CHARACTERS

ANTIGONE
ISMENE
CREON, King of Thebes
HAEMON, his son
TEIRESIAS, a prophet, blind
A SOLDIER
A MESSENGER
EURYDICE, wife of Creon
CHORUS of Senators of Thebes
GUARDS
SOLDIERS
ATTENDANTS
TEIRESIAS' BOY

the daughters of Oedipus
This translation was commissioned by BBC Television and first produced in the autumn of 1986, with the following cast:

**ANTIGONE**
- Juliet Stevenson

**ISMENE**
- Gwen Taylor

**CREON**
- John Shrapnel

**HAEMON**
- Mike Gwilym

**TEIRESIAS**
- John Gielgud

**SOLDIER**
- Tony Selby

**MESSENGER**
- Bernard Hill

**EURYDICE**
- Rosalie Crutchley

**CHORUS**
- Patrick Barr, Paul Daneman, Donald Eccles, Robert Edsson, Patrick Godfrey, Ewan Hooper, Peter Jeffrey, Noel Johnson, Robert Lang, John Ringham, Frederick Treves, John Woodnutt

**TEIRESIAS' BOY**
- Paul Russell

**GUARDS**
- Chris Andrews, Steve Ausden, Leon Ferguson, Stephen Epressieux, Steve Ismay, Paul LeFevre, David Rogue, Steve Roxton

**ATTENDANTS TO EURLYDICE**
- Jeannie Downes, Vanessa Linstead

**ATTENDANTS**
- Michael Eriera, David Fieldsend, William Franklyn-Pool, Paul Holmes, Jack Lonsdale, Bernard Losh, Graeme Sneddon

**Directed by** Don Taylor

**Produced by** Louis Marks

**Designed by** David Myerscough-Jones

**Music by** Derek Bourgeois

**Costumes by** June Hudson

---

The scene is set outside the royal palace of Thebes. Enter ANTIGONE and ISMENE. They are both nervous and troubled. ANTIGONE looks round to be sure they cannot be overheard before speaking.

ANTIGONE. Ismene listen. The same blood Flows in both our veins, doesn't it, my sister, The blood of Oedipus. And suffering, Which was his destiny, is our punishment too, The sentence passed on all his children. Physical pain, contempt, insults, Every kind of dishonour: we've seen them all, And endured them all, the two of us. But there's more to come. Now, today... Have you heard it, this new proclamation, Which the king has made to the whole city? Have you heard how those nearest to us Are to be treated, with the contempt We reserve for traitors? People we love! ISMENE. No one has told me anything, Antigone, I have heard nothing, neither good nor bad About anyone we love — not since the battle I mean, and the terrible news That both our brothers were dead: one day, One battle, and fratricide twice over, Each brother cutting down his own flesh... But the army from Argos retreated last night, I have heard that. Nothing else To cheer me up, or depress me further.

ANTIGONE. I thought you hadn't. That's why I asked you To meet me here, where I can tell you everything Without any risk of being overheard.

ISMENE. What is it then? More terrible news? Something black and frightening, I can see that.

ANTIGONE. Well, what do you think, Ismene? Perhaps You can guess. We have two brothers, Both of them dead. And Creon has decreed That a decent burial shall be given to one, But not to the other. Eteocles, apparently, Has already been buried, with full military honours, And all the formalities due to the dead.
He has neither the right nor the power to do that.

ISMENE. Have you forgotten what happened to our father?
Contempt and loathing from everyone,
Even from himself, that was his reward.
And blinded too, by his own hand.
And his mother-wife, as ill matched with him
As those two words are with each other,
She knotted a rope, and hanged herself.
And now our two brothers, both in one day
Caught in the same trap, claiming
Blood for blood and death for death
Each one at the expense of the other.
We are the last ones left, sister,
And what a death is promised for us,
More terrible than any, if we break the law
By defying the king, and the power of the State.
Think for a moment Antigone, please!
We are women, that's all. Physically weaker –
And barred from any political influence.
How can we fight against the institutionalised strength
Of the male sex? They are in power,
And we have to obey them – this time
And maybe in worse situations than this.
May god forgive me, and the spirits of the dead,
I have no choice! State power
Commands, and I must do as I am told.
When you are powerless, wild gestures
And heroic refusals are reserved for madmen!

ANTIGONE. Don't say any more. I won't ask again.
In fact, if you were to offer help now,
I would refuse it. Do as you please.
I intend to bury my brother,
And if I die in the attempt, I shall die
In the knowledge that I have acted justly.
What greater satisfaction than that,
For a loving sister to embrace a loving brother
Even in the grave: and to be condemned
For the criminal act of seeing him at peace!
Our lives are short. We have too little time
To waste it on men, and the laws they make.
The approval of the dead is everlasting,
And I shall bask in it, as I lie among them.
Do as you please. Live, by all means.
The laws you will break are not of man's making.

ISMENE. I reverence them. But how can I defy
The unlimited power of the State? What weapons
Of mine are strong enough for that?

ANTIGONE. Fine. That's a good excuse. I'll go
And shovel the earth on my brother's body.

ISMENE. I'm frightened, Antigone. I'm frightened for you.

ANTIGONE. Don't be frightened for me. Fear for yourself.

ISMENE. For god's sake, keep it quiet. Don't tell anyone.
I'll keep our meeting secret.

ANTIGONE. Don't you dare!
You must tell everybody, shout it in the streets.
If you keep it secret, I shall begin to hate you.

ISMENE. There's a fire burning in you Antigone,
But it makes me go cold just to hear you!

ANTIGONE. I'm not doing it to please you. It's for him.

ISMENE. This obsession will destroy you! You're certain to fail!

ANTIGONE. I shall fail when I have failed. Not before.

ISMENE. But you know it's hopeless. Why begin
When you know you can't possibly succeed!

ANTIGONE. Be quiet, before I begin to despise you
For talking so feeblly! He will despise you
Too, and justly. You can go now. Go!

If I'm mad, you can leave me here with my madness
Which will doubtless destroy me soon enough.
Death is the worst thing that can happen,
And some deaths are more honourable than others.

ISMENE. If you've made your mind up... Antigone, it's

Remember, I love you... whatever happens...
Exit ANTIGONE and ISMENE in opposite directions.

Enter the CHORUS OF THE SENATORS OF THEBES.

CHORUS. The life-giving sun has never shone
More brightly on the seven gates of Thebes
Than he shines this morning:
Never a more glorious dawning
Than this sunrise over Dirce's river,
When the army of the foreign invader
At first light

Made its panic-stricken flight,
And all its white shields and its bright weapons were gone.
Like a snowy eagle from the mountain crest it came
Shrieking down on our city,
The army of Argos, with a spurious treaty
To enforce Polynices' claim,
All its horsehair plumes nodding together
And a grinding of brass and a creaking of leather.

By our seven shuttered gates it waited,
Eyes glittering in dark helmets,
Swords drawn, spears couching.
But before the killing and burning,
The metallic taste of blood
And crashing stonework and blazing wood,
They turned and fled, the music of death
In their ears, at their backs, the dragon's breath.
Zeus had seen them, he who hates inflated
Pride, and the empty boast
Of the windbag, he heard their singing
As if the victory were theirs for the taking
And he brought down his thunder on their glittering host,
Struck them with lightening, and sent them flying,
Scorched them, and burned them, and left them dying.

Down like a rock from the mountain crest
He came thundering to earth, the flame
Dashed from his hand,
The son of Thebes whose best hope of fame
Was to conquer his native land
And who failed in his quest.
For the war god gave us his word of command,
Like a battle chariot his terrible name
Ran them down where they stood, and they died in the dust.
Now, at each of our seven gates
A Theban defender waits
As seven champions bring their fame and armour to the fight:
And before the coming of night
Six have put their fame to the test,
Six have laid both fame and armour to rest
As a tribute at great Zeus' feet.
At the seventh gate two brothers meet
Sharing their blood in death as in birth,
Each striking together,
Each laying the other
Dead on the earth.

There will be victory celebrations today
In this city of charioteers,
And singing in the streets.
There will be ceremonies of thanksgiving, and grateful tears
For the end of fighting, as the enemy retreats
And the time comes for relaxation and play.
Now, as all voices are raised, and the drum beats
The ecstatic god himself will appear,
Bacchus the drunkard, to take power for one day
In the city he calls his own. Time to dance all night,
To shake the foundations, till the faint light
Of dawn flushes the windows, and the lamps fade.

Now Creon is king. He made
The most of his fortune, and the gods’ choice,
The son of Menoeceus. As the people rejoice
The new king enters to take his throne,
The responsibility his alone.
But why has he called us here, to debate
In emergency session
His public proclamation
So vital to the State?

CREON enters, well-guarded by soldiers.

CREON. Senators: our country, like a ship at sea,
Has survived the hurricane. The gods, who sent it,
Have navigated us into calmer waters now.
I have chosen to summon this assembly
Because I know I can trust you. Your predecessors
Were loyal and reliable in King Laius’ time,
And when King Oedipus, in his exceptional wisdom,
Restored the fortunes of this city.
When tragedy struck him, and his rule was ended,
Your loyalty to the blood royal
Was never questioned, and you supported his sons:
Till they too were brought down,
In a single day, incestuously murdered,
Each brother shedding a brother’s blood.
By that same bloodright, as next of kin,
I claim the throne, and all its power
Both city and kingdom. I claim it and hold it
From today, as mine by right.
There is no certain measure of a man’s quality,
The depth of his intellect and the maturity of his judgement,
Until he is put to the supreme test
By the exercise of lawful power in the State.
My own opinion is well known:
The ruler who fears the consequences
Of his actions, or who is afraid to act openly,
Or take the good advice of his senators,
Is beneath contempt. Equally contemptible
Is the man who puts the interests of his friends,
Or his relations, before his country.
There is nothing good can be said of him.
Let me make it plain, before the gods,
Whose eyes are in every council chamber,
When I see any threat to this nation,
From whatever direction, I shall make it public.
No one who is an enemy of the State
Shall ever be any friend of mine.
The State, the Fatherland, is everything
To us, the ship we all sail in.
If she sinks, we all drown,
And friendship drowns with us. That’s my policy:
A policy of service to the Commonwealth.
And in pursuance of that policy,
I have issued an official State decree
Concerning the sons of Oedipus.
Eteocles, who died fighting for his country,
And with exceptional bravery, we shall bury him
With all the honours and funeral ceremonies
Customary for a man who died a hero.
The other, the outcast, the exile –
His brother Polynices, who returned here
At the head of a foreign army, to destroy
His homeland, to burn down the city
And reduce the people to a condition of slavery,
Or kill them in the streets – I have ordered
That he is to have no grave at all.
No one is to bury him, or mourn for him.
His body is to be left in the open, uncovered,
A stinking feast for the scavengers,
Dogs and crows, a sight to inspire terror.
I intend to make it quite plain
That never, under my administration,
Will people who commit crimes against the State
Reap any benefit from their actions: and at the expense
Of honest decent citizens too.
But people who serve the State, alive
Or dead, that makes no difference –
I shall honour them for their patriotism.

CHORUS. Son of Menoeceus, you are king now.
You have delivered your verdict and sentence
Upon the man who defended the city
And the man who attacked it, unambiguously.
The full power of the law is in your hands,
And it binds the dead, as well as the living.
We are all at your disposal.

CREON. Make sure
Then, that my orders are carried out.

CHORUS. Younger men than us should implement your policies.

CREON. I don’t mean that. Polynices’ body
Is already under guard.

CREON. What else
Must we do? What other responsibility
Do you lay upon us?

CREON. Not to intrigue
With dissidents, or subversive elements.

CHORUS. We are not mad sir. We know the law,
And the penalty for breaking it.

CREON. Which will be death. And be in no doubt
I shall enforce it. Because there are always men
Who can be bought, who will risk anything,
Even death, if the bribe is large enough

Enter a SOLDIER in a dusty uniform, struggling with the guards,
Who bring him before CREON. He is very frightened.

SOLDIER. My Lord Creon . . . sir! If I can hardly speak
For lack of breath . . . it’s not ‘cos I ran . . .
I kept on strolling, as a matter of fact,
In fact, no clues of any kind at all,
Nothing to tell you who might have done it.
When the sentry taking the early turn
Discovered what had happened, and reported back,
We were all shattered, and scared stiff.
It was as though the body had disappeared –
Not buried in a proper grave, I don’t mean,
But lightly covered with a layer of earth.
Almost as though some passing stranger
With a religious turn of mind, knowing
That being left unburied means everlasting
Anguish, and wandering without rest,
Had scattered a few handfuls. There was no tracks
Of animals either, not of dogs or anything,
Who might have gnawed at it, and covered it over
With their front legs, like they do a bone.
A real row started then, I can tell you.
We shouted at each other, and it could have been a fight,
There was no one there to stop us. Any one of us
Could have done it, we all suspected each other:
But we all denied it, and there was no evidence
To prove one man guilty rather than another.
So we all dared each other to swear
To go through fire and water, to hold
Red hot pokers in our hands, and call all the gods
As witnesses that we hadn’t done it,
And didn’t know anyone who had,
Or would even think of it, let alone do it.
And none of any of it got us nowhere.
Then one of the fellers had his say, and he
Scared us all shitless, I can tell you.
He said – and we knew he was dead right –
There was no way out of it, we had to do it
And take our chances – this feller said
‘One of us lot must tell the King,
Because we can’t just hide it, can we?’
That’s what he said. And we knew he was right.
So we decided we’d have to draw lots,
And, just my luck, I drew the short straw.
So here I am. And I don’t like telling it
One little bit more than you like hearing it.
Who have sold themselves, they'll find the price
Considerably higher than they thought it was!
CREON speaks to the SOLDIER.
You! Come here! Get this into your head!
By Zeus, my god, whose power I revere,
I swear to you, soldier, that either you will find
The man who buried Polynices' body
In defiance of my express command
And bring him here – the actual man
Who sprinkled the earth, no other will do,
Standing here, in front of me – or you, soldier,
Will die for it. And death, I promise you,
Will be the least of your punishments.
You will be made a public example –
And interrogated by the security police,
Kept standing, beaten across the feet,
The whole repertoire of special techniques
At which we excel so much – until
You confess the full range of this conspiracy,
Who paid you, how much, and for what purpose.
The choice is yours: and perhaps that indicates
Where your own best interests lie. Crimes
Against the State and its laws, you'll find,
Are very unprofitable in the end.
SOLDIER. Am I allowed to speak sir?
CREON. No!
Why should you speak! Every word you say
Is painful to me.
SOLDIER. Well, it can't be earache,
Can it sir, not what I said!
It must stick in your gullet. Or further down
Maybe, a sort of pain in the conscience.
CREON. Do you dare to answer me back: and make jokes
About my conscience?
SOLDIER. Me sir? No sir!
I might give you earache, I can see that.
I talk too much, always have done.
But the other pain, the heartburn, as it were,
It's the criminal causing that sir, not me.
CREON. You're not short of a quick answer either.
SOLDIER. Maybe not. But I didn't bury the body.

Not guilty to that sir.
CREON. But maybe guilty
Of selling your eyes for money, eh Sentry,
Of looking the other way for cash?
SOLDIER. I think it's a shame sir, that an intelligent man
And as well educated as you are
Should miss the point so completely.
CREON. I'm not interested in your opinions!
If you fail to find this enemy of the State
And bring him here to me, you'll learn
That money, from whatever source,
Will certainly not save your life!
Exit CREON.
SOLDIER. Let's hope they find him, whoever he is.
But one thing I'm sure of: they won't find me.
I never thought I'd get out of here
Alive. And when I do get out,
Nothing will bring me back again.
I've had an amazing stroke of luck,
And I won't chance my arm a second time!
Exit the SOLDIER.
CHORUS. Is there anything more wonderful on earth,
Our marvellous planet,
Than the miracle of man!
With what arrogant ease
He rides the dangerous seas,
From the waves' towering summit
To the yawning trough beneath.
The earth mother herself, before time began,
The oldest of the ageless gods,
Learned to endure his driving plough,
Turning the earth and breaking the clods
Till by the sweat of his brow
She yielded up her fruitfulness.
The quick-witted birds are no match for him,
Neither victim nor predator
Among the beasts of the plain
Nor the seas' seething masses.
His cunning surpasses
Their instinct, his skill is the greater,
Her father's destiny
Was suffering and pain
And on all his progeny
Misfortunes rain.
Child, did you openly disobey
The new king's order
And bury your brother?
Do you have to manhandle her this way?
SOLDIER. We saw it! Actually burying the body,
Caught him in the act, as they say, red-handed.
Only it's not a him, it's a her. Where's the king?
CHORUS. Just returning now: when he's most needed.
Re-enter CREON.
CREON. What's all the noise? By the look of things
I'm here not a moment too soon.
He sees ANTIGONE and the guards.  
What has happened?
SOLDIER. Lord Creon, I reckon it's always unwise
To swear oaths and make promises,
Even to yourself. Second thoughts,
Nine times out of ten, will have their say
And end up by calling you a liar.
It's no time at all since I promised myself
I wouldn't be seen dead here again:
You were that angry with me the last time,
A right mouthful you gave me, more than enough
Thanks very much. But you can't beat
A real turn-up for the book, can you,
There's nothing more enjoyable than a good win
When you're expecting a towsing. So here I am
Again, as the comic said, and my promises
Not worth the air they was spoken with!
This girl's your criminal. We caught her doing it,
Actually setting the grave to rights.
I brought her here, and there was no panic
This time, I can tell you, no recriminations
Or drawing lots! This job was all mine.
I caught her, and I claim the credit for it.
And now, she's all yours. Take her, and accuse her,
Stone her to death, if you like. By rights,
I'm free to go: and well shot of all of it.
CREON. Where did you arrest her? Tell me the details.
SOLDIER. She was burying him. What else is there to say?
CREON. Are you out of your mind? Do you realise
The implications of what you are saying?
SOLDIER. Sir, she was burying the body, I saw her:
The body you ordered not to be buried.
I can’t speak plainer than that.
CREON. Did you
Catch her in the act? Did you see her doing it?
SOLDIER. Well, gentlemen, it was like this.
As soon as I got back, remembering
All those threats, or promises you made me,
We brushed all the earth off the naked body,
Which was all wet and beginning to decay
By now, and we sat up on the ridge,
Well to the windward of the stink.
We all kept a sharp eye on each other,
Ready to nudge anyone who dropped off,
And tear him off a strip too. For hours
We sat there, till about midday.
The sun was smack overhead, blazing down,
And the heat was something terrible, I can tell you.
And then, it was as though a whirlwind blew up,
Definitely a twister it was, but localised, like,
And it raised up a dust storm, which swept across the plain,
Tore all the leaves off the trees, blotted out
The whole sky, and completely blinded us.
It seemed like some terrible manifestation
Of the gods, and you had to shut your eyes
To endure it all. Then, suddenly it stopped,
And when the air cleared, we opened our eyes,
And saw this girl, standing there,
Beside the grave, and sort of wailing,
As though she were in pain, or maybe, anger:
Just like a bird who comes back to the nest
And finds the eggs smashed, or the fledglings gone.
That’s what it sounded like. She was standing there,
Looking at the naked body, and screaming,
And cursing the monsters who had done such a thing
Us, of course. And then she crouched down,
And picked up a few handfuls of the dry dust
And scattered it on him. She carried an urn,
A small ceremonial bronze thing,
And she poured from it, three times, on the dead body –
Honey and wine and stuff in it, I suppose –
All the proper ritual for a funeral, anyway.
Soon as we saw that, we came charging down
And arrested her on the spot. She wasn’t
Frightened or anything. She stood her ground.
So then we formally charged her with the crime,
This, and the one before. She admitted
She’d done them both, and we were relieved
To hear that, I can tell you. But sorry
Too, at the same time. It’s very nice
To get out of trouble yourself. Not so nice
When you drop someone else up to the neck in it,
Someone you’ve got no quarrel with.
But still. Your own life comes first, I reckon.
You have to look after number one.
CREON. And you. You with your head down.
What do you say to this accusation?
Do you admit it? Are you guilty, or not?
ANTIGONE. Yes, I’m guilty. I don’t pretend otherwise.
CREON. You, soldier, get out. You’re cleared of all charges
Against you, and free to go back to your unit.
The soldier seems about to speak, thinks better of it, and goes,
much relieved.
Now, tell me, a simple yes or no.
Did you hear of my order forbidding the burial?
ANTIGONE. Of course I heard it. How could I not?
CREON. And yet you dared to disobey the law?
ANTIGONE. Yes, I did. Because it’s your law,
Not the law of god. Natural justice,
Which is of all times and places, numinous,
Not material, a quality of Zeus,
Not of kings, recognises no such law.
You are merely a man, mortal,
Like me, and laws that you enact
Cannot overturn ancient moralities
Or common human decency.
They speak the language of eternity,
Are not written down, and never change.
They are for today, yesterday, and all time. 
No one understands where they came from, 
But everyone recognises their force: 
And no man’s arrogance or power 
Can make me disobey them. I would rather 
Suffer the disapproval and punishment 
Of men, than dishonour such ancient truths. 
I shall die, of course, some time, 
Whether you make laws or not. If my death 
Comes sooner rather than later, I shall welcome it. 
My life has been misery – is misery now. 
I shall be more than happy to leave it. 
There will be no pain, and no despair 
In that. But to leave my mother’s son 
Out there in the open, unburied, 
That would have been unendurable, 
I could not have borne it. Whereas this 
I shall endure. By your judgement 
Of course, I’m a fool. But by mine, 
It’s the judge, not the accused who’s behaving foolishly.

CHORUS. This is her father speaking. Stubborn 
Like him, she won’t give way, not even 
With the whole power of the State against her.

CREON. Well, we shall see. Any man can be broken, 
And often the most committed and determined 
Break soonest. Even iron, you know, 
Left lying in the fire too long 
Becomes over tempered, and will snap 
As soon as a little pressure is applied. 
You can break it in pieces. And the wildest horse 
In the end submits to the bit and halter 
Just like the rest. People without power, 
Ordinary citizens, must necessarily obey 
Those in authority over them. 
This woman is very proud. That was obvious 
In the first place when she broke the law, 
And is even clearer now. She glories 
In the crime she has committed, and insults me 
To my face, as well as ignoring my decree. 
If she is allowed to flout the law 
In this way, all authority 

In the State will collapse. I will not have that! 
There will be no exchanging of roles here, 
Me playing the woman while she plays the king! 
She is my niece, my sister’s child. 
But I am the law. And that responsibility 
Is above kinship. Were she even closer, 
The closest, my own daughter, my duty 
Would be plain. The law has its weapons, 
And they will strike, at her, 
And at her sister too – her accomplice, 
I’ve no doubt, in this illegal act – 
To the full extent of the punishment proscribed. 
The other one, Ismene, bring her here. 
I saw her in the corridor, talking to herself 
And sobbing emotionally, like a madwoman! 
Guilty consciences, you see, can never be hidden 
Completely, the human face reveals 
Conspiracies before they are enacted 
Again and again. But there is nothing 
More disgusting than the confessed criminal 
Who tries to justify his actions, 
As this woman has done here today.

ANTIGONE. What more do you want? Kill me, and have done with it.

CREON. Nothing more than your death. That’ll be enough.

ANTIGONE. Then what are you waiting for? Nothing you say 
Will be of the slightest interest to me, 
And my arguments you will not listen to. 
I’ve done what I said I’d do. I’ve buried my brother. 
I aspire to no greater honour, and if I am to be famous, let it be for that. 
All these, these senators of yours, 
They all agree with me in their hearts. 
But there is no gag like terror, is there 
Gentlemen? And tyrants must have their way, 
Both in word and action, that’s their privilege!

CREON. You are quite mistaken. None of the Thebans 
Anywhere in the city, thinks as you do.

ANTIGONE. They all do! But they keep their mouths shut when 
you’re here!

CREON. Not at all! And you should be ashamed 
Setting yourself up against the majority,
Disregarding the will of the people!

ANTIGONE. I love my brother. I honour him dead
As I loved him living. There's no shame in that.
CREON. And the one he murdered? Wasn't he your brother?
ANTIGONE. My mother bore them both, and I loved them both.
CREON. If you honour one, you insult the other.
ANTIGONE. Neither of those dead men would say that.
CREON. Eteocles would. His brother was a traitor.
Does he merit no greater respect than that?
ANTIGONE. But he was not an animal. They both died
Together. And they were both men.
CREON. Yes, and the one died defending his country
While the other traitorously attacked it!
ANTIGONE. The dead have their rights, and we have our duties
Towards them, dictated by common decency!
CREON. And if good and bad are to be honoured equally,
Where are our values? Patriotism! Civic duty!
ANTIGONE. Death is another country. Such things
May not be valued there. May even be crimes.
CREON. An enemy is still an enemy. Dead or alive.
ANTIGONE. No, I was born with love enough
To share: no hate for anyone.
CREON. Very well. Share your love by all means,
Share it with the dead. I wish them well of it.
Women must learn to obey, as well as men.
They can have no special treatment. Law is law
And will remain so while I am alive –
And no woman will get the better of me . . .
ISMENE is brought in under guard. She has been crying, and looks
gaunt and worn.
CHORUS (severally). Look Senators, Ismene, weeping for her sister!
Her face is raw with tears,
Flayed with misery!
Her loveliness is scarred now – this disaster
Darkens her fair skin with premonitions and fears
And flushes her cheeks with anguish, not beauty.
ISMENE is dragged before CREON.
CREON. And you! Snake! Slithering silently
About my house, to drink my blood
In secret! Both of you the same!
I looked the other way: and like terrorists
You laid undercover plans to destroy me.
Well, do you too confess your complicity
In this crime? Or protest your innocence?
ISMENE. Yes, I confess. If she will allow me
To say so. I was fully involved,
And if she is guilty, so am I.
ANTIGONE. No! That isn't justice! When I asked
For help, you refused me: and so I told you
I didn't want you, I'd do it alone.
ISMENE. But now that you're in danger, Antigone,
I'm proud to stand beside you in the dock.
ANTIGONE. The dead man knows who buried him. What use
Are people who are all words and no action?
ISMENE. Please, my sister, don't despise me!
Let me share the honour and die with you.
ANTIGONE. You've no right to claim the honour for doing
What you were afraid to do. One death
Will be enough. Why should you die?
ISMENE. Because life without you won't be worth living.
ANTIGONE. Ask Creon to protect you. He is your uncle.
ISMENE. Do I deserve such contempt? Do you enjoy
Making fun of me, sneering at my misery.
ANTIGONE. You're right. It's a reflection of my own pain,
If such bitter pleasures are all I have left.
ISMENE. Let me help you then. It's not too late.
ANTIGONE. Save your own life. Do that for yourself
Without any criticism from me: or envy.
ISMENE. For god's sake, Antigone, will you not allow me
Even to share my death with my sister?
ANTIGONE. No. I won't. You chose to live
When I chose to die: and that's the end of it.
ISMENE. But I wasn't afraid to speak! I warned you
That this would happen. I knew how it would be!
ANTIGONE. And most, the majority, would agree with you.
But some would be of my opinion.
ISMENE. But we're both in the wrong, and both condemned!
ANTIGONE. No, you must live. I have been dead
For a long time, inwardly. I am well suited
To pay honour to the dead, and die for it.
CREON. These women are neurotic, lunatics, both of them!
One of them going off her head before
Our eyes, the other one born unbalanced.

ISMENE. Well, are you surprised! Anyone would crack,
The most tough-minded person, under such treatment.
CREON. You lost your senses when you allowed yourself
To be influenced by her lunacy.
ISMENE. There's no life for me here! Not without my sister!
CREON. Don't speak of her. She's as good as dead.
ISMENE. Will you kill the woman your son plans to marry?
CREON. There are other women: no lack of choice
For a young man. Other fields to plough.
ISMENE. But they're devoted to each other. You can't
Change love as you change your clothes!
CREON. No son of mine can marry a criminal.
ANTIGONE. Oh Haemon, when you hear how your father insults
you!

CREON. Let him hear. What does his mistress matter to me.
CHORUS. Lord CREON, you insult your own!
They are formally betrothed. Will you tear
The woman from your own son's arms?
CREON. Death parts all lovers, sooner or later.
CHORUS. If that's how the land lies, the poor child's doomed,
Her death warrant sealed and delivered.
CREON. By you, gentlemen, if you remember,
As well as by me. You heard the order,
Agreed it with me, if only by your silence,
Did you not, before the criminal was known?
We'll have no more shilly-shallying. Take them away,
Lock them up, and keep them under close guard.
It's time they understood they are women,
And their proper place in this society.
There's nothing like the immediate threat
Of death to soften up their rhetoric,
And make them look reality in the face.

ISMENE and ANTIGONE are dragged away by the guards. CREON
remains on stage during the following chorus.

CHORUS. They can call themselves lucky, the fortunate few
Who live their lives through
Never drinking from the bitter cup of pain.
But when one unlucky family
Incurs the gods' malignity
From generation to generation

They must swallow the bitter potion
Again, and then again!
Just as rollers crash, and seaspray whips
On an exposed beach, and black clouds lower
And the gale from the north screams through frozen lips,
While the sea casts up from its depths a shower
Of pebbles on the shore, and black sand
From the chasms of ocean darkens the strand.

On every descendant of the ancient line
Of Labdacus, divine
And merciless retribution falls.
In the unremembered past
Some unforgiving Olympian cast
The weight of his vengeance on the whole race,
So that agony, destruction, disgrace,
Destroy son and daughter, and darken their halls
With tragedy. The cold hands of the dead
Reach out for the living, and no one is spared.
Another generation sheds its blood,
New light is snuffed out, the young root bared
For the same bloody axe. The characteristic sin
Of Oedipus, arrogance, brings its bleak harvest in.

For Zeus is all-powerful, no man can match him,
He never sleeps, as man must sleep,
And time, which leaves its mark
On fair complexions and dark,
Can never engrave his face, or dim
The brightness of his palace, where the gods keep
Their ageless court, at the utmost peak
Of sublime Olympus. Zeus is master there,
And well did that wise man speak
Who said that past and future time
He holds in his hand by right,
And that those who climb
In their greatness or wickedness
Beyond the permitted height
He brings to destruction and despair.

But all men hope, and some have ambition,
Far-ranging birds that never tire.
Those wings bear some men steadily onward,
But some others aimlessly swoop and glide
Down to frivolous pastures, landscapes of obsession,
Pathways to disaster, and the merciless fire.
And no man can claim to have understood
Hope or ambition, till the flames burn
Under his feet, and the once solid wood
Of his life is reduced to its last condition,
Ashes, and dust. A wise man said
From out of the depths of his inspiration,
When a man commits crimes, and is proud of the action,
A flaming sword hangs over his head:
No future but the grave, and a funeral urn.

HAEMON is seen approaching.
Creon, here comes your youngest son.
Is he desperate with grief
That his future bride
Should be so brutally denied,
And all his hopes of happiness gone?
For the last of your sons, what relief
From his consuming fears
And the bitter penance of tears?
Does he come to beg for mercy
For his beloved Antigone?

CREON. We shall know that from his own lips
Without any need of fortune-tellers.

HAEMON enters and the two men face each other. Both are aware of the delicacy and magnitude of the situation.
My dear son. I don’t doubt you have heard
The news of our final decision, the condemnation
Of the woman you intended to marry. You come here,
I hope, not in any spirit of anger
Against your father, but understanding
That we are always comrades, and my love for you is unshaken.

HAEMON. I know I am your son, Father,
I understand the depth of your experience
In matters of State, and I try to follow
And benefit from it, whenever I can.
Any marriage would be worthless to me
That did not have your approval, and love.

CREON. Good fellow. Hang on to that! A father’s opinion
Should always be influential with his son:
And fathers with young sons, when they pray for them,
Ask especially that they should grow up to be
Loyal, obedient, under pressure the first
To strike at their father’s enemies,
Just as they are the first to support his friends.
A father whose sons yield no such profits
From the investment of his parenthood
Breeds grief and sorrow as his offspring,
And becomes himself a figure of fun,
Especially to his enemies. Don’t be taken in,
Boy. Don’t let any woman ensnare you
By exploiting her sexuality, or any of the attractions
That lure infatuated men into submission.
God help the lovesick fool who marries
A dominating woman. Passion never lasts,
And a cold bedroom breeds cold hearts,
Anger, and bitterness, for there’s no hatred
So violent as the hatred of two people
Who were once in love. Get rid of her,
My boy, this girl’s an enemy, no good
To you, or your best interests. Spit her out like poison!
Let her find herself a husband that suits her
Among the dead. Don’t deceive yourself.
She has been openly apprehended
Performing a criminal act against the State.
She is a confessed traitor, and if I
Were to spare her life, I too would betray
The State, and its law, and everything I stand for.
I will not do it. And she must die.
Let her pray to Zeus till she drops,
Let her assert she stands for family love
And ancient virtues, and all the rest of it.
If I tolerate treachery in my own house,
Under my very nose, how can I crush subversion
Anywhere else in the city, or in the State
At large? A man who rules wisely
Within his own family, is more likely
To make sensible judgements in political matters
In his direction of the State. To pervert the law,
To twist it to serve one's own ends
Or the interests of one's relations -
That cannot be allowed, neither in States,
Nor in families: and will not be allowed
By me, in any circumstances.
Unquestioning obedience to whomsoever the State
Appoints to be its ruler is the law
As far as I'm concerned, and this applies
To small things as well as great ones,
Just or unjust, right or wrong.
The man who is firm in his dealings with his family
Will be equally firm in power, his wisdom
Will be equally remarkable, whether as king,
Or indeed as subject. In times of war
And national danger, he will be the man
You can rely on, the man you would feel safe with
Fighting beside you in the front rank
When the battle becomes critical. Indiscipline,
Anarchy, disobedience, what greater scourge
Than that for humankind? States collapse
From within, cities are blown to rubble,
Efficient armies are disorganised,
And potential victory turned to disaster
And carnage, and all by disobedience,
Anarchy, indiscipline. Whereas the well-drilled regiment
That asks no questions stands firm,
Knows nothing, and needs to know nothing, and wins,
Thus saving the lives of millions of honest people.
Authority is essential in any State,
And will be upheld in this one, by me.
There will be no yielding to female fantasies,
Not by so much as an inch. And if we must be deposed,
Let it be by a man's hand, eh son?
Not by a conspiracy of women!
chorus. If an old man is fit to judge, Lord Creon,
You have spoken rationally, sensibly, and with the wisdom
Gathered from long experience.
haimon. Father, the most enviable of a man's gifts
Is the ability to reason clearly,
And it's not for me to say you are wrong,
Even if I were clever enough, or experienced enough,
CREON. The State is the statesman who rules it; it reflects 
His judgement, it belongs to him!
HAEMON. Go and rule in the desert then! There's nobody there 
To argue with you! What a king you'll be there!
CREON. This boy of mine is on the woman's side!
HAEMON. Yes, if you are a woman, I am. 
I'm on your side Father, I'm fighting for you.
CREON. You damned impertinent devil! Every word 
You say is against me. Your own father!
HAEMON. When I know you are wrong, I have to speak. 
CREON. How am I wrong? By maintaining my position 
And the authority of the State? Is that wrong?
HAEMON. When position and authority 
Ride roughshod over moral feeling . . .
CREON. You're weak, and uxorious, and contemptible, 
With no will of your own. You're a woman's mouthpiece!
HAEMON. I'm not ashamed of what I'm saying. 
CREON. Every word you have said pleads for her cause. 
HAEMON. I plead for you, and for myself, 
And for common humanity, respect for the dead!
CREON. You will never marry that woman, she won't 
Live long enough to see that day!
HAEMON. If she dies, 
She won't die alone. There'll be two deaths, not one. 
CREON. Are you threatening me? How dare you threaten . . .
HAEMON. No, that's not a threat. I'm telling you 
Your policy was misbegotten from the beginning.
CREON. Misbegotten! Dear god, if anything's misbegotten 
Here, it's my son. You'll regret this, I promise you.
HAEMON. If you weren't my father, I'd say you were demented.
CREON. Don't father me! You're a woman's plaything, 
A tame lap dog!
HAEMON. Is anyone else 
Allowed to speak? Must you have the last word 
In everything, must all the rest of us be gagged?
CREON. I must, and I will! And you, I promise you, 
Will regret what you have spoken here 
Today. I will not be sneered at or contradicted 
By anyone. Sons can be punished too.
Bring her out, the bitch, let her die here and now, 
In the open, with her bridegroom beside her.
As a witness! You can watch the execution!

HAEMON. That's one sight I shall never see!
Nor from this moment, Father, will you
Ever see me again. Those that wish
To stay and watch this disgusting spectacle
In company with a madman, are welcome to it!

Exit HAEMON.

CHORUS. Lord Creon, an uncontrollable fury
Has possessed your son, and swept him off like a whirlwind.
A young man's anger is a terrifying thing!

CREON. Let him go and shout his head off about moral this
And decent that, till he raves himself senseless!
The two women are sentenced. It will take more than bluster
To reprieve them, I promise you.

CHORUS. Both of them sir?
You mean to put both of the sisters to death?
CREON. No. You are right. I can take advice.
The one who covered the body. Not the other.
CHORUS. And for the condemned one: what manner of death?
CREON. Take her to some lonely place, rocky,
And unfrequented by anyone. Find a cave
And wall her up in it. Bury her alive:
But with just enough food so that no guilt
For her death will fall either upon us or the State.
She'll have plenty of time to honour the gods
Of the dead there, since they receive
So many of her prayers. They will release her.
And she will learn that worshipping the dead
Is not the business of the living.

Exit CREON.

CHORUS. When the god of unbridled passion makes war
He always wins.
No force on earth can withstand
His powerful, merciless hand.
When the first flowers appear
In a young girl's cheek
The remorseless magic begins:
And then, from the deepest valley to the highest peak
His traps are set,
And no man's sins
Or virtues can keep him from the net.

The mania is universal. The gods themselves run mad.
Men lose their wits, and no one is spared.

When the madness strikes, no one is safe.
The maturest of men
Will commit follies and crimes
Undreamed of in saner times.
What else could provoke this strife
Between father and son, this family divided
And murderous anger between kin?
There is fire in a woman's eye, incited
By such consuming heat,
A man's mind can burn.
Aphrodite shares power with Zeus, her seat
Is at his right hand, her lightning
Strikes to the heart, and its power is frightening.
The doors open and ANTIGONE enters, heavily guarded. She is
dressed in a plain white gown.

CHORUS. Yet how can we talk of justice
And the needs of the State
While we stand and watch this
Unendurable sight?
My eyes will have their way and weep,
Seeing Antigone, like a young bride
Going to her bedchamber, to marry the dead
And share their everlasting sleep.

ANTIGONE. In all my wanderings, gentlemen, this place
Has been my home. I was born in this city:
And now I begin my last journey.
I look up at the sun in its familiar sky
And feel its warmth on my face
Only to say goodbye.
In the daytime of my life, in mid-breath,
This security policeman, death,
Arrests me, as he arrests everyone, young and old
At home, or in the street. To the cold
Waters of darkness we come, never
To return across that silent river.
No wedding for me,
No music, no guests in the room:
My wedding gift is eternity
In a stone tomb,
My dowry, for ever not-to-be,
Death my bridegroom.

CHORUS. But your action is famous,
In every street
Mouths whisper 'Antigone'.
You go down to the dead
With the promise of glory ringing in your head
And nothing to devalue your beauty.
No sword has scarred you, plague visited:
Unmarked, untouched, you pass
From the dangerous light
Into the safety of eternal night,
Alive, alone, and free.

ANTIGONE. Do you remember the sad story
Of Tantalus' daughter? She was a stranger
From Phrygia, unmarried, like me, in danger
Like mine. She was sentenced to die on the rock
Of Sipylus, and there was no glory
For her, only the endless shock
Of the elements, and the terrible place
Where she was imprisoned: the mountain's embrace
Like fingers of ivy tying her down,
Enclosing, entombing her, and she all alone
While the snows blinded her, and the freezing rain
Whipped her to rags, and exposed her pain
To the naked sky.
What bitter tears she shed
As she slowly turned to stone, and the grey
Rock petrified her by inches, and she died.
Her story is mine. Today
I shall share her rocky bed.

CHORUS. But she was a goddess
Not born for death
Like the children of men
Whose desperate mortality
Is their only certainty.
Will it soothe your pain
To share her destiny,
Or soften your distress
As alive in the earth

You draw your last breath,
To live on in legend and stone?

ANTIGONE. This is a mockery! By everything
The city of our fathers has ever held sacred,
You landowners, you elder statesmen,
You rulers of Thebes, my dying
Is no joke! Am I a figure of fun
To be treated like a child, insulted and humiliated
As I leave you for ever?
Then, forests and meadows, and our Theban river,
Glittering pathway, ceaselessly flowing
From Dirce's death till now, flat lands
Thundering beneath our chariots, you
Must be my witnesses, my only friends
And mourners, as, victimised by an unjust law, I go
To my last home
In the living tomb,
To wait, while the slow darkness descends,
Cold and starving on my stony bed
Halfway between the living and the dead.

CHORUS. No one has ever dared
To go so far before
As you have dared to go.
Now you have stumbled, and stubbed your toe
And will shortly shed your blood
On the marble staircase of the law.
You carry your father's crimes
Like a millstone on your back:
Small wonder, in such times,
If the bones bend, or break.

ANTIGONE. Nothing more painful than that, the remembrance
Of my father's long agony, and the curse
On my suffering family from the beginning.
So much grief from the unlucky chance
Of the son finding the mother's bed, and worse
Than anything, the benighted offspring
Of that unspeakable marriage: and I,
With the others, share that terrible destiny.
Conceived in incest, no repentance
Can soften the punishment: the years
Pass, the agonies increase
And there is no pity for our tears.
No marriage for me, for certain. I shall close
That book for ever,
As I meet my father
And mother in the shades. The weddings will cease.
Marriage to the woman of Argos finished my brother
And finished me too. One death breeds another.

CHORUS. To pay respect to the dead
Is praiseworthy, an act of love,
And religion must have its due:
But no civilised State can eschew
Authority. Laws must be obeyed,
Whether we approve or disapprove.
If you refuse to sanction
The power of the State
By indulging your obsession
You connive at your own fate.

ANTIGONE. Spare me your sympathy,
Weep no false tears,
I know the path that I must follow,
To the sunless country of eternal sorrow,
The bleak waters of eternity,
The unimaginable years.
No grief where none is felt. I shall go alone
And in silence to my house of stone.
Enter CREON, with his guards.

CREON. If death could be prevented by singing arias
About it, or other self-indulgent displays
Of grief, this performance would go on for ever,
I've no doubt. But I've had enough of it.
Take her away, lock her up
In her stone vault, with half a mountain
For a roof, then brick up the door! Let her die
There, if she chooses. Or if she prefers,
Let her stay alive in her grave, why not?
Because the grave's the only fit place for her,
Solitary confinement among the dead!
Whatever she does, there will be no guilt
On me, or on the State. Her death is her own.
But there's no place for her among the living.

ANTIGONE. To my grave then. My honeymoon bed.
My prison. My crypt, under the mountain.

My home for the rest of time. I shall meet
So many of my relations there:
We shall all be guests of the sad-faced queen
Of the shadows, Persephone, in that bleak hotel
That is never short of a room. I am the last,
The unhappiest, I think, and the youngest,
Booking in too soon. But my father will be there
To meet me at the door: my mother will smile,
And hug me close, as she always did:
And my brother. He will be glad to see me,
More than all the rest. At each fresh grave
My hands sprinkled the earth, at each
I poured the purifying water,
And made offerings. And for my beloved Polynices,
Whose broken body I set to rest,
I am rewarded with a shameful death.
There are some, I know, more thoughtful people,
Who respect my action. They must justify me.
Not for a husband, you understand,
Not even for a son would I have done this.
If the law had forbidden it, I would have bowed
My head, and let them rot. Does that
Make sense? I could have married again,
Another husband, and had more children
By him, if the first had died. Do you see?
Do you understand me? But my mother and father
Are dead. There will be no more brothers,
Never again. My love had to speak
At Polynices' grave, or nowhere.
And for that terrible crime, my dearest brother,
Creon sentences me to death,
Drags me here, and will shut me away
In a cavern under the mountain, a living death,
In silence and darkness and solitude.
I shall die unmarried, all those pleasures
Denied me, and motherhood denied
Too, no children to love me, to love:
And now, no friends. What moral law
Have I broken? What eternal truths
Have I denied? Yet now, not even a god
Can help me, and there's no man who will,
I'm sure of that. No help, and no hope.
How can there be, when common decency
Has become a crime? If the gods in heaven
Have changed their minds, and this is the way
They order things now, I shall soon know it:
And I shall have learned my lesson the hard way.
But if some others are mistaken,
Let them be punished as I have been punished,
And suffer the injustice that I suffer!

CHORUS. She hasn't changed, even now. The anger
Inside her still blows like a hurricane.

CREON. The sooner she's got rid of, shut up
Out of harm's way, and forgotten, the better.
Tell those guards to get a move on, or they will regret it!

ANTIGONE. That word is my death.

CREON. And now it is spoken.

Don't comfort yourself with hope. There's none.

ANTIGONE. This is the land of my fathers: Thebes,
Built by a god. You see, senators,
My time has run out, there is no more left.
I am the last of the royal blood,
A daughter of kings. And I die his victim,
Unjustly, for upholding justice
And the humanity of humankind.

ANTIGONE is led away by the guards. CREON remains on stage.

CHORUS. Others have suffered, my child, like you:
Upon Danaë too
The same dreadful sentence was passed.
Far from the light of day
In a tower of brass she was shut away,
And that one single room,
Both prison and tomb
Became her wedding chamber at last.
Like you, she was a child of kings,
Yet in her womb the semen of Zeus
Descending in a golden shower
Made a mockery of the brazen tower.
Fate has its own momentum: when things
Must be, they will be. What use
Is power in the State, or wealth,
Massive armies, an unsinkable fleet?

Gods make their entrances by strength or stealth,
And no tombs or towers can keep them out.

The arrogant King Lycuragus discovered
Wisdom, when he angered
The god Dionysus with his railing.
That proud Edonian king
Was punished with madness, and long
Imprisoned in a rocky cell
To endure the private and particular hell
Of lunacy: till the healing
Silence soothed and re-ordered his brain.
He learned there the terrible power
Of the god he had challenged. Ecstasy
Is beyond man's understanding, a mystery
Deeper than reason, which overcomes pain,
And seeks truth in intoxication and terror.
Only a fool would attempt to stop
The Maenads in full flight,
Or silence their ecstatic singing. The sleep
Of reason is not darkness, but another kind of light.

And where the gloomy rocks divide the seas
In Thrace, by the Bosphorus,
The savage god Ares
Laughed to see the sons of Phineus
Blinded with a spindle. Nothing could placate
Their vengeful stepmother's hate.
Her bloody needle darkened their eyes for ever,
Blinding the children, as the gods had blinded the father.
From their mother's wedding day, their destiny
Was settled. Their wasted lives
They wept away in sightless misery,
Yet she was descended from the gods. In the echoing caves
Of the north wind she hallooed, as a child,
And on the open mountainside ran wild
With the horses. Man's fate is determined, will not be denied.
The child Antigone pays for the parents' pride.

Enter the blind man Tiresias, accompanied by his boy. He looks exactly as he did in Oedipus the King. Nothing has changed, either in age or dress or manner.
TEIRESIAS. Senators of Thebes – and your new king, Creon! We have travelled together, my boy and I, Sharing one pair of eyes between the two of us – Which is the way blind men must make their journeys.

CREON. Teiresias! What news brings an old man so far? TEIRESIAS. Important news, that can’t wait: And advice, which if you’re wise, you’ll listen to. CREON. I’ve always listened: and acted upon it More than once!

TEIRESIAS. And like a sensible captain Who values his pilot, you’ve avoided the rocks. CREON. I admit it. We all do. We’re in your debt. TEIRESIAS. Then for god’s sake, listen to me now. You’re like a man balanced on a razor, Likely to fall – or cut himself to pieces.

CREON. Are you serious? Any man would shudder Hearing such things from your lips That have foretold so many horrors . . . Tell me what you mean.

TEIRESIAS. Oh yes, I intend to: Everything my experience of forecasting the future And understanding symbols has revealed to me, I will make plain to you. I was sitting In my usual seat, a place where I can hear The singing and the secret language Of the birds, and understand their meaning, When I heard, quite unexpectedly, A terrible new sound, like shrieking, or cries Of anguish, hysterical twitting and whistling Like the babble of a barbaric language Only capable of expressing hatred Or pain. By that, and the wild beating of wings, I knew the birds were at war. Such sounds Could mean nothing else. I could well imagine Their bloodstained beaks and dripping claws, And that thought disturbed me deeply. At once I went to my altar to see what I could learn From the sacrifice by fire. But nothing would burn. A filthy liquid ran from the flesh And dropped on the embers – and sizzled and bubbled Among the ashes. Then the gall bladder burst,

Spurting stinking acid across the meat, And all the fat melted, and was rendered down Till the bone was left bare. I saw all this – Or my boy saw it. He sees for me What my eyes cannot, just as I see Things to which other people are blind. But in that filth I read nothing. The oracle Was clogged with fat and decay – And then . . . it was revealed. I understood That you, King Creon, have decreed this filth That chokes our altars. The blood and flesh That decays and stinks there, is the blood and flesh Vomited from the gullets of dogs And carrion crows, the blood of Polynices, The flesh of that unluckiest of the sons Of Oedipus, still unburied, And affronting more than our sense of smell. The gods themselves are disgusted. They reject Our prayers and sacrifices. How could they do otherwise? How can the birds sing of anything But horrors, blown out with this banquet Of human blood, clogged and stinking, Till their very beaks drip with it? My son, listen to me. Any man Can make a mistake, or commit a crime. The man who can recognise what he has done, See that he was mistaken, or morally wrong, Admit it, and put it right, that man Proves that it is never too late to become Wise, and no one will condemn him. But if he compounds his stupidity With stubbornness, and an obstinate refusal To face the facts, he is nothing but a fool. Is there anyone more stupid than the stupid man Who cannot see his own stupidity? Polynices is dead. Don’t revenge yourself On his remains. You can kill a man once, And once only. Is there any glory To be gained by defeating a poor corpse? This is good advice my son, sincerely offered By someone who wishes you well . . . Take it . . .
CREON. So that's your news, is it, old man.
I am to be the target, am I,
For everyone to shoot at? Well, I am wise too:
Wise to the ways of fortune-tellers,
And the buying and selling you all go in for.
And I'm to be the latest bargain
I see, I'm to be bought and sold
Like silver from the exchequer at Sardis, or gold
From India, I'm to be part of the trade!
Let me tell you this. There is not enough gold
In the world to buy a grave for that man!
If golden eagles should carry him up
By joints and shreds to Zeus,
And spew him in gobbets on the marble floor
Of Olympus, not even that blasphemy
Would be enough to deflect me from my purpose:
Because I know that no single human act,
However much it may degrade the earth,
And the men who perpetrate or suffer it,
Can stain the purity of the ever-living gods!
But, let me tell you this, Teiresias,
A man can fall: he can fall like a stone,
Especially if he pretends to give good advice,
And wraps it up in a profound cloak
Of religiosity, when all the time
Naked self-interest, and the greed for profit
Are the only motives that matter to him!
TEIRESIAS. Are there any wise men left? Anywhere?
CREON. Goodness, how profound! Do you have any more
Thunderous platitudes to follow that one?
TEIRESIAS. Mature judgement cannot be bought.
No treasure is as valuable. And good advice
Is worth more than a fortune to any man.
CREON. And bad advice is worse than worthless,
A disease which infects the wisest of men!
TEIRESIAS. You describe your own symptoms exactly.
CREON. I refuse to become involved in a slanging match
Or quarrel with the recognised prophet of Thebes!
TEIRESIAS. And yet you insult me to my face. You say
My predictions are both false and dishonest.
CREON. That is because all fortune-tellers
Are money grubbers and charlatans.
TEIRESIAS. Kings too have been known to be acquisitive.
CREON. Do you realise the man you are talking to?
I am the king!
TEIRESIAS. You are the king, yes.
My good advice helped to make you one.
CREON. You've had your successes, I know that,
You've been proved right on more than one occasion.
But honesty's another matter. I've never trusted you.
TEIRESIAS. Don't provoke me to tell you everything.
The dark waters of prophecy are better left undisturbed.
CREON. Disturb them, I don't care! Say anything at all,
But say it honestly, not for cash!
TEIRESIAS. Are you really foolish enough to believe
That money has ever been my motive?
CREON. Because my integrity is not for sale!
TEIRESIAS. Listen Creon. This is the truth!
Before many more days, before the sun has risen
- Well, shall we say a few more times -
You will have made your payment, corpse
For corpse, with a child of your own blood.
You have buried the one still living; the woman
Who moves and breathes, you have given to the grave;
And the dead man you have left, unwashed,
Unwept, and without the common courtesy
Of a decent covering of earth. So that both
Have been wronged, and the gods of the underworld,
To whom the body truly belongs,
Are denied it, and are insulted. Such matters
Are not for you to judge. You usurp
Ancient rights which even the gods
Themselves don't dare to question, powers
Which are not in the prerogative of kings.
Even now, implacable avengers
Are on their way, the Furies, who rise up
From Hell and swoop down from Heaven,
Fix their hooks into those who commit crimes,
And will never let go. The suffering
You inflicted upon others, will be inflicted
Upon you, you will suffer, as they did.
Have I been bribed, do you think? Am I speaking
For money now? Before very long,
Yes, it will be soon, there will be screaming
And bitter tears and hysterical crying
In this house. Men, as well as women.
Other cities too, other States,
Will turn upon you for the crime you have committed.
Dogs and vultures will swarm in their streets
Dropping fragments of the unburied man
At corners, on doorsteps, in the public squares.
They will smell the pollution, and turn to you,
Its author! That's all I have to say.
You made me angry, Creon, with
Your crude accusations. So I made you my target:
And like a good marksman, all my shots
Have hit the bull. You can feel them, can't you,
You can feel the pain, like an arrow, here!
Take me home now, boy. Leave him alone
To entertain some younger ears than mine
With his ridiculous outbursts. Either that
Or let him learn maturer judgement
And how a wise man controls his tongue.

*Exit Teiresias led by the boy. The chorus is appalled, and Creon is visibly shaken.*

**Chorus.** My Lord, he's gone, promising nothing
But disasters to come . . .
My hair grew grey in this city:
I was dark-haired here, and now I am white,
And in all that time I have never known
Any of his prophecies to be proved wrong.

**Creon.** Neither have I, man! . . . I know that much
As well as you . . . My mind's torn apart
Like a tug of war, one way, then the other . . .
How can I give way now? But how
Can I stand here like a fool, and wait
Stubbornly for whatever disaster may be coming?

**Chorus.** Lord Creon . . . it's time to take good advice.

**Creon.** Give it then. Don't be afraid. I'll listen.

**Chorus.** Release the woman from her underground prison:
And give honourable burial to the dead man.

**Creon.** Oh, so that's your advice! Total collapse,

Complete withdrawal! Do you all think that?

**Chorus.** We do sir. And do it quickly, for heaven's sake!
The gods never move faster than when punishing men
With the consequences of their own actions.

**Creon.** How can I do it? It's unendurable
To deny every principle and every action
I have stood fast by. But I dare not stand
Against the iron laws of necessity.

**Chorus.** Go on sir, do it now, and do it personally,
Not by proxy - with your own hands.

**Creon.** Yes . . . I'll go, myself, at once!
Somebody, everybody, bring spades and sledge-hammers
Out onto the mountain. I'm coming with you!
If I've changed my mind, I'll act upon it
With exactly the same determination.
I sentenced her, and I'll set her free,
Tear down the bricks with my own hands
If necessary. Perhaps it is wiser
To let the old laws stand. My fear
Tells me it is. And that's a voice
Every prudent man must listen to.

**Creon.** Rushes off in near panic with his soldiers and attendants.

**Chorus.** Great god with many names,
Child of the thunder,
Whom Zeus conceived on Cadmus' daughter
Here in Thebes: Bacchus, Dionysus,
In Italy revered,
And in Demeter's mysterious Eleusis
Both praised and feared,
This is your native city, where the quiet river
Of Isemenus waters the meadows, where the fever
Of ecstasy possesses your womenfolk, your own
Thebes, where the dragon's teeth were sown.

The whole world worships you,
Wine god, intoxicator;
On the two-pronged mountain where the torches glitter
And the nymphs of Parnassus dance: by the pool
Where Castalia's suicide
Made the fountain magical, and the cool
Waters of prophecy reside.
I almost failed. My heart was wrung-out.

An accident of some disaster to those we love.

To make me feel well, mother first.

A few scraps of your conversation enough.

To catch the sound of your voice, Donker,

And then that joke about the pool where I lived.

The front door of my own home, Alice.

As I opened the door I saw on my way

One word of your saying, a few words.

Exhale, Conversation... Good friends. My ears caught something

Everywhere. Conversation... Good friends. My ears caught something

Of a woman, where she does not know it's her own.

Or because she was lost, to know her losses?

Do you think she's safe, the one you kept by chance,

And then, poor woman, of course, does she know,

Chorus. The doors are opening, look, here's Enrico,

Chorus. The proper wording used. Is all the same true.

Chorus. The rhythm. Action, direction, shape,

Nearness. He has hidden the word.

You mean of the word

Nearness. His other.

Nearness! The king's son, Hermon. The royal blood

Children, in whom whose, dead whose, in whose.

Blame.

Children, in whom whose, dead whose, in whose.

Nearness. They've been dead. And the thing must take the

Nearness, they're both dead. And the thing must take the

When will I be heard? in the heart

When you can take pleasure in wealth or power

A miner's pocket, over the paragon

When all the of the old is gone.

Then reach perhaps, as what's with it

Still shall own and circumstance, he's, a king.

Here, though, exalted, as is yours

Then, how it is, as is yours

Moving and extinguish, and not alone

Can these be when the things that make the pleasant

All this is now, when the life

When we will, now. When we will

When we will, now. When we will.

The world in which is yours in your, the thing's success.

And the thing, what is in your, what is soon, the thing.

From the unscrupulous shops of Nysa, where the ivy runs wild.
Caught me in their arms. Please, speak it out
Plainly, whatever it is. I can bear it.
We are bred to stoicism in this family.
MESSENGER. Dear Queen, whom we all respect . . . I was there,
I saw it all, and I'll tell you
Exactly what happened. There's no point
In trying to soften the blow now
Only to be proved a liar later.
It's best to tell the truth. I went
With the king, your husband, to the edge of the battlefield,
Where we saw the body of Polynices
Still lying where he fell, and in a terrible state:
The dogs had been at him. So we prayed –
First to Hecate, who haunts crossroads
And tombs, and the scenes of crimes committed
But not atoned for, and then to Pluto,
King of the Dead. We asked them to have pity
On him, and on us, and not to be angry.
Then we washed him, or what was left of him,
With holy water, cut fresh branches
To make a pyre, and burned the remains.
Then we shovelled a mound of his own Theban earth
Over the ashes, and when we had finished
We hurried off as fast as we could
To the prison cell furnished with stones
That served as a bridal suite for the girl
Married to death. But before we arrived,
One of the soldiers, with the unenviable job
Of guarding that god-forsaken place
Came running back to tell the king
That he'd heard a terrible noise, like screaming,
From inside the mountain. And as Creon got nearer
He heard it too – faint, but audible,
A kind of weird sobbing, or moaning,
Low and unearthly, as though grief were speaking
Its own naked language. The king groaned
Aloud, and we all heard him say
'Oh, god, this is what I was afraid of.
Am I a prophet too? This path
Up to the tomb, these last few steps,
Are the most agonising journey I shall ever make.
EURYDICE turns and walks out, without hurry. Her women look round, uncertain, then follow her. Some of the CHORUS see the exit, and are disturbed. The MESSENGER does not see it, and continues telling his story to the rest of the CHORUS.
So now they're together, two corpses,
Joined in death. He got his marriage,
Poor lad, but it was solemnised in the grave
Where there are no celebrations.
They look like honeymooners, quietly sleeping
Side by side in one bed: evidence
Of the havoc man can bring upon man
By his own pig-headedness and arrogance.

CHORUS. That's strange... What do you make of it? ... His wife
Has gone without a word: giving no indication
Of her own feelings, one way or the other...

MESSENGER. It scares me a bit... but I'm quite sure
She has good reason. A public demonstration
Of grief would be unlike her. She'll suffer
Like any other mother, for her son's death,
But in private, with her women. She'd never
Do anything foolish or indiscreet,
I'm sure of that. She's far too sensible.

CHORUS. I don't know. Her silence was unnerving,
Dangerously unlike what one would expect.
That sort of silence is sometimes more threatening
Than screaming and tears.

MESSENGER. I'll go in after her:
Just to make sure that grief doesn't tempt her
To anything silly, or excessive. You're right,
The silence was unnerving. She seemed to feel nothing:
And in my experience, that can be dangerous.

The MESSENGER goes in after the queen. As he does so, the doors open, and servants enter carrying the dead body of HAEMON on a bier, closely followed by the distraught CREON.

CHORUS. Look there! The king is coming:
But not alone.
A silent witness comes before him,
Dead as stone,
Unspeakable evidence that the crime
Like the grief, is all his own.
He suffers now for his wrongdoing.

CREON. Pain...
There was hatred inside me, the urge to destroy
Drove me like a maniac, an insane
Plunge towards death—your death my boy.
See here, the killer and his victim!
See here, the father and his son!
I was responsible. My actions killed him.
There is no blame for him, none.
Blasted in the morning of your life,
My hope, my joy,
My hand powered the knife,
My arrogance determined your fate.

CHORUS. You see the truth now, but you see it too late.

CREON. Suffering
Is the only schoolteacher.
The gods have broken my back,
Whipped me like a beast up this stony track
And destroyed my self-respect.
All pleasure, all rejoicing
They have turned to anguish and weeping.
Man is a naked mortal creature:
Affliction is all he can expect.

Re-enter the MESSENGER.

MESSENGER. My Lord, you have suffered enough. But more
Suffering is marked to your name.
One agony lies here in the open,
Another is waiting, the same
Anguish redoubled, behind the door.

CREON. There can be nothing worse. My heart is broken.

MESSENGER. Your wife is dead, the mother of this slaughtered son.
Her wound is fresh, but the breath of life is gone.

CREON. Hades
Is deep, bottomless the abyss of the dead.
Will you kill me too, or bring me to my knees
To suffer longer: beating my head
Insensible with pain? What can you say,
MESSENGER of death with the sad face
More than you've said already? My way
Is towards the darkness, my case
Can be no worse than it is. Can you kill me again?
I am dead already. Is there more blood,
More savagery, more hacking of flesh, more pain,
First the son, then the mother? No end to this grief?

CHORUS. There's no hiding it now. See for yourself.
_The doors open to reveal EURYDICE dead._

CREON. Unending
Unendurable pain.
This is the second time I am forced to see
What no man's eyes should ever see,
Even once. Is this how it ends?
Or will there be more torture, more suffering?
A few moments ago my trembling
Arms embraced a dead son.
Now death has snatched the mother from my hands.

MESSENGER. It was there by the household shrine she collapsed,
Still holding the razor-sharp knife. And as darkness
Drew down its slow blinds, and her eyes closed,
She spoke of Megareus who died in the fulness
Of his youth, her elder boy. By his empty bed
She wept, and for the son whose life ended
Today, and with her last, dying breath,
Cursed you as his murderer, who drove him to this death.

CREON. I'm shaking! I shall go mad with this terror!
There must be a sword, somewhere,
A sharp, two-edged knife
To cut away my life.
Living is misery for me now, for ever.
When I look, I see blood everywhere.

MESSENGER. It's no more than the truth I've told.
Her last word
Was to blame you for both deaths, mother and son.

CREON. How did she die? Did she do it alone?
MESSENGER. She heard them weeping for Haemon, cried aloud,
And skewered herself under the heart with a sword.

CREON. She spoke the truth. All the guilt is mine!
I am the murderer. Make that plain.
Somebody, anybody, take me away:
I disgrace the decent light of day.

I am nothing now. I have become nothing.
Nothing can happen to a man who is nothing.

CHORUS. How can we judge for the best
In times like these?
Prompt action is safest.
What more is there to lose?

CREON. Where are you, my friend? Come you shadowy
Messenger who runs faster than the wind,
Wrap me in darkness, as a friend should!
Why waste another day? What good
Is daylight to me? Why should my misery
Darken the face of another dawn? Pull down the blind.

CHORUS. Tomorrow is a mystery. No man can say
What time will make plain. We live day by day.
The future is in greater hands than ours.

CREON. I am nothing. I want nothing. My last, simplest prayers.

CHORUS. No time for prayers now. Too late to pray.
What must come, will come, tomorrow, or today.

CREON. I am nothing. Take me then. The man
Who killed, without knowing it, his wife and son.
Where shall I go then? Left, or right?
All wrong turnings now. Into the night,
Darkness, hide me. There's blood on my hands. My head
Is split, my back is broken. I should be dead.

Exit CREON.

CHORUS. The key to human happiness
Is to nurture wisdom in your heart,
For man to attend to man's business
And let the gods play their part:
Above all, to stand in awe
Of the eternal, unalterable law.
The proud man may pretend
In his arrogance to despise
Everything but himself. In the end
The gods will bring him to grief.
Today it has happened here. With our own eyes
We have seen an old man, through suffering, become wise.

Exit the CHORUS.