

CREON:

Never. Once an enemy, never a friend,
not even after death.

ANTIGONE:

I was born to join in love, not hate—
that is my nature.

590

CREON:

Go down below and love,
if love you must—love the dead! While I'm alive,
no woman is going to lord it over me.

*Enter ISMENE from the palace,
under guard.*

CHORUS:

Look,

Ismene's coming, weeping a sister's tears,
loving sister, under a cloud . . .
her face is flushed, her cheeks streaming.
Sorrow puts her lovely radiance in the dark.

595

CREON:

You—

in my own house, you viper, slinking undetected,
sucking my life-blood! I never knew
I was breeding twin disasters, the two of you
rising up against my throne. Come, tell me,
will you confess your part in the crime or not?
Answer me. Swear to me.

600

ISMENE:

I did it, yes—
if only she consents—I share the guilt,
the consequences too.

ANTIGONE:

No,
Justice will never suffer that—not you,
you were unwilling. I never brought you in.

605

ISMENE:

But now you face such dangers . . . I'm not ashamed
to sail through trouble with you,
make your troubles mine.

ANTIGONE:

Who did the work?
Let the dead and the god of death bear witness!
I have no love for a friend who loves in words alone.

610

ISMENE:

Oh no, my sister, don't reject me, please,
let me die beside you, consecrating
the dead together.

ANTIGONE:

Never share my dying,
don't lay claim to what you never touched.
My death will be enough.

615

ISMENE:

What do I care for life, cut off from you?

ANTIGONE:

Ask Creon. Your concern is all for him.

ISMENE:

Why abuse me so? It doesn't help you now.

ANTIGONE:

You're right— 620

if I mock you, I get no pleasure from it,
only pain.

ISMENE:

Tell me, dear one,
what can I do to help you, even now?

ANTIGONE:

Save yourself. I don't grudge you your survival.

ISMENE:

Oh no, no, denied my portion in your death? 625

ANTIGONE:

You chose to live, I chose to die.

ISMENE:

Not, at least,
without every kind of caution I could voice.

ANTIGONE:

Your wisdom appealed to one world—mine, another.

ISMENE:

But look, we're both guilty, both condemned to death.

ANTIGONE:

Courage! Live your life. I gave myself to death,
long ago, so I might serve the dead. 630

CREON:

They're both mad, I tell you, the two of them.
One's just shown it, the other's been that way
since she was born.

ISMENE:

True, my king,
the sense we were born with cannot last forever . . . 635
commit cruelty on a person long enough
and the mind begins to go.

CREON:

Yours did,
when you chose to commit your crimes with her.

ISMENE:

How can I live alone, without her?

CREON:

Her?
Don't even mention her—she no longer exists. 640

ISMENE:

What? You'd kill your own son's bride?

CREON:

Absolutely:
there are other fields for him to plow.

ISMENE:

Perhaps,
but never as true, as close a bond as theirs.

CREON:

A worthless woman for my son? It repels me.

ISMENE:

Dearest Haemon, your father wrongs you so! 645

CREON:

Enough, enough—you and your talk of marriage!

ISMENE:

Creon—you're really going to rob your son of Antigone?

CREON:

Death will do it for me—break their marriage off.

LEADER:

So, it's settled then? Antigone must die?

CREON:

Settled, yes—we both know that.

650

To the guards.

Stop wasting time. Take them in.
From now on they'll act like women.
Tie them up, no more running loose;
even the bravest will cut and run,
once they see Death coming for their lives.

655



*The guards escort ANTIGONE and
ISMENE into the palace. CREON
remains while the old citizens form
their CHORUS.*

CHORUS:

Blest, they are the truly blest who all their lives
have never tasted devastation. For others, once
the gods have rocked a house to its foundations
the ruin will never cease, cresting on and on
from one generation on throughout the race—

660

like a great mounting tide

driven on by savage northern gales,

surging over the dead black depths

roiling up from the bottom dark heaves of sand

and the headlands, taking the storm's onslaught full-force,

665

roar, and the low moaning

echoes on and on

and now

as in ancient times I see the sorrows of the house,

the living heirs of the old ancestral kings,

piling on the sorrows of the dead

and one generation cannot free the next—

670

some god will bring them crashing down,

the race finds no release.

And now the light, the hope

springing up from the late last root

in the house of Oedipus, that hope's cut down in turn

675

by the long, bloody knife swung by the gods of death

by a senseless word

by fury at the heart.

Zeus,
yours is the power, Zeus, what man on earth
can override it, who can hold it back?
Power that neither Sleep, the all-ensnaring
no, nor the tireless months of heaven
can ever overmaster—young through all time,
mighty lord of power, you hold fast
the dazzling crystal mansions of Olympus.
And throughout the future, late and soon
as through the past, your law prevails:
no towering form of greatness
enters into the lives of mortals
free and clear of ruin.

680

685

True,
our dreams, our high hopes voyaging far and wide
bring sheer delight to many, to many others
delusion, blithe, mindless lusts
and the fraud steals on one slowly . . . unaware
till he trips and puts his foot into the fire.
He was a wise old man who coined
the famous saying: "Sooner or later
foul is fair, fair is foul
to the man the gods will ruin"—
He goes his way for a moment only
free of blinding ruin.

690

695

700

Enter HAEMON from the palace.

Here's Haemon now, the last of all your sons.
Does he come in tears for his bride,
his doomed bride, Antigone—
bitter at being cheated of their marriage?

CREON:

We'll soon know, better than seers could tell us. 705

Turning to HAEMON.

Son, you've heard the final verdict on your bride?
Are you coming now, raving against your father?
Or do you love me, no matter what I do?

HAEMON:

Father, I'm your son . . . you in your wisdom
set my bearings for me—I obey you. 710
No marriage could ever mean more to me than you,
whatever good direction you may offer.

CREON:

Fine, Haemon.

That's how you ought to feel within your heart,
subordinate to your father's will in every way.
That's what a man prays for: to produce good sons— 715
a household full of them, dutiful and attentive,
so they can pay his enemy back with interest
and match the respect their father shows his friend.
But the man who rears a brood of useless children,
what has he brought into the world, I ask you? 720
Nothing but trouble for himself, and mockery
from his enemies laughing in his face.

Oh Haemon,

never lose your sense of judgment over a woman.
The warmth, the rush of pleasure, it all goes cold
in your arms, I warn you . . . a worthless woman 725
in your house, a misery in your bed.
What wound cuts deeper than a loved one
turned against you? Spit her out,
like a mortal enemy—let the girl go.
Let her find a husband down among the dead. 730

Imagine it: I caught her in naked rebellion,
 the traitor, the only one in the whole city.
 I'm not about to prove myself a liar,
 not to my people, no, I'm going to kill her!
 That's right—so let her cry for mercy, sing her hymns 735
 to Zeus who defends all bonds of kindred blood.
 Why, if I bring up my own kin to be rebels,
 think what I'd suffer from the world at large.
 Show me the man who rules his household well:
 I'll show you someone fit to rule the state. 740
 That good man, my son,
 I have every confidence he and he alone
 can give commands and take them too. Staunch
 in the storm of spears he'll stand his ground,
 a loyal, unflinching comrade at your side. 745

But whoever steps out of line, violates the laws
 or presumes to hand out orders to his superiors,
 he'll win no praise from me. But that man
 the city places in authority, his orders
 must be obeyed, large and small, 750
 right and wrong.

Anarchy—

show me a greater crime in all the earth!
 She, she destroys cities, rips up houses,
 breaks the ranks of spearmen into headlong rout.
 But the ones who last it out, the great mass of them 755
 owe their lives to discipline. Therefore
 we must defend the men who live by law,
 never let some woman triumph over us.
 Better to fall from power, if fall we must,
 at the hands of a man—never be rated 760
 inferior to a woman, never.

LEADER:

To us,
 unless old age has robbed us of our wits,
 you seem to say what you have to say with sense.

HAEMON:

Father, only the gods endow a man with reason,
 the finest of all their gifts, a treasure. 765
 Far be it from me—I haven't the skill,
 and certainly no desire, to tell you when,
 if ever, you make a slip in speech . . . though
 someone else might have a good suggestion.

Of course it's not for you, 770
 in the normal run of things, to watch
 whatever men say or do, or find to criticize.
 The man in the street, you know, dreads your glance,
 he'd never say anything displeasing to your face.
 But it's for me to catch the murmurs in the dark, 775
 the way the city mourns for this young girl.
 "No woman," they say, "ever deserved death less,
 and such a brutal death for such a glorious action.
 She, with her own dear brother lying in his blood—
 she couldn't bear to leave him dead, unburied, 780
 food for the wild dogs or wheeling vultures.
 Death? She deserves a glowing crown of gold!"
 So they say, and the rumor spreads in secret,
 darkly . . .

I rejoice in your success, father—
 nothing more precious to me in the world. 785
 What medal of honor brighter to his children
 than a father's growing glory? Or a child's
 to his proud father? Now don't, please,
 be quite so single-minded, self-involved,
 or assume the world is wrong and you are right. 790
 Whoever thinks that he alone possesses intelligence,
 the gift of eloquence, he and no one else,
 and character too . . . such men, I tell you,
 spread them open—you will find them empty.

No,

it's no disgrace for a man, even a wise man,
to learn many things and not to be too rigid.
You've seen trees by a raging winter torrent,
how many sway with the flood and salvage every twig,
but not the stubborn—they're ripped out, roots and all.
Bend or break. The same when a man is sailing:
haul your sheets too taut, never give an inch,
you'll capsize, and go the rest of the voyage
keel up and the rowing-benches under.

795

Oh give way. Relax your anger—change!
I'm young, I know, but let me offer this:
it would be best by far, I admit,
if a man were born infallible, right by nature.
If not—and things don't often go that way,
it's best to learn from those with good advice.

805

LEADER:

You'd do well, my lord, if he's speaking to the point,
to learn from him,

810

Turning to HAEMON.

and you, my boy, from him.

You both are talking sense.

CREON:

So,

men our age, we're to be lectured, are we?—
schooled by a boy his age?

HAEMON:

Only in what is right. But if I seem young,
look less to my years and more to what I do

815

CREON:

Do? Is admiring rebels an achievement?

HAEMON:

I'd never suggest that you admire treason.

CREON:

Oh?—

isn't that just the sickness that's attacked her?

HAEMON:

The whole city of Thebes denies it, to a man.

820

CREON:

And is Thebes about to tell me how to rule?

HAEMON:

Now, you see? Who's talking like a child?

CREON:

Am I to rule this land for others—or myself?

HAEMON:

It's no city at all, owned by one man alone.

CREON:

What? The city is the king's—that's the law!

825

HAEMON:

What a splendid king you'd make of a desert island—
you and you alone.

CREON:

To the CHORUS.

This boy, I do believe,
is fighting on her side, the woman's side.

HAEMON:

If you are a woman, yes—
my concern is all for you.

830

CREON:

Why, you degenerate—bandying accusations,
threatening me with justice, your own father!

HAEMON:

I see my father offending justice—wrong.

CREON:

Wrong?

To protect my royal rights?

HAEMON:

Protect your rights?

When you trample down the honors of the gods?

835

CREON:

You, you soul of corruption, rotten through—
woman's accomplice!

HAEMON:

That may be,
but you will never find me accomplice to a criminal.

CREON:

That's what *she* is,
and every word you say is a blatant appeal for her—

840

HAEMON:

And you, and me, and the gods beneath the earth.

CREON:

You will never marry her, not while she's alive.

HAEMON:

Then she will die . . . but her death will kill another.

CREON:

What, brazen threats? You go too far!

HAEMON:

What threat?

Combating your empty, mindless judgments with a word? 845

CREON:

You'll suffer for your sermons, you and your empty wisdom!

HAEMON:

If you weren't my father, I'd say you were insane.

CREON:

Don't flatter me with Father—you woman's slave!

HAEMON:

You really expect to fling abuse at me
and not receive the same?

CREON:

Is that so!

850

Now, by heaven, I promise you, you'll pay—
taunting, insulting me! Bring her out,
that hateful—she'll die now, here,
in front of his eyes, beside her groom!

HAEMON:

No, no, she will never die beside me—
don't delude yourself. And you will never
see me, never set eyes on my face again.
Rage your heart out, rage with friends
who can stand the sight of you.

855

Rushing out.

LEADER:

Gone, my king, in a burst of anger. 860
A temper young as his . . . hurt him once,
he may do something violent.

CREON:

Let him do—
dream up something desperate, past all human limit!
Good riddance. Rest assured,
he'll never save those two young girls from death. 865

LEADER:

Both of them, you really intend to kill them both?

CREON:

No, not her, the one whose hands are clean—
you're quite right.

LEADER:

But Antigone—
what sort of death do you have in mind for her?

CREON:

I will take her down some wild, desolate path 870
never trod by men, and wall her up alive
in a rocky vault, and set out short rations,
just the measure piety demands
to keep the entire city free of defilement.
There let her pray to the one god she worships: 875
Death—who knows?—may just relieve her from death.
Or she may learn at last, better late than never,
what a waste of breath it is to worship Death.

Exit to the palace.

CHORUS:

Love, never conquered in battle
Love the plunderer laying waste the rich! 880
Love standing the night-watch

guarding a girl's soft cheek,
you range the seas, the shepherds' steadings off in the wilds—
not even the deathless gods can flee your onset,
nothing human born for a day— 885
whoever feels your grip is driven mad.

Love!—

you wrench the minds of the righteous into outrage,
swerve them to their ruin—you have ignited this,
this kindred strife, father and son at war

and Love alone the victor— 890

warm glance of the bride triumphant, burning with desire!
Throned in power, side-by-side with the mighty laws!
Irresistible Aphrodite, never conquered—
Love, you mock us for your sport.

*ANTIGONE is brought from the palace
under guard.*

But now, even I would rebel against the king, 895
I would break all bounds when I see this—
I fill with tears, I cannot hold them back,
not any more . . . I see Antigone make her way
to the bridal vault where all are laid to-rest.

ANTIGONE:

Look at me, men of my fatherland, 900
 setting out on the last road
 looking into the last light of day
 the last I will ever see . . .
 the god of death who puts us all to bed
 takes me down to the banks of Acheron alive— 905
 denied my part in the wedding-songs,
 no wedding-song in the dusk has crowned my marriage—
 I go to wed the lord of the dark waters.

CHORUS:

Not crowned with glory or with a dirge,
 you leave for the deep pit of the dead. 910
 No withering illness laid you low,
 no strokes of the sword—a law to yourself,
 alone, no mortal like you, ever, you go down
 to the halls of Death alive and breathing.

ANTIGONE:

But think of Niobe—well I know her story— 915
 think what a living death she died,
 Tantalus' daughter, stranger queen from the east:
 there on the mountain heights, growing stone
 binding as ivy, slowly walled her round
 and the rains will never cease, the legends say 920
 the snows will never leave her . . .
 wasting away, under her brows the tears
 showering down her breasting ridge and slopes—
 a rocky death like hers puts me to sleep.

CHORUS:

But she was a god, born of gods, 925
 and we are only mortals born to die.
 And yet, of course, it's a great thing
 for a dying girl to hear, even to hear
 she shares a destiny equal to the gods,
 during life and later, once she's dead.

ANTIGONE:

Why, in the name of all my fathers' gods
 why can't you wait till I am gone—
 must you abuse me to my face?
 O my city, all your fine rich sons!
 And you, you springs of the Dirce, 935
 holy grove of Thebes where the chariots gather,
 you at least, you'll bear me witness, look,
 unmourned by friends and forced by such crude laws
 I go to my rockbound prison, strange new tomb—
 always a stranger, O dear god, 940
 I have no home on earth and none below,
 not with the living, not with the breathless dead.

CHORUS:

You went too far, the last limits of daring—
 smashing against the high throne of Justice!
 Your life's in ruins, child—I wonder . . . 945
 do you pay for your father's terrible ordeal?

ANTIGONE:

There—at last you've touched it, the worst pain
 the worst anguish! Raking up the grief for father
 three times over, for all the doom
 that's struck us down, the brilliant house of Laius. 950
 O mother, your marriage-bed
 the coiling horrors, the coupling there—
 you with your own son, my father—doomstruck mother!
 Such, such were my parents, and I their wretched child.
 I go to them now, cursed, unwed, to share their home— 955
 I am a stranger! O dear brother, doomed
 in your marriage—your marriage murders mine,
 your dying drags me down to death alive!

Enter Creon.

CHORUS:

Reverence asks some reverence in return—
but attacks on power never go unchecked, 960
not by the man who holds the reins of power.
Your own blind will, your passion has destroyed you.

ANTIGONE:

No one to weep for me, my friends,
no wedding-song—they take me away
in all my pain . . . the road lies open, waiting. 965
Never again, the law forbids me to see
the sacred eye of day. I am agony!
No tears for the destiny that's mine,
no loved one mourns my death.

CREON:

Can't you see?

If a man could wail his own dirge *before* he dies, 970
he'd never finish.

To the guards.

Take her away, quickly!
Wall her up in the tomb, you have your orders.
Abandon her there, alone, and let her choose—
death or a buried life with a good roof for shelter.
As for myself, my hands are clean. This young girl— 975
dead or alive, she will be stripped of her rights,
her stranger's rights, here in the world above.

ANTIGONE:

O tomb, my bridal-bed—my house, my prison
cut in the hollow rock, my everlasting watch!
I'll soon be there, soon embrace my own, 980
the great growing family of our dead
Persephone has received among her ghosts.

I,

the last of them all, the most reviled by far,
go down before my destined time's run out.
But still I go, cherishing one good hope: 985
my arrival may be dear to father,
dear to you, my mother,
dear to you, my loving brother, Eteocles—
When you died I washed you with my hands,
I dressed you all, I poured the sacred cups 990
across your tombs. But now, Polynices,
because I laid your body out as well,
this, this is my reward. Nevertheless
I honored you—the decent will admit it—
well and wisely too.

Never, I tell you.

if I had been the mother of children 995
or if my husband died, exposed and rotting—
I'd never have taken this ordeal upon myself,
never defied our people's will. What law,
you ask, do I satisfy with what I say?
A husband dead, there might have been another. 1000
A child by another too, if I had lost the first.
But mother and father both lost in the halls of Death,
no brother could ever spring to light again.

For this law alone I held you first in honor. 1005
 For this, Creon, the king, judges me a criminal
 guilty of dreadful outrage, my dear brother!
 And now he leads me off, a captive in his hands,
 with no part in the bridal-song, the bridal-bed,
 denied all joy of marriage, raising children— 1010
 deserted so by loved ones, struck by fate,
 I descend alive to the caverns of the dead.

What law of the mighty gods have I transgressed?
 Why look to the heavens any more, tormented as I am?
 Whom to call, what comrades now? Just think, 1015
 my reverence only brands me for irreverence!
 Very well: if this is the pleasure of the gods,
 once I suffer I will know that I was wrong.
 But if these men are wrong, let them suffer
 nothing worse than they mete out to me— 1020
 these masters of injustice!

LEADER:

Still the same rough winds, the wild passion
 raging through the girl.



CREON:

To the guards.

Take her away.

You're wasting time—you'll pay for it too.

ANTIGONE:

Oh god, the voice of death. It's come, it's here. 1025

CREON:

True. Not a word of hope—your doom is sealed.

ANTIGONE:

Land of Thebes, city of all my fathers—
 O you gods, the first gods of the race!
 They drag me away, now, no more delay.
 Look on me, you noble sons of Thebes— 1030
 the last of a great line of kings,
 I alone, see what I suffer now
 at the hands of what breed of men—
 all for reverence, my reverence for the gods!

*She leaves under guard: the CHORUS
 gathers.*

CHORUS:

Danaë, Danaë— 1035
 even she endured a fate like yours,
 in all her lovely strength she traded
 the light of day for the bolted brazen vault—
 buried within her tomb, her bridal-chamber,
 wed to the yoke and broken. 1040

 But she was of glorious birth
 my child, my child
 and treasured the seed of Zeus within her womb,
 the cloudburst streaming gold!
 The power of fate is a wonder, 1045
 dark, terrible wonder—
 neither wealth nor armies
 towered walls nor ships
 black hulls lashed by the salt
 can save us from that force. 1050

The yoke tamed him too
 young Lycurgus flaming in anger
 king of Edonia, all for his mad taunts
 Dionysus clamped him down, encased
 in the chain-mail of rock 1055
 and there his rage

 his terrible flowering rage burst—
 sobbing, dying away . . . at last that madman
 came to know his god—
 the power he mocked, the power 1060
 he taunted in all his frenzy
 trying to stamp out
 the women strong with the god—
 the torch, the raving sacred cries—
 enraging the Muses who adore the flute. 1065

And far north where the Black Rocks
 cut the sea in half
 and murderous straits
 split the coast of Thrace
 a forbidding city stands 1070
 where once, hard by the walls
 the savage Ares thrilled to watch
 a king's new queen, a Fury rearing in rage
 against his two royal sons—
 her bloody hands, her dagger-shuttle 1075
 stabbing out their eyes—cursed, blinding wounds—
 their eyes blind sockets screaming for revenge!

They wailed in agony, cries echoing cries
 the princes doomed at birth . . .
 and their mother doomed to chains, 1080
 walled up in a tomb of stone—
 but she traced her own birth back
 to a proud Athenian line and the high gods
 and off in caverns half the world away,
 born of the wild North Wind 1085
 she sprang on her father's gales,
 racing stallions up the leaping cliffs—
 child of the heavens. But even on her the Fates
 the gray everlasting Fates rode hard
 my child, my child.

*Enter TIRESIAS, the blind prophet,
led by a boy.*

TIRESIAS:

Lords of Thebes, 1090
I and the boy have come together,
hand in hand. Two see with the eyes of one . . .
so the blind must go, with a guide to lead the way.

CREON:

What is it, old Tiresias? What news now?

TIRESIAS:

I will teach you. And you obey the seer.

CREON:

I will, 1095
I've never wavered from your advice before.

TIRESIAS:

And so you kept the city straight on course.

CREON:

I owe you a great deal, I swear to that.

TIRESIAS:

Then reflect, my son: you are poised, 1100
once more, on the razor-edge of fate.

CREON:

What is it? I shudder to hear you.

TIRESIAS:

You will learn
when you listen to the warnings of my craft.
As I sat on the ancient seat of augury,
in the sanctuary where every bird I know
will hover at my hands—suddenly I heard it, 1105
a strange voice in the wingbeats, unintelligible,
barbaric, a mad scream! Talons flashing, ripping,
they were killing each other—that much I knew—
the murderous fury whirring in those wings
made that much clear!

I was afraid, 1110
I turned quickly, tested the burnt-sacrifice,
ignited the altar at all points—but no fire,
the god in the fire never blazed.
Not from those offerings . . . over the embers
slid a heavy ooze from the long thighbones, 1115
smoking, sputtering out, and the bladder
puffed and burst—spraying gall into the air—
and the fat wrapping the bones slithered off
and left them glistening white. No fire!
The rites failed that might have blazed the future 1120
with a sign. So I learned from the boy here:
he is my guide, as I am guide to others.

And it is you—
your high resolve that sets this plague on Thebes.
The public altars and sacred hearths are fouled,
one and all, by the birds and dogs with carrion 1125
torn from the corpse, the doomstruck son of Oedipus!
And so the gods are deaf to our prayers, they spurn
the offerings in our hands, the flame of holy flesh.
No birds cry out an omen clear and true—
they're gorged with the murdered victim's blood and fat. 1130

Take these things to heart, my son, I warn you.
 All men make mistakes, it is only human.
 But once the wrong is done, a man
 can turn his back on folly, misfortune too,
 if he tries to make amends, however low he's fallen, 1135
 and stops his bullnecked ways. Stubbornness
 brands you for stupidity—pride is a crime.
 No, yield to the dead!
 Never stab the fighter when he's down.
 Where's the glory, killing the dead twice over? 1140

I mean you well. I give you sound advice.
 It's best to learn from a good adviser
 when he speaks for your own good:
 it's pure gain.

CREON:

Old man—all of you! So,
 you shoot your arrows at my head like archers at the target—
 I even have *him* loosed on me, this fortune-teller.
 Oh his ilk has tried to sell me short
 and ship me off for years. Well,
 drive your bargains, traffic—much as you like—
 in the gold of India, silver-gold of Sardis. 1150
 You'll never bury that body in the grave,
 not even if Zeus's eagles rip the corpse
 and wing their rotten pickings off to the throne of god!
 Never, not even in fear of such defilement
 will I tolerate his burial, that traitor. 1155
 Well I know, we can't defile the gods—
 no mortal has the power.

No,
 reverend old Tiresias, all men fall,
 it's only human, but the wisest fall obscenely
 when they glorify obscene advice with rhetoric— 1160
 all for their own gain.

TIRESIAS:

Oh god, is there a man alive
 who knows, who actually believes . . .

CREON:

What now?

What earth-shattering truth are you about to utter?

TIRESIAS:

. . . just how much a sense of judgment, wisdom 1165
 is the greatest gift we have?

CREON:

Just as much, I'd say,
 as a twisted mind is the worst affliction known.

TIRESIAS:

You are the one who's sick, Creon, sick to death.

CREON:

I am in no mood to trade insults with a seer.

TIRESIAS:

You have already, calling my prophecies a lie.

CREON:

Why not? 1170

You and the whole breed of seers are mad for money!

TIRESIAS:

And the whole race of tyrants lusts for filthy gain.

CREON:

This slander of yours—
are you aware you're speaking to the king?

TIRESIAS:

Well aware. Who helped you save the city?

CREON:

You— 1175

you have your skills, old seer, but you lust for injustice!

TIRESIAS:

You will drive me to utter the dreadful secret in my heart.

CREON:

Spit it out! Just don't speak it out for profit.

TIRESIAS:

Profit? No, not a bit of profit, not for you.

CREON:

Know full well, you'll never buy off my resolve. 1180

TIRESIAS:

Then know this too, learn this by heart!

The chariot of the sun will not race through
so many circuits more, before you have surrendered
one born of your own loins, your own flesh and blood,
a corpse for corpses given in return, since you have thrust 1185
to the world below a child sprung for the world above,
ruthlessly lodged a living soul within the grave—
then you've robbed the gods below the earth,
keeping a dead body here in the bright air,
unburied, unsung, unhallowed by the rites. 1190

You, you have no business with the dead,
nor do the gods above—this is violence
you have forced upon the heavens.
And so the avengers, the dark destroyers late
but true to the mark, now lie in wait for you, 1195
the Furies sent by the gods and the god of death
to strike you down with the pains that you perfected!

There. Reflect on that, tell me I've been bribed.
The day comes soon, no long test of time, not now,
when the mourning cries for men and women break 1200
throughout your halls. Great hatred rises against you—
cities in tumult, all whose mutilated sons
the dogs have graced with burial, or the wild beasts
or a wheeling crow that wings the ungodly stench of carrion
back to each city, each warrior's hearth and home. 1205

These arrows for your heart! Since you've raked me
I loose them like an archer in my anger,
arrows deadly true. You'll never escape
their burning, searing force.

Motioning to his escort.

Come, boy, take me home. 1210
So he can vent his rage on younger men,
and learn to keep a gentler tongue in his head
and better sense than what he carries now.

Exit to the side.

LEADER:

The old man's gone, my king—
 terrible prophecies. Well I know, 1215
 since the hair on this old head went gray,
 he's never lied to Thebes.

CREON:

I know it myself—I'm shaken, torn.
 It's a dreadful thing to yield . . . but resist now?
 Lay my pride bare to the blows of ruin? 1220
 That's dreadful too.

LEADER:

But good advice,
 Creon, take it now, you must.

CREON:

What should I do? Tell me . . . I'll obey.

LEADER:

Go! Free the girl from the rocky vault
 and raise a mound for the body you exposed. 1225

CREON:

That's your advice? You think I should give in?

LEADER:

Yes, my king, quickly. Disasters sent by the gods
 cut short our follies in a flash.

CREON:

Oh it's hard,
 giving up the heart's desire . . . but I will do it—
 no more fighting a losing battle with necessity. 1230

LEADER:

Do it now, go, don't leave it to others.

CREON:

Now—I'm on my way! Come, each of you,
 take up axes, make for the high ground,
 over there, quickly! I and my better judgment
 have come round to this—I shackled her, 1235
 I'll set her free myself. I am afraid . . .
 it's best to keep the established laws
 to the very day we die.



*Rushing out, followed by his
entourage. The CHORUS clusters
around the altar.*

CHORUS:

God of a hundred names!

Great Dionysus—

Son and glory of Semele! Pride of Thebes—

1240

Child of Zeus whose thunder rocks the clouds—

Lord of the famous lands of evening—

King of the Mysteries!

King of Eleusis, Demeter's plain

her breasting hills that welcome in the world—

Great Dionysus!

Bacchus, living in Thebes

1245

the mother-city of all your frenzied women—

Bacchus

living along the Ismenus' rippling waters

standing over the field sown with the Dragon's teeth!

You—we have seen you through the flaring smoky fires,

your torches blazing over the twin peaks

1250

where nymphs of the hallowed cave climb onward

fired with you, your sacred rage—

we have seen you at Castalia's running spring

and down from the heights of Nysa crowned with ivy

the greening shore rioting vines and grapes

1255

down you come in your storm of wild women

ecstatic, mystic cries—

Dionysus—

down to watch and ward the roads of Thebes!

First of all cities, Thebes you honor first
you and your mother, bride of the lightning—
come, Dionysus! now your people lie
in the iron grip of plague,
come in your racing, healing stride

1260

down Parnassus' slopes

or across the moaning straits.

Lord of the dancing—

1265

dance, dance the constellations breathing fire!

Great master of the voices of the night!

Child of Zeus, God's offspring, come, come forth!

Lord, king, dance with your nymphs, swirling, raving

arm-in-arm in frenzy through the night

1270

they dance you, Iacchus—

Dance, Dionysus

giver of all good things!

Enter a MESSENGER from the side.

MESSENGER:

Neighbors,

friends of the house of Cadmus and the kings,

there's not a thing in this mortal life of ours

I'd praise or blame as settled once for all.

1275

Fortune lifts and Fortune fells the lucky

and unlucky every day. No prophet on earth

can tell a man his fate. Take Creon:

there was a man to rouse your envy once,

as I see it. He saved the realm from enemies,

1280

taking power, he alone, the lord of the fatherland,

he set us true on course—he flourished like a tree

with the noble line of sons he bred and reared . . .

and now it's lost, all gone.

Believe me,
 when a man has squandered his true joys, 1285
 he's good as dead, I tell you, a living corpse.
 Pile up riches in your house, as much as you like—
 live like a king with a huge show of pomp,
 but if real delight is missing from the lot,
 I wouldn't give you a wisp of smoke for it, 1290
 not compared with joy.

LEADER:

What now?
 What new grief do you bring the house of kings?

MESSENGER:

Dead, dead—and the living are guilty of their death!

LEADER:

Who's the murderer? Who is dead? Tell us.

MESSENGER:

Haemon's gone, his blood spilled by the very hand— 1295

LEADER:

His father's or his own?

MESSENGER:

His own . . .
 raging mad with his father for the death—

LEADER:

Oh great seer,
 you saw it all, you brought your word to birth!

MESSENGER:

Those are the facts. Deal with them as you will.

*As he turns to go, EURYDICE enters
 from the palace.*

LEADER:

Look, Eurydice. Poor woman, Creon's wife, 1300
 so close at hand. By chance perhaps,
 unless she's heard the news about her son.

EURYDICE:

My countrymen,
 all of you—I caught the sound of your words
 as I was leaving to do my part,
 to appeal to queen Athena with my prayers. 1305
 I was just loosing the bolts, opening the doors,
 when a voice filled with sorrow, family sorrow,
 struck my ears, and I fell back, terrified,
 into the women's arms—everything went black.
 Tell me the news, again, whatever it is . . . 1310
 sorrow and I are hardly strangers.
 I can bear the worst.

MESSENGER:

I—dear lady,
 I'll speak as an eye-witness. I was there.
 And I won't pass over one word of the truth.
 Why should I try to soothe you with a story, 1315
 only to prove a liar in a moment?
 Truth is always best.

So,

I escorted your lord, I guided him
 to the edge of the plain where the body lay,
 Polynices, torn by the dogs and still unmourned. 1320
 And saying a prayer to Hecate of the Crossroads,
 Pluto too, to hold their anger and be kind,
 we washed the dead in a bath of holy water
 and plucking some fresh branches, gathering . . .
 what was left of him, we burned them all together 1325
 and raised a high mound of native earth, and then
 we turned and made for that rocky vault of hers,
 the hollow, empty bed of the bride of Death.

And far off, one of us heard a voice,
 a long wail rising, echoing 1330
 out of that unhallowed wedding-chamber,
 he ran to alert the master and Creon pressed on,
 closer—the strange, inscrutable cry came sharper,
 throbbing around him now, and he let loose
 a cry of his own, enough to wrench the heart, 1335
 “Oh god, am I the prophet now? going down
 the darkest road I’ve ever gone? My son—
 it’s *his* dear voice, he greets me! Go, men,
 closer, quickly! Go through the gap,
 the rocks are dragged back— 1340
 right to the tomb’s very mouth—and look,
 see if it’s Haemon’s voice I think I hear,
 or the gods have robbed me of my senses.”

The king was shattered. We took his orders,
 went and searched, and there in the deepest, 1345
 dark recesses of the tomb we found her . . .
 hanged by the neck in a fine linen noose,
 strangled in her veils—and the boy,
 his arms flung around her waist,
 clinging to her, wailing for his bride, 1350
 dead and down below, for his father’s crimes
 and the bed of his marriage blighted by misfortune.
 When Creon saw him, he gave a deep sob,
 he ran in, shouting, crying out to him,
 “Oh my child—what have you done? what seized you, 1355
 what insanity? what disaster drove you mad?
 Come out, my son! I beg you on my knees!”
 But the boy gave him a wild burning glance,
 spat in his face, not a word in reply,
 he drew his sword—his father rushed out, 1360
 running as Haemon lunged and missed!—
 and then, doomed, desperate with himself,
 suddenly leaning his full weight on the blade,
 he buried it in his body, halfway to the hilt.

And still in his senses, pouring his arms around her, 1365
 he embraced the girl and breathing hard,
 released a quick rush of blood,
 bright red on her cheek glistening white.
 And there he lies, body enfolding body . . .
 he has won his bride at last, poor boy, 1370
 not here but in the houses of the dead.

Creon shows the world that of all the ills
 afflicting men the worst is lack of judgment.

*EURDYCE turns and reenters the
 palace.*

LEADER:

What do you make of that? The lady’s gone,
 without a word, good or bad.

MESSENGER:

I’m alarmed too 1375
 but here’s my hope—faced with her son’s death
 she finds it unbecoming to mourn in public.
 Inside, under her roof, she’ll set her women
 to the task and wail the sorrow of the house.
 She’s too discreet. She won’t do something rash. 1380

LEADER:

I’m not so sure. To me, at least,
 a long heavy silence promises danger,
 just as much as a lot of empty outcries.

MESSENGER:

We’ll see if she’s holding something back,
 hiding some passion in her heart. 1385
 I’m going in. You may be right—who knows?
 Even too much silence has its dangers.

*Exit to the palace. Enter CREON
 from the side, escorted by attendants
 carrying HAEMON’S body on a bier.*

LEADER:

The king himself! Coming toward us,
look, holding the boy's head in his hands.
Clear, damning proof, if it's right to say so— 1390
proof of his own madness, no one else's,
no, his own blind wrongs.

CREON:

Ohhh,

so senseless, so insane . . . my crimes,
my stubborn, deadly—
Look at us, the killer, the killed, 1395
father and son, the same blood—the misery!
My plans, my mad fanatic heart,
my son, cut off so young!
Ai, dead, lost to the world,
not through your stupidity, no, my own.

LEADER:

Too late, 1400

too late, you see what justice means.

CREON:

Oh I've learned

through blood and tears! Then, it was then,
when the god came down and struck me—a great weight
shattering, driving me down that wild savage path,
ruining, trampling down my joy. Oh the agony, 1405
the heartbreaking agonies of our lives.

*Enter the MESSENGER from the
palace.*

MESSENGER:

Master,

what a hoard of grief you have, and you'll have more.
The grief that lies to hand you've brought yourself—

Pointing to HAEMON's body.

the rest, in the house, you'll see it all too soon.

CREON:

What now? What's worse than this?

MESSENGER:

The queen is dead. 1410

The mother of this dead boy . . . mother to the end—
poor thing, her wounds are fresh.

CREON:

No, no,

harbor of Death, so choked, so hard to cleanse!—
why me? why are you killing me?
Herald of pain, more words, more grief? 1415
I died once, you kill me again and again!
What's the report, boy . . . some news for me?
My wife dead? O dear god!
Slaughter heaped on slaughter?

*The doors open; the body of
EURYDICE is brought out on her bier.*

MESSENGER:

See for yourself:

now they bring her body from the palace.

CREON:

Oh no, 1420

another, a second loss to break the heart.
What next, what fate still waits for me?
I just held my son in my arms and now,
look, a new corpse rising before my eyes—
wretched, helpless mother—O my son! 1425

MESSENGER:

She stabbed herself at the altar,
 then her eyes went dark, after she'd raised
 a cry for the noble fate of Megareus, the hero
 killed in the first assault, then for Haemon,
 then with her dying breath she called down
 torments on your head—you killed her sons. 1430

CREON:

Oh the dread,
 I shudder with dread! Why not kill me too?—
 run me through with a good sharp sword?
 Oh god, the misery, anguish—
 I, I'm churning with it, going under. 1435

MESSENGER:

Yes, and the dead, the woman lying there,
 piles the guilt of all their deaths on you.

CREON:

How did she end her life, what bloody stroke?

MESSENGER:

She drove home to the heart with her own hand,
 once she learned her son was dead . . . that agony. 1440

CREON:

And the guilt is all mine—
 can never be fixed on another man,
 no escape for me. I killed you,
 I, god help me, I admit it all!

To his attendants.

Take me away, quickly, out of sight. 1445
 I don't even exist—I'm no one. Nothing.

LEADER:

Good advice, if there's any good in suffering.
 Quickest is best when troubles block the way.

CREON:

Kneeling in prayer.

Come, let it come!—that best of fates for me
 that brings the final day, best fate of all. 1450
 Oh quickly, now—
 so I never have to see another sunrise.

LEADER:

That will come when it comes;
 we must deal with all that lies before us.
 The future rests with the ones who tend the future. 1455

CREON:

That prayer—I poured my heart into that prayer!

LEADER:

No more prayers now. For mortal men
 there is no escape from the doom we must endure.

CREON:

Take me away, I beg you, out of sight.
 A rash, indiscriminate fool! 1460
 I murdered you, my son, against my will—
 you too, my wife . . .

Wailing wreck of a man,
 whom to look to? where to lean for support?

*Desperately turning from HAEMON to
 EURYDICE on their biers.*

Whatever I touch goes wrong—once more
 a crushing fate's come down upon my head! 1465

*The MESSENGER and attendants lead
 CREON into the palace.*

CHORUS:

Wisdom is by far the greatest part of joy,
and reverence toward the gods must be safeguarded.
The mighty words of the proud are paid in full
with mighty blows of fate, and at long last
those blows will teach us wisdom.

1470

The old citizens exit to the side.

OEDIPUS THE KING

