

**SCENE 1: 237-277**

Creon and the Watchman

**WATCHMAN:**

First, I want to tell you where I stand:  
I didn't do this thing, and I don't know who did,  
And it wouldn't be fair if I got hurt. [240]

**CREON:**

All right, your defense perimeter is up.  
Now, let's have your report.

**WATCHMAN:**

It's terrible news. I can't come right out with that.

**CREON:**

Speak up! And then get lost.

**WATCHMAN:**

OK, here it is. The body out there—someone buried it [245]  
Just now and went away. They spread thirsty dust  
All over the skin and did the ceremony in full.

**CREON:**

What? No man would dare! Who did it?

**WATCHMAN:**

I don't know. The ground was so hard and dry.  
It showed no marks. No spade scratches, [250]  
No pickaxe holes, not even chariot ruts.  
The perpetrator had not left a single clue.  
When the first day-watchman showed it to us,  
We were all amazed. It was incredible:

The guy had vanished.<sup>1</sup> There was no tomb, [255]  
Only fine dust lying over the body, enough to take  
The curse away. No sign of wild animals,  
No dogs sniffing or tugging at the corpse.

We burst out shouting at each other;  
Everyone was hurling accusations. [260]

We kept coming to blows, no one to stop us.  
Any one of us could have done the thing.

No one caught red-handed, everyone pled ignorance.  
We were about to test each other with red-hot iron  
Or run our hands through fire and swear by all the gods: [265]

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<sup>1</sup> "The guy had vanished"—The subject of this sentence probably is the corpse of Polynices.

“I didn’t do it, and I had no part in any plot  
To do it, not with anyone else, not by hand or word.”  
Well, we weren’t getting anywhere, and in the end  
Someone told us to do a thing we couldn’t see how  
To refuse *or* accept. So we dropped heads, stared at the ground [270]  
In fear. There was no way it would turn out good for us.  
We simply had to bring word to you,  
Because we could not hide a thing like this.  
We voted to do it, and I am so damned unlucky  
I won the lottery to have this lovely job. [275]  
I didn’t want to come. And you sure didn’t want to see me:  
No one loves the man who brings bad news.

**SCENE TWO: 332-75 (FIRST STASIMON, ODE TO MAN)**

Chorus

**CHORUS:**

[Strophe *a*]

Many wonders, many terrors,<sup>2</sup>  
But none more wonderful than the human race  
Or more dangerous.

This creature travels on a winter gale [335]

Across the silver sea,

Shadowed by high-surfing waves,

While on Earth, grandest of the gods,

He grinds the deathless, tireless land away,<sup>3</sup>

Turning and turning the plow [340]

From year to year, behind driven horses.

[Antistrophe *a*]

Light-headed birds he catches

And takes them away in legions. Wild beasts

Also fall prey to him.

And all that is born to live beneath the sea [345]

Is thrashing in his woven nets.

For he is Man,<sup>4</sup> and he is cunning.

He has invented ways to take control<sup>5</sup>

Of beasts that range mountain meadows:

Taken down the shaggy-necked horses, [350]

The tireless mountain bulls,

And put them under the yoke.<sup>6</sup>

[Strophe *b*]

Language and a mind swift as the wind

For making plans— [355]

These he has taught himself—

And the character to live in cities under law.<sup>7</sup>

He's learned to take cover from a frost

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<sup>2</sup> "Many wonders, many terrors" (*polla ta deina*)—A word-for-word translation would be "Many things are wonderful-terrible, but none is more so than a human being." The word *deinon* is used of things that are awe-inspiring in both good and bad ways. I have rendered this double meaning by using "wonder," "terror," and "dangerous" in the opening lines.

<sup>3</sup> "Grinds the ... land away"—The Greek verb implies that he does this for his benefit.

<sup>4</sup> "Man"—The ode begins at line 333 with the generic "human," but here the male of the species is plainly indicated. The quarrel between a man and a woman that lies at the heart of the play is in the background; Greek men of this period frequently used images of taming and controlling animals for the relation between the sexes.

<sup>5</sup> "Ways to take control"—The Greek word is used for conquest or the illegitimate rule of a tyrant.

<sup>6</sup> "Yoke"—This word too is politically charged. Line 292, just before this ode, talks about "the yoke of justice"—With this powerful and undemocratic image, Creon speaks of holding his citizens to justice as he would of breaking animals to the yoke.

<sup>7</sup> "The character to live in cities"—Literally, the untranslated phrase indicates the emotions that give order to cities. Probably the line refers to such virtues as reverence, justice, and a sense of shame, all of which civic life was widely thought to depend upon. See Plato's *Protagoras* 322c–d. But the word translated "character" can also mean "anger," as at line 875.

And escape sharp arrows of sleet.  
He has the means to handle every need, [360]  
Never steps toward the future without the means.  
Except for Death: He's got himself no relief from that,  
Though he puts every mind to seeking cures  
For plagues that are hopeless.

[Antistrophe *b*]

He has cunning contrivance, [365]  
Skill surpassing hope,  
And so he slithers into wickedness sometimes,  
Other times into doing good.  
If he honors the law of the land  
And the oath-bound justice of the gods, [370]  
Then his city shall stand high.  
But no city for him if he turns shameless out of daring.  
He will be no guest of mine,  
He will never share my thoughts,  
If he goes wrong. [375]

**SCENE THREE: 450-525**

Creon and Antigone

**ANTIGONE:**

What laws? I never heard it was Zeus [450]

Who made that announcement.

And it wasn't justice, either. The gods below

Didn't lay down this law for human use.

And I never thought your announcements

Could give you—a mere human being— [445]

Power to trample the gods' unfailing,

Unwritten laws. These laws weren't made now

Or yesterday. They live for all time,

And no one knows when they came into the light.

No man could frighten me into taking on

The gods' penalty for breaking such a law. [460]

I'll die in any case, of course I will,

Whether you announce my execution or not.

But if I die young, all the better:

People who live in misery like mine

Are better dead. So if that's the way [465]

My life will end, the pain is nothing.

But if I let the corpse—my mother's son—

Lie dead, unburied, that would be agony.

This way, no agony for me. But you! You think

I've been a fool? It takes a fool to think that. [470]

**CHORUS:**

Now we see the girl's as wild by birth as her father.

She has no idea how to bow her head to trouble.

**CREON:** (*To the chorus.*)<sup>8</sup>

Don't forget: The mind that is most rigid

Stumbles soonest; the hardest iron—

Tempered in fire till it is super-strong— [475]

Shatters easily and clatters into shards.

And you can surely break the wildest horse

With a tiny bridle. When the master's watching,

Pride has no place in the life of a slave.

This girl was a complete expert in arrogance [480]

Already, when she broke established law.

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<sup>8</sup> Creon apparently does not think it worth his while to answer Antigone; instead, he responds to the chorus in a speech that consists mainly of a ringing list of clichés about the risks attending arrogance and inflexible judgment—risks he is unconsciously taking himself. His opening image of hard, fragile iron prefigures Haemon's mention of stiff trees breaking in a flood, lines 712–4.

And now, arrogantly, she adds insult to injury:<sup>9</sup>  
She's boasting and sneering about what she's done!  
Listen, if she's not punished for taking the upper hand,  
Then I am not a man. *She* would be a man! [485]  
I don't care if she is my sister's child—  
Or closer yet at my household shrine for Zeus—  
She and her sister must pay the full price  
And die for their crime.

*(The chorus indicate their surprise that both must die.)*  
Yes, I say they have equal guilt,  
Conniving, one with the other, for this burial. [490]  
Bring her out. I saw her in there a minute ago;  
She was raving mad, totally out of her mind.  
Often it's the feelings of a thief that give him away  
Before the crimes he did in darkness come to light.

*(Turning to Antigone.)*  
But how I hate it when she's caught in the act, [495]  
And the criminal still glories in her crime.

**ANTIGONE:**

You've caught me, you can kill me. What more do you want?

**CREON:**

For me, that's everything. I want no more than that.

**ANTIGONE:**

Then what are you waiting for? More talk?  
Your words disgust me, I hope they always will.<sup>10</sup> [500]  
And I'm sure you are disgusted by what I say.  
But yet, speaking of glory, what could be more  
Glorious than giving my true brother his burial?  
All these men would tell you they're rejoicing  
Over that, if you hadn't locked their tongues [505]  
With fear. But a tyrant says and does

What he pleases. That's his great joy.

**CREON:**

You are the only one, in all Thebes, who thinks that way.

**ANTIGONE:**

No. They all see it the same. You've silenced them.

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<sup>9</sup> "Arrogance ... injury"—The Greek word *hubris* includes the meanings of arrogance, insolence, outrage, and crime. Typically violating justice and reverence, *hubris* is practiced by the strong against the weak.

<sup>10</sup> "Your words disgust me"—Although the literal translation is closer to "are not pleasing to me," ancient Greek understatements often imply powerful sentiments.

**CREON:**

Aren't you ashamed to have a mind apart from theirs?

[510]

**ANTIGONE:**

There's no shame in having respect for a brother.

**CREON:**

Wasn't he your brother, too, the one who died on the other side?

**ANTIGONE:**

Yes, my blood brother—same mother, same father.

**CREON:**

When you honor the one, you disgrace the other. Why do it?

**ANTIGONE:**

The dead will never testify against a burial.

[515]

**CREON:**

Yes, if they were equal. But one of them deserves disgrace.

**ANTIGONE:**

He wasn't any kind of slave. He was his brother, who died.

**CREON:**

He was killing and plundering. The other one defended our land.

**ANTIGONE:**

Even so, Hades longs to have these laws obeyed.<sup>11</sup>

**CREON:**

But surely not equal treatment for good and bad?

[520]

**ANTIGONE:**

Who knows? Down below that might be blessed.

**CREON:**

An enemy is always an enemy, even in death.

**ANTIGONE:**

I cannot side with hatred. My nature sides with love.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Hades is the god of death; his name is also used for the Underworld, to which the dead belong.

<sup>12</sup> "I cannot side with hatred. My nature sides with love"—Antigone coins new words here for her extraordinary feelings. She means that even if her brothers hate each other, it is her nature not to join them in hatred, but in the family love (*philia*)

**CREON:**

Go to Hades, then, and if you have to love, love someone dead.  
As long as I live, I will not be ruled by a woman.

[525]

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they have for her. Note also that family love is natural, i.e., by birth, unlike any sort of enmity: "I have friends by birth, not enemies" (Lloyd-Jones 1994).

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**SCENE FOUR: 801-82**

Chorus and Antigone

**CHORUS:**

Now I, too, am swept away,<sup>13</sup>  
Out of bounds, when I see this.  
I cannot contain the surge of tears:  
For now I see Antigone, soon to gain  
The marriage bed where everyone must sleep. [805]

**ANTIGONE:**

See how I walk the last road,  
You who belong to my city,  
How I fill my eyes with the last  
Shining of the sun.  
There's no return: I follow death, alive, [810]  
To the brink of Acheron,  
Where He gives rest to all.  
No marriage hymns for me.  
No one sounds  
A wedding march: [815]  
I will be the bride of Acheron.<sup>14</sup>

**CHORUS:**

But won't you have hymns of praise?  
So much glory attends you  
As you pass into the deep place of the dead.  
For you are not wasted by disease, not maimed by a sword. [820]  
But true to your own laws, you are the only one,<sup>15</sup>  
Of mortals, who'll go down to Hades while still alive.<sup>16</sup>

**ANTIGONE:**

No. I hear Niobe was lost in utmost misery<sup>17</sup>—  
Daughter of Tantalus, visitor in Thebes,  
Wasted on a Phrygian mountain. [825]  
Rock sprouted up around her, firm,  
Erect as shoots of ivy,

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<sup>13</sup> "I, too"—The chorus find themselves carried away by forbidden feelings, as they say happened earlier to Haemon.

<sup>14</sup> Acheron—a river in the Underworld.

<sup>15</sup> "But true to your own laws"—The Greek is *autonomos*, rendered by some scholars as "of your own will"; but the word means more than that in ancient Greek, and the root word "law" (*nomos*) is clearly heard.

<sup>16</sup> "While still alive"—The chorus mean that she will be entombed while still alive.

<sup>17</sup> Niobe—Antigone misunderstands the chorus to be saying that she will live forever underground and cites the case of Niobe, who was entombed alive and then turned to stone. Niobe had many children and boasted of them by comparison with Leto, who had only two children, Artemis and Apollo. For this she was punished by seeing her children die of disease.

And it subdued her. So men say.  
Rain and snow pelted her  
Without a break, and she melted away,  
Dripping from her mournful brows, [830]  
Tears streaming down her flanks.  
It's the same for me, exactly:  
Something divine lays me to sleep.

**CHORUS:**

Really! Niobe was a god; she had a god for a father.  
We are mortal, and our fathers pass away. [835]  
But you—when you die, you will be great,  
You will be equal in memory to the gods,  
By the glory of your life and death.

**ANTIGONE:**

You're laughing at me.  
For the gods' sake, why now? [840]  
You could have waited till I'm gone.  
But now you make insults to my face,  
You grasping, rich old men! What a city you have!  
I call on the rising of rivers in Thebes  
And on the great chariot-reaches of the plain. [845]  
The rivers and the plain are on my side, at least.  
They'll testify that no friends wept for me,  
That the laws of Thebes sent me to prison  
In a rock-hollowed tomb.  
They see how unusual and cruel this is. [850]  
But I have no place with human beings,  
Living or dead. No city is home to me.

**CHORUS:**

You've gone too far! You are extreme, impetuous.  
My child, you caught your foot and fell  
When you tried to climb against high justice. [855]  
This is your father's legacy—pain and punishment.

**ANTIGONE:**

Now you raise the agony that hurts my mind the most:  
Grief for my father,  
Like raw earth plowed three times,  
Grief for the whole huge disaster of *us*, [860]  
Our brilliant family,  
Labdacus' descendants.  
I weep for the ruin in my mother's bed,  
The sexual intercourse and the incest

My father had with our mother. [865]  
Ill-fated parents make a miserable child.  
I am going to them now,  
Unholy and unmarried, to lodge with them.  
Oh, my brother, you were married once,<sup>18</sup>  
But what a disaster it was: [870]  
Your death snuffed out my life.

**CHORUS:**

You have one kind of reverence.  
But a man whose job it is to rule  
Will never let you trample on his power.  
You chose anger, and anger destroyed you. [875]

**ANTIGONE:**

No tears for me, no friends, no wedding hymns.  
They are taking me away  
In misery by the road before me,  
Now and forever forbidden to see  
This blessed eye of light. [880]  
No friends cry for me,  
No one is mourning.

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<sup>18</sup> "You were married once"—Polynices married the daughter of the king of Argos, and Argos provided the army that attacked Thebes.

**SCENE FIVE: 1033-1090**

Tiresias and Creon

**CREON:**

I hear you, old man: You people keep shooting arrows at me  
Like marksmen at a target. Do you think I don't know?

I have a lot of experience with soothsayers. Your whole tribe [1035]  
Has made market of me from the start. "Benefit"? "Gain"?

If you want to turn a profit, speculate in gold from India  
Or go trade with Sardis for electrum and traffic in that.<sup>19</sup>

You'll never put that man down in a grave,  
Not even if eagles snatched morsels of his dead flesh [1040]

And carried them up to the very throne of Zeus.

I won't shrink from that. And don't you call it "pollution"<sup>20</sup>

Or tell me I have to bury him to fend off miasma—

Surely no human power could pollute a god.

You're terribly clever, old man, but listen to me.<sup>21</sup> [1045]

Clever people tend to stumble into shameful traps

When they make a wicked speech sound good

For their personal gain.

**TIRESIAS:**

This is very sad:

Does any human being know, or even question...

**CREON:** (*Interrupting.*)

What's this? More of your great "common knowledge"?

**TIRESIAS:**

How powerful good judgment is, compared to wealth. [1050]

**CREON:**

Exactly. And no harm compares with heedlessness.

**TIRESIAS:**

Which runs through you like the plague.

**CREON:**

I have no desire to trade insults with a soothsayer.

**TIRESIAS:**

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<sup>19</sup> Electrum is an alloy of gold and silver made in Sardis, the city where Croesus, famous for his wealth, had ruled in the sixth century.

<sup>20</sup> Pollution, miasma—Either an unburied corpse or an unavenged murder was thought to infect the land with *miasma*, pollution. Creon dismisses this on rational grounds.

<sup>21</sup> "Terribly clever"—The Greek word *deinos* carries both positive and negative meanings.

But you're doing it. You implied that I make false prophecies.

**CREON:**

Prophecies? All your tribe wants to make is money. [1055]

**TIRESIAS:**

And what about tyrants? Filthy lucre is all you want!

**CREON:**

Remember, you are speaking about your commander-in-chief.

**TIRESIAS:**

I haven't forgotten. It was by my powers that you saved the city.

**CREON:**

Cunning soothsayer! Yes, but you'd rather do what's wrong.

**TIRESIAS:**

You are provoking me. I have a secret we have not touched. [1060]

**CREON:**

Well, touch it then. But do not speak as you've been paid to do.

**TIRESIAS:**

Do you really think that's why I've spoken out?

**CREON:**

You'll never collect your fee; I'm not changing *my* mind.

**TIRESIAS:**

So be it. But you must know this and know it well:  
You'll hardly see the sun race around its course [1065]

Before you'll make a trade with your own boy's corpse—  
Your only child, born from your guts, traded for corpses.<sup>22</sup>

You took one who dwells above and tossed her below,  
You rejected a living soul and peopled a tomb with her.  
And you took one who belongs down there and kept him here, [1070]

Untouched by gods, unburied, unholy, a corpse exposed.  
The dead are no business of yours; not even the gods above  
Own any part of them. You've committed violence against them.  
For this, an ambush awaits you—slow, crippling avengers,  
Furies<sup>23</sup> sent by Hades and the gods above. [1075]

You will be tangled in the net of your own crimes.

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<sup>22</sup> Haemon is Creon's last surviving child.

<sup>23</sup> Furies—avenging spirits.

Now look carefully: Have I been paid to speak out?  
No. The passage of a little time will prove the point;  
Men and women will be wailing over death in your family.  
And all the cities of our enemies are in a rage [1080]  
For their dead, whose funeral rites were held by dogs  
Or wild beasts or vultures, and for the stench of bodies  
Carried by birds to defile their hearths at home.<sup>24</sup>  
These are my arrows. You stung me, and I let fly,  
In my anger, like a marksman aiming for your heart. [1085]  
And I never miss. You can't outrun the pain.  
*(To his guide.)*  
Take us home, boy.  
Let him vent his anger on younger men;  
May he learn to cultivate a gentler tongue  
And a mind more cogent than he has shown today. [1090]

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<sup>24</sup> These lines refer to the tradition, not otherwise mentioned in this play, that Creon left not just Polynices but all the enemy troops unburied. (Some editors reject these lines as spurious in order to maintain the consistency of the play.)

**SCENE SIX: 1261-1347**

Creon and Chorus

[Strophe *a*]

**CREON:**

Oh, howl for the sins of a stubborn mind,  
Evil-minded, death-dealing! O you who are witnesses,  
You saw those who killed and those who died,  
All in one family,  
Cry out against the sacrilege that I called strategy!  
Oh, howl, my son, my young son, for your young death.  
Ah! Ah!  
You were expelled from life  
By my bad judgment, never yours.

[1265]

**CHORUS:**

Yes, it is late, but you have seen where justice lies.

[1270]

[Strophe *b*]

**CREON:** Oh yes:

I have learned, and it is misery.  
Some god leapt full force onto my head  
And steered me onto a wild path, shaking my reins,  
And I have trampled joy with sharp hooves.  
Oh weep, weep for the pain of human pain!

[1275]

*(Enter Messenger through the great doors.)*

**MESSENGER:**

You have so many troubles, master, troubles in hand—  
You carry them yourself. And troubles at home—  
You'll see them for yourself, soon enough, when you arrive.

[1280]

**CREON:**

What, after this, could be worse?

**MESSENGER:**

Your wife is dead, poor woman.  
Fresh-killed, a mother to match this dead boy.

[Antistrophe *a*]

**CREON:**

Howl, howl! O Death, refuge that cannot be  
appeased,  
Why me? Why me, Destroyer?  
*(To the Messenger.)*

And you,

[1285]

What is this noise you're making? Your horrible message?  
It is only grief.  
I was a man in ruins, and you crushed me again.

Speak to me, my son, tell me, is there more killing?

Ah! Ah!

[1290]

Is it a woman's sacrifice,  
Her death piled on yours?

*(The great doors open, and Eurydice's body is brought out or revealed.)*

**CHORUS** (or **MESSENGER**):

Look, she is here, brought out from the inner rooms.

[Antistrophe b]

**CREON**:

Oh yes:

Here's the second disaster for my misery to see.

[1295]

What could be worse? Does fate have more for me?

A moment ago, I took my dead son in my arms.

Now I see her face to face—my wife. And she is dead.

Oh weep, weep for the mother in torment, weep for the child.

**MESSENGER**:

She died at the altar.

[1300]

A sharp sword-thrust brought darkness to her eyes,

But first she grieved over Megareus,<sup>25</sup> dead before his wedding,

And then over Haemon.

Last of all she called out to you,

"These are your crimes, Childkiller!"

[1305]

[Strophe c]

**CREON**:

Ah! Ah!

I am on wings of fear.

Take a sharp sword, someone.

Why don't you kill me now?

My misery is so huge,

[1310]

I am dissolved in misery.

**MESSENGER**:

Yes, she brought this charge against you as she died:

"You're to blame for his death, and the other boy's, too."

**CREON**:

Tell me, how was she killed?

**MESSENGER**:

Stabbed in the guts by her own hand,

[1315]

As soon as she heard what horrors came over her boy.

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<sup>25</sup> Megareus—Haemon's only brother, son of Creon and Eurydice. The audience probably knew that Megareus had been sacrificed earlier to ensure victory over Argos.



[Strophe d]

**CREON:**

The grief is mine, all mine.

I'll never pin the blame on anyone else that's human.

I was the one, I killed you, poor child.

I did it. It is all true.

[1320]

Now, my neighbors,

Please take me away,

Take me quickly.

I must not be underfoot;

I am worth less than a nobody.

[1325]

**CHORUS:**

A worthy request—if there's any value in suffering.

Shortest way is strongest way when trouble's afoot.

[Antistrophe c]

**CREON:**

Let it come! Let it come!

I look for the light

Of my last day.

[1330]

My ultimate fate

Oh, let it come

I never want to face another day!

**CHORUS:**

That lies in the future. Our duty is for the present.

Leave your death to the Ones whose concern it is.

[1335]

**CREON:**

But that's what I long for. I prayed for that.

**CHORUS:**

Then don't pray at all.

A mortal has no escape from fate.

[Antistrophe d]

**CREON:** (*Praying.*)

Please take this useless man,

Put him out of your way. He killed you, my child,

[1340]

Though that is not what he wished.

And you, too, my wife.

What a miserable wretch I am!

Never to see them again!

On whom can I lean?

[1345]

Everything I touch turns against me,

My head bows to the fate that has leapt on it.