

What Has Athens to do with Jerusalem?

Greek and Biblical Tragedy



Founders' Scholarship Competition:
February 23-26, 2023

Genesis 2-3

Genesis 2-3 Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition

2 Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. **2** And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done. **3** So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all his work which he had done in creation.

4 These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

Another Account of the Creation

5 In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, **5** when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no man to till the ground; **6** but a mist^b went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground— **7** then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. **8** And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. **9** And out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

10 A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers. **11** The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one which flows around the whole land of Hav'ilah, where there is gold; **12** and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. **13** The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one which flows around the whole land of Cush. **14** And the name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphra'tes.

15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. **16** And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; **17** but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

18 Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." **19** So out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the

field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. **20** The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper fit for him. **21** So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; **22** and the rib which the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. **23** Then the man said,

"This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called Woman,^[c]
because she was taken out of Man."^[d]

24 Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh. **25** And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

The First Sin and Its Punishment

3 Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden'?" **2** And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; **3** but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" **4** But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die. **5** For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." **6** So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate. **7** Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons.

8 And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. **9** But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" **10** And he said, "I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." **11** He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" **12** The man said, "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." **13** Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent beguiled me, and I ate." **14** The LORD God said to the serpent,

"Because you have done this,
cursed are you above all cattle,
and above all wild animals;
upon your belly you shall go,
and dust you shall eat
all the days of your life.

15 I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your seed and her seed;
he shall bruise your head,^[e]
and you shall bruise his heel."

16 To the woman he said,

"I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children,
yet your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you."

17 And to Adam he said,

"Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,
and have eaten of the tree
of which I commanded you,
'You shall not eat of it,'
cursed is the ground because of you;
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
18 thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.

19 In the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread
till you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
you are dust,
and to dust you shall return."

20 The man called his wife's name Eve,^[f] because she was the mother of all living. 21 And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them.

22 Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever"— 23 therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. 24 He drove out the man; and at the east of

the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.

Footnotes

- a. 2.4b ff This account of the state of the world at the beginning, which introduces the story of the first sin, comes from a different and earlier source and is composed in a very different style. There is nothing in these early chapters that commits us to any particular scientific view of the origins of the world or man, or that would exclude the evolution hypothesis.
- b. Genesis 2:6 Or *flood*
- c. Genesis 2:23 Heb *ishshah*
- d. Genesis 2:23 Heb *ish*
- e. 3.15 *he shall bruise your head:* i.e., the seed of the woman, that is, mankind descended from Eve, will eventually gain the victory over the powers of evil. This victory will, of course, be gained through the work of the Messiah who is *par excellence* the seed of the woman. The Latin Vulgate has the reading *ipsa conteret*, "she shall bruise." Some Old Latin manuscripts have this reading and it occurs also in St. Augustine, *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, II, which is earlier than St. Jerome's translation. It could be due originally to a copyist's mistake, which was then seen to contain a genuine meaning—namely, that Mary, too, would have her share in the victory, inasmuch as she was mother of the Savior.
- f. Genesis 3:20 The name in Hebrew resembles the word for *living*

[Genesis 4](#)

< [Genesis 1](#)

Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (RSVCE)

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Judges 11

Judges 11 Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition

Jephthah

11 Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior, but he was the son of a harlot. Gilead was the father of Jephthah. **2** And Gilead's wife also bore him sons; and when his wife's sons grew up, they thrust Jephthah out, and said to him, "You shall not inherit in our father's house; for you are the son of another woman." **3** Then Jephthah fled from his brothers, and dwelt in the land of Tob; and worthless fellows collected round Jephthah, and went raiding with him.

4 After a time the Ammonites made war against Israel. **5** And when the Ammonites made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to bring Jephthah from the land of Tob; **6** and they said to Jephthah, "Come and be our leader, that we may fight with the Ammonites." **7** But Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "Did you not hate me, and drive me out of my father's house? Why have you come to me now when you are in trouble?" **8** And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "That is why we have turned to you now, that you may go with us and fight with the Ammonites, and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead." **9** Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "If you bring me home again to fight with the Ammonites, and the LORD gives them over to me, I will be your head." **10** And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "The LORD will be witness between us; we will surely do as you say." **11** So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and leader over them; and Jephthah spoke all his words before the LORD at Mizpah.

12 Then Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites and said, "What have you against me, that you have come to me to fight against my land?" **13** And the king of the Ammonites answered the messengers of Jephthah, "Because Israel on coming from Egypt took away my land, from the Arnon to the Jabbok and to the Jordan; now therefore restore it peaceably." **14** And Jephthah sent messengers again to the king of the Ammonites **15** and said to him, "Thus says Jephthah: Israel did not take away the land of Moab or the land of the Ammonites, **16** but when they came up from Egypt, Israel went through the wilderness to the Red Sea and came to Kadesh. **17** Israel then sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, 'Let us pass, we pray, through your land'; but the king of Edom would not listen. And they sent also to the king of Moab, but he

would not consent. So Israel remained at Kadesh. **18** Then they journeyed through the wilderness, and went around the land of Edom and the land of Moab, and arrived on the east side of the land of Moab, and camped on the other side of the Arnon; but they did not enter the territory of Moab, for the Arnon was the boundary of Moab. **19** Israel then sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, king of Heshbon; and Israel said to him, 'Let us pass, we pray, through your land to our country.' **20** But Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his territory; so Sihon gathered all his people together, and encamped at Jahaz, and fought with Israel. **21** And the LORD, the God of Israel, gave Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel, and they defeated them; so Israel took possession of all the land of the Amorites, who inhabited that country. **22** And they took possession of all the territory of the Amorites from the Arnon to the Jabbok and from the wilderness to the Jordan. **23** So then the LORD, the God of Israel, dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel; and are you to take possession of them? **24** Will you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? And all that the LORD our God has dispossessed before us, we will possess. **25** Now are you any better than Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever strive against Israel, or did he ever go to war with them? **26** While Israel dwelt in Heshbon and its villages, and in Aro'er and its villages, and in all the cities that are on the banks of the Arnon, three hundred years, why did you not recover them within that time? **27** I therefore have not sinned against you, and you do me wrong by making war on me; the LORD, the Judge, decide this day between the people of Israel and the people of Ammon." **28** But the king of the Ammonites did not heed the message of Jephthah which he sent to him.

Jephthah's Vow

29 Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manas'eh, and passed on to Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites. **30** And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, "If thou wilt give the Ammonites into my hand, **31** then whoever comes forth from the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the LORD's, and I will offer him up for a burnt offering." **32** So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them; and the LORD gave them into his hand. **33** And he smote them from Aro'er to the neighborhood of Minnith, twenty cities, and as far as Abel-keramim, with a very great slaughter. So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel.

Jephthah's Daughter

34 Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah; and behold, his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and with dances; she was his only child; beside her he had neither son nor daughter. **35** And when he saw her, he rent his clothes, and said, "Alas,

my daughter! you have brought me very low, and you have become the cause of great trouble to me; for I have opened my mouth to the LORD, and I cannot take back my vow.” ³⁶ And she said to him, “My father, if you have opened your mouth to the LORD, do to me according to what has gone forth from your mouth, now that the LORD has avenged you on your enemies, on the Ammonites.” ³⁷ And she said to her father, “Let this thing be done for me; let me alone two months, that I may go and wander^[a] on the mountains, and bewail my virginity, I and my companions.” ³⁸ And he said, “Go.” And he sent her away for two months; and she departed, she and her companions, and bewailed her virginity upon the mountains. ³⁹ And at the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had made.^[b] She had never known a man. And it became a custom in Israel ⁴⁰ that the daughters of Israel went year by year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year.

Footnotes

- a. Judges 11:37 Cn: Heb *go down*
- b. 11.39 Human sacrifice, common in Canaan and surrounding lands, was never permitted in Israel; cf. Lev 18.21. The few cases we find were due to foreign influence or to an erroneous conscience; cf. 2 Sam 21.4-6; 2 Kings 23.10.

< [Judges 10](#)

[Judges 12](#) >

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ANTIGONE

By Sophocles

CHARACTERS

ANTIGONE
daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta

ISMENE
sister of Antigone

A CHORUS
of old Theban citizens and their LEADER

CREON
King of Thebes, uncle of Antigone and Ismene

A SENTRY

HAEMON
son of Creon and Eurydice

TIRESIAS
a blind prophet

A MESSENGER

EURYDICE
wife of Creon

Guards, attendants, and a boy

[Line numbers at the head of each page refer to the Greek text; those in the margin refer to the English translation.]

TIME AND SCENE: The royal house of Thebes. It is still night, and the invading armies of Argos have just been driven from the city. Fighting on opposite sides, the sons of Oedipus, Eteocles and Polynices, have killed each other in combat. Their uncle, CREON, is now king of Thebes.

Enter ANTIGONE, slipping through the central doors of the palace. She motions to her sister, ISMENE, who follows her cautiously toward an altar at the center of the stage.

ANTIGONE:

My own flesh and blood—dear sister, dear Ismene,
how many griefs our father Oedipus handed down!
Do you know one, I ask you, one grief
that Zeus will not perfect for the two of us
while we still live and breathe? There's nothing,
no pain—our lives are pain—no private shame,
no public disgrace, nothing I haven't seen
in your griefs and mine. And now this:
an emergency decree, they say, the Commander
has just now declared for all of Thebes.
What, haven't you heard? Don't you see?
The doom reserved for enemies
marches on the ones we love the most.

5

10

ISMENE:

Not I, I haven't heard a word, Antigone.
Nothing of loved ones,
no joy or pain has come my way, not since
the two of us were robbed of our two brothers,
both gone in a day, a double blow—
not since the armies of Argos vanished,
just this very night. I know nothing more,
whether our luck's improved or ruin's still to come.

15

20

ANTIGONE:
I thought so. That's why I brought you out here,
past the gates, so you could hear in private.

ISMENE:
What's the matter? Trouble, clearly . . .
you sound so dark, so grim.

ANTIGONE:
Why not? Our own brothers' burial!
Hasn't Creon graced one with all the rites,
disgraced the other? Eteocles, they say,
has been given full military honors,
rightly so—Creon has laid him in the earth
and he goes with glory down among the dead.
But the body of Polynices, who died miserably—
why, a city-wide proclamation, rumor has it,
forbids anyone to bury him, even mourn him.
He's to be left unwept, unburied, a lovely treasure
for birds that scan the field and feast to their heart's content.

Such, I hear, is the martial law our good Creon
lays down for you and me—yes, me, I tell you—
and he's coming here to alert the uninformed
in no uncertain terms,
and he won't treat the matter lightly. Whoever
disobeys in the least will die, his doom is sealed:
stoning to death inside the city walls!

There you have it. You'll soon show what you are,
worth your breeding, Ismene, or a coward—
for all your royal blood.

45

ISMENE:
My poor sister, if things have come to this,
who am I to make or mend them, tell me,
what good am I to you?

ANTIGONE:
Decide.
Will you share the labor, share the work?

ISMENE:
What work, what's the risk? What do you mean?

ANTIGONE:
Raising her hands.
Will you lift up his body with these bare hands
and lower it with me?

ISMENE:
What? You'd bury him—
when a law forbids the city?

ANTIGONE:
Yes!
He is my brother and—deny it as you will—
your brother too.
No one will ever convict me for a traitor.

ISMENE:
So desperate, and Creon has expressly—

ANTIGONE:
No,
he has no right to keep me from my own.

ISMENE:
Oh my sister, think—
think how our own father died, hated,
his reputation in ruins, driven on
by the crimes he brought to light himself—
to gouge out his eyes with his own hands—
then mother . . . his mother and wife, both in one,
mutilating her life in the twisted noose—
and last, our two brothers dead in a single day,
both shedding their own blood, poor suffering boys,
battling out their common destiny hand-to-hand.

Now look at the two of us, left so alone . . .

think what a death we'll die, the worst of all
if we violate the laws and override
the fixed decree of the throne, its power—
we must be sensible. Remember we are women,
we're not born to contend with men. Then too,
we're underlings, ruled by much stronger hands,
so we must submit in this, and things still worse.

I, for one, I'll beg the dead to forgive me—
I'm forced, I have no choice—I must obey
the ones who stand in power. Why rush to extremes?
It's madness, madness.

ANTIGONE:

I won't insist,
no, even if you should have a change of heart,
I'd never welcome you in the labor, not with me.
So, do as you like, whatever suits you best—
I will bury him myself.

And even if I die in the act, that death will be a glory.

I will lie with the one I love and loved by him—
an outrage sacred to the gods! I have longer
to please the dead than please the living here:
in the kingdom down below I'll lie forever.

Do as you like, dishonor the laws
the gods hold in honor.

ISMENE:

I'd do them no dishonor . . .
but defy the city? I have no strength for that.

75

ANTIGONE:
You have your excuses. I am on my way,
I will raise a mound for him, for my dear brother.

ISMENE:
Oh Antigone, you're so rash—I'm so afraid for you!

ANTIGONE:
Don't fear for me. Set your own life in order.



ISMENE:

Then don't, at least, blurt this out to anyone.
Keep it a secret. I'll join you in that, I promise.

ANTIGONE: Dear god, shout it from the rooftops. I'll hate you all the more for silence—tell the world!

ISMENE: So fiery—and it ought to chill your heart.

ANTIGONE: I know I please where I must please the most.

ISMENE: Yes, if you can, but you're in love with impossibility.

ANTIGONE: Very well then, once my strength gives out I will be done at last.

ISMENE: You're wrong from the start, you're off on a hopeless quest.

ANTIGONE: If you say so, you will make me hate you, and the hatred of the dead, by all rights, will haunt you night and day. But leave me to my own absurdity, leave me to suffer this—dreadful thing. I will suffer nothing as great as death without glory.

Exit to the side.

ISMENE: Then go if you must, but rest assured, wild, irrational as you are, my sister, you are truly dear to the ones who love you.

Withdrawing to the palace.

Enter a CHORUS, the old citizens of Thebes, chanting as the sun begins to rise.

CHORUS: Glory!—great beam of the sun, brightest of all that ever rose on the seven gates of Thebes, you burn through night at last!

CHORUS: Great eye of the golden day, mounting the Dirce's banks you throw him back—the enemy out of Argos, the white shield, the man of bronze—he's flying headlong now the bridle of fate stampeding him with pain!

CHORUS: 105 And he had driven against our borders, launched by the warring claims of Polynices—like an eagle screaming, winging havoc over the land, wings of armor shielded white as snow, a huge army massing, crested helmets bristling for assault.

CHORUS: He hovered above our roofs, his vast maw gaping closing down around our seven gates, his spears thirsting for the kill

CHORUS: 110 but now he's gone, look, before he could glut his jaws with Theban blood or the god of fire put our crown of towers to the torch. He grappled the Dragon none can master—Thebes—the clang of our arms like thunder at his back!

CHORUS: 115 Zeus hates with a vengeance all bravado, the mighty boasts of men. He watched them coming on in a rising flood, the pride of their golden armor ringing shrill—and brandishing his lightning blasted the fighter just at the goal, rushing to shout his triumph from our walls.

Down from the heights he crashed, pounding down on the earth!
 And a moment ago, blazing torch in hand—
 mad for attack, ecstatic
 he breathed his rage, the storm
 of his fury hurling at our heads!

150

But now his high hopes have laid him low
 and down the enemy ranks the iron god of war
 deals his rewards, his stunning blows—Ares
 rapture of battle, our right arm in the crisis.

155

Seven captains marshaled at seven gates
 seven against their equals, gave
 their brazen trophies up to Zeus,
 god of the breaking rout of battle,
 all but two: those blood brothers,
 one father, one mother—matched in rage,
 spears matched for the twin conquest—
 clashed and won the common prize of death.

But now for Victory! Glorious in the morning,
 joy in her eyes to meet our joy
 she is winging down to Thebes,
 our fleets of chariots wheeling in her wake—
 Now let us win oblivion from the wars,
 thronging the temples of the gods
 in singing, dancing choirs through the night!
 Lord Dionysus, god of the dance
 that shakes the land of Thebes, now lead the way!

160

*Enter CREON from the palace,
 attended by his guard.*

But look, the king of the realm is coming,
 Creon, the new man for the new day,
 whatever the gods are sending now . . .
 what new plan will he launch?
 Why this, this special session?
 Why this sudden call to the old men
 summoned at one command?

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 whatever the gods are sending now . . .
 what new plan will he launch?

Why this, this special session?

Why this sudden call to the old men
 summoned at one command?

CREON:

My countrymen,
 the ship of state is safe. The gods who rocked her,
 after a long, merciless pounding in the storm,
 have righted her once more.

Out of the whole city

I have called you here alone. Well I know,
 first, your undeviating respect

for the throne and royal power of King Laius.

Next, while Oedipus steered the land of Thebes,
 and even after he died, your loyalty was unshakable,
 you still stood by their children. Now then,
 since the two sons are dead—two blows of fate
 in the same day, cut down by each other's hands,
 both killers, both brothers stained with blood—
 as I am next in kin to the dead,
 I now possess the throne and all its powers.

Of course you cannot know a man completely,
 his character, his principles, sense of judgment,
 not till he's shown his colors, ruling the people,
 making laws. Experience, there's the test.

As I see it, whoever assumes the task,
 the awesome task of setting the city's course,
 and refuses to adopt the soundest policies
 but fearing someone, keeps his lips locked tight,
 he's utterly worthless. So I rate him now,
 I always have. And whoever places a friend
 above the good of his own country, he is nothing.
 I have no use for him. Zeus my witness,
 Zeus who sees all things, always—

150

195

190

200

175

I could never stand by silent, watching destruction
march against our city, putting safety to rout,
nor could I ever make that man a friend of mine
who menaces our country. Remember this:
our country is our safety.

Only while she voyages true on course
can we establish friendships, truer than blood itself.

Such are my standards. They make our city great.
210

Closely akin to them I have proclaimed,
just now, the following decree to our people
concerning the two sons of Oedipus.
Eteocles, who died fighting for Thebes,
excelling all in arms: he shall be buried,
crowned with a hero's honors, the cups we pour
215
to soak the earth and reach the famous dead.

But as for his blood brother, Polynices,
who returned from exile, home to his father-city
and the Gods of his race, consumed with one desire—
to burn them roof to roots—who thirsted to drink
220
his kinsmen's blood and sell the rest to slavery:
that man—a proclamation has forbidden the city
to dignify him with burial, mourn him at all.
No, he must be left unburied, his corpse
225
carried for the birds and dogs to tear,
an obscenity for the citizens to behold!

These are my principles. Never at my hands
will the traitor be honored above the patriot.
But whoever proves his loyalty to the state—
I'll prize that man in death as well as life.

CREON:

220

225

230

235

240

245

LEADER:

215

220

225

230

235

240

245

250

255

260

265

270

275

280

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LEADER:

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LEADER:

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A SENTRY enters from the side.

SENTRY:

I can't say I'm winded from running, or set out
with any spring in my legs either—no sir,
I was lost in thought, and it made me stop, often,
dead in my tracks, wheeling, turning back,
and all the time a voice inside me muttering,
"Idiot, why? You're going straight to your death."
Then muttering, "Stopped again, poor fool?
If somebody gets the news to Creon first,
what's to save your neck?"

And so,

mulling it over, on I trudged, dragging my feet,
you can make a short road take forever . . .
but at last, look, common sense won out,
I'm here, and I'm all yours,
and even though I come empty-handed
I'll tell my story just the same, because
I've come with a good grip on one hope;
what will come will come, whatever fate—

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My lord,

SENTRY:

Dangerous too, and danger makes you delay
for all you're worth.

CREON:

Out with it—then dismiss!

SENTRY:

All right, here it comes. The body—
someone's just buried it, then run off . . .
sprinkled some dry dust on the flesh,
given it proper rites.

CREON:

What?
What man alive would dare—

SENTRY:

I've no idea, I swear it.
There was no mark of a spade, no pickaxe there,
no earth turned up, the ground packed hard and dry,
unbroken, no tracks, no wheelruts, nothing,
the workman left no trace. Just at sunup
the first watch of the day points it out—
it was a wonder! We were stunned . . .
a terrific burden too, for all of us, listen:
you can't see the corpse, not that it's buried,
really, just a light cover of road-dust on it,

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SENTRY:

Come to the point!
What's wrong—why so afraid?

SENTRY:

First, myself, I've got to tell you,
I didn't do it, didn't see who did—
Be fair, don't take it out on me.

CREON:

You're playing it safe, soldier,
barricading yourself from any trouble.
It's obvious, you've something strange to tell.

72 But what came next! Rough talk flew thick and fast,
295 guard grilling guard—we'd have come to blows
at last, nothing to stop it; each man for himself
and each the culprit, no one caught red-handed,
all of us pleading ignorance, dodging the charges,
300 ready to take up red-hot iron in our fists,
go through fire, swear oaths to the gods—
“I didn't do it, I had no hand in it either,
not in the plotting, not the work itself!”

Finally, after all this wrangling came to nothing,
305 one man spoke out and made us stare at the ground,
hanging our heads in fear. No way to counter him,
no way to take his advice and come through
safe and sound. Here's what he said:
“Look, we've got to report the facts to Creon,
310 we can't keep this hidden.” Well, that won out,
and the lot fell to me, condemned me,
unlucky as ever, I got the prize. So here I am,
against my will and yours too, well I know—
no one wants the man who brings bad news.

LEADER:

My king,
315 ever since he began I've been debating in my mind,
could this possibly be the work of the gods?

CREON:

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Stop—
before you make me choke with anger—the gods!
You, you're senile, must you be insane?
You say—why it's intolerable—say the gods
could have the slightest concern for that corpse?
Tell me, was it for meritorious service
320 they proceeded to bury him, prized him so? The hero
who came to burn their temples ringed with pillars,
their golden treasures—scorch their hallowed earth
and fling their laws to the winds.
Exactly when did you last see the gods
celebrating traitors? Inconceivable!

No, from the first there were certain citizens
325 who could hardly stand the spirit of my regime,
grumbling against me in the dark, heads together,
tossing wildly, never keeping their necks beneath
the yoke, loyally submitting to their king.
These are the instigators, I'm convinced—
they've perverted my own guard, bribed them
to do their work.

Money! Nothing worse
335 in our lives, so current, rampant, so corrupting,
Money—you demolish cities, root men from their homes,
you train and twist good minds and set them on
to the most atrocious schemes. No limit,
you make them adept at every kind of outrage,
every godless crime—money!

Everyone—

the whole crew bribed to commit this crime,
they've made one thing sure at least:
sooner or later they will pay the price.

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Wheeling on the SENTRY.

You—

I swear to Zeus as I still believe in Zeus,
 if you don't find the man who buried that corpse,
 the very man, and produce him before my eyes,
 simple death won't be enough for you,
 not till we string you up alive
 and wring the immorality out of you.
 Then you can steal the rest of your days,
 better informed about where to make a killing.
 You'll have learned, at last, it doesn't pay
 to itch for rewards from every hand that beckons.
 Filthy profits wreck most men, you'll see—
 they'll never save your life.

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CREON:
 Still talking?
 You talk too much! A born nuisance—

SENTRY:
 Maybe so,
 but I never did this thing, so help me!

CREON:
 Yes you did—
 what's more, you squandered your life for silver!
 365

SENTRY:
 Oh it's terrible when the one who does the judging
 judges things all wrong.

CREON:

Well now,
 you just be clever about your judgments—
 if you fail to produce the criminals for me,
 you'll swear your dirty money brought you pain.

SENTRY:
 Please,
 may I say a word or two, or just turn and go?

CREON:
 Can't you tell? Everything you say offends me.

SENTRY:
 Where does it hurt you, in the ears or in the heart?

SENTRY:
 Who are you to pinpoint my displeasure?
 And who

SENTRY:
 The culprit grates on your feelings,
 I just annoy your ears.

CREON:

Still talking?
 You talk too much! A born nuisance—

SENTRY:

Maybe so,
 but I never did this thing, so help me!

CREON:

Yes you did—
 what's more, you squandered your life for silver!

SENTRY:

Oh it's terrible when the one who does the judging
 judges things all wrong.

CREON:

Well now,
 you just be clever about your judgments—
 if you fail to produce the criminals for me,
 you'll swear your dirty money brought you pain.

Turning sharply, reentering
 the palace.

SENTRY:

I hope he's found. Best thing by far.
 But caught or not, that's in the lap of fortune:
 I'll never come back, you've seen the last of me.
 I'm saved, even now, and I never thought,
 I never hoped—
 dear gods, I owe you all my thanks!

360

Rushing out.

CHORUS: Numberless wonders
terrible wonders walk the world but none the match for man—
that great wonder crossing the heaving gray sea,
driven on by the blasts of winter
on through breakers crashing left and right,
holds his steady course
the oldest of the gods he wears away—
the Earth, the immortal, the inexhaustible—
as his plows go back and forth, year in, year out
with the breed of stallions turning up the furrows.

380 385
And the blithe, lighthaded race of birds he snares,
the tribes of savage beasts, the life that swarms the depths—
with one fling of his nets
woven and coiled tight, he takes them all,
man the skilled, the brilliant!
He conquers all, taming with his techniques
the prey that roams the cliffs and wild lairs,
training the stallion, clamping the yoke across
his shaggy neck, and the tireless mountain bull.

And speech and thought, quick as the wind
and the mood and mind for law that rules the city—
all these he has taught himself
and shelter from the arrows of the frost
when there's rough lodging under the cold clear sky
and the shafts of lashing rain—
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ready, resourceful man!

Never without resources
never an impasse as he marches on the future—
only Death, from Death alone he will find no rescue
but from desperate plagues he has plotted his escapes!
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Man the master, ingenious past all measure
past all dreams, the skills within his grasp—
he forges on, now to destruction
now again to greatness. When he weaves in
the laws of the land, and the justice of the gods
that binds his oaths together
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he and his city rise high—
but the city casts out
that man who weds himself to inhumanity
thanks to reckless daring. Never share my hearth
415
never think my thoughts, whoever does such things.



*Enter ANTIGONE from the side,
accompanied by the SENTRY.*

Here is a dark sign from the gods—
what to make of this? I know her,
how can I deny it? That young girl's Antigone!
Wretched, child of a wretched father,
Oedipus. Look, is it possible?
They bring you in like a prisoner—
why? did you break the king's laws?
Did they take you in some act of mad defiance?

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SENTRY:
She's the one, she did it single-handed—
we caught her burying the body. Where's Creon?

Enter CREON from the palace.

LEADER:
Back again, just in time when you need him.

CREON:
In time for what? What is it?

SENTRY:

My king,
there's nothing you can swear you'll never do—
second thoughts make liars of us all.
I could have sworn I wouldn't hurry back
(what with your threats, the buffeting I just took),
but a stroke of luck beyond our wildest hopes,
what a joy, there's nothing like it. So,
back I've come, breaking my oath, who cares?
I'm bringing in our prisoner—this young girl—
we took her giving the dead the last rites.
But no casting lots this time; this is *my* luck,
my prize, no one else's.

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Now, my lord,
here she is. Take her, question her,
cross-examine her to your heart's content.
But set me free, it's only right—
I'm rid of this dreadful business once for all.

CREON:
Prisoner! Her? You took her—where, doing what?

SENTRY:
Burying the man. That's the whole story.

CREON:

You mean what you say, you're telling me the truth?
What?

SENTRY:

She's the one. With my own eyes I saw her
bury the body, just what you've forbidden.
There. Is that plain and clear?

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(what with your threats, the buffeting I just took),
but a stroke of luck beyond our wildest hopes,
what a joy, there's nothing like it. So,
back I've come, breaking my oath, who cares?
I'm bringing in our prisoner—this young girl—
we took her giving the dead the last rites.
But no casting lots this time; this is *my* luck,
my prize, no one else's.

CREON: What did you see? Did you catch her in the act?

SENTRY: Here's what happened. We went back to our post, those threats of yours breathing down our necks— we brushed the corpse clean of the dust that covered it, stripped it bare . . . it was slimy, going soft, and we took to high ground, backs to the wind so the stink of him couldn't hit us; jostling, baiting each other to keep awake, shouting back and forth—no napping on the job, not this time. And so the hours dragged by until the sun stood dead above our heads, a huge white ball in the noon sky, beating, blazing down, and then it happened—

suddenly, a whirlwind! Twisting a great dust-storm up from the earth, a black plague of the heavens, filling the plain, ripping the leaves off every tree in sight, choking the air and sky. We squinted hard and took our whipping from the gods.

And after the storm passed—it seemed endless—

there, we saw the girl! And she cried out a sharp, piercing cry, like a bird come back to an empty nest, peering into its bed, and all the babies gone . . . Just so, when she sees the corpse bare she bursts into a long, shattering wail and calls down withering curses on the heads of all who did the work. And she scoops up dry dust, handfuls, quickly, and lifting a fine bronze urn, lifting it high and pouring, she crowns the dead with three full libations.

we rushed her, closed on the kill like hunters, and she, she didn't flinch. We interrogated her, charging her with offenses past and present—

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she stood up to it all, denied nothing. I tell you, it made me ache and laugh in the same breath. It's pure joy to escape the worst yourself, it hurts a man to bring down his friends. But all that, I'm afraid, means less to me than my own skin. That's the way I'm made.

CREON:

Wheeling on ANTIGONE.

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

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

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

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 had done it—the insolence,
twice over—to glory in it, laughing,

mocking us to our face with what she'd done.
I am 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, the most barbaric death.

Yes, I accuse her sister of an equal part

in scheming this, this burial.

To his attendants.

Bring her here!

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.

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

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.

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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.

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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 would 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.

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

ANTIGONE:
He will 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?

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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?

EON: Once an enemy, never a friend,
at even after death.

ANTIGONE: I was born to join in love, not hate—
at is my nature.

LEON: Go down below and love,
love you must—love the dead! While I'm alive,
woman is going to lord it over me.
Enter ISMENE from the palace, under guard.

HORUS: Look,
smene's coming, weeping a sister's tears,
owing sister, under a cloud . . .
er 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:
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.

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

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ISMENE:

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

ANTIGONE:

Go down below and love?
Who did the work?
Let the dead and the god of death bear witness!
I have 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.

538-540]

ANTIGONE

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

ANTIGONE:

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

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

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

Never share my dying,
don't lay claim to what you never touched.
My death will be enough.

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

ANTIGONE: You're right—⁶²⁰
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.
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: Your wisdom appealed to one world—mine, another.

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

ANTIGONE: Your wisdom appealed to one world—mine, another.
But look, we're both guilty, both condemned to death.

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

CREON: They're both mad, I tell you, the two of them.
One's just shown it, the other's been that way
since she was born.

ISMENE: True, my king,
the sense we were born with cannot last forever . . .
commit cruelty on a person long enough
and the mind begins to go.

CREON: Yours did,
when you chose to commit your crimes with her.

ISMENE: How can I live alone, without her?

CREON: Her?
Don't even mention her—she no longer exists.

ISMENE: What? You'd kill your own son's bride?

CREON: Absolutely:
there are other fields for him to plow.

ISMENE: Perhaps,
but never as true, as close a bond as theirs.

CREON: A worthless woman for my son? It repels me.

ISMENE: Dearest Haemon, your father wrongs you so!

ANTIGONE: True, my king,
the sense we were born with cannot last forever . . .
commit cruelty on a person long enough
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there are other fields for him to plow.

ISMENE: Perhaps,
but never as true, as close a bond as theirs.

CREON: A worthless woman for my son? It repels me.

ISMENE: Dearest Haemon, your father wrongs you so!

CREON:
Enough, enough—you and your talk of marriage!

ISMENE:
Creon—you're really going to rob your son of Antigone?

CREON:
Death will do it for me—break their marriage off.

LEADER:
So, it's settled then? Antigone must die?

CREON:
Settled, yes—we both know that.

To the guards,

Stop wasting time. Take them in.
From now on they'll act like women.
Tie them up, no more running loose;
even the bravest will cut and run,
once they see Death coming for their lives.

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CHORUS:
Blust, they are the truly blessed who all their lives
have never tasted devastation. For others, once
the gods have rocked a house to its foundations
the ruin will never cease, cresting on and on
from one generation on throughout the race—
like a great mounting tide
driven on by savage northern gales,
surging over the dead black depths
roiling up from the bottom dark heaves of sand
and the headlands, taking the storm's onslaught full-force,
roar, and the low moaning

echoes on and on
and now

as in ancient times I see the sorrows of the house,
the living heirs of the old ancestral kings,
piling on the sorrows of the dead
and one generation cannot free the next—
some god will bring them crashing down,
the race finds no release.

And now the light, the hope
springing up from the late last root
in the house of Oedipus, that hope's cut down in turn
by the long, bloody knife swung by the gods of death
by a senseless word

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675
by fury at the heart.



*The guards escort ANTIGONE and
ISMENE into the palace. CREON
remains while the old citizens form
their choragus.*

Zeus,

yours is the power, Zeus, what man on earth
can override it, who can hold it back?
Power that neither Sleep, the all-ensnaring
no, nor the tireless months of heaven
can ever overmaster—young through all time,
mighty lord of power, you hold fast
the dazzling crystal mansions of Olympus.
And throughout the future, late and soon
as through the past, your law prevails:
no towering form of greatness
enters into the lives of mortals
free and clear of ruin.

True,

our dreams, our high hopes voyaging far and wide
bring sheer delight to many, to many others
delusion, blithe, mindless lusts
and the fraud steals on one slowly . . . unaware
till he trips and puts his foot into the fire.
He was a wise old man who coined
the famous saying: "Sooner or later
foul is fair, fair is foul
to the man the gods will ruin"—
He goes his way for a moment only
free of blinding ruin.

CREON:

680
685

690

HAEMON.

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?

705

710

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.

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—
a household 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,

Enter HAEMON from the palace.

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.

725
730

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:

740

I'll show you someone fit to rule the state.

745

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 woman 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.

765

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, dread 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 growing 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.

LEADER:

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

No,

795

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.

800

Bend or break. The same when a man is sailing:
haul your sheets too taut, never give an inch,
you'll capsize, and 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.

805

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,

Only in what is right. But if I seem young,
look less to my years and more to what I do
is fighting on her side, the woman's side.

815

CREON:

To the CHORUS.

This boy, I do believe,
is fighting on her side, the woman's side.

CREON:

To the CHORUS.

This boy, I do believe,

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

820

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

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.

CREON:

To the CHORUS.

This boy, I do believe,

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

825

HAEMON:
If you are a woman, yes—
my concern is all for you.

CREON:
Why, you degenerate—bandying accusations,
threatening me with justice, your own father!

HAEMON:
I see my father offending justice—wrong.

CREON:
To protect my royal rights?

HAEMON:
Protect your rights?
When you trample down the honors of the gods?

CREON:
You, you soul of corruption, rotten through—
woman's accomplice!

HAEMON:
That may be,
but you will never find me accomplice to a criminal.

CREON:
That's what she is,
and every word you say is a blatant appeal for her—

HAEMON:
And you, and me, and the gods beneath the earth.
CREON:
You will never marry her, not while she's alive.

HAEMON:
Then she will die . . . but her death will kill another.

830

CREON:
What, brazen threats? You go too far!
HAEMON:
Combating your empty, mindless judgments with a word? 845
What threat?

CREON:
I see my father suffering for your sermons, you and your empty wisdom!

HAEMON:
Wrong?

HAEMON:
If you weren't my father, I'd say you were insane.

CREON:
Don't flatter me with Father—you woman's slave!

HAEMON:
You really expect to fling abuse at me
and not receive the same?

CREON:
Is that so!
Now, by heaven, I promise you, you'll pay—

taunting, insulting me! Bring her out,
that hateful—she'll die now, here,
in front of his eyes, beside her groom!

840

HAEMON:
No, no, she will never die beside me—
don't delude yourself. And you will never
see me, never set eyes on my face again.
Rage your heart out, rage with friends
who can stand the sight of you.

Rushing out.

855

LEADER:
Gone, my king, in a burst of anger.
A temper young as his . . . hurt him once,
he may do something violent.

CREON:
Let him do—
dream up something desperate, past all human limit!
Good riddance. Rest assured,
he'll never save those two young girls from death.

LEADER:
Both of them, you really intend to kill them both?

CREON:
No, not her, the one whose hands are clean—
you're quite right.

LEADER:
But Antigone—
what sort of death do you have in mind for her?

CREON:
I will take her down some wild, desolate path
never trod by men, and wall her up alive
in a rocky vault, and set out short rations,
just the measure piety demands
to keep the entire city free of defilement.
There let her pray to the one god she worships:
Death—who knows?—may just reprieve her from death.
Or she may learn at last, better late than never,
what a waste of breath it is to worship Death.

Exit to the palace.

860

865

870

875

CHORUS:

Love, never conquered in battle
Love the plunderer laying waste the rich!
Love standing the night-watch
guarding a girl's soft cheek,
you range the seas, the shepherds' steadings off in the wilds—
not even the deathless gods can flee your onset,
nothing human born for a day—
whoever feels your grip is driven mad.

Love!—

you wrench the minds of the righteous into outrage,
swerve them to their ruin—you have ignited this,
this kindred strife, father and son at war
and Love alone the victor—
warm glance of the bride triumphant, burning with desire!
Throned in power, side-by-side with the mighty laws!
Irresistible Aphrodite, never conquered—
Love, you mock us for your sport.

ANTIGONE is brought from the palace
under guard.

But now, even I would rebel against the king,
I would break all bounds when I see this—
I fill with tears, I cannot hold them back,
not any more . . . I see Antigone make her way
to the bridal vault where all are laid to rest.

880

885

890

895

ANTIGONE:
Look at me, men of my fatherland,
setting out on the last road
looking into the last light of day
the last I will ever see . . .
the god of death who puts us all to bed
takes me down to the banks of Acheron alive—
denied my part in the wedding-songs,
no wedding-song in the dusk has crowned my marriage—
I go to wed the lord of the dark waters.

CHORUS:
Not crowned with glory or with a dirge,
you leave for the deep pit of the dead.
No withering illness laid you low,
no strokes of the sword—a law to yourself,
alone, no mortal like you, ever, you go down
to the halls of Death alive and breathing.

ANTIGONE: 900

905

ANTIGONE:
But think of Niobe—well I know her story—
think what a living death she died,
Tantalus' daughter, stranger queen from the east:
there on the mountain heights, growing stone
binding as ivy, slowly walled her round
and the rains will never cease, the legends say
the snows will never leave her . . .
wasting away, under her brows the tears
showering down her breasting ridge and slopes—
a rocky death like hers puts me to sleep.

910

920

CHORUS:
But she was a god, born of gods,
and we are only mortals born to die.
And yet, of course, it's a great thing
for a dying girl to hear, even to hear
she shares a destiny equal to the gods,
during life and later, once she's dead.

925

ANTIGONE: 935

Why, in the name of all my fathers' gods
why can't you wait till I am gone—
must you abuse me to my face?

O my city, all your fine rich sons!

And you, you springs of the Dirce,
holy grove of Thebes where the chariots gather,

you at least, you'll bear me witness, look,
unmourned by friends and forced by such crude laws

I go to my rockbound prison, strange new tomb—

always a stranger, O dear god,

I have no home on earth and none below,
not with the living, not with the breathless dead.

CHORUS:
You went too far, the last limits of daring—
smashing against the high throne of Justice!
Your life's in ruins, child—I wonder . . .
do you pay for your father's terrible ordeal?

ANTIGONE:
There—at last you've touched it, the worst pain
the worst anguish! Raking up the grief for father
three times over, for all the doom
that's struck us down, the brilliant house of Laius.

O mother, your marriage-bed
the coiling horrors, the coupling there—
you with your own son, my father—doomstruck mother!

Such, such were my parents, and I their wretched child.
I go to them now, cursed, unwed, to share their home—

I am a stranger! O dear brother, doomed
in your marriage—your marriage murders mine,
your dying drags me down to death alive!

940

945

950

955

Enter Creon.

CHORUS:
Reverence asks some reverence in return—
but attacks on power never go unchecked,
not by the man who holds the reins of power.
Your own blind will, your passion has destroyed you.

ANTIGONE:
No one to weep for me, my friends,
no wedding-song—they take me away
in all my pain . . . the road lies open, waiting. 965
Never again, the law forbids me to see
the sacred eye of day. I am agony!
No tears for the destiny that's mine,
no loved one mourns my death.

CREON:
Can't you see?
If a man could wail his own dirge before he dies,
he'd never finish.

To the guards.

Take her away, quickly!
Wall her up in the tomb, you have your orders.
Abandon her there, alone, and let her choose—
death or a buried life with a good roof for shelter. 975
As for myself, my hands are clean. This young girl,
dead or alive, she will be stripped of her rights,
her stranger's rights, here in the world above.

ANTIGONE:

O tomb, my bridal-bed—my house, my prison
cut in the hollow rock, my everlasting watch!
I'll soon be there, soon embrace my own,
980
the great growing family of our dead
Persephone has received among her ghosts.

I,

the last of them all, the most reviled by far,
go down before my destined time's run out.
But still I go, cherishing one good hope:
985
my arrival may be dear to father,
dear to you, my mother,
dear to you, my loving brother, Eteocles—
When you died I washed you with my hands,
I dressed you all, I poured the sacred cups
across your tombs. But now, Polynices,
because I laid your body out as well,
this, this is my reward. Nevertheless
I honored you—the decent will admit it—
well and wisely too.

Never, I tell you.

995
if I had been the mother of children
or if my husband died, exposed and rotting—
I'd never have taken this ordeal upon myself,
never defied our people's will. What law,
you ask, do I satisfy with what I say?
1000
A husband dead, there might have been another.
A child by another too, if I had lost the first.
But mother and father both lost in the halls of Death,
no brother could ever spring to light again.

For this law alone I held you first in honor.
For this, Creon, the king, judges me a criminal
guilty of dreadful outrage, my dear brother!
And now he leads me off, a captive in his hands,
with no part in the bridal-song, the bridal-bed,
denied all joy of marriage, raising children—
deserted so by loved ones, struck by fate,
I descend alive to the caverns of the dead.

What law of the mighty gods have I transgressed?
Why look to the heavens any more, tormented as I am?
Whom to call, what comrades now? Just think,
my reverence only brands me for irreverence!
Very well: if this is the pleasure of the gods,
once I suffer I will know that I was wrong.
But if these men are wrong, let them suffer
nothing worse than they mete out to me—
these masters of injustice!

1005

1010

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1030



LEADER:
Still the same rough winds, the wild passion
raging through the girl.

CREON:

To the guards.

Take her away.
You're wasting time—you'll pay for it too.

ANTIGONE:
Oh god, the voice of death. It's come, it's here.

CREON:
True. Not a word of hope—your doom is sealed.

ANTIGONE:
Land of Thebes, city of all my fathers—
O you gods, the first gods of the race!
They drag me away, now, no more delay.
Look on me, you noble sons of Thebes—
the last of a Great line of kings,
I alone, see what I suffer now
at the hands of what breed of men—
all for reverence, my reverence for the gods!

She leaves under guard; the CHORUS
gathers.

CHORUS: Danaë, Danaë—
Danaë, Danaë—
even she endured a fate like yours,
in all her lovely strength she traded
the light of day for the bolted brazen vault—
buried within her tomb, her bridal-chamber,
wed to the yoke and broken.
But she was of glorious birth
my child, my child
and treasured the seed of Zeus within her womb,
the cloudburst streaming gold!
The power of fate is a wonder,
dark, terrible wonder—
neither wealth nor armies
towered walls nor ships
black hulls lashed by the salt
can save us from that force.

And far north where the Black Rocks
cut the sea in half
and murderous straits
split the coast of Thrace
a forbidding city stands
where once, hard by the walls
the savage Ares thrilled to watch
a king's new queen, a Fury rearing in
against his two royal sons—
her bloody hands, her dagger-shut
stabbing out their eyes—cursed, blind
their eyes blind sockets screaming for

dark, terrible wonder—
neither wealth nor armies
towered walls nor ships
black hulls lashed by the salt
can save us from that force.

The yoke tamed him too
young Lycurgus flaming in anger
king of Edonia, all for his mad taunts
Dionysus clamped him down, encased
in the chain-mail of rock
and there his rage
his terrible flowering rage burst—
sobbing, dying away . . . at last that madman
came to know his god—
the power he mocked, the power
he taunted in all his frenzy
trying to stamp out
the women strong with the god—
the torch, the raving sacred cries—
engaging the Muses who adore the flute.

And far north where the Black Rocks
cut the sea in half
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a king's new queen, a Fury rearing in
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their eyes blind sockets screaming for

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And far north where the Black Rocks
cut the sea in half
and murderous straits
split the coast of Thrace
a forbidding city stands
where once, hard by the walls
the savage Ares thrilled to watch
a king's new queen, a Fury rearing in rage
against his two royal sons—
her bloody hands, her dagger-shuttle
stabbing out their eyes—cursed, blinding wounds—
their eyes blind sockets screaming for revenge!

dark, terrible wonder—
neither wealth nor armies
towered walls nor ships
black hulls lashed by the salt
can save us from that force.

The yoke tamed him too
young Lycurgus flaming in anger
king of Edonia, all for his mad taunts
Dionysus clamped him down, encased
in the chain-mail of rock
and there his rage
his terrible flowering rage burst—
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the power he mocked, the power
he taunted in all his frenzy
trying to stamp out
the women strong with the god—
the torch, the raving sacred cries—
engaging the Muses who adore the flute.

Enter TIRESIAS, the blind prophet,
led by a boy.

TIRESIAS: Lords of Thebes,

I and the boy have come together,
hand in hand. Two see with the eyes of one
so the blind must go, with a guide to lead the way.

CREON: What is it, old Tiresias? What news now?

TIRESIAS: I will teach you. And you obey the seer.

CREON: I will,

I've never wavered from your advice before.

TIRESIAS: And so you kept the city straight on course.

CREON: I owe you a great deal, I swear to that.

TIRESIAS: Then reflect, my son: you are poised,
once more, on the razor-edge of fate.

CREON: What is it? I shudder to hear you.

TIRESIAS:

You will learn
when you listen to the warnings of my craft.

As I sat on the ancient seat of augury,
in the sanctuary where every bird I know
will hover at my hands—suddenly I heard it,
a strange voice in the wingbeats, unintelligible,
barbaric, a mad scream! Talons flashing, ripping,
they were killing each other—that much I knew—
the murderous fury whirring in those wings
made that much clear!

I was afraid,

I turned quickly, tested the burnt-sacrifice,
ignited the altar at all points—but no fire,
the god in the fire never blazed.
Not from those offerings . . . over the embers
slid a heavy ooze from the long thighbones,
smoking, sputtering out, and the bladder
puffed and burst—spraying gall into the air—
and the fat wrapping the bones slithered off
and left them glistening white. No fire!
The rites failed that might have blazed the future
with a sign. So I learned from the boy here:
he is my guide, as I am guide to others.

And it is you—

your high resolve that sets this plague on Thebes.

The public altars and sacred hearths are fouled,
one and all, by the birds and dogs with carrion
torn from the corpse, the doomstruck son of Oedipus!
And so the gods are deaf to our prayers, they spurn
the offerings in our hands, the flame of holy flesh.
No birds cry out an omen clear and true—
they're gorged with the murdered victim's blood and fat.

1100 1125 1130

1090 1105

1095 1115

1120

112 SOPHOCLES: THE THREE THEBAN PLAYS [1023-47]

Take these things to heart, my son, I warn you.
All men make mistakes, it is only human.
But once the wrong is done, a man
can turn his back on folly, misfortune too,
if he tries to make amends, however low he's fallen,
and stops his bullnecked ways. Stubbornness
brands you for stupidity—pride is a crime.
No, yield to the dead!
Never stab the fighter when he's down.
Where's the glory, killing the dead twice over?

1135

I mean you well. I give you sound advice.
It's best to learn from a good adviser
when he speaks for your own good:
it's pure gain.

CREON: Old man—all of you! So,
you shoot your arrows at my head like archers at the target—
I even have him loosed on me, this fortune-teller.
Oh his ilk has tried to sell me short
and ship me off for years. Well,
drive your bargains, traffic—much as you like—

1140

You'll never bury that body in the grave,
in the gold of India, silver-gold of Sardis.
You'll never bury the corpse
not even if Zeus's eagles rip the throne of god!
and wing their rotten pickings off to the traitor.

1155

Never, not even in fear of such defilement
will I tolerate his burial, that god—
Well I know, we can't defile the gods—
no mortal has the power.

No,

reverend old Tiresias, all men fall,
it's only human, but the wisest fall obscenely—
when they glorify obscene advice with rhetoric—
all for their own gain.

TIRESIAS:
Oh god, is there a man alive
who knows, who actually believes . . .

What now?

115

CREON:

All earth-shattering truth are you about to utter?

What earth-shattering truth are you about to utter?

1165

TIRESIAS:
. . . just how much a sense of judgment, wisdom
is the greatest gift we have?

CREON:

Just as much, I'd say,
as a twisted mind is the worst affliction known.

TIRESIAS:
You are the one who's sick, Creon, sick to death.

TIRESIAS:
You are the one who's sick, Creon, sick to death.

CREON:
I am in no mood to trade insults with a seer.

TIRESIAS:
You have already, calling my prophecies a lie.

CREON:
Why not? 1170
You and the whole breed of seers are mad for money!

1175

1160

114 TIRESIAS:
And the whole race of tyrants lusts for filthy gain.

CREON:
This slander of yours—
are you aware you're speaking to the king?

TIRESIAS:
Well aware. Who helped you save the city?

CREON:
You—
you have your skills, old seer, but you lust for injustice!

TIRESIAS:
You will drive me to utter the dreadful secret in my heart.

CREON:
Spit it out! Just don't speak it out for profit.

TIRESIAS:
Profit? No, not a bit of profit, not for you.

CREON:
Know full well, you'll never buy off my resolve.

1155

1190

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1205

TIRESIAS:
Then know this too, learn this by heart!

The chariot of the sun will not race through
so many circuits more, before you have surrendered
one born of your own loins, your own flesh and blood,
a corpse for corpses given in return, since you have thrust
to the world below a child sprung for the world above,
ruthlessly lodged a living soul within the grave—
then you've robbed the gods below the earth,
keeping a dead body here in the bright air,
unburied, unsung, unhallowed by the rites.

You, you have no business with the dead,
nor do the gods above—this is violence.
you have forced upon the heavens.
And so the avengers, the dark destroyers late
but true to the mark, now lie in wait for you,
the Furies sent by the gods and the god of death
to strike you down with the pains that you perfected!

There. Reflect on that, tell me I've been bribed.
The day comes soon, no long rest of time, not now,
when the mourning cries for men and women break
throughout your halls. Great hatred rises against you—
cities in tumult, all whose mutilated sons
the dogs have graced with burial, or the wild beasts
or a wheeling crow that wings the ungodly stench of carrion
back to each city, each warrior's hearth and home.

These arrows for your heart! Since you've raked me
I loose them like an archer in my anger,
arrows deadly true. You'll never escape
their burning, searing force.

Motioning to his escort.

1210

Come, boy, take me home.
So he can vent his rage on younger men,
and learn to keep a gentler tongue in his head
and better sense than what he carries now.
Exit to the side.

LEADER:
The old man's gone, my king—
terrible prophecies. Well I know,
since the hair on this old head went gray,
he's never lied to Thebes.

1215

CREON:
I know it myself—I'm shaken, torn.
It's a dreadful thing to yield . . . but resist now?
Lay my pride bare to the blows of ruin?
That's dreadful too.

1220

LEADER:
Yes, my king, quickly. Disasters sent by the gods
cut short our follies in a flash.

1215

CREON:
Oh it's hard,
giving up the heart's desire . . . but I will do it—
no more fighting a losing battle with necessity.

1230

LEADER:
Do it now, go, don't leave it to others.

1235

CREON:
Now—I'm on my way! Come, each of you,
take up axes, make for the high ground,
over there, quickly! I and my better judgment
have come round to this—I shackled her,
I'll set her free myself. I am afraid . . .
it's best to keep the established laws
to the very day we die.

LEADER:
But good advice,
Creon, take it now, you must.

1235

CREON:
What should I do? Tell me . . . I'll obey.

LEADER:
Go! Free the girl from the rocky vault
and raise a mound for the body you exposed.

1225

CREON:
That's your advice? You think I should give in?



Rushing out, followed by his
entourage. The chorus clusters
around the altar.

CHORUS:
God of a hundred names!

Great Dionysus—

Son and glory of Semel! Pride of Thebes—

Child of Zeus whose thunder rocks the clouds—

Lord of the famous lands of evening—

King of the Mysteries! King of Eleusis, Demeter's plain

her breasting hills that welcome in the world—

Great Dionysus! Bacchus, living in Thebes

the mother-city of all your frenzied women— Bacchus

living along the Ismeneus' rippling waters
standing over the field sown with the Dragon's teeth!

You—we have seen you through the flaring smoky fires,
your torches blazing over the twin peaks
where nymphs of the hallowed cave climb onward
fired with you, your sacred rage—
we have seen you at Castalia's running spring
and down from the heights of Nysa crowned with ivy
the greening shore rioting vines and grapes
down you come in your storm of wild women
ecstatic, mystic cries— Dionysus—

down to watch and ward the roads of Thebes!

First of all cities, Thebes you honor first

you and your mother, bride of the lightning—
come, Dionysus! now your people lie
in the iron grip of plague,
come in your racing, healing stride
down Parnassus' slopes

or across the moaning straits.

1240

Lord of the dancing—

dance, dance the constellations breathing fire!
Great master of the voices of the night!
Child of Zeus, God's offspring, come, come forth!
Lord, king, dance with your nymphs, swirling, raving
arm-in-arm in frenzy through the night
they dance you, Iacchus—

Dance, Dionysus
giver of all good things!

1245

Enter a MESSENGER from the side.

MESSENGER:

Neighbors,
friends of the house of Cadmus and the kings,
there's not a thing in this mortal life of ours
I'd praise or blame as settled once for all.
Fortune lifts and Fortune feels the lucky
and unlucky every day. No prophet on earth
can tell a man his fate. Take Creon:
there was a man to rouse your envy once,
as I see it. He saved the realm from enemies,
taking power, he alone, the lord of the fatherland,
he set us true on course—he flourished like a tree
with the noble line of sons he bred and reared . . .

1250

1275

1280

and now it's lost, all gone.

Believe me,
when a man has squandered his true joys,
he's good as dead, I tell you, a living corpse.
Pile up riches in your house, as much as you like—
live like a king with a huge show of pomp,
but if real delight is missing from the lot,
I wouldn't give you a wisp of smoke for it,
not compared with joy.

1290

LEADER: What now?
MESSENGER: Who new grief do you bring the house of kings?

LEADER: Who's the murderer? Who is dead? Tell us.

MESSENGER: Haemon's gone, his blood spilled by the very hand—
Dead, dead—and the living are guilty of their death!

LEADER: His father's or his own?

MESSENGER: His own . . .
raging mad with his father for the death—

LEADER: His father's or his own?

MESSENGER: Oh great seer,
you saw it all, you brought your word to birth!

MESSENGER:
Those are the facts. Deal with them as you will.
*As he turns to go, EURYDICE cries
from the palace.*

LEADER:
Look, Eurydice. Poor woman, Creon's wife,
so close at hand. By chance perhaps,
unless she's heard the news about her son.

1300

EURYDICE:
My countrymen,

all of you—I caught the sound of your words
as I was leaving to do my part,
to appeal to queen Athena with my prayers.
I was just loosing the bolts, opening the doors,
when a voice filled with sorrow, family sorrow,
struck my ears, and I fell back, terrified,
into the women's arms—everything went black.
Tell me the news, again, whatever it is . . .
sorrow and I are hardly strangers.
I can bear the worst.

MESSENGER:
I—dear lady,

1295

I'll speak as an eye-witness. I was there.
And I won't pass over one word of the truth.
Why should I try to soothe you with a story,
only to prove a liar in a moment?
Truth is always best.

So,

I escorted your lord, I guided him
to the edge of the plain where the body lay,
Polynices, torn by the dogs and still unmourned.
And saying a prayer to Hecate of the Crossroads,
Pluto too, to hold their anger and be kind,
we washed the dead in a bath of holy water
and plucking some fresh branches, gathering . . .
what was left of him, we burned them all together
and raised a high mound of native earth, and then
we turned and made for that rocky vault of hers,
the hollow, empty bed of the bride of Death.

1315

1320

1325

And far off, one of us heard a voice,
a long wail rising, echoing
out of that unhallored wedding-chamber,
he ran to alert the master and Creon pressed on,
closer—the strange, inscrutable cry came sharper,
throbbing around him now, and he let loose
a cry of his own, enough to wrench the heart,
“Oh god, am I the prophet now? going down
the darkest road I’ve ever gone? My son—
it’s his dear voice, he greets me! Go, men,
closer, quickly! Go through the gap,
the rocks are dragged back—
right to the tomb’s very mouth—and look,
see if it’s Haemon’s voice I think I hear,
or the gods have robbed me of my senses.”

1330

1335

1340

The king was shattered. We took his orders,
went and searched, and there in the deepest,
dark recesses of the tomb we found her . . .
hanged by the neck in a fine linen noose,
strangled in her veils—and the boy.
His arms flung around her waist,
clinging to her, wailing for his bride,
dead and down below, for his father’s crimes
and the bed of his marriage blighted by misfortune.

When Creon saw him, he gave a deep sob,
he ran in, shouting, crying out to him,
“Oh my child—what have you done? what seized you,
what insanity? what disaster drove you mad?”

Come out, my son! I beg you on my knees!”
But the boy gave him a wild burning glance,
spat in his face, not a word in reply,
he drew his sword—his father rushed out,
running as Haemon lunged and missed!—
and then, doomed, desperate with himself,
suddenly leaning his full weight on the blade,
he buried it in his body, halfway to the hilt.

1345

1375

1350

1360

And still in his senses, pouring his arms around her,
he embraced the girl and breathing hard,
released a quick rush of blood,
bright red on her cheek glistening white.
And there he lies, body enfolding body . . .
he has won his bride at last, poor boy,
not here but in the houses of the dead.

Creon shows the world that of all the ills
afflicting men the worst is lack of judgment.
*EURYDICE turns and reenters the
palace.*

1365

1370

LEADER:
What do you make of that? The lady’s gone,
without a word, good or bad.

MESSENGER:

I’m alarmed too
but here’s my hope—faced with her son’s death
she finds it unbecoming to mourn in public.
Inside, under her roof, she’ll set her women
to the task and wail the sorrow of the house.
She’s too discreet. She won’t do something rash.

1375

1380

LEADER:
I’m not so sure. To me, at least,
a long heavy silence promises danger,
just as much as a lot of empty outcries.

MESSENGER:

We’ll see if she’s holding something back,
hiding some passion in her heart.
I’m going in. You may be right—who knows?
Even too much silence has its dangers.

1385

*Exit to the palace. Enter CREON
from the side, escorted by attendants
carrying HAEMON’s body on a bier.*

LEADER: The king himself! Coming toward us,
look, holding the boy's head in his hands.
Clear, damning proof, if it's right to say so—
proof of his own madness, no one else's,
no, his own blind wrongs.

CREON:
Ohhh,
so senseless, so insane . . . my crimes,
my stubborn, deadly—
Look at us, the killer, the killed,
father and son, the same blood—the misery!
My plans, my mad fanatic heart,
my son, cut off so young!
Ai, dead, lost to the world,
not through your stupidity, no, my own.

1395

LEADER: Too late, 1400
too late, you see what justice means.

CREON:
Oh I've learned
through blood and tears! Then, it was then,
when the god came down and struck me—a great weight
shattering, driving me down that wild savage path,
ruining, trampling down my joy. Oh the agony,
the heartbreaking agonies of our lives.

*Enter the MESSENGER from the
palace.*

1405

MESSENGER:
Master,
what a hoard of grief you have, and you'll have more.
The grief that lies to hand you've brought yourself—

Pointing to HAEMON's body.

the rest, in the house, you'll see it all too soon.

CREON:
What now? What's worse than this?

MESSENGER:
The queen is dead. 1410
The mother of this dead boy . . . mother to the end—
poor thing, her wounds are fresh.

CREON:

Ohhh,
No, no,
harbor of Death, so choked, so hard to cleanse!—
why me? why are you killing me?
Herald of pain, more words, more grief!
I died once, you kill me again and again!
What's the report, boy . . . some news for me?
My wife dead? O dear god!
Slaughter heaped on slaughter?

1415

*The doors open; the body of
EURYDICE is brought out on her bier.*

MESSENGER:
See for yourself:
now they bring her body from the palace.

CREON:

Oh no,
another, a second loss to break the heart.
What next, what fate still waits for me?
I just held my son in my arms and now,
look, a new corpse rising before my eyes—
wretched, helpless mother—O my son!

1425

MESSENGER:
Master,

what a hoard of grief you have, and you'll have more.
The grief that lies to hand you've brought yourself—

Pointing to HAEMON's body.

MESSINGER:
She stabbed herself at the altar,
then her eyes went dark, after she'd raised
a cry for the noble fate of Megareus, the hero
killed in the first assault, then for Haemon,
then with her dying breath she called down
torments on your head—you killed her sons.

1430

1435

CREON:
Oh the dread,
I shudder with dread! Why not kill me too?—
run me through with a good sharp sword?
Oh god, the misery, anguish—
I, I'm churning with it, going under.

1440

MESSINGER:
Yes, and the dead, the woman lying there,
piles the guilt of all their deaths on you.

1445

CREON:
How did she end her life, what bloody stroke?

MESSINGER:
She drove home to the heart with her own hand,
once she learned her son was dead . . . that agony.

1450

1455

CREON:
And the guilt is all mine—
can never be fixed on another man,
no escape for me. I killed you,
I, god help me, I admit it all!

To his attendants

Take me away, quickly, out of sight.
I don't even exist—I'm no one. Nothing.

1455

Whatever I touch goes wrong—once more
a crushing fate's come down upon my head!
The MESSENGER and attendants lead
CREON into the palace.

LEADER:
Good advice, if there's any good in suffering.
Quickest is best when troubles block the way.

CREON:
Kneeling in prayer.
Come, let it come!—that best of fates for me
that brings the final day, best fate of all.
Oh quickly, now—
so I never have to see another sunrise.

1450

1455

LEADER:
That will come when it comes;
we must deal with all that lies before us.
The future rests with the ones who tend the future.

1455

CREON:
That prayer—I poured my heart into that prayer!

1460

LEADER:
No more prayers now. For mortal men
there is no escape from the doom we must endure.

CREON:
Take me away, I beg you, out of sight.
A rash, indiscriminate fool!
I murdered you, my son, against my will—
you too, my wife . . . Wailing wreck of a man,
whom to look to? where to lean for support?
Desperately turning from HAEMON to EURYDICE on their biers.

1460

1465

CHORUS:

Wisdom is by far the greatest part of joy,
and reverence toward the gods must be safeguarded.
The mighty words of the proud are paid in full
with mighty blows of fate, and at long last
those blows will teach us wisdom.

1470

The old citizens exit to the side.



OEDIPUS THE KING



Excerpts from

THE TRAGIC ABYSS

By Louise Cowan

Introduction

The Tragic Abyss

LOUISE COWAN

So blind, in so severe a place
(All life before in the black grave)
The last alternatives they face
Of life, without the life to save.
Allen Tate, "The Cross"

Despite its sinister revelations, tragedy stands virtually unchallenged in the Western world for moral and artistic supremacy. And though its pure lineaments surface only rarely, it remains in the poetic canon a privileged model, if only as an unattainable ideal. Aristotle lists it in the Poetics as one of the four "kinds" and assumes its superiority over the other three in artistic economy and power (Butcher 116-117). But his authoritative analysis of its formal elements, almost slavishly adopted in every epoch since the fifteenth-century rediscovery of his treatise, left the meaning of tragedy essentially undefined. What are its dark secrets that even the rumor of them so fascinates and entralls? For, despite its few appearances, this most absolute of genres seems always hovering in the background in Western society. It manifests its presence as a potentiality of the psyche, and though seldom embodied—and then, apparently, only in drama—appears like a kind of fractal design in the margins of our music, our films, our news media. It punctuates our conversations; it governs our relationships and exhales in our dreams what Max Scheler calls tragedy's "heavy breath" (249). It is one of the supreme human icons, borne with us on the shared journey of civilization, much as Aeneas carried his household gods—or, it might be more appropriate to say, as Perseus carried his shield. Despite the critical disagreements it spurs, its infrequent manifestations are

universally recognized. Only by some sort of theoretical timidity do we stop short of acknowledging behind them the presence of a tragic essence, an archetypal idea that takes on form at intervals throughout history.

Unlike the other modes of which Aristotle speaks, tragedy cannot really be said to be a *mimesis* of a *praxis*, an imitation of an action. Certainly it has a plot, characters, and the other elements he names as imitating an action "serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude" (Butcher 63). In both epic and comedy, however, that action, the underlying "movement of spirit," as Francis Fergusson expresses it (Introduction 4), is an image of some such movement in life. It is in this large analogy that those genres are mimetic, not simply in their characters and plots. But tragedy, rather than being a model of life experience, seems absolute—like a diagram or a recipe. It evokes something rather than reminds us of something. As raindancers strive in their ritual not so much to imitate human action as to make gestures that, reaching beyond the human, cause rain to fall, so tragedy bends all its efforts toward producing a result. And in this purpose it stands in contrast with comedy, whose long-drawn-out episodic turns mimic in distorted guise the trials and narrow escapes of daily living. Viewed in this light, tragedy is less a simulacrum of human action than a liturgical confrontation of a deep-seated dread which, when brought to light, can be borne only through the medium of poetic language. Its plots, then, should be recognized for what they are: not really, as Aristotle would have it, structures with a complication and resolution—with a beginning, middle, and end—but dramatizations of single moments of unmasking, accompanied by whatever is necessary to reach that chilling and epiphanic event. For a moment in the tragic vision one looks beyond the boundaries of ordinary awareness and glimpses the caverns of a lightless abyss. The tragic protagonists who find themselves in this severe place—Job, Prometheus, Oedipus, Hamlet, Macbeth, Ahab, Joe Christmas, among others—discover that they are transfixed, as though caught in a trap. They face the immediacy of an ultimate choice. For, in the dead air of this unmoving time, they are unable to go forward or backward. They have reached a point of no return. These chosen protagonists *qua* victims confront the final alternatives. This is the tragic moment.

But it seems less an analogy of anything that happens in life than an unconcealing of the substratum of human existence. Thus in the tragic world, for all its otherness, one is somehow in familiar territory—the setting of dreams and nightmares. But tragedy presents a nightmare from which the dreamer cannot awake. Its vision has a finality that leaves not only the protagonist but the audience changed. It rends the curtain of intelligibility to reveal another kind of reality, so deep that it seems to the viewer an abyss. For the spectator, what remains is not the specific action represented onstage so much as the drama aroused in the underworld of the spirit, that deep well of darkness in the human psyche in which joy and pain are mingled. Many twentieth-century thinkers have been concerned with this hidden aspect of the person. Freud has directed his attention to the "dark, inaccessible part of our personality" (19:36); and Jacques Maritain has spoken of "the nocturnal kingdom of the mind" (94). But tragedy goes even deeper than these statements would indicate: it dredges up something from the bottomless pit. Like the gorgon's gaze, what it brings up ought not be faced directly, as one knows instinctively, but is better viewed at a slant, through a mask or an image. To see the thing itself could mark the fulfillment of the *dies irae*, the day of wrath, the whisper "Thou art the man." And because this final accusation is never quite realized in actual life, no matter how dire one's circumstances, it is likely to be kept in abeyance as an undischarged fear in the back of consciousness, its terror and pity doled out in small doses.

An impressive number of twentieth-century thinkers have attempted to isolate tragedy in one of its elements, such as suffering,¹ paradox,² the destruction of a value,³ or the confrontation with the irremediable.⁴ Others consider it to issue from the ritual of sacrifice,⁵ the boundary situation,⁶ or the incarnation of political order.⁷ These theories—and there are hundreds more—advance single elements as keys to the tragic. Yet no one of them completely captures its forbidding though oddly exhilarating power. In seeking the sources of this power, however, one must first acknowledge that tragedy seems not to have a definable content or a specifiable structure. As we have been suggesting, it presents itself almost as a kind of mechanism—or a sacrament—something that does something, that has an effect *ex opere operato*. And though what it does may be fearfully important for the *polis*, as Aristotle

made clear twenty-five hundred years ago, it channels its power through the medium of one protagonist—the scapegoat, victim, tyrant, or hero—who must go alone to face the abyss. It is as though tragedy opens the door to Tartarus, activating the pattern of the soul's possibility and exposing the threat buried at the bottom of consciousness. But it is a threat from another realm and hence represents something beyond the human, something essentially metaphysical, rather than the distillation of actual experience.

But without its art form, the tragic is likely to be kept in abeyance, an undischarged terror in the psyche. And the creation of tragedy is not simply subject to the author's will: modern tragedy, for instance, has been infrequent and, when it occurs, incomplete. It is hardly evocable in the novel. As readers of novels, we lack the viscera for tragedy; we are all minds and sensibilities. However terrible, Kurtz's famous cry, "The horror! The horror!" stops short of the genuinely tragic, even though it is the dying voice of a tormented soul that has exceeded human bounds in "stepping over the edge." But, as readers, we do not see with him what he sees but are told about the experience retrospectively. "*Heart of Darkness*" is a superb novella about the abyss, but it is not tragedy. It wisely makes no attempt to trace the grammar of Kurtz's vision. We are not present at the moment that the trap springs.

Such a sight as Kurtz saw, unless it is to overwhelm entirely, would have to be brought into consciousness as communal experience in full view of an audience. There, secure within the tragic form, and not as solitary reader, one might look directly upon the face of the gorgon and live to tell the tale. Otherwise a Marlow must interpret for us—or, in *Absalom, Absalom!* a Quentin Compson, who goes with Miss Rosa Coldfield into the deserted Sutpen mansion, the house of death, to find Henry Sutpen, his brother's murderer, locked away in darkness. Horrifying as this moment is, however, it is still questionable as tragedy. Quentin reports the experience to us, and our minds and sympathies give assent to it. We recognize it and thrill in vicarious horror. But what we experience is removed from the fullblown tragic experience. For in the confines of the novel, we are shielded by meditation from the unfathomable contradictions of the act. It happened somewhere else, to someone whose interiority we do not know. We know of it intellectually and can contemplate it in

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complete safety. Another person is telling us about it, which is another kind of experience entirely—possessing its own *frisson*, no doubt, but not the full-bodied pity and terror that come of being there, or even when we read the Greeks or Shakespeare, of feeling that we're there. Unalleviated tragedy provides no protection for us, no way out by means of psychological detachment. In its authentic appearances, the tragic experience is irreducible, inexplicable, offered directly to the audience.

During the two epochs of its generally agreed-upon appearance in Western history, it was within the safety of cities that the tragic epiphany occurred. The tragic pattern was harrowed up into the light of recognition, with all levels of the populace looking on in the same fascinated horror and *jouissance*. And the dramas produced during those two epochs are still capable, centuries later, among strangers, of generating the tragic event. Like the Bible, these Greek and Shakespearean texts remain potential sources of unmediated catharsis in ages and climes far removed from their origin, belonging to succeeding eras as much as to their own. Even solitary readers can experience the shared pity and terror arising from their pages. For in their essence, these works were conceived communally and expressed in language that carries with it primordial implications, recognizable—even longed for—in whatever medium. But the Greek and Shakespearean dramas do not exhaust the tragic; they *educate* us about it. They have shown us that it is a pattern in reality, not of our own making; hence we can recognize in works of art its partial appearance as well as oblique patterns signifying its presence, hieroglyphics that we would otherwise miss. For, though not every age can or even should try to produce full-blown tragedy, a sense of the tragic seems a necessary ingredient of the Western mind.

Tragic Theory

Tragedy in itself is unarguably communal, but its relation to the *polis* has frequently been considered problematic. Plato saw it as the poetic kind most dangerous to the city, a condemnation Aristotle attempted to offset in his *Poetics*, with his emphasis on the ethical and the ameliorative. In the Aristotelian view, the tragic action results from a castigable blindness—*hamartia*, the same word Christians were later to use for *sin*—a myopia affecting the

judgment and will of an otherwise predominantly virtuous leader. Further, a reversal of fortune and its consequent recognition brings about a counterpoint of pity and terror leading to insight and effecting a catharsis, with a subsequent restoration of order. This conception of tragedy dominated the poetics of the Middle Ages, even though, steeped in Horace and Cicero, medieval writers were familiar with Aristotle only through a Latin translation by the Arabic philosopher Averroes.

After the late fifteenth-century rediscovery of the *Poetics* in a Greek manuscript, it became almost the sole arbiter of tragic drama, though it was blended with an already established Roman didacticism.⁸ For a couple of centuries afterward, neoclassical theorists tended to view tragedy in the light of poetic justice, conceiving of tragic conflict as the dramatization of a threat against not only morality but decorum, ending, however, with the ultimate vindication of right order. Not until the nineteenth century, when Hegel advanced his philosophy of the conflict of good with good, or *kollision*—his term for the painful attempt of Spirit to embody itself in space and time—was there a theory to rival Aristotle's, though, unlike the Greek philosopher, Hegel was chiefly concerned with the significance of tragedy rather than its art form.⁹ Hegel considered certain human powers as making up an ethical substance binding a person to various “goods.” The most poignant situation in which one can find oneself, according to Hegel, is to encounter these goods in conflict with each other in one's own life.

Nietzsche continued this view of tragedy as representing forces in conflict with each other—as he expressed it, between the Apollonian and the Dionysian poles in human culture and in individual persons (Birth 143). As Gerald Else comments, Nietzsche saw the rise of tragedy “out of the dark womb of the ‘Dionysian,’ that indispensable, all confounding Primal Unity of joy and pain which lies at the heart of life itself” (9). And in the twentieth century, Max Scheler, building on Hegel and Nietzsche, reiterates the idea of tragedy as representing a conflict between two values in which, though such a clash generates new meaning, it nonetheless destroys something keenly valuable. Scheler is adamant about the necessity of acknowledging a potential tragic presence in the depths of existence. As he comments, “it is impossible to arrive at the phenomenon of the tragic through the art product alone... The tragic

Introduction: The Tragic Abyss

is rather an essential element of the universe itself. The material made use of by the art product and the tragedian must contain beforehand the dark strain of this element" (249).

The tragic, then, according to Scheler, "is not the result of an interpretation of the world and the important events of the world" but inheres in events, in people, in fortunes. It is given off by them "like a heavy breath, or seems like an obscure glimmering that surrounds them." Scheler continues, "In it a specific feature of the world's makeup appears before us, and not a condition of our own ego, nor its emotions, nor its experience of compassion and fear." What he calls the "tragic knot" occurs in the "inner entanglement between the creation of a value and the destruction of a value as they take place in the unity of the tragic action and the tragic event. When we can see the catastrophe as a "species of transcendent necessity," for which no blame can be attached, then and only then do we have tragedy (262).

Lionel Abel in America and Roman Ingarden in Poland proceed in this vein, viewing tragedy with an ontological rather than an ethical, psychological, or aesthetic concern. For Abel, tragedy provides a vision of the irremediable. The tragic vision, he maintains, results from a direct act of seeing rather than from holding any particular view. The tragic writer provides the noblest view of human adversity, portraying a world wherein supreme values collide, "one in which we know we could not live" (187). Ingarden is openly metaphysical in his conception of the literary work of art in general. The tragic, in his view, is among those essences which "are not properties in the usual sense of the term, nor are they in general 'features' of some psychic state but instead they are usually revealed... as an atmosphere which... penetrates and illuminates everything with its light" (291). In realizing them, Ingarden maintains, "we enter into primal existence..." (292). We have a secret longing "for their realization and contemplation—even if they are to be frightful" (293). Tragedy, both of these writers would say, is primarily concerned not so much with examining philosophical ideas or ethical standards as with discerning a tension at the heart of being, to which mortals resonate in their depths.

If the tragic vision has given rise to great diversity of interpretation, the tragic structure, in contrast, has been regarded throughout history with a surprising rigidity. Of course the Aristotelian "rules" dominated the theory and practice of tragic artistry for several centuries. But even after the nineteenth-century break with the unities, critics (and dramatists themselves) have constantly felt the need to demand certain specifics of the tragic art, giving rise to basic imperatives concerning the proper form for tragedy. Many have thought there is a prescribed shape to its plot—that it should be condensed, limited in time and space, with a *peripeteia*, a reversal, and an *anagnorisis*, a recognition, ending in the death of the protagonist. But then questions have arisen: Is the protagonist necessarily male? Must he commit a "terrible deed," make an egregious mistake? Should he always be guilty of hubris? Is he a scapegoat—Isaiah's "rejected, despised of men"? Or should he be a public leader, a magnanimous soul, our highest representative, our bravest contender? Are divine presences essential to tragedy? Does it need a chorus?

These questions are, of course, unanswerable if not perhaps irrelevant. All one can say is that if the tragic action means ending in a certain place—a black hole—then any way one gets there seems sufficient. We have been suggesting that the tragic, rather than being a primarily aesthetic phenomenon, is a metaphysical occurrence given form, to be judged by its ability to call down upon its viewers a certain response. Admittedly, in its infrequent appearances throughout the centuries, one can observe certain strategies it has employed to secure its effect, certain themes and situations, images and symbols. Whatever constants we find, however, are neither necessary nor sufficient, even though many of them have recurred with notable regularity in the tragic canon. Largely Greek in their origins, they are absent from the Book of Job, for instance, as from The Iliad, Lorca's Blood Wedding, Faulkner's Light in August, Allen Tate's lyric poem "The Cross," Robert Penn Warren's Brother to Dragons, and Toni Morrison's Beloved, all of which are in some measure versions of tragedy. Hence, one must infer, the traditional themes and conventions of tragedy are not its absolute essentials. However we may analyze the parts of a tragic drama, the conviction persists that something

beyond its separable elements is responsible for its tragic nature. It takes place in a tragic world, for one thing; and in that world no action, even if comic in itself, can dispel the ominous shadow. For all his quips, Hamlet must die the death.

Some of the observables one can note from examples of the tragic tradition could be regarded as purely dramatic conventions; yet they are perhaps clues to the essence we seek. In all the paradigmatic models, for instance, tragedy takes place in a disturbed realm that has only recently begun to question its established *doxa*. It makes use of few characters and even fewer incidents in the unfolding of the plot; it tends to observe an inexorable cause and effect, single out a lone—and in most instances, male—protagonist and move toward a shattering conclusion, usually concluding with his death and the deconstruction of the established regime that has revolved around him. It moves with extraordinary rapidity: tragic time is brief, swift-paced, demanding immediate action, leaving little room for alternatives for those moving to destruction. Yet somewhere in it there is leisure for lamentation: the chorus or one of the victimized characters manages to stop time and utter cries and protests that in rising from the depths demand a lyric, primordial language. Its wailing has something always to do with lost unity, with the earth, with the gods. Further, tragedy tends to portray the victimization of the feminine; to concern the relation of fathers and children, down-playing or ignoring the maternal. Its total effect is usually to portray the collapse of the myth of order; and, though it may offer some sort of reconciliation, it leaves its audience with the vision of a denuded world and only a faint hope for any possible far-off restoration of civil harmony.

As the tragic action has been conceived in Greek and Shakespearean drama (its two high points), it describes an arc divided into three parts. Francis Fergusson, basing his analysis on Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, has designated these three portions of the action as purpose, passion, and perception (Fergusson, Introduction 10-13). The Greek trilogies themselves testify to this tripartite structure, though we have to extrapolate somewhat from the *Oresteia*, the only complete surviving trilogy, in order to discern the underlying action of the triple structure in other Greek cycles. In the first stage of tragedy, as we can see in the *Agamemnon*, the first drama of the *Oresteia*, the catastrophe occurs at the end,

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producing a violent reversal, a fall from happiness to misery. This is the portion of tragedy described in the *Poetics*, with the more than ordinarily good man coming to misery; his *hamartia* causing the tragic misstep that leads to *atē* (madness) and finally, to a *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* (reversal and recognition), with pity and fear producing a *catharsis* (purgation). Aristotle analyzes Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* as the paradigmatic example of tragic art, but, in fact, rather than encompassing the entire range of tragedy (as we can see from an encounter with *Oedipus at Colonus*), this play represents only the first "moment" of the tragic movement, the stage in which the "terrible deed" is done. In Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, the opening drama, *Agamemnon*, traces out this movement; and one might be justified in speculating that the lost play of Prometheus (*The Firebringer*) takes place in this stage, like *Oedipus the King*, *The Bacchae*, and *Othello*.

In the second stage, the catastrophe occurs at the beginning or has just occurred: this is a time of stasis, marked by tension, conflict, suffering, paradox, indecision. Tragedies that fit this category are *The Libation Bearers* (the second drama of the *Oresteia*), *Job*, *Prometheus Bound*, *Electra*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and the *Oedipus* play that Sophocles did not write, which would have had to depict the time between Thebes and Colonus, his hero's period of helpless wandering after blinding himself. In the third stage, the catastrophe has occurred long before; the movement of the plot is upward, *de profundis*, toward redemption and reconciliation. One finds this pattern in the third part of the *Oresteia*, the *Eumenides*, as well as in the lost *Prometheus Unbound*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *King Lear*.¹⁰

Looking back over the tradition, one can see that, in contrast with comedy, tragedy has an immediate and powerful impact on the reader or viewer. The effect of comedy is developmental, lifting spirits and enlightening intellects, so that the audience can see better how to compromise and endure in a damaged world. Tragedy in contrast is cataclysmic, granting its recipients a terrible and exalted kind of wisdom then and there, at that very moment. And in any profound questioning of tragedy, it is the character of this revelation that one seeks to know. What is it, one wonders, that the viewers of—or, perhaps more accurately, participants in—this most mysterious of genres see and understand? Is it at base what Wole Soyinka claims for Yoruban tragic ritual,

a taming of the abyss? (Myth 2). Or is it a surrender to it? Are participants in tragedy being swallowed up for a moment in "outer darkness"? a glimpse of uncreation?—of *nihil*? a *Blick ins Chaos*? Is it that their being is contingent, that they did not create themselves; that they stand convicted before a primal power unimaginable in its grandeur? Is Kafka's *Trial* a proper delineation of the tragic fear?—that one is accused of a nameless crime by a faceless judge, to be tried at a time and place, with evidence of which one is kept ignorant?

We should have to say, rather, that Job's, Oedipus', or Lear's situation is much worse. What each confronts is something that elicits his self-condemnation—something that makes him "repent in dust and ashes," or dash out his eyes, or take leave of his reason. "I am bound / Upon a wheel of fire," the old king declares to his daughter Cordelia, "that mine own tears / Do scald like molten lead" (4.7.45-47). He is carried, in Yeats's words about tragedy in general, "beyond time and persons, to where passion living through its thousand purgatorial years, as in the wink of an eye, becomes wisdom" (239). But to attain this wisdom the hero must go down into the abyss, and the audience is brought as near as possible to its brink.

The Borderland of Tragedy

What is first discernible in the no-man's-land that surrounds the abyss is its menacing and horrid aspect. When one comes finally to the dark tower (as Browning would have it in "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came"), it has been by enduring "ugly little rivers," containing possible corpses of infants. Ancient memories of human sacrifice, long hidden out of sight, remind the audience of a shared communal guilt. Cassandra in the *Oresteia* acknowledges this liminal region and intuits the abyss beyond it, when—caught like an animal and prodded to go in to her own slaughter—she looks up at the rooftop and makes out the apparitions of horror: the mutilated children, their bodies half-eaten, their blood staining the palace roof. She cries out against "the house that hates god, / an echoing womb of guilt, kinsmen / torturing kinsmen, severed heads, slaughterhouse of heroes, soil streaming blood" and calls upon the murdered children:

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See, my witnesses—I trust to them, to the babies
wailing, skewered on the sword,
their flesh charred, the father gorging on their parts.

(Aeschylus, *Agam.*, 1095-97)

Human sacrifice and torture are border images implied in all the tragedies, sometimes made overt, as in the *Oresteia*, sometimes hidden, as in the *Oedipus*. Robert Miola, speaking particularly of Renaissance revenge tragedy and "the *disiecta membra* of hands, tongues, and other bodily parts," makes clear that "the expression of such *thymos* in action rends the human body and the human soul" (12). But even further, in this shadowy no-man's-land verging on the abyss lie not only human sacrifice and torture, but that most unspeakable *sanctum sanctorum*, cannibalism—the ritual eating of human flesh—at once the most sacred of practices and the most heinous of crimes. This is a portion of the tragic knowledge shared by the human race in its Great Memory. But even the horror of torture, child murder, and cannibalism—only a few of the unspeakable things mortals have done to each other—cannot entirely account for the tragic response. Cassandra not only apprehends this fearful past but at the same moment recognizes the power of the gods: she herself is inexorably to be slain, along with the man who has captured and violated her. In *King Lear* we witness onstage an atrocity beyond language in the blinding of Gloucester and then later, a mute acceptance in the calm eloquence of Cordelia's dead body. Yet an abiding presence hovers over these unspeakable acts and modifies their horror. An open-eyed view of necessity characterizes the tragic vision and gives it a willing acquiescence to what has been and what must be. Standing on the brink of the abyss, Oedipus commands the herdsman to relinquish the final bit of information that will send his king hurling into the darkness. "Oh God, I am on the verge of frightful speech," the hapless shepherd protests. "And I of hearing," Oedipus replies. Then later, emerging after he has put out his own eyes, "Darkness! / Horror of darkness, enfolding, resistless, unspeakable," he exclaims, to our pity and our mesmerized joy. "Look there!" are the dying words of the old and maddened Lear.

Peering over from the edge, the chorus and the audience watch the inescapable, transported to the realm of the unsayable. Authentic experience of the tragic threshold, in its enactment before us,

is so stark and so demanding as not to be governed by the imagination, that ingenious mediator between spirit and flesh. The devastating effect of tragedy, in fact, may be related to the utter separateness in it of the mind and the senses. Tragedy, as it is experienced, is of the innards, as Ruth Padel translates the Greek word *splanchna* (the brain, the liver, the heart, the bowels). "Tragedy's language," she writes, "stresses that whatever is within us is obscure, many-faceted, impossible to see" (77). And it is this impossibility that tragedy takes as its challenge. Its task is to transport us to this inside-outside and to strip away the veil concealing the dread secret. Greek tragedy in particular, according to Padel, "with its dialectics of seen and unseen, inside and outside, exit and entrance was a simultaneously internal and external, intellectual and somatic expression of contemporary questions about the inward sources of harm, knowledge, power, and darkness" (77).

But its damage is perceived not only by the body; the spirit, too, is deeply implicated in tragic knowledge. When the hidden is brought back from the abyss, revealed in the art form of tragedy, the mind recoils in pity at the body's suffering; and the body is wracked by fear at the mind's recognition. The imagination, which is essentially a comic alleviator, has no part in unifying the experience and hence is paralyzed by what seems inevitable. In the tragic realm, the protagonist cannot triumph, can only submit. The trap is sprung, the jig is up. The audience stands on the rim, so to say, and participates in the peculiar doubleness of the moment of discovery, wherein the realization remains unassimilated and unresolved, retaining the full force of its painful contradiction.

The Tragic Abyss

But if the chorus and the audience remain on the rim, the tragic protagonist has to descend into the deepest crevices of the universe—into Tartarus itself. Caught in its depths, he can go neither forward or backward. He finds himself in a pit at the bottom of an underworld where gravity is so heavy that nothing can escape. In this no place—this stony cliff, this bloody ground, this blasted heath, this dungheap, this pit for beasts (poets have exhaustively explored the variety of metaphors that can express the absoluteness of the tragic *khora*, this place that is the final end

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of all things), the laws of the land dictate that one is in an ultimate situation, that everything hangs on the next few seconds. Time has run out, in direct contrast to comedic time, which is elastic enough to allow sufficient leisure for working things out or slipping by and evading the consequences. But in tragedy, suddenly no time at all exists and hence no escape is possible. When Birnam Wood can be seen coming to Dunsinane, nothing can be done but to arm oneself for a battle one is fated to lose. Comedy, in contrast, has recourse to an alternative world, so that, instead of heading straight for disaster, one can avoid it long enough to dream up narrow escapes—to don a disguise, or leave a misleading note, or hide behind a bush.

The prospects of tragedy are so thoroughly unsettling that—yet again—one must wonder at our fascination with it. What does the tragic protagonist accomplish in the abyss that is worth our attention? Why do we long so for tragedy; why do we watch it at all? Is it that we are fulfilled in this glimpse of the irremediable? Is it that matter itself is a triumph? That we cry out for the reality of blood? That darkness affirms life in ways that light and harmony cannot do? Whatever the answers to these questions, the one thing agreed upon in discussions of tragedy is that its effect is strangely therapeutic. As art form tragedy helps its viewers (not its protagonists!) look upon violence and turn away from it freed and content. It enables them to rise from the devastating experience with a sense of having been fulfilled and liberates them to shape their lives into the wisdom of comedy. But tragedy supplies the knowledge with which they shape that wisdom. Without the tragic there could be no comic resolution. Further, it is important to note that tragedy itself never simply turns into comedy. If it effects a reconciliation—as in the *Oresteia*—its harmony comes about still within a tragic terrain. And that terrain is elsewhere. For the situations and characters of the tragic world make us see not our own lives but rather something in the universe that, though it affects our world, has no counterpart in the daily lives we lead.

Is tragedy, then, simply a vision of human destiny and the dramatization of our dread at confronting it? Certainly there is a dread that lies dormant at the bottom-most portion of our psyches, suppressed throughout life, since life could not be lived if it were confronted directly. It has to do with our being caught

in the flesh, of daring to exist as a spirit incorporated in matter, of believing in the "blind hopes" Prometheus planted in the human race. Uncovered, it reveals itself as a dread of seeing in one fearful instant of *Aufklarung* the vast distance between temporal consciousness and the realm of essences. Yet something in the iconic gaze of tragedy evokes a corresponding image in our depths: for a moment we glimpse ourselves as full participants within the accused and splendid human race. And for a moment we see that the gods look on, with bright interest and admiration, watching the suffering of mortals that elevates them to an almost godlike standing.

To adopt so apocalyptic a vision of tragedy is of course to abjure the employment of the word in its ordinary usage as catastrophe, or disaster, or personal loss. For if the tragic consists, as I have been arguing, of the experience of the abyss, as if one had fallen into a black hole in inner or outer space, then it would seem unsuitable to speak of even the most severe actual suffering as tragic. If we adopt this distinction, it is with some wonder at how a form so remote and forbidding has assumed its supreme power over the art of poetry and the lives of mortals. The answer has to lie, of course, in the experience of the tragic art itself, which in some mysterious manner is not forbidding, not removed from daily life but rather lights it up from within.

A clue to the solution of this enigma is offered in Aristotle's doctrine of *catharsis*, which seems nearer the mark than his frequently cited *mimesis*. To emphasize the cathartic nature of tragedy implies that the tragic art accomplishes its task apart from any resemblance to life. That is, if its essence is to be located in what it *does* rather than what it *emulates*, then it is a kind of *leitourgeia*, a liturgy, a public ceremony; and its elements have to be assembled in such a manner as in the end to achieve the right effect, or, to change metaphors, to make the right kind of compound—a purgative remedy that discharges the poisons afflicting the psyche. Tragedy, then, as we have been saying, would have to be judged by neither its plot nor its characters but, like a cathartic, by its results, which, we are hazarding, effect a cleansing of the soul and a regeneration of the *polis*. The tragic effect is absolute and final. As Job laments, "What I feared has come upon me." And Oedipus can only stand in stunned silence as the last piece of the puzzle fits into its inevitable place.

Perhaps one might further hazard that the tragic work of art, as a ritual conveying the sudden intuition of outer darkness, surprisingly reveals that shadowy realm to be, not chaos as uncreation, as one might think, but a *ruin*—creation after the fall. In it order is confounded, goodness marred. Putting it simply, then, we could say that tragedy results from a final *anagnorisis*—a recognition of the harm done by some primordial event. But this vision is dependent upon an instantaneous revelation in which the tragic protagonist—and the viewers of tragedy—see what creation was like before its ruin and at the same moment recognize that they themselves have been responsible for the loss. Confronted with their imperfection, which they discern as an external depth into which they have fallen, and finding themselves to blame for everything, they are stunned into immobility as from a sudden blow.

But it is only from within the deep chiaroscuro of the divine, in the perspective of eternity, that this culpability can be apprehended. In ordinary life, human beings have a secret but unexamined awareness of an imperfection in the frame of things and of their own implication in it—along with the intuition that they will ultimately be held accountable for it. Tragedy dramatizes this potential judgment—a dreaded experience that in actual life can only be intuited. The reference point of tragedy is from the deeps. Humanity is viewed from the outer darkness, as in his *Comedy* Dante portrayed his characters from the outer light. But his view of them, being comic, was external, through observation and conversation. The view of tragedy is internal; through its agency one is made to see from within the soul a potential experience as though it were taking place.

Perhaps we can begin to delineate what that potential experience consists of, that experience that lies behind and beyond tragedy: can we not say that it is the dread of eternal loss, along with a simultaneous recognition of one's full value? Lucien Goldmann quotes an anonymous seventeenth-century Jansenist text:

There is in our heart so deep an abyss that we cannot sound its depths; we can scarcely make out light from dark or good from evil... But the affliction that God, in his infinite mercy, sends down upon us is like a two-edged sword that enters into the very depths of our hearts and minds. There, it cleaves our human thoughts from those

which God causes to rise up in our souls, and the spirit of God can then no longer hide itself. We begin to have so clear a knowledge of this spirit that we can no longer be deceived. (66)

Is it not this sudden switch from one universe to another that causes the vertigo in tragedy that we call catharsis? And is not the center of that alternate universe that we have suddenly glimpsed, the center from which all radiates, the "deep but dazzling darkness" of the divine, as in the *Commedia* it is its dazzling light? Tragedy might thus be seen as the *aporia* that allows a momentary glimpse of the ruined cosmos, whereas comedy provides, in contrast, a glimpse of its redemption. At the center of the tragic abyss, at the opposing pole from Dante's sun in comedy, is the event that staggers the imagination: the agony of a god, an event sensed preventively from *illo tempore*. Thus the terror of tragedy stems from the sudden vision of our implication in this sacrifice, with its resultant imperative to choose for or against the bottomless abyss of love—which has to be witnessed as though it is from beyond this life.

Hence the tragic vision seems to have to do with facing both the origin and the end of things: the veiled Chaos and Old Night that surround the divine author of the cosmos. "I seed the beginnin and now I sees the endin," as Dilsey professes in *The Sound and the Fury*. The endeavor is something like the way in which Einstein conceived of modern physics, as bringing one "closer to the secret of the Old One." To become aware of a vast all-fathering darkness and a suffering god is to see something that reminds the audience, uncomfortably, of the act of creation—its own rootedness in matter and its gravity and guilt in the downward pull toward the ancient mother. Jahweh's answer to Job is to remind him of the secret ways of the earth; Oedipus's murky path leads him to the grove of the Furies, "ladies whose eyes are terrible"; Lear's wanderings in the storm teach him something repugnant but humbling about the reproductive fertility of nature.

Wole Soyinka laments the gradual loss in Western drama of the earth and cosmic consciousness, attributing its absence to Platonic and Christian thought (Myth 10), though such a radical shift seems more probably related to the dominant modern view of the universe as mechanism. In discovering the existence of a "dark energy" in the universe that devours whole galaxies,

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postmodern cosmologists are coming to view our little planet as insignificant indeed, a small point in the blankness of infinite space. If a requirement for tragedy is guilt toward a precious earth and humility toward a vast outer darkness which, though we cannot comprehend it, beckons to us with love—along with a sharp awareness of the ruin we have made of the human enterprise—then twenty-first century writers may once again be able to evoke the necessary shared pity and terror that tragedy demands.

But not without the one secret ingredient. Without Job's lamentations, Oedipus' grave and noble protests, Lear's howls of remorse, Hamlet's anguished, theatrical meditations, there could be no tragedy. The tragic hero suffers not in silence but in the most opulent and expressive language the world has known. From these cries arising in the center of the soul, the secret dwelling-place of language—in a darkness corresponding to the abyss—bursts the poetry that raises human suffering to the level of contemplation and, to a stunned and gratified audience, conveys the liberation of tragic joy.

NOTES

¹ "Tragedy's one essential is a soul that can feel greatly. Given such a one and any catastrophe may be tragic. But the earth may be removed and the mountains carried into the midst of the sea, and if only the small and shallow are involved, tragedy is absent" (Hamilton 142); "The suffering of a soul that can suffer greatly—that and only that, is tragedy" (143).

² D. D. Raphael, *passim*.

³ See Scheler 255.

⁴ See Lionel Abel, "Is There a Tragic Sense of Life?" (Abel 177).

⁵ See Fergusson, Harrison (Themis), and Muller.

⁶ Originally Karl Jaspers' phrase, it was adopted by Tillich: "The human boundary situation is encountered when human possibility reaches its limit, when human existence is confronted by an ultimate threat" (197).

⁷ See Veegelin (Order 143-147).

⁸ For a thorough treatment of tragic theory after the Greek and Roman epochs, see Henry Ansgar Kelly.

⁹ See Gellrich 23-93.

Shakespeare combines all three stages in the single arena of each

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of his tragic dramas, though he may emphasize one stage and merely imply the others.