

SYNOPSIS OF SOPHOCLES' *ANTIGONE*

Oedipus the King of Thebes murdered his father and unwittingly marries his own mother, Jocasta. They have four children: two sons, Polyneices and Eteocles and two daughters, Antigone and Ismene. After discovering the truth, Oedipus blinds himself and Jocasta kills herself. When Oedipus dies, his two sons, Polyneices and Eteocles, agree to rule over the City of Thebes in turns. Eteocles rules first but then breaks his promise and refuses to allow his brother, Polyneices, to rule. Polyneices, sees this as injustice, and departs but returns with an army vowing not only to kill Eteocles, but to destroy Thebes and its people. Polyneices attacks the city and during the battle, they murder each other. Creon, Jocasta's brother, and closest male relative, becomes King of Thebes. (Only men can rule).

Intending to restore public order and rule of law after a fratricidal war, Creon intends to make an example of his nephew Polyneices' arrogance and treachery. As a warning to those who would act to return society to chaos, he orders Eteocles, who stoked the flames of conflict by refusing to honour his pact with his brother, yet valiantly defended the city against invaders, receive full burial honours. On the other hand, Polyneices, who attacked the city, should not even receive the dignity of a burial according to custom. His corpse should rot in public, preventing his soul from finding rest with his ancestors. Anyone who attempts to bury him, is condemned to death. The elders try to convince him to change course, but in vain.

Furious with this unjust and inhumane degree, Antigone vows to bury Polyneices, even if it means her own death. Her sister Ismene is conflicted, not wanting to show disloyalty to her country, but also concerned about her duty to her slain brother. Ismene reminds her of the misery their family has already suffered. Creon's decision is wrong, but as women, no one will listen to them. They have no say. Despite Ismene's pleas for understanding, Antigone accuses her of disloyalty and parts on bad terms. Antigone buries her brother by performing a customary burial ritual and spreading dirt over his body. She is caught and then taken to Creon. She agrees that Polyneices attacked the city but the laws governing the dead are different than the laws governing the living. Creon is a mortal, not a god. Vowing not to let a mere woman sway his decisions, he condemns her to death.

The King's son and Antigone's fiancé, Haemon, declaring his loyalty to his father, tries to convince his father to stay the execution. He bases his arguments on the common values of the people and tells his father that the people of Thebes see Creon as the rightful leader and restorer of order; nevertheless, they are sympathetic to Antigone's act of piety towards her brother. It was the right thing to do. Polyneices's act was evil, but Creon should not punish Antigone for doing something good. Haemon compares his father's stance to a tree in the wind. The flexible tree that bends in a storm remains standing; the ship that always keeps its sails tight, capsizes. Like a ship, he should change course. Haemon warns his father that although Polyneices' deed was indeed evil, Creon does not rule for himself, but for the good of everyone. Creon insults Haemon and his bride to be. Antigone is just as evil as her brother for disobeying his order and women are only good for sex. Haemon leaves in fury claiming that his father will regret his unbending stance, promising to never to see him again. Creon remains inflexible. Antigone is led to an underground cave that will become her tomb.

Afterwards, the King's blind adviser, Teiresias, enters the scene. He warns Creon that not being able to show respect for the dead, even when it concerns an enemy, is a sign of a sick society. His stubborn decision to rule against the burial of Polyneices – on the fear of death - is arrogant and foolish. What benefit can the King gain by killing a man twice? Creon mocks the wise man and his religious conventions and accuses him of seeking some kind of monetary reward. Creon himself, not the gods, make the rules. Teiresias issues a final warning: Creon's arrogance and inflexible stance will lead to his and his family's destruction.

Creon is shaken. After Teiresias leaves, the elders plead with him again to reconsider before it is too late. He should bury Polyneices and release Antigone. Creon concedes, but it is too late. Antigone is dead. After seeing her body, Haemon falls on his sword and dies in grief. Creon's wife, Eurydice, hears the news of her son's death, curses her husband and kills herself. Creon finally realizes that the evil that he has experienced was not due to an outsider (Polyneices), but due to his own arrogance and mistaken judgement. He realizes that, in fact, his too harsh interpretation of the law and concern for his own appearance of authority, led to the deaths of his niece, his son and wife. But he realized this too late to save them.