

6 Greek Drama

Western drama is an art form that originated in Greece. It had its beginnings in the religious ceremonies of the Greeks and initially served a ritual function linking the Greeks with their gods. In the hands of the great Greek dramatists, drama gradually became less concerned with the activities of the gods, emphasizing instead human personality and universal human themes.

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 *Wheeling on Antigone.*
You,
with your eyes fixed on the ground—speak up.
Do you deny you did this, yes or no?

ANTIGONE
I did it. I don't deny a thing.

CREON *To the Sentry.*
You, get out, wherever you please—
you're clear of a very heavy charge.
He leaves; Creon turns back to Antigone.

You, tell me briefly, no long speeches—
were you aware a decree had forbidden this?

ANTIGONE
Well aware. How could I avoid it? It was
public.

CREON
And still you had the gall to break this law?

ANTIGONE
Of course I did. It wasn't Zeus, not in the
least,
who made this proclamation—not to me.
Nor did that Justice, dwelling with the gods
beneath the earth, ordain such laws for men.
Nor did I think your edict had such force
that you, a mere mortal, could override the
gods,
the great unwritten, unshakable traditions.
They are alive, not just today or yesterday:
they live forever, from the first of time,
and no one knows when they first saw the
light.

These laws—I was not about to break them,
not out of fear of some man's wounded pride,
and face the retribution of the gods.
Die I must, I've known it all my life—
how could I keep from knowing?—even
without
your death-sentence ringing in my ears.
And if I am to die before my time

I consider that a gain. Who on earth,
 alive in the midst of so much grief as I,
 could fail to find his death a rich reward?
 So for me, at least, to meet this doom of yours
 is precious little pain. But if I had allowed
 my own mother's son to rot, an unburied
 corpse—
 that would have been an agony! This is nothing.
 And if my present actions strike you as foolish,
 let's just say I've been accused of folly
 by a fool.

* LEADER¹
 Like father like daughter,
 passionate, wild . . .
 she hasn't learned to bend before adversity.

CREON
 No? Believe me, the stiffest stubborn wills
 fall the hardest; the toughest iron,
 tempered strong in the white-hot fire,
 you'll see it crack and shatter first of all.
 And I've known spirited horses you can
 break
 with a light bit—proud, rebellious horses.
 There's no room for pride, not in a slave,
 not with the lord and master standing by.

This girl was an old hand at insolence
 when she overrode the edicts we made public.
 But once she'd done it—the insolence,
 twice over—to glory in it, laughing,
 mocking us to our face with what she'd done.
 I'm not the man, not now: she is the man
 if this victory goes to her and she goes free.

Never! Sister's child or closer in blood
 than all my family clustered at my altar
 worshiping Guardian Zeus—she'll never
 escape,
 she and her blood sister [Ismene], the most
 barbaric death.

Yes, I accuse her sister of an equal part
 in scheming this, this burial.

* Bring her here!

To his attendants.

¹This character, sometimes called the *choragos*, was a single commentator on the action of the play.

I just saw her inside, hysterical, gone to
 pieces.
 It never fails: the mind convicts itself
 in advance, when scoundrels are up to no
 good,
 plotting in the dark. Oh but I hate it more
 when a traitor, caught red-handed,
 tries to glorify his crimes.

ANTIGONE
 Creon, what more do you want
 than my arrest and execution?

CREON
 Nothing. Then I have it all.

ANTIGONE
 Then why delay? Your moralizing repels me,
 every word you say—pray god it always will.
 So naturally all I say repels you too.
 Enough.
 Give me glory! What greater glory could I
 win
 than to give my own brother decent burial?
 These citizens here would all agree.

To the Chorus.

they'd praise me too
 if their lips weren't locked in fear.

Pointing to Creon.

* Lucky tyrants—the perquisites of power!
 Ruthless power to do and say whatever pleases
 them.

CREON
 You alone, of all the people in Thebes,
 see things that way.

ANTIGONE
 They see it just that way
 but defer to you and keep their tongues in
 leash.

CREON
 And you, aren't you ashamed to differ so from
 them?
 So disloyal!

ANTIGONE
 Not ashamed for a moment,
 not to honor my brother, my own flesh and
 blood.

CREON

Wasn't Eteocles a brother too—cut down, facing him?

ANTIGONE

Brother, yes, by the same mother, the same father.

CREON

Then how can you render his enemy such honors, such impieties in his eyes?

ANTIGONE

He'll never testify to that, Eteocles dead and buried.

CREON

He will—
if you honor the traitor just as much as him.

ANTIGONE

But it was his brother, not some slave that died—

CREON

Ravaging our country!—
but Eteocles died fighting in our behalf.

ANTIGONE

No matter—Death longs for the same rites for all.

CREON

Never the same for the patriot and the traitor.

ANTIGONE

Who, Creon, who on earth can say the ones below
don't find this pure and uncorrupt?

CREON

Never. Once an enemy, never a friend,
not even after death.

ANTIGONE

I was born to join in love, not hate—
that is my nature.

CREON

Go down below and love,
if love you must—love the dead! While I'm
alive,

no woman is going to lord it over me.

* *Enter Ismene from the palace, under guard.*

CHORUS

Look,
Ismene's coming, weeping a sister's tears,
loving sister, under a cloud . . .
her face is flushed, her cheeks streaming.
Sorrow puts her lovely radiance in the dark.

CREON

You—
in my own house, you viper, slinking
undetected,
sucking my life-blood! I never knew
I was breeding twin disasters, the two of you
rising up against my throne. Come, tell me,
will you confess your part in the crime or
not?
Answer me. Swear to me.

ISMENE

I did it, yes—
if only she consents—I share the guilt,
the consequences too.

ANTIGONE

No,
Justice will never suffer that—not you,
you were unwilling. I never brought you in.

ISMENE

But now you face such dangers . . . I'm not
ashamed
to sail through trouble with you,
make your troubles mine.

ANTIGONE

Who did the work?
Let the dead and the god of death bear
witness!
I've no love for a friend who loves in words
alone.

ISMENE

Oh no, my sister, don't reject me, please,
let me die beside you, consecrating
the dead together.

ANTIGONE

Never share my dying,

don't lay claim to what you never touched.
My death will be enough.

ISMENE

What do I care for life, cut off from you?

ANTIGONE

Ask Creon. Your concern is all for him.

ISMENE

Why abuse me so? It doesn't help you now.

ANTIGONE

You're right—
if I mock you, I get no pleasure from it,
only pain.

ISMENE

Tell me, dear one,
what can I do to help you, even now?

ANTIGONE

Save yourself. I don't grudge you your
survival.

ISMENE

Oh no, no, denied my portion in your death?

ANTIGONE

You chose to live, I chose to die.

ISMENE

Not, at least,
without every kind of caution I could voice.

ANTIGONE

Your wisdom appealed to one world—mine,
another.

ISMENE

But look, we're both guilty, both condemned
to death.

ANTIGONE

Courage! Live your life. I gave myself to death,
long ago, so I might serve the dead.

Haimon, 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.

* SCENE III

CREON

We'll soon know, better than seers could tell
us.

Turning to Haemon.

Son, you've heard the final verdict on your
bride?

Are you coming now, raving against your
father?

Or do you love me, no matter what I do?

HAEMON

Father, I'm your *son* . . . you in your wisdom
set my bearings for me—I obey you.
No marriage could ever mean more to me than
you,
whatever good direction you may offer.

CREON

Fine, Haemon.

That's how you ought to feel within your
heart,

subordinate to your father's will in every way.
That's what a man prays for: to produce good
sons—

households full of them, dutiful and attentive,
so they can pay his enemy back with interest
and match the respect their father shows his
friend.

But the man who rears a brood of useless
children,

what has he brought into the world, I ask you?
Nothing but trouble for himself, and mockery
from his enemies laughing in his face.

Oh Haemon,

never lose your sense of judgment over a
woman.

The warmth, the rush of pleasure, it all goes
cold

in your arms, I warn you . . . a worthless
woman

in your house, a misery in your bed.

What wound cuts deeper than a loved one
turned against you? Spit her out,

like a mortal enemy—let the girl go.

Let her find a husband down among the dead.

Imagine it: I caught her in naked rebellion,

the traitor, the only one in the whole city.
I'm not about to prove myself a liar,
not to my people, no, I'm going to kill her!
That's right—so let her cry for mercy, sing her
hymns

to Zeus who defends all bonds of kindred
blood.

Why, if I bring up my own kin to be rebels,
think what I'd suffer from the world at large.
Show me the man who rules his household
well:

I'll show you someone fit to rule the state.
That good man, my son,
I have every confidence he and he alone
can give commands and take them too.

Staunch
in the storm of spears he'll stand his ground,
a loyal, unflinching comrade at your side.

But whoever steps out of line, violates the laws
or presumes to hand out orders to his
superiors,

he'll win no praise from me. But that man
the city places in authority, his orders
must be obeyed, large and small,
right and wrong.

Anarchy—
show me a greater crime in all the earth!
She, she destroys cities, rips up houses,
breaks the ranks of spearmen into headlong
rout.

But the ones who last it out, the great mass of
them

owe their lives to discipline. Therefore
we must defend the men who live by law,
never let some women triumph over us.

Better to fall from power, if fall we must,
at the hands of a man—never be rated
inferior to a woman, never.

LEADER

To us,
unless old age has robbed us of our wits,
you seem to say what you have to say with
sense.

HAEMON

Father, only the gods endow a man with
reason,

the finest of all their gifts, a treasure.
Far be it from me—I haven't the skill,
and certainly no desire, to tell you when,
if ever, you make a slip in speech . . . though
someone else might have a good suggestion.

Of course it's not for you,
in the normal run of things, to watch
whatever men say or do, or find to criticize.
The man in the street, you know, dreads your
glance,

he'd never say anything displeasing to your
face.

But it's for me to catch the murmurs in the
dark,

the way the city mourns for this young girl.
"No woman," they say, "ever deserved death
less,

and such a brutal death for such a glorious
action.

She, with her own dear brother lying in his
blood—

she couldn't bear to leave him dead, unburied,
food for the wild dogs or wheeling vultures.

Death? She deserves a glowing crown of gold!"
So they say, and the rumor spreads in secret,
darkly . . .

I rejoice in your success, father—

nothing more precious to me in the world.
What medal of honor brighter to his children
than a father's glowing glory? Or a child's
to his proud father? Now don't, please,
be quite so single-minded, self-involved,
or assume the world is wrong and you are
right.

Whoever thinks that he alone possesses
intelligence,

the gift of eloquence, he and no one else,
and character, too . . . such men, I tell you,
spread them open—you will find them empty.

No,

it's no disgrace for a man, even a wise man,
to learn many things and not to be too rigid.
You've seen trees by a raging winter torrent,
how many sway with the flood and salvage
every twig,

but not the stubborn—they're ripped out,
roots and all.

Bend or break. The same when a man is sailing:
haul your sheets too taut, never give an inch,
you'll capsize, go the rest of the voyage
keel up and the rowing-benches under.

Oh give way. Relax your anger—change!
I'm young, I know, but let me offer this:
it would be best by far, I admit,
if a man were born infallible, right by nature.
If not—and things don't often go that way,
it's best to learn from those with good advice.

*

LEADER
You'd do well, my lord, if he's speaking to the
point,
to learn from him,

Turning to Haemon.

and you, my boy, from him.
You both are talking sense.

CREON
So,
men our age, we're to be lectured, are we?—
schooled by a boy his age?

HAEMON
Only in what is right. But if I seem young,
look less to my years and more to what I do.

CREON
Do? Is admiring rebels an achievement?

HAEMON
I'd never suggest that you admire treason.

CREON
Oh?—
isn't that just the sickness that's attacked her?

HAEMON
The whole city of Thebes denies it, to a man.

CREON
And is Thebes about to tell me how to rule?

HAEMON
Now, you see? Who's talking like a child?

CREON
Am I to rule this land for others—or myself?

HAEMON
It's no city at all, owned by one man alone.

CREON
What? The city *is* the king's—that's the law!

HAEMON
What a splendid king you'd make of a desert
island—
you and you alone.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was Antigone's justification for disobeying the command of the king?
Provide examples of historical figures who have employed a similar justification for their actions.
2. Why did Creon react so violently to Antigone's action?
3. What does the text of the drama tell us about the rival political views prevalent in democratic Athens in the days of Sophocles?

7 Athenian Greatness

The fifty years following the Persian Wars marked Athens' golden age. The central figure in Athenian political life for much of this period was Pericles (c. 495–429 B.C.), a gifted statesman and military commander. In the opening stage of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta (431–404 B.C.), Pericles delivered an oration in honor of the Athenian war dead. In this speech, as reconstructed by the historian Thucydides, Pericles brilliantly described Athenian greatness.