

Sophocles  
*Antigone*



Translated by Ian Johnston

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Antigone

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by

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Antigone

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## Translator's Note

The translator would like to acknowledge the extremely valuable help provided by Andrew Brown's edition of Sophocles' *Antigone* (Aris & Philips, 1987), especially by his editorial notes.

Note that in this translation the numbers in square brackets refer to the Greek text, and the numbers with no brackets refer to this text. In numbering the lines in the translated text, the translator has normally included a short indented line with the short line immediately above it.

## Background Note

When Oedipus, king of Thebes, discovered through his own investigations that he had killed his father and married his mother, Jocasta, he put out his own eyes, and Jocasta killed herself. Once Oedipus ceased being king of Thebes, his two sons, Polyneices and Eteocles, agreed to alternate as king. When Eteocles refused to give up power to Polyneices, the latter collected a foreign army of Argives and attacked the city. In the ensuing battle, the Thebans triumphed over the invading forces, and the two brothers killed each other, with Eteocles defending the city and Polyneices attacking it. The action of the play begins immediately after the battle. Note that Creon is a brother of Jocasta and thus an uncle of Antigone, Ismene, Eteocles, and Polyneices.

# Sophocles Antigone

## Dramatis Personae

ANTIGONE: daughter of Oedipus.

ISMENE: daughter of Oedipus, sister of Antigone

CREON: king of Thebes

EURYDICE: wife of Creon

HAEMON: son of Creon and Euridice, engaged to Antigone.

TEIRESIAS: an old blind prophet

BOY: a young lad guiding Teiresias

GUARD: a soldier serving Creon.

MESSENGER

CHORUS: Theban Elders

ATTENDANTS and SOLDIERS

*[In Thebes, directly in front of the royal palace, which stands in the background, its main doors facing the audience.]*

*[Enter Antigone leading Ismene away from the palace]*

ANTIGONE

Now, dear Ismene, my own blood sister,  
do you have any sense of all the troubles  
Zeus keeps bringing on the two of us,  
as long as we're alive? All that misery  
which stems from Oedipus? There's no suffering,  
no shame, no ruin—not one dishonour—  
which I have not seen in all the troubles  
you and I go through. What's this they're saying now,  
something our general has had proclaimed  
throughout the city? Do you know of it? 10  
Have you heard? Or have you just missed the news?  
Dishonours which better fit our enemies  
are now being piled up on the ones we love. [10]

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ISMENE

I've had no word at all, Antigone,  
nothing good or bad about our family,  
not since we two lost both our brothers,  
killed on the same day by a double blow.  
And since the Argive army, just last night,  
has gone away, I don't know any more  
if I've been lucky or face total ruin.

20

ANTIGONE

I know that. That's why I brought you here,  
outside the gates, so only you can hear.

ISMENE

What is it? The way you look makes it seem  
you're thinking of some dark and gloomy news.

[20]

ANTIGONE

Look—what's Creon doing with our two brothers?  
He's honouring one with a full funeral  
and treating the other one disgracefully!  
Eteocles, they say, has had his burial  
according to our customary rites,  
to win him honour with the dead below.  
But as for Polyneices, who perished  
so miserably, an order has gone out  
throughout the city—that's what people say.  
He's to have no funeral or lament,  
but to be left unburied and unwept,  
a sweet treasure for the birds to look at,  
for them to feed on to their heart's content.  
That's what people say the noble Creon  
has announced to you and me—I mean to me—  
and now he's coming to proclaim the fact,  
to state it clearly to those who have not heard.  
For Creon this matter's really serious.  
Anyone who acts against the order  
will be stoned to death before the city.  
Now you know, and you'll quickly demonstrate

30

[30]

40

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whether you are nobly born, or else  
a girl unworthy of her splendid ancestors.

ISMENE

Oh my poor sister, if that's what's happening,  
what can I say that would be any help  
to ease the situation or resolve it?

50 [40]

ANTIGONE

Think whether you will work with me in this  
and act together.

ISMENE

In what kind of work?  
What do you mean?

ANTIGONE

Will you help these hands  
take up Polyneices' corpse and bury it?

ISMENE

What? You're going to bury Polyneices,  
when that's been made a crime for all in Thebes?

ANTIGONE

Yes. I'll do my duty to my brother—  
and yours as well, if you're not prepared to.  
I won't be caught betraying him.

ISMENE

You're too rash.  
Has Creon not expressly banned that act?

60

ANTIGONE

Yes. But he's no right to keep me from what's mine.

ISMENE

O dear. Think, Antigone. Consider  
how our father died, hated and disgraced,  
when those mistakes which his own search revealed  
forced him to turn his hand against himself  
and stab out both his eyes. Then that woman,  
his mother and his wife—her double role—

[50]

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destroyed her own life in a twisted noose.  
Then there's our own two brothers, both butchered  
in a single day—that ill-fated pair 70  
with their own hands slaughtered one another  
and brought about their common doom.  
Now, the two of us are left here quite alone.  
Think how we'll die far worse than all the rest,  
if we defy the law and move against [60]  
the king's decree, against his royal power.  
We must remember that by birth we're women,  
and, as such, we shouldn't fight with men.  
Since those who rule are much more powerful,  
we must obey in this and in events 80  
which bring us even harsher agonies.  
So I'll ask those underground for pardon—  
since I'm being compelled, I will obey  
those in control. That's what I'm forced to do.  
It makes no sense to try to do too much.

#### ANTIGONE

I wouldn't urge you to. No. Not even  
if you were keen to act. Doing this with you  
would bring me no joy. So be what you want. [70]  
I'll still bury him. It would be fine to die  
while doing that. I'll lie there with him, 90  
with a man I love, pure and innocent,  
for all my crime. My honours for the dead  
must last much longer than for those up here.  
I'll lie down there forever. As for you,  
well, if you wish, you can show contempt  
for those laws the gods all hold in honour.

#### ISMENE

I'm not disrespecting them. But I can't act  
against the state. That's not in my nature.

#### ANTIGONE

Let that be your excuse. I'm going now [80]  
to make a burial mound for my dear brother. 100

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ISMENE

Oh poor Antigone, I'm so afraid for you.

ANTIGONE

Don't fear for me. Set your own fate in order.

ISMENE

Make sure you don't reveal to anyone  
what you intend. Keep it closely hidden.  
I'll do the same.

ANTIGONE

No, no. Announce the fact—  
if you don't let everybody know,  
I'll despise your silence even more.

ISMENE

Your heart is hot to do cold deeds.

ANTIGONE

But I know  
I'll please the ones I'm duty bound to please.

ISMENE

Yes, if you can. But you're after something  
which you're incapable of carrying out.

110 [90]

ANTIGONE

Well, when my strength is gone, then I'll give up.

ISMENE

A vain attempt should not be made at all.

ANTIGONE

I'll hate you if you're going to talk that way.  
And you'll rightly earn the loathing of the dead.  
So leave me and my foolishness alone—  
we'll get through this fearful thing. I won't suffer  
anything as bad as a disgraceful death.

ISMENE

All right then, go, if that's what you think right.  
But remember this—even though your mission  
makes no sense, your friends do truly love you.

120

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*[Exit Antigone away from the palace. Ismene watches her go and then returns slowly into the palace. Enter the Chorus of Theban elders]*

CHORUS

O ray of sunlight, [100]  
most beautiful that ever shone  
on Thebes, city of the seven gates,  
you've appeared at last,  
you glowing eye of golden day,  
moving above the streams of Dirce,  
driving into headlong flight  
the white-shield warrior from Argos,  
who marched here fully armed, 130  
now forced back by your sharper power.<sup>1</sup>

CHORUS LEADER

Against our land he marched, [110]  
sent here by the warring claims  
of Polyneices, with piercing screams,  
an eagle flying above our land,  
covered wings as white as snow,  
and hordes of warriors in arms,  
helmets topped with horsehair crests.

CHORUS

Standing above our homes,  
he ranged around our seven gates, 140  
with threats to swallow us  
and spears thirsting to kill.  
Before his jaws had had their fill [120]  
and gorged themselves on Theban blood,  
before Hephaistos' pine-torch flames  
had seized our towers, our fortress crown,  
he went back, driven in retreat.<sup>2</sup>  
Behind him rings the din of war—

<sup>1</sup> *Dirce*: one of the rivers beside Thebes.

<sup>2</sup> *Hephaistos*: Olympian god of fire.

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his enemy, the Theban dragon-snake,  
too difficult for him to overcome. 150

CHORUS LEADER

Zeus hates an arrogant boasting tongue.  
Seeing them march here in a mighty stream,  
in all their clanging golden pride, [130]  
he hurled his fire and struck the man,  
up there, on our battlements, as he began  
to scream aloud his victory.

CHORUS

The man swung down, torch still in hand,  
and smashed into unyielding earth—  
the one who not so long ago attacked,  
who launched his furious, enraged assault, 160  
to blast us, breathing raging storms.  
But things turned out not as he'd hoped.  
Great war god Ares assisted us—  
he smashed them down and doomed them all [140]  
to a very different fate.

CHORUS LEADER

Seven captains at seven gates  
matched against seven equal warriors  
paid Zeus their full bronze tribute,  
the god who turns the battle tide,  
all but that pair of wretched men, 170  
born of one father and one mother, too—  
who set their conquering spears against each other  
and then both shared a common death.

CHORUS

Now victory with her glorious name  
has come, bringing joy to well-armed Thebes.  
The battle's done—let's strive now to forget [150]  
with songs and dancing all night long,  
with Bacchus leading us to make Thebes shake.

*[The palace doors are thrown open and guards appear at the doors]*

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CHORUS LEADER

But here comes Creon, new king of our land,  
son of Menoikeos. Thanks to the gods, 180  
who've brought about our new good fortune.  
What plan of action does he have in mind?  
What's made him hold this special meeting, [160]  
with elders summoned by a general call?

*[Enter Creon from the palace. He addresses the assembled elders]*

CREON

Men, after much tossing of our ship of state,  
the gods have safely set things right again.  
Of all the citizens I've summoned you,  
because I know how well you showed respect  
for the eternal power of the throne,  
first with Laius and again with Oedipus, 190  
once he restored our city.<sup>1</sup> When he died,  
you stood by his children, firm in loyalty.  
Now his sons have perished in a single day,  
killing each other with their own two hands,  
a double slaughter, stained with brother's blood. [170]  
And so I have the throne, all royal power,  
for I'm the one most closely linked by blood  
to those who have been killed. It's impossible  
to really know a man, to know his soul,  
his mind and will, before one witnesses 200  
his skill in governing and making laws.  
For me, a man who rules the entire state  
and does not take the best advice there is,  
but through fear keeps his mouth forever shut, [180]  
such a man is the very worst of men—  
and always will be. And a man who thinks  
more highly of a friend than of his country,  
well, he means nothing to me. Let Zeus know,  
the god who always watches everything,  
I would not stay silent if I saw disaster 210

<sup>1</sup> *Laius*: king of Thebes and father of Oedipus. Oedipus killed him (not knowing who he was) and became the next king of Thebes by saving the city from the devastation of the Sphinx.

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moving here against the citizens,  
 a threat to their security. For anyone  
 who acts against the state, its enemy,  
 I'd never make my friend. For I know well  
 our country is a ship which keeps us safe,  
 and only when it sails its proper course [190]  
 do we make friends. These are the principles  
 I'll use in order to protect our state.  
 That's why I've announced to all citizens  
 my orders for the sons of Oedipus— 220  
 Eteocles, who perished in the fight  
 to save our city, the best and bravest  
 of our spearmen, will have his burial,  
 with all those purifying rituals  
 which accompany the noblest corpses,  
 as they move below. As for his brother—  
 that Polyneices, who returned from exile,  
 eager to wipe out in all-consuming fire [200]  
 his ancestral city and its native gods,  
 keen to seize upon his family's blood 230  
 and lead men into slavery—for him,  
 the proclamation in the state declares  
 he'll have no burial mound, no funeral rites,  
 and no lament. He'll be left unburied,  
 his body there for birds and dogs to eat,  
 a clear reminder of his shameful fate.  
 That's my decision. For I'll never act  
 to respect an evil man with honours  
 in preference to a man who's acted well.  
 Anyone who's well disposed towards our state, 240  
 alive or dead, that man I will respect. [210]

#### CHORUS LEADER

Son of Menoikeos, if that's your will  
 for this city's friends and enemies,  
 it seems to me you now control all laws  
 concerning those who've died and us as well—  
 the ones who are still living.

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CREON

See to it then,  
and act as guardians of what's been proclaimed.

CHORUS

Give that task to younger men to deal with.

CREON

There are men assigned to oversee the corpse.

CHORUS LEADER

Then what remains that you would have us do? 250

CREON

Don't yield to those who contravene my orders.

CHORUS LEADER

No one is such a fool that he loves death. [220]

CREON

Yes, that will be his full reward, indeed.  
And yet men have often been destroyed  
because they hoped to profit in some way.

*[Enter a guard, coming towards the palace]*

GUARD

My lord, I can't say I've come out of breath  
by running here, making my feet move fast.  
Many times I stopped to think things over—  
and then I'd turn around, retrace my steps.  
My mind was saying many things to me, 260  
"You fool, why go to where you know for sure  
your punishment awaits?"—"And now, poor man,  
why are you hesitating yet again?

If Creon finds this out from someone else, [230]  
how will you escape being hurt?" Such matters  
kept my mind preoccupied. And so I went,  
slowly and reluctantly, and thus made  
a short road turn into a lengthy one.

But then the view that I should come to you  
won out. If what I have to say is nothing, 270  
I'll say it nonetheless. For I've come here

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clinging to the hope that I'll not suffer  
anything that's not part of my destiny.

CREON

What's happening that's made you so upset?

GUARD

I want to tell you first about myself.  
I did not do it. And I didn't see  
the one who did. So it would be unjust  
if I should come to grief.

[240]

CREON

You hedge so much.  
Clearly you have news of something ominous.

GUARD

Yes. Strange things that make me pause a lot.

280

CREON

Why not say it and then go—just leave.

GUARD

All right, I'll tell you. It's about the corpse.  
Someone has buried it and disappeared,  
after spreading thirsty dust onto the flesh  
and undertaking all appropriate rites.

CREON

What are you saying? What man would dare this?

GUARD

I don't know. There was no sign of digging,  
no marks of any pick axe or a mattock.  
The ground was dry and hard and very smooth,  
without a wheel track. Whoever did it  
left no trace. When the first man on day watch  
revealed it to us, we were all amazed.  
The corpse was hidden, but not in a tomb.  
It was lightly covered up with dirt,  
as if someone wanted to avert a curse.  
There was no trace of a wild animal  
or dogs who'd come to rip the corpse apart.

[250]

290

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Then the words flew round among us all,  
with every guard accusing someone else. [260]  
We were about to fight, to come to blows— 300  
no one was there to put a stop to it.  
Every one of us was responsible,  
but none of us was clearly in the wrong.  
In our defence we pleaded ignorance.  
Then we each stated we were quite prepared  
to pick up red-hot iron, walk through flames,  
or swear by all the gods that we'd not done it,  
we'd no idea how the act was planned,  
or how it had been carried out. At last,  
when all our searching had proved useless, 310  
one man spoke up, and his words forced us all  
to drop our faces to the ground in fear. [270]  
We couldn't see things working out for us,  
whether we agreed or disagreed with him.  
He said we must report this act to you—  
we must not hide it. And his view prevailed.  
I was the unlucky man who won the prize,  
the luck of the draw. That's why I'm now here,  
not of my own free will or by your choice.  
I know that—for no one likes a messenger 320  
who comes bearing unwelcome news with him.

#### CHORUS LEADER

My lord, I've been wondering for some time now—  
could this act not be something from the gods?

#### CREON

Stop now—before what you're about to say [280]  
enrages me completely and reveals  
that you're not only old but stupid, too.  
No one can tolerate what you've just said,  
when you claim gods might care about this corpse.  
Would they pay extraordinary honours  
and bury as a man who'd served them well 330  
someone who came to burn their offerings,  
their pillared temples, to torch their lands  
and scatter all its laws? Or do you see

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gods paying respect to evil men? No, no.  
 For quite a while some people in the town  
 have secretly been muttering against me. [290]  
 They don't agree with what I have decreed.  
 They shake their heads and have not kept their necks  
 under my yoke, as they are duty bound to do  
 if they were men who are content with me. 340  
 I well know that these guards were led astray—  
 such men urged them to carry out this act  
 for money. To foster evil actions,  
 to make them commonplace among all men,  
 nothing is as powerful as money.  
 It destroys cities, driving men from home.  
 Money trains and twists the minds in worthy men,  
 so they then undertake disgraceful acts.  
 Money teaches men to live as scoundrels, [300]  
 familiar with every profane enterprise. 350  
 But those who carry out such acts for cash  
 sooner or later see how for their crimes  
 they pay the penalty. For if great Zeus  
 still has my respect, then understand this—  
 I swear to you on oath—unless you find  
 the one whose hands really buried him,  
 unless you bring him here before my eyes,  
 then death for you will never be enough.  
 No, not before you're hung up still alive  
 and you confess to this gross, violent act. 360  
 That way you'll understand in future days, [310]  
 when there's a profit to be gained from theft,  
 you'll learn that it's not good to be in love  
 with every kind of monetary gain.  
 You'll know more men are ruined than are saved  
 when they earn profits from dishonest schemes.

GUARD

Do I have your permission to speak now,  
 or do I just turn round and go away?

CREON

But I find your voice so irritating—

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don't you realize that?

GUARD

Where does it hurt?  
Is it in your ears or in your mind?

370

CREON

Why try to question where I feel my pain?

GUARD

The man who did it—he upsets your mind.  
I offend your ears.

CREON

My, my, it's clear to see  
it's natural for you to chatter on.

[320]

GUARD

Perhaps. But I never did this.

CREON

This and more—  
you sold your life for silver.

GUARD

How strange and sad  
when the one who sorts this out gets it all wrong.

CREON

Well, enjoy your sophisticated views.  
But if you don't reveal to me who did this,  
you'll just confirm how much your treasonous gains  
have made you suffer.

380

*[Exit Creon back into the palace. The doors close behind him]*

GUARD

Well, I hope he's found.  
That would be best. But whether caught or not—  
and that's something sheer chance will bring about—  
you won't see me coming here again.  
This time, against all hope and expectation,  
I'm still unhurt. I owe the gods great thanks.

[330]

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*[Exit the Guard away from the palace]*

CHORUS

There are many strange and wonderful things,  
but nothing more strangely wonderful than man.  
He moves across the white-capped ocean seas 390  
blasted by winter storms, carving his way  
under the surging waves engulfing him.  
With his teams of horses he wears down  
the unwearied and immortal earth,  
the oldest of the gods, harassing her,  
as year by year his ploughs move back and forth. [340]

He snares the light-winged flocks of birds,  
herds of wild beasts, creatures from deep seas,  
trapped in the fine mesh of his hunting nets.  
O resourceful man, whose skill can overcome 400  
ferocious beasts roaming mountain heights. [350]  
He curbs the rough-haired horses with his bit  
and tames the inexhaustible mountain bulls,  
setting their savage necks beneath his yoke.

He's taught himself speech and wind-swift thought,  
trained his feelings for communal civic life,  
learning to escape the icy shafts of frost,  
volleys of pelting rain in winter storms,  
the harsh life lived under the open sky.  
That's man—so resourceful in all he does. 410 [360]  
There's no event his skill cannot confront—  
other than death—that alone he cannot shun,  
although for many baffling sicknesses  
he has discovered his own remedies.

The qualities of his inventive skills  
bring arts beyond his dreams and lead him on,  
sometimes to evil and sometimes to good.  
If he treats his country's laws with due respect  
and honours justice by swearing on the gods,  
he wins high honours in his city. 420  
But when he grows bold and turns to evil, [370]  
then he has no city. A man like that—

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let him not share my home or know my mind.

*[Enter the Guard, bringing Antigone with him. She is not resisting]*

CHORUS LEADER

What this? I fear some omen from the gods.  
I can't deny what I see here so clearly—  
that young girl there—it's Antigone.  
Oh you poor girl, daughter of Oedipus,  
child of a such a father, so unfortunate,  
what's going on? Surely they've not brought you here  
because you've disobeyed the royal laws,  
because they've caught you acting foolishly?

430

[380]

GUARD

This here's the one who carried out the act.  
We caught her as she was burying the corpse.  
Where's Creon?

*[The palace doors open. Enter Creon with attendants]*

CHORUS LEADER

He's coming from the house—  
and just in time.

CREON

Why have I come "just in time"?  
What's happening? What is it?

GUARD

My lord,  
human beings should never take an oath  
there's something they'll not do—for later thoughts  
contradict what they first meant. I'd have sworn  
I'd not soon venture here again. Back then,  
the threats you made brought me a lot of grief.  
But there's no joy as great as what we pray for  
against all hope. And so I have come back,  
breaking that oath I swore. I bring this girl,  
captured while she was honouring the grave.  
This time we did not draw lots. No. This time  
I was the lucky man, not someone else.

440

[390]

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And now, my lord, take her for questioning.  
Convict her. Do as you wish. As for me,  
by rights I'm free and clear of all this trouble.

450 [400]

CREON

This girl here—how did you catch her? And where?

GUARD

She was burying that man. Now you know  
all there is to know.

CREON

Do you understand  
just what you're saying? Are your words the truth?

GUARD

We saw this girl giving that dead man's corpse  
full burial rites—an act you'd made illegal.  
Is what I say simple and clear enough?

CREON

How did you see her, catch her in the act?

GUARD

It happened this way. When we got there,  
after hearing those awful threats from you,  
we swept off all the dust covering the corpse,  
so the damp body was completely bare.  
Then we sat down on rising ground up wind,  
to escape the body's putrid rotting stench.  
We traded insults just to stay awake,  
in case someone was careless on the job.  
That's how we spent the time right up till noon,  
when the sun's bright circle in the sky  
had moved half way and it was burning hot.  
Then suddenly a swirling windstorm came,  
whipping clouds of dust up from the ground,  
filling the plain—some heaven-sent trouble.  
In that level place the dirt storm damaged  
all the forest growth, and the air around  
was filled with dust for miles. We shut our mouths  
and just endured this scourge sent from the gods.

460  
[410]

470  
[420]

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A long time passed. The storm came to an end.  
That's when we saw the girl. She was shrieking—  
a distressing painful cry, just like a bird  
who's seen an empty nest, its fledglings gone. 480  
That's how she was when she saw the naked corpse.  
She screamed out a lament, and then she swore,  
calling evil curses down upon the ones  
who'd done this. Then right away her hands  
threw on the thirsty dust. She lifted up  
a finely made bronze jug and then three times [430]  
poured out her tributes to the dead.  
When we saw that, we rushed up right away  
and grabbed her. She was not afraid at all.  
We charged her with her previous offence 490  
as well as this one. She just kept standing there,  
denying nothing. That made me happy—  
though it was painful, too. For it's a joy  
escaping troubles which affect oneself,  
but painful to bring evil on one's friends.  
But all that is of less concern to me  
than my own safety. [440]

CREON

You there—you with your face  
bent down towards the ground, what do you say?  
Do you deny you did this or admit it?

ANTIGONE

I admit I did it. I won't deny that. 500

CREON [*to the Guard*]

You're dismissed—go where you want. You're free—  
no serious charges made against you.

[*Exit the Guard. Creon turns to interrogate Antigone*]

Tell me briefly—not in some lengthy speech—  
were you aware there was a proclamation  
forbidding what you did?

ANTIGONE

I'd heard of it.

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How could I not? It was public knowledge.

CREON

And yet you dared to break those very laws?

ANTIGONE

Yes. Zeus did not announce those laws to me. [450]

And Justice living with the gods below  
sent no such laws for men. I did not think 510

anything which you proclaimed strong enough

to let a mortal override the gods

and their unwritten and unchanging laws.

They're not just for today or yesterday,

but exist forever, and no one knows

where they first appeared. So I did not mean

to let a fear of any human will

lead to my punishment among the gods.

I know all too well I'm going to die— [460]

how could I not?—it makes no difference 520

what you decree. And if I have to die

before my time, well, I count that a gain.

When someone has to live the way I do,

surrounded by so many evil things,

how can she fail to find a benefit

in death? And so for me meeting this fate

won't bring any pain. But if I'd allowed

my own mother's dead son to just lie there,

an unburied corpse, then I'd feel distress.

What going on here does not hurt me at all. 530

If you think what I'm doing now is stupid,

perhaps I'm being charged with foolishness [470]

by someone who's a fool.

CHORUS LEADER

It's clear enough  
the spirit in this girl is passionate—  
her father was the same. She has no sense  
of compromise in times of trouble.

CREON *[to the Chorus Leader]*

But you should know the most obdurate wills

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are those most prone to break. The strongest iron  
tempered in the fire to make it really hard—  
that's the kind you see most often shatter. 540  
I'm well aware the most tempestuous horses  
are tamed by one small bit. Pride has no place  
in anyone who is his neighbour's slave.  
This girl here was already very insolent [480]  
in contravening laws we had proclaimed.  
Here she again displays her proud contempt—  
having done the act, she now boasts of it.  
She laughs at what she's done. Well, in this case,  
if she gets her way and goes unpunished,  
then she's the man here, not me. She may be 550  
my sister's child, closer to me by blood  
than anyone belonging to my house  
who worships Zeus Herkeios in my home,  
but she'll not escape my harshest punishment—  
her sister, too, whom I accuse as well.<sup>1</sup>  
She had an equal part in all their plans [490]  
to do this burial. Go summon her here.  
I saw her just now inside the palace,  
her mind out of control, some kind of fit.

*[Exit attendants into the palace to fetch Ismene]*

When people hatch their mischief in the dark 560  
their minds often convict them in advance,  
betraying their treachery. How I despise  
a person caught committing evil acts  
who then desires to glorify the crime.

ANTIGONE

Take me and kill me—what more do you want?

CREON

Me? Nothing. With that I have everything.

ANTIGONE

Then why delay? There's nothing in your words

<sup>1</sup>*Zeus Herkeios*: Zeus of the Courtyard, a patron god of worship within the home.

that I enjoy—may that always be the case! [500]  
And what I say displeases you as much.  
But where could I gain greater glory 570  
than setting my own brother in his grave?  
All those here would confirm this pleases them  
if their lips weren't sealed by fear—being king,  
which offers all sorts of various benefits,  
means you can talk and act just as you wish.

CREON

In all of Thebes, you're the only one  
who looks at things that way.

ANTIGONE

They share my views,  
but they keep their mouths shut just for you.

CREON

These views of yours—so different from the rest—  
don't they bring you any sense of shame? 580 [510]

ANTIGONE

No—there's nothing shameful in honouring  
my mother's children.

CREON

You had a brother  
killed fighting for the other side.

ANTIGONE

Yes—from the same mother and father, too.

CREON

Why then give tributes which insult his name?

ANTIGONE

But his dead corpse won't back up what you say.

CREON

Yes, he will, if you give equal honours  
to a wicked man.

ANTIGONE

But the one who died

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was not some slave—it was his own brother.

CREON

Who was destroying this country—the other one  
went to his death defending it. 590

ANTIGONE

That may be,  
but Hades still desires equal rites for both.<sup>1</sup>

CREON

A good man does not wish what we give him  
to be the same an evil man receives. [520]

ANTIGONE

Who knows? In the world below perhaps  
such actions are no crime.

CREON

An enemy  
can never be a friend, not even in death.

ANTIGONE

But my nature is to love. I cannot hate.

CREON

Then go down to the dead. If you must love,  
love them. No woman's going to govern me—  
no, no—not while I'm still alive. 600

*[Enter two attendants from the house bringing Ismene to Creon]*

CHORUS LEADER

Ismene's coming. There—right by the door.  
She's crying. How she must love her sister!  
From her forehead a cloud casts its shadow  
down across her darkly flushing face—  
and drops its rain onto her lovely cheeks. [530]

CREON

You there—you snake lurking in my house,

<sup>1</sup>*Hades*: god of the underworld, lord of the dead.

sucking out my life's blood so secretly.  
I'd no idea I was nurturing two pests,  
who aimed to rise against my throne. Come here. 610  
Tell me this—do you admit you played your part  
in this burial, or will you swear an oath  
you had no knowledge of it?

ISMENE

I did it—  
I admit it, and she'll back me up.  
So I bear the guilt as well.

ANTIGONE

No, no—  
justice will not allow you to say that.  
You didn't want to. I didn't work with you.

ISMENE

But now you're in trouble, I'm not ashamed 540  
of suffering, too, as your companion.

ANTIGONE

Hades and the dead can say who did it— 620  
I don't love a friend whose love is only words.

ISMENE

You're my sister. Don't dishonour me.  
Let me respect the dead and die with you.

ANTIGONE

Don't try to share my death or make a claim  
to actions which you did not do. I'll die—  
and that will be enough.

ISMENE

But if you're gone,  
what is there in life for me to love?

ANTIGONE

Ask Creon. He's the one you care about.

ISMENE

Why hurt me like this? It doesn't help you. 550

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ANTIGONE

If I am mocking you, it pains me, too.

630

ISMENE

Even now is there some way I can help?

ANTIGONE

Save yourself. I won't envy your escape.

ISMENE

I feel so wretched leaving you to die.

ANTIGONE

But you chose life—it was my choice to die.

ISMENE

But not before I'd said those words just now.

ANTIGONE

Some people may approve of how you think—  
others will believe my judgment's good.

ISMENE

But the mistake's the same for both of us.

ANTIGONE

Be brave. You're alive. But my spirit died  
some time ago so I might help the dead.

640 [560]

CREON

I'd say one of these girls has just revealed  
how mad she is—the other's been that way  
since she was born.

ISMENE

My lord, whatever good sense  
people have by birth no longer stays with them  
once their lives go wrong—it abandons them.

CREON

In your case, that's true, once you made your choice  
to act in evil ways with wicked people.

ISMENE

How could I live alone, without her here?

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CREON

Don't speak of her being here. Her life is over.

ISMENE

You're going to kill your own son's bride?

650

CREON

Why not? There are other fields for him to plough.

ISMENE

No one will make him a more loving wife  
than she will.

CREON

I have no desire my son  
should have an evil wife.

ANTIGONE

Dearest Haemon,  
how your father wrongs you.

CREON

I've had enough of this—  
you and your marriage.

ISMENE

You really want that?  
You're going to take her from him?

CREON

No, not me.  
Hades is the one who'll stop the marriage.

CHORUS LEADER

So she must die—that seems decided on.

CREON

Yes—for you and me the matter's closed.

660

*[Creon turns to address his attendants]*

No more delay. You slaves, take them inside.  
From this point on they must act like women  
and have no liberty to wander off.  
Even bold men run when they see Hades

[580]

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coming close to them to snatch their lives.

*[The attendants take Antigone and Ismene into the palace, leaving Creon and the Chorus on stage]*

CHORUS

Those who live without tasting evil  
have happy lives—for when the gods  
shake a house to its foundations,  
then inevitable disasters strike, 670  
falling upon whole families,  
just as a surging ocean swell  
running before cruel Thracian winds  
across the dark trench of the sea  
churns up the deep black sand [590]  
and crashes headlong on the cliffs,  
which scream in pain against the wind.

I see this house's age-old sorrows,  
the house of Labdakos' children,  
sorrows falling on the sorrows of the dead,  
one generation bringing no relief 680  
to generations after it—some god  
strikes at them—on and on without an end.<sup>1</sup>  
For now the light which has been shining  
over the last roots of Oedipus' house [600]  
is being cut down with a bloody knife  
belonging to the gods below—  
for foolish talk and frenzy in the soul.

O Zeus, what human trespasses  
can check your power? Even Sleep,  
who casts his nets on everything, 690  
cannot master that—nor can the months,  
the tireless months the gods control.  
A sovereign who cannot grow old,  
you hold Olympus as your own,

<sup>1</sup> *Labdakos*: father of Laius and hence grandfather of Oedipus and great-grandfather of Antigone and Ismene.

in all its glittering magnificence.<sup>1</sup> [610]  
From now on into all future time,  
as in the past, your law holds firm.  
It never enters lives of human beings  
in its full force without disaster.

Hope ranging far and wide brings comfort 700  
to many men—but then hope can deceive,  
delusions born of volatile desire.  
It comes upon the man who's ignorant  
until his foot is seared in burning fire.  
Someone's wisdom has revealed to us [620]  
this famous saying—sometimes the gods  
lure a man's mind forward to disaster,  
and he thinks evil's something good.  
But then he lives only the briefest time  
free of catastrophe.

*[The palace doors open]*

CHORUS LEADER

Here comes Haemon, 710  
your only living son. Is he grieving  
the fate of Antigone, his bride,  
bitter that his marriage hopes are gone? [630]

CREON

We'll soon find out—more accurately  
than any prophet here could indicate.

*[Enter Haemon from the palace]*

My son, have you heard the sentence that's been passed  
upon your bride? And have you now come here  
angry at your father? Or are you loyal to me,  
on my side no matter what I do?

HAEMON

Father, I'm yours. For me your judgments 720  
and the ways you act on them are good—

<sup>2</sup>*Olympus*: a mountain in northern Greece where, according to tradition, the major gods live.

You have just read the first 30 pages of Ian Johnston's new translation of Sophocles' *Antigone*.

Professor Johnston's works are increasingly becoming the translations of choice in high schools, colleges and universities in the U.S. here and around the world. Reviews of his work can be found on our website, which is listed below.

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## A Note on the Translator

Ian Johnston was born in Valparaiso, Chile, and educated in England and Canada. He has a BSc from McGill (Geology and Chemistry), a BA from Bristol (English and Greek), and an MA from Toronto (English). For many years he taught literature (English, Classics, and Liberal Studies) in the British Columbia college and university-college system, mostly at Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, before retiring in 2004. He is the author of *The Ironies of War: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad* (1988). He now lives in Nanaimo, British Columbia. His numerous translations from German, French, and Greek are available on his web site at the following address: <http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/index.htm>, and his translations of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have recently been published in the United States by Richer Resources Publications. The following Ian Johnston translations are available as printed books from Richer Resources Publications:

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Aristophanes, *Clouds*  
Aristophanes, *Frogs*  
Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*  
Aristophanes, *Birds*  
Homer, *Iliad* (both full and abridged versions)  
Homer, *Odyssey* (both full and abridged versions)  
Euripides, *Bacchae*  
Euripides, *Medea*  
Sophocles, *Antigone*  
Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*

Sound recordings of his translations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are available from Naxos AudioBooks at [www.naxosaudiobooks.com](http://www.naxosaudiobooks.com).

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Sophocles  
**Antigone**  
Translated by Ian Johnston

Sophocles (495 - 406 BC), the most prolific of the Greek playwrights whose works survive, wrote a number of plays about the family of Oedipus, legendary king of Thebes. Of these plays, the two most popular are Oedipus the King and Antigone. The former tells the tragic story of Oedipus' search for the murderer of Laius, the previous king. His investigation inexorably uncovers Oedipus' true identity, the discovery of which is so horrific that Oedipus blinds himself and goes off into exile.

The story of Antigone begins soon after Oedipus' downfall and the ensuing quarrel between his two sons over who should rule Thebes, a conflict which leads to a battle in which the two sons kill each other. The new ruler, Creon, decrees that Polyneices, the son who brought a foreign army against Thebes, will not be allowed a proper burial. Antigone, Oedipus' daughter, believes the proclamation is contrary to the rule of the gods and so takes it upon herself to bury her brother. When Creon discovers what she has done, he orders her death. By the time he is dissuaded of this action by a prophecy of doom should it be carried out, Antigone has already accepted her fate and taken her own life. Her lover, Haemon, who is Creon's son, finds her and in his grief over her loss, takes his own life. Thus the prophecy is carried out despite Creon's last minute attempts to change fate's decree.



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