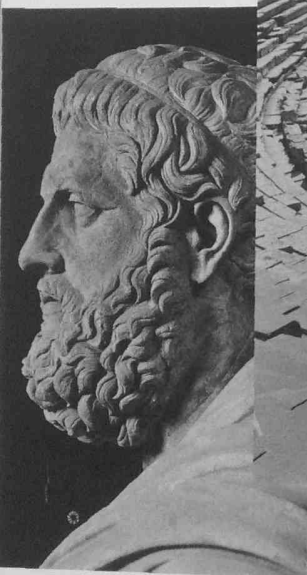


ANTIGONE



SOPHOCLES

CAST OF CHARACTERS

- Antigone } daughters of Oedipus, former king
- Ismene } of Thebes
- Creon (krē'ōn'), king of Thebes, uncle of Antigone and Ismene
- Haemon (hē'mōn'), Creon's son, engaged to Antigone
- Eurydice (yŏō-rīd'ī-sē), wife of Creon
- Teiresias (tī-rē'sē-ās), a blind prophet
- Chorus, made up of about 15 elders of Thebes
- Choragus, leader of the chorus
- a Sentry
- a Messenger

Bust of Sophocles. Museo Lateranense, Vatican Museums, Vatican City, Alinari / Art Resource, New York.

Antigone contemplates her fate. Culver Pictures.

Ruins of ancient theater at Epidaurus, Greece. Copyright © 1993 Barbara Ries / Photo Researchers, Inc.

Scene: Before the palace of Creon, king of Thebes. A central double door, and two doors at the side. A platform extends the length of the stage, and from this platform three steps lead down into the orchestra, or chorus ground.

Time: Dawn of the day after the repulse of the Argive army from the assault on Thebes

(An-tig-o-nie)

PROLOGUE

(Antigone and Ismene enter from the central door of the palace.)

Antigone. Ismene, dear sister,

You would think that we had already suffered enough

For the curse on Oedipus:

I cannot imagine any grief

5 That you and I have not gone through. And now—

Have they told you the new decree of our king Creon?

Ismene. I have heard nothing: I know

That two sisters lost two brothers, a double death

In a single hour; and I know that the Argive army

10 Fled in the night; but beyond this, nothing.

Antigone. I thought so. And that is why I wanted you

To come out here with me. There is something we must do.

Ismene. Why do you speak so strangely?

Antigone. Listen, Ismene:

15 Creon buried our brother Eteocles

With military honors, gave him a soldier's funeral,

And it was right that he should; but Polyneices,

Who fought as bravely and died as miserably—

They say that Creon has sworn

20 No one shall bury him, no one mourn for him,

But his body must lie in the fields, a sweet treasure

For carrion birds to find as they search for food.

That is what they say, and our good Creon is coming here

To announce it publicly; and the penalty—

25 Stoning to death in the public square!

There it is,

And now you can prove what you are:

A true sister, or a traitor to your family.

Ismene. Antigone, you are mad! What could I possibly do?

Antigone. You must decide whether you will help me or not.

30 **Ismene.** I do not understand you. Help you in what?

Antigone. Ismene, I am going to bury him. Will you come?

GUIDE FOR READING

repulse: an act of turning away or beating back.

9 Argive: of Argos.

20–22 The obligation to bury the dead with appropriate burial rites was considered a sacred law among the ancient Greeks. They believed that the soul of someone left unburied would never find peace.

28–35 What contrast between Antigone and Ismene is suggested by the conversation between them?

Ismene. Bury him! You have just said the new law forbids it.

Antigone. He is my brother. And he is your brother, too.

Ismene. But think of the danger! Think what Creon will do!

Antigone. Creon is not strong enough to stand in my way.

Ismene. Ah sister!

Oedipus died, everyone hating him

For what his own search brought to light, his eyes

Ripped out by his own hand; and Jocasta died,

His mother and wife at once: she twisted the cords

That strangled her life; and our two brothers died,

Each killed by the other's sword. And we are left:

But oh, Antigone,

Think how much more terrible than these

Our own death would be if we should go against Creon

And do what he has forbidden! We are only women;

We cannot fight with men, Antigone!

The law is strong, we must give in to the law

In this thing, and in worse. I beg the dead

To forgive me, but I am helpless: I must yield

To those in authority. And I think it is dangerous business

To be always meddling.

Antigone.

If that is what you think,

I should not want you, even if you asked to come.

You have made your choice; you can be what you want to be.

But I will bury him; and if I must die,

I say that this crime is holy: I shall lie down

With him in death, and I shall be as dear

To him as he to me.

It is the dead,

Not the living, who make the longest demands:

We die forever. . . .

You may do as you like,

Since apparently the laws of the gods mean nothing to you.

Ismene. They mean a great deal to me; but I have no strength

To break laws that were made for the public good.

Antigone. That must be your excuse, I suppose. But as for me,

I will bury the brother I love.

Ismene.

Antigone,

I am so afraid for you!

Antigone.

You need not be:

You have yourself to consider, after all.

39 Jocasta, the mother of Antigone and Ismene, hanged herself when she realized the truth about her relationship with Oedipus.

55-61 What do these lines reveal about Antigone's feelings for her brother and the gods' laws?

Ismene. But no one must hear of this; you must tell no one!
I will keep it a secret, I promise!

Antigone.

Oh tell it! Tell everyone!

70 Think how they'll hate you when it all comes out
If they learn that you knew about it all the time!

Ismene. So fiery! You should be cold with fear.

Antigone. Perhaps. But I am doing only what I must.

Ismene. But can you do it? I say that you cannot.

75 Antigone. Very well: when my strength gives out, I shall do no more.

Ismene. Impossible things should not be tried at all.

Antigone. Go away, Ismene:

I shall be hating you soon, and the dead will too,

For your words are hateful. Leave me my foolish plan:

80 I am not afraid of the danger; if it means death,

It will not be the worst of deaths—death without honor.

Ismene. Go then, if you feel that you must.

You are unwise,

But a loyal friend indeed to those who love you.

(Exit into the palace. Antigone goes off, left. Enters the Chorus,
with Choragus.)

PARODOS

Chorus. Now the long blade of the sun, lying

Level east to west, touches with glory

Thebes of the Seven Gates. Open, unlidded

Eye of golden day! O marching light

5 Across the eddy and rush of Dirce's stream,

Striking the white shields of the enemy

Thrown headlong backward from the blaze of morning!

Choragus. Polyneices their commander

Roused them with windy phrases,

10 He the wild eagle screaming

Insults above our land,

His wings their shields of snow,

His crest their marshaled helms.

Chorus. Against our seven gates in a yawning ring

15 The famished spears came onward in the night;

But before his jaws were sated with our blood,

PARODOS: The parodos is a song that marks the entry of the chorus, which represents the leading citizens of Thebes.

5 Dirce's (dûr'sêz) **stream:** a stream flowing past Thebes. The stream is named after a murdered queen who was thrown into it.

14–15 Thebes had seven gates, which the Argives attacked all at once.

WORDS

TO

KNOW

sated (sâ'tîd) *adj.* satisfied fully **sate** *v.*

Or pine fire took the garland of our towers,
He was thrown back; and as he turned, great Thebes—
No tender victim for his noisy power—
Rose like a dragon behind him, shouting war.

Choragus. For God hates utterly
The bray of bragging tongues;
And when he beheld their smiling,
Their swagger of golden helmets,
The frown of his thunder blasted
Their first man from our walls.

Chorus. We heard his shout of triumph high in the air
Turn to a scream; far out in a flaming arc
He fell with his windy torch, and the earth struck him.
And others storming in fury no less than his
Found shock of death in the dusty joy of battle.

Choragus. Seven captains at seven gates
Yielded their clanging arms to the god
That bends the battle line and breaks it.
These two only, brothers in blood,
Face to face in matchless rage,
Mirroring each the other's death,
Clashed in long combat.

Chorus. But now in the beautiful morning of victory
Let Thebes of the many chariots sing for joy!
With hearts for dancing we'll take leave of war:
Our temples shall be sweet with hymns of praise,
And the long night shall echo with our chorus.

21-26 Zeus, the king of the gods, threw a thunderbolt, which killed the first Argive attacker. What type of conduct was Zeus punishing?

32-34 When the seven captains were killed, their armor was offered as a sacrifice to Ares (âr'êz), the god of war.

Choral scene from a contemporary staging of a Greek tragedy at Guthrie Theater, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Copyright © 1992 Michal Daniel.



Terra-cotta mask (second century B.C.) found at shrine of the goddess Artemis, Sparta, Greece. Similar masks were used by actors in ancient Greece. Musée de Picardie, Amiens, France, Giraudon / Art Resource, New York.

SCENE 1

Choragus. But now at last our new king is coming:
Creon of Thebes, Menoeceus' son.

In this auspicious dawn of his reign
What are the new complexities

5 That shifting Fate has woven for him?
What is his counsel? Why has he summoned
The old men to hear him?

(Enter Creon from the palace. He addresses the Chorus from the top step.)

2 Menoeceus (mə-nē'syōōs).

5 The Greeks believed that human destiny was controlled by three sisters called the Fates: Clotho (klō'thō), who spun the thread of human life; Lachesis (lāk'y-sis), who determined its length; and Atropos (ăt'rə-pōs'), who cut the thread.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

auspicious (ō-spīsh'əs) *adj.* promising success; favorable

Creon. Gentlemen: I have the honor to inform you that our ship of state, which recent storms have threatened to destroy, has come safely to harbor at last, guided by the merciful wisdom of heaven. I have summoned you here this morning because I know that I can depend upon you: your devotion to King Laius was absolute; you never hesitated in your duty to our late ruler Oedipus; and when Oedipus died, your loyalty was transferred to his children. Unfortunately, as you know, his two sons, the princes Eteocles and Polyneices, have killed each other in battle; and I, as the next in blood, have succeeded to the full power of the throne.

12 Laius (lā'əs): father of Oedipus.

I am aware, of course, that no ruler can expect complete loyalty from his subjects until he has been tested in office. Nevertheless, I say to you at the very outset that I have nothing but contempt for the kind of governor who is afraid, for whatever reason, to follow the course that he knows is best for the state; and as for the man who sets private friendship above the public welfare—I have no use for him, either. I call God to witness that if I saw my country headed for ruin, I should not be afraid to speak out plainly; and I need hardly remind you that I would never have any dealings with an enemy of the people. No one values friendship more highly than I; but we must remember that friends made at the risk of wrecking our ship are not real friends at all.

18–30 According to Creon, what deserves the highest loyalty? How do you feel about Creon's principles?

These are my principles, at any rate, and that is why I have made the following decision concerning the sons of Oedipus: Eteocles, who died as a man should die, fighting for his country, is to be buried with full military honors, with all the ceremony that is usual when the greatest heroes die; but his brother Polyneices, who broke his exile to come back with fire and sword against his native city and the shrines of his fathers' gods, whose one idea was to spill the blood of his blood and sell his own people into slavery—Polyneices, I say, is to have no burial: no man is to touch him or say the least prayer for him; he shall lie on the plain, unburied; and the birds and the scavenging dogs can do with him whatever they like.

31–42 Do you think Creon is justified in treating Polyneices' corpse in this way? What do you think his motive is?

This is my command, and you can see the wisdom behind it. As long as I am king, no traitor is going to be honored with the loyal man. But whoever shows by word and deed that he is on the side of the state—he shall have my respect while he is living, and my reverence when he is dead.

Choragus. If that is your will, Creon son of Menoeceus, You have the right to enforce it: we are yours.

Creon. That is my will. Take care that you do your part.

Choragus. We are old men: let the younger ones carry it out.

Creon. I do not mean that: the sentries have been appointed.

Choragus. Then what is it that you would have us do?

Creon. You will give no support to whoever breaks this law.

55 **Choragus.** Only a crazy man is in love with death!

Creon. And death it is; yet money talks, and the wisest

Have sometimes been known to count a few coins too many.

(Enter Sentry.)

Sentry. I'll not say that I'm out of breath from running, King, because

60 every time I stopped to think about what I have to tell you, I felt like going back. And all the time a voice kept saying, "You fool,

don't you know you're walking straight into trouble?"; and then

another voice: "Yes, but if you let somebody else get the news to

Creon first, it will be even worse than that for you!" But good sense

65 won out, at least I hope it was good sense, and here I am with a

story that makes no sense at all; but I'll tell it anyhow, because, as

they say, what's going to happen's going to happen, and—

Creon. Come to the point. What have you to say?

Sentry. I did not do it. I did not see who did it. You must not punish me for what someone else has done.

70 **Creon.** A comprehensive defense! More effective, perhaps, If I knew its purpose. Come: what is it?

Sentry. A dreadful thing . . . I don't know how to put it—

Creon. Out with it!

Sentry. Well, then;

The dead man—

Polyneices—

(Pause. The Sentry is overcome, fumbles for words.

Creon waits impassively.)

out there—

someone—

75 New dust on the slimy flesh!

(Pause. No sign from Creon.)

Someone has given it burial that way, and

Gone. . . .

(Long pause. Creon finally speaks with deadly control.)

Creon. And the man who dared do this?

Sentry.

I swear I

Do not know! You must believe me!

78 Note that Creon assumes it is a man who has tried to bury the body.

Listen:
The ground was dry, not a sign of digging, no,
Not a wheel track in the dust, no trace of anyone.
It was when they relieved us this morning: and one of them,
The corporal, pointed to it.

The strangest—

There it was,

Look:

The body, just mounded over with light dust: you see?
Not buried really, but as if they'd covered it
Just enough for the ghost's peace. And no sign
Of dogs or any wild animal that had been there.

85-88 Notice that the burial of Polyneices is symbolic and ritualistic rather than actual.

And then what a scene there was! Every man of us
Accusing the other: we all proved the other man did it;
We all had proof that we could not have done it.
We were ready to take hot iron in our hands,
Walk through fire, swear by all the gods,
It was not I!

I do not know who it was, but it was not I!

(Creon's rage has been mounting steadily, but the Sentry is too intent upon his story to notice it.)

And then, when this came to nothing, someone said
A thing that silenced us and made us stare
Down at the ground: you had to be told the news,
And one of us had to do it! We threw the dice,
And the bad luck fell to me. So here I am,
No happier to be here than you are to have me:
Nobody likes the man who brings bad news.

Choragus. I have been wondering, King: can it be that the gods
have done this?

104-109 Note how quickly Creon rejects a reasonable question posed by the choragus. Creon is convinced that he knows how the gods think.

Creon (*furiously*). Stop!

Must you doddering wrecks

Go out of your heads entirely? "The gods!"

Intolerable!

The gods favor this corpse? Why? How had he served them?

Tried to loot their temples, burn their images,

Yes, and the whole state, and its laws with it!

Is it your senile opinion that the gods love to honor bad men?

A pious thought!—

No, from the very beginning

There have been those who have whispered together,

Stiff-necked anarchists, putting their heads together,

114 **anarchists** (ăn'ər-kĭsts): persons favoring the overthrow of government.

115 Scheming against me in alleys. These are the men,
And they have bribed my own guard to do this thing.
(*sententiously*) Money!

There's nothing in the world so demoralizing as money.
Down go your cities,
120 Homes gone, men gone, honest hearts corrupted,
Crookedness of all kinds, and all for money!
(*to Sentry*) But you—!

I swear by God and by the throne of God,
The man who has done this thing shall pay for it!
Find that man; bring him here to me, or your death
125 Will be the least of your problems: I'll string you up
Alive, and there will be certain ways to make you
Discover your employer before you die;
And the process may teach you a lesson you seem to have
missed:

The dearest profit is sometimes all too dear.
130 That depends on the source. Do you understand me?
A fortune won is often misfortune.

Sentry. King, may I speak?

Creon. Your very voice distresses me.

Sentry. Are you sure that it is my voice, and not your conscience?

Creon. By God, he wants to analyze me now!

135 **Sentry.** It is not what I say, but what has been done, that hurts you.

Creon. You talk too much.

Sentry. Maybe; but I've done nothing.

Creon. Sold your soul for some silver: that's all you've done.

Sentry. How dreadful it is when the right judge judges wrong!

Creon. Your figures of speech

140 May entertain you now; but unless you bring me the man,
You will get little profit from them in the end.

(*Exit Creon into the palace.*)

Sentry. "Bring me the man"—!

I'd like nothing better than bringing him the man!

But bring him or not, you have seen the last of me here.

145 At any rate, I am safe!

(*Exit Sentry.*)

117 *sententiously* (sén-tén'ash-ee-ah)
in a pompous, moralizing manner
117-121 What does Creon assume
about the motives of those who
have disobeyed him?

ODE 1

Chorus. Numberless are the world's wonders, but none
More wonderful than man; the storm-grey sea
Yields to his prowess; the huge crests bear him high;
Earth, holy and inexhaustible, is graven
With shining furrows where his plows have gone
Year after year, the timeless labor of stallions.

The light-boned birds and beasts that cling to cover,
The lithe fish lighting their reaches of dim water,
All are taken, tamed in the net of his mind;
The lion on the hill, the wild horse windy-maned,
Resign to him; and his blunt yoke has broken
The sultry shoulders of the mountain bull.

Words also, and thought as rapid as air,
He fashions to his good use; statecraft is his,
And his the skill that deflects the arrows of snow,
The spears of winter rain: from every wind
He has made himself secure—from all but one:
In the late wind of death he cannot stand.

O clear intelligence, force beyond all measure!
O fate of man, working both good and evil!
When the laws are kept, how proudly his city stands!
When the laws are broken, what of his city then?
Never may the anarchic man find rest at my hearth,
Never be it said that my thoughts are his thoughts.

ODE: An ode is a song chanted by the chorus.

4 graven: carved; engraved.

24 What does this ode convey about human greatness and tragic limitation?