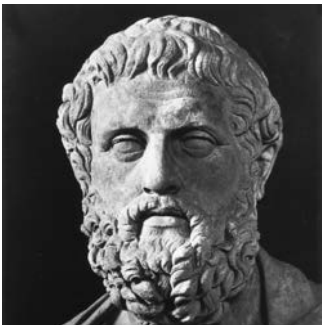
26 CRITICAL CONTEXTS: SOPHOCLES'S *ANTIGONE*

Even more than other forms of literature, drama has a relatively stable **canon**, a select group of plays that the theater community thinks of as especially worthy of frequent performance. New plays join this canon, of course, but theater companies worldwide tend to perform the same ones over and over, especially those by Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Sophocles. The reasons are many, involving the plays' themes and continued appeal across times and cultures as well as their formal literary and theatrical features. But their repeated performance means that a relatively small number of plays become much better known than all the others and that there is a tradition of "talk" about those plays. A lot of this talk is informal and local, resulting from the fact that people see plays communally, viewing performances together and often comparing responses afterward. But more permanent and more formal responses also exist; individual productions of plays are often reviewed in newspapers and magazines, on radio and television, and on the Internet. Such reviews concentrate primarily on evaluating specific productions. But because every production of a play involves a particular interpretation of the text, cumulative accounts of performances add up to a body of interpretive criticism—that is, analytical commentary about many aspects of the play as text and as performance. Scholars add to that body of criticism by publishing their own interpretations of a play in academic journals and books.

Sophocles's Antigone, for instance, attracts attention from a wide variety of perspectives—from Greek scholars, who view it in relation to classical myth or ancient Greek language and culture; from philosophers, who may see in it examinations of classic ideas and ethical problems; from theater historians, who may think about it in relation to traditions of staging and visualization or the particulars of gestures and stage business; and from historians of rhetoric, who may consider the interactions between the chorus and the players or the way characters use or abuse classical rhetorical conventions.

As a reader of plays in a textbook like this one, you may or may not bring to your reading an awareness of what others have thought about a particular play, but that body of material is available if you choose to use it as a way of getting additional perspectives on the text. You don't have to read this accumulated criticism to understand what happens in a text. But reading what others have said about a text can help you—by offering historical information that you hadn't known or hadn't considered relevant, by pointing to problems or possibilities of interpretation you had not yet thought of, or by supporting a reading you had already arrived at. In a sense, reading published criticism is like talking with your fellow students or being involved in a class discussion. In general, you shouldn't read "the critics" until after you have read the play at least once, just as you should read the text in full before you discuss it with others. That way, your initial responses to the play are

your own; if you don't understand some things, you can always discuss them later or read a few pieces of good criticism.



A bust of Sophocles

Reading criticism can be especially helpful when you have to write an essay. Critics will often guide you to crucial points of debate or to a place in the text that is a crux for deciding on a particular interpretation. You will likely get the most help if you read several critics with different perspectives—not because more is better, but because you will see their differences and, more important, the *grounds* for their differences in the kinds of evidence they use and the various inferences they draw from it. Their disagreements will likely be very useful to you as a new interpreter. But don't regard critics as "authorities" (an interpretation is not true simply because it is published or because it is written by somebody famous); instead, look to critics and their work as a spur to your own thinking.

Often, when you're just starting to think about the essay you want to write, reading criticism can help you see some of the critical issues in the play. Critics frequently disagree on the interpretation of particular issues or passages or even on what the issues really are, but reading their work can make your own thoughts concrete, especially when you're just starting to sort things out. Reacting to someone else's view, especially one that is strongly argued, can help you articulate what you think and can suggest a line of interpretation and argument. Sorting out the important issues can be complicated, and issues do shift from era to era and culture to culture. But often the arguments posed in one era interest subsequent critics in whatever age and from whatever perspective. More generally, studying how professional critics make arguments and what makes some arguments more compelling and effective than others can help you both assess and improve your own.

If you draw on published criticism in your paper, you should acknowledge the critic up front and then work his or her words into your paper the way you have learned to do with lines or phrases from a literary text, though you will often find that summary or paraphrase—stating a source's ideas in your own words—is more effective. Sometimes a particular critic can be especially helpful in focusing your thoughts because you so clearly disagree with what she or he says. In that case, you may well get a good paper out of a rebuttal. Pitting one critic against another—sorting out the issues that interpreters disagree on and showing what their differences consist of—can also be a good way to frame your own contribution. But remember that the point of reading criticism is to *use* it for your own interpretive purposes, to make your responses more sensitive and resonant, to make you a more informed reader of the play, and to make you a better reader and writer in general.

• • •

Antigone's performance history goes back more than twenty-four centuries, and over that time readers and viewers have recorded many thousands of responses. Following the text of the play below, we reprint only a small sample, all from the twentieth century. But earlier views are often referred to and sometimes still argued about. The famous comments of the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel (1770–

Scene from the 1982 New York Shakespeare Festival production of *Antigone*

1831), for example, continue to set the agenda for an astonishing number of interpreters. Many answer him directly; others use him to sharpen, complicate, or flesh out their views or simply to position themselves in some larger debate about specific issues in the play or about literary criticism or philosophy more generally.

In the following selections, you will find various interpretations of crucial scenes and issues in *Antigone*. Especially prominent are questions about how to read the opinions of the chorus, how to interpret the character of Antigone, and how to assess Creon's flaws. As you read the critics, pay attention to the way they argue—what kinds of textual evidence they use to back up their claims and how they structure their arguments—as well as the main interpretive claims they make. (Following the chapter is a sample student essay about *Antigone* that draws on one of the critical excerpts in this chapter, as well as other secondary sources.)

SOPHOCLES
Antigone[1]

CHARACTERS

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

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

1. Translated by David Grene.

ANTIGONE: Ismene, my dear sister,
whose father was my father, can you think of any
of all the evils that stem from Oedipus[2]
that Zeus does not bring to pass for us, while we yet live?
No pain, no ruin, no shame, and no dishonor
but I have seen it in our mischiefs,
yours and mine.
And now what is the proclamation that they tell of
made lately by the commander, publicly,
to all the people? Do you know it? Have you heard it?
Don't you notice when the evils due to enemies
are headed towards those we love?
ISMENE: Not a word, Antigone, of those we love,
either sweet or bitter, has come to me since the moment
when we lost our two brothers,
on one day, by their hands dealing mutual death.
Since the Argive[3] army fled in this past night,
I know of nothing further, nothing
of better fortune or of more destruction.
ANTIGONE: *I* knew it well; that is why I sent for you
to come outside the palace gates
to listen to me, privately.
ISMENE: What is it? Certainly your words
come of dark thoughts.
ANTIGONE: Yes, indeed; for those two brothers, of ours, in burial
has not Creon honored the one, dishonored the other?
Eteocles, they say he has used justly
with lawful rites and hid him in the earth
to have his honor among the dead men there.
But the unhappy corpse of Polyneices
he has proclaimed to all the citizens,
they say, no man may hide
in a grave nor mourn in funeral,
but leave unwept, unburied, a dainty treasure
for the birds that see him, for their feast's delight.
That is what, they say, the worthy Creon
has proclaimed for you and me—for me, I tell you—
and he comes here to clarify to the unknowing
his proclamation; he takes it seriously;
for whoever breaks the edict death is prescribed,
and death by stoning publicly.

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

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

There you have it; soon you will show yourself
as noble both in your nature and your birth,
or yourself as base, although of noble parents.
ISMENE: If things are as you say, poor sister, how
can I better them? how loose or tie the knot?
ANTIGONE: Decide if you will share the work, the deed.
ISMENE: What kind of danger is there? How far have your thoughts gone?
ANTIGONE: Here is this hand. Will you help it to lift the dead man?
ISMENE: Would you bury him, when it is forbidden the city?
ANTIGONE: At least he is my brother—and yours, too,
though you deny him. *I* will not prove false to him.
ISMENE: You are so headstrong. Creon has forbidden it.
ANTIGONE: It is not for him to keep me from my own.
ISMENE: O God!
Consider, sister, how our father died,
hated and infamous; how he brought to light
his own offenses; how he himself struck out
the sight of his two eyes;
his own hand was their executioner.
Then, mother and wife, two names in one, did shame
violently on her life, with twisted cords.
Third, our two brothers, on a single day,
poor wretches, themselves worked out their mutual doom.
Each killed the other, hand against brother's hand.
Now there are only the two of us, left behind,
and see how miserable our end shall be
if in the teeth of law we shall transgress
against the sovereign's decree and power.
You ought to realize we are only women,
not meant in nature to fight against men,
and that we are ruled, by those who are stronger,
to obedience in this and even more painful matters.
I do indeed beg those beneath the earth
to give me their forgiveness,
since force constrains me,
that I shall yield in this to the authorities.
Extravagant action is not sensible.
ANTIGONE: I would not urge you now; nor if you wanted
to act would I be glad to have you with me.
Be as you choose to be; but for myself
I myself will bury him. It will be good
to die, so doing. I shall lie by his side,
loving him as he loved me; I shall be
a criminal—but a religious one.
The time in which I must please those that are dead
is longer than I must please those of this world.
For there I shall lie forever. You, if you like,
can cast dishonor on what the gods have honored.

ISMENE: I will not put dishonor on them, but
to act in defiance of the citizenry,
my nature does not give me means for that.
ANTIGONE: Let that be your excuse. But I will go
to heap the earth on the grave of my loved brother.
ISMENE: How I fear for you, my poor sister!
ANTIGONE: Do not fear for me. Make straight your own path to destiny.
ISMENE: At least do not speak of this act to anyone else;
bury him in secret; I will be silent, too.
ANTIGONE: Oh, oh, no! shout it out. I will hate you still worse
for silence—should you not proclaim it,
to everyone.
ISMENE: You have a warm heart for such chilly deeds.
ANTIGONE: I know I am pleasing those I should please most.
ISMENE: *If* you can do it. But you are in love
with the impossible.
ANTIGONE: No. When I can no more, then I will stop.
ISMENE: It is better not to hunt the impossible
at all.
ANTIGONE: If you will talk like this I will loathe you,
and you will be adjudged an enemy—
justly—by the dead's decision. Let me alone
and my folly with me, to endure this terror.
No suffering of mine will be enough
to make me die ignobly.
ISMENE: Well, if you will, go on.
Know this; that though you are wrong to go, your friends
are right to love you.
CHORUS: Sun's beam, fairest of all
that ever till now shone
on seven-gated Thebes;
O golden eye of day, you shone
coming over Dirce's stream;[4]
You drove in headlong rout
the whiteshielded man from Argos,
complete in arms;
his bits rang sharper
under your urging.

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

4. River near Thebes.

He stood above the halls, gaping with murderous lances,
encompassing the city's
seven-gated mouth[5]
But before his jaws would be sated
with our blood, before the fire,
pine fed, should capture our crown of towers,
he went hence—
such clamor of war stretched behind his back,
from his dragon foe, a thing he could not overcome.

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

The earth rose to strike him as he fell swinging.
In his frantic onslaught, possessed, he breathed upon us
with blasting winds of hate.
Sometimes the great god of war was on one side,
and sometimes he struck a staggering blow on the other;
the god was a very wheel horse[6] on the right trace.

At seven gates stood seven captains,
ranged equals against equals, and there left
their brazen suits of armor
to Zeus, the god of trophies.
Only those two wretches born of one father and mother
set their spears to win a victory on both sides;
they worked out their share in a common death.

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

But here is the king of our land,
Creon,[7] son of Menoeceus;

5. Thebes was known throughout the ancient world for having seven gateways through the walls protecting the city.
6. Strongest and ablest horse in a team pulling a vehicle, harnessed nearest the front wheels "on the right trace."
7. Brother of Jocasta, mother and wife of Oedipus; he became king of Thebes after the deaths of Oedipus's sons.

in our new contingencies with the gods,
he is our new ruler.
He comes to set in motion some design—
what design is it? Because he has proposed
the convocation of the elders.
He sent a public summons for our discussion.

CREON: Gentlemen: as for our city's fortune,
the gods have shaken her, when the great waves broke,
but the gods have brought her through again to safety.
For yourselves, I chose you out of all and summoned you
to come to me, partly because I knew you
as always loyal to the throne—at first,
when Laïus[8] was king, and then again
when Oedipus saved our city and then again
when he died and you remained with steadfast truth
to their descendants,
until they met their double fate upon one day,
striking and stricken, defiled each by a brother's murder.
Now here I am, holding all authority
and the throne, in virtue of kinship with the dead.
It is impossible to know any man—
I mean his soul, intelligence, and judgment—
until he shows his skill in rule and law.
I think that a man supreme ruler of a whole city,
if he does not reach for the best counsel for her,
but through some fear, keeps his tongue under lock and key,
him I judge the worst of any;
I have always judged so; and anyone thinking
another man more a friend than his own country,
I rate him nowhere. For my part, God is my witness,
who sees all, always, I would not be silent
if I saw ruin, not safety, on the way
towards my fellow citizens. I would not count
any enemy of my country as a friend—
because of what I know, that she it is
which gives us our security. If she sails upright
and we sail on her, friends will be ours for the making.
In the light of rules like these, I will make her greater still.

In consonance with this, I here proclaim
to the citizens about Oedipus' sons.
For Eteocles, who died this city's champion,
showing his valor's supremacy everywhere,
he shall be buried in his grave with every rite
of sanctity given to heroes under earth.
However, his brother, Polyneices, a returned exile,
who sought to burn with fire from top to bottom

8. Father of Oedipus.

his native city, and the gods of his own people;
who sought to taste the blood he shared with us,
and lead the rest of us to slavery—
I here proclaim to the city that this man
shall no one honor with a grave and none shall mourn.
You shall leave him without burial; you shall watch him
chewed up by birds and dogs and violated.
Such is my mind in the matter; never by me
shall the wicked man have precedence in honor
over the just. But he that is loyal to the state
in death, in life alike, shall have my honor.

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

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

CHORUS: Please lay this burden on some younger man.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

that nothing can betide him save what is fated.
CREON: What is it then that makes you so afraid?
SENTRY: No, I want first of all to tell you my side of it.
I didn't do the thing; I never saw who did it.
It would not be fair for me to get into trouble.
CREON: You hedge, and barricade the thing itself.
Clearly you have some ugly news for me.
SENTRY: Well, you know how disasters make a man
hesitate to be their messenger.
CREON: For God's sake, tell me and get out of here!
SENTRY: Yes, I *will* tell you. Someone just now
buried the corpse and vanished. He scattered on the skin
some thirsty dust; he did the ritual,
duly, to purge the body of desecration.
CREON: What! Now who on earth could have done that?
SENTRY: I do not know. For there was there no mark
of axe's stroke nor casting up of earth
of any mattock; the ground was hard and dry,
unbroken; there were no signs of wagon wheels.
The doer of the deed had left no trace.
But when the first sentry of the day pointed it out,
there was for all of us a disagreeable
wonder. For the body had disappeared;
not in a grave, of course; but there lay upon him
a little dust as of a hand avoiding
the curse of violating the dead body's sanctity.
There were no signs of any beast nor dog
that came there; he had clearly not been torn.
There was a tide of bad words at one another,
guard taunting guard, and it might well have ended
in blows, for there was no one there to stop it.
Each one of us was the criminal but no one
manifestly so; all denied knowledge of it.
We were ready to take hot bars in our hands
or walk through fire,[9] and call on the gods with oaths
that we had neither done it nor were privy
to a plot with anyone, neither in planning
nor yet in execution.
At last when nothing came of all our searching,
there was one man who spoke, made every head
bow to the ground in fear. For we could not
either contradict him nor yet could we see how
if we did what he said we would come out all right.

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

His word was that we must lay information
about the matter to yourself; we could not cover it.
This view prevailed and the lot of the draw chose me,
unlucky me, to win that prize. So here
I am. I did not want to come,
and you don't want to have me. I know that.
For no one likes the messenger of bad news.
CHORUS: My lord: I wonder, could this be God's doing?
This is the thought that keeps on haunting me.
CREON: Stop, before your words fill even me with rage,
that you should be exposed as a fool, and you so old.
For what you say is surely insupportable
when you say the gods took forethought for this corpse.
Is it out of excess of honor for the man,
for the favors that he did them, they should cover him?
This man who came to burn their pillared temples,
their dedicated offerings—and this land
and laws he would have scattered to the winds?
Or do you see the gods as honoring
criminals? This is not so. But what I am doing
now, and other things before this, some men disliked,
within this very city, and muttered against me,
secretly shaking their heads; they would not bow
justly beneath the yoke to submit to me.
I am very sure that these men hired others
to do this thing. I tell you the worse currency
that ever grew among mankind is money. This
sacks cities, this drives people from their homes,
this teaches and corrupts the minds of the loyal
to acts of shame. This displays
all kinds of evil for the use of men,
instructs in the knowledge of every impious act.
Those that have done this deed have been paid to do it,
but in the end they will pay for what they have done.

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

SENTRY: Have I your leave to say something—or should
I just turn and go?
CREON: Don't you know your talk is painful enough already?
SENTRY: Is the ache in your ears or in your mind?
CREON: Why do you dissect the whereabouts of my pain?
SENTRY: Because it is he who did the deed who hurts your
mind. I only hurt your ears that listen.
CREON: I am sure you have been a chatterbox since you were born.
SENTRY: All the same, I did not do this thing.
CREON: You might have done this, too, if you sold your soul.
SENTRY: It's a bad thing if one judges and judges wrongly.
CREON: You may talk as wittily as you like of judgment.
Only, if you don't bring to light those men
who have done this, you will yet come to say
that your wretched gains have brought bad consequences.
SENTRY: [*Aside.*] It were best that he were found, but whether
the criminal is taken or he isn't—
for that chance will decide—one thing is certain,
you'll never see me coming here again.
I never hoped to escape, never thought I could.
But now I have come off safe, I thank God heartily.
CHORUS: Many are the wonders, none
is more wonderful than what is man.
This it is that crosses the sea
with the south winds storming and the waves swelling,
breaking around him in roaring surf.
He it is again who wears away
the Earth, oldest of gods, immortal, unwearied,
as the ploughs wind across her from year to year
when he works her with the breed that comes from horses.

The tribe of the lighthearted birds he snares
and takes prisoner the races of savage beasts
and the brood of the fish of the sea,
with the close-spun web of nets.
A cunning fellow is man. His contrivances
make him master of beasts of the field
and those that move in the mountains.
So he brings the horse with the shaggy neck
to bend underneath the yoke;
and also the untamed mountain bull;
and speech and windswift thought
and the tempers that go with city living
he has taught himself, and how to avoid
the sharp frost, when lodging is cold
under the open sky
and pelting strokes of the rain.
He has a way against everything,
and he faces nothing that is to come

without contrivance.
Only against death
can he call on no means of escape;
but escape from hopeless diseases
he has found in the depths of his mind.
With some sort of cunning, inventive
beyond all expectation
he reaches sometimes evil,
and sometimes good.

If he honors the laws of earth,
and the justice of the gods he has confirmed by oath,
high is his city; no city
has he with whom dwells dishonor
prompted by recklessness.
He who is so, may he never
share my hearth!
may he never think my thoughts!

Is this a portent sent by God?
I cannot tell.
I know her. How can I say
that this is not Antigone?
Unhappy girl, child of unhappy Oedipus,
what is this?
Surely it is not you they bring here
as disobedient to the royal edict,
surely not you, taken in such folly.

SENTRY: She is the one who did the deed;
we took her burying him. But where is Creon?
CHORUS: He is just coming from the house, when you most need him.
CREON: What is this? What has happened that I come
so opportunely?
SENTRY: My lord, there is nothing
that a man should swear he would never do.
Second thoughts make liars of the first resolution.
I would have vowed it would be long enough
before I came again, lashed hence by your threats.
But since the joy that comes past hope, and against all hope,
is like no other pleasure in extent,
I have come here, though I break my oath in coming.
I bring this girl here who has been captured
giving the grace of burial to the dead man.
This time no lot chose me; this was my jackpot,
and no one else's. Now, my lord, take her
and as you please judge her and test her; I
am justly free and clear of all this trouble.
CREON: This girl—how did you take her and from where?
SENTRY: She was burying the man. Now you know all.
CREON: Do you know what you are saying? Do you mean it?

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

She was crying out with the shrill cry
of an embittered bird
that sees its nest robbed of its nestlings
and the bed empty. So, too, when she saw
the body stripped of its cover, she burst out in groans,
calling terrible curses on those that had done that deed;
and with her hands immediately
brought thirsty dust to the body; from a shapely brazen
urn, held high over it, poured a triple stream
of funeral offerings; and crowned the corpse.
When we saw that, we rushed upon her and
caught our quarry then and there, not a bit disturbed.
We charged her with what she had done, then and the first time.
She did not deny a word of it—to my joy,
but to my pain as well. It is most pleasant
to have escaped oneself out of such troubles
but painful to bring into it those whom we love.
However, it is but natural for me
to count all this less than my own escape.
CREON: You there, that turn your eyes upon the ground,
do you confess or deny what you have done?
ANTIGONE: Yes, I confess; I will not deny my deed.
CREON: [*To the* SENTRY.] You take yourself off where you like.

You are free of a heavy charge.
Now, Antigone, tell me shortly and to the point,
did you know the proclamation against your action?
ANTIGONE: I knew it; of course I did. For it was public.
CREON: And did you dare to disobey that law?
ANTIGONE: Yes, it was not Zeus that made the proclamation;
nor did Justice, which lives with those below, enact
such laws as that, for mankind. I did not believe
your proclamation had such power to enable
one who will someday die to override
God's ordinances, unwritten and secure.
They are not of today and yesterday;
they live forever; none knows when first they were.
These are the laws whose penalties I would not
incur from the gods, through fear of any man's temper.

I know that I will die—of course I do—
even if you had not doomed me by proclamation.
If I shall die before my time, I count that
a profit. How can such as I, that live
among such troubles, not find a profit in death?
So for such as me, to face such a fate as this
is pain that does not count. But if I dared to leave
the dead man, my mother's son, dead and unburied,
that would have been real pain. The other is not.
Now, if you think me a fool to act like this,
perhaps it is a fool that judges so.
CHORUS: The savage spirit of a savage father
shows itself in this girl. She does not know
how to yield to trouble.
CREON: I would have you know the most fanatic spirits
fall most of all. It is the toughest iron,
baked in the fire to hardness, you may see
most shattered, twisted, shivered to fragments.
I know hot horses are restrained
by a small curb. For he that is his neighbor's slave cannot
be high in spirit. This girl had learned her insolence
before this, when she broke the established laws.
But here is still another insolence
in that she boasts of it, laughs at what she did.
I swear I am no man and she the man
if she can win this and not pay for it.
No; though she were my sister's child or closer
in blood than all that my hearth god acknowledges
as mine, neither she nor her sister should escape
the utmost sentence—death. For indeed I accuse her,
the sister, equally of plotting the burial.

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

ANTIGONE: Do you want anything
beyond my taking and my execution?

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

ANTIGONE: Why do you wait, then? Nothing that you say
pleases me; God forbid it ever should.
So my words, too, naturally offend you.
Yet how could I win a greater share of glory
than putting my own brother in his grave?
All that are here would surely say that's true,
if fear did not lock their tongues up. A prince's power
is blessed in many things, not least in this,
that he can say and do whatever he likes.

CREON: You are alone among the people of Thebes
to see things in that way.

ANTIGONE: No, these do, too,
but keep their mouths shut for the fear of you.

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

ANTIGONE: There is nothing shameful in honoring my brother.

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

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

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

ANTIGONE: *That* other dead man
would never bear you witness in what you say.

CREON: Yes he would, if you put him only on equality
with one that was a desecrator.

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

CREON: He died destroying the country the other defended.

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHORUS: Here before the gates comes Ismene
shedding tears for the love of a brother.
A cloud over her brow casts shame

on her flushed face, as the tears wet
her fair cheeks.
CREON: You there, who lurked in my house, viper-like—
secretly drawing its lifeblood; I never thought
that I was raising two sources of destruction,
two rebels against my throne. Come tell me now,
will you, too, say you bore a hand in the burial
or will you swear that you know nothing of it?
ISMENE: I did it, yes—if she will say I did it
I bear my share in it, bear the guilt, too.
ANTIGONE: Justice will not allow you what you refused
and I will have none of your partnership.
ISMENE: But in your troubles I am not ashamed
to sail with you the sea of suffering.
ANTIGONE: Where the act was death, the dead are witnesses.
I do not love a friend who loves in words.
ISMENE: Sister, do not dishonor me, denying me
a common death with you, a common honoring
of the dead man.
ANTIGONE: Don't die with me, nor make your own
what you have never touched. I that die am enough.
ISMENE: What life is there for me, once I have lost you?
ANTIGONE: Ask Creon; all your care was on his behalf.
ISMENE: Why do you hurt me, when you gain nothing by it?
ANTIGONE: I am hurt by my own mockery—if I mock you.
ISMENE: Even now—what can I do to help you still?
ANTIGONE: Save yourself; I do not grudge you your escape.
ISMENE: I cannot bear it! Not even to share your death!
ANTIGONE: Life was your choice, and death was mine.
ISMENE: You cannot say I accepted that choice in silence.
ANTIGONE: You were right in the eyes of one party, I in the other.
ISMENE: Well then, the fault is equally between us.
ANTIGONE: Take heart; you are alive, but my life died
long ago, to serve the dead.
CREON: Here are two girls; I think that one of them
has suddenly lost her wits—the other was always so.
ISMENE: Yes, for, my lord, the wits that they are born with
do not stay firm for the unfortunate.
They go astray.
CREON: Certainly yours do,
when you share troubles with the troublemaker.
ISMENE: What life can be mine alone without her?
CREON: Do not
speak of *her*. *She* isn't, anymore.
ISMENE: Will you kill your son's wife to be?[1]

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

CREON: Yes, there are other fields for him to plough.
ISMENE: Not with the mutual love of him and her.
CREON: I hate a bad wife for a son of mine.
ANTIGONE: Dear Haemon, how your father dishonors you.
CREON: There is too much of you—and of your marriage!
CHORUS: Will you rob your son of this girl?
CREON: Death—it is death that will stop the marriage for me.
CHORUS: Your decision it seems is taken: she shall die.
CREON: Both you and I have decided it. No more delay.

[*He turns to the* SERVANTS.]

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

CHORUS: Lucky are those whose lives
know no taste of sorrow.
But for those whose house has been shaken by God
there is never cessation of ruin;
it steals on generation after generation
within a breed. Even as the swell
is driven over the dark deep
by the fierce Thracian winds
I see the ancient evils of Labdacus' house[2]
are heaped on the evils of the dead.
No generation frees another, some god
strikes them down; there is no deliverance.
Here was the light of hope stretched
over the last roots of Oedipus' house,
and the bloody dust due to the gods below
has mowed it down—that and the folly of speech
and ruin's enchantment of the mind.

Your power, O Zeus, what sin of man can limit?
All-aging sleep does not overtake it,
nor the unwearied months of the gods; and you,
for whom time brings no age,
you hold the glowing brightness of Olympus.

For the future near and far,
and the past, this law holds good:
nothing very great
comes to the life of mortal man
without ruin to accompany it.
For Hope, widely wandering, comes to many of mankind
as a blessing,
but to many as the deceiver,
using light-minded lusts;

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

she comes to him that knows nothing
till he burns his foot in the glowing fire.
With wisdom has someone declared
a word of distinction:
that evil seems good to one whose mind
the god leads to ruin,
and but for the briefest moment of time
is his life outside of calamity.
Here is Haemon, youngest of your sons.
Does he come grieving
for the fate of his bride to be,
in agony at being cheated of his marriage?

CREON: Soon we will know that better than the prophets.
My son, can it be that you have not heard
of my final decision on your betrothed?
Can you have come here in your fury against your father?
Or have I your love still, no matter what I do?

HAEMON: Father, I am yours; with your excellent judgment
you lay the right before me, and I shall follow it.
No marriage will ever be so valued by me
as to override the goodness of your leadership.

CREON: Yes, my son, this should always be
in your very heart, that everything else
shall be second to your father's decision.
It is for this that fathers pray to have
obedient sons begotten in their halls,
that they may requite with ill their father's enemy
and honor his friend no less than he would himself.
If a man have sons that are no use to him,
what can one say of him but that he has bred
so many sorrows to himself, laughter to his enemies?
Do not, my son, banish your good sense
through pleasure in a woman, since you know
that the embrace grows cold
when an evil woman shares your bed and home.
What greater wound can there be than a false friend?
No. Spit on her, throw her out like an enemy,
this girl, to marry someone in Death's house.
I caught her openly in disobedience
alone out of all this city and I shall not make
myself a liar in the city's sight. No, I will kill her.
So let her cry if she will on the Zeus of kinship;
for if I rear those of my race and breeding
to be rebels, surely I will do so with those outside it.
For he who is in his household a good man
will be found a just man, too, in the city.
But he that breaches the law or does it violence
or thinks to dictate to those who govern him

shall never have my good word.
The man the city sets up in authority
must be obeyed in small things and in just
but also in their opposites.
I am confident such a man of whom I speak
will be a good ruler, and willing to be well ruled.
He will stand on his country's side, faithful and just,
in the storm of battle. There is nothing worse
than disobedience to authority.
It destroys cities, it demolishes homes;
it breaks and routs one's allies. Of successful lives
the most of them are saved by discipline.
So we must stand on the side of what is orderly;
we cannot give victory to a woman.
If we must accept defeat, let it be from a man;
we must not let people say that a woman beat us.
CHORUS: We think, if we are not victims of Time the Thief,
that you speak intelligently of what you speak.
HAEMON: Father, the natural sense that the gods breed
in men is surely the best of their possessions.
I certainly could not declare you wrong—
may I never know how to do so!—Still there might
be something useful that some other than you might think.
It is natural for me to be watchful on your behalf
concerning what all men say or do or find to blame.
Your face is terrible to a simple citizen;
it frightens him from words you dislike to hear.
But what *I* can hear, in the dark, are things like these:
the city mourns for this girl; they think she is dying
most wrongly and most undeservedly
of all womenkind, for the most glorious acts.
Here is one who would not leave her brother unburied,
a brother who had fallen in bloody conflict,
to meet his end by greedy dogs or by
the bird that chanced that way. Surely what she merits
is golden honor, isn't it? That's the dark rumor
that spreads in secret. Nothing I own
I value more highly, father, than your success.
What greater distinction can a son have than the glory
of a successful father, and for a father
the distinction of successful children?
Do not bear this single habit of mind, to think
that what you say and nothing else is true.
A man who thinks that he alone is right,
or what he says, or what he *is* himself,
unique, such men, when opened up, are seen
to be quite empty. For a man, though he be wise,

it is no shame to learn—learn many things,
and not maintain his views too rigidly.
You notice how by streams in wintertime
the trees that yield preserve their branches safely,
but those that fight the tempest perish utterly.
The man who keeps the sheet[3] of his sail tight
and never slackens capsizes his boat
and makes the rest of his trip keel uppermost.
Yield something of your anger, give way a little.
If a much younger man, like me, may have
a judgment, I would say it were far better
to be one altogether wise by nature, but,
as things incline not to be so, then it is good
also to learn from those who advise well.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

HAEMON: I see your acts as mistaken and unjust.

CREON: Am I mistaken, reverencing my own office?

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

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

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

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

3. Rope attached to the corner of a sail to hold it at the proper angle to the wind.

HAEMON: Yes, and for you and me—and for the gods below.
CREON: You will never marry her while her life lasts.
HAEMON: Then she must die—and dying destroy another.
CREON: Has your daring gone so far, to threaten me?
HAEMON: What threat is it to speak against empty judgments?
CREON: Empty of sense yourself, you will regret
your schooling of me in sense.
HAEMON: If you were not
my father, I would say you are insane.
CREON: You woman's slave, do not try to wheedle me.
HAEMON: You want to talk but never to hear and listen.
CREON: Is that so? By the heavens above you will not—
be sure of that—get off scot-free, insulting,
abusing me.

[*He speaks to the* SERVANTS.]

You people bring out this creature,
this hated creature, that she may die before
his very eyes, right now, next her would-be husband.
HAEMON: Not at my side! Never think that! She will not
die by my side. But you will never again
set eyes upon my face. Go then and rage
with such of your friends as are willing to endure it.
CHORUS: The man is gone, my lord, quick in his anger.
A young man's mind is fierce when he is hurt.
CREON: Let him go, and do and think things superhuman.
But these two girls he shall not save from death.
CHORUS: Both of them? Do you mean to kill them both?
CREON: No, not the one that didn't do anything.
You are quite right there.
CHORUS: And by what form of death do you mean to kill her?
CREON: I will bring her where the path is loneliest,
and hide her alive in a rocky cavern there.
I'll give just enough of food as shall suffice
for a bare expiation, that the city may avoid pollution.
In that place she shall call on Hades, god of death,
in her prayers. That god only she reveres.
Perhaps she will win from him escape from death
or at least in that last moment will recognize
her honoring of the dead is labor lost.
CHORUS: Love undefeated in the fight,
Love that makes havoc of possessions,
Love who lives at night in a young girl's soft cheeks,
Who travels over sea, or in huts in the countryside—
there is no god able to escape you
nor anyone of men, whose life is a day only,
and whom you possess is mad.

You wrench the minds of just men to injustice,
to their disgrace; this conflict among kinsmen
it is you who stirred to turmoil.
The winner is desire. She gleaming kindles
from the eyes of the girl good to bed.
Love shares the throne with the great powers that rule.
For the golden Aphrodite[4] holds her play there
and then no one can overcome her.

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

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

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

ANTIGONE: But indeed I have heard of the saddest of deaths—
of the Phrygian stranger,[6] daughter of Tantalus,
whom the rocky growth subdued, like clinging ivy.
The rains never leave her, the snow never fails,
as she wastes away. That is how men tell the story.
From streaming eyes her tears wet the crags;
most like to her the god brings me to rest.

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

ANTIGONE: You mock me. In the name of our fathers' gods
why do you not wait till I am gone to insult me?

4. Goddess of love and beauty. 5. River in Hades.
6. Niobe, whose children were slain because of her boastfulness and who was herself turned into a stone on Mount Sipylus. Her tears became the mountain's streams.

Must you do it face to face?
My city! Rich citizens of my city!
You springs of Dirce, you holy groves of Thebes,
famed for its chariots! I would still have you as my witnesses,
with what dry-eyed friends, under what laws
I make my way to my prison sealed like a tomb.
Pity me. Neither among the living nor the dead
do I have a home in common—
neither with the living nor the dead.
CHORUS: You went to the extreme of daring
and against the high throne of Justice
you fell, my daughter, grievously.
But perhaps it was for some ordeal of your father
that you are paying requital.
ANTIGONE: You have touched the most painful of my cares—
the pity for my father, ever reawakened,
and the fate of all of our race, the famous Labdacids;
the doomed self-destruction of my mother's bed
when she slept with her own son,
my father.
What parents I was born of, God help me!
To them I am going to share their home,
the curse on me, too, and unmarried.
Brother, it was a luckless marriage you made,
and dying killed my life.
CHORUS: There *is* a certain reverence for piety.
But for him in authority,
he cannot see that authority defied;
it is your own self-willed temper
that has destroyed you.
ANTIGONE: No tears for me, no friends, no marriage. Brokenhearted
I am led along the road ready before me.
I shall never again be suffered
to look on the holy eye of the day.
But my fate claims no tears—
no friend cries for me.
CREON: [*To the* SERVANTS.] Don't you know that weeping and wailing before death
would never stop if one is allowed to weep and wail?
Lead her away at once. Enfold her
in that rocky tomb of hers—as I told you to.
There leave her alone, solitary,
to die if she so wishes
or live a buried life in such a home;
we are guiltless in respect of her, this girl.
But living above, among the rest of us, this life
she shall certainly lose.
ANTIGONE: Tomb, bridal chamber, prison forever
dug in rock, it is to you I am going

to join my people, that great number that have died,
whom in their death Persephone[7] received.
I am the last of them and I go down
in the worst death of all—for I have not lived
the due term of my life. But when I come
to that other world my hope is strong
that my coming will be welcome to my father,
and dear to you, my mother, and dear to you,
my brother deeply loved. For when you died,
with my own hands I washed and dressed you all,
and poured the lustral offerings on your graves.
And now, Polyneices, it was for such care of your body
that I have earned these wages.
Yet those who think rightly will think I did right
in honoring you. Had I been a mother
of children, and my husband been dead and rotten,
I would not have taken this weary task upon me
against the will of the city. What law backs me
when I say this? I will tell you:
If my husband were dead, I might have had another,
and child from another man, if I lost the first.
But when father and mother both were hidden in death
no brother's life would bloom for me again.
That is the law under which I gave you precedence,
my dearest brother, and that is why Creon thinks me
wrong, even a criminal, and now takes me
by the hand and leads me away,
unbedded, without bridal, without share
in marriage and in nurturing of children;
as lonely as you see me; without friends;
with fate against me I go to the vault of death
while still alive. What law of God have I broken?
Why should I still look to the gods in my misery?
Whom should I summon as ally? For indeed
because of piety I was called impious.
If this proceeding is good in the gods' eyes
I shall know my sin, once I have suffered.
But if Creon and his people are the wrongdoers
let their suffering be no worse than the injustice
they are meting out to me.

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

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

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

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

CREON: I will not comfort you
with hope that the sentence will not be accomplished.
ANTIGONE: O my father's city, in Theban land,
O gods that sired my race,
I am led away, I have no more stay.
Look on me, princes of Thebes,
the last remnant of the old royal line;
see what I suffer and who makes me suffer
because I gave reverence to what claims reverence.
CHORUS: Danae suffered, too, when, her beauty lost, she gave
the light of heaven in exchange for brassbound walls,
and in the tomb-like cell was she hidden and held;
yet she was honored in her breeding, child,
and she kept, as guardian, the seed of Zeus
that came to her in a golden shower.[8]
But there is some terrible power in destiny
and neither wealth nor war
nor tower nor black ships, beaten by the sea,
can give escape from it.

The hot-tempered son of Dryas,[9] the Edonian king,
in fury mocked Dionysus,
who then held him in restraint
in a rocky dungeon.
So the terrible force and flower of his madness
drained away. He came to know the god
whom in frenzy he had touched with his mocking tongue,
when he would have checked the inspired women
and the fire of Dionysus,
when he provoked the Muses[1] that love the lyre.
By the black rocks, dividing the sea in two,
are the shores of the Bosporus, Thracian Salmydessus.[2]
There the god of war who lives near the city
saw the terrible blinding wound
dealt by his savage wife
on Phineus' two sons.[3]
She blinded and tore with the points of her shuttle,
and her bloodied hands, those eyes
that else would have looked on her vengefully.
As they wasted away, they lamented
their unhappy fate that they were doomed

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

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

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

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

to be born of a mother cursed in her marriage.
She traced her descent from the seed
of the ancient Erechtheidae.
In far-distant caves she was raised
among her father's storms, that child of Boreas[4]
quick as a horse, over the steep hills,
a daughter of the gods.
But, my child, the long-lived Fates[5]
bore hard upon her, too.

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

TEIRESIAS: My lords of Thebes, we have come here together,
one pair of eyes serving us both. For the blind
such must be the way of going, by a guide's leading.
CREON: What is the news, my old Teiresias?
TEIRESIAS: I will tell you; and you, listen to the prophet.
CREON: Never in the past have I turned from your advice.
TEIRESIAS: And so you have steered well the ship of state.
CREON: I have benefited and can testify to that.
TEIRESIAS: Then realize you are on the razor edge
of danger.
CREON: What can that be? I shudder to hear those words.
TEIRESIAS: When you learn the signs recognized by my art
you will understand.
I sat at my ancient place of divination
for watching the birds, where every bird finds shelter;
and I heard an unwonted voice among them;
they were horribly distressed, and screamed unmeaningly.
I knew they were tearing each other murderously;
the beating of their wings was a clear sign.
I was full of fear; at once on all the altars,
as they were fully kindled, I tasted the offerings,
but the god of fire refused to burn from the sacrifice,
and from the thighbones a dark stream of moisture
oozed from the embers, smoked and sputtered.
The gall bladder burst and scattered to the air
and the streaming thighbones lay exposed
from the fat wrapped round them—
so much I learned from this boy here,
the fading prophecies of a rite that failed.
This boy here is my guide, as I am others'.
This is the city's sickness—and your plans are the cause of it.
For our altars and our sacrificial hearths

4. God of the cold north wind, who sometimes took the form of a stallion.
5. Supernatural forces, usually represented as three old women, who determine the quality and length of life.

are filled with the carrion meat of birds and dogs,
torn from the flesh of Oedipus' poor son.
So the gods will not take our prayers or sacrifice
nor yet the flame from the thighbones, and no bird
cries shrill and clear, so glutted
are they with fat of the blood of the killed man.
Reflect on these things, son. All men
can make mistakes; but, once mistaken,
a man is no longer stupid nor accursed
who, having fallen on ill, tries to cure that ill,
not taking a fine undeviating stand.
It is obstinacy that convicts of folly.
Yield to the dead man; do not stab him—
now he is gone—what bravery is this,
to inflict another death upon the dead?
I mean you well and speak well for your good.
It is never sweeter to learn from a good counselor
than when he counsels to your benefit.

CREON: Old man, you are all archers, and I am your mark.
I must be tried by your prophecies as well.
By the breed of you I have been bought and sold
and made a merchandise, for ages now.
But I tell you: make your profit from silver-gold
from Sardis[6] and the gold from India
if you will. But this dead man you shall not hide
in a grave, not though the eagles of Zeus should bear
the carrion, snatching it to the throne of Zeus itself.
Even so, I shall not so tremble at the pollution
to let you bury him.
No, I am certain
no human has the power to pollute the gods.
They fall, you old Teiresias, those men,
—so very clever—in a bad fall whenever
they eloquently speak vile words for profit.

TEIRESIAS: I wonder if there's a man who dares consider—

CREON: What do you mean? What sort of generalization
is this talk of yours?

TEIRESIAS: How much the best of possessions is the ability
to listen to wise advice?

CREON: As I should imagine that the worst
injury must be native stupidity.

TEIRESIAS: Now that is exactly where your mind is sick.

CREON: I do not like to answer a seer with insults.

TEIRESIAS: But you do, when you say my prophecies are lies.

CREON: Well,

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

the whole breed of prophets certainly loves money.
TEIRESIAS: And the breed that comes from princes loves to take
advantage—base advantage.
CREON: Do you realize
you are speaking in such terms of your own prince?
TEIRESIAS: I know. But it is through me you have saved the city.
CREON: You are a wise prophet, but what you love is wrong.
TEIRESIAS: You will force me to declare what should be hidden
in my own heart.
CREON: Out with it—
but only if your words are not for gain.
TEIRESIAS: They won't be for *your* gain—that I am sure of.
CREON: But realize you will not make a merchandise
of my decisions.
TEIRESIAS: And you must realize
that you will not outlive many cycles more
of this swift sun before you give in exchange
one of your own loins bred, a corpse for a corpse,
for you have thrust one that belongs above
below the earth, and bitterly dishonored
a living soul by lodging her in the grave;
while one that belonged indeed to the underworld
gods you have kept on this earth without due share
of rites of burial, of due funeral offerings,
a corpse unhallowed. With all of this you, Creon,
have nothing to do, nor have the gods above.
These acts of yours are violence, on your part.
And in requital the avenging Spirits
of Death itself and the gods' Furies shall
after *your* deeds, lie in ambush for you, and
in their hands you shall be taken cruelly.
Now, look at this and tell me I was bribed
to say it! The delay will not be long
before the cries of mourning in your house,
of men and women. All the cities will stir in hatred
against you, because their sons in mangled shreds
received their burial rites from dogs, from wild beasts
or when some bird of the air brought a vile stink
to each city that contained the hearths of the dead.
These are the arrows that archer-like I launched—
you vexed me so to anger—at your heart.
You shall not escape their sting. You, boy,
lead me away to my house, so he may discharge
his anger on younger men; so may he come to know
to bear a quieter tongue in his head and a better
mind than that now he carries in him.
CHORUS: That was a terrible prophecy, my lord.
The man has gone. Since these hairs of mine grew white

from the black they once were, he has never spoken
a word of a lie to our city.
CREON: I know, I know.
My mind is all bewildered. To yield is terrible.
But by opposition to destroy my very being
with a self-destructive curse must also be reckoned
in what is terrible.
CHORUS: You need good counsel, son of Menoeceus,
and need to take it.
CREON: What must I do, then? Tell me; I shall agree.
CHORUS: The girl—go now and bring her up from her cave,
and for the exposed dead man, give him his burial.
CREON: That is really your advice? You would have me yield.
CHORUS: And quickly as you may, my lord. Swift harms
sent by the gods cut off the paths of the foolish.
CREON: Oh, it is hard; I must give up what my heart
would have me do. But it is ill to fight
against what must be.
CHORUS: Go now, and do this;
do not give the task to others.
CREON: I will go,
just as I am. Come, servants, all of you;
take axes in your hands; away with you
to the place you see, there.
For my part, since my intention is so changed,
as I bound her myself, myself will free her.
I am afraid it may be best, in the end
of life, to have kept the old accepted laws.
CHORUS: You of many names,[7] glory of the Cadmeian
bride, breed of loud thundering Zeus;
you who watch over famous Italy;
you who rule where all are welcome in Eleusis;
in the sheltered plains of Deo—
O Bacchus that dwells in Thebes,
the mother city of Bacchanals,
by the flowing stream of Ismenus,
in the ground sown by the fierce dragon's teeth.

You are he on whom the murky gleam of torches glares,
above the twin peaks of the crag
where come the Corycean nymphs
to worship you, the Bacchanals;
and the stream of Castalia has seen you, too;
and you are he that the ivy-clad

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

slopes of Nisaean hills,
and the green shore ivy-clustered,
sent to watch over the roads of Thebes,
where the immortal Evoe chant[8] rings out.

It is Thebes which you honor most of all cities,
you and your mother both,
she who died by the blast of Zeus' thunderbolt.
And now when the city, with all its folk,
is gripped by a violent plague,
come with healing foot, over the slopes of Parnassus,[9]
over the moaning strait.
You lead the dance of the fire-breathing stars,
you are master of the voices of the night.
True-born child of Zeus, appear,
my lord, with your Thyiad attendants,
who in frenzy all night long
dance in your house, Iacchus,
dispenser of gifts.

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

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

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

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

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

8. Come forth, come forth!

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

CHORUS: Truly his own hand? Or his father's?
MESSENGER: His own hand, in his anger
against his father for a murder.
CHORUS: Prophet, how truly you have made good your word!
MESSENGER: These things are so; you may debate the rest.
Here I see Creon's wife Eurydice
approaching. Unhappy woman!
Does she come from the house as hearing about her son
or has she come by chance?
EURYDICE: I heard your words, all you men of Thebes, as I
was going out to greet Pallas[2] with my prayers.
I was just drawing back the bolts of the gate
to open it when a cry struck through my ears
telling of my household's ruin. I fell backward
in terror into the arms of my servants; I fainted.
But tell me again, what is the story? I
will hear it as one who is no stranger to sorrow.
MESSENGER: Dear mistress, I will tell you, for I was there,
and I will leave out no word of the truth.
Why should I comfort you and then tomorrow
be proved a liar? The truth is always best.
I followed your husband, at his heels, to the end of the plain
where Polyneices' body still lay unpitied,
and torn by dogs. We prayed to Hecate, goddess
of the crossroads, and also to Pluto[3]
that they might restrain their anger and turn kind.
And him we washed with sacred lustral water
and with fresh-cut boughs we burned what was left of him
and raised a high mound of his native earth;
then we set out again for the hollowed rock,
death's stone bridal chamber for the girl.
Someone then heard a voice of bitter weeping
while we were still far off, coming from that unblest room.
The man came to tell our master Creon of it.
As the king drew nearer, there swarmed about him
a cry of misery but no clear words.
He groaned and in an anguished mourning voice
cried "Oh, am I a true prophet? Is this the road
that I must travel, saddest of all my wayfaring?
It is my son's voice that haunts my ear. Servants,
get closer, quickly. Stand around the tomb
and look. There is a gap there where the stones
have been wrenched away; enter there, by the very mouth,
and see whether I recognize the voice of Haemon
or if the gods deceive me." On the command

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

of our despairing master we went to look.
In the furthest part of the tomb we saw her, hanging
by her neck. She had tied a noose of muslin on it.
Haemon's hands were about her waist embracing her,
while he cried for the loss of his bride gone to the dead,
and for all his father had done, and his own sad love.
When Creon saw him he gave a bitter cry,
went in and called to him with a groan: "Poor son!
what have you done? What can you have meant?
What happened to destroy you? Come out, I pray you!"
The boy glared at him with savage eyes, and then
spat in his face, without a word of answer.
He drew his double-hilted sword. As his father
ran to escape him, Haemon failed to strike him,
and the poor wretch in anger at himself
leaned on his sword and drove it halfway in,
into his ribs. Then he folded the girl to him,
in his arms, while he was conscious still,
and gasping poured a sharp stream of bloody drops
on her white cheeks. There they lie,
the dead upon the dead. So he has won
the pitiful fulfillment of his marriage
within death's house. In this human world he has shown
how the wrong choice in plans is for a man
his greatest evil.

CHORUS: What do you make of this? My lady is gone,
without a word of good or bad.

MESSENGER: I, too,
am lost in wonder. I am inclined to hope
that hearing of her son's death she could not
open her sorrow to the city, but chose rather
within her house to lay upon her maids
the mourning for the household grief. Her judgment
is good; she will not make any false step.

CHORUS: I do not know. To me this over-heavy silence
seems just as dangerous as much empty wailing.

MESSENGER: I will go in and learn if in her passionate
heart she keeps hidden some secret purpose.
You are right; there is sometimes danger in too much silence.

CHORUS: Here comes our king himself. He bears in his hands
a memorial all too clear;
it is a ruin of none other's making,
purely his own if one dare to say that.

CREON: The mistakes of a blinded man
are themselves rigid and laden with death.
You look at us the killer and the killed
of the one blood. Oh, the awful blindness
of those plans of mine. My son, you were so young,

so young to die. You were freed from the bonds of life
through no folly of your own—only through mine.
CHORUS: I think you have learned justice—but too late.
CREON: Yes, I have learned it to my bitterness. At this moment
God has sprung on my head with a vast weight
and struck me down. He shook me in my savage ways;
he has overturned my joy, has trampled it,
underfoot. The pains men suffer
are pains indeed.
SECOND MESSENGER: My lord, you have troubles and a store besides;
some are there in your hands, but there are others
you will surely see when you come to your house.
CREON: What trouble can there be beside these troubles?
SECOND MESSENGER: The queen is dead. She was indeed true mother
of the dead son. She died, poor lady,
by recent violence upon herself.
CREON: Haven of death, you can never have enough.
Why, why do you destroy me?
You messenger, who have brought me bitter news,
what is this tale you tell?
It is a dead man that you kill again—
what new message of yours is this, boy?
Is this new slaughter of a woman
a doom to lie on the pile of the dead?
CHORUS: You can see. It is no longer
hidden in a corner.

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

CREON: Here is yet another horror
for my unhappy eyes to see.
What doom still waits for me?
I have but now taken in my arms my son,
and again I look upon another dead face.
Poor mother and poor son!
SECOND MESSENGER: She stood at the altar, and with keen whetted knife
she suffered her darkening eyes to close.
First she cried in agony recalling the noble fate of Megareus,[5]
who died before all this,
and then for the fate of this son; and in the end
she cursed you for the evil you had done
in killing her sons.
CREON: I am distracted with fear. Why does not someone
strike a two-edged sword right through me?
I am dissolved in an agony of misery.

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

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

THE END

c. 441 BCE

CRITICAL EXCERPTS

Richard C. Jebb

From Introduction to *The* Antigone *of Sophocles* (1902)[1]

The issue defined in the opening scene,—the conflict of divine with human law,—remains the central interest throughout. The action, so simple in plan, is varied by masterly character-drawing, both in the two principal figures, and in those lesser persons who contribute gradations of light and shade to the picture. There is no halting in the march of the drama; at each successive step we become more and more keenly interested to see how this great conflict is to end; and when the tragic climax is reached, it is worthy of such a progress.

The simplicity of the plot is due to the clearness with which two principles are opposed to each other. *Creon represents the duty of obeying the State's laws; Antigone, the duty of listening to the private conscience.* The definiteness and the power with which the play puts the case on each side are conclusive proofs that the question had assumed a distinct shape before the poet's mind. It is the only instance in which a Greek play has for its central theme a practical problem of conduct, involving issues, moral and political, which might be discussed on similar grounds in any age and in any country of the world. Greek tragedy, owing partly to the limitations which it placed on detail, was better suited than modern drama to raise such a question in a general form. The *Antigone*, indeed, raises the question in a form as nearly abstract as is compatible with the nature of drama. The case of Antigone is a thoroughly typical one for the private conscience, because the particular thing which she believes that she ought to do was, in itself, a thing which every Greek of that age recognised as a most sacred duty,—viz.,[2] to render burial rites to kinsfolk. This advantage was not devised by Sophocles; it came to him as part of the story which he was to dramatise; but it forms an additional reason for thinking that, when he dramatised that story in the precise manner which he has chosen, he had a consciously dialectical purpose. Such a purpose was wholly consistent, in this instance, with the artist's first aim,—to produce a work of art. It is because Creon and Antigone are so human that the controversy which they represent becomes so vivid.

But how did Sophocles intend us to view the result? What is the drift of the words at the end, which say that "wisdom is the supreme part of happiness"? If this wisdom, or prudence [. . .], means, generally, the observance of due limit, may not the suggested moral be that both the parties to the conflict were censurable? As Creon overstepped the due limit when, by his edict, he infringed the divine law, so Antigone also overstepped it when she defied the edict. The drama would thus be a conflict between two persons, each of whom defends an intrinsically sound principle, but defends it in a mistaken way; and both persons are therefore punished. This view, of which Boeckh[3] is the chief representative, has found several supporters. Among them is Hegel:—"In the view of the Eternal

1. Sir Richard C. Jebb. Introduction. *The* Antigone *of Sophocles*. 1902. Abridged by E. S. Shuckburgh, Cambridge UP, 1971, pp. xi–xxx.

2. Namely (abbreviation of the Latin *videlicet*) [editor's note].

3. August Boeckh (1785–1867), German classical scholar [editor's note].

Justice, both were wrong, because they were one-sided, but at the same time both were right."[4]

Or does the poet rather intend us to feel that Antigone is wholly in the right,—*i.e.*, that nothing of which the human lawgiver could complain in her was of a moment's account beside the supreme duty which she was fulfilling;—and that Creon was wholly in the wrong,—*i.e.*, that the intrinsically sound maxims of government on which he relies lose all validity when opposed to the higher law which he was breaking? If that was the poet's meaning, then the "wisdom" taught by the issue of the drama means the sense which duly subordinates human to divine law,—teaching that, if the two come into conflict, human law must yield.

A careful study of the play itself will suffice (I think) to show that the second of these two views is the true one. Sophocles has allowed Creon to put his case ably, and (in a measure from which an inferior artist might have shrunk) he has been content to make Antigone merely a nobly heroic woman, not a being exempt from human passion and human weakness; but none the less does he mean us to feel that, in this controversy, the right is wholly with her, and the wrong wholly with her judge.

Maurice Bowra

From Sophoclean Tragedy (1944)[1]

Modern critics who do not share Sophocles' conviction about the paramount duty of burying the dead and who attach more importance than he did to the claims of political authority have tended to underestimate the way in which he justifies Antigone against Creon. To their support they have called in the great name of Hegel, who was fascinated by the play and advanced remarkable views on it.[2] [. . . H]e has been made responsible for the opinion that Sophocles dramatized a conflict not between right and wrong but between right and right, that Antigone and Creon are equally justified in their actions and that the tragedy arises out of this irreconcilable conflict. [. . .] Hegel used the *Antigone* to illustrate his view of tragedy and his view of existence. He drew his own conclusions about the actions portrayed in it, as he was fully entitled to do. But his views are not those of Sophocles, and he should not be thought to maintain that Creon and Antigone were equally right in the eyes of their creator.

Sophocles leaves no doubt what conclusion should be drawn from the *Antigone*. He closes with a moral on the lips of the Chorus which tells the audience what to think:

> Wisdom has first place in happiness,
> And to fail not in reverence to the gods.
> The big words of the arrogant
> Lay big stripes on the boasters' backs.

4. *Religionsphilosophie*, II. 114 [Jebb's note].

1. Maurice Bowra. *Sophoclean Tragedy*. Clarendon, 1944. Bowra's notes have been edited.

2. *Philosophie der Religion,* xvi, I.133, *Aesthetik,* ii.2, Absch. I. Cf. A. C. Bradley, *Oxford Lectures on Poetry,* pp. 69–92 [Bowra's note].

They pay the price
And learn in old age to be wise.[3]

This can refer to no one but Creon, whose lack of wisdom has brought him to misery, who has shown irreverence to the gods in refusing burial to Polynices, been chastened for his proud words, and learned wisdom in his old age. To this lesson the preceding action in which Creon has lost son and wife and happiness has already made its effective contribution. We may be sure that the Chorus speak for the poet. It is as silent about Antigone as it is emphatic about Creon. There is no hint that she has in any way acted wrongly or that her death should be regarded as a righteous punishment. Of course the final words do not sum up everything important in the play, but we may reasonably assume that they pass judgement on its salient events as they appear in retrospect when the action is finished. There is no real problem about the ethical intention of the *Antigone*. It shows the fall of a proud man, and its lesson is that the gods punish pride and irreverence. But what matters much more than the actual conclusion is the means by which it is reached, the presentation of the different parties in the conflict, the view that we take of each, the feelings that are forced on us. The interest and power of the *Antigone* lie in the tangled issues which are unravelled in it.

A conclusion so clear as this is only worth reaching if it has been preceded by a drama in which the issues are violent and complex. The rights and wrongs of the case must not throughout be so obvious as they are at the end; the audience must feel that the issue is difficult, that there is much to be said on both sides, that the ways of the gods are hard to discern. Without this the play will fail in dramatic and human interest. And Sophocles has taken great care to show the issues in their full difficulty before he provides a solution for them. He makes the two protagonists appear in such a light that at intervals we doubt if all the right is really with Antigone and all the wrong with Creon. To Creon, who defies the divine ordinance of burial, he gives arguments and sentiments which sound convincing enough when they are put forward, and many must feel that he has some good reason to act as he does. On the other hand Antigone, who fearlessly vindicates the laws of the gods, is by no means a gentle womanly creature who suffers martyrdom for the right. She may be right, but there are moments when we qualify our approval of her, when she seems proud and forbidding in her determination to do her duty and to do it alone. For these variations in our feelings Sophocles is responsible. He makes us find some right in Creon, some wrong in Antigone, even if we are misled about both. He built his play on a contrast not between obvious wrong and obvious right but between the real arrogance of Creon and the apparent arrogance of Antigone. The first deceives by its fine persuasive sentiments; the second works through Antigone's refusal to offer concessions or to consider any point of view but her own. This contrast runs through much of the play, accounts for misunderstandings of what takes place in it, provides false clues and suggests wrong conclusions, and adds greatly to the intensity of the drama. When a play is written round a moral issue, that issue must be a real problem about which more than one view is tenable until all the relevant facts are known. So the *Antigone* dramatizes a conflict which was familiar to

3. Bowra's translation of lines 1409–13.

the Periclean age,[3] would excite divergent judgements and feelings, and make some support Antigone, some Creon, until the end makes all clear.

Bernard Knox

From Introduction to *Antigone* (1982)[1]

The opening scenes show us the conflicting claims and loyalties of the two adversaries, solidly based, in both cases, on opposed political and religious principles. This is of course the basic insight of Hegel's famous analysis of the play: he sees it as "a collision between the two highest moral powers." What is wrong with them, in his view, is that they are both "one-sided." But Hegel goes much further than that. He was writing in the first half of the nineteenth century, a period of fervent German nationalism in which the foundations of the unified German state were laid: his views on loyalty to the state were very much those of Creon. "Creon," he says, "is not a tyrant, he is really a moral power. He is not in the wrong."

However, as the action develops the favorable impression created by Creon's opening speech is quickly dissipated. His announcement of his decision to expose the corpse, the concluding section of his speech, is couched in violent, vindictive terms—"carrion for the birds and dogs to tear" (225)[2]—which stand in shocking contrast to the ethical generalities that precede it. This hint of a cruel disposition underlying the statesmanlike façade is broadened by the threat of torture leveled at the sentry (335–41) and the order to execute Antigone in the presence of Haemon, her betrothed (818–20). And as he meets resistance from a series of opponents—Antigone's contemptuous defiance, the rational, political advice of his son Haemon, the imperious summons to obedience of the gods' spokesman, Tiresias—he swiftly abandons the temperate rhetoric of his inaugural address for increasingly savage invective. Against the two sanctions invoked by Antigone, the demands of blood relationship, the rights and privileges of the gods below, he rages in terms ranging from near-blasphemous defiance to scornful mockery.

> Sister's child or closer in blood
> than all my family clustered at my altar
> worshiping Guardian Zeus—she'll never escape,
> . . . the most barbaric death. (530–33)

He will live to regret this wholesale denial of the family bond, for it is precisely through that family clustered at his altar that his punishment will be administered, in the suicides of his son and his wife, both of whom die cursing him.

And for Antigone's appeals to Hades, the great god of the underworld to whom the dead belong, Creon has nothing but contempt; for him "Hades" is simply a

3. The height of Athenian culture and political power in the time of the Athenian statesman Pericles (c. 495–429 BCE) [editor's note].

1. Bernard Knox. Introduction. *Antigone, Sophocles, The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*, translated by Robert Fagles, Penguin, 1982, pp. 21–37. All footnotes have been added by the editor.

2. Knox's references are to Robert Fagles's translation, printed in *The Three Theban Plays*. Here and throughout we have substituted for the line numbers in Knox's parenthetical citations numbers for the relevant lines in the translation reprinted in this anthology. The wording varies between translations.

word meaning "death," a sentence he is prepared to pass on anyone who stands in his way. He threatens the sentry with torture as a prelude: "simple death won't be enough for you" (340). When asked if he really intends to deprive Haemon of his bride he answers sarcastically: "Death will do it for me" (630). He expects to see Antigone and Ismene turn coward "once they see Death coming for their lives" (635–36). With a derisive comment he tells his son to abandon Antigone: "Spit her out, / . . . Let her find a husband down among the dead [in Hades' house]" (704–05). And he dismisses Antigone's reverence for Hades and the rights of the dead with mockery as he condemns her to be buried alive: "There let her pray to the one god she worships: / Death" (837–38). But this Hades is not something to be so lightly referred to, used or mocked. In the great choral ode which celebrated Man's progress and powers this was the one insurmountable obstacle that confronted him:

> ready, resourceful man!
> Never without resources
> never an impasse as he marches on the future—
> only Death, from Death alone he will find no rescue . . . (381, 393–97)

And Creon, in the end, looking at the corpse of his son and hearing the news of his wife's suicide, speaks of Hades for the first time with the fearful respect that is his due, not as an instrument of policy or a subject for sardonic wordplay, but as a divine power, a dreadful presence: "harbor of Death, so choked, so hard to cleanse!— / why me? why are you killing me?" (1350–51).

Creon is forced at last to recognize the strength of those social and religious imperatives that Antigone obeys, but long before this happens he has abandoned the principles which he had proclaimed as authority for his own actions. His claim to be representative of the whole community is forgotten as he refuses to accept Haemon's report that the citizens, though they dare not speak out, disapprove of his action; he denies the relevance of such a report even if true—"And is Thebes about to tell me how to rule?" (790)—and finally repudiates his principles in specific terms by an assertion that the city belongs to him—"The city *is* the king's—that's the law!" (795). This autocratic phrase puts the finishing touch to the picture Sophocles is drawing for his audience: Creon has now displayed all the characteristics of the "tyrant," a despotic ruler who seizes power and retains it by intimidation and force. Athens had lived under the rule of a "tyrant" before the democracy was established in 508 B.C., and the name and institution were still regarded with abhorrence. Creon goes on to abandon the gods whose temples crown the city's high places, the gods he once claimed as his own, and his language is even more violent. The blind prophet Tiresias tells him that the birds and dogs are fouling the altars of the city's gods with the carrion flesh of Polynices; he must bury the corpse. His furious reply begins with a characteristic accusation that the prophet has been bribed (the sentry had this same accusation flung at him), but what follows is a hideously blasphemous defiance of those gods Creon once claimed to serve:

> 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! (1090–92)

At this high point in his stubborn rage (he will break by the end of the scene and try, too late, to avoid the divine wrath), he is sustained by nothing except his tyrannical insistence on his own will, come what may, and his outraged refusal to be defeated by a woman. "No woman," he says, "is going to lord it over me" (577). "I'm not the man, not now: she is the man / if this victory goes to her and she goes free" (528–29).

Antigone, on her side, is just as indifferent to Creon's principles of action as he is to hers. She mentions the city only in her last agonized laments before she is led off to her living death:

> O my city, all your fine rich sons!
> . . . springs of the Dirce,
> holy grove of Thebes . . . (893–94)

But here she is appealing for sympathy to the city over the heads of the chorus, the city's symbolic representative on stage. In all her arguments with Creon and Ismene she speaks as one wholly unconscious of the rights and duties membership in the city confers and imposes, as if no unit larger than the family existed. It is a position just as extreme as Creon's insistence that the demands of the city take precedence over all others, for the living and the dead alike.

Like Creon, she acts in the name of gods, but they are different gods. There is more than a little truth in Creon's mocking comment that Hades is "the one god she worships (838)." She is from the beginning "much possessed by death"; together with Ismene she is the last survivor of a doomed family, burdened with such sorrow that she finds life hardly worth living. "Who on earth," she says to Creon, "alive in the midst of so much grief as I, / could fail to find his death a rich reward?" (507–08). She has performed the funeral rites for mother, father and her brother Eteocles:

> I washed you with my hands,
> I dressed you all, I poured the cups
> across your tombs. (948–50)

She now sacrifices her life to perform a symbolic burial, a handful of dust sprinkled on the corpse, for Polynices, the brother left to rot on the battlefield. She looks forward to her reunion with her beloved dead in that dark kingdom where Persephone, the bride of Hades, welcomes the ghosts (939–41). It is in the name of Hades, one of the three great gods who rule the universe, that she defends the right of Polynices and of all human beings to proper burial. "Death [Hades] longs for the same rites for all" (570), she tells Creon—for patriot and traitor alike; she rejects Ismene's plea to be allowed to share her fate with an appeal to the same stern authority: "Who did the work? / Let the dead and the god of death bear witness!" (595). In Creon's gods, the city's patrons and defenders, she shows no interest at all. Zeus she mentions twice: once as the source of all the calamities that have fallen and are still to fall on the house of Oedipus (2–5), and once again at the beginning of her famous speech about the unwritten laws. But the context here suggests strongly that she is thinking about Zeus in his special relationship to the underworld, Zeus *Chthonios* (Underworld Zeus). "It wasn't Zeus," she says,

> who made this proclamation. . . .
> Nor did that Justice, dwelling with the gods
> beneath the earth, ordain such laws for men. (494–96)

From first to last her religious devotion and duty are to the divine powers of the world below, the masters of that world where lie her family dead, to which she herself, reluctant but fascinated, is irresistibly drawn.

But, like Creon, she ends by denying the great sanctions she invoked to justify her action. In his case the process was spread out over the course of several scenes, as he reacted to each fresh pressure that was brought to bear on him; Antigone turns her back on the claims of blood relationship and the nether gods in one sentence: three lines in Greek, no more. They are the emotional high point of the speech she makes just before she is led off to her death.

> Never, I tell you,
> if I had been the mother of children
> or if my husband died, exposed and rotting—
> I'd never have taken this ordeal upon myself,
> never defied our people's will. (954–57)

These unexpected words are part of the long speech that concludes a scene of lyric lamentation and is in effect her farewell to the land of the living. They are certainly a total repudiation of her proud claim that she acted as the champion of the unwritten laws and the infernal gods, for, as she herself told Creon, those laws and those gods have no preferences, they long "for the same rites for all" (570). And her assertion that she would not have done for her children what she has done for Polynices is a spectacular betrayal of that fanatical loyalty to blood relationship which she urged on Ismene and defended against Creon, for there is no closer relationship imaginable than that between the mother and the children of her own body. Creon turned his back on his guiding principles step by step, in reaction to opposition based on those principles; Antigone's rejection of her public values is just as complete, but it is the sudden product of a lonely, brooding introspection, a last-minute assessment of her motives, on which the imminence of death confers a merciless clarity. She did it because Polynices was her brother; she would not have done it for husband or child. She goes on to justify this disturbing statement by an argument which is more disturbing still: husband and children, she says, could be replaced by others but, since her parents are dead, she could never have another brother. It so happens that we can identify the source of this strange piece of reasoning; it is a story in the *Histories* of Sophocles' friend Herodotus (a work from which Sophocles borrowed material more than once). Darius the Great King had condemned to death for treason a Persian noble, Intaphrenes, and all the men of his family. The wife of Intaphrenes begged importunately for their lives; offered one, she chose her brother's. When Darius asked her why, she replied in words that are unmistakably the original of Antigone's lines. But what makes sense in the story makes less in the play. The wife of Intaphrenes saves her brother's life, but Polynices is already dead; Antigone's phrase "no brother could ever spring to light again" (962) would be fully appropriate only if Antigone had managed to save Polynices' life rather than bury his corpse.

For this reason, and also because of some stylistic anomalies in this part of the speech, but most of all because they felt that the words are unworthy of the Antigone who spoke so nobly for the unwritten laws, many great scholars and also a great poet and dramatist, Goethe, have refused to believe that Sophocles wrote them. "I would give a great deal," Goethe told his friend Eckermann in 1827, "if some talented scholar could prove that these lines were interpolated, not genuine." Goethe did not know that the attempt had already been made, six years earlier; many others have tried since—Sir Richard Jebb, the greatest English editor of Sophocles, pronounced against them—and opinion today is still divided. Obviously a decision on this point is of vital significance for the interpretation of the play as a whole: with these lines removed, Antigone goes to her prison-tomb with no flicker of self-doubt, the flawless champion of the family bond and the unwritten laws, "whole as the marble, founded as the rock"[3]—unlike Creon, she is not, in the end, reduced to recognizing that her motive is purely personal.

There is however one objective piece of evidence that speaks volumes for the authenticity of the disputed lines. Aristotle, writing his treatise on rhetoric less than a century after the death of Sophocles, summarizes this part of Antigone's speech and quotes the two lines about the irreplaceability of a brother. He is telling the would-be orator that if, in a law-court speech for the defense, he has to describe an action that seems inappropriate for the character of his client and hard to believe, he must provide an explanation for it "as in the example Sophocles gives, the one from *Antigone*"—the phrasing suggests that the passage was well known to Aristotle's readers. Evidently he does not find the passage as repellent as Goethe and Jebb did; he recognizes that Antigone's initial statement is, in terms of her character, "hard to believe" [. . .], but apparently he finds her explanation rhetorically satisfactory. He does not, however, for one moment suspect the authenticity of the lines. [. . .] His acceptance of Antigone's speech as genuine demands that rather than suppress it we should try to understand it.

This is Antigone's third and last appearance on stage; in the prologue she planned her action, in the confrontation with Creon she defended it, and now, under guard, she is on her way to the prison which is to be her tomb. In lyric meters, the dramatic medium for unbridled emotion, she appeals to the chorus for sympathy and mourns for the marriage hymn she will never hear (this is as close as she ever comes to mentioning Haemon). She gets little comfort from the Theban elders; the only consolation they offer is a reminder that she may be the victim of a family curse—"do you pay for your father's terrible ordeal?" (904–05)—a suggestion that touches her to the quick and provokes a horror-struck rehearsal of the tormented loves and crimes of the house of Oedipus. There is, as she goes on to say, no one left to mourn her; the lyric lament she sings in this scene is her attempt to provide for herself that funeral dirge which her blood relatives would have wailed over her corpse, if they had not already preceded her into the realm of Hades. This is recognized by Creon, who cuts off the song with a sarcastic comment: "if a man could wail his own dirge *before* he dies, / he'd never finish" (928–29). And he orders the guards to take her away.

Her song cut off, she turns from the lyric medium of emotion to spoken verse, the vehicle of reasoned statement, for her farewell speech. It is not directed at

3. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* 3.4.22.

anyone on stage; it resembles a soliloquy, a private meditation. It is an attempt to understand the real reasons for the action that has brought her to the brink of death. After an address to the tomb and prison where she expects to be reunited with her family she speaks to Polynices (Creon is referred to in the third person). It is to Polynices that she is speaking when she says that she would not have given her life for anyone but a brother; it is as if she had already left the world of the living and joined that community of the family dead she speaks of with such love. Now, in the face of death, oblivious of the presence of Creon and the chorus, with no public case to make, no arguments to counter, she can at last identify the driving force behind her action, the private, irrational imperative which was at the root of her championship of the rights of family and the dead against the demands of the state. It is her fanatical devotion to one particular family, her own, the doomed, incestuous, accursed house of Oedipus and especially to its most unfortunate member, the brother whose corpse lay exposed to the birds and dogs. When she tells him that she has done for him what she would not have done for husband or children she is not speaking in wholly hypothetical terms, for in sober fact she has sacrificed, for his sake, her marriage to Haemon and the children that might have issued from it.

And in this moment of self-discovery she realizes that she is absolutely alone, not only rejected by men but also abandoned by gods. "What law of the mighty gods have I transgressed?" (971) she asks—as well she may, for whatever her motive may have been, her action was a blow struck for the rights of Hades and the dead. Unlike Christians whose master told them not to look for signs from heaven (Matthew 16:4),[4] the ancient Greek expected if not direct intervention at least some manifestation of favor or support from his gods when he believed his cause was just—a flight of eagles, the bird of Zeus, or lightning and thunder, the signs which, in the last play,[5] summon Oedipus to his resting place. But Antigone has to renounce this prospect: "Why look to heavens any more . . . ?" (972). She must go to her death as she has lived, alone, without a word of approval or a helping hand from men or gods.

Antigone's discovery that her deepest motives were purely personal has been overinterpreted by those who would suppress the passage on the grounds that, to quote Jebb's eloquent indictment, "she suddenly gives up that which, throughout the drama, has been the immovable basis of her action—the universal and unqualified validity of the divine law." This formulation is too absolute. Before the raw immediacy of death, which, as Doctor Johnson remarked, wonderfully concentrates the mind,[6] she has sounded the depths of her own soul and identified the determinant of those high principles she proclaimed in public. But that does not mean that they were a pretense, still less that she has now abandoned them. She dies for them. In her very last words, as she calls on the chorus to bear witness to her unjust fate, she claims once more and for the last time that she is the champion of divine law—she suffers "all for reverence, my reverence for the gods!" (993).

4. "A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given unto it [. . .]."

5. *Oedipus at Colonus*.

6. Samuel Johnson (1709–84), as quoted in James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791): "when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully."

Unlike Creon, who after proclaiming the predominance of the city's interests rides roughshod over them, speaking and acting like a tyrant, who after extolling the city's gods dismisses Tiresias, their spokesman, with a blasphemous insult, Antigone does not betray the loyalties she spoke for. No word of compromise or surrender comes to her lips, no plea for mercy [. . .].

• • •

This is a pattern of character and behavior which is found in other Sophoclean dramatic figures also; not only in the Oedipus of the other two plays of this volume but also in the protagonists of *Ajax*, *Electra* and *Philoctetes*. They are of course very different from each other, but they all have in common the same uncompromising determination, the same high sense of their own worth and a consequent quickness to take offense, the readiness to die rather than surrender—a heroic temper. This figure of the tragic hero [. . .] seems, as far as we can tell from what remains of Attic tragedy, to have been a peculiarly Sophoclean creation. In his plays he explores time and again the destinies of human beings who refuse to recognize the limits imposed on the individual will by men and gods, and go to death or triumph, magnificently defiant to the last.

Antigone is such a heroic figure, and this is another of the ways in which she is different from Creon. Not only does Creon, unlike Antigone, betray in action the principles he claimed to stand for; he also, subjected to pressure that falls short of the death Antigone is faced with, collapses in abject surrender. He was sure Antigone would give way when force was applied; he has seen "the stiffest stubborn wills / fall the hardest; the toughest iron . . . crack and shatter" (518–21)—but he is wrong. He is the one who is shattered. Tiresias tells him that he will lose a child of his own to death in return for the living being he has imprisoned in the tomb and the corpse he has kept in the sunlight. He hesitates: "I'm shaken, torn. / It's a dreadful thing to yield . . ." (1158). But yield he does. "What should I do?" he asks the chorus (1164) and they tell him: release Antigone, bury Polynices. But he arrives too late; Antigone, independent to the last, has chosen her own way to die [. . .]

[. . .] His savage dismissal of the claims of that blood relationship Antigone stood for has been punished with exquisite appropriateness, in the destruction of his own family, the curses of his son and wife. [. . .] The gods of the city whom he claimed to defend, have, through the medium of the blind seer, denounced his action, and the city he proposed to steer on a firm course is now, as Tiresias told him, threatened by the other cities whose dead were left to rot, like Polynices, outside the walls of Thebes (1141–45). He is revealed as a disastrous failure, both as head of a family and head of state, an offender against heaven and a man without family or friends, without the respect of his fellow-citizens. He may well describe himself as "no one. Nothing" (1386).

Antigone asked the gods to punish Creon if he was wrong [975–79], and they have. They have shown to all the world that her action was right. But she did not live to see her vindication. [. . . T]he will of the gods remains, as in all three of these plays, mysterious; revealed partially, if at all, through prophets rejected and prophecies misunderstood, it is the insoluble riddle at the heart of Sophocles' tragic vision. The gods told Creon he was wrong, but it is noticeable that

Tiresias, their spokesman, does not say Antigone was right, he does not praise her—in fact he does not mention her. Antigone was ready to admit, if the gods did not save her and she suffered death, that she was wrong (975–76); these words suggest that she hanged herself not just to cut short the lingering agony of starvation and imprisonment but in a sort of existential despair. [. . .]

The gods do not praise Antigone, nor does anyone else in the play—except the young man who loves her so passionately that he cannot bear to live without her. Haemon tells his father what the Thebans are saying behind his back, the "murmurs in the dark" (743): that Antigone deserves not death but "a glowing crown of gold!" (751). Whether this is a true report (and the chorus does not praise Antigone even when they have been convinced that she was right) or just his own feelings attributed to others for the sake of his argument, it is a timely reminder of Antigone's heroic status. In the somber world of the play, against the background of so many sudden deaths and the dark mystery of the divine dispensation, her courage and steadfastness are a gleam of light; she is the embodiment of the only consolation tragedy can offer—that in certain heroic natures unmerited suffering and death can be met with a greatness of soul which, because it is purely human, brings honor to us all.

Martha C. Nussbaum

From Sophocles' *Antigone*: Conflict, Vision, and Simplification (1986, 2001)[1]

[. . . A]lmost all interpreters of this play have agreed that the play shows Creon to be morally defective, though they might not agree about the particular nature of his defect. The situation of Antigone is more controversial. Hegel assimilated her defect to Creon's; some more recent writers uncritically hold her up as a blameless heroine. Without entering into an exhaustive study of her role in the tragedy, I should like to claim (with the support of an increasing number of recent critics) that there is at least some justification for the Hegelian assimilation—though the criticism needs to be focused more clearly and specifically than it is in Hegel's brief remarks. I want to suggest that Antigone, like Creon, has engaged in a ruthless simplification of the world of value which effectively eliminates conflicting obligations. Like Creon, she can be blamed for refusal of vision. But there are important differences, as well, between her project and Creon's. When these are seen, it will also emerge that this criticism of Antigone is not incompatible with the judgment that she is morally superior to Creon.

• • •

There has been a war. On one side was an army led by Eteocles, brother of Antigone and Ismene. On the other side was an invading army, made up partly of foreigners, but led by a Theban brother, Polynices. This heterogeneity is denied,

1. Martha C. Nussbaum. "Sophocles' *Antigone*: Conflict, Vision, and Simplification." *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy.* 1986. Revised ed. Cambridge UP, 2001, pp. 51–84. Nussbaum's footnotes and parenthetical citations have been edited.

in different ways, by both Creon and Antigone. Creon's strategy is to draw, in thought, a line between the invading and defending forces. What falls to one side of this line is a foe, bad, unjust; what falls to the other (if loyal to the city's cause) becomes, indiscriminately, friend or loved one. Antigone, on the other hand, denies the relevance of this distinction entirely. She draws, in imagination, a small circle around the members of her family: what is inside (with further restrictions which we shall mention) is family, therefore loved one and friend; what is outside is non-family, therefore, in any conflict with the family, enemy. If one listened only to Antigone, one would not know that a war had taken place or that anything called "city" was ever in danger.[2] To her it is a simple injustice that Polynices should not be treated like a friend.

"Friend" (*philos*) and "enemy," then, are functions solely of family relationship.[3] When Antigone says, "It is my nature to join in loving (*sumphilein*), not to join in hating," she is expressing not a general attachment to love, but a devotion to the *philia* of the family. It is the nature of these *philia* bonds to make claims on one's commitments and actions regardless of one's occurrent desires. This sort of love is not something one decides about; the relationships involved may have little to do with liking or fondness. We might say (to use terminology borrowed from Kant[4]) that Antigone, in speaking of love, means "practical," not "pathological" love (a love that has its source in fondness or inclination). "He is my own brother," she says to Ismene in explanation of her defiance of the city's decree, "and yours too, even if you don't want it. I certainly will never be found a traitor to him" (51–52). Relationship is itself a source of obligation, regardless of the feelings involved. When Antigone speaks of Polynices as "my dearest [. . .] brother" (94), even when she proclaims, "I shall lie with him as a loved one with a loved one [. . .]" (83–84), there is no sense of closeness, no personal memory, no particularity animating her speech.[5] Ismene, the one person who ought, historically, to be close to her, is treated from the beginning with remote coldness; she is even called enemy (110) when she takes the wrong stand on matters of pious obligation. It is Ismene whom we see weeping "sister-loving tears," who acts out of commitment to a felt love. "What life is worth living for me, bereft of you?" (602) she asks with an intensity of feeling that never animates her sister's

2. Cf. [S. G.] Bernardete, "A Reading [of Sophocles' *Antigone*]." [*Interpretation* 4 (1975): 148–96; 5 (1975): 1–55, 148–84,] 2.4 [Nussbaum's note].

3. [. . .] Cf. Bernardete, *op. cit.* 8.6, 9.5, [C.] Segal, *Tragedy* [*and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles* (Cambridge, 1981)] 189, [R. P.] Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles*[*: An Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1980)] 129ff, [B.] Knox, [*The*] *Heroic Temper*[*: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy* (Berkeley, 1964)] 79–80 [Nussbaum's note].

4. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), German philosopher who uses these terms in his *Critique of Pure Reason*.

5. A number of scholars have claimed that Antigone is motivated by deep personal love for Polynices: for example, [M.] Santirocco, "Justice [in Sophocles' *Antigone*.]" [*Phil Lit* 4 (1980): 1880–98,] 188, Knox, *Heroic Temper* 107ff., Winnington-Ingram, *op cit.* 130. Contrast the effective negative arguments of [G.] Perrotta, *Sofocle* [Messina-Florence, 1935] 112–14, [H.] Lloyd-Jones, [*The Justice of Zeus* (Berkeley, 1971)] 116, [I. M.] Linforth, "Antigone and Creon" [*University of California Publications in Classical Philology* 15 (1961): 183–260,] 250. Perrotta correctly observes that she loves Polynices not *qua* Polynices, but *qua* falling under a family duty. [. . .] With her abstract and cold remarks of mourning we might contrast, for example, the agonized mourning of Hecuba (in Euripides' *Trojan Women* [. . .]) over the corpse of her grandchild, where each part of the loved body conjures up a new memory of shared affection. There are many similar cases [Nussbaum's note].

piety. To Haemon, the man who passionately loves and desires her, Antigone never addresses a word throughout the entire play.[6] It is Haemon, not Antigone, whom the Chorus views as inspired by *erōs* (842–56). Antigone is as far from *erōs* as Creon.[7] For Antigone, the dead are "those whom it is most important to please" (103). "You have a warm heart for the cold" (102), observes her sister, failing to comprehend this impersonal and single-minded passion.

Duty to the family dead is the supreme law and the supreme passion. And Antigone structures her entire life and her vision of the world in accordance with this simple, self-contained system of duties. Even within this system, should a conflict ever arise, she is ready with a fixed priority ordering that will clearly dictate her choice. The strange speech (954–64) in which she ranks duties to different family dead, placing duty to brother above duties to husband and children, is in this sense (if genuine) highly revealing: it makes us suspect that she is capable of a strangely ruthless simplification of duties, corresponding not so much to any known religious law as to the exigencies of her own practical imagination.[8]

Other values fall into place, confirming these suspicions. Her single-minded identification with duties to the dead (and only some of these) effects a strange reorganization of piety, as well as of honor and justice. She is truly, in her own words, *hosia panourgēsasa*, one who will do anything for the sake of the pious;[9] and her piety takes in only a part of conventional religion.[1] She speaks of her allegiance to Zeus [. . .], but she refuses to recognize his role as guardian of the

6. Cf. Perrotta, *op. cit.* 112. We must ascribe "O dearest Haemon, how your father dishonors you," to Ismene as in all the manuscripts. Pearson and other editors have assigned it to Antigone, out of their desire to have Antigone say something affectionate about Haemon. But *philtate,* "dearest," is not unusually strong inside a close family relationship, and it is perfectly appropriate to the affectionate Ismene; it need not, in fact, even desgianate close affection. Creon's reply that the speaker's continued harping on marriage "irritates him is appropriate to his relationship with Ismene (who is, in any case, the one who has been "harping" on marriage), but is far too mild to express his deep hatred for and anger against Antigone. See the arguments of Linforth, *op. cit.* 209, Bernardete *ad loc* [Nussbaum's note].

7. On Antigone's refusal of *eros,* see [J.-P.] Vernant, "Tensions [et ambiguités dans la tragédie grecque]," in [J-P.] Vernant and [P.] Vidal-Naquet, *Mythe et tragédie en grèce ancienne* (Paris, 1972),] 34–5, Bernardete, "A reading" 8.6; compare Segal, *Tragedy* §VIII [Nussbaum's note, here abbreviated].

8. This speech is notoriously controversial. It would surely have been branded spurious had it not been quoted as genuine by Aristotle in the *Rhetoric*; this dates it so early that, if spurious, it could only be an actor's interpolation. And it is difficult to imagine an actor giving himself such an oddly legalistic and unemotional speech at a climactic moment in the dramatic action. It is, then, [. . .] almost certainly genuine; and it is very difficult to explain as a confused and incoherent outpouring of passionate love—thought this approach has indeed been tried (e.g. by Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles* 145ff., Knox, *Heroic Temper* 144ff.). The best explanation for this coldly determined priority-ordering of duties is that Antigone is not animated by personal love at all, but by a stern determination to have a fixed set of ordered requirements that will dictate her actions without engendering conflict; her refusal of the erotic [. . .] is then sufficient to explain her choice of the brother. For review of the controversy about authenticity and about the relation of the passage to Herodotus III.119, see [D. A.] Hester, "Sophocles the unphilosophical[: A Study in the *Antigone*.]" [*Mnemosyne* 4th ser. 24 (1971): 11–59,] 55–80, [R. C.] Jebb, [*Sophocles: The Antigone* (Cambridge, 1900),] Appendix, 258–65, [G.] Müller, *Sophokles, Antigone* [Heidelberg, 1967] 198ff, 106ff., Knox, *op. cit.* 105–6, Winnington-Ingram, *op. cit.* 145ff. See also D. Page, *Actors' Interpolations in Greek Tragedy* (Oxford, 1934) [Nussbaum's note].

9. See Bernardete, "A reading" 9.3 [Nussbaum's note].

1. See Knox, *Heroic Temper* 94ff., Segal, *Tragedy* §VIII. Winnington-Ingram calls the way in which she denies the hatred of brothers for one another after death a "heroic fiat," "a supreme effort to impose heroic will upon a recalcitrant world" (*Sophocles* 132) [Nussbaum's note].

city and backer of Eteocles. The very expression of her devotion is suspect: "Zeus did not decree this, as far as I am concerned" ([. . .] 494). She sets herself up as the arbiter of what Zeus can and cannot have decreed, just as Creon took it upon himself to say whom the gods could and could not have covered: no other character bears out her view of Zeus as single-mindedly backing the rights of the dead. She speaks, too, of the goddess *Dikē*, Justice; but *Dikē;* for her is, simply, "the Justice who lives together with the gods below" (495). The Chorus recognizes another *Dikē*.[2] Later they will say to her, "Having advanced to the utmost limit of boldness, you struck hard against the altar of *Dikē* on high, o child" (901–3). Justice is up here in the city, as well as below the earth. It is not as simple as she says it is. Antigone, accordingly, is seen by them not as a conventionally pious person, but as one who improvised her piety, making her own decisions about what to honor. She is a "maker of her own law [. . .]"; her defiance is "self-invented passion" ([. . .]920). Finally they tell her unequivocally that her pious respect is incomplete: "[This] reverent action [. . .] is a part of piety [. . .]" (917). Antigone's rigid adherence to a single narrow set of duties has caused her to misinterpret the nature of piety itself, a virtue within which a more comprehensive understanding would see the possibility of conflict.

Creon's strategy of simplification led him to regard others as material for his aggressive exploitation. Antigone's dutiful subservience to the dead leads to an equally strange, though different (and certainly less hideous) result. Her relation to others in the world above is characterized by an odd coldness. "You are alive," she tells her sister, "but my life [. . .] is long since dead, to the end of serving the dead." The safely dutiful human life requires, or is, life's annihilation.[3] Creon's attitude towards others is like necrophilia: he aspires to possess the inert and unresisting. Antigone's subservience to duty is, finally, the ambition to be a *nekros*, a corpse beloved of corpses. (Her apparent similarity to martyrs in our own tradition, who expect a fully active life after death, should not conceal from us the strangeness of this goal.) In the world below, there are no risks of failure or wrongdoing.

Neither Creon nor Antigone, then, is a loving or passionate being in anything like the usual sense. Not one of the gods, not one human being escapes the power of *erōs*, says the Chorus (842–47); but these two oddly inhuman beings do, it appears, escape. Creon sees loved persons as functions of the civic good, replaceable producers of citizens. For Antigone, they are either dead, fellow servants of the dead, or objects of complete indifference. No living being is loved for his or her personal qualities, loved with the sort of love that Haemon feels and Ismene praises. By altering their beliefs about the nature and value of persons, they have, it seems, altered or restructured the human passions themselves. They achieve harmony in this way; but at a cost. The Chorus speaks of *erōs* as a force as important and obligating as the ancient *thesmoi* or laws of right, a force against which it is both foolish and, apparently, blameworthy to rebel [. . .].

2. On Antigone's conception of *diké* and its novelty, see R. Hirzel, *Themis, Diké, and Verwandtes* (Leipzig, 1907) 147ff.; also Santirocco, "Justice" 186, Segal, *op. cit.* 170 [Nussbaum's note].

3. Segal, *op. cit.* provides an excellent discussion of this aspect of Antigone in several places—esp. 156ff., §VIII, §IV, 196 [Nussbaum's note].

Antigone learns too—like Creon, by being forced to recognize a problem that lies at the heart of her single-minded concern. Creon saw that the city itself is pious and loving; that he could not be its champion without valuing what it values, in all its complexity. Antigone comes to see that the service of the dead requires the city, that her own religious aims cannot be fulfilled without civic institutions. By being her own law, she has not only ignored a part of piety, she has also jeopardized the fulfillment of the very pious duties to which she is so attached. Cut off from friends, from the possibility of having children, she cannot keep herself alive in order to do further service to the dead; nor can she guarantee the pious treatment of her own corpse. In her last speeches she laments not so much the fact of imminent death as, repeatedly, her isolation from the continuity of offspring, from friends and mourners. She emphasizes the fact that she will never marry; she will remain childless. Acheron will be her husband, the tomb her bridal chamber. Unless she can successfully appeal to the citizens whose needs as citizens she had refused to consider, she will die without anyone to mourn her death or to replace her as guardian of her family religion. She turns therefore increasingly, in this final scene, to the citizens and the gods of the city [. . .], until her last words closely echo an earlier speech made by Creon [. . .] and blend his concerns with hers:

> O city of my fathers in this land of Thebes. O gods, progenitors of our race. I am led away, and wait no longer. Look, leaders of Thebes, the last of your royal line. Look what I suffer, at whose hands, for having respect for piety. (987–93)

We have, then, two narrowly limited practical worlds, two strategies of avoidance and simplification. In one, a single human value has become *the* final end; in the other, a single set of duties has eclipsed all others. But we can now acknowledge that we admire Antigone, nonetheless, in a way that we do not admire Creon. It seems important to look for the basis of this difference.

First, in the world of the play, it seems clear that Antigone's actual choice is preferable to Creon's. The dishonour to civic values involved in giving pious burial to an enemy's corpse is far less radical than the violation of religion involved in Creon's act. Antigone shows a deeper understanding of the community and its values than Creon does when she argues that the obligation to bury the dead is an unwritten law, which cannot be set aside by the decree of a particular ruler. The belief that not all values are utility-relative, that there are certain claims whose neglect will prove deeply destructive of communal attunement and individual character, is a part of Antigone's position left untouched by the play's implicit criticism of her single-mindedness.

Furthermore, Antigone's pursuit of virtue is her own. It involves nobody else and commits her to abusing no other person. Rulership must be rulership *of* something; Antigone's pious actions are executed alone, out of a solitary commitment. She may be strangely remote from the world; but she does no violence to it.

Finally, and perhaps most important, Antigone remains ready to risk and to sacrifice her ends in a way that is not possible for Creon, given the singleness of his conception of value. There is a complexity in Antigone's virtue that permits genuine sacrifice *within* the defense of piety. She dies recanting nothing; but

still she is torn by a conflict. Her virtue is, then, prepared to admit a contingent conflict, at least in the extreme case where its adequate exercise requires the cancellation of the conditions of its exercise. From within her single-minded devotion to the dead, she recognizes the power of these contingent circumstances and yields to them, comparing herself to Niobe wasted away by nature's snow and rain (878–84).[4] (Earlier she had been compared, in her grief, to a mother bird crying out over an empty nest; so she is, while heroically acting, linked with the openness and vulnerability of the female.) The Chorus here briefly tries to console her with the suggestion that her bad luck does not really matter, in view of her future fame; she calls their rationalization a mockery of her loss. This vulnerability in virtue, this ability to acknowledge the world of nature by mourning the constraints that it imposes on virtue, surely contributes to making her the more humanly rational and the richer of the two protagonists: both active and receptive, neither exploiter nor simply victim.

Philip Holt

From Polis *and Tragedy in the* Antigone (1999)[1]

I. INTRODUCTION

Sophokles' *Antigone* is an easy play for moderns, even modern classicists, to get wrong.[2] We are likely to see Antigone as the champion of moral right, or conscience, or religion against the authority of the state, as represented by Kreon. She is then a martyr for a cause, and our age is rather drawn to causes and martyrs. This does much to explain the scholarly predilection for what Hester called "the orthodox view" of the play: Antigone right and noble, Kreon wrong and tyrannical.[3] But these terms for describing the conflict—and even more the ethical weight and emotional coloring these terms carry—are relatively modern.

4. The importance of this link with the yielding world of nature is seen by Segal, *Tragedy* 154ff [Nussbaum's note, here abbreviated].

1. Philip Holt. "*Polis* and Tragedy in the *Antigone*." *Mnemosyne*, 4th ser., vol. 52, no. 6, Dec. 1999, pp. 658–90. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/4433045. All footnotes are the author's, but some have been edited and others omitted, along with the parts of the essay to which they pertain.

2. The following works are cited by author's name (and short title where necessary) only: [. . .] Helene Foley, *Tragedy and Democratic Ideology: The Case of Sophocles'* Antigone, in: Barbara Goff (ed.), *History, Tragedy, Theory: Dialogues on Athenian Drama* (Austin 1995), 131–50; Simon Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge 1986); Bernard M. W. Knox, *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy* (Berkeley 1964); Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, *Assumptions and the Creation of Meaning: Reading Sophocles'* Antigone, JHS 109 (1989), 134–48 and (with substantial overlap) *Sophocles' Antigone as a "Bad Woman,"* in: F. Dieteren, E. Kloek (ed.), *Writing Women into History* (Amsterdam 1990), 11–38; and the commentaries of Brown (Warminster 1987) [. . . and] Kamerbeek (Leiden 1978) [. . .]. I have used the text of Lloyd-Jones and Wilson (Oxford 1990).

3. Hester's extensive review of scholarship on the play found this view to be far more popular than what he called the "Hegelian" view, which sees Antigone and Kreon as being more evenly matched with flaws on both sides: D. A. Hester, *Sophocles the Unphilosophical: A Study in the* Antigone, Mnemosyne 24 (1971), 11–59. For a similar tilt in Germany (Schlegel over Hegel), see Erick Eberlein, *Über die verschiedenen Deutungen des tragischen Konflikts in der Tragödie 'Antigone' des Sophokles*, Gymnasium 68 (1961), 16–34 at 16–9.

"The state" to us means a nation-state with extensive powers over the lives of its citizens and an extensive apparatus of bureaucrats and police to enforce its dictates. We worry about its powers and want to protect our freedom within it, especially after twentieth-century experience with totalitarian regimes. "Conscience" and "morality" to us mean the personal values of an autonomous individual, influenced by society but often at variance with it. "Religion" to us is likely to include notions of divinely revealed truth and an organized body of believers, both of them distinct from, and often at odds with, political authority. For us, then, conscience, morality, and religion set the individual apart from, perhaps even against, the state. It is easy for us to make Antigone into a heroic dissident. She upholds principle against political authority, and she is right.

• • •

We must understand fifth-century Athenian beliefs about the state, the role of the individual within it, and its relations to religion, funerals, and related matters—the "*polis*" part of my title—before we can make sense of the *Antigone*. These will be surveyed, with some large debts to previous work, in part II. Here the "orthodox" view is particularly weak, and its weaknesses still need attention. [. . .]

Still, understanding Greek beliefs and attitudes is only a first step towards interpretation. We need to consider not so much what Greeks thought and felt generally as how they are likely to have thought and felt under the conditions of a tragic performance, this tragedy in particular. Hence the "tragedy" part of my title: a discussion of how decent Greek opinion fares over the course of the *Antigone* (part III) and a coda on how it might fare in tragedy generally (part IV). Tragedy is the *polis*' partner in an intricate dialogue. She has her own agenda and her own ways of making her points, some of them quite sly,[4] and she is rather more on Antigone's side than the *polis* is. The main burden of this essay is to understand better her side of the conversation, an area where history-minded critics, straining to catch the voice of the *polis*, often miss things.

II. *POLIS*

• • •

Broad construction of the public interest gave the Athenian *polis* considerable power to regulate what its citizens did. Among other things, the *polis* could regulate funerals. A funeral was basically a family function, but the display and ostentation which the family could employ were restricted by the state.[5] The state could also restrict funeral rites for certain classes of people—suicides, for example.[6]

4. "Drama . . . unfolds as a complex dialogue that refuses to be bound in any direct fashion by the discourses of the agora" (Foley, 132); it provides a "radical critique" of "the city's discourse" (Goldhill, 78; on how this applies to some particular issues in the *Antigone*, see 104–6, 174–80).

5. Erwin Rohde, *Psyche: The Cult of Souls and Belief in Immortality among the Greeks*, English trans. (London 1925), 164 f.; Robert Garland, *The Greek Way of Death* (Ithaca, N.Y. 1985), 21–3.

6. Thalheim, *Selbstmord, RE* II A.1 (1921), 1134 f.

This brings us to a fact which is troublesome for devotees of St. Antigone the Martyr but important for assessing how an Athenian audience would respond to the play: Athenian law forbade the burial of traitors and sacrilegious people in Athenian territory. There is abundant evidence of this law, and of similar laws in other states.[7] Now, Polyneikes, who led an army against his homeland, was certainly a traitor, and if Kreon is right that he planned to burn the temples of the gods (*Ant.* 199–201, 284–7), he aspired to sacrilege as well. Hence in refusing him burial, Kreon was imposing a sanction that was recognizable to the audience as part of their law. He had good reasons for it. In a small city-state, defeat in war could mean civic destruction and the loss of everything one had; treason was a serious business, a threat to the survival of the community.

• • •

To sum up, in fifth-century terms Kreon is within his rights as the leader of his *polis*, and his ban on burying Polyneikes is a reasonable sanction. In fifth-century terms, Antigone's defiance of that ban is seriously, perhaps even shockingly, out of line: an individual defying due authority in the *polis*, in time of crisis, on behalf of a national enemy, and moreover a woman defying due male authority.

Critics often see Antigone as an isolated figure, willful and obstinate, proud and cold to others, acting from a mixed bag of reasons, both principled and personal.[8] There are good reasons why they should. To a degree which may be hard for us to imagine, she stands alone, forced to rely heavily on her own heroic temper. A modern Antigone comes with some ready-made bases for defying the community, respected and well-articulated values to which she can appeal. The ancient Antigone is not so well equipped. Conscience and religious authority are largely out. "The wide range of ideals, eccentricities and obsessions which we nowadays amalgamate under the name of 'conscience' did not seem to Greeks to be good reasons for defying the law."[9] Religion was focused more on prayer and ritual than on beliefs and ethical demands, more apt to produce traditionalists and conformists than dissidents and martyrs. Far from providing a basis for criticizing the *polis*, religion was an integral part of it. The *polis*,

7. Gustave Glotz, *La solidarité de la famille dans le droit criminel en Grèce* (Paris 1904), 460f. gives an extensive collection of evidence; also basic, and long neglected for bringing the issue into discussion of the *Antigone*, is W. Vischer, *Zu Sophokles Antigone*, RhM 20 (1865), 444–54 at 445–9.

8. So (with considerable variation) Elizabeth Bryson Bongie, *The Daughter of Oedipus*, in: John L. Heller (ed.), *Serta Turyniana* (Urbana 1974), 239–67; Brown, 7–10; Gerald F. Else, *The Madness of Antigone* (Heidelberg 1976); Knox, 62–8, 102–7, 113–6. Two important recent studies have done much to clear Antigone of the charge of inconsistency: Helene P. Foley, *Antigone as Moral Agent*, in: M. S. Silk (ed.), *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond* (Oxford 1996), 49–73; Matt Neuburg, *How Like a Woman: Antigone's "Inconsistency,"* CQ 40 (1990): 54–76. But her consistent reasons are nevertheless complicated and strongly rooted in the specifics of her unusual situation, dying unmarried (Neuburg, 66–70) and acting on behalf of a brother (Foley, 51–7). Complex situations produce complex motives. It is possible to see her as both consistent and self-willed: Martin Cropp, *Antigone's Final Speech* (*Sophocles*, Antigone 891–928), G&R 44 (1997), 137–60.

9. [K. J.] Dover[, *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle* (Berkeley 1974)], (n.13) 309.

after all, administered, financed, and regulated much of the religious activity within it.[1] It had large scope in making decisions about religious matters.

There remains the family, whose entanglements with the *polis*, interdependent yet often conflicting, were important in Greek history and have been important in *Antigone* criticism at least since Hegel. There is no anachronism in raising family concerns. Antigone does, after all, break Kreon's edict on behalf of her brother, precisely because he is her brother, and she appeals repeatedly to that blood-tie to justify her action.[2] Still, family and *polis* do not meet in the play as an evenly balanced pair of opposites, a thesis and antithesis in search of a synthesis.[3] The *Antigone* presents a situation which the fifth-century *polis* had already decided in its own favor. As we have seen, the *polis* could override the family to regulate funerals, or even ban them for certain classes of people—including traitors like Polyneikes. [. . .]

Sophokles, then, gives Kreon a strong position, far stronger than we moderns are generally prepared or able to recognize. What becomes of that position on the stage, however, is another matter.

III. THE *ANTIGONE*

It should not escape the reader's notice that the discussion so far is aimed at estimating how fifth-century Athenians would react to Antigone's action if it were a real event in civic life—if they were debating it in the assembly or judging it as jurors in a court of law or discussing it as a piece of recent news. [. . .] But of course, Polyneikes' burial is not an event in real life. It is part of a tragic drama, which is to say, it is presented to the audience by the playwright in a certain way and observed by the audience under certain conditions. This complicates the task of interpretation. We may know, more or less, what decent Athenian opinion held; but what does the play do with it?

I shall argue that the structure of Sophokles' drama—his arrangement and presentation of events, the playwright's devices for getting his story across—does much to encourage sympathy for Antigone, undercutting the shock and condemnation that her action would likely arouse in real life. Moreover, this sympathy for a lawbreaker is of a piece with what tragedy does elsewhere: it tests limits, defies norms, gives a certain kind of outlet for antisocial feelings. The audience

1. Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, *What Is* Polis *Religion*?, in: Oswyn Murray, Simon Price (ed.), *The Greek City from Homer to Alexander* (Oxford 1990), 295–322 and *Further Aspects of Polis Religion*, AION (archeol) 10 (1988), 259–74.

2. *Ant.* 21 f., 45 f., 80 f., 466–8, 502–4, 511, 517; see also 696–8 (spoken by Haimon), 10, 73, 89 (*philos* and related expressions). Kreon's valuation of kinship ties is considerably lower (486–9, 658 f.) Antigone's notorious declaration that she would not have broken Kreon's edict to bury anyone but her brother (904–20), however odd critics find it, is consistent with her motives as repeatedly stated elsewhere. Antigone's loyalty to Polyneikes may not be simply a matter of blood-ties: Patricia J. Johnson, *Woman's Third Face: A Psycho/Social Reconsideration of Sophocles*' Antigone, Arethusa 30 (1997), 369–98 raises the issue, with a highly speculative answer.

3. One can question more broadly whether Antigone's action really respects proper family loyalties and proper responsibilities in burying dead kin: Sourvinou-Inwood, *Bad Woman*, 17–21 and 29–31. I find some of the arguments too intricate to be helpful in estimating a theatre audience's responses to the play, but the question deserves fuller consideration. I confine my remarks here to narrow grounds involving funerals.

did not come to a tragedy to vent its orthodoxies upon the characters; it came, I suggest, partly for the more interesting and exciting experience of watching the characters defy the orthodoxies.

We may begin with the premise of Sophokles' drama—Kreon's edict forbidding the burial of Polyneikes. As we have seen, the edict was in keeping with Athenian law; but that does not settle the question of how an Athenian audience would have regarded it. Denying burial to traitors and temple-robbers was, after all, a circumscribed exception to a widely accepted norm, the right to a decent funeral. It was an extreme reprisal, and it may well have occasioned doubts, reservations, and ambivalence in the community that resorted to it.

• • •

To a large extent, the action of the *Antigone* is taken up with unfolding th[e "heavy unanticipated"] costs [of Kreon's edict]. Kreon's position is repeatedly challenged, he repeatedly resists, but each challenge reveals new weaknesses, and eventually he crumbles. Orthodox critics tend to regard this result as a foregone conclusion: Kreon's position is of course wrong, so he is bound to end badly. This is too harsh: it underestimates the basic reasonableness (in Greek terms) of Kreon's position, and it tends to read the play backwards, interpreting the early scenes out of our advance knowledge of how things will turn out and magnifying small hints in those early scenes accordingly.[4] Historically minded critics, on the other hand, sometimes appear to regard the outcome as a surprise, as though we had to wait for Teiresias to tell us how wrong Kreon is.[5] This is too sanguine: it scants some important signs in the text of the stages by which Kreon's edict is undone. We would do better to see the play as a progression of complications, with Kreon's position undermined bit by bit. The outcome is not clear from the start, but we can see it coming as the play goes on. Tragic complications encroach more and more upon the dictates of the *polis*. Sophokles first deals Kreon a strong hand and then has us watch him lose with it.

• • •

The play opens towards dawn, with two women in conversation. Kreon, we are told, has already issued his edict but is on his way "to proclaim it clearly to those who do not know it" (*Ant.* 31–4).[6] This cusp of time gives Antigone a chance to respond to the edict in advance, after it is formulated but before any other character or the audience hears it. Sophokles uses this bit of timing to let her launch a pre-emptive strike upon it to win the audience's sympathy.

Her strike is an impressive one. The terms of the edict are revealed only after a dramatic buildup. The house of Oidipous has suffered everything imaginable, she says, "for there is nothing painful or destructive or shameful or dishonorable which I have not seen among your sufferings and mine" (*Ant.* 4–6). And

4. A. S. McDevitt, *Sophocles' Praise of Man in the Antigone*, Ramus 1 (1972), 152–64 at 159f. and Sourvinou-Inwood, *Assumptions*, 135f. both raise some powerful objections to such backward reading.

5. Sourvinou-Inwood waits for Teiresias; Calder [. . .] , 401f. holds out even after that. [William M. Calder III, *Sophokles' Political Tragedy,* Antigone, GRBS 9 (1968), 389–407.]

6. [. . .] On the timing, see Brown, *ad* 31–4.

now [. . .] on top of it all, this terrible proclamation [. . .]. We have not yet heard what the proclamation says, but by the time Ismene asks [. . .], twenty lines into this scene, we are primed to hear something terrible.

Terrible indeed [. . .]. Eteokles' burial is described simply and approvingly (23–5), but the other brother and his treatment are described more fully, in more emotional terms [. . .] (26–30). Polyneikes is "wretchedly dead," and the consequences of exposing his corpse are graphically depicted: no lamentation, no funeral, only the birds to devour him. [. . .] First impressions are powerful, and our first impression of Kreon's edict comes to us filtered through Antigone's grief and indignation.[7]

We need not wait long for a second impression, even before Kreon's entrance. Ismene elicits gradually, through a series of questions, the details of Antigone's plan to bury Polyneikes (*Ant.* 39–48), and she finds it bold and dangerous. The series of questions brings out Antigone's plan in stages, each more shocking than the last, and we are invited to share Ismene's surprise and alarm [. . .]. Like Antigone, she can rehearse the sad history of the family (49–57), but it affects her differently. It does not sting her to outrage, it urges her to caution: "Consider how we two, left alone, will perish wretchedly if despite the law we transgress the ruler's decision and power" (58–60). Ismene also reminds us that Antigone's plan is illegal. [. . .]

Ismene, notoriously, is no tragic heroine. We could, like many critics, cheer Antigone's heroism and castigate Ismene's cowardice, but the scene is not quite so one-sided. At the very least, Ismene reminds us that more than one reaction to Kreon's edict is possible. [. . .]

Still, Antigone has had the chance to strike the first blow, and she has done it well, passionately, and dramatically. The audience may well sympathize with her, not necessarily because they would agree with her, but because shock and distress seen up close arouse sympathy. Ismene's objections, although often underrated, do not erase this. Kreon comes to the plate with one strike against him.

After the parados, we move from the private world of Antigone to the public world of Kreon. Despite Antigone's pre-emptive strike, Kreon's opening address to the Chorus gives him every chance to look good in the audience's eyes. The Chorus has just given thanks to the gods for delivering Thebes from great danger, and their song has reminded us vividly of the impiety and violence of Polyneikes' army, the sufferings that awaited the Thebans had they lost the battle.[8] As a new ruler in a difficult time, Kreon has a claim on our sympathy, and for the most part he comes off well. His speech is reasoned, his tone moderate under the circumstances. His heart is clearly in the right place: he seeks good advice in guiding the city (*Ant.* 178–81), he puts the city first, before private connections (182–91), and he is determined to distinguish between the patriotic Eteokles and the treacherous Polyneikes. [. . .]

Still, the question is raised whether Thebes is in good hands, and the answer is not altogether satisfactory.[9] "It is impossible to know any man's soul and

7. "Thus we learn of the edict, not from a bald report, but through Antigone's sense of outrage at it" (Brown, 135). 8. McDevitt [. . .] 157–9.

9. R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles: An Interpretation* (Cambridge 1980), 123–5 offers a more extensive discussion than mine of "warning signals" in this scene.

thought and mind," Kreon says, "before he is experienced in office and law" (*Ant.* 175–7). This puts us on notice that Kreon is untested at this point in the play, hence unknown. More telling, his edict forbidding funeral rites for Polyneikes, presented after a slow, careful buildup, gets a remarkably lukewarm reception from the Chorus. [. . .] Indeed, all through the play the merits of Kreon's edict (as distinguished from his authority to impose it) go unsupported by anybody but him. Saying that he has the power or the right to command something is not the same as saying that it is a good idea.

Kreon's position is almost immediately challenged. The Guard enters with news that Polyneikes' corpse has been sprinkled with dust. Kreon, untried in "office and law" (*Ant.* 177), is on trial here, for we will see how he stands up to the first test of his new regime. Our attention begins to shift, and will shift more markedly in the following scene, from the proclamation to the ruler who issues it. The ruler does not come off well, for he meets the challenge with anger, error, and obstinacy.

• • •

In the Guard's narrative as in the prologue, Antigone's grief and outrage are given play, stressing the terrible consequences of Kreon's edict. She wails like a bird robbed of its young, laments the corpse "when she saw it bare," and curses those who left it that way (422–8). Kreon does not change his plans when he finds out that the perpetrator of the crime is his own niece and his son's fiancée; he is still determined to put her to death. These developments show Kreon persisting in his intention as the emotional costs mount. Kreon's edict may be based on sound principles, but it takes a tough heart and a strong stomach to maintain his position in the extreme situation which the play presents. Unfortunately, Kreon possesses both these qualities.

By this point in the play, principles have gotten mixed up with personalities. We have come away from the noble abstractions of Kreon's "inaugural address" and gotten a chance to see something of Kreon himself. He is less impressive than his ideals, and he is not doing terribly well on the test he set for himself—how well he performs "in office and law" (*Ant.* 175–7). Still, a Greek audience might well hold back from shifting all its sympathy to Antigone. Her ringing declaration of the unwritten laws, eternal and not to be altered by human decree, makes a fine sound to modern ears, but fifth-century Greeks were not so well primed to hear it. More important, the unwritten laws occupy only half her speech to Kreon (450–60). The other half (460–70) is more specific and personal [. . .]. The Chorus' response to all this is that she is her father's daughter, all right, "raw" and stubborn (471 f.). This is not an endorsement of the unwritten laws, and it is not altogether complimentary to Antigone either. Like Kreon's rule, Antigone's defiance is a complex combination of principle and personality, and she is driven by will, pride, and family honor at least as much as by devotion to the unwritten laws.[1] The conflict is between two characters,

1. This deserves fuller discussion, for which I must refer the reader to Bongie [. . .] and Knox, inter alia. Bongie, 252 goes so far as to call the speech on the unwritten laws "a rationalization of the more compelling personal motives."

Kreon and Antigone, not between the principles of state and family, or human and divine law, to which they appeal.[2] It is more personal and thereby more dramatic, and neither comes off unscathed.

Kreon's scene with Haimon shows his weaknesses as a ruler to a higher degree.

• • •

Nestled in all Haimon's deference is one piece of information: the people of Thebes pity Antigone and support her (*Ant.* 692–700). [. . . P]opular opinion is beginning to tilt against Kreon.

Kreon, predictably, [. . .] reacts with rage and disbelief. His world is being turned upside down: a younger man is venturing to instruct an elder (*Ant.* 726 f.), Antigone is rebellious (730–2), the city is not submitting to its ruler (734–9). Perhaps worst of all, women are getting the better of men (740, 746, 756; the point has also appeared at 484 f., 525, 677–80). The world thus disturbed is actually that of the *polis* to a large degree; most Greeks in the audience would probably have been quite content with the idea that the young ought to submit to the old, people to authority, women to men.[3] But accepting a principle does not mean that we will automatically agree with everyone who invokes it. Kreon's nervous insistence on these principles begins to look like a sign of weakness, inflexibility, or even tyranny. He does not so much espouse civic norms as hide behind them.

The denouement of the play can be discussed more briefly, at least for the issues that concern us here. Antigone's kommos and final speech draw critical attention mostly for what they tell us about her, about her motives for defying Kreon and her feelings as she faces death. These are important questions, but for this enquiry it is worth stressing a simpler and more obvious point, what Kreon is doing to her. [. . .] Amid the many problems of this scene—whether the Chorus is sympathetic or aloof, what Antigone means in comparing herself to Niobe, why she values her brother over other kin—we are invited to grieve over her. This echoes in a different key something which we encountered in the prologue, when we saw at close range Antigone's grief and outrage over Kreon's edict. In both scenes, whatever we might think of the practice of throwing out traitors unburied, or of Antigone herself, we are invited to pity her.[4] Pity can be potent. The Thebans, Haimon tells us, grieved for Antigone [. . .] and so came to support her. The Chorus grieves in spite of Kreon's rulings[5] and does not break with him openly. We may turn our pity into a political position, like the Thebans, or decide not to, like the Chorus. Either way, we are invited again to contemplate the costs of Kreon's edict, and of his way of running the *polis*.

2. See inter alia Eberlein [. . .], passim; Else [. . .] 42; Hester [. . .] 40; Knox, 102–16.

3. [Vittorio] Citti[, *Strutture e tensioni sociali nell'*Antigone *di Sofocle*, AIV 134 (1975–76), 477–501] [. . .], 487–92 and [*Sofocle e le strutture di potere nell'Atene del V secolo*, BIFG 3 (1976), 84–120 at 103], passim; Sourvinou-Inwood, *Assumptions*, 138–40, 144 f.

4. Sourvinou-Inwood, *Bad Woman*, 17 notes the shift from portraying Antigone as a threatening rebellious woman earlier in the play to showing her as a pitiable bride of Hades here.

5. The Chorus says that they are "carried outside the *thesmoi*" ([. . .] 801 f.) upon seeing Antigone and are unable to restrain their tears. I take it that the *thesmoi* here are Kreon's (Jebb, Kamerbeek), whether his sentence against Antigone or his royal authority generally.

The costs become far more apparent in the Teiresias scene, when the seer first reports dire omens and disruptions in the kosmos and then announces that it is all because of Kreon. Kreon tries to make amends, but too late: three people die, and Kreon is left ruined.

The verdict of the gods is in at last, but as often, the verdict is plainer than the story leading up to it. We miss much of the story, and much of the achievement of the *Antigone*, if we make Kreon merely impious in issuing his proclamation and Antigone merely noble in defying him. As we have seen, Kreon starts in a stronger position, and one more in keeping with fifth-century values, than we often recognize. Consequently, the play takes on a larger task than we often recognize in making his ruin credible and satisfying. In succeeding, it is a better play than we often recognize—not only a great one, but a deft one as well. [. . .]

[. . .] the modern picture of Antigone as a heroic dissenter is not altogether wrong. Only we must recognize that the play does not generate sympathy for Antigone by appealing to any widely held notions about martyrs for causes or conscience against tyranny. Rather, it works by the way it arranges events and shades their presentation—perhaps even by manipulation. Antigone's distress and passion are given full play, her opponent is made to appear weak and foolish, and she and her allies get most of the good lines.[6] The play encourages the audience to root for a rebel against the values which they would likely espouse and practice in real life.

• • •

IV. TRAGEDY

If this reading of the play is reasonably close to the truth, then the *Antigone* does something which tragedy does generally. Defiance of the norms is part of its stock in trade. Tragedy is a "genre of transgression" and features an "interplay between norm and transgression"—an important part of the current lively discussion of drama in relation to the *polis*.[7] The *Antigone* presents quite a lot of transgression. Antigone's defiance of Kreon involves a degree of self-assertion and boldness which would be hard to find, perhaps even hard to conceive of, in a real-life Greek city, but her play lets the antisocial voice speak on stage and gives the audience reason to root for it in spite of itself.

6. A few "zingers": The doer grieves your mind, I grieve your ears (*Ant.* 319); I would have died even if you hadn't sentenced me (460 f.); if my actions seem foolish, I'm accused of folly by a fool (469 f.); there is no city which belongs to one man (737); you'd rule well over a desert alone (739); I speak for her—and you and me and the gods below (749). Kreon's only approach to pithiness (as distinguished from his usual maxim-spouting) is his declaration that one of his nieces has just lost her mind and the other never had any (561 f.).

7. Quotes from Goldhill, [*The*] *Great Dionysia* [*and Civic Ideology*, in: John J. Winkler, Froma I. Zeitlin (ed.), *Nothing to Do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in its Social Context* (Princeton 1990)], [. . .] 126 and 127, a basic study for delineating the paradox of anticivic discourse in a highly ordered civic setting. For the discussion more generally, a good starter bibliography would include the collections edited by Goff [. . .] , Pelling [Christopher Pelling, *Greek Tragedy and the Historian* (Oxford 1997)], and Winkler and Zeitlin. [. . .]

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING

1. The first two scenes or episodes of ANTIGONE introduce us to each of the play's two main characters—first Antigone herself, then Creon. Write an essay in which you explore what each scene shows us about who these characters are, what motives and values drive them, and why they come into conflict. What does Sophocles achieve by showing us Antigone in conversation with her sister, or Creon with a "convocation of the elders" (line 177)? In terms of characterization and conflict, what is the significance of the choral songs that end each episode?
2. As is conventional in Greek drama, ANTIGONE ends with a final choral song that articulates the theme of the play, while also leaving a great deal of room for interpretation about just what that theme is. Drawing on evidence from the entire play, explain how we should interpret the final song and the play's theme.
3. Write an essay that draws on evidence from this ancient Greek play to explore precisely how and why it remains relevant to the world in which you live. Does ANTIGONE, for example, depict a type of person or a conflict still common in the twenty-first century, or might it articulate a theme that still applies?
4. Many of the critical excerpts in this chapter focus on the conflict between Antigone and Creon, debating not only how that conflict is ultimately resolved but also what the nature of the conflict is. To take just two examples, Richard C. Jebb takes the conflict to be one between "*the duty of obeying the State's laws*" and "*the duty of listening to the private conscience,*" while Maurice Bowra implies that the conflict is instead between duty to the laws of man versus those of the gods and/or between the human tendency toward "arrogance" versus the need for humility and reverence. Carefully read the other critical excerpts in the chapter, working to understand how each characterizes the conflict between Creon and Antigone. Then, write an essay in which you first describe the views of all the critics and then draw on evidence from the play either to defend one of these views or to offer an alternative interpretation of the conflict between Antigone and Creon.
5. Though he acknowledges that ANTIGONE depicts an external conflict between Antigone and Creon and the views and values each represents, Bernard Knox suggests that the play also presents Creon as internally conflicted. Carefully read the excerpt from Knox's introduction, and write an essay exploring whether the play supports his interpretation of Creon's internal conflict and its resolution.
6. Re-read the critical excerpts in this chapter and then make a list of at least three moments in ANTIGONE or aspects or elements of the play that strike you as important, but that aren't given adequate attention in the critical excerpts. Then write an essay that explains why any one of these moments, aspects, or elements is especially important to the play's effect and meaning.