

Sophocles

Antigone

Dramatis Personae

Background Note to the Story

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.

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

[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?
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.

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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.

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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.

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

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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?

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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?

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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—
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
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
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
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.

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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.
I'll still bury him. It would be fine to die
while doing that. I'll lie there with him,
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.

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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
to make a burial mound for my dear brother.

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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.

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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.

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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]*

