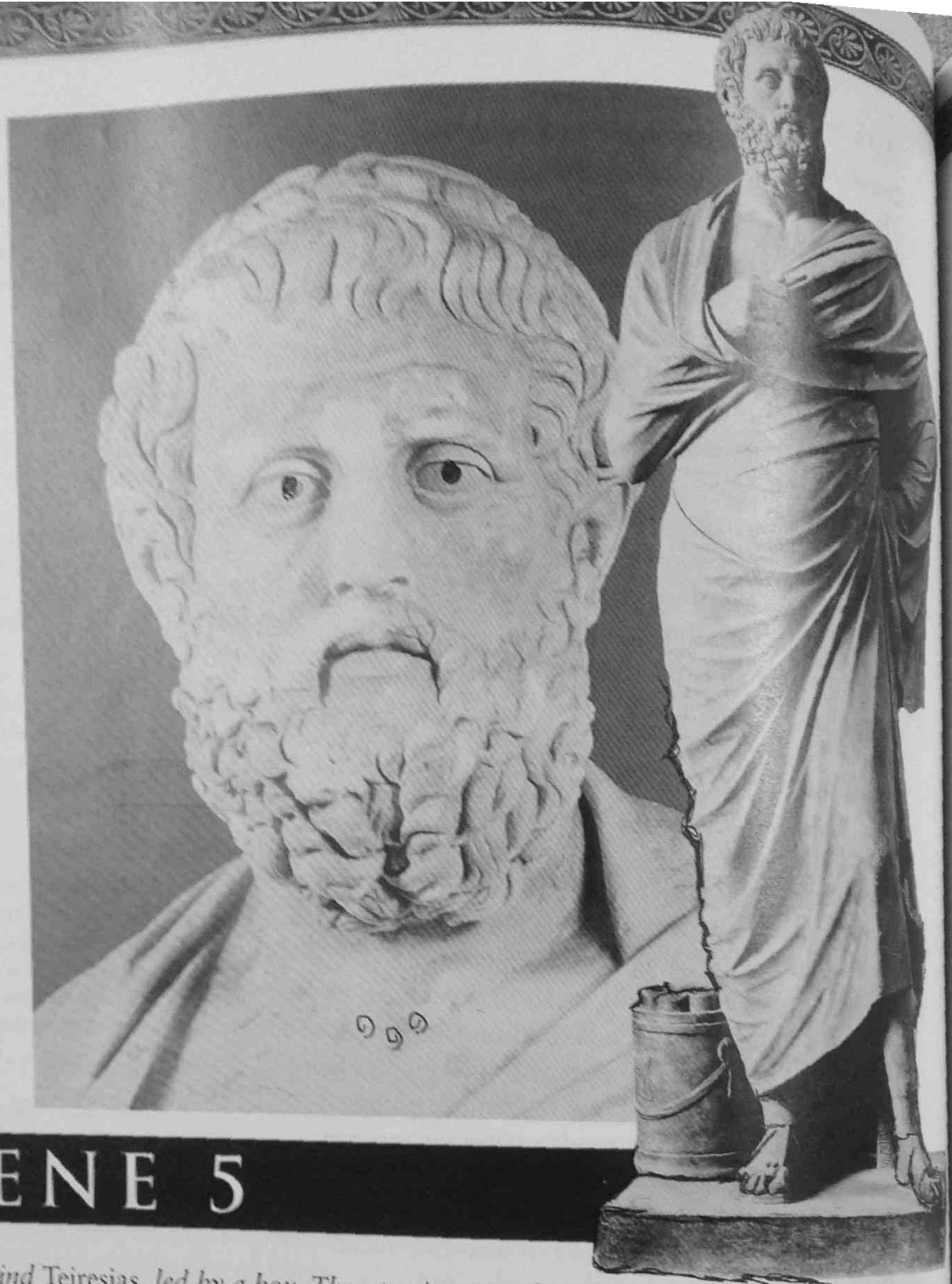


Two views of Sophocles, who was regarded by his Greek admirers as "the perfect man."

Left, Museo Gregoriano Profano, Vatican Museums, Vatican State, Alinari / Art Resource, New York. Right, Museo Lateranense, Vatican Museums, Vatican City, Alinari / Art Resource, New York.



SCENE 5

(Enter blind Teiresias, led by a boy. The opening speeches of Teiresias should be in singsong contrast to the realistic lines of Creon.)

Teiresias. This is the way the blind man comes, princes, princes, Lock step, two heads lit by the eyes of one.

Creon. What new thing have you to tell us, old Teiresias?

Teiresias. I have much to tell you: listen to the prophet, Creon.

Creon. I am not aware that I have ever failed to listen.

Teiresias. Then you have done wisely, King, and ruled well.

Creon. I admit my debt to you. But what have you to say?

1-7 The blind Teiresias is physically blind but spiritually sighted. As a prophet, he is an agent of the gods in their dealings with humans. His revelation of the truth to Oedipus led Oedipus to leave Thebes, which indirectly helped Creon to become king.

Teiresias. This, Creon: you stand once more on the edge of fate.

Creon. What do you mean? Your words are a kind of dread.

Teiresias. Listen, Creon:

I was sitting in my chair of augury, at the place
Where the birds gather about me. They were all a-chatter,
As is their habit, when suddenly I heard
A strange note in their jangling, a scream, a
Whirring fury; I knew that they were fighting,
Tearing each other, dying
In a whirlwind of wings clashing. And I was afraid.
I began the rites of burnt offering at the altar,
But Hephaestus failed me: instead of bright flame,
There was only the sputtering slime of the fat thigh-flesh
Melting; the entrails dissolved in grey smoke;
The bare bone burst from the welter. And no blaze!
This was a sign from heaven. My boy described it,
Seeing for me as I see for others.

I tell you, Creon, you yourself have brought
This new calamity upon us. Our hearths and altars
Are stained with the corruption of dogs and carrion birds
That glut themselves on the corpse of Oedipus' son.
The gods are deaf when we pray to them; their fire
Recoils from our offering; their birds of omen
Have no cry of comfort, for they are gorged
With the thick blood of the dead.

O my son,

These are no trifles! Think: all men make mistakes,
But a good man yields when he knows his course is wrong,
And repairs the evil. The only crime is pride.

Give in to the dead man, then: do not fight with a corpse—
What glory is it to kill a man who is dead?

Think, I beg you:

It is for your own good that I speak as I do.

You should be able to yield for your own good.

Creon. It seems that prophets have made me their especial province.

All my life long

I have been a kind of butt for the dull arrows
Of doddering fortunetellers!

No, Teiresias:

If your birds—if the great eagles of God himself—
Should carry him stinking bit by bit to heaven,
I would not yield. I am not afraid of pollution:

11-17 The chair of augury is the place where Teiresias sits to hear the birds, whose sounds reveal the future to him. The fighting among the birds suggests that the anarchy infecting Thebes has spread even to the world of nature.

19 Hephaestus (hī-fēs'təs): god of fire.

18-32 According to Teiresias, the birds and dogs that have eaten the corpse of Polyneices have become corrupt, causing the gods to reject the Thebans' offerings and prayers. What do these lines suggest about how the gods view Creon's refusal to allow Polyneices to be buried?

44-48 What do these lines suggest about Creon's view of himself and the gods?

No man can defile the gods.

Do what you will;

Go into business, make money, speculate

- 50 In India gold or that synthetic gold from Sardis,
Get rich otherwise than by my consent to bury him.
Teiresias, it is a sorry thing when a wise man
Sells his wisdom, lets out his words for hire!

Teiresias. Ah Creon! Is there no man left in the world—

- 55 **Creon.** To do what? Come, let's have the aphorism!

Teiresias. No man who knows that wisdom outweighs any wealth?

Creon. As surely as bribes are baser than any baseness.

Teiresias. You are sick, Creon! You are deathly sick!

Creon. As you say: it is not my place to challenge a prophet.

- 60 **Teiresias.** Yet you have said my prophecy is for sale.

Creon. The generation of prophets has always loved gold.

Teiresias. The generation of kings has always loved brass.

Creon. You forget yourself! You are speaking to your king.

Teiresias. I know it. You are a king because of me.

- 65 **Creon.** You have a certain skill; but you have sold out.

Teiresias. King, you will drive me to words that—

Creon. Say them, say them!

Only remember: I will not pay you for them.

Teiresias. No, you will find them too costly.

Creon. No doubt. Speak:

Whatever you say, you will not change my will.

- 70 **Teiresias.** Then take this, and take it to heart!

The time is not far off when you shall pay back
Corpse for corpse, flesh of your own flesh.

You have thrust the child of this world into living night;

You have kept from the gods below the child that is theirs:

- 75 The one in a grave before her death, the other,

Dead, denied the grave. This is your crime:

And the Furies and the dark gods of hell

Are swift with terrible punishment for you.

Do you want to buy me now, Creon?

Not many days,

- 80 And your house will be full of men and women weeping,
And curses will be hurled at you from far

49-53 What does Creon think is the motive behind Teiresias' prophecies?

50 Sardis (sār'dis): the capital of ancient Lydia, where metals were first produced.

77-78 Furies: three goddesses who avenge crimes, especially those that violate family ties. How do you think this prophecy will be fulfilled?

WORDS
TO
KNOW

defile (dī-fil') v. to make foul, dirty, unclean, or impure

Cities grieving for sons unburied, left to rot before the walls of Thebes.

These are my arrows, Creon: they are all for you.

(to boy) But come, child: lead me home.

Let him waste his fine anger upon younger men.

Maybe he will learn at last

To control a wiser tongue in a better head.

(Exit Teiresias.)

Choragus. The old man has gone, King, but his words
Remain to plague us. I am old, too,

But I cannot remember that he was ever false.

Creon. That is true. . . . It troubles me.

Oh it is hard to give in! but it is worse

To risk everything for stubborn pride.

Choragus. Creon: take my advice.

Creon.

What shall I do?

Choragus. Go quickly: free Antigone from her vault
And build a tomb for the body of Polyneices.

Creon. You would have me do this?

Choragus.

Creon, yes!

And it must be done at once: God moves

Swiftly to cancel the folly of stubborn men.

Creon. It is hard to deny the heart! But I
Will do it: I will not fight with destiny.

Choragus. You must go yourself; you cannot leave it to others.

Creon. I will go.

—Bring axes, servants:

Come with me to the tomb. I buried her; I

Will set her free.

Oh quickly!

My mind misgives—

The laws of the gods are mighty, and a man must serve them

To the last day of his life!

(Exit Creon.)

PAEAN

Choragus. God of many names

Chorus.

O Iacchus

son

of Cadmean Semele

O born of the thunder!

guardian of the West

regent

of Eleusis' plain

O prince of maenad Thebes

5 and the Dragon Field by rippling Ismenus:

Choragus. God of many names

Chorus.

the flame of torches

flares on our hills

the nymphs of Iacchus

dance at the spring of Castalia:

from the vine-close mountain

come ah come in ivy:

10 *Evohé evohé!* sings through the streets of Thebes

Choragus. God of many names

Chorus.

Iacchus of Thebes

heavenly child

of Semele bride of the Thunderer!

The shadow of plague is upon us:

come

with clement feet

oh come from Parnassus

15 down the long slopes

across the lamenting water

Choragus. Io Fire! Chorister of the throbbing stars!

O purest among the voices of the night!

Thou son of God, blaze for us!

Chorus. Come with choric rapture of circling Maenads

20 Who cry *Io Iacche!*

God of many names!

PAEAN: A paean (pē'an) is a song appealing to the gods for assistance. In this paean, the chorus praises Dionysus, or Iacchus (yā'kes), and calls on him to come to Thebes to show mercy and put out evil.

2 Cadmus was the legendary founder of Thebes. Dionysus was the son of Cadmus' daughter Semele (sē-mē'lē) and Zeus, who is referred to here as thunder.

4-5 These lines name locations near Athens and Thebes. The maenads (mē'nadz') were priestesses of Dionysus.

8-9 The spring of Castalia is on the sacred mountain Parnassus. Grape vines and ivy were symbols of Dionysus.

10 *evohé:* hallelujah.

EXODOS

(Enter Messenger.)

Messenger. Men of the line of Cadmus, you who live
Near Amphion's citadel:

I cannot say
Of any condition of human life, "This is fixed,
This is clearly good, or bad." Fate raises up,
And Fate casts down the happy and unhappy alike:
No man can foretell his fate.

Take the case of Creon:
Creon was happy once, as I count happiness:
Victorious in battle, sole governor of the land,
Fortunate father of children nobly born.
And now it has all gone from him! Who can say
That a man is still alive when his life's joy fails?
He is a walking dead man. Grant him rich;
Let him live like a king in his great house:
If his pleasure is gone, I would not give
So much as the shadow of smoke for all he owns.

Choragus. Your words hint at sorrow: what is your news for us?

Messenger. They are dead. The living are guilty of their death.

Choragus. Who is guilty? Who is dead? Speak!

Messenger.

Haemon.

Haemon is dead; and the hand that killed him

Is his own hand.

Choragus. His father's? or his own?

Messenger. His own, driven mad by the murder his father had done.

Choragus. Teiresias, Teiresias, how clearly you saw it all!

Messenger. This is my news: you must draw what conclusions you
can from it.

Choragus. But look: Eurydice, our queen:

Has she overheard us?

(Enter Eurydice from the palace, center.)

Eurydice. I have heard something, friends:
As I was unlocking the gate of Pallas' shrine,
For I needed her help today, I heard a voice
Telling of some new sorrow. And I fainted
There at the temple with all my maidens about me.
But speak again: whatever it is, I can bear it:
Grief and I are no strangers.

EXODOS: The exodos is the last episode in the play. It is followed by a final speech made by the choragus and addressed directly to the audience.

2 Amphion: Niobe's husband, who built a wall around Thebes by charming the stones into place with music.

15 How does the messenger compare with the sentry who appeared in Scenes 1 and 2?

27 Pallas: Athena, the goddess of wisdom.

32 Megareus (mə-gär'ē-əs), the older son of Eurydice and Creon, had died in the battle for Thebes.

Messenger.

Dearest lady,
I will tell you plainly all that I have seen.
I shall not try to comfort you: what is the use,
35 Since comfort could lie only in what is not true?
The truth is always best.

I went with Creon
To the outer plain where Polyneices was lying,
No friend to pity him, his body shredded by dogs.
We made our prayers in that place to Hecate
40 And Pluto, that they would be merciful. And we bathed
The corpse with holy water, and we brought
Fresh-broken branches to burn what was left of it,
And upon the urn we heaped up a towering barrow
Of the earth of his own land.

When we were done, we ran
45 To the vault where Antigone lay on her couch of stone.
One of the servants had gone ahead,
And while he was yet far off he heard a voice
Grieving within the chamber, and he came back
And told Creon. And as the king went closer,
50 The air was full of wailing, the words lost,
And he begged us to make all haste. "Am I a prophet?"
He said, weeping. "And must I walk this road,
The saddest of all that I have gone before?
My son's voice calls me on. Oh quickly, quickly!
55 Look through the crevice there, and tell me
If it is Haemon, or some deception of the gods!"
We obeyed; and in the cavern's farthest corner
We saw her lying:

She had made a noose of her fine linen veil
60 And hanged herself. Haemon lay beside her,
His arms about her waist, lamenting her,
His love lost underground, crying out
That his father had stolen her away from him.
When Creon saw him, the tears rushed to his eyes,
65 And he called to him: "What have you done, child? Speak to me.
What are you thinking that makes your eyes so strange?
O my son, my son, I come to you on my knees!"
But Haemon spat in his face. He said not a word,
Staring—

and suddenly drew his sword
70 And lunged. Creon shrank back; the blade missed, and the boy,
Desperate against himself, drove it half its length

39-40 Hecate (hēk'ā-tē) and Pluto are other names for Persephone and Hades, the goddess and god of the underworld.

43-44 Note the contrast between the barrow, or burial mound, erected by Creon and the handful of dirt used by Antigone to cover her brother.

60 Note that this is the same in which Jocasta, Antigone's mother, killed herself.

75 Into his own side and fell. And as he died,
He gathered Antigone close in his arms again,
Choking, his blood bright red on her white cheek.
And now he lies dead with the dead, and she is his
At last, his bride in the houses of the dead.

(Exit Eurydice into the palace.)

Choragus. She has left us without a word. What can this mean?

Messenger. It troubles me, too; yet she knows what is best;
Her grief is too great for public lamentation,
And doubtless she has gone to her chamber to weep
80 For her dead son, leading her maidens in his dirge.

Choragus. It may be so: but I fear this deep silence.

(Pause)

Messenger. I will see what she is doing. I will go in.

*(Exit Messenger into the palace. Enter Creon with attendants,
bearing Haemon's body.)*

Choragus. But here is the king himself: oh look at him,
85 Bearing his own damnation in his arms.

Creon. Nothing you say can touch me any more.
My own blind heart has brought me
From darkness to final darkness. Here you see
The father murdering, the murdered son—
90 And all my civic wisdom!
Haemon my son, so young, so young to die,
I was the fool, not you; and you died for me.

Choragus. That is the truth; but you were late in learning it.

Creon. This truth is hard to bear. Surely a god
95 Has crushed me beneath the hugest weight of heaven,
And driven me headlong a barbaric way
To trample out the thing I held most dear.
The pains that men will take to come to pain!

(Enter Messenger from the palace.)

Messenger. The burden you carry in your hands is heavy,
100 But it is not all: you will find more in your house.

Creon. What burden worse than this shall I find there?

Messenger. The queen is dead.

Creon. O port of death, deaf world,
Is there no pity for me? And you, angel of evil,
105 I was dead, and your words are death again.

Is it true, boy? Can it be true?
Is my wife dead? Has death bred death?

Messenger. You can see for yourself.

(The doors are opened, and the body of Eurydice is disclosed within.)

Creon. Oh pity!

110 All true, all true, and more than I can bear!
O my wife, my son!

Messenger. She stood before the altar, and her heart
Welcomed the knife her own hand guided,
And a great cry burst from her lips for Megareus dead,
113 And for Haemon dead, her sons; and her last breath
Was a curse for their father, the murderer of her sons.
And she fell, and the dark flowed in through her closing eyes.

Creon. O God, I am sick with fear.

Are there no swords here? Has no one a blow for me?

120 **Messenger.** Her curse is upon you for the deaths of both.

Creon. It is right that it should be. I alone am guilty.

I know it, and I say it. Lead me in,

Quickly, friends.

I have neither life nor substance. Lead me in.

125 **Choragus.** You are right, if there can be right in so much wrong.
The briefest way is best in a world of sorrow.

Creon. Let it come;

Let death come quickly and be kind to me.

I would not ever see the sun again.

130 **Choragus.** All that will come when it will; but we, meanwhile,
Have much to do. Leave the future to itself.

Creon. All my heart was in that prayer!

Choragus. Then do not pray any more: the sky is deaf.

Creon. Lead me away. I have been rash and foolish.

135 I have killed my son and my wife.

I look for comfort; my comfort lies here dead.

Whatever my hands have touched has come to nothing.

Fate has brought all my pride to a thought of dust.

(As Creon is being led into the house, the Choragus advances and speaks directly to the audience.)

Choragus. There is no happiness where there is no wisdom;

140 No wisdom but in submission to the gods.

Big words are always punished,

And proud men in old age learn to be wise.