

SCENE 1

POLYNEICES, ETEOCLES

POLYNEICES

Truth's argument is simple enough. I looked forward to my share of the crown, as he to his. I left this land, on my own free will, yielding it into his hands. He and I both agreed to share the burden of the crown. First he would govern the country for one year which I would spend in voluntary exile with the intention of ruling in my turn once I returned. In this way I hoped to neither inflict nor suffer ill-will and hatred. But what happened is that he who swore an oath by the gods kept none of his promise. Instead, he clings to power and keeps my share in this state.

Even now I am prepared, on condition that I get what's mine, to send my army away from Thebes, to take my turn, and then to transfer it back to this man at the end of my year as king. It takes no great genius to see that I have spoken justly.

ETEOCLES

I shall tell you plainly, aunt, holding nothing back. I would go beneath the earth in order to have absolute power.

Power is good. I want it for myself. It is unmanly to give up great things for lesser. I'm ashamed at the thought that he - coming here with arms to sack the city - should get what he wants. If he wants to stay in this land on some other terms, I'll grant it. But I will never willingly yield to his demands.

So, send out fire, sharpen your swords, assemble horses and soldiers! For I will never part power! What better need for committing injustice than to achieve power. In other things I'm all for virtue.

Now, it's too late for words. We could never reach an agreement on my terms. [to POLYNEICES] And you - clear out or die!

POLYNEICES

At whose hands? Who is swordsman enough to kill me, and not die the same death he would inflict on me?

ETEOCLES

Are you blind? I am that man.

POLYNEICES

All I see is a rich man. But Mr. Opulence himself is a coward clinging to life.

ETEOCLES

What a braggart! With only the truce to keep you from being killed right here, right now.

POLYNEICES

And you! Again I demand my share of the land and the crown.

ETEOCLES

Again I reject your demand. This is my house, mine alone!

POLYNEICES

You drove me off and took my share.

ETEOCLES

And I'll take your life too. Now get out!

POLYNEICES

Aunt, you have lost a nephew. This man insults my very nature.

ETEOCLES

I return insult for insult.

POLYNEICES

Where will you fight?

ETEOCLES

What do you ask that for?

POLYNEICES

To take my stand opposite you to kill you.

ETEOCLES

I plan exactly the same. Now, for the final time - fuck off! Let the whole house fall to ruin!

POLYNEICES

My sword will be bloodstained. I call the gods as witnesses and the land that nourished me, that I - dishonoured, insulted - am driven from my country like a slave, not the son of Oedipus, who is my father no less than his. And so, Thebes, for the fate you suffer, blame him, not me. I marched to Thebes against my will, against my will I wage this war.

Scene 2

CREON, MENOIKEUS

TEIRESIAS has just prophesied that Creon has to sacrifice his son Menoikeus in order to save the city from war. Menoikeus was present and heard the prophecy.

MENOIKEUS

Father?

CREON

I will never fall so low as to slaughter my own son for the sake of a city. Who would ever? I would never want anybody to praise me for my patriotism as I am murdering my son.

Come, Menoikeus, before the whole city learns about this. You must flee! Ignore these selfish utterances of the prophet and run!

MENOIKEUS

But whereto shall I run? To which city?

CREON

Go as far away from this place as possible, my boy. To Delphi.

MENOIKEUS

Very well. I will make one last visit to mother. Then I shall leave and save my life.

CREON

Quickly, my love.

Exit CREON.

MENOIKEUS

He wants me to run, depriving my city of its good fortune. He wants to make a coward out of me, a traitor to my country.

What disgrace, if those men who are not bound by any oracle stand and fight for their land, risking their lives while I run off! Cowardice might be forgiven to an old man like my father but there would be no pardon if I became a traitor. No! By Zeus, I swear! I will not betray my family, my city. I will stand on the highest top of the battlements and sacrifice myself. A gift to the city. A cure from this plague.

Scene 3

EURYDICE, MESSENGER

EURYDICE

Dear friend, have you brought any news of Eteocles? Is he dead? Are you the messenger of that man's death whom you swore to protect from every attack? I have another question and swear by the gods your answer's true. Is Polyneices still alive?

MESSENGER

Don't worry, my lady. So far, both your nephews are alive.

EURYDICE

And our walls? Our seven gates? How are they?

MESSENGER

Nothing is changed. The walls are not breached, the city is safe.

EURYDICE

Fortune and the gods have been good. Continue.

MESSENGER

What else is there to say? Eteocles needs me at his side.

EURYDICE

You're hiding something, are you not?

MESSENGER

I will not talk of misery after your blessings.

EURYDICE

You must unless you can vanish into air.

MESSENGER

Your nephews - with more arrogance than reason - intend to fight in single combat in front of their armies. To the assembled armies they have spoken words that should never have left their lips. First Eteocles raised his voice:

"Commanders of Thebes: do not for my sake or for the sake of Polyneices throw away your lives. I will settle this conflict and fight with my brother alone. If I kill him, I'll rule this kingdom peacefully by myself. But if he slays me, this land will perish."

A truce was made and the two generals swore to abide by these terms. Now, my lady, if you have any powers of persuasion over them, go and stop them from this disastrous fight. The danger is great!

EURYDICE

Antigone, come here. You and I must prevent your brothers from killing each other.

Scene 4

ANTIGONE, ISMENE

ANTIGONE

Ismene, haven't we endured enough pain by losing both our brothers? And now this unruly, unholy decree! Dishonours fit for enemies are now bestowed on our beloved brother.

ISMENE

Yes, I have heard of it, Antigone, and thought of nothing else since. All night I pictured our brothers. I imagined how Eteocles' soul is travelling to Hades and how Polyneices just lies there - without any coins for the ferry man. May Hades be merciful to his soul.

ANTIGONE

That is why I need to talk to you, in private. Creon is honouring one brother with a full funeral and dishonouring the other one. He has buried Eteocles according to our customs. But his brother Polyneices who died just as miserably must be left unburied on the plain; a feast for the ravaging birds! Now you get to show whether you yourself are noble or a coward from a noble family.

ISMENE

What could we possibly do to change this dictated fate?

ANTIGONE

We can do the work together.

ISMENE

What work?

ANTIGONE

Help me bury Polyneices' body!

ISMENE

What? You intend to bury him, when that has been made a crime by our king?

ANTIGONE

Yes, I will not be caught betraying my brother - and your brother, even if you wish he were not.

ISMENE

You're too rash. Creon has forbidden it. Think, sister, how our father died, then mother. And now the third disaster: our two brothers butchered one another and sealed each other's destiny. Only the two of us are left - think how we will die far worse than our relatives, if we transgress the decree of the king. We must respect his power. Remember that we were born women, and as such we must not fight against men.

I, at least, will beg the dead to forgive me. In the meantime I shall obey those in power. It makes no sense to overstep our boundaries.

ANTIGONE

Fine, I will not urge you. But don't come crawling back to me, when you change your mind. I would never accept your help. Be as you will, I will bury him. The meaning of life cannot be found in being alive but in being valuable. I will have to please those below far longer than those here. But you, Ismene, go on disrespecting the laws of the gods.

ISMENE

I do not disrespect them; but I cannot act against the state. That is not in my nature.

ANTIGONE

Sure, hold onto that excuse; I'm off burying the brother I love.

ISMENE

No! Antigone, I fear for you!

ANTIGONE

Do not fear for me; worry about your own fate.

ISMENE

At least don't reveal your intentions to anyone; keep it a secret and I will, too.

ANTIGONE

No, Ismene! Shout it out! By the gods, tell the whole world! I would hate you far more for your silence than for your idleness!

ISMENE

I have no room for hate in my heart. But you are obsessed with the impossible.

ANTIGONE

When my strength is gone, I will stop.

ISMENE

A vain attempt is what you will produce.

ANTIGONE

You have already earned my hatred and the hatred of your dead brother by talking this way. So, leave me and my foolishness alone! I will endure this fate alone; for I will suffer nothing as bad as a disgraceful death.

ISMENE

All right then, go, if you think, what you do is right. But be sure, that even though your work is madness, you are truly loved.

Scene 5

Haemon, ANTIGONE

HAEMON

My love!

ANTIGONE

Haemon. Farewell.

HAEMON

What? What is the matter with you? Is it about Poyneices and my father's decree? I am so sorry; I can try to persuade him to change it.

ANTIGONE

No, he has shown his true self by now. However, I do not wish to make Creon a part of our conversation.

HAEMON

What then shall we make a part of our conversation? Have I told you that these past months have been the most joyful and blessed times I've had in ages, maybe forever? I suppose you are the reason for my happiness.

ANTIGONE

[*to herself*] We will all be judged by the courage of our hearts.
[*to HAEMON*] I will never become your wife.

ANTIGONE pushes HAEMON softly away from her and wants to leave.

HAEMON

Wait, Antigone, what are you talking about? Our wedding is not far away.

ANTIGONE

If you love me, you let me go.

HAEMON

No, I... I love you. And you love me. I'm scared of not being with you.

ANTIGONE

Make this promise to me: you will not give up!

Scene 6

CHORUS, GUARD

GUARD

My lord, I cannot say that I have lost my breath by running here. You see, I had many pauses to think things over, I almost turned in my tracks to go back where I came from. You see, my mind was talking to me all the time, saying: "You fool, why are you going where punishment for your journey awaits?" And: "Rogue, why are you wasting time? If Creon finds out about this from someone else, you'll be sure to take the blame for it!" With these thoughts spinning about in my head I got here slowly, rather reluctantly. So a short road turns into a long one. But eventually, in spite of the arguments in my head, coming here to you was the decision that won the day. I cling to one hope: that I will suffer nothing other but my due fate, my king.

CREON

What happened that made you so afraid?

GUARD

First, I want to tell you about myself: I didn't do it! And I didn't see the man who did it; so it would be unjust if I should come to any harm.

CREON

You clearly have something ominous to tell me. Speak.

GUARD

Yes, and terrible, which makes me very reluctant to tell you.

CREON

Well, out with it! And then leave.

GUARD

All right, I will tell you. [pauses] Someone has buried the body. Impossible to say who. The man sprinkled a bit of soil onto the flesh, gave it the proper rites and left. Whoever did it left no trace, no footprints, no nothing. When the first guard on the day shift revealed it to us, we were stunned. It seemed to us all like a miracle - but an ominous one. The corpse was buried, but not in a tomb. It could be that someone wanted to save him from dishonour. Then the arguing started, guard blaming guard. But everybody pleaded innocence and our arguing came to nothing. In the end, one man spoke up. He said that we should report the act to you immediately and not cover it up. We agreed and let the lot decide. Well, I was the unlucky man who won this privilege. So here I am, unwilling and unwanted. For no one ever loves the bearer of bad news.

CREON

All this time people have been muttering against me in secret. They have been resenting my decree like traitors, when they should be keeping their heads down and obey me. That is their duty. Know this: If you do not find the man responsible for the burial and bring him to me, death alone will not suffice for you.

GUARD

My king, do I have permission to speak or shall I just turn around and leave?

CREON

Do you not realize how irritating I find your voice?

GUARD

Is it your ears they bother or your soul?

CREON

Why?

GUARD

Well, you see, the man responsible offends your soul, whereas I merely offend your ears.

CREON

You are a natural chatterbox.

GUARD

But an innocent chatterbox. How terrible it is when someone with the power to judge judges wrongly!

CREON

Go! Bring me the perpetrator. And if you do not, you will soon see that corrupt profits bring only misery.

GUARD

I hope with all my heart that he will be found! But whether caught or not - and fortune will decide which one it shall be - there's no way you will ever see me again. This time I have been saved against all odds. Who knows about next time... For now I thank the great gods and I thank you, my Lord.

Scene 7

CREON, HAEMON

CREON

My son, have you come here in anger or are you still loyal to me?

HAEMON

Father, I am your son and subject. You have good judgement and I shall follow your orders. I shall value nothing worldly more highly than your fine leadership and good counsel.

CREON

Indeed, that is how you should feel in your heart.
My son, never let a woman make you abandon your good sense. What could be worse than a loved one who is evil?

HAEMON

Yes... But what is your good counsel to me in this matter?

CREON

Spit her out! Let Antigone marry someone else in Hades. I caught her disobeying me and I will not act against my own laws, so I must kill her. The man in charge must be listened to, no matter the issue. Then good government is a given. Therefore nothing is more evil than disobedience. We must uphold the laws and never let some woman beat us down. If needs be it would be better to fall from power by some man's hand than be called inferior to women.

HAEMON

I cannot say that your words are not right. And yet it could be that other views are right as well. It is not a king's nature to pay attention to everything that people say or do or criticise. But I can hear how the city mourns for this woman. They say that of all women she least deserves to die, because her crime was an act of virtue. So don't be closed-minded and stick not only to one idea. For the man who believes that he alone can think and speak is nothing but empty.

CREON

That girl you are protecting is evil.

HAEMON

The united people of Thebes say no.

CREON

So now the city tells me how I should rule?

HAEMON

This city doesn't belong to one man.

CREON

It does; to its ruler.

HAEMON

You'd make a good king for an empty country!

CREON

This boy is fighting on the woman's side.

HAEMON

This man is fighting on the side of his betrothed wife and his father. My concerns lie with you as well.

CREON

You worthless boy! You set your fighting against your own father!?

HAEMON

Because I see your judgement mistaken about what is just.

CREON

So I am mistaken to respect my own rule?

HAEMON

You do not respect it when you trample on the laws of the gods. I shall never give way to shameful behaviour.

CREON

Every word you speak is spoken on her behalf. You will ever marry that woman alive.

HAEMON

If she dies, she will take someone else's life with her.

CREON

Is that a threat?

HAEMON

Where is the threat in challenging an idiotic decree and protecting the woman I love?

CREON

By Zeus, be sure you will regret your insults! Bring out that hateful thing, so she can die right here, right now! And you will watch!

HAEMON

No, she will not die with me standing here. As for you - you will never see my face again.

Monologues

CHORUS

The brothers Eteocles and Polyneices were cursed with the unholy of curses: it was declared they split their patrimony with sharp steel. Full of terror that the gods would make the curses flower, if they lived together, they came to a decision: The younger, Polyneices, would be the first to leave this country Thebes in voluntary exile, while Eteocles would stay to wield the sceptre. And year by year they'd exchange rule. But when Eteocles was king he remained king. He claimed all the throne and exiled the fleeing Polyneices from this land. When Polyneices arrived in Argos, he mustered a great army of Argives, himself being the commander. And now he stands against these seven-gated walls demanding back the king's sceptre and his share of the land.

To cure this strife their aunt has caused brother to come to brother by a truce, before they get on with their war.

CREON

It is impossible to really know a man, to know his shrewdness, his will, his soul, before one sees him governing. A man in command of an entire city, who does not take the best advice, but keeps his mouth shut out of fear, is worthless. Let Zeus be my witness that I would never hold my tongue if I saw disaster threatening the well-being of my people. Any man who is hostile to this city, is my enemy. I will by such principles protect our beloved city.

Now, as per these principles, hear my proclamation concerning the sons of Oedipus. Eteocles, who died fighting to protect our city, and in that proved himself the best and bravest of us all, will be buried in a tomb and honoured with every rite and ritual worthy a king. But his brother, Polyneices - who wanted to burn this city to the ground - will not be granted a burial. He will not be granted any funeral rites and he will go without any tears or lamentation. He must be left an unburied corpse for the birds and dogs to rip apart and feast on - a reminder of disgrace. If any man is to violate this decree he will face a most gruesome death. For, I will never honour the worthless more than the just.

ANTIGONE

Look upon me, citizens of this land, as I go on my last journey, as I look at the sun one last time. For Hades leads me, still alive, down to the shores of the Styx, where I shall marry the eternal darkness. Is there no one who will shed a tear for me? No loved one who will mourn me?

I went to the extremity of daring, to the high throne of Justice and I fell. Now I go to join my people. I am the last to pass below, and I die the most evil death by far. Yet I hope that I will be welcomed by you, my dear Polyneices; for when you died, I buried your body and so I deserve this reward.

There is no justice in this land, not unless we make it. I was right to honour you. But to Creon I seem to have committed a crime. And now, he has me seized by force and led away. Bereft of loved ones I go alive to my grave.

If this is fair in the eyes of the gods, I will admit that I have sinned. But if these people have done wrong, I pray they suffer.