

SOPHOCLES (495-406 B.C.)

Of the three famous tragic dramatists of ancient Greece, Sophocles is probably the greatest. Aeschylus was more preoccupied with profound religious and ethical problems, such as the meaning of divine justice; Euripides, the psychologist and skeptic, with the tangled emotional conflicts that war, religion, and politics engender in the souls of men, and especially women. But Sophocles, with his "even-balanced soul," was interested primarily in man as a complex human being heroically and painfully striving to attain knowledge and happiness in a world governed by inexorable laws. Less the religious idealist than Aeschylus, less the social critic than Euripides, Sophocles was the realistic, sympathetic humanist "who saw life steadily, and saw it whole."

His life spanned almost the whole of that remarkable fifth century when Athens reached the height of her glory in drama, philosophy, art, and architecture. Sophocles' ironic and tragic vision of life was not the result of any personal misfortunes. Sophocles lived a long, happy, fruitful life writing more than 120 plays. At the age of ninety he wrote his valedictory to the Attic stage, his beautiful mystical play *Oedipus at Colonus*. Upon him the gods showered their abundant gifts: riches, beauty, health, genius, fame, a long life, and a peaceful death.

He was born about 495 B.C. in Colonus, a suburb on a lovely hill about a mile from Athens. His well-to-do family gave him the best education obtainable, and he grew up to be a handsome, intelligent youth, an accomplished musician, and an excellent athlete. At the age of fifteen he was chosen to lead a boys' chorus celebrating the victory at Salamis. When he was only twenty-seven, he defeated Aeschylus in the annual dramatic competi-

tion. Because of his long dramatic career and his consummate art, Sophocles won the first prize more than any other competitor. Unfortunately, only seven of his plays have survived: *Ajax*, *Antigone*, *Maidens of Trachis*, *Oedipus the King*, *Electra*, *Philoctetes*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*.

He distinguished himself equally in civic affairs. With Pericles he was chosen one of the ten generals, the highest elective office in Athens, and served with him in the war against the Samian revolt. Later he was put in charge of the Greek confederacy funds. His contributions to the drama, and his zeal in public affairs won for him the respect of the whole community. Besides his fellow dramatists, his friends included Herodotus and Thucydides, the historians; Socrates, the philosopher, and young Aristophanes, the comic dramatist. Sophocles died in 406 B.C. honored by all the citizens whom he had served so well.

Sophocles, the dramatist, made several important contributions to the development of Greek tragedy. By introducing a third actor, he made both the plot and characterization more complex. Though for choreographic reasons he increased the size of the chorus from the customary twelve to fifteen, he subordinated its function and laid increased emphasis on the plot and dialogue. He made each play of the conventional trilogy a separate organic unit. He delineated characters more subtly, and created better parts for the actors. By stressing action on the stage rather than lengthy narration by messengers, he increased the dramatic interest in his plays. By his improved dramatic technique he motivated the entrances and exits of his characters. He made costume innovations, and finally, he is credited by

the philosopher Aristotle with inventing painted scenery. It is no wonder that

Sophocles was honored both as a man and dramatist many years after his death.

INTRODUCTION TO *ANTIGONE*

For almost three thousand years the poignant story of Oedipus and his family has held a strange fascination for mankind. Though mentioned but briefly by Homer in the *Odyssey*, the legend became a popular subject for Attic dramatists. Sophocles wrote three tragedies dealing with the family; the earliest was *Antigone* (about 441 B.C.), the next was *Oedipus the King* (about 430 B.C.), and the last was *Oedipus at Colonus* (401 B.C.). The modern reader, or spectator will understand and enjoy a play like *Antigone* better if he familiarizes himself with the background of the story. What follows is a very brief account of the main events.

Warned by an oracle that their newborn son would murder his father and marry his mother, Laius, the king of Thebes, and his wife, Jocasta, exposed the infant to die. The child, called Oedipus, or Swallowfoot, survived. Years later, however, while running away in an attempt to escape the prophecy, Oedipus unknowingly killed his father in a highway brawl. His travels soon took him to Thebes where he rescued the Thebans from the terror of the Sphinx by answering the riddle she posed. The grateful Thebans thereupon made Oedipus their king, and he married the queen, Jocasta. Thus, both prophecies were fulfilled.

For years he reigned as a popular and beloved ruler, with Jocasta and their two sons, Polyneices and Eteocles, and their two daughters, Antigone and Ismene. Then, a devastating plague struck the kingdom, and the oracle warned that the country would be spared only if the murderer of Laius were exposed and pun-

ished. After an agonizing search, Oedipus discovered the truth and blinded himself; and Jocasta committed suicide. The plague was at last lifted.

For twenty years Oedipus lived on in Thebes, until Creon, now the regent of Thebes, expelled him. Accompanied only by Antigone, blind Oedipus wandered from place to place. His son Polyneices sought him out to ask help in the civil war, but Oedipus denounced both his sons for their faithlessness, and predicted their deaths. Oedipus died in Colonus, where he had been given haven by Theseus, king of Athens.

Civil war continued in Thebes until it was agreed to settle the issue through single combat of Eteocles and Polyneices. Oedipus' prophecy was fulfilled as the two died by each other's hand.

Creon decreed that Eteocles should be buried a hero, but that Polyneices, an enemy of the state, should remain unburied. However, in response to her brother's last request to her (that she bury him in the event of his death while fighting against Thebes), Antigone defied Creon's decree. It is at this point that the play *Antigone* opens.

One of the most persistent conflicts in human history has been the opposition of the individual soul or conscience to delegated authority, or the clash of human and divine law. Socrates heroically faced his Athenian judges; Joan of Arc, her inquisitors; Thomas à Becket and Sir Thomas More, their English sovereigns; Anne Hutchinson, her Puritan accusers; and Thoreau refused to pay a tax to support slavery and a war he considered morally indefensible. Twenty-four hun-

dred years ago Sophocles dramatized this age-old ethical problem in his play *Antigone*.

The tragic, blind Oedipus wept prophetic tears when he lamented the bitter fate that he foresaw for his two daughters. In the opening scene of the *Antigone* Sophocles quickly informs us of Antigone's firm resolution to defy King Creon's decree. The eternal battle, between the individual conscience upholding what she calls the eternal unwritten laws of God and the secular law of the state, is once more joined.

Sophocles does not sentimentalize this conflict by portraying Antigone as a perfect, starry-eyed heroine, and Creon as a conscienceless villain. In the end heroic goodness does not triumph over evil. The Attic dramatist was too much the realist, and was too familiar with human frailties to falsify life in this way. Admirable as Antigone is in her love for her brother, her respect for the dead, her reverence for the higher unseen law; and heroic as she is in her defiance of Creon, the king of Thebes, she is presented as contemptuous of her gentle sister Ismene, fierce in her denunciation of those who disagree with her, and boastful in justifying her martyrdom. Despite her weaknesses, what

makes her a universal tragic figure like Oedipus is her fanatical zeal in clinging to a noble ideal even though it leads to her destruction. Creon is as stubborn and sincere as she is in upholding what he considers to be the security of the state and his duty as king. He is a new, inexperienced ruler who finds it difficult to withdraw his first edict, so openly defied by a young girl. How evenly balanced the two antagonists are in their dramatic debate is evident from the fact that the chorus, which has been described as "the ideal spectator," is easily swayed from one to the other.

Yet that Sophocles wants us finally to sympathize with Antigone is clearly evident. Sophocles, the traditionalist, believed that human authority and divine law should be compatible. However, if a conflict should ever arise between the two concepts, the eternal law of the gods should prevail. After all, the virtuous Haemon, Teiresias the prophet, and finally Creon himself accept this truth. At the conclusion of the play, the broken Creon, like the blind Oedipus, learns the bitter lesson of the fallibility of man and the limitations of his power in a complex but morally-ordered universe.

ANTIGONE

SOPHOCLES

ENGLISH STAGE AND TELEVISION VERSION BY JOHN GASSNER

CHARACTERS

ANTIGONE, *Creon's niece and the younger daughter of Oedipus*
 ISMENE, *her sister*
 CREON, *new king of Thebes (pronounce Thēbz)*

SENTRY

HAEMON, *Creon's sole surviving son*
 TEIRESIAS, *the blind old prophet of Thebes*
 EURYDICE, *the queen, Creon's wife and Haemon's mother*

Chief elder, *the chorus leader of Chorus (Choragos)*; chorus of the elders of Thebes, *(consisting of 15 men together with the "chief elder")*; guards and attendants; messenger; boy who leads Teiresias; and attendants of the queen.

NOTE ON THIS VERSION: *The matter enclosed in parentheses was intended for television production by the Omnibus television program sponsored by The Ford Foundation in the 1950's. It may assist the student in visualizing a possible stage production, but it cannot stand for a stage production in Sophocles' own times except for the presence of a permanent building which represents Creon's palace, a*

flight of front steps, and a circular area (the orchestra) facing the palace and serving the chorus of the elders of Thebes as a place for dancing and recitation. Entrances and exits are at the right and the left behind the palace and the orchestra. In the television directions, the word "percussion" refers to drums, tympani, etc.; "theme up" means rising volume and "under" signifies decreasing volume when the music or the percussion fades under the words of the characters or the chorus.

A key to pronunciation of characters' names is as follows:

OEDIPUS Oed-i-pus
 ANTIGONE An-tig-o-ne
 ISMENE Is-me-ne
 POLYNICES Pol-y-ni-ces
 TEIRESIAS Ti-re-si-as
 CREON Cre-on
 HAEMON He-mon
 EURYDICE U-rid-i-ke
 ETEOCLES E-te-o-cles

Music (Theme)
 Theme Up
 Theme Under

NARRATOR: *The greatest of all legends about human fate is the ancient story of King Oedipus and his family. Oedipus, upon discovering that he had killed his father and married his mother unknowingly, was so overcome with horror that he blinded himself and exiled himself from his kingdom. His two sons Eteocles*

and Polyuces, succeeded him, with the understanding that they would alternate as kings of Thebes. When Eteocles refused to yield the crown to his brother, Polyuces laid siege to Thebes with the help of an army from the neighboring kingdom of Argos. In the ensuing battle the two brothers slew each other in hand to hand combat. The army from Argos, however, was driven off by the Thebans and the crown passed on to Creon, uncle of the slain brothers and their sisters Antigone and Ismene. Peace, one might have thought, had come at last to the long-suffering kingdom of Thebes. But, no! Fate, operating through the blind heart and will of man, was not yet satisfied. It continued to exact its toll of human suffering, as you shall see.

(Dissolve to a view of the city of Thebes in moonlight. Then move to a medium shot of the palace of Thebes, a columned edifice with three doors. Center door is the largest. A ramp of steps leads up to the palace, facing which is a semicircular—actually circular—area, with an altar in the center. Entrances to the right and left between this area and the palace steps lead presumably to gates of the city. Music up, then out.)

(ANTIGONE and ISMENE come out of the palace, door left: ANTIGONE, holding a small bronze vase, is in a state of great agitation.)

ANTIGONE: Ismene, dearest sister, my only one, is there any grief, or any misery, inherited from our father that we have been spared? Sorrow and shame, distress and anguish—all the evil that life can bring has befallen us: You have heard the news perhaps, the outrage Creon has committed against us. Have you heard?

ISMENE: I have heard nothing, Antigone, but that the enemy fled in the darkness; and nothing more I know than that two miserable sisters have lost two unfortunate brothers who died by each other's hand.

ANTIGONE: I knew you hadn't heard,

and that is the reason I called you out here. Something must be done at once.

ISMENE: Some strange thing distresses you: What is it, Antigone?

ANTIGONE: What else but that a great disgrace befalls our family? Our brother Eteocles has been buried with due honor and with all customary rites. But Polyuces, no less our brother, who died so miserably, lies, I hear, unburied in the field—for the birds of prey to swoop down and feast upon him, a welcome reward for them, unwept and unhonored: and this is what Creon, our kinsman, our virtuous Creon, decreed! And soon the entire city will hear of it; he is coming here to proclaim the edict to all who do not yet know it. No one shall bury Polyuces or mourn for him upon pain of death by stoning before all the people; Creon dares give such orders! Now you know all—and now is the time to show yourself the daughter of a noble line or a base common-born woman.

ISMENE: Poor sister, how can I help you?

ANTIGONE: You must decide at once. Will you help me or not?

ISMENE: In what rash, what dangerous thing? What would you have me do?

ANTIGONE: Will you help me remove the dear dead one?

ISMENE: You would dare to do this when it is plainly forbidden?

ANTIGONE: I will not disgrace my birth! I shall do my part—and yours, too, if necessary, by a brother, who is your brother, too.

ISMENE: Oh, overbold one—when Creon forbids it?

ANTIGONE: Creon has no right to keep me from my own.

ISMENE: Oh, remember, sister, how our father perished? How he was loathe and scorned for what he himself so bravely brought to light? And how he ripped out his eyes with his own hands in his anguish! Remember, too, how our own

mother died—his mother and yet his wife! How she, poor woman, twisted out her life in a noose. And now, our two brothers having fallen in a single day, each shedding each hapless one, the other's blood. We alone are left. So think, Antigone, how we, weak women, shall perish if we disobey the law. I shall pray to the dead to forgive me but, helpless as I am, I shall submit to him who has the power. It is senseless to meddle!

ANTIGONE: I will not urge you then. Remain what you choose to be: I would not let you help me now even if you changed your mind. But I will bury him, though I die for it: I shall have peace then, at last, lying by the side of him I loved, sinless in sinning. It is to the dead that my allegiance belongs, in their world I shall abide forever.

(She starts to move toward the City's Walls)

And now I leave you since the gods' eternal laws are nothing to you.

ISMENE: I too honor the gods, but I am a frail woman and I cannot defy the laws of the state.

ANTIGONE: Let that be your pretext, if you will. As for me, I am going to raise a mound, heaping the earth on a brother I love.

ISMENE: How I fear for you, Antigone!

ANTIGONE: Have no fear for me. Fend for yourself!

ISMENE: Oh, sister, sister: if you must, be sure to tell nobody; keep it hidden, and I shall keep it hidden too.

ANTIGONE: No, no, I shall hate you if you remain silent: Let everyone know, for from now on I intend to please no one alive! Think, too, what the king will do if you fail to tell him.

ISMENE: How that hot heart of yours makes my blood run cold!

ANTIGONE: I am doing what I must do, pleasing whom I most wish to please.

ISMENE: If only you could! But I know that you cannot. And you must know you propose more than you can do.

ANTIGONE: *(resolutely)* When I have done all I can, I shall do no more!

ISMENE: Impossible things should not be attempted at all.

ANTIGONE: No more! I shall come to hate you for your hateful words, and the dead shall hate you, too. Now, leave me to what you think is my madness. I am not afraid, for if I die I shall not die dishonorably.

ISMENE: Go, then, on your way, but remember this: Wild as you are, all who love you must love you still.

(ANTIGONE goes out right, and ISMENE, wringing her hands, runs anxiously, fearfully, into the palace through door left, where the sister's quarters are presumably located.)

(Percussion music as one by one, or in small groups, the ELDERS of Thebes approach the palace and take their stand in front of it, a short distance from the lowest step, gradually forming a chorus. Day is breaking as they start to recite.)

CHORUS OF ELDERS:

O Light of the rising sun,
Brightest beam that ever shone on Thebes
of the seven gates:

How you have sped in the night the warrior king who with white shield
Came from Argos to destroy our land
As an eagle shrieking shrill with snow-white wings,
Stirred up by the prince Polyuces to support his claim.

He raged above the roofs of the city,
Encircling our wide portals with thirsty spears;

But he sped before he could fill his jaw
with the blood of our men,
Before the fire-god seized our crown of towers:
So loud the din of battle

We raised against the foe as we smote him down!

Crashing to earth he fell
The man who, torch in hand, with mad-
man's haste
Swept over us with the blast of hate;
And Mars, the god of war, brought each
foe his fate:

Each captain, matched by captain at one
gate,
Yielded his armor to the god and fled—
All but the fated ones,
Who, from one father and one mother
sprung, brother against brother,
Driving their spears to the desperate end
gave to each other a common death.

But now that victory
Has come to Thebes the glorious land,
Let joy be great;
Learn we forgetfulness,
Taking leave of war;
And all night long, with dance and hymn
Let us go round in state
To the temples of our gods;
And may Bacchus lead us, whose dancing
shakes the earth.

(*Percussion out. A trumpet sounds. The
center door opens. CREON, now King of
Thebes and wearing the crown, comes out
with attendants.*)

AN ELDER OF THE CHORUS: But here at
last comes our new king, Creon, crowned
by chance, the providence of god. We
shall hear now why he has summoned us,
the elders of our city at this hour.

(*They range themselves in front of the
lowest step, bowing lightly, as CREON de-
scends one step to address them, flanked
by attendants. He holds a scroll in his
hand. An elderly reverent man, the chief
of the elders, steps forth to greet him,
then goes back to join the chorus and to
act as its leader.*)

(*Trumpet. Then drum-beat under.*)

CREON: Elders of Thebes, the ship of
state vexed by the gods' wild waves has
been safely righted again and stands

steadily. I have summoned you here sepa-
rately to establish at once with you, be-
fore the rest of Thebes, my right to the
throne as next in the royal line now that
the sons of Oedipus are dead. You were
loyal to Oedipus when he ruled the land,
and then loyal to them when they became
the rulers of Thebes, and I expect you
now to be loyal to me now that I possess
the throne and its power. I realize of
course that no ruler can be known in
mind and spirit until his judgment has
been tested. But you will know my mind,
since I have summoned you for this pur-
pose. You will see me at once as a man
who puts his country's welfare above all
the claims of friendship and kinship, for I
set nothing above the state. I hold him
most base who keeps his lips locked tight
when the nation's welfare is at stake; and
I have only contempt for a man who puts
his friend ahead of his country. Let Zeus
be my witness, Zeus who sees everything,
that I would never hesitate to speak out
full and clear if I saw my people heading
for disaster. Nor will I ever treat as
friend my country's foe, never forgetting
that only while the ship of state prospers
and keeps us safely afloat can we have
true friends. It is in conformity with these
principles, which secure the city's welfare,
that I have had Eteocles, who fell fighting
for our city, buried with full honors as
becomes a hero. But I have left the body
of his miserable brother, traitorous Poly-
nices, unburied where he fell outside the
city's gate. He sought to destroy his city
and consume the altars of his fathers and
their gods with fire. He sought to spill his
kinsmen's blood or else enslave his coun-
trymen. I shall never reward evil with
virtue's due! And now, having drawn up
my decree, I have summoned you to hear
it.

(*Unrolling the scroll, he reads from it.*)

"Whereas Polynices came to Thebes
with fire and sword to claim the throne,
from his brother, who died fighting for
our land; whereas Polynices waged war

it will be worse for me. So, revolving all
this in my mind, I came in haste—but
slow, and made a short road long. So here
I am ready to speak out, though what I
have to say doesn't make any sense. After
all, whatever happens, I said to myself, I
can suffer only my fate.

CREON: Come, come! What is your
trouble, man?

SENTRY: First, I want to say a word
about myself: Let it be understood, my
lord, *I didn't do it, and I didn't see who
did*. It wouldn't be right if I were punished
for it.

CREON: You are very good at fencing
—or putting a fence around yourself. You
must have something very curious to re-
port. What is it?

SENTRY: A man bringing dreadful
news, you know, has reason to hesitate.

CREON: You have hesitated enough—
out with it, man!

SENTRY: Well, I suppose I must. The
corpse, my lord—someone gave it burial.
Someone sprinkled it with dust, perform-
ing the proper rites for the dead, and—
disappeared.

CREON: What are you saying, soldier?
What man dared?

SENTRY: I don't know. There was no
stroke of axe in the dry ground, and the
earth was not dug up. We found no
chariot-wheel tracks in the dust, and he
who did it went and left no sign. There
was no sign whatever that human hands
had done the deed. When the first day-
watchman came to relieve us, it was he
who showed us what had been done—the
dead entirely hidden under dust, as if
someone had tried to avert the curse that
lies on those who are left unburied. And
the wonder of it is that no dog nor wild
beast had been there to disturb the body.
Words then flew fast, each man accusing
the other, until we nearly came to blows.
Every man was accused, though no one
could be proved guilty; each man was
willing to take a red-hot iron in his hand

against Thebes, it is my will and com-
mand that no man shall touch his body or
pray for him on pain of death. Unburied
he shall lie, a shameful sight, for the birds
and the dogs to have their fill of him." So
you know the bent of my mind. As long
as I rule, only the friend of the state,
living or dead, shall receive any con-
sideration.

CHIEF ELDER: That is your will,
Creon, son of Menœceus, touching the
city's foe, and yours is the power to
order things for the living as well as for
the dead.

CREON: You are to heed this order,
and see to it that there is no disobedience.

CHIEF ELDER: But would that the
burden were placed on younger shoulders
than ours! We are too old to carry out
this task.

CREON: I do not require this of you
that you should keep watch. I have posted
sentries to watch the corpse.

CHIEF ELDER: Then what task do you
require us to perform?

CREON: I require nothing more from
you than this: That you refrain from giv-
ing support to those who violate my
decree.

CHIEF ELDER: Who would dare? Only
fools are in love with death.

CREON: And death is the penalty I
have established for this crime. Yet
bribery flourishes and the love of profit
has lured many a man to his ruin.

(*The CHORUS is about to speak when a
soldier, the SENTRY, enters the scene from
the right, troubled and hesitant, but try-
ing to put on a bold face as far as pos-
sible.*)

SENTRY: I would not say, my lord,
that I have come breathless with speed; I
will not say I came plying nimble feet, for
I had many halting points of thought and
I felt like turning back. My mind kept on
saying to me, "You ox! why must you go
to your doom?" But then I reflected that
if Creon gets the news from someone else,

