

CLASSICAL GREEK TRAGEDY



Sophocles

ANTIGONE

SOPHOCLES (496?-406 B.C.)

Antigone

An English Version by Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald

Person Represented

ANTIGONE
ISMENE
EURYDICE
CREON
HAIMON
TEIRESIAS
A SENTRY
A MESSENGER
CHORUS

SCENE: Before the Palace of Creon, King of Thebes. A central double door, and two lateral doors. A platform extends the length of the façade, and from this platform three steps lead down into the “orchestra”, or chorus-ground. TIME: Dawn of the day after the repulse of the Argive army from the assault on Thebes.

PROLOGUE

[ANTIGONE and ISMENE enter from the central door of the Palace.]

ANTIGONE:

Ismene, dear sister,
You would think that we had already suffered enough
For the curse on Oedipus:¹
I cannot imagine any grief
That you and I have not gone through. And now — 5
Have they told you of the new decree of our King Creon?

ISMENE:

I have heard nothing: I know
That two sisters lost two brothers, a double death
In a single hour; and I know that the Argive army
Fled in the night; but beyond this, nothing. 10

ANTIGONE:

I thought so. And that is why I wanted you
To come out here with me. There is something we must do.

¹ Oedipus, once King of Thebes, was the father of Antigone and Ismene, and of their brothers Polyneices and Eteocles. Oedipus unwittingly killed his father, Laios, and married his own mother, Iocaste. When he learned what he had done, he blinded himself and left Thebes. Eteocles and Polyneices quarreled, Polyneices was driven out but returned to assault Thebes. In the battle each brother killed the other; Creon became king and ordered that Polyneices be left to rot unburied on the battlefield as a traitor. [Editors' note]

ISMENE:

Why do you speak so strangely?

ANTIGONE:

Listen, Ismenê:

Creon buried our brother Eteoclês 15

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

And it was right that he should; but Polyneicês,

They fought as bravely and died as miserably,--

They say that Creon has sworn

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

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

For carrion birds to find as they search for food.

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

To announce it publicly; and the penalty —

Stoning to death I the public square!

There it is, 25

And now you can prove what you are:

A true sister, or a traitor to your family.

ISMENE:

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

ANTIGONE:

You must decide whether you will help me or not.

ISMENE:

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

ANTIGONE:

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

ISMENE:

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

ANTIGONE:

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

ISMENE:

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

ANTIGONE:

Creon is not enough to stand in my way. 15

ISMENE:

Ah sister!

Oedipus died, everyone hating him

For what his own search brought to light, his eyes
Ripped out by his own hand; and Iocaste died,
His mother and wife at once: she twisted the cords 40
That strangled her life; and our two brothers died,
Each killed by the other's sword. And we are left:
But oh, Antigone,
Think how much more terrible than these
Our own death would be if we should go against Creon 45
And do what he has forbidden! We are only women,
We cannot fight with men, Antigone!
The law is strong, we must give in to the law
In this thing, and in worse. I beg the Dead
To forgive me, but I am helpless: I must yield 50
To those in authority. And I think it is dangerous business
To be always meddling.

ANTIGONE:

If that is what you think,
I should not want you, even if you asked to come.
You have made your choice, you can be what you want to be.
But I will bury him; and if I must die, 55
I say that this crime is holy: I shall lie down
With him in death, and I shall be as dear
To him as he to me.

It is the dead
Not the living, who make the longest demands:
We die for ever...

You may do as you like
Since apparently the laws of the god mean nothing to you.

ISMENE:

They mean a great deal to me, but I have no strength
To break laws that were made for the public good.

ANTIGONE:

That must be your excuse, I suppose. But as for me,
I will bury the brother I love.

ISMENE:

Antigone,
I am so afraid for you!

ANTIGONE:

You need not be:
You have yourself to consider, after all.

ISMENE:

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

ANTIGONE:

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

ISMENE:

So fiery! You should be cold with fear.

ANTIGONE:

Perhaps. But I am doing only what I must.

ISMENE:

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

ANTIGONE

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

ISMENE:

Impossible things should not be tried at all.

ANTIGONE:

Go away, Ismene:
I shall be hating you soon, and the dead will too,
For your words are hateful. Leave me my foolish plan:
I am not afraid of the danger; if it means death, 80
It will not be the worst of deaths —death without honor.

ISMENE:

Go then, if you feel that you must.
You are unwise,
But a loyal friend indeed to those who love you.
[Exit into the Palace. ANTIGONE goes off, L. Enter the CHORUS.]

PARODOS

CHORUS:

Now the long blade of the sun, lying [Strophe 1] 85
Level east to west, touches with glory
Thebes of the Seven Gates. Open, unlidged
Eye of golden day! O marching light
Across the eddy and rush of Dirce's stream,²
Striking the white shields of the enemy 90
Thrown headlong backward from the blaze of morning!

² Dirce: a stream west of Thebes. [Editor's note]

CHORAGOS:³

Polyneices their commander
Roused them with windy phrases,
He the wild eagle screaming
Insults above our land, 95
His wings their shields of snow,
His crest their marshaled helms.

CHORUS: [Antistrophe 1]

Against our seven gates in a yawning ring
The famished spears came onward in the night;
But before his jaws were sated with our blood, 100
Or pine fire took the garland of our towers,
He was thrown back; and as he turned, great Thebes—
No tender victim for his noisy power—
Rose like a dragon behind him, shouting war.

CHORAGOS:

For God hates utterly 105
The bray of bragging tongues;
And when he beheld their smiling,
Their swagger of golden helms,
The frown of his thunder blasted
Their first man from our walls 110

CHORUS: [Strophe 2]

We heard his shout of triumph high in the air
Turn to a scream; far out in a flaming are
He fell with his windy torch, and the earth struck him.
And others storming in fury no less than his
Found shock of death in the dusty joy of battle 115

CHORAGOS:

Seven captains at seven gates
Yielded their clanging arms to the god
That bends the battle-line and breaks it.
These two only, brothers in blood,
Face to face in matchless rage, 120
Mirroring each the other's death,
Clashed in long combat.

CHORUS: [Antistrophe 2]

But now in the beautiful morning of victory
Let Thebes of the many chariots sing for joy!
With hearts for dancing we'll take leave of war: 125
Our temples shall be sweet with hymns of praise,

³ Leader of the Chorus. [Editors' note]

And the long night shall echo with our chorus.

SCENE I

CHORAGUS:

But now at last our new King is coming:
Creon of Thebes, Menoikeus' son.

In this auspicious dawn of his reign

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What are the new complexities

That shifting Fate has woven for him?

What is his counsel? Why has he summoned

The old men to hear him?

[Enter CREON from the Palace, C. He addresses the CHORUS
from the top step.]

CREON:

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

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

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

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him; he shall lie on the plain, unburied; and the birds and the scavenging dogs can do with him whatever they like.

This is my command, and you can see the wisdom behind it. As long as I am King, no traitor is going to be honored with the loyal man. But whoever shows by word and deed that he is on the side of the State,—he shall have my respect while he is living and my reverence when he is dead. 175

CHORAGOS:

If that is your will, Creon son of Menoikeus,
You have the right to enforce it: we are yours. 180

CREON:

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

CHORAGOS:

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

CREON:

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

CHORAGOS:

Then what is it that you would have us do?

CREON:

You will give no support to whoever breaks this law. 185

CHORAGOS:

Only a crazy man is in love with death!

CREON:

And death it is; yet money talks, and the wisest
Have sometimes been known to count a few coins too many.

[Enter *SENTRY* from *L.*]

SENTRY:

I'll not say that I'm out of breath from running, King, because every time I stopped to think about what I have to tell you, I felt like going back. And all the time a voice kept saying, "You fool, don't you know you're walking straight into trouble?"; and then another voice: "Yes, but if you let somebody else get the news to Creon first, it will be even worse than that for you!" But good sense won out, at least I hope it was good sense, and here I am with a story that makes no sense at all; but I'll tell it anyhow, because, as they say, what's going to happen's going to happen, and— 190 195

CREON:

Come to the point. What have you to say?

SENTRY:

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

CREON:

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

SENTRY:

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

CREON:

Out with it!

SENTRY:

Well, then;
The dead man—

Polyneices—

[Pause. The SENTRY is overcome, fumbles for words. CREON
waits impassively.]

out there—

someone, —

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new dust on the slimy flesh!

[Pause. No sign from CREON.]

Someone has given it burial that way, and

Gone ...

[Long pause. CREON finally speaks with deadly control.]

CREON:

And the man who dared do this?

SENTRY:

I swear I

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Do not know! You must believe me!

Listen:

The ground was dry, not a sign of digging, no,

Not a wheel track in the dust, no trace of anyone.

It was when they relieved us this morning: and one of them,

The corporal, pointed to it.

There it was,

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The strangest—

Look:

The body, just mounded over with light dust: you see?

Not buried really, but as if they'd covered it

Just enough for the ghost's peace. And no sign
Of dogs or any wild animal that had been there. 220

And then what a scene there was! Every man of us
Accusing the other: we all proved the other man did it,
We all had proof that we could not have done it.
We were ready to take hot iron in our hands,
Walk through fire, swear by all the gods,
It was not I! 225

I do not know who it was, but it was not I!
[CREON's rage has been mounting steadily, but the SENTRY
is too intent upon his story to notice it.]
And then, when this came to nothing, someone said
A thing that silenced us and made us stare
Down at the ground: you had to be told the news,
And one of us had to do it! We threw the dice, 230
And the bad luck fell to me. So here I am,
No happier to be here than you are to have me:
Nobody likes the man who brings bad news.

CHORAGOS:

I have been wondering, King: can it be that the gods have done this? 235

CREON:

[*Furiously.*]

Stop!
Must you doddering wrecks
Go out of your heads entirely? "The gods!"
Intolerable!
The gods favor this corpse? Why? How had he served them? 240
Tried to loot their temples, burn their images,
Yes, and the whole State, and its laws with it!
Is it your senile opinion that the gods love to honor bad men?
A pious thought! —

No, from the every beginning
There have been those who have whispered together, 245
Stiff-necked anarchists, putting their heads together,
Scheming against me in alleys. These are the men,
And they have bribed my own guard to do this thing.

Money! [Sententiously.]
There's nothing in the world so demoralizing as money. 250
Find that man, bring him here to me, or your death
Will be the least of your problems: I'll string you up
Alive, and there will be certain ways to make you
Discover your employer before you die;
And the process may teach you a lesson you seem to have missed 260
The dearest profit is sometimes all too dear:

That depends on the source. Do you understand me?
A fortune won is often misfortune.

SENTRY:
King, may I speak?

CREON:
Your very voice distresses me.

SENTRY:
Are you sure that it is my voice, and not your conscience? 265

CREON:
By God, he wants to analyze me now!

SENTRY:
It is not what I say, but what has been done, that hurts you.

CREON:
You talk too much.

SENTRY:
Maybe; but I've done nothing.

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

SENTRY:
How dreadful it is when the right judge judges wrong! 270

CREON:
Your figures of speech
May entertain you now; but unless you bring me the man,
You will get little profit from them in the end.
[Enter CREON into the Palace.]

SENTRY:
"Bring me the man" —!
I'd like nothing better than bringing him the man! 275
But bring him or not, you have seen the last of me here.
At any rate, I am safe! [Exit SENTRY.]

ODE I

CHORUS: [Strophe I]
Numberless are the world's wonders, but none
More wonderful than man; the stormgray sea
Yields to his prows, the huge crests bear him high; 280

Earth, holy and inexhaustible, is graven
With shining furrows where his plows have gone
Year after year, the timeless labor of stallions.

[*Antistrophe 1*]

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

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[*Strophe 2*]

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

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[*Antistrophe 2*]

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

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SCENE II

[*Re-enter SENTRY leading ANTIGONE.*]

CHORAGOS:

What does this mean? Surely this captive woman
Is the Princess, Antigone. Why should she be taken?

SENTRY:

Here is the one who did it! We caught her
In the very act of burying him. —Where is Creon?

CHORAGOS:

Just coming from the house.

[*Enter CREON, C.*]

CREON:

What has happened?
Why have you come back so soon?

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SENTRY:

O King,

A man should never be too sure of anything:
I would have sworn
That you'd not see me here again: your anger
Frightened me so, and the things you threatened me with; 310
But how could I tell then
That I'd be able to solve the case so soon?

No dice-throwing this time: I was only too glad to come!

Here is this woman. She is the guilty one:
We found her trying to bury him. 315
Take her, then; question her; judge her as you will.
I am through with the whole thing now, and glad of it.

CREON:

But this is Antigone! Why have you brought her here?

SENTRY:

She was burying him, I tell you!

CREON:

[*Severely.*]
Is this the truth?

SENTRY:

I saw her with my own eyes. Can I say more? 320

CREON:

The details: come, tell me quickly!

SENTRY:

It was like this:

After those terrible threats of yours King.
We went back and brushed the dust away from the body.
The flesh was soft by now, and stinking, 325
So we sat on a hill to windward and kept guard.
No napping happened until the white round sun
Whirled in the center of the round sky over us:
Then, suddenly,
A storm of dust roared up from the earth, and the sky 330
Went out, the plain vanished with all its trees
In the stinging dark. We closed our eyes and endured it.
The whirlwind lasted a long time, but it passed;
And then we looked, and there was Antigone!
I have seen 335
A mother bird come back to a stripped nest, heard

Her crying bitterly a broken note or two
For the young ones stolen. Just so, when this girl
Found the bare corpse, and all her love's work wasted,
She wept, and cried on heaven to damn the hands 340
That had done this thing

And then she brought more dust
And sprinkled wine three times for her brother's ghost.
We ran and took her at once. She was not afraid,
Not even when we charged her with what she had done.
She denied nothing.

And this was a comfort to me, 345
And some uneasiness: for it is a good thing
To escape from death, but it is no great pleasure
To bring death to a friend.

Yet I always say
There is nothing so comfortable as your own safe skin!

CREON: {*Slowly, dangerously.*}
And you, Antigone, 350
You with your head hanging—do you confess this thing?

ANTIGONE:
I do. I deny nothing.

CREON: [To SENTRY:]
You may go.
{*Exit SENTRY. To ANTIGONE:*}
Tell me, tell me briefly:
Had you heard my proclamation touching this matter?

ANTIGONE:
It was public. Could I help hearing it? 355

CREON:
And yet you dared defy the law.

ANTIGONE:
I dared.
It was not God's proclamation. That final Justice
That rules the world below makes no such laws.

Your edict, King, was strong,
But all your strength is weakness itself against 360
The immortal unrecorded laws of God.
They are not merely now: they were, and shall be,
Operative for ever, beyond man utterly.

This talking is a great weariness: your words 395
Are distasteful to me, and I am sure that mine
Seem so to you. And yet they should not seem so:
I should have praise and honor for what I have done.
All these men here would praise me
Were their lips not frozen shut with fear of you. 400

[*Bitterly.*]

Ah the good fortune of kings,
Licensed to say and do whatever they please!

CREON:

You are alone here in that opinion.

ANTIGONE:

No, they are with me. But they keep their tongues in leash.

CREON:

Maybe. But you are guilty, and they are not. 405

ANTIGONE:

There is no guilt in reverence for the dead.

CREON:

But Eteocles—was he not your brother too?

ANTIGONE:

My brother too.

CREON:

And you insult his memory?

ANTIGONE:

The dead man would not say that I insult it.

[*Softly.*]

CREON:

He would: for you honor a traitor as much as him. 410

ANTIGONE:

His own brother, traitor or not, and equal in blood.

CREON:

He made war on his country. Eteocles defended it.

ANTIGONE:

Nevertheless, there are honors due all the dead.

CREON:

But not the same for the wicked as for the just.

ANTIGONE:

Ah Creon, Creon, 415
Which of us can say what the gods hold wicked?

CREON:

An enemy is an enemy, even dead.

ANTIGONE:

It is my nature to join in love, not hate.

CREON:

{ Finally losing patience. }

Go join them, then; if you must have your love,
Find it in hell! 420

CHORAGOS:

But see, Ismene comes:

[Enter ISMENE, guarded.]

Those tears are sisterly, the cloud
That shadows her eyes rains down gentle sorrow.

CREON:

You too, Ismene,
Snake in my ordered house, sucking my blood 425
Stealthily—and all the time I never knew
That these two sisters were aiming at my throne!

Ismene,

Do you confess your share in this crime, or deny it?
Answer me.

ISMENE:

Yes, if she will let me say so. I am guilty. 430

ANTIGONE:

[Coldly.]

No, Ismene. You have no right to say so.
You would not help me, and I will not have you help me.

ISMENE:

But now I know what you meant; and I am here
To join you, to take my share of punishment.

ANTIGONE:

The dead man and the gods who rule the dead 435
Know whose act this was. Words are not friends.

ISMENE:

Do you refuse me, Antigone? I want to die with you:
I too have a duty that I must discharge to the dead.

ANTIGONE:

You shall not lessen my death by sharing it.

ISMENE:

What do I care for life when you are dead? 440

ANTIGONE:

Ask Creon. You're always hanging on his opinions.

ISMENE:

You are laughing at me. Why, Antigone?

ANTIGONE:

It's a joyless laughter, Ismene.

ISMENE:

But can I do nothing?

ANTIGONE:

Yes. Save yourself. I shall not envy you.
There are those who will praise you; I shall have honor, too. 445

ISMENE:

But we are equally guilty!

ANTIGONE:

No more, Ismene.
You are alive, but I belong to Death.

CREON:

{*To the CHORUS:*}

Gentlemen, I beg you to observe these girls:
One has just now lost her mind; the other,
It seem, has never had a mind at all. 450

ISMENE:

Grief teaches the steadiest minds to waver, King.

CREON:

Yours certainly did, when you assumed guilt with the guilty!

ISMENE:

But how could I go on living without her?

CREON:

You are.

She is already dead.

ISMENE:

But your own son's bride!

CREON:

There are places enough for him to push his plow.
I want no wicked women for my sons!

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ISMENE:

O dearest Haimon, how your father wrong you!

CREON:

I've had enough of your childish talk of marriage!

CHORAGOS:

Do you really intend to steal this girl from your son?

CREON:

No; Death will do that for me.

CHORAGOS:

Then she must die?

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CREON:

You dazzle me.

[*Ironically.*]

—But enough of this talk!

[*To GUARDS:*]

You, there, take them away and guard them well:
For they are but women, and even brave men run
When they see Death coming.

[*Exeunt ISMENE, ANTIGONE, and GUARDS.*]

ODE II

CHORUS:

[*Strophe I*]

Fortunate is the man who has never tasted God's vengeance!
Where once the anger of heaven has struck, that house is shaken
For ever: damnation rises behind each child
Like a wave cresting out of the black northeast,
When the long darkness under sea roars up
And bursts drumming death upon the windwhipped sand.

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[*Antistrophe 1*]

I have seen this gathering sorrow from time long past
Loom upon Oedipus' children: generation from generation
Takes the compulsive rage of the enemy god.
So lately this last flower of Oedipus' line
Drank the sunlight! but now a passionate word 475
And a handful of dust have closed up all its beauty

[*Strophe 2*]

What mortal arrogance
Transcends the wrath of Zeus?
Sleep cannot lull him, nor the effortless long months
Of the timeless gods: but he is young for ever, 480
And his house is the shining day of high Olympos.
All that is and shall be,
And all the past, is his.
No pride on earth is free of the curse of heaven.

[*Antistrophe 2*] 485

The straying dreams of men
May bring them ghosts of joy:
But as they drowse, the waking embers burn them;
Or they walk with fixed eyes, as blind men walk.
But the ancient wisdom speaks for our own time:
Fate works most for woe 490
With Folly's fairest show.
Man's little pleasure is the spring of sorrow.

SCENE III

CHORAGOS:

But here is Haimon, King, the last of all your sons.
Is it grief for Antigone, that brings him here,
And bitterness at being robbed of his bride? 495

[*Enter HAIMON.*]

CREON:

We shall soon see, and no need of diviners.
—Son,
You have heard my final judgment on that girl:
Have you come here hating me, or have you come
With deference and with love, whatever I do?

HAIMON:

I am your son, father. You are my guide. 500
You make things clear for me, and I obey you.
No marriage means more to me than your continuing wisdom.

CREON:

Good. That is the way to behave: subordinate
Everything else, my son, to your father's will
This is what a man prays for, that he may get 505
Sons attentive and dutiful in his house,
Each one hating his father's enemies,
Honoring his father's friends. But if his sons
Fail him, if they turn out unprofitably,
What has he fathered but trouble for himself 510
And amusement for the malicious?

So you are right

Not to lose your head over this woman.
Your pleasure with her would soon, grow cold, Haimon,
And then you'd have a hellcat in bed and elsewhere.
Let her find her husband in Hell! 515
Of all the people in this city, only she
Has had contempt for my law and broken it.

Do you want me to show myself weak before the people?
Or to break my sworn word? No, and I will not.
The woman dies. 520
I suppose she'll plead "family ties." Well, let her.
If I permit my own family to rebel,
How shall I earn the world's obedience?
Show me the man who keeps his house in hand,
He's fit for public authority.

I'll have no dealings 525

With law-breakers, critics of the government:
Whoever is chosen to govern should be obeyed—
Must be obeyed, in all things, great and small,
Just and unjust! O Haimon,
The man who knows how to obey, and that man only, 530
Knows how to give commands when the time comes.
You can depend on him, no matter how fast
The spears come: he's a good soldier, he'll stick it out.

Anarchy, anarchy! Show me a greater evil!
This is why cities tumble and the great houses rain down, 535
This is what scatters armies!

No, no: good lives are made so by discipline.
We keep the laws then, and the lawmakers,
And no woman shall seduce us. If we must lose,
Let's lose to a man, at least! Is a woman stronger than we? 540

CHORAGOS:

Unless time has rusted my wits,
What you say, King, is said with point and dignity.

HAIMON:

[*Boyishly earnest.*]

Father:

Reason is God's crowning gift to man, and you are right
To warn me against losing mine. I cannot say—
I hope that I shall never want to say! —that you 545
Have reasoned badly. Yet there are other men
Who can reason, too; and their opinions might be helpful.
You are not in a position to know everything
That people say or do, or what they feel:
Your temper terrifies them—everyone 550
Will tell you only what you like to hear.
But I, at any rate, can listen; and I have heard them
Muttering and whispering in the dark about this girl.
They say no woman has ever, so unreasonably,
Died so shameful a death for a generous act: 555
“She covered her brother's body. Is this indecent?
She kept him from dogs and vultures. Is this a crime?
Death? —She should have all the honor that we can give her!”

This is the way they talk out there in the city.

You must believe me: 560
Nothing is closer to me than your happiness.
What could be closer? Must not any son
Value his father's fortune as his father does his?
I beg you, do not be unchangeable:
Do not believe that you alone can be right. 565
The man who thinks that,
The man who maintains that only he has the power
To reason correctly, the gift to speak, to soul—
A man like that, when you know him, turns out empty.

It is not reason never to yield to reason! 570

In flood time you can see how some trees bend,
And because they bend, even their twigs are safe,
While stubborn trees are torn up, roots and all.
And the same thing happens in sailing:
Make your sheet fast, never slacken,—and over you go, 575
Head over heels and under: and there's your voyage.
Forget you are angry! Let yourself be moved!
I know I am young; but please let me say this:
The ideal condition
Would be, I admit, that men should be right by instinct; 580
But since we are all too likely to go astray,
The reasonable thing is to learn from those who can teach.

CHORAGOS:

You will do well to listen to him, King,
If what he says is sensible. And you, Haimon,
Must listen to your father. —Both speak well.

585

CREON:

You consider it right for a man of my years and experience
To go to school to a boy?

HAIMON:

It is not right
If I am wrong. But if I am young, and right,
What does my age matter?

CREON:

You think it right to stand up for an anarchist?

590

HAIMON:

Not at all. I pay no respect to criminals.

CREON:

Then she is not a criminal?

HAIMON:

The City proposes to teach me how to rule?

CREON:

And the City proposes to teach me how to rule?

HAIMON:

Ah. Who is it that's talking like a boy now?

595

CREON:

My voice is the one voice giving orders in this City!

HAIMON:

It is no City if it takes orders from one voice.

CREON:

The State is the King!

HAIMON:

Yes, if the State is a desert.

[Pause.]

CREON:

This boy, it seems, has sold out to a woman.

HAIMON:
If you are a woman: my concern is only for you. 600

CREON:
So? Your “concern”! In a public brawl with your father!

HAIMON:
How about you, in a public brawl with justice?

CREON:
With justice, when all that I do is within my rights?

HAIMON:
You have no right to trample on God’s right.

CREON: [Completely out of control.]
Fool, adolescent fool! Taken in by a woman! 605

HAIMON:
You’ll never see me taken in by anything vile.

CREON:
Every word you say is for her!

HAIMON: [Quietly, darkly.]
And for you.
And for me. And for the gods under the earth.

CREON:
You’ll never marry her while she lives.

HAIMON:
Then she must die. —But her death will cause another. 610

CREON:
Another?
Have you lost your senses? Is this an open threat?

HAIMON:
There is no threat in speaking to emptiness.

CREON:
I swear you’ll regret this superior tone of yours!
You are the empty one!

HAIMON:
If you were not my father, 615

I'd say you were perverse.

CREON:

You girlstruck fool, don't play at words with me!

HAIMON:

I am sorry. You prefer silence.

CREON:

Now, by God—!

I swear, by all the gods in heaven above us,
You'll watch it, I swear you shall

[To the SERVANTS:]

Bring her out!

620

Bring the woman out! Let her die before his eyes!
Here, this instant, with her bridegroom beside her!

HAIMON:

Not here, no; she will not die here, King.
And you will never see my face again.

Go on raving as long as you've a friend to endure you.

625

[Exit HAIMON.]

CHORAGOS:

Gone, gone.

Creon, a young man in a rage is dangerous!

CREON:

Let him do, or dream to do, more than a man can.
He shall not save these girls from death.

CHORAGOS:

These girls?

You have sentenced them both?

CREON:

No, you are right

630

I will not kill the one whose hands are clean.

CHORAGOS:

But Antigone?

CREON:

[Somberly.]

I will carry her far away

Out there in the wilderness, and lock her
Living in a vault of stone. She shall have food,
As the custom is, to absolve the State of her death.
And there let her pray to the gods of hell:

635

CHORUS:

Yet not unpraised, not without a kind of honor,
You walk at last into the underworld;
Untouched by sickness, broken by no sword.
What woman has ever found your way to death? 670

ANTIGONE:

[*Antistrophe 1*]

How often I have heard the store of Niobe,⁶
Tantalos' wretched daughter, how the stone
Clung fast about her, ivy-close: and they say
The rain falls endlessly
And rifting soft snow; her tears are never done. 675
I feel the loneliness of her death in mine.

CHORUS:

But she was born of heaven, and you
Are woman, woman-born. If her death is yours,
A mortal woman's, is this not for you
Glory in our world and in the world beyond? 680

ANTIGONE:

[*Strophe 2*]

You laugh at me. Ah, friends, friends,
Can you not wait until I am dead? O Thebes,
O men many-charioted, in love with Fortune,
Dear spring of Dirce, sacred Theban grove,
Be witnesses for me, denied all pity, 685
Unjustly judge! and think a word of love
For her whose path turns
Under dark earth, where there are no more tears.

CHORUS:

You have passed beyond human daring and come at last
Into a place of stone where Justice sits 690
I cannot tell
What shape of your father's guilt appears in this.

ANTIGONE:

[*Antistrophe 2*]

You have touched it at last: that bridal bed
Unspeakable, horror of son an mother mingling: 695
Their crime, infection of all our family!
O Oedipus, father and brother!
Your marriage strikes from the grave to murder mine.
I have been a stranger here in my own land:

⁶ Niobe boasted of her numerous children, provoking Leto, the mother of Apollo, to destroy them. Niobe wept profusely, and finally was turned into a stone on Mount Sipylus, whose streams are her tears. [Editors' note]

All my life
The blasphemy of my birth has followed me. 700

CHORUS:

Reverence is a virtue, but strength
Lives in established law: that must prevail.
You have made your choice,
Your death is the doing of your conscious hand.

ANTIGONE:

[*Epode*] 705
Then let me go, since all your words are bitter,
And the very light of the sun is cold to me.
Lead me to my vigil, where I must have
Neither love nor lamentation; no song, but silence.
[*CREON interrupts impatiently.*]

CREON:

If dirges and planned lamentations could put off death,
Men would be singing for ever.
[*To the SERVANTS:*]

Take her, go! 710
You know your orders: take her to the vault
And leave her alone there. And if she lives or dies,
That's her affair, not ours: our hands are clean.

ANTIGONE:

O tomb, vaulted bride-bed in eternal rock,
Soon I shall be with my own again 715
Where Persephone⁷ welcome the thin ghost underground:
And I shall see my father again, and you, mother,
And dearest Polyneices—

dearest indeed
To me, since it was my hand
That washed him clean and poured the ritual wine: 720
And my reward is death before my time!

And yet, as men's hearts know, I have done no wrong,
I have not sinned before God. Or if I have,
I shall know the truth in death. But if the guilt
Lies upon Creon who judged me, then, I pray, 725
May his punishment equal my own.

CHORAGOS:

O passionate heart,
Unyielding, tormented still by the same winds!

⁷ Queen of the underworld. [Editors' note]

CREON:

Her guards shall have good cause to regret their delaying.

ANTIGONE:

Ah! That voice you no reason to think voice of death!

CREON:

I can give you no reason to think you are mistaken. 730

ANTIGONE:

Thebes, and you my fathers' gods,
And rulers of Thebes, you see me now, the last
Unhappy daughter of a line of kings,
Your kings, led away to death. You will remember
What things I suffer, and at what men's hands, 735
Because I would not transgress the laws of heaven.

[*To the GUARDS, simply:*]

Come: let us wait no longer.

[*Exit ANTIGONE, L., guarded.*]

ODE IV

CHORUS:

All Danae's beauty was locked away {*Strophe I*}
In a brazen cell where the sunlight could not come:
A small room, still as any grave, enclosed her. 740
Yet she was a princess too,
And Zeus in a rain of gold poured love upon her.
O child, child,
No power in wealth or war
Or tough sea-blackened ships 745
Can prevail against untiring Destiny!

{*Antistrophe I*}

And Dryas' son⁸ also, that furious king,
Bore the god's prisoning anger for his pride:
Sealed up by Dionysos in deaf stone,
His madness died among echoes. 750
So at the last he learned what dreadful power
His tongue had mocked:
For he had profaned the revels,
And fired the wrath of the nine
Implacable Sisters⁹ that love the sound of the flute. 755

⁸ Drays' son: Lycurgus, King of Thrace. [Editors' note]

⁹ The Muses. [Editors' note]

[*Strophe 2*]

And old men tell a half-remembered tale
Of horror done where a dark ledge splits the sea
And a double surf beats on the gray shores:
How a king's new woman,¹⁰ sick
With hatred for the queen he had imprisoned, 760
Ripped out his two son's eyes with her bloody hands
While grinning Ares¹¹ watched the shuttle plunge
Four times: four blind wounds crying for revenge,

[*Antistrophe 2*]

Crying, tears and blood mingled, —Piteously born,
Those sons whose mother was of heavenly birth! 765
Her father was the god of the North Wind
And she was cradled by gales,
She raced with young colts on the glittering hills
And walked untrammelled in the open light:
But in her marriage deathless Fate found means 770
To build a tomb like yours for all her joy.

SCENE V

[*Enter blind TEIRESIAS, led by a boy. The opening speeches of TEIRESIAS should be in singsong contrast to the realistic lines of CREON.*]

TEIRESIAS:

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

CREON:

What new thing have you tell us, old Teiresias?

TEIRESIAS:

I have much to tell you: listen to the prophet, Creon. 775

CREON:

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

TEIRESIAS:

Listen, Creon:
I was sitting in my chair of augury, at the place
Where the birds gather about me. They were all a-chatter,
As is their habit, when suddenly I heard
A strange note in their jangling, a scream, a 785

¹⁰ Eidothea, second wife of King Phineus, blinded her stepsons. (Their mother, Cleopatra, had been imprisoned in a cave.) Phineus was the son of a king, and Cleopatra, his first wife, was the daughter of Boreas, the North Wind; but this illustrious ancestry could not protect his sons from violence and darkness. [Editors' note]

¹¹ God of war. [Editors' note]

Whirring fury; I knew that they were fighting,
Tearing each other, dying
In a whirlwind of wings clashing. And I was afraid.
I began the rites of burnt-offering at the altar,
But Hephaistos¹² failed me: instead of bright flame, 790
There was only the sputtering slime of the fat thigh-flesh
Melting: the entrails dissolved in gray smoke,
The bare bone burst from the welter. And no blaze!

This was a sign from heaven. My boy described it,
Seeing for me as I see for others. 795

I tell you, Creon, you yourself have brought
This new calamity upon us. Our hearths and altars
Are stained with the corruption of dogs and carrion birds
That glut themselves on the corpse of Oedipus' son.
The gods are deaf when we pray to them, their fire 800
Recoils from our offering, their birds of omen
Have no cry of comfort, for they are gorged
With the thick blood of the dead.

O my son,

These are no trifles! Think: all men make mistakes,
But a good man yields when he knows his course is wrong, 805
And repairs the evil. The only crime is pride.

Give in to the dead man, then: do not fight with a corpse—
What glory is it to kill a man who is dead?
Think, I beg you:
It is for your own good that I speak as I do. 810
You should be able to yield for your own good.

CREON:

It seems that prophets have made me their especial province.
All my life long
I have been a kind of butt for dull arrows
Of doddering fortune-tellers!

No, Teiresias:

If your birds—if the great eagles of God himself
Should carry him stinking bit by bit to heaven,
I would not yield. I am not afraid of pollution:
No man can defile the gods. 815

Do what you will,

Go into business, make money, speculate 820
In India gold or that synthetic gold from Sardis,
Get rich otherwise than by my consent to bury him.
Teiresias, it is a sorry thing when a wise man

¹² God of fire. [Editors' note]

Sells his wisdom, lets out his words for hire!

TEIRESIAS:

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

825

CREON:

To do what? —Come, let's have the aphorism!

TEIRESIAS:

No man who knows that wisdom outweighs any wealth?

CREON:

As surely as bribes are baser than any baseness.

TEIRESIAS:

You are sick, Creon! You are deathly sick!

CREON:

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

830

TEIRESIAS:

Yet you have said my prophecy is for sale.

CREON:

The generation of prophets has always loved gold.

TEIRESIAS:

The generation of kings has always loved brass.

CREON:

You forget yourself! You are speaking to your King.

TEIRESIAS:

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

835

CREON:

You have a certain skill; but you have sold out.

TEIRESIAS:

King, you will drive me to words that—

CREON:

Say them, say them!

Only remember: I will not pay you for them.

TEIRESIAS:

No, you will find them too costly.

No doubt. Speak:
Whatever you say, you will not change my will.

TEIRESIAS:

Then take this, and take it to heart!
The time is not far off when you shall pay back
Corpse for corpse, flesh of your own flesh.
You have thrust the child of this world into living night,
You have kept from the gods below the child that is theirs: 845
The one on a grave before her death, the other,
Dead, denied the grave. This is your crime:
And the Furies and the dark gods of Hell
Are swift with terrible punishment for you.

Do you want to buy me now, Creon?

Not many days, 850
And your house will be full of men and women weeping,
And curses will be hurled at you from far
Cities grieving for sons unburied, left to rot
Before the walls of Thebes.

These are my arrows, Creon: they are all for you. 855
[To BOY:]

But come, child: lead me home.
Let him waste his fine anger upon younger men.
Maybe he will learn at last
To control a wiser tongue in a better head.
[Exit TEIRESIAS.]

CHORAGOS:

The old man has gone, King, but his words 860
Remain to plague us. I am old, too,
But I cannot remember that he was ever false.

CREON:

That is true... . It troubles me.
Oh it is hard to give in! but it is worse
To risk everything for stubborn pride. 865

CHORAGOS:

Creon: take my advice.

CREON:

What shall I do?

CHORAGOS:

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

CREON:

You would have me do this?

CHORAGOS:

Creon, yes!
And it must be done at once: God moves 870
Swiftly to cancel the folly of stubborn men.

CREON:

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

CHORAGOS:

You must go yourself, you cannot leave it to others.

CREON:

I will go.
—Bring axes, servants: 875
Come with me to the tomb. I buried her, I
Will set her free.
Oh quickly!
My mind misgives—
The laws of the gods are mighty, and a man must serve them
To the last day of his life! 880

[Exit CREON.]

*PAEN*¹³

CHORAGOS:

God of many names [Strophe I]

CHORUS:

O Iacchos
son
of Kadmeian Semele
O born of the Thunder!
Guardian of the West
Regent
of Eleusis' plain
O Prince of maenad Thebes

¹³ A hymn here dedicated to Iacchos (also called Dionysos). His father was Zeus, his mother was Semele, daughter of Kadmos. Iacchos' worshippers were the Maenads, whose cry was "Evohe evohē."
[Editors' note]

and the Dragon Field by rippling Ismenos:¹⁴ 885

CHORAGOS:

God of many names [Antistrophe 1]

CHORUS:

the flame of torches
flares on our hills
the nymphs of Iacchos
dance at the spring of Castalia:¹⁵
from the vine-close mountain
come ah come in ivy:
Evohe evohe! Sings through the streets of Thebes 890

CHORAGOS:

God of many names [Strophe 2]

CHORUS:

Iacchos of Thebes
heavenly Child
of Semele bride of the Thunderer!
The shadow of plague is upon us:
come
with clement feet
oh come from Parnasos
down the long slopes
across the lamenting water 895

CHORAGOS:

[Antistrophe 2]
Io Fire! Chorister of the throbbing stars!
O purest among the voices of the night!
Thou son of God, blaze for us!

CHORUS:

Come with choric rapture of circling Maenads
Who cry Io Iacche! 900
God of many names!

EXODOS

[Enter MESSENGER, L.]

¹⁴ A river east of Thebes. From a dragon's teeth (sown near the river) there sprang men who became the ancestors of the Theban nobility. [Editors' note]

¹⁵ A spring on Mountain Parnasos. [Editors' note]

MESSENGER:

Men of the line of Kadmos ¹⁶you who live
Near Amphion's citadel:

I cannot say
Of any condition of human life "This is fixed,
This is clearly good, or bad." Fate raises up,
And Fate casts down the happy and unhappy alike: 905
No man can foretell his Fate.

Take the case of Creon:
Creon was happy once, as I count happiness:
Victorious in battle, sole governor of the land,
Fortunate father of children nobly born.
And now it has all gone from him! Who can say 910
That a man is still alive when his life's joy fails?
He is a walking dead man. Grant him rich,
Let him live like a king in his great house:
If his pleasure is gone, is would not give
So much as the shadow of smoke for all he owns. 915

CHORAGOS:

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

MESSENGER:

They are dead. The living are guilt of their death.

CHORAGOS:

Who is guilty? Who is dead? Speak!

MESSENGER:

Haimon.
Haimon is dead; and the land that killed him
Is his own hand.

CHORAGOS:

His father's? or his own? 920

MESSENGER:

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

CHORAGOS:

Teiresias, Teiresias, how clearly you saw it all!

MESSENGER:

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

¹⁶ Kadmos, who sowed the dragon's teeth, was the founder of Thebes; Amphion played so sweetly on his lyre that he charmed stones to form a wall around. [Editors' note]

CHORAGOS:

But look: Eurydice, our Queen:
Has she overheard us?

925

[Enter UERYDICE from the Palace, C.]

EURIDICE:

I have heard something, friends:
As I was unlocking the gate of Pallas' ¹⁷ shrine,
For I needed her help today, I heard a voice
Telling of some new sorrow. And I fainted
There at the temple with all my maidens about me.
But speak again: whatever it is, I can bear it:
Grief and I are no strangers.

930

MESSENGER:

Dearest Lady,

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

935

I went with Creon

To the outer plain where Polyneices was lying,
No friend to pity him, his body shredded by dogs.
We made our prayers in that place to Hecate
And Pluto, ¹⁸ that they would be merciful. And we bathed
The corpse with holy water, and we brought
Fresh-broken branches to burn what was left of it,
And upon the urn we heaped up a towering barrow
Of the earth of his own land.

940

When we are done, we ran

To the vault where Antigone lay on her couch of stone.
One of the servants had gone ahead,

945

And while he was yet far off he heard a voice
Grieving within the chamber, and he came back

950

And told Creon. And as the King went closer,
The air was full of wailing, the words lost,
And he begged us to make all haste. "Am I a prophet?"

He said, weeping, "And must I walk this road,
The saddest of all that I have gone before?
My son's voice calls me on. Oh quickly, quickly!

955

Look through the crevice there, and tell me
If it is Haimon, or some deception of the gods!"

We obeyed; and in the cavern's farthest corner
We saw her lying:

¹⁷ Pallas Athene, goddess of wisdom. [Editors' note]

¹⁸ Hecate and Pluto (also known as Hades) were deities of the underworld. [Editors' note]

She had made a noose of her fine linen veil
And hanged herself. Haimon lay beside hers, 960
His arms about her waist, lamenting her,
His love lost under ground, crying out
That his father has stolen her away from him.

When Creon saw him the tears rushed to his eyes
And he called to him: "What have you done, child? Speak to me. 965
What are you thinking that makes your eyes so stranger?
O my son, my son, I come to you on my knees!"
But Haimon spat in his face. He said not a word,
Staring—

And suddenly drew his sword
And lunged. Creon shrank back, the blade missed; and the boy, 970
Desperate against himself, drove it half its length
Into his own side, and fell. And as he died
He gathered Antigone close in his arms again.
Choking, his blood bright red on her white cheek.
And now he lies dead with the dead, and she is his 975
At last, his bride in the houses of the dead.

[Exit EURDICE into the Palace.]

CHORAGOS:

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

MESSENGER:

It troubles me, too; yet she knows what is best,
Her grief is too great for public lamentation,
And doubtless she has gone to her chamber to weep 980
For dead son, leading her maidens in his dirge.

CHORAGOS:

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

MESSENGER:

[Pause.]

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

[Exit MESSENGER into the Palace.]

*[Enter CREON with attendants,
bearing HAIMON'S body.]*

CHORAGOS:

But here is the King himself: oh look at him,
Bearing his own damnation in his arms. 985

CREON:

Nothing you say can touch me any more.

My own blind heart has brought me
From darkness to final darkness. Here you see
The father murdering, the murdered son—
And all my civic wisdom! 990

Haimon my son, so young, so young to die,
I was the fool, not you; and you died for me.

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

CREON:
This truth is hard to bear. Surely a god
Has crushed me beneath the hugest weight of heaven, 995
And driven me headlong a barbaric way
To trample out the thing I held most dear.

The pains that men will take to come to pain!
[Enter MESSENGER from the Palace.]

MESSENGER:
The burden you carry in your hands is heavy,
But it is not all: you will find more in your house. 1000

CREON:
What burden worse than this shall I find there?

MESSENGER:
The Queen is dead.

CREON:
O port of death, deaf world,
Is there no pity for me? And you, Angel of evil,
I was dead, and your words are death again.
Is it true, boy? Can it be true? 1005
Is my wife dead? Has death bred death?

MESSENGER:
You can see for yourself.
*[The doors are opened, and the body
of EURDICE is disclosed within.]*

CREON:
Oh pity!
All true, all true, and more than I can bear! 1010
O my wife, my son!

MESSENGER:

She stood before the altar, and her heart
Welcome the knife her own hand guided.
And a great cry burst from her lips for Megareus¹⁹ dead,
And for Haimon dead, her sons; and her last breath 1015
Was a curse for their father, the murdered of her sons.
And she fell, and the dark flowed in through her closing eyes.

CREON:

O God, I am sick with fear.
Are there no swords here? Has no one a blow for me?

MESSENGER:

Her curse is upon you for the deaths of both. 1020

CREON:

It is right that it should be. I alone am guilty.
I know it, and I say it. Lead me in,
Quickly, friends.
I have neither life nor substance. Lead me in.

CHORAGOS:

You are right, if there can be right in so much wrong. 1025
The briefest way is best in a world of sorrow.

CREON:

Let it come,
Let death come quickly, and be kind to me.
I would not ever see the sun again.

CHORAGOS:

All that will come when it will; but we, meanwhile, 1030
Have much to do. Leave the future to itself.

CREON:

All my heart was in that prayer!

CHORAGOS:

Then do not pray any more: the sky is deal

CREON:

Lead me away. I have been rash and foolish.
I have killed my son and my wife. 1035
I look for comfort; my comfort lies here dead.
Whatever my hands have touched has come to nothing.
Fate has brought all my pride to a thought of dust.

¹⁹ Megareus, brothe of Haimon, had died in the assault on Thebes. [Editors' note]

[As CREON is being led into the house, the CHORAGOS advances and speaks directly to the audience.]

CHORAGOS:

There is no happiness where there is no wisdom;
No wisdom but in submission to the gods.
Big words are always punished,
And proud men in old age learn to be wise.

1040