

Sophocles

ANTIGONE

In *Antigone*, the dramatist Sophocles expresses the Greeks' high esteem for humanity and its potential. He also deals with a theme that recurs in Western thought over the centuries: the conflict between individual morality and the requirements of the state, between personal conscience and the state's laws. Creon, king of Thebes, forbids the burial of Polyneikes, Antigone's brother, because he rebelled against the state. The body, decrees Creon, shall remain unburied, food for dogs and vultures, despite the fact that Antigone is his niece and betrothed to his son. Antigone believes that a higher law compels her to bury her brother, even though this means certain death for her and for her sister Ismene, if the latter helps Antigone.

SCENE II

CREON (*to* ANTIGONE)

You there. You, looking at the ground. Tell me.
Do you admit this or deny it? Which?

ANTIGONE

Yes, I admit it. I do not deny it.

CREON (*to* GUARD)

Go. You are free. The charge is dropped.

Exit GUARD

Now you,

Answer this question. Make your answer brief.

You knew there was a law forbidding this?

ANTIGONE

Of course I knew it. Why not? It was public.

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CREON

And you have dared to disobey the law?

ANTIGONE

Yes. For this law was not proclaimed by Zeus,
Or by the gods who rule the world below.
I do not think your edicts have such power
That they can override the laws of heaven,
Unwritten and unfailing, laws whose life
Belongs not to today or yesterday
But to time everlasting; and no man
Knows the first moment that they had
their being.

If I transgressed these laws because I feared
The arrogance of man, how to the gods
Could I make satisfaction? Well I know,
Being a mortal, that I have to die,
Even without your proclamations. Yet
If I must die before my time is come,
That is a blessing. Because to one who lives,
As I live, in the midst of sorrows, death
Is of necessity desirable.
For me, to face death is a trifling pain
That does not trouble me. But to have left
The body of my brother, my own brother,
Lying unburied would be bitter grief.
And if these acts of mine seem foolish to you,
Perhaps a fool accuses me of folly.

CHORUS

The violent daughter of a violent father,
She cannot bend before a storm of evils.

CREON (to ANTIGONE)

Stubborn? Self-willed? People like that, I tell
you,
Are the first to come to grief. The hardest iron,
Baked in the fire, most quickly flies to pieces.
An unruly horse is taught obedience
By a touch of the curb. How can you be so
proud?
You, a mere slave? (to CHORUS) She was well
schooled already
In insolence, when she defied the law.
And now look at her! Boasting, insolent,
Exulting in what she did. And if she triumphs
And goes unpunished, I am no man—she is.
If she were more than niece, if she were closer

Than anyone who worships at my altar,
She would not even then escape her doom,
A dreadful death. Nor would her sister. Yes,
Her sister had a share in burying him.
(to ATTENDANT) Go bring her here. I have just
seen her, raving,
Beside herself. Even before they act,
Traitors who plot their treason in the dark
Betray themselves like that. Detestable!
(to ANTIGONE) But hateful also is an evil-doer
Who, caught red-handed, glorifies the crime.

ANTIGONE

Now you have caught me, will you do more
than kill me?

CREON

No, only that. With that I am satisfied.

ANTIGONE

Then why do you delay? You have said
nothing
I do not hate. I pray you never will.
And you hate what I say. Yet how could I
Have won more splendid honor than by giving
Due burial to my brother? All men here
Would grant me their approval, if their lips
Were not sealed up in fear. But you, a king,
Blessed by good fortune in much else besides,
Can speak and act with perfect liberty.

CREON

All of these Thebans disagree with you.

ANTIGONE

No. They agree, but they control their tongues.

CREON

You feel no shame in acting without their
help?

ANTIGONE

I feel no shame in honoring a brother.

CREON

Another brother died who fought against him.

ANTIGONE

Two brothers. The two sons of the same
parents.

* * *

CREON
Honor to one is outrage to the other.

ANTIGONE
Eteocles will not feel himself dishonored.

CREON
What! When his rites are offered to a traitor?

ANTIGONE
It was his brother, not his slave, who died.

CREON
One who attacked the land that he defended.

ANTIGONE
The gods still wish those rites to be performed.

CREON
Are the just pleased with the unjust as their equals?

ANTIGONE
That may be virtuous in the world below.

CREON
No. Even there a foe is never a friend.

ANTIGONE
I am not made for hatred but for love.

CREON
Then go down to the dead. If you must love,
Love them. While I yet live, no woman
rules me.

CHORUS
Look there. Ismene, weeping as sisters weep,
The shadow of a cloud of grief lies deep.
On her face, darkly flushed; and in her pain
Her tears are falling like a flood of rain.

Enter ISMENE and ATTENDANTS

CREON
You viper! Lying hidden in my house,
Sucking my blood in secret, while I reared,
Unknowingly, two subverters of my throne.
Do you confess that you have taken part
In this man's burial, or deny it? Speak.

ISMENE
If she will recognize my right to say so,
I shared the action and I share the blame.

ANTIGONE
No. That would not be just. I never let you
Take any part in what you disapproved of.

ISMENE
In your calamity, I am not ashamed
To stand beside you, beaten by this tempest.

ANTIGONE
The dead are witnesses of what I did,
To love in words alone is not enough.

ISMENE
Do not reject me, Sister! Let me die
Beside you, and do honor to the dead.

ANTIGONE
No. You will neither share my death nor claim
What I have done. My death will be sufficient.

ISMENE
What happiness can I have when you are gone?

ANTIGONE
Ask Creon that. He is the one you value.

ISMENE
Do you gain anything by taunting me?

ANTIGONE
Ah, no! By taunting you, I hurt myself.

ISMENE
How can I help you? Tell me what I can do.

ANTIGONE
Protect yourself. I do not grudge your safety.

ISMENE
Antigone! Shall I not share your fate?

ANTIGONE
We both have made our choices life, and death.

ISMENE
At least I tried to stop you. I protested.

ANTIGONE
Some have approved your way; and others,
mine.

ISMENE
Yet now I share your guilt. I too am ruined.

* * *

ANTIGONE

Take courage. Live your life. But I long since
Gave myself up to death to help the dead. . . .

Haemon, grief-stricken at the condemnation
of his fiancée Antigone, approaches his father
Creon, and tries to resolve the crisis.
Creon is suspicious about Haemon's loyalty.

CREON

We soon shall know better than seers could tell
us.

My son, Antigone is condemned to death.
Nothing can change my sentence. Have you
learned

Her fate and come here in a storm of anger,
Or do you love me and support my acts?

HAEMON

Father, I am your son. Your greater knowledge
Will trace the pathway that I mean to follow.
My marriage cannot be of more importance
Than to be guided always by your wisdom.

CREON

Yes, Haemon, this should be the law you
live by!

In all things to obey your father's will.
Men pray for children round them in their
homes

Only to see them dutiful and quick
With hatred to require [for] their father's foe,
With honor to repay their father's friend.
But what is there to say of one whose children
Prove to be valueless? That he has fathered
Grief for himself and laughter for his foes.
Then, Haemon, do not, at the lure of pleasure,
Unseat your reason for a woman's sake.
This comfort soon grows cold in your embrace:
A wicked wife to share your bed and home.
Is there a deeper wound than to find worthless
The one you love? Turn from this girl with
loathing,
As from an enemy, and let her go
To get a husband in the world below.

For I have found her openly rebellious,
Her only out of all the city. Therefore,
I will not break the oath that I have sworn.
I will have her killed. Vainly she will invoke
The bond of kindred blood the gods make
sacred.

If I permit disloyalty to breed
In my own house, I nurture it in strangers.
He who is righteous with his kin is righteous
In the state also. Therefore, I cannot pardon
One who does violence to the laws or thinks
To dictate to his rulers; for whoever
May be the man appointed by the city,
That man must be obeyed in everything,
Little or great, just or unjust. And surely
He who was thus obedient would be found
As good a ruler as he was a subject;
And in a storm of spears he would stand fast
With loyal courage at his comrade's side.
But disobedience is the worst of evils.
For it is this that ruins cities; this
Makes our homes desolate; armies of allies
Through this break up in rout. But most men
find
Their happiness and safety in obedience.
Therefore we must support the law, and never
Be beaten by a woman. It is better
To fall by a man's hand, if we must fall,
Than to be known as weaker than a girl.

CHORUS

We may in our old age have lost our judgment,
And yet to us you seem to have spoken wisely.

HAEMON

The gods have given men the gift of reason,
Greatest of all things that we call our own.
I have no skill, nor do I wish to have it,
To show where you have spoken wrongly. Yet
Some other's thought, beside your own, might
prove
To be of value. Therefore it is my duty,
My natural duty as your son, to notice,
On your behalf, all that men say, or do,
Or find to blame. For your frown frightens
them,

So that the citizen dares not say a word
That would offend you. I can hear, however,
Murmurs in darkness and laments for her.
They say: "No woman ever less deserved
Her doom, no woman ever was to die
So shamefully for deeds so glorious.
For when her brother fell in bloody battle,
She would not let his body lie unburied
To be devoured by carrion dogs or birds.
Does such a woman not deserve reward,
Rewards of golden honor?" This I hear,
A rumor spread in secrecy and darkness.
Father, I prize nothing in life so highly
As your well-being. How can children have
A nobler honor than their father's fame
Or father than his son's? Then do not think
Your mood must never alter; do not feel
Your word, and yours alone, must be correct.
For if a man believes that he is right
And only he, that no one equals him
In what he says or thinks, he will be found
Empty when searched and rested. Because
a man
Even if he be wise, feels no disgrace
In learning many things, in taking care
Not to be over-rigid. You have seen
Trees on the margin of a stream in winter:
Those yielding to the flood save every twig,
And those resisting perish root and branch.
So, too, the mariner who never slackens
His taut sheet overturns his craft and spends
Keel uppermost the last part of his voyage.
Let your resentment die. Let yourself change.
For I believe—if I, a younger man,
May have a sound opinion—it is best
That men by nature should be wise in all
things.
But most men find they cannot reach that goal;
And when this happens, it is also good
To learn to listen to wise counselors.

CHORUS

Sir, when his words are timely, you should heed them.

And Haemon, you should profit by his words.
Each one of you has spoken reasonably.

CREON

Are men as old as I am to be taught
How to behave by men as young as he?

HAEMON

Not to do wrong. If I am young, ignore
My youth. Consider only what I do.

CREON

Have you done well in honoring the rebellious?

HAEMON

Those who do wrong should not command
respect.

CREON

Then that disease has not infected her?

HAEMON

All of our city with one voice denies it.

CREON

Does Thebes give orders for the way I rule?

HAEMON

How young you are! How young in saying
that!

CREON

Am I to govern by another's judgment?

HAEMON

A city that is one man's is no city.

CREON

A city is the king's. That much is sure.

HAEMON

You would rule well in a deserted country.