

of Sophocles's tragedies survive—the Oedipus trilogy (*Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*), *Philoctetes*, *Ajax*, *Trachiniae*, and *Electra*—though he is believed to have written as many as 123 plays.

CHARACTERS

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|-------------------------|------------------|
| ANTIGONE | HAEMON |
| ISMENE | TEIRESIAS |
| CHORUS OF THEBAN ELDERS | A MESSENGER |
| CREON | EURYDICE |
| A SENTRY | SECOND MESSENGER |

The two sisters ANTIGONE and ISMENE meet in front of the palace gates in Thebes.

ANTIGONE: Ismene, my dear sister,
 whose father was my father, can you think of any
 of all the evils that stem from Oedipus²
 that Zeus does not bring to pass for us, while we yet live?
 No pain, no ruin, no shame, and no dishonor
 but I have seen it in our mischiefs,
 yours and mine.
 And now what is the proclamation that they tell of
 made lately by the commander, publicly,
 to all the people? Do you know it? Have you heard it?
 Don't you notice when the evils due to enemies
 are headed towards those we love?

ISMENE: Not a word, Antigone, of those we love,
 either sweet or bitter, has come to me since the moment
 when we lost our two brothers,
 on one day, by their hands dealing mutual death.
 Since the Argive³ army fled in this past night,
 I know of nothing further, nothing
 of better fortune or of more destruction.

ANTIGONE: I knew it well; that is why I sent for you
 to come outside the palace gates
 to listen to me, privately.

ISMENE: What is it? Certainly your words
 come of dark thoughts.

2. In Greek legend, Oedipus became king of Thebes by inadvertently fulfilling the prophecy that he was destined to kill his father and marry his mother (as depicted in Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*, p. 1758); for these offenses against nature and the gods, Creon sent Oedipus, along with his daughters Antigone and Ismene, into exile at Colonus. Oedipus's sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, agreed to take turns ruling Thebes. But when Eteocles refused to give up the throne at the end of his first allotted year, Polyneices gathered an "Argive army" (line 17) and attacked the city.

3. From Argos, a rival Greek city-state.

- 25 ANTIGONE: Yes, indeed; for those two brothers of ours, in burial
has not Creon honored the one, dishonored the other?
Eteocles, they say he has used justly
with lawful rites and hid him in the earth
to have his honor among the dead men there.
- 30 But the unhappy corpse of Polyneices
he has proclaimed to all the citizens,
they say, no man may hide
in a grave nor mourn in funeral,
but leave unwept, unburied, a dainty treasure
- 35 for the birds that see him, for their feast's delight.
That is what, they say, the worthy Creon
has proclaimed for you and me—for me, I tell you—
and he comes here to clarify to the unknowing
his proclamation; he takes it seriously;
- 40 for whoever breaks the edict death is prescribed,
and death by stoning publicly.
There you have it; soon you will show yourself
as noble both in your nature and your birth,
or yourself as base, although of noble parents.
- 45 ISMENE: If things are as you say, poor sister, how
can I better them? how loose or tie the knot?
ANTIGONE: Decide if you will share the work, the deed.
ISMENE: What kind of danger is there? How far have your thoughts gone?
ANTIGONE: Here is this hand. Will you help it to lift the dead man?
- 50 ISMENE: Would you bury him, when it is forbidden the city?
ANTIGONE: At least he is my brother—and yours, too,
though you deny him. I will not prove false to him.
ISMENE: You are so headstrong. Creon has forbidden it.
ANTIGONE: It is not for him to keep me from my own.
- 55 ISMENE: O God!
Consider, sister, how our father died,
hated and infamous; how he brought to light
his own offenses; how he himself struck out
the sight of his two eyes;
- 60 his own hand was their executioner.
Then, mother and wife, two names in one, did shame
violently on her life, with twisted cords.
Third, our two brothers, on a single day,
poor wretches, themselves worked out their mutual doom.
- 65 Each killed the other, hand against brother's hand.
Now there are only the two of us, left behind,
and see how miserable our end shall be
if in the teeth of law we shall transgress
against the sovereign's decree and power.
- 70 You ought to realize we are only women,
not meant in nature to fight against men,
and that we are ruled, by those who are stronger,

to obedience in this and even more painful matters.
I do indeed beg those beneath the earth
to give me their forgiveness,
since force constrains me,
that I shall yield in this to the authorities.
Extravagant action is not sensible.

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ANTIGONE: I would not urge you now; nor if you wanted
to act would I be glad to have you with me.
Be as you choose to be; but for myself
I myself will bury him. It will be good
to die, so doing. I shall lie by his side,
loving him as he loved me; I shall be
a criminal—but a religious one.
The time in which I must please those that are dead
is longer than I must please those of this world.
For there I shall lie forever. You, if you like,
can cast dishonor on what the gods have honored.

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ISMENE: I will not put dishonor on them, but
to act in defiance of the citizenry,
my nature does not give me means for that.

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ANTIGONE: Let that be your excuse. But I will go
to heap the earth on the grave of my loved brother.

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ISMENE: How I fear for you, my poor sister!

ANTIGONE: Do not fear for me. Make straight your own path to destiny.

ISMENE: At least do not speak of this act to anyone else;
bury him in secret; I will be silent, too.

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ANTIGONE: Oh, oh, no! shout it out. I will hate you still worse
for silence—should you not proclaim it,
to everyone.

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ISMENE: You have a warm heart for such chilly deeds.

ANTIGONE: I know I am pleasing those I should please most.

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ISMENE: If you can do it. But you are in love
with the impossible.

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ANTIGONE: No. When I can no more, then I will stop.

ISMENE: It is better not to hunt the impossible
at all.

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ANTIGONE: If you will talk like this I will loathe you,
and you will be adjudged an enemy—
justly—by the dead's decision. Let me alone
and my folly with me, to endure this terror.
No suffering of mine will be enough
to make me die ignobly.

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ISMENE: Well, if you will, go on.
Know this; that though you are wrong to go, your friends
are right to love you.

CHORUS: Sun's beam, fairest of all
that ever till now shone
on seven-gated Thebes;

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O golden eye of day, you shone
 coming over Dirce's stream;⁴
 You drove in headlong rout
 the whiteshielded man from Argos,
 125 complete in arms;
 his bits rang sharper
 under your urging.

Polyneices brought him here
 against our land, Polyneices,
 130 roused by contentious quarrel;
 like an eagle he flew into our country,
 with many men-at-arms,
 with many a helmet crowned with horsehair.

He stood above the halls, gaping with murderous lances,
 135 encompassing the city's
 seven-gated mouth⁵
 But before his jaws would be sated
 with our blood, before the fire,
 pine fed, should capture our crown of towers,
 140 he went hence—
 such clamor of war stretched behind his back,
 from his dragon foe, a thing he could not overcome.

For Zeus, who hates the most
 the boasts of a great tongue,
 145 saw them coming in a great tide,
 insolent in the clang of golden armor.
 The god struck him down with hurled fire,
 as he strove to raise the victory cry,
 now at the very winning post.

The earth rose to strike him as he fell swinging.
 150 In his frantic onslaught, possessed, he breathed upon us
 with blasting winds of hate.
 Sometimes the great god of war was on one side,
 and sometimes he struck a staggering blow on the other;
 155 the god was a very wheel horse⁶ on the right trace.

At seven gates stood seven captains,
 160 ranged equals against equals, and there left
 their brazen suits of armor
 to Zeus, the god of trophies.
 Only those two wretches born of one father and mother

4. River near Thebes.

5. Thebes was known throughout the ancient world for having seven gateways through the walls protecting the city.

6. Strongest and ablest horse in a team pulling a vehicle, harnessed nearest the front wheels "on the right trace."

set their spears to win a victory on both sides;
they worked out their share in a common death.

Now Victory, whose name is great, has come
to Thebes of many chariots
with joy to answer her joy,
to bring forgetfulness of these wars;
let us go to all the shrines of the gods
and dance all night long.

Let Bacchus lead the dance,
shaking Thebes to trembling.

But here is the king of our land,
Creon,⁷ son of Menoeceus;
in our new contingencies with the gods,
he is our new ruler.

He comes to set in motion some design—
what design is it? Because he has proposed
the convocation of the elders.

He sent a public summons for our discussion.

CREON: Gentlemen: as for our city's fortune,
the gods have shaken her, when the great waves broke,
but the gods have brought her through again to safety.
For yourselves, I chose you out of all and summoned you
to come to me, partly because I knew you
as always loyal to the throne—at first,
when Laius⁸ was king, and then again
when Oedipus saved our city and then again
when he died and you remained with steadfast truth

to their descendants,
until they met their double fate upon one day,
striking and stricken, defiled each by a brother's murder.

Now here I am, holding all authority
and the throne, in virtue of kinship with the dead.

It is impossible to know any man—
I mean his soul, intelligence, and judgment—
until he shows his skill in rule and law.

I think that a man supreme ruler of a whole city,
if he does not reach for the best counsel for her,
but through some fear, keeps his tongue under lock and key,
him I judge the worst of any;

I have always judged so; and anyone thinking
another man more a friend than his own country,
I rate him nowhere. For my part, God is my witness,
who sees all, always, I would not be silent

7. Brother of Jocasta, mother and wife of Oedipus; he became king of Thebes after the deaths of Oedipus's sons.

8. Father of Oedipus.

205 if I saw ruin, not safety, on the way
towards my fellow citizens. I would not count
any enemy of my country as a friend—
because of what I know, that she it is
which gives us our security. If she sails upright
and we sail on her, friends will be ours for the making.
210 In the light of rules like these, I will make her greater still.

In consonance with this, I here proclaim
to the citizens about Oedipus' sons.
For Eteocles, who died this city's champion,
showing his valor's supremacy everywhere,
215 he shall be buried in his grave with every rite
of sanctity given to heroes under earth.

However, his brother, Polyneices, a returned exile,
who sought to burn with fire from top to bottom
his native city, and the gods of his own people;
220 who sought to taste the blood he shared with us,
and lead the rest of us to slavery—

I here proclaim to the city that this man
shall no one honor with a grave and none shall mourn.
You shall leave him without burial; you shall watch him
225 chewed up by birds and dogs and violated.

Such is my mind in the matter; never by me
shall the wicked man have precedence in honor
over the just. But he that is loyal to the state
in death, in life alike, shall have my honor.

230 CHORUS: Son of Menoeceus, so it is your pleasure
to deal with foe and friend of this our city.
To use any legal means lies in your power;
both about the dead and those of us who live.

CREON: I understand, then, you will do my bidding.

235 CHORUS: Please lay this burden on some younger man.

CREON: Oh, watchers of the corpse I have already.

CHORUS: What else, then, do your commands entail?

CREON: That you should not side with those who disagree!

CHORUS: There is none so foolish as to love his own death.

240 CREON: Yes, indeed those are the wages, but often greed
has with its hopes brought men to ruin.

[The SENTRY whose speeches follow represents a remarkable experiment in Greek tragedy in the direction of naturalism of speech. He speaks with marked clumsiness, partly because he is excited and talks almost colloquially. But also the royal presence makes him think apparently that he should be rather grand in his show of respect. He uses odd bits of archaism or somewhat stale poetical passages, particularly in catch phrases. He sounds something like lower-level Shakespearean characters, e.g. Constable Elbow, with his uncertainty about benefactor and malefactor.]

SENTRY: My lord, I will never claim my shortness of breath
 is due to hurrying, nor were there wings in my feet.
 I stopped at many a lay-by in my thinking;
 I circled myself till I met myself coming back.
 My soul accosted me with different speeches. 245
 "Poor fool, yourself, why are you going somewhere
 when once you get there you will pay the piper?"
 "Well, aren't you the daring fellow! stopping again?
 and suppose Creon hears the news from someone else—
 don't you realize that you will smart for that?" 250
 I turned the whole matter over. I suppose I may say
 "I made haste slowly" and the short road became long.
 However, at last I came to a resolve:
 I must go to you; even if what I say
 is nothing, really, still I shall say it. 255
 I come here, a man with a firm clutch on the hope
 that nothing can betide him save what is fated.

CREON: What is it then that makes you so afraid?

SENTRY: No, I want first of all to tell you my side of it. 260
 I didn't do the thing; I never saw who did it.
 It would not be fair for me to get into trouble.

CREON: You hedge, and barricade the thing itself.
 Clearly you have some ugly news for me.

SENTRY: Well, you know how disasters make a man
 hesitate to be their messenger. 265
 CREON: For God's sake, tell me and get out of here!

SENTRY: Yes, I will tell you. Someone just now
 buried the corpse and vanished. He scattered on the skin
 some thirsty dust; he did the ritual,
 duly, to purge the body of desecration. 270
 CREON: What! Now who on earth could have done that?

SENTRY: I do not know. For there was there no mark
 of axe's stroke nor casting up of earth
 of any mattock; the ground was hard and dry,
 unbroken; there were no signs of wagon wheels. 275
 The doer of the deed had left no trace.
 But when the first sentry of the day pointed it out,
 there was for all of us a disagreeable
 wonder. For the body had disappeared;
 not in a grave, of course; but there lay upon him
 a little dust as of a hand avoiding
 the curse of violating the dead body's sanctity. 280
 There were no signs of any beast nor dog
 that came there; he had clearly not been torn.
 There was a tide of bad words at one another,
 guard taunting guard, and it might well have ended
 in blows, for there was no one there to stop it.
 Each one of us was the criminal but no one

290 manifestly so; all denied knowledge of it.
 We were ready to take hot bars in our hands
 or walk through fire,⁹ and call on the gods with oaths
 295 that we had neither done it nor were privy
 to a plot with anyone, neither in planning
 nor yet in execution.
 At last when nothing came of all our searching,
 there was one man who spoke, made every head
 bow to the ground in fear. For we could not
 either contradict him nor yet could we see how
 300 if we did what he said we would come out all right.
 His word was that we must lay information
 about the matter to yourself; we could not cover it.
 This view prevailed and the lot of the draw chose me,
 305 unlucky me, to win that prize. So here
 I am. I did not want to come, and you don't want to have me. I know that.
 For no one likes the messenger of bad news.
 CHORUS: My lord: I wonder, could this be God's doing?
 This is the thought that keeps on haunting me.
 310 CREON: Stop, before your words fill even me with rage,
 that you should be exposed as a fool, and you so old.
 For what you say is surely insupportable
 when you say the gods took forethought for this corpse.
 315 Is it out of excess of honor for the man,
 for the favors that he did them, they should cover him?
 This man who came to burn their pillared temples,
 their dedicated offerings—and this land
 320 and laws he would have scattered to the winds?
 Or do you see the gods as honoring
 criminals? This is not so. But what I am doing
 now, and other things before this, some men disliked,
 325 within this very city, and muttered against me,
 secretly shaking their heads; they would not bow
 justly beneath the yoke to submit to me.
 I am very sure that these men hired others
 to do this thing. I tell you the worse currency
 330 that ever grew among mankind is money. This
 sacks cities, this drives people from their homes,
 this teaches and corrupts the minds of the loyal
 to acts of shame. This displays
 all kinds of evil for the use of men,
 instructs in the knowledge of every impious act.

9. Ancient legal custom required an accused person to undergo a "trial by ordeal," such as walking through fire; if the resulting injuries were not serious, the person was considered innocent and therefore divinely protected.

Those that have done this deed have been paid to do it,
but in the end they will pay for what they have done.

It is as sure as I still reverence Zeus—
know this right well—and I speak under oath—
if you and your fellows do not find this man
who with his own hand did the burial
and bring him here before me face to face,
your death alone will not be enough for me.
You will hang alive till you open up this outrage.
That will teach you in the days to come from what
you may draw profit—safely—from your plundering.
It's not from anything and everything
you can grow rich. You will find out
that ill-gotten gains ruin more than they save.

SENTRY: Have I your leave to say something—or should
I just turn and go?

CREON: Don't you know your talk is painful enough already?

SENTRY: Is the ache in your ears or in your mind?

CREON: Why do you dissect the whereabouts of my pain?

SENTRY: Because it is he who did the deed who hurts your
mind. I only hurt your ears that listen.

CREON: I am sure you have been a chatterbox since you were born.

SENTRY: All the same, I did not do this thing.

CREON: You might have done this, too, if you sold your soul.

SENTRY: It's a bad thing if one judges and judges wrongly.

CREON: You may talk as wittily as you like of judgment.

Only, if you don't bring to light those men
who have done this, you will yet come to say
that your wretched gains have brought bad consequences.

SENTRY: [*Aside.*] It were best that he were found, but whether
the criminal is taken or he isn't—
for that chance will decide—one thing is certain,
you'll never see me coming here again.

I never hoped to escape, never thought I could.
But now I have come off safe, I thank God heartily.

CHORUS: Many are the wonders, none
is more wonderful than what is man.

This it is that crosses the sea
with the south winds storming and the waves swelling,
breaking around him in roaring surf.
He it is again who wears away

the Earth, oldest of gods, immortal, unwearied,
as the ploughs wind across her from year to year
when he works her with the breed that comes from horses.

The tribe of the lighthearted birds he snares
and takes prisoner the races of savage beasts

- and the brood of the fish of the sea,
 with the close-spun web of nets.
 380 A cunning fellow is man. His contrivances
 make him master of beasts of the field
 and those that move in the mountains.
 So he brings the horse with the shaggy neck
 to bend underneath the yoke;
 385 and also the untamed mountain bull;
 and speech and windswift thought
 and the tempers that go with city living
 he has taught himself, and how to avoid
 the sharp frost, when lodging is cold
 390 under the open sky
 and pelting strokes of the rain.
 He has a way against everything,
 and he faces nothing that is to come
 395 without contrivance.
 Only against death
 can he call on no means of escape;
 but escape from hopeless diseases
 he has found in the depths of his mind.
 400 With some sort of cunning, inventive
 beyond all expectation
 he reaches sometimes evil,
 and sometimes good.
 If he honors the laws of earth,
 405 and the justice of the gods he has confirmed by oath,
 high is his city; no city
 has he with whom dwells dishonor
 prompted by recklessness.
 He who is so, may he never
 410 share my hearth!
 may he never think my thoughts!
- Is this a portent sent by God?
 I cannot tell.
 I know her. How can I say
 415 that this is not Antigone?
 Unhappy girl, child of unhappy Oedipus,
 what is this?
 Surely it is not you they bring here
 as disobedient to the royal edict,
 420 surely not you, taken in such folly.
- SENTRY: She is the one who did the deed,
 we took her burying him. But where is Creon?
 CHORUS: He is just coming from the house, when you most need him.
 CREON: What is this? What has happened that I come
 425 so opportunely?
 SENTRY: My lord, there is nothing

that a man should swear he would never do.
 Second thoughts make liars of the first resolution.
 I would have vowed it would be long enough
 before I came again, lashed hence by your threats. 430
 But since the joy that comes past hope, and against all hope,
 is like no other pleasure in extent,
 I have come here, though I break my oath in coming.
 I bring this girl here who has been captured
 giving the grace of burial to the dead man. 435
 This time no lot chose me; this was my jackpot,
 and no one else's. Now, my lord, take her
 and as you please judge her and test her; I
 am justly free and clear of all this trouble.

CREON: This girl—how did you take her and from where? 440

SENTRY: She was burying the man. Now you know all!

CREON: Do you know what you are saying? Do you mean it?

SENTRY: She is the one; I saw her burying
 the dead man you forbade the burial of.

Now, do I speak plainly and clearly enough? 445

CREON: How was she seen? How was she caught in the act?

SENTRY: This is how it was. When we came there,
 with those dreadful threats of yours upon us,
 we brushed off all the dust that lay upon
 the dead man's body, heedfully
 leaving it moist and naked. 450
 We sat on the brow of the hill, to windward,
 that we might shun the smell of the corpse upon us.
 Each of us wakefully urged his fellow
 with torrents of abuse; not to be careless
 in this work of ours. So it went on,
 until in the midst of the sky the sun's bright circle
 stood still; the heat was burning. Suddenly
 a squall lifted out of the earth a storm of dust,
 a trouble in the sky. It filled the plain,
 ruining all the foliage of the wood
 that was around it. The great empty air
 was filled with it. We closed our eyes, enduring
 this plague sent by the gods. When at long last
 we were quit of it, why, then we saw the girl. 465

She was crying out with the shrill cry
 of an embittered bird
 that sees its nest robbed of its nestlings
 and the bed empty. So, too, when she saw
 the body stripped of its cover, she burst out in groans,
 calling terrible curses on those that had done that deed;
 and with her hands immediately
 brought thirsty dust to the body; from a shapely brazen

urn, held high over it, poured a triple stream
 475 of funeral offerings; and crowned the corpse.
 When we saw that, we rushed upon her and
 480 caught our quarry then and there, not a bit disturbed.
 We charged her with what she had done, then and the first time.
 She did not deny a word of it—to my joy,
 but to my pain as well. It is most pleasant
 to have escaped oneself out of such troubles
 but painful to bring into it those whom we love.
 However, it is but natural for me
 to count all this less than my own escape.

485 CREON: You there, that turn your eyes upon the ground,
 do you confess or deny what you have done?

ANTIGONE: Yes, I confess; I will not deny my deed.

CREON: [*To the SENTRY.*] You take yourself off where you like.
 You are free of a heavy charge.

490 Now, Antigone, tell me shortly and to the point,
 did you know the proclamation against your action?

ANTIGONE: I knew it; of course I did. For it was public.

CREON: And did you dare to disobey that law?

ANTIGONE: Yes, it was not Zeus that made the proclamation;

495 nor did Justice, which lives with those below, enact
 such laws as that, for mankind. I did not believe

your proclamation had such power to enable

one who will someday die to override

God's ordinances, unwritten and secure.

500 *They* are not of today and yesterday;

they live forever; none knows when first they were.

These are the laws whose penalties I would not

incur from the gods, through fear of any man's temper.

I know that I will die—of course I do—

505 even if you had not doomed me by proclamation.

If I shall die before my time, I count that

a profit. How can such as I, that live

among such troubles, not find a profit in death?

510 So for such as me, to face such a fate as this

is pain that does not count. But if I dared to leave

the dead man, my mother's son, dead and unburied,

that would have been real pain. The other is not.

Now, if you think me a fool to act like this,

perhaps it is a fool that judges so.

515 CHORUS: The savage spirit of a savage father

shows itself in this girl. She does not know

how to yield to trouble.

CREON: I would have you know the most fanatic spirits

fall most of all. It is the toughest iron,

520 baked in the fire to hardness, you may see

most shattered, twisted, shivered to fragments.

I know hot horses are restrained
by a small curb. For he that is his neighbor's slave cannot
be high in spirit. This girl had learned her insolence
before this, when she broke the established laws.

But here is still another insolence
in that she boasts of it, laughs at what she did.

I swear I am no man and she the man
if she can win this and not pay for it.

No; though she were my sister's child or closer
in blood than all that my hearth god acknowledges
as mine, neither she nor her sister should escape
the utmost sentence—death. For indeed I accuse her,
the sister, equally of plotting the burial.

Summon her. I saw her inside, just now,
crazy, distraught. When people plot
mischiefs in the dark, it is the mind which first
is convicted of deceit. But surely I hate indeed
the one that is caught in evil and then makes
that evil look like good.

ANTIGONE: Do you want anything

beyond my taking and my execution?

CREON: Oh, nothing! Once I have that I have everything.

ANTIGONE: Why do you wait, then? Nothing that you say

pleases me; God forbid it ever should.

So my words, too, naturally offend you.

Yet how could I win a greater share of glory

than putting my own brother in his grave?

All that are here would surely say that's true,
if fear did not lock their tongues up. A prince's power
is blessed in many things, not least in this,
that he can say and do whatever he likes.

CREON: You are alone among the people of Thebes

to see things in that way.

ANTIGONE: No, these do, too,

but keep their mouths shut for the fear of you.

CREON: Are you not ashamed to think so differently
from them?

ANTIGONE: There is nothing shameful in honoring my brother.

CREON: Was not he that died on the other side your brother?

ANTIGONE: Yes, indeed, of my own blood from father and mother.

CREON: Why then do you show a grace that must be impious
in his sight?

ANTIGONE: That other dead man

would never bear you witness in what you say.

CREON: Yes he would, if you put him only on equality

with one that was a desecrator.

ANTIGONE: It was his brother, not his slave, that died.

CREON: He died destroying the country the other defended.

570 ANTIGONE: The god of death demands these rites for both.

CREON: But the good man does not seek an *equal* share only,
with the bad.

ANTIGONE: Who knows
if in that other world this is true piety?

CREON: My enemy is still my enemy, even in death.

575 ANTIGONE: My nature is to join in love, not hate.

CREON: Go then to the world below, yourself, if you
must love. Love *them*. When I am alive no woman shall rule.

CHORUS: Here before the gates comes Ismene
shedding tears for the love of a brother.

580 A cloud over her brow casts shame
on her flushed face, as the tears wet
her fair cheeks.

CREON: You there, who lurked in my house, viper-like—
secretly drawing its lifeblood; I never thought
585 that I was raising two sources of destruction,
two rebels against my throne. Come tell me now,
will you, too, say you bore a hand in the burial
or will you swear that you know nothing of it?

ISMENE: I did it, yes—if she will say I did it
590 I bear my share in it, bear the guilt, too.

ANTIGONE: Justice will not allow you what you refused
and I will have none of your partnership.

ISMENE: But in your troubles I am not ashamed
to sail with you the sea of suffering.

595 ANTIGONE: Where the act was death, the dead are witnesses.
I do not love a friend who loves in words.

ISMENE: Sister, do not dishonor me, denying me
a common death with you, a common honoring
of the dead man.

600 ANTIGONE: Don't die with me, nor make your own
what you have never touched. I that die am enough.

ISMENE: What life is there for me, once I have lost you?

ANTIGONE: Ask Creon; all your care was on his behalf.

ISMENE: Why do you hurt me, when you gain nothing by it?

605 ANTIGONE: I am hurt by my own mockery—if I mock you.

ISMENE: Even now—what can I do to help you still?

ANTIGONE: Save yourself; I do not grudge you your escape.

ISMENE: I cannot bear it! Not even to share your death!

ANTIGONE: Life was your choice, and death was mine.

610 ISMENE: You cannot say I accepted that choice in silence.

ANTIGONE: You were right in the eyes of one party, I in the other.

ISMENE: Well then, the fault is equally between us.

ANTIGONE: Take heart; you are alive, but my life died
long ago, to serve the dead.

CREON: Here are two girls; I think that one of them
 has suddenly lost her wits—the other was always so. 615

ISMENE: Yes, for, my lord, the wits that they are born with
 do not stay firm for the unfortunate.
 They go astray.

CREON: Certainly yours do,
 when you share troubles with the troublemaker. 620

ISMENE: What life can be mine alone without her?

CREON: Do not
 speak of *her*. *She* isn't, anymore.

ISMENE: Will you kill your son's wife to be?¹

CREON: Yes, there are other fields for him to plough. 622

ISMENE: Not with the mutual love of him and her. 625

CREON: I hate a bad wife for a son of mine.

ANTIGONE: Dear Haemon, how your father dishonors you.

CREON: There is too much of you—and of your marriage!

CHORUS: Will you rob your son of this girl? 628

CREON: Death—it is death that will stop the marriage for me. 630

CHORUS: Your decision it seems is taken: she shall die.

CREON: Both you and I have decided it. No more delay.

[*He turns to the SERVANTS.*]

Bring her inside, you. From this time forth,
 these must be women, and not free to roam.
 For even the stout of heart shrink when they see
 the approach of death close to their lives. 635

CHORUS: Lucky are those whose lives
 know no taste of sorrow.
 But for those whose house has been shaken by God
 there is never cessation of ruin;
 it steals on generation after generation 640
 within a breed. Even as the swell
 is driven over the dark deep
 by the fierce Thracian winds
 I see the ancient evils of Labdacus' house²
 are heaped on the evils of the dead. 645
 No generation frees another, some god
 strikes them down; there is no deliverance.
 Here was the light of hope stretched
 over the last roots of Oedipus' house,
 and the bloody dust due to the gods below 650
 has mowed it down—that and the folly of speech
 and ruin's enchantment of the mind.
 Your power, O Zeus, what sin of man can limit?

1. Antigone, betrothed to Creon's son Haemon.

2. Theban royal lineage that included Labdacus; his son, Laius; and his grandson, Oedipus.

655 All-aging sleep does not overtake it,
nor the unwearied months of the gods; and you,
for whom time brings no age,
you hold the glowing brightness of Olympus.

660 For the future near and far,
and the past, this law holds good:
nothing very great
comes to the life of mortal man
without ruin to accompany it.

665 For Hope, widely wandering, comes to many of mankind
as a blessing,
but to many as the deceiver,
using light-minded lusts;
she comes to him that knows nothing
till he burns his foot in the glowing fire.

670 With wisdom has someone declared
a word of distinction:
that evil seems good to one whose mind
the god leads to ruin,
and but for the briefest moment of time
is his life outside of calamity.

675 Here is Haemon, youngest of your sons.
Does he come grieving
for the fate of his bride to-be,
in agony at being cheated of his marriage?

680 CREON: Soon we will know that better than the prophets:

My son, can it be that you have not heard
of my final decision on your betrothed?

Can you have come here in your fury against your father?

Or have I your love still, no matter what I do?

685 HAEMON: Father, I am yours; with your excellent judgment
you lay the right before me, and I shall follow it.

No marriage will ever be so valued by me
as to override the goodness of your leadership.

690 CREON: Yes, my son, this should always be
in your very heart, that everything else
shall be second to your father's decision.

It is for this that fathers pray to have
obedient sons begotten in their halls,

695 that they may requite with ill their father's enemy
and honor his friend no less than he would himself.

If a man have sons that are no use to him,
what can one say of him but that he has bred

so many sorrows to himself, laughter to his enemies?
Do not, my son, banish your good sense

700 through pleasure in a woman, since you know
that the embrace grows cold
when an evil woman shares your bed and home.

What greater wound can there be than a false friend?
 No. Spit on her, throw her out like an enemy,
 this girl, to marry someone in Death's house. 705
 I caught her openly in disobedience
 alone out of all this city and I shall not make
 myself a liar in the city's sight. No, I will kill her.
 So let her cry if she will on the Zeus of kinship;
 for if I rear those of my race and breeding 710
 to be rebels, surely I will do so with those outside it.
 For he who is in his household a good man
 will be found a just man, too, in the city.
 But he that breaches the law or does it violence
 or thinks to dictate to those who govern him 715
 shall never have my good word.
 The man the city sets up in authority
 must be obeyed in small things and in just
 but also in their opposites.
 I am confident such a man of whom I speak 720
 will be a good ruler, and willing to be well ruled.
 He will stand on his country's side, faithful and just,
 in the storm of battle. There is nothing worse
 than disobedience to authority.
 It destroys cities, it demolishes homes; 725
 it breaks and routs one's allies. Of successful lives
 the most of them are saved by discipline.
 So we must stand on the side of what is orderly;
 we cannot give victory to a woman.
 If we must accept defeat, let it be from a man; 730
 we must not let people say that a woman beat us.

CHORUS: We think, if we are not victims of Time the Thief,
 that you speak intelligently of what you speak.

HAEMON: Father, the natural sense that the gods breed 735
 in men is surely the best of their possessions.
 I certainly could not declare you wrong—
 may I never know how to do so!—Still there might
 be something useful that some other than you might think.
 It is natural for me to be watchful on your behalf 740
 concerning what all men say or do or find to blame.
 Your face is terrible to a simple citizen;
 it frightens him from words you dislike to hear.
 But what I can hear, in the dark, are things like these:
 the city mourns for this girl; they think she is dying 745
 most wrongly and most undeservedly
 of all womenkind, for the most glorious acts.
 Here is one who would not leave her brother unburied,
 a brother who had fallen in bloody conflict,
 to meet his end by greedy dogs or by
 the bird that chanced that way. Surely what she merits 750

is golden honor, isn't it? That's the dark rumor
 that spreads in secret. Nothing I own
 I value more highly, father, than your success.
 What greater distinction can a son have than the glory
 755 of a successful father, and for a father
 the distinction of successful children?
 Do not bear this single habit of mind, to think
 that what you say and nothing else is true.
 A man who thinks that he alone is right,
 760 or what he says, or what he is himself,
 unique, such men, when opened up, are seen
 to be quite empty. For a man, though he be wise,
 it is no shame to learn—learn many things,
 and not maintain his views too rigidly.
 765 You notice how by streams in wintertime
 the trees that yield preserve their branches safely,
 but those that fight the tempest perish utterly.
 The man who keeps the sheet³ of his sail tight
 and never slackens capsizes his boat
 770 and makes the rest of his trip keel uppermost.
 Yield something of your anger, give way a little.
 If a much younger man, like me, may have
 a judgment, I would say it were far better
 to be one altogether wise by nature, but,
 775 as things incline not to be so, then it is good
 also to learn from those who advise well.

CHORUS: My lord, if he says anything to the point,
 you should learn from him, and you, too, Haemon,
 780 learn from your father. Both of you
 have spoken well.

CREON: Should we that are my age learn wisdom
 from young men such as he is?

HAEMON: Not learn injustice, certainly. If I am young,
 do not look at my years but what I do.

CREON: Is what you do to have respect for rebels?

785 HAEMON: I would not urge you to be scrupulous
 towards the wicked.

CREON: Is *she* not tainted by the disease of wickedness?

HAEMON: The entire people of Thebes says no to that.

790 CREON: Should the city tell me how I am to rule them?

HAEMON: Do you see what a young man's words these are of yours?

CREON: Must I rule the land by someone else's judgment
 rather than my own?

HAEMON: There is no city
 possessed by one man only.

3. Rope attached to the corner of a sail to hold it taut.

CREON: Is not the city thought to be the ruler's? 795

HAEMON: You would be a fine dictator of a desert. 800

CREON: It seems this boy is on the woman's side. 805

HAEMON: If you are a woman—my care is all for you.

CREON: You villain, to bandy words with your own father!

HAEMON: I see your acts as mistaken and unjust.

CREON: Am I mistaken, reverencing my own office? 810

HAEMON: There is no reverence in trampling on God's honor.

CREON: Your nature is vile, in yielding to a woman.

HAEMON: You will not find me yield to what is shameful. 815

CREON: At least, your argument is all for her.

HAEMON: Yes, and for you and me—and for the gods below.

CREON: You will never marry her while her life lasts.

HAEMON: Then she must die—and dying destroy another.

CREON: Has your daring gone so far, to threaten me? 820

HAEMON: What threat is it to speak against empty judgments?

CREON: Empty of sense yourself, you will regret
your schooling of me in sense. 825

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

CREON: You woman's slave, do not try to wheedle me.

HAEMON: You want to talk but never to hear and listen. 830

CREON: Is that so? By the heavens above you will not—
be sure of that—get off scot-free, insulting,
abusing me. 835

[He speaks to the SERVANTS.]

You people bring out this creature,
this hated creature, that she may die before
his very eyes, right now, next her would-be husband. 840

HAEMON: Not at my side! Never think that! She will not
die by my side. But you will never again
set eyes upon my face. Go then and rage
with such of your friends as are willing to endure it.

CHORUS: The man is gone, my lord, quick in his anger. 845

A young man's mind is fierce when he is hurt.

CREON: Let him go, and do and think things superhuman.

But these two girls he shall not save from death.

CHORUS: Both of them? Do you mean to kill them both? 850

CREON: No, not the one that didn't do anything.

You are quite right there.

CHORUS: And by what form of death do you mean to kill her?

CREON: I will bring her where the path is loneliest,
and hide her alive in a rocky cavern there. 855

I'll give just enough of food as shall suffice
for a bare expiation, that the city may avoid pollution.

In that place she shall call on Hades, god of death,

in her prayers. That god only she reveres.
Perhaps she will win from him escape from death
840 or at least in that last moment will recognize
her honoring of the dead is labor lost.

CHORUS: Love undefeated in the fight,
Love that makes havoc of possessions,
Love who lives at night in a young girl's soft cheeks,
845 Who travels over sea, or in huts in the countryside—
there is no god able to escape you
nor anyone of men, whose life is a day only,
and whom you possess is mad.

You wrench the minds of just men to injustice,
850 to their disgrace; this conflict among kinsmen
it is you who stirred to turmoil.
The winner is desire. She gleaming kindles
from the eyes of the girl good to bed.
Love shares the throne with the great powers that rule.
855 For the golden Aphrodite⁴ holds her play there
and then no one can overcome her.

Here I too am borne out of the course of lawfulness
when I see these things, and I cannot control
the springs of my tears
860 when I see Antigone making her way
to her bed—but the bed
that is rest for everyone.

ANTIGONE: You see me, you people of my country,
as I set out on my last road of all,
865 looking for the last time on this light of this sun—
never again. I am alive but Hades who gives sleep to everyone
is leading me to the shores of Acheron,⁵
though I have known nothing of marriage songs
nor the chant that brings the bride to bed.
870 My husband is to be the Lord of Death.

CHORUS: Yes, you go to the place where the dead are hidden,
but you go with distinction and praise.
You have not been stricken by wasting sickness;
875 you have not earned the wages of the sword;
it was your own choice and alone among mankind
you will descend, alive,
to that world of death.

ANTIGONE: But indeed I have heard of the saddest of deaths—
880 of the Phrygian stranger,⁶ daughter of Tantalus,
whom the rocky growth subdued, like clinging ivy.

4. Goddess of love and beauty. 5. River in Hades, the underworld.

6. Niobe, whose children were slain because of her boastfulness and who was herself turned into a stone on Mount Sipylus. Her tears became the mountain's streams.

The rains never leave her, the snow never fails,
 as she wastes away. That is how men tell the story.
 From streaming eyes her tears wet the crags;
 most like to her the god brings me to rest.

CHORUS: Yes, but she was a god, and god born,
 and you are mortal and mortal born.
 Surely it is great renown
 for a woman that dies, that in life and death
 her lot is a lot shared with demigods.

ANTIGONE: You mock me. In the name of our fathers' gods
 why do you not wait till I am gone to insult me?
 Must you do it face to face?
 My city! Rich citizens of my city!
 You springs of Dirce, you holy groves of Thebes,
 famed for its chariots! I would still have you as my witnesses,
 with what dry-eyed friends, under what laws
 I make my way to my prison sealed like a tomb.
 Pity me. Neither among the living nor the dead
 do I have a home in common—
 neither with the living nor the dead.

CHORUS: You went to the extreme of daring
 and against the high throne of Justice
 you fell, my daughter, grievously.
 But perhaps it was for some ordeal of your father
 that you are paying requital.

ANTIGONE: You have touched the most painful of my cares—
 the pity for my father, ever reawakened,
 and the fate of all of our race, the famous Labdacids,
 the doomed self-destruction of my mother's bed
 when she slept with her own son,
 my father.
 What parents I was born of, God help me!
 To them I am going to share their home,
 the curse on me, too, and unmarried.
 Brother, it was a luckless marriage you made,
 and dying killed my life.

CHORUS: There is a certain reverence for piety.
 But for him in authority,
 he cannot see that authority defied;
 it is your own self-willed temper
 that has destroyed you.

ANTIGONE: No tears for me, no friends, no marriage. Brokenhearted
 I am led along the road ready before me.
 I shall never again be suffered
 to look on the holy eye of the day.
 But my fate claims no tears—
 no friend cries for me.

CREON: [To the SERVANTS.] Don't you know that weeping and wailing before death

would never stop if one is allowed to weep and wail?

930

Lead her away at once. Enfold her
in that rocky tomb of hers—as I told you to.

There leave her alone, solitary,

288

to die if she so wishes

or live a buried life in such a home;

935

we are guiltless in respect of her, this girl.

But living above, among the rest of us, this life

she shall certainly lose.

008

ANTIGONE: Tomb, bridal chamber, prison forever

dug in rock, it is to you I am going

940

to join my people, that great number that have died,

whom in their death Persephone⁷ received.

I am the last of them and I go down

202

in the worst death of all—for I have not lived

the due term of my life. But when I come

945

to that other world my hope is strong

that my coming will be welcome to my father,

and dear to you, my mother, and dear to you,

000

my brother deeply loved. For when you died,

with my own hands I washed and dressed you all,

950

and poured the lustral offerings on your graves.

And now, Polyneices, it was for such care of your body

that I have earned these wages!

202

Yet those who think rightly will think I did right

in honoring you. Had I been a mother

955

of children, and my husband been dead and rotten,

I would not have taken this weary task upon me

against the will of the city. What law backs me

when I say this? I will tell you:

960

If my husband were dead, I might have had another,

and child from another man, if I lost the first.

But when father and mother both were hidden in death

no brother's life would bloom for me again.

210

That is the law under which I gave you precedence,

my dearest brother, and that is why Creon thinks me

965

wrong, even a criminal, and now takes me

by the hand and leads me away,

unbedded, without bridal, without share

050

in marriage and in nurturing of children;

as lonely as you see me; without friends;

970

with fate against me I go to the vault of death

while still alive. What law of God have I broken?

Why should I still look to the gods in my misery?

Whom should I summon as ally? For indeed

because of piety I was called impious.

7. Abducted by Pluto (known to the Greeks as Hades), god of the underworld, who made her his queen.

If this proceeding is good in the gods' eyes
I shall know my sin, once I have suffered. 975

But if Creon and his people are the wrongdoers
let their suffering be no worse than the injustice
they are meting out to me. 980

CHORUS: It is the same blasts, the tempests of the soul,
possess her. 980

CREON: Then for this her guards,
who are so slow, will find themselves in trouble.

ANTIGONE: [*Cries out.*] Oh, that word has come
very close to death. 985

CREON: I will not comfort you
with hope that the sentence will not be accomplished. 985

ANTIGONE: O my father's city, in Theban land,
O gods that sired my race,
I am led away, I have no more stay.

Look on me, princes of Thebes,
the last remnant of the old royal line; 990

see what I suffer and who makes me suffer
because I gave reverence to what claims reverence.

CHORUS: Danae suffered, too, when, her beauty lost, she gave
the light of heaven in exchange for brassbound walls,
and in the tomb-like cell was she hidden and held; 995

yet she was honored in her breeding, child,
and she kept, as guardian, the seed of Zeus

that came to her in a golden shower.⁸

But there is some terrible power in destiny
and neither wealth nor war 1000

nor tower nor black ships, beaten by the sea,
can give escape from it.

The hot-tempered son of Dryas,⁹ the Edonian king,
in fury mocked Dionysus, 1005

who then held him in restraint
in a rocky dungeon.

So the terrible force and flower of his madness
drained away. He came to know the god

whom in frenzy he had touched with his mocking tongue,
when he would have checked the inspired women 1010

and the fire of Dionysus,
when he provoked the Muses¹ that love the lyre.

By the black rocks, dividing the sea in two,
are the shores of the Bosphorus, Thracian Salmydessus.² 1015

8. Danae was locked away because it was prophesized that her son would kill her father. Zeus entered her cell as a shower of gold, impregnated her, and thus fathered Perseus, the child who fulfilled the prophecy. 9. Stricken with madness by Dionysus.

1. Nine sister goddesses of poetry, music, and the arts.

2. City in the land of Thrace, in ancient times erroneously believed to lie on the Bosphorus; the strait separating Europe and Asia at the outlet of the Black Sea.

There the god of war who lives near the city
saw the terrible blinding wound
dealt by his savage wife
on Phineus' two sons.³

1020 She blinded and tore with the points of her shuttle,
and her bloodied hands, those eyes
that else would have looked on her vengefully.

As they wasted away, they lamented
their unhappy fate that they were doomed
1025 to be born of a mother cursed in her marriage.
She traced her descent from the seed
of the ancient Erechtheidae.

In far-distant caves she was raised
among her father's storms, that child of Boreas⁴
1030 quick as a horse, over the steep hills,
a daughter of the gods.

But, my child, the long-lived Fates⁵
bore hard upon her, too.

[Enter TEIRESIAS, the blind prophet, led by a BOY.]

TEIRESIAS: My lords of Thebes, we have come here together,
1035 one pair of eyes serving us both. For the blind
such must be the way of going, by a guide's leading.

CREON: What is the news, my old Teiresias?

TEIRESIAS: I will tell you; and you, listen to the prophet.

CREON: Never in the past have I turned from your advice.

1040 TEIRESIAS: And so you have steered well the ship of state.

CREON: I have benefited and can testify to that.

TEIRESIAS: Then realize you are on the razor edge
of danger.

CREON: What can that be? I shudder to hear those words.

1045 TEIRESIAS: When you learn the signs recognized by my art
you will understand.

I sat at my ancient place of divination
for watching the birds, where every bird finds shelter;
and I heard an unwonted voice among them;
1050 they were horribly distressed, and screamed unmeaningly.

I knew they were tearing each other murderously;
the beating of their wings was a clear sign.

I was full of fear; at once on all the altars,
as they were fully kindled, I tasted the offerings,
1055 but the god of fire refused to burn from the sacrifice,

3. King Phineus's second wife blinded the children of his first wife, whom Phineus had imprisoned in a cave.

4. God of the cold north wind, who sometimes took the form of a stallion.

5. Supernatural forces, usually represented as three elderly women, who determine the quality and length of life.

and from the thighbones a dark stream of moisture
 oozed from the embers, smoked and sputtered.
 The gall bladder burst and scattered to the air
 and the streaming thighbones lay exposed
 from the fat wrapped round them—

so much I learned from this boy here,
 the fading prophecies of a rite that failed.

This boy here is my guide, as I am others'.

This is the city's sickness—and your plans are the cause of it.

For our altars and our sacrificial hearths
 are filled with the carrion meat of birds and dogs,

torn from the flesh of Oedipus' poor son.

So the gods will not take our prayers or sacrifice

nor yet the flame from the thighbones, and no bird
 cries shrill and clear, so gluttoned

are they with fat of the blood of the killed man.

Reflect on these things, son. All men

can make mistakes; but, once mistaken,

a man is no longer stupid nor accursed

who, having fallen on ill, tries to cure that ill,

not taking a fine undeviating stand.

It is obstinacy that convicts of folly.

Yield to the dead man; do not stab him—

now he is gone—what bravery is this,

to inflict another death upon the dead?

I mean you well and speak well for your good.

It is never sweeter to learn from a good counselor
 than when he counsels to your benefit.

CREON: Old man, you are all archers, and I am your mark.

I must be tried by your prophecies as well.

By the breed of you I have been bought and sold

and made a merchandise, for ages now.

But I tell you: make your profit from silver-gold

from Sardis⁶ and the gold from India

if you will. But this dead man you shall not hide

in a grave, not though the eagles of Zeus should bear

the carrion, snatching it to the throne of Zeus itself.

Even so, I shall not so tremble at the pollution
 to let you bury him.

No, I am certain

no human has the power to pollute the gods.

They fall, you old Teiresias, those men,

—so very clever—in a bad fall whenever

they eloquently speak vile words for profit.

6. Capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia, part of modern-day Turkey, and an important trading center, famed for its wealth.

- TEIRESIAS: I wonder if there's a man who dares consider—
- 1100 CREON: What do you mean? What sort of generalization is this talk of yours?
- TEIRESIAS: How much the best of possessions is the ability to listen to wise advice?
- 1105 CREON: As I should imagine that the worst injury must be native stupidity.
- TEIRESIAS: Now that is exactly where your mind is sick.
- CREON: I do not like to answer a seer with insults.
- TEIRESIAS: But you do, when you say my prophecies are lies.
- 1110 CREON: Well, the whole breed of prophets certainly loves money.
- TEIRESIAS: And the breed that comes from princes loves to take advantage—base advantage.
- 1115 CREON: Do you realize you are speaking in such terms of your own prince?
- TEIRESIAS: I know. But it is through me you have saved the city.
- 1120 CREON: You are a wise prophet, but what you love is wrong.
- TEIRESIAS: You will force me to declare what should be hidden in my own heart.
- 1125 CREON: Out with it— but only if your words are not for gain.
- TEIRESIAS: They won't be for *your* gain—that I am sure of.
- 1130 CREON: But realize you will not make a merchandise of my decisions.
- TEIRESIAS: And you must realize that you will not outlive many cycles more of this swift sun before you give in exchange one of your own loins bred, a corpse for a corpse; for you have thrust one that belongs above below the earth, and bitterly dishonored a living soul by lodging her in the grave; while one that belonged indeed to the underworld gods you have kept on this earth without due share of rites of burial, of due funeral offerings, a corpse unhallowed. With all of this you, Creon, have nothing to do, nor have the gods above. These acts of yours are violence, on your part. And in requital the avenging Spirits of Death itself and the gods' Furies shall after *your* deeds, lie in ambush for you, and in their hands you shall be taken cruelly. Now, look at this and tell me I was bribed to say it! The delay will not be long before the cries of mourning in your house, of men and women. All the cities will stir in hatred against you, because their sons in mangled shreds received their burial rites from dogs, from wild beasts

or when some bird of the air brought a vile stink
to each city that contained the hearths of the dead.

1145

These are the arrows that archer-like I launched—
you vexed me so to anger—at your heart:

1146

You shall not escape their sting. You, boy,
lead me away to my house, so he may discharge

1147

his anger on younger men; so may he come to know

1148

to bear a quieter tongue in his head and a better

1149

mind than that now he carries in him.

1150

CHORUS: That was a terrible prophecy, my lord.
The man has gone. Since these hairs of mine grew white

1151

from the black they once were, he has never spoken

1152

a word of a lie to our city.

1153

CREON: I know, I know.

1154

My mind is all bewildered. To yield is terrible.

1155

But by opposition to destroy my very being

1156

with a self-destructive curse must also be reckoned

1157

in what is terrible.

1158

CHORUS: You need good counsel, son of Menoeceus,
and need to take it.

1159

CREON: What must I do, then? Tell me; I shall agree.

1160

CHORUS: The girl—go now and bring her up from her cave,
and for the exposed dead man, give him his burial.

1161

CREON: That is really your advice? You would have me yield.

1162

CHORUS: And quickly as you may, my lord. Swift harms

1163

sent by the gods cut off the paths of the foolish;

1164

CREON: Oh, it is hard; I must give up what my heart

1165

would have me do. But it is ill to fight

1166

against what must be.

1167

CHORUS: Go now, and do this;

1168

do not give the task to others.

1169

CREON: I will go,

1170

just as I am. Come, servants, all of you;

1171

take axes in your hands; away with you

1172

to the place you see, there.

1173

For my part, since my intention is so changed,

1174

as I bound her myself, myself will free her.

1175

I am afraid it may be best, in the end

1176

of life, to have kept the old accepted laws.

1177

CHORUS: You of many names,⁷ glory of the Cadmeian

1178

bride, breed of loud thundering Zeus;

1179

you who watch over famous Italy;

1180

you who rule where all are welcome in Eleusis;

1181

in the sheltered plains of Deo—

1182

7. Refers to Dionysus, known also as Bacchus (especially to the later Romans); son of Zeus and Semele, a mortal princess of Thebes. As god of wine, Dionysus presided over frenzied rites known as Bacchanals.

1190 O Bacchus that dwells in Thebes,
the mother city of Bacchanals,
by the flowing stream of Ismenus,
in the ground sown by the fierce dragon's teeth.

1195 You are he on whom the murky gleam of torches glares,
above the twin peaks of the crag
where come the Corycean nymphs
to worship you, the Bacchanals;
and the stream of Castalia has seen you, too;
and you are he that the ivy-clad
slopes of Nisaeon hills,
1200 and the green shore ivy-clustered,
sent to watch over the roads of Thebes,
where the immortal Evoc chant⁸ rings out.

1205 It is Thebes which you honor most of all cities,
you and your mother both,
she who died by the blast of Zeus' thunderbolt.
And now when the city, with all its folk,
is gripped by a violent plague,
come with healing foot, over the slopes of Parnassus,⁹
over the moaning strait.

1210 You lead the dance of the fire-breathing stars,
you are master of the voices of the night.
True-born child of Zeus, appear,
my lord, with your Thyiad attendants,
who in frenzy all night long
1215 dance in your house, Iacchus,
dispenser of gifts.

1220 **MESSENGER:** You who live by the house of Cadmus and Amphion,¹
hear me. There is no condition of man's life
that stands secure. As such I would not
praise it or blame. It is chance that sets upright;
it is chance that brings down the lucky and the unlucky,
each in his turn. For men, that belong to death,
there is no prophet of established things.
Once Creon was a man worthy of envy—
1225 of my envy, at least. For he saved this city
of Thebes from her enemies, and attained
the throne of the land, with all a king's power.
He guided it right. His race bloomed
with good children. But when a man forfeits joy
1230 I do not count his life as life, but only
a life trapped in a corpse.
Be rich within your house, yes greatly rich,
if so you will, and live in a prince's style.

8. Come forth, come forth!

9. Mountain in central Greece sacred to Apollo, Dionysus, and the Muses; Apollo's shrine, Delphi, lies at the foot of Parnassus. 1. A name for Thebes.

If the gladness of these things is gone, I would not give the shadow of smoke for the rest, as against joy.

1258

CHORUS: What is the sorrow of our princes of which you are the messenger?

1259

MESSANGER: Death; and the living are guilty of their deaths.

CHORUS: But who is the murderer? Who the murdered? Tell us.

MESSANGER: Haemon is dead; the hand that shed his blood was his very own.

1262

CHORUS: Truly his own hand? Or his father's?

1263

MESSANGER: His own hand, in his anger against his father for a murder.

1264

CHORUS: Prophet, how truly you have made good your word!

1265

MESSANGER: These things are so; you may debate the rest.

1266

Here I see Creon's wife Eurydice approaching. Unhappy woman!

Does she come from the house as hearing about her son or has she come by chance?

1268

EURYDICE: I heard your words, all you men of Thebes, as I was going out to greet Pallas² with my prayers.

1269

I was just drawing back the bolts of the gate to open it when a cry struck through my ears telling of my household's ruin. I fell backward

1270

in terror into the arms of my servants; I fainted.

1271

But tell me again, what is the story? I will hear it as one who is no stranger to sorrow.

1272

MESSANGER: Dear mistress, I will tell you, for I was there, and I will leave out no word of the truth.

1273

Why should I comfort you and then tomorrow be proved a liar? The truth is always best.

1274

I followed your husband, at his heels, to the end of the plain

1275

where Polyneices' body still lay unpitied, and torn by dogs. We prayed to Hecate, goddess

1276

of the crossroads, and also to Pluto³ that they might restrain their anger and turn kind.

1277

And him we washed with sacred lustral water

1278

and with fresh-cut boughs we burned what was left of him

1279

and raised a high mound of his native earth; then we set out again for the hollowed rock,

1280

death's stone bridal chamber for the girl. Someone then heard a voice of bitter weeping

1281

while we were still far off, coming from that unblest room.

1282

The man came to tell our master Creon of it. As the king drew nearer, there swarmed about him

1283

a cry of misery but no clear words. He groaned and in an anguished mourning voice

1284

2. Athena, goddess of wisdom.

3. King of the underworld, known to the Greeks as Hades. *Hecate*: goddess of witchcraft.

- 1280 cried "Oh, am I a true prophet? Is this the road
that I must travel, saddest of all my wayfaring?
It is my son's voice that haunts my ear. Servants,
get closer, quickly. Stand around the tomb
and look. There is a gap there where the stones
have been wrenched away; enter there, by the very mouth,
1285 and see whether I recognize the voice of Haemon
or if the gods deceive me." On the command
of our despairing master we went to look.
In the furthest part of the tomb we saw her, hanging
by her neck. She had tied a noose of muslin on it.
1290 Haemon's hands were about her waist embracing her,
while he cried for the loss of his bride gone to the dead,
and for all his father had done, and his own sad love.
When Creon saw him he gave a bitter cry,
went in and called to him with a groan: "Poor son!
1295 what have you done? What can you have meant?
What happened to destroy you? Come out, I pray you!"
The boy glared at him with savage eyes, and then
spat in his face, without a word of answer.
He drew his double-hilted sword. As his father
1300 ran to escape him, Haemon failed to strike him,
and the poor wretch in anger at himself
leaned on his sword and drove it halfway in,
into his ribs. Then he folded the girl to him,
in his arms, while he was conscious still,
1305 and gasping poured a sharp stream of bloody drops
on her white cheeks. There they lie,
the dead upon the dead. So he has won
the pitiful fulfillment of his marriage
within death's house. In this human world he has shown
1310 how the wrong choice in plans is for a man
his greatest evil.
- CHORUS: What do you make of this? My lady is gone,
without a word of good or bad.
- MESSENGER: I, too,
1315 am lost in wonder. I am inclined to hope
that hearing of her son's death she could not
open her sorrow to the city, but chose rather
within her house to lay upon her maids
the mourning for the household grief. Her judgment
is good; she will not make any false step.
- 1320 CHORUS: I do not know. To me this over-heavy silence
seems just as dangerous as much empty wailing.
- MESSENGER: I will go in and learn if in her passionate
heart she keeps hidden some secret purpose.
You are right; there is sometimes danger in too much silence.
- 1325 CHORUS: Here comes our king himself. He bears in his hands
a memorial all too clear;

it is a ruin of none other's making,
purely his own if one dare to say that.

CREON: The mistakes of a blinded man
are themselves rigid and laden with death.
You look at us the killer and the killed
of the one blood. Oh, the awful blindness
of those plans of mine. My son, you were so young,
so young to die. You were freed from the bonds of life
through no folly of your own—only through mine. 1330

CHORUS: I think you have learned justice—but too late. 1335

CREON: Yes, I have learned it to my bitterness. At this moment
God has sprung on my head with a vast weight
and struck me down. He shook me in my savage ways;
he has overturned my joy, has trampled it,
underfoot. The pains men suffer
are pains indeed. 1340

SECOND MESSENGER: My lord, you have troubles and a store besides;
some are there in your hands, but there are others
you will surely see when you come to your house. 1345

CREON: What trouble can there be beside these troubles? 1350

SECOND MESSENGER: The queen is dead. She was indeed true mother
of the dead son. She died, poor lady,
by recent violence upon herself. 1355

CREON: Haven of death, you can never have enough.
Why, why do you destroy me? 1360

You messenger, who have brought me bitter news,
what is this tale you tell?
It is a dead man that you kill again—
what new message of yours is this, boy? 1355

Is this new slaughter of a woman
a doom to lie on the pile of the dead?
CHORUS: You can see. It is no longer
hidden in a corner. 1360

[By some stage device, perhaps the so-called *eccyclema*,⁴ the inside of the
palace is shown, with the body of the dead QUEEN.]

CREON: Here is yet another horror
for my unhappy eyes to see.
What doom still waits for me?
I have but now taken in my arms my son,
and again I look upon another dead face. 1365

Poor mother and poor son!
SECOND MESSENGER: She stood at the altar, and with keen whetted knife
she suffered her darkening eyes to close.
First she cried in agony recalling the noble fate of Megareus,⁵
who died before all this, 1370

4. Wheeled platform rolled forward onto the stage to depict interior scenes; often used in tragedies to reveal dead bodies. 5. Another son of Creon who died defending Thebes.

- 1370 and then for the fate of this son; and in the end
she cursed you for the evil you had done
in killing her sons.
- 1375 CREON: I am distracted with fear. Why does not someone
strike a two-edged sword right through me?
I am dissolved in an agony of misery.
- 1380 SECOND MESSENGER: You were indeed accused
by her that is dead
of Haemon's and of Megareus' death.
- CREON: By what kind of violence did she find her end?
- 1385 SECOND MESSENGER: Her own hand struck her to the entrails
when she heard of her son's lamentable death.
- CREON: These acts can never be made to fit another
to free me from the guilt. It was I that killed her.
Poor wretch that I am, I say it is true!
- 1390 Servants, lead me away, quickly, quickly.
I am no more a live man than one dead.
- CHORUS: What you say is for the best—if there be a best
in evil such as this. For the shortest way
is best with troubles that lie at our feet.
- 1395 CREON: O, let it come, let it come,
that best of fates that waits on my last day.
Surely best fate of all. Let it come, let it come!
That I may never see one more day's light!
- CHORUS: These things are for the future. We must deal
with what impends. What in the future is to care for,
rests with those whose duty it is
to care for them.
- 1400 CREON: At least, all that I want
is in that prayer of mine.
- CHORUS: Pray for no more at all. For what is destined
for us, men mortal, there is no escape.
- 1405 CREON: Lead me away, a vain silly man
who killed you, son, and you, too, lady.
I did not mean to, but I did.
I do not know where to turn my eyes
to look to, for support.
- Everything in my hands is crossed. A most unwelcome fate
has leaped upon me.
- 1410 CHORUS: Wisdom is far the chief element in happiness
and, secondly, no irreverence towards the gods.
But great words of haughty men exact
in retribution blows as great
and in old age teach wisdom.

THE END

c. 441 BCE