

ANTIGONE

Adapted primarily from Fagels (1982) and Watling (1947)

The palace of Thebes.

Enter ANTIGONE, ISMENE

ANTIGONE

My own flesh and blood – dear sister, dear Ismene, how many griefs our father Oedipus handed down! You know how heavy the hands of the Gods are upon us; how we must suffer for our father while we live and breathe. There's nothing, no pain – our lives are pain – no private shame, no public disgrace, nothing I haven't seen in your grief and mine. And now more. Now this order, this emergency decree. Have you heard this latest that the King has proclaimed for all of Thebes? The doom reserved for enemies marches on the ones we love the most.

ISMENE

Not I, I haven't heard a word, Antigone. Nothing of loved ones, no joy or pain has come my way, not since the two of us were robbed of our two brothers, both gone in one day, a double blow – not since the armies of Argos vanished, this very night. I know nothing more, whether our luck's improved or ruin's still to come.

ANTIGONE

I thought so. That is why I brought you out here, past the gates, so we won't be heard... So I could tell you in private.

ISMENE

What's the matter? Trouble, clearly... You sound so dark, so grim.

ANTIGONE

Why not? Our own brothers' burial! Hasn't Creon graced one with all the rites, disgraced the other? Eteocles, they say, has been buried in state, rightly so – Creon has laid him in the earth and he goes with honorable observances to glory among the dead. But the body of Polynices, who died just as miserably – why, a city-wide proclamation – an order – forbids anyone to bury him, even mourn him. He's left unwept, unburied, a lovely treasure, a feast of flesh, for carrion birds that scan the fields.

Such, I hear, is the martial law our good, or noble Creon lays down for you and me. It is against us has made this order – yes me, I tell you – and he's coming here to alert the uninformed in no uncertain terms – this is no idle threat. Whoever disobeys in the least will die, his doom is sealed: stoning to death inside the city walls!

There you have it. You'll soon show what you are, worth your breeding, Ismene, or a coward – for all your royal blood.

ISMENE

My poor sister, if things have come to this, who am I to make or mend them? Tell me, what good am I to you?

ANTIGONE

Decide. Will you help me? Will you share the labor? Share the work?

ISMENE

What work? What's the risk? What do you mean?

ANTIGONE

Will you lift his body up with these bare hands and lower it with me?

ISMENE

What? You'd bury him – when a law forbids...?

ANTIGONE

Yes! He is my brother and – deny it as you will – your brother too. No one will ever convict me for a traitor.

ISMENE

How can you dare? When Creon has expressly –

ANTIGONE

He has no right to keep me from my own.

ISMENE

Oh my sister, think – think how our own father perished in shame and misery, his reputation in ruins, driven on by the crimes self-proved to gouge out his own eyes with his own hands – then mother... his mother and

wife, both in one, mutilating her life in the twisted noose – and now, our two brothers dead in a single day, fallen in awful exaction of death for death, blood for blood, each slain by the other's hand.

Now look at the two of us, left so alone... think what death we'll die, the worst of all if we violate the laws and override the fixed decree of the throne, its power – we must be sensible. Remember we are women, we are not born to contend with men. Our rulers are stronger than we, and so we must submit in this, and things still worse.

I, for one, I'll beg the dead to forgive me – I'm forced, I have no choice – I must obey the ones who stand in power. To do more is madness. Madness.

ANTIGONE

I won't insist, no, even if you have a change o heart, I'd never welcome you in the labor. Not with me. So. Do as you like, whatever suits you best – I will bury him myself. And even if I die in the act, the death will be a glory. Convicted of reverence? I will lie beside a brother and be content – We have only a little time to please the living,, but all eternity to honor the dead. Do as you like, dishonor the laws the gods to obey your king.

ISMENE

I do not dishonor them, but I am not strong enough to act in defiance
Creon.

ANTIGONE

Let that be your excuse, then. I will go. I will raise a mound of earth for him – over my dear brother.

ISMENE

I fear for you, Antigone. You are so rash, I fear...

ANTIGONE

You need not fear for me. Set your own life in order. Fear for yourself

ISMENE

At least be secret. Don't blurt this out to anyone. Don't breathe a word. I'll join you in that. I promise.

ANTIGONE

Gods! Shout it! Publish it! I'll hate you all the more for silence. Tell all the world!

ISMENE

Your heart burns. It ought, as mine, be chilled by these thoughts.

ANTIGONE

I know what I must do. I know where duty truly lies.

ISMENE

If you can do this....but you're in love with an impossibility.

ANTIGONE

When I have TRIED and failed, then will I have failed. Once my strength gives out, I shall be done.

ISMENE

You're wrong from the start. You're on a hopeless quest.

ANTIGONE

If you say this, you will make me hate you. You will make HIM hate you – rightly. Leave me alone. Leave me to suffer this. There is no punishment that can rob me of honor in death.

ISMENE

Go then. Do as you must, wild and irrational as it be. Know those who love you, love you still.

Exit ANTIGONE to the side and ISMENE to the palace

Enter a CHORUS of Theban elders

CHORUS

Hail the Sun! Brightest of all that ever dawned on the City of Seven
Gates, City of Thebes!

You burn through the night at last, great eye of golden day, mounting the
Dirce's banks, rising to speed the flight of the invaders, to throw back the
enemies from Argos, now homeward in full retreat, flying headlong the
bridle of fate stampeding them with pain.

Driven against our borders
Launched by warring claims of Polynices
Like an eagle screaming, like a ravening bird of prey swooping
Over the land, wings of armor shielded white as snow
With flying plumes, and armed host ranked in thousands

At the threshold of seven gates in a circle of blood,
His swords stood round us
Jaws open against us
Spears thirsting for the kill
But before he could taste us
Before he could glut his jaws with Theban blood
Or put our crown of towers to the torch, he fled
Grappled the dragon none can master – Thebes
Fled with the roar of the Dragon behind him
With the clang of our arms at his back
The thunder of war in his ears.

Zeus hates the proud tongue's boasting
He watched them come in rising flood
Proud
Golden armor ringing shrill
He heard them cry victory
And brandishing his lightning
Smote them with fire to the ground
As they rushed to shout triumph from our walls

Down from the heights he crashed
Pounding down on the earth
Breathing rage, the storm of his fury hurling at our heads
And with the fiery brand of his hate brought low
Each and all to their doom, destruction

appointed by the iron god of War
Ares deals his reward, his stunning blows
Our right arm in crisis

Seven captains marshaled at seven gates
Seven against their equals gave
Their brazen trophies up to Zeus
All but two
Those blood brothers
One father, one mother
Matched in rage
Spears in twin conquest clashed
And won the common prize of death

Great be the victory, great be the joy!
She is winging down to Thebes
Our fleets of chariots wheeling in her wake
Now is the time to fill the temples
With glad thanksgiving for warfare-ended,
Dancing choirs through the night!
Lord Dionysus, god of the dance
that shakes the land of Thebes,
Now lead the way!

Enter CREON, from the palace

But see the King here comes
Creon, new man for a new day
Whatever the Gods are sending now...
What matter is it? Why this special session?
Why does he call us together by special proclamation?

CREON

My councilors: Now that the gods have brought our city
Safe through the storms of trouble to tranquility,
I've called you here, of all my people, to conference together.
Well I know your undeviating respect
For the throne and royal power of King Laius.
Then when Oedipus steered our lands
And even after his death, your loyalty was unshakable
And as you faithfully served his sons

Till they, in turn, fell – both slayers, both slain
Both stained with brother blood, dead in a day..
And I, their next of kin, inherit
This throne and kingdom I now possess.

You cannot know a man completely – his character, his principles
Sense of judgment, the temper of his mind and spirit
Till he be tried in the practice of authority and rule
For my part, I have always held the view
And hold it still, that the kin whose lips are sealed by fear,
Unwilling to seek advice is damned.
And no less damned, is he who puts friend above country
He is nothing, I've no use for him

Zeus my witness, Zeus who sees all things always –
When I see danger threatening my people
Whatever it may be, I shall declare it.
No man who is his country's enemy
Shall call himself my friend.
Of this I am sure.
Our country is our life –
only when she rides safely, have we any friends at all.
Such are my standards. They make our city great!

In pursuance of this, I have made a proclamation
The following decree to our people
Concerning the sons of Oedipus:
Eteocles, who fell fighting in defence of Thebes
Excelling in all arms: He shall be buried,
Crowned with heroes honors
With all the rites due the noble dead.

But for his brother, the other,
Who returned from exile to his father's city
And the gods of his race with one desire –
To burn them from roof to roots –
To drink of his kinsmen's blood and sell the rest to slavery –
He is to have no grave, no burial, no mourning from anyone;
It is forbidden!
He is to be left uncovered, his corpse to be carrion
For the birds and dogs to tear, a horror for all to see.

I am determined, that never at my hands
Should a traitor be honored above the good
The faithful servant of his country
I'll prize in death as well as life.

LEADER

Creon, you've given your judgment for the friend and for the foe
As for those who are dead, so for us who remain,
Your will is law.

CREON

See that it is kept

LEADER

My lord, we are too old. Lay that burden on younger shoulders.

CREON

No, I mean not the body – watchers are already set on the corpse.

LEADER

What commands for us, then? What other service?

CREON

See that you never side with those who break my orders.

LEADER

If there were any so mad as to ask for death –

CREON

Death is the price – you are right.
But all too often there is someone
Ready to be lured to ruin by hope of gain.

Enter a SENTRY from the side

SENTRY

My lord, if I am out of breath it is not from haste
I've not been running. On the contrary, I was lost in thought,

And it made me stop often, dead in my tracks,
Wheeling, turning back, and all the time
Muttering to myself 'Idiot, why?' You go straight to your death!"
And then I said 'Hurry, you fool! If Creon hears this first from another
Your head's as good as off!
And so... mulling it over, on I trudged, dragging my feet.
You can make a short road take forever... but at last, look,
Common sense won out. I am here. I am yours,
Though I come empty handed, I'll tell my story...
Though it may be nothing after all.
And whatever I have to suffer, it can't be more
Than what the gods will, so I cling to that for my comfort.
Whatever fate...

CREON

Come to the point!
What is wrong? Why do you fear?

SENTRY

First, I must tell you I didn't do it, sir
Nor saw who did. In fairness, you can't punish me for that.

CREON

You tell your tale with artful precaution, soldier.
It is evidently something strange you have to tell.

SENTRY

Indeed and dangerous, too. And danger makes one delay for all he is
worth.

CREON

Out with it, so we may be done with you!

SENTRY

It is this, sir... the corpse... someone has buried it and gone.
Dry dust sprinkled on the body, scattered on the flesh in proper rites.

CREON

What!? Who dared do it? What man alive...

SENTRY

I've no idea, I swear it. There was no mark of spade. No pickaxe there
No earth turned up. The ground is hard and dry, unbroken –
No wheelruts, no track, nothing. Whoever it was left no trace behind.
Just at sunup, the first watch of the day showed us
It was a wonder. We were stunned...
The corpse was covered from sight. Not a proper burial, really,
Just a layer of earth, a light cover of road dust, as if someone,
Some pious passerby, meant to lay the dead to rest
And keep from getting cursed.
No sign in sight either that the dogs or wild beasts
Had worried the body, even torn the skin.

But what came next! Rough talk flew thick and fast
Each accusing the others, and it might have come to blows
At last, nothing to stop us, each man for himself
And each of us culprit, no-one caught red handed
And all pleading ignorance, dodging the charges
Ready to take up red hot iron in our fists
Go through fire, swear oaths to the gods,
"I didn't do it. I had no hand in it either
Not in the plotting nor the work itself!"

We could make nothing of it, and out of this wrangling came nothing
Then one man spoke and our blood ran cold from fear.
Something we could neither refuse to do, nor do,
But at our own risk. No way to take his advice or counter him
And come through safe and sound.
What he said was "This must be reported to the King.
We can't keep this hidden"
So it was agreed. We drew lots for it, as I, such was my luck, condemned
me, unlucky as ever, got the prize.
So here I am, against my will and yours, too, well I know –
A bringer of bad news expects no welcome.

LEADER

My lord, since he began to speak, I've feared this may prove an act of the
Gods.