 thinks but you.

ANTIGONE:
Clearly they hold their tongues for fear of you.

CREON:
Have you no shame to differ from all these? 510

ANTIGONE:
To honour flesh and blood can bring no shame.

CREON:
Was his dead foeman not your kinsman too?

ANTIGONE:
One mother bore them and the same father.

CREON:
Why cast a slur on one by honouring one?

ANTIGONE:
The dead man will not bear you out in this. 515

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:
Nonetheless, the realms below require the rites.

CREON:
Not that the base should fare as do the brave. 520

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 love you must;
No woman shall be master while I live. 525

(Enter Ismene)

CHORUS:
Lo from out the palace gate,
Weeping over her sister's fate,
Comes Ismene; see her brow,
Once serene, beclouded now,
See her beauteous face overspread
With a flush of angry red. 530

CREON:
Woman, who like a viper unperceived
Did harbour in my house and drain my blood,
Two plagues I nurtured blindly, so it proves,
To sap my throne. Say, did you too abet
This crime, or do you deny complicity? 535

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

ANTIGONE:
That is not true. You would not act with me
At first, and I refused your partnership.

ISMENE:
But now that you are in a sea of troubles 540
I am not ashamed to stay by you.

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
Your work of piety, and with you die. 545

ANTIGONE:

Claim not a work in which you had no hand;
One death is enough. Why should you die?

ISMENE:

What would life profit me bereft of you?

ANTIGONE:

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

ISMENE:

Do you enjoy mocking me like this? 550

ANTIGONE:

It is a sad mockery, if indeed I mock.

ISMENE:

O say if I can help you even now.

ANTIGONE:

No, save yourself; I grudge not your escape.

ISMENE:

Is even this boon denied, to share your fate?

ANTIGONE:

Yes, for you chose life, and I to die. 555

ISMENE:

Thou cannot say that I did not protest.

ANTIGONE:

Well, some approved your wisdom, others mine.

ISMENE:

But now we stand convicted, both alike.

ANTIGONE:

Fear not; you live, I died long ago,
Then when I gave my life to save the dead. 560

CREON:
Both women, I think, are crazed. One suddenly
Has lost her wits, the other was born mad.

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

CREON:
Trully; your wits left you when you made
Your choice to join with criminals in crime. 565

ISMENE:
What life for me without my sister here?

CREON:
Your sister isn't here; she is already dead.

ISMENE:
What, will you slay your own son's bride?

CREON:
Why not, let him find other fields to plough.

ISMENE:
No one can replace her. 570

CREON:
I want no evil wife for my son.

ANTIGONE:
O Haemon, how your father dishonours you!

CREON:
A plague on you and your accursed betrothal!

CHORUS:
What, will you rob your own son of his bride?

CREON:
It is death that bars this marriage, not his father. 575

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, not to roam at large.
 For even the bravest spirits run away 580
 When they perceive death pressing on life's heels.

Second Stasimon (583 - 630)

CHORUS (Strophe 1):

Thrice blest are they who never tasted pain!
 Once the curse of Heaven falls upon a clan,
 The infection spreads to woman and man, 585
 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, 590
 Billow on billow thunders on the shore.¹⁶

CHORUS (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 595
 Scourges each age with sorrows never ending.¹⁷
 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. 600
 O Oedipus, by reckless pride undone!

CHORUS (Strophe 2)

Your might, O Zeus, what mortal power can quell? 605
 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. 610
 You reign King, omnipotent, sublime.
 Past, present, and to be,
 All bow to your decree,
 All that exceeds the mean by Fate
 Is punished, Love or Hate.

¹⁶ The metaphor here, not well captured in the translation, is that a great sin poisons the whole family, generation after generation, like an earthquake which causes a tsunami which spreads destruction as it rolls over the lands.

¹⁷ There are several suggestions in our sources that the curse on the family predates Oedipus and may be fault of Labdacus - but the editor is unable to confirm a source.

CHORUS (Antistrophe 2)

Hope flits about on never-wearying wings; 615
 Profit to some, to some light loves she brings,
 But no man knows how her gifts may turn,
 Till 'neath his feet the treacherous ashes burn.
 Sure 'twas a sage inspired that spoke this word; 620
 If evil good appear
 To any, Fate is near;
 And brief the respite from her flaming sword. 625
 Here comes Haemon in angry mood
 Youngest and last of your sons;
 Is it for his bride he's grieved,
 Of her marriage-bed deceived,
 Does he make his mourn for thee,
 Maid forlorn, Antigone? 630

3rd Episode (631 - 780).

CREON:

Soon shall we know, better than seer can tell. 631
 Learning my fixed decree concerning your bride,
 You intend not, son, to rage against your father?
 Know not whatever we do is done in love?

HAEMON:

O father, I am yours, and I will take 635
 Your wisdom as the helm to steer withal.
 Therefore no wedlock shall by me be held
 More precious than your loving governance.

CREON:

Well spoken: so right-minded sons should feel, 640
 In all deferring to a father's will.
 For it is the hope of parents they may rear
 An obedient brood of sons, keen to avenge
 Their father's wrongs, and count his friends their own. 645
 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. 650
 For what can wound so surely to the quick

As a false friend? So spurn and cast her off,
 Bid her go find a husband with the dead.
 For since I caught her openly rebelling, 655
 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? 660
 For that man who is good and just in his own home,
 Will prove a good man in the State as well.
 But he who overbears the laws, or thinks
 To overrule his rulers, such a person
 I never will allow. Whomever the State 665
 Appoints, must be obeyed in everything,
 Both small and great, just and unjust alike.
 I warrant that such a person in either case
 Would govern and be governed well; such a man
 Would in the storm of battle stand his ground, 670
 A comrade real 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. 675
 Therefore we must maintain authority
 And yield no tittle to a woman's will.
 Better, if need be, men should cast us out
 Than hear it said, a woman proved his match. 680

CHORUS:

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

HAEMON:

Father, the gods implant in mortal men
 Reason, the choicest gift bestowed by heaven.
 It is not for me to say your err, nor 685
 Would I arraign your 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 your frown,
 And dare not utter aught that might offend, 690
 But I can overhear their muttered complaints,

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 695
 Unburied, she suffered not his corpse
 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. 700
 O father, nothing is by me more prized
 Than thy well-being, for what higher good
 Can children covet than their father's good name,
 As fathers too take pride in glorious sons?
 Therefore, my father, cling not to one mood,
 And think not you are right and all others wrong. 705
 For whoever 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. 710
 See how the trees beside a stream in flood
 Save, if they yield to force, each spray unbanned,
 But by resisting perish root and branch.
 The mariner who keeps his mainsheet taut, 715
 And will not slacken in the gale, is like
 To sail with thwarts reversed, keel uppermost.
 Relent then and repent of your wrath;
 For, if one young in years may claim some sense,
 I'll say it is best of all to be endowed 720
 With absolute wisdom; but, if that's denied,
 (And nature takes not readily that ply)
 Next wise is he who listens to sage advice.

CHORUS:

If he says anything in season, heed him, King.
 (to *Haemon*)
 You listen to you father, too; both have spoken well. 725

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:
Is it merit to reward lawbreakers? 730

HAEMON:
I wouldn't plead for a lawbreaker.

CREON:
Is not this woman an errant lawbreaker?

HAEMON:
The Theban people, with one voice, say no.

CREON:
Now you say that the mob dictates my policy?

HAEMON:
It is you, I think, who talks like a boy. 735

CREON:
Am I to rule for others, or myself?

HAEMON:
A State for one man is no State at all.

CREON:
By tradition, the State is his who rules it.

HAEMON:
As monarch of a desert you would do well.

CREON:
I think this boy maintains the woman's cause. 740

HAEMON:
Only if you are the woman. My thoughts are for you.

CREON:
Traitor! Why do you go against your own father?

HAEMON:
Because I see you making a mistake.

CREON:
And am I wrong, if I maintain my rights?

HAEMON:
You haven't the right to trample divine laws. 745

CREON:
Your mind has been corrupted! You are this woman's slave!

HAEMON:
But not a slave to my own passions.

CREON:
Your words, at least, are all for her.

HAEMON:
And for you and me, and for the gods below.

CREON:
As long as she lives you will not marry her. 750

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

CREON:
Would you threaten me?

HAEMON:
What threat is this, to warn against a bad plan?

CREON:
You will regret trying to advise your betters.

HAEMON:
If you were not my father, I would say you were insane. 755

CREON:
Woman's slave - don't question me.

HAEMON:
You wish that you only can speak
But entertain no one speaking in reply.

CREON:
Is that a fact? Well, by Olympus, know this too,
You won't taunt and insult me with impunity.

(to the guards)
 Bring out the hateful thing that she may die 760
 Right now, in front of her bridegroom.

HAEMON:
 Don't think she will die in my sight,
 Or by my side. And don't think you will
 See my face ever again. Enjoy the company 765
 Of those who tolerate your madness.
 (*Exit Haemon*)

CHORUS:
 Your son has gone, my king, in angry haste.
 Fell is the wrath of youth beneath a smart.

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

CHORUS:
 Surely, you don't mean to slay them both? 770

CREON:
 No, you're right, 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, 775
 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
 Hades, the one god she worships,
 Or learn too late a lesson learned at last:
 It is a waste of effort to worship Hades. 780

Third Stasimon (781 - 875)

CHORUS (Strophe):
 Love resistless in fight, all yield at a glance of your eye, 781
 Love who pillowed all night on a maiden's cheek does lie,
 Over the upland folds you roam, and the trackless sea. 785

Love the gods captive holds. Shall mortals not yield to thee? 790

CHORUS (Antistrophe):

Mad are your subjects all, and even the wisest heart
 Straight to folly will fall, at a touch of your poisoned dart.
 You did 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,
 You bended man to your will, O all invincible Love. 800

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 805
 Death's bower with the dead to share.

ANTIGONE: (Strophe 1)

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, 810

And beckons me to Acheron's dark fold,¹⁸
 An unwed wife.
 No youths have sung the marriage song for me,
 My bridal bed
 No maids have strewn with flowers from the lea,
 It is Death I wed. 815

CHORUS:

But do you think you are sped,
 Great and glorious, to the dead.
 You the sword's edge have not tasted,
 No disease your frame has wasted. 820
 Freely you alone shall go
 Living to the dead below.

ANTIGONE (Antistrophe I):

Nay, but the piteous tale I've heard men tell
 Of Tantalus' doomed child, 825
 Chained upon Sipylus' high rocky fell,

¹⁸ Acheron usually refers to the river which leads to the underworld. The name comes from the myth of Acheron, the son of Helios and Gaea, who helped the Titans in their war with the gods and was turned into the river as punishment.

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; 830
 Her fate is mine.¹⁹

CHORUS:

She was sprung of gods, divine,
 Mortals we of mortal line.
 Like renown with gods to gain
 Recompenses all your pain.
 Take this solace to thy tomb 835
 Hers in life and death your doom.

ANTIGONE (Strophe 2):

Alack, alack! You mock me. Is it meet
 Thus to insult me living, to my face? 840
 Cease, by our country's altars I entreat,
 You lordly rulers of a lordly race.
 O fount of Dirce,²⁰ wood-embowered plain
 Where Theban chariots to victory speed,
 Mark you the cruel laws that now have wrought my bane, 845
 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, 850
 An alien midst the living and the dead.

CHORUS (Strophe 3):

Overstepping the bounds of daring
 You kicked the throne of Justice,
 And there you have fallen, child. 855
 But the price you pay is your father's debt.

ANTIGONE (Antistrophe 2):

At this you touch my most poignant pain,
 My ill-fated father's piteous disgrace,
 The taint of blood, the hereditary stain,
 That clings to all of Labdacus' famed race. 860
 Woe worth the monstrous marriage-bed where lay

¹⁹ Niobe, the daughter of Tantalus, who was married to Amphion of Thebes. She was metamorphosed into stone on Mt. Sipylus.

²⁰ Dirce was the wife of Lycus, regent of Thebes, and aunt to Amphion and Zethus, cousins of Labdacus. The Spring of Dirce was created by Dionysus on the spot where she died.

A mother with the son her womb had borne;
 Therein I was conceived, woe worth the day,
 Fruit of incestuous sheets, a maid forlorn, 865
 And now I pass, accursed and unwed,
 To meet them as an alien there below;
 And you, O brother, in marriage ill-bestead, 870
 'Twas your dead hand that dealt me this deathblow.

CHORUS (Antistrophe 3):
 Your devotion and piety ring true,
 But rites be paid when rites are due.
 Yet is it ill to disobey
 The powers who hold by might the sway.
 You have withstood authority,
 A self-willed rebel, you must die. 875

4th Episode (876 -943)

ANTIGONE:
 Unwept, unwed, unfriended, hence I go, 876
 No longer may I see the day's bright eye;
 Not one friend left to share my bitter woe, 880
 And over my ashes heave one passing sigh.

CREON:
 If cries and lamentation ever worked
 To prevent death, I wager they'd never end.
 Away with her, and having walled her up
 In a rock-vaulted tomb, as I ordained, 885
 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. 890

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,²¹
 The last of all, of all most miserable, 895
 I pass, my destined span of years cut short.
 And yet good hope is mine that I shall find

²¹ Phersephassa, or Persephassa, are alternative spellings for Persephone, the wife of Hades.

A welcome from my sire, a welcome too,
 From you, my mother, and my brother dear;
 For with these hands, I laved and decked your limbs 900
 In death, and poured libations on your grave.
 And last, my Polyneices, unto you
 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, 905
 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 home
 Another child, to take the dead child's place. 910
 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 you, dear brother, and was judged
 By Creon guilty of a heinous crime. 915
 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? 920
 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, 925
 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. 930

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 says, 935
 Portends no other thing than death.

ANTIGONE:
 My fatherland, city of Thebes divine,
 You gods of Thebes whence sprang my line,
 Look, puissant lords of Thebes, on me;
 The last of all your royal house you see. 940
 Martyred by men of sin, undone.
 Such reward my piety has won.
 (*Exit Antigone*)

Fourth Stasimon (944 - 987)

CHORUS (Strophe 1):
 Like to you that maiden bright, 945
 Danae, in her brass-bound tower,²²
 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 950
 Nor wealth, nor arms withstand, nor tower;
 Nor brass-prowed ships, that breast the sea
 From Fate can flee.

CHORUS (Antistrophe 1)
 Thus Dryas' child, the rash Edonian King, 955
 For words of high disdain
 Did Dionysus to a rocky dungeon bring,
 To cool the madness of a fevered brain.²³
 His frenzy passed, 960
 He learned at last
 'Twas madness gibes against a god to fling.
 For once he fain had quenched the Maenad's fire;

²² Danae, the daughter of Acrisius, king of Argos, was locked in a tower to prevent her getting pregnant. It was foretold that her son would be the ruin of Acrisius. Danae was visited by Zeus and she gave birth to Perseus.

²³ Edonia, or Hedonia, was a kingdom in Thrace. Lycurgus, King of Edonia, attempted to oppose Dionysus and was entombed in Mt. Pangeus (Apollod. iii.5.1).

And of the tuneful Nine provoked the ire.²⁴ 965

CHORUS: (Strophe 2)

By the Iron Rocks that guard the double main,
 On Bosphorus' lone strand,
 Where stretches Salmydessus' plain
 In the wild Thracian land,
 There on his borders Ares witnessed 970
 The vengeance by a jealous step-dame taken,
 The gore that trickled from a spindle red,
 The sightless orbits of her step-sons twain.²⁵ 975

(Antistrophe 2)

Wasting away they mourned their piteous doom,
 The blasted issue of their mother's womb. 980
 But she her lineage could trace
 To great Erectheus' race;
 Daughter of Boreas in her sire's vast caves 985
 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
 vanquished.

5th Episode (988 - 1114)

(Enter Teiresias and a Boy)

TEIRESIAS:

Princes of Thebes, two wayfarers as one,
 Having between us eyes for one, we are here.
 The blind man cannot move without a guide. 990

CREON:

What tidings, old Teiresias?

TEIRESIAS:

I will tell you;
 And when you hear you must heed the seer.

²⁴ The Nine Muses.

²⁵ The third comparison is to Cleopatra, wife of Phineus, king of Thrace - in the region of the Salmydessus River. She was imprisoned and her two sons blinded.

CREON:
I have never disobeyed you yet.

TEIRESIAS:
So have you steered the ship of State aright.

CREON:
I know it, and I gladly own my debt. 995

TEIRESIAS:
Be aware, then, that once again you teeter
On the edge of Fortune's grace.

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 1000
Finds harbourage, upon mine ears was borne
A jargon strange of twitterings, hoots, and screams;
So knew I that each bird at the other tore
With bloody talons, for the whirr of wings
Could signify nothing else. Perturbed in soul,
I straight essayed the sacrifice by fire 1005
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 1010
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. 1015
O King, your wilful 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 1020
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 1025
 Hugs not his errors, but repents and seeks
 The cure, is not a wastrel nor unwise.
 No fool, the saying goes, like the obstinate fool.
 Let death disarm your vengeance. O forbear
 To vex the dead. What glory will you win 1030
 By slaying twice the slain? I mean you well;
 Counsel's most welcome if it promise gain.

CREON:

(to the Chorus)

Old men, you all let fly at me your shafts
 Like archers at a target; yes, you even set
 Your soothsayer on me. Pedlars are you all 1035
 And I the merchandise you buy and sell.
 Go to, and make your profit where you will,
 Silver of Sardis change for gold of India;
 You will not purchase this man's burial,
 Not though the winged ministers of Zeus 1040
 Should bear him in their talons to his throne;
 Not even in awe of prodigy so dire
 Would I permit his burial, for I know
 No human defiler can assail the gods;
 This too I know, Teiresias, dire is the fall 1045
 Of craft and cunning when it tries to gloss
 Foul treachery with fair words for filthy gain.

TEIRESIAS:

Alas! Does any know and lay to heart...

CREON:

Is this the prelude to some hackneyed truism?

TEIRESIAS:

Is sound judgement not the greatest strength? 1050

CREON:

Yes, and foolishness is the worst disease.

TEIRESIAS:

You are infected with that ill yourself.

CREON:

I will not trade insults with you, seer.

TEIRESIAS:

And yet you say my prophecies are frauds.

CREON:

Prophets are all a money-getting tribe. 1055

TEIRESIAS:

And tyrants are all profit mongers.

CREON:

Do you know you are addressing your ruler?

TEIRESIAS:

Ruler of the State and saviour, thanks to me.

CREON:

Skilled prophet you are, but to wrong inclined.

TEIRESIAS:

Take heed, you will provoke me to reveal 1060
The mystery deep hidden in my heart.

CREON:

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

TEIRESIAS:

Where you are concerned, I will never gain.

CREON:

Be sure you will not traffic on my patience.

TEIRESIAS:

Know then for sure, the coursers of the sun
Not many times shall run their race, before 1065
You shall have given your own offspring

In quittance of the murder, life for life;
For that you have entombed a living soul,

And sent below a denizen of earth,
And wronged the nether gods by leaving here 1070
A corpse unholy, unwept, unburied.

Herein you have no part, nor even the gods
In heaven; and you usurped a power not yours.

For this the Erinyes, avenging spirits of the gods 1075

Who dog the steps of sin, are on your trail:

What these have suffered you shall suffer too.

And now, consider whether bought by gold
 I prophesy. For, yet a little while,
 The sound of lamentation shall be heard,
 Of men and women through your desolate halls;
 And all your neighbour States are leagued to avenge 1080
 Their mangled warriors who have found a grave
 In the maw of wolf or hound, or winged 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, 1085
 Unerring, and their sting you shall 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. 1090
 (*Exit Teiresias*)

CHORUS:
 My liege, the man has 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. 1095
 To yield is grievous, but the obstinate soul
 That fights with Fate, is smitten grievously.

CHORUS:
 Son of Menoeceus, listen to good advice.

CREON:
 What should I do? Advise me. I will heed.

CHORUS:
 Go, free the maiden from her rocky cell; 1100
 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 1105
 My heart's resolve; but Fate is ill to fight.

CHORUS:
 Go, trust not others. Do it quickly yourself!

CREON:
 Quickly indeed! Rise up one and all,
 My guards. Get axes. Speed away
 To the mountain. I too will go,
 For all my resolution this way sways. 1110
 It was 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.

Fifth Stasimon: Ode to Dionysus (1115 - 1154)

CHORUS (Strophe 1):
 You who are by many names adored, 1115
 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 Bacchanals, men and maids, 1120
 Dionysus, you are seen.
 Where Ismenus rolls his waters,
 Where the Dragon's teeth were sown,
 Where the Bacchanals, your daughters
 Round thee roam,
 There your home;
 Thebes, Dionysus, is your own. 1125

CHORUS (Antistrophe 1):
 You on the two-crested rock
 Lurid-flaming torches see;
 Where Corisian maidens flock,
 You the springs of Castaly.
 By Nysa's bastion ivy-clad, 1130
 By shores with clustered vineyards glad,
 There to you the hymn rings out,
 And through our streets we Thebans shout

All hail to you! 1135

CHORUS: (Strophe 2):

Oh, as you love this city best of all,
To you, and to your lightning-struck Mother,
In our dire need we call;
You see with what a plague our townsfolk sicken. 1140

Your ready help we crave,
Whether down Parnassian heights descending,
Or over the roaring straits your swift way wending 1145

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 your train of Thyiads with you bring,
Your maddened rout
Who dance before you all night long, and shout, 1150
Iacchus the Giver!

Exodus (1155 - 1353)

Enter Messenger

MESSENGER:

Attend all you who dwell beside the halls 1155
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 future. 1160

Take Creon; he, I thought, 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 1165
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 1170
His wealth and power against a gram of joy.

CHORUS:

What fresh woes do you bring 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. 1175

CHORUS:

What do you mean? By his father's or his own?

MESSENGER:

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

CHORUS:

What the prophet spoke has come to pass!

MESSENGER:

So stands the case; now it is for you to act.

CHORUS:

Look! From the palace gates I see approaching 1180
Creon's unhappy wife, Eurydice.
Comes she by chance or learning her son's fate?

Enter Eurydice

EURYDICE:

Men of Thebes, I overheard your talk.
As I passed out to offer up my prayer
To Pallas, and was drawing back the bar 1185
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 1190
To one not unacquainted with misery.

MESSENGER:

Dear mistress, I was there and will relate
The perfect truth, omitting not one word.
Why should we gloss and flatter, to be proved
Liars hereafter? Truth is ever best. 1195
Well, in attendance on the king, your husband,

I crossed the plain to its utmost margin, where
 The corpse of Polyneices, gnawn and mauled,
 Was lying yet. We offered first a prayer
 To Pluto and the goddess of cross-ways,²⁶ 1200
 With contrite hearts, to deprecate their ire.
 Then laved with lustral waves the mangled corpse,
 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, 1205
 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 home.
 He groaned and uttered then this bitter plaint: 1210
 "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 1215
 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 cavern's vaulted gloom 1220
 I saw the maiden lying strangled there,
 A noose of linen twined about her neck;
 And close 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 1225
 He moved towards him, crying, "O my son.
 What have you done? What ailed you? What
 Has reft you of your reason? O come forth,
 Come forth, my son; your father supplicates." 1230
 But the son glared at him with tiger eyes,
 Spat in his face, and then, without a word,
 Drew his two-hilted sword and swung, 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 1235

²⁶ Hecate, one of the Titans but a friend of the gods and the only Titan revered by Zeus. She watches over tombs, crossroads and the blood of the murdered. In later writers, especially Roman, she becomes more of a goddess of the underworld, the night, and witchcraft.

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, joined in death. His marriage rites 1240
 Are consummated in the halls of Hades:
 A witness that of whatever ills befall
 Mortals; the failure of careful consideration
 Is the worst of all.

Exit Eurydice

CHORUS:
 What do you make of this? The Queen has gone
 Without a word revealing good or ill. 1245

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. 1250

CHORUS:
 I don't know, but strained silence, I think,
 Is no less ominous than excessive grief.

MESSENGER:
 Well, let us go to the house and solve our doubts,
 Whether the tumult of her heart conceals
 Some fell design. It may be you are right: 1255
 Unnatural silence signifies no good.

CHORUS:
 Look, 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. 1260

CREON: (Strophe)
 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. 1265
 Alas, my son,
 Life scarce begun,
 You were undone.
 The fault was mine, mine only, O my son!

CHORUS:
 Too late, it seems, you see the truth. 1270

CREON: (Strophe 2)
 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; 1275
 Poor mortals, how we labour all in vain!

SECOND MESSENGER:
 Sorrows are yours, my lord, and more to come,
 One lying at thy feet, another yet
 More grievous waits you, when you come home. 1280

CREON:
 What woe is lacking to my tale of woes?

MESSENGER
 Your wife, the mother of your dead son here,
 Lies stricken by a fresh inflicted blow.

CREON: (Antistrophe 1)
 How bottomless the pit
 Does claim me too, O Death? 1285
 What is this word he said,
 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? 1290

The doors of the palace open and the corpse of Eurydice is brought out:

CHORUS:
 Look for yourself. She lies for all to view.

CREON: (Antistrophe 2)
 Alas! Another added woe I see. 1295
 What more remains to crown my agony?

A minute past I clasped a lifeless son,
 And now another victim Death has won.
 Unhappy mother, most unhappy son! 1300

MESSENGER:
 Beside the altar on a keen-edged sword
 She fell and closed her eyes in night, but first
 She mourned for Megareus²⁷ who nobly died
 Long since, then for her son; with her last breath
 She cursed you, the slayer of her sons. 1305

CREON: (Strophe 3)
 I shudder with fright.
 O for a two-edged sword to slay outright
 A wretch like me,
 Made one with misery. 1310

MESSENGER:
 'Tis true that you were charged by the dead Queen
 As author of both deaths, hers and her son's.

CREON:
 In what wise was her self-destruction wrought?

MESSENGER:
 Hearing the loud lament above her son 1315
 With her own hand she stabbed herself to the heart.

CREON:
 I am the guilty cause. I did the deed,
 Your murderer. Yes, I guilty plead. 1320
 My servants, lead me from here, away,
 I am a dead man, less than nothing; no delay!

CHORUS:
 Well said, if in disaster anything is well: 1325
 Evil beyond endure demands the swiftest cure.

CREON: (Antistrophe 3)
 Come, Fate, a friend at need,
 Come with all speed!
 Come, my best friend, 1330

²⁷ Another son of Creon. He died defending Thebes in the same battle that claimed Eteocles and Polyneices (Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes* 470 - 80).

And speed my end!
Away, away!
Let me not look upon another day!

CHORUS:
This for tomorrow; to us are present needs
That they whom it concerns must take in hand. 1335

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.

CREON: (Antistrophe 4)
Away with me, a worthless wretch who slew
Unwitting you, my son, you mother too. 1340
Where to turn I know not; every way
Leads but astray,
And on my head I feel the heavy weight
Of crushing Fate. 1345

CHORUS:
The best part of happiness
Is a wise heart:
And to defraud the gods in anything
With peril's fraught. 1350
Swelling words of high-flown might
Mightily the gods do smite.
Chastisement for errors past
Wisdom brings to age at last. 1353

End

Further Reading

- Adams, S. M. 1955. *Antigone*. *Phoenix* 9.2; 47 - 62.
- Bushnell, Rebecca W. 1988. *Prophesying Tragedy: Sign and Voice in Sophocles' Theban Plays*. Cornell UP.
- Cullyer, Helen. 2005. A Wind that Blows from Thrace: Dionysus in the Fifth Stasimon of Sophocles' "Antigone". *The Classical World* 99.1: 3 - 20.
- Jebb, Sir Richard C. 1990 (1966). *The Antigone of Sophocles*. Cambridge UP.
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0023%3Atext%3Dintro>
- Oudemans, Th. C. W. and Lardinois, A. P. M. H. 1987. *Tragic Ambiguity; Anthropology, Philosophy and Sophocles' Antigone*. E. J. Brill.
- Söderbäck, Fanny, ed. 2010. *Feminist Readings of Antigone*. State University of New York
- Trypanis, C.A., trans. 1986. *Sophocles: The Three Theban Plays*. Warminster: Aris and Philips.