Sophocles, *Antigone*, c. 442 BC
Complete text available at http://www.stoa.org/diotima/anthology/ant/antigstruct.htm

Beginning of Play
Scene and Time: The area before the royal house of Thebes at the break of day (16).

**Antigone**
O common one of the same womb, head of Ismene, do you know of any suffering of those from Oedipus that Zeus is yet to fulfill for us two yet living? Nothing painful, nothing without ruin, no disgrace, no dishonor exists that I have not seen among your evils and mine. And now, what is this proclamation they say the general just laid down for the whole city? Do you know, have you heard, or are you unaware that evils worthy of enemies are marching down on philoi?

**Ismene**
No word of philoi, Antigone, sweet or painful, has come to me since we two were deprived of our two brothers, each dead on one day by the other's hand. Since the Argive army left last night, I know nothing further whether I am fortunate or ruined more.

**Antigone**
I thought as much. That is why I kept calling you outside the courtyard gates so you would be alone when you heard.

**Ismene**
What is it? Clearly, you are deeply blue over some word.

**Antigone**
Why not? A tomb--has not Creon honored one of our two brothers with one and dishonored the other without one? Eteocles, as they say, with just use of justice and custom, he has hidden beneath the earth, honored among the dead below. But as for the corpse of Polynices who perished wretchedly, they say that proclamation has been sent forth to the citizens that no one cover it with a tomb or bewail it, but let it lie unmourned, unentombed, a sweet treasury for birds looking upon it for meat. Such proclamations they say the good Creon
has decreed for you and me--me I say. He is coming here to proclaim this clearly to whoever does not know, and he considers it no small matter. For anyone who does any of these things, murder by public stoning in the city is ordained. Now, this is the way it is for you, and you will show quickly whether you are of noble birth or base born from good stock.

Ismene
What can I do, wretched one, if things are in this state, by loosening or tightening the knot?

Antigone
See whether you will join in the toil and the deed with me.

Ismene
What dangerous enterprise? What ever are you thinking?

Antigone
Whether you will lift the corpse with this hand?

Ismene
What? Do you intend to perform rites for it, a thing forbidden the city?

Antigone
For my brother, certainly, and yours, if you will not. I for one will not be caught betraying him.

Ismene
Headstrong! When Creon has forbidden it?

Antigone
He has no part in keeping me from what is mine.

Ismene
Ah me! think, sister, how father, died on the two of us, hated and disgraced, when driven by self-discovered offenses, he pierced both his eyes with a self-inflicting hand. Then his mother and wife--a twofold name--mistreated her life with twisted nooses. And thirdly, two brothers in one day, the wretched pair, worked a common fate by killing themselves with hands turned upon one another. Now in turn, we two left all alone, consider how badly we will perish, if in violence of the law
we transgress the decree and power of absolute rulers. 60
No, we two women must keep in mind we were born
women whose purpose is not to battle against men. Then, because we are ruled by those who are stronger,
we must hear and obey this and things yet more painful.
As for me, begging those below for pardon, since I am being forced in this,
I will yield to those in authority,
for acting in excess has no sense.

**Antigone**
And I would not ask you, and if you wish
in the future, you would not gladly do anything with me. No, be whatever seems best to you. That one
I shall give rites. It is noble for me to die doing this.
I shall lie with him, phil with philos,
after I have done anything and everything holy, since far longer
is the time I must please those below than those here. I shall lie there for ever. You, if you think it best,
hold in dishonor the honored things of the gods.

**Ismene**
I am doing them no dishonor, but I am incapable
by my nature of acting in violence of the citizens.

**Antigone**
You can make excuses, but I shall go, heap up a mound for a most philos brother.

**Ismene**
Ah me! unhappy one, how I fear for you.

**Antigone**
Do not be afraid for me. Set straight the course of your own fate.

**Ismene**
Please, do not tell anyone what you are doing.
Keep it secret, and I will do the same.

**Antigone**
Ah me! Tell everybody. You will be more hostile
if you keep silent and do not proclaim this to everyone.

**Ismene**
You have a hot heart for cold things.
**Antigone**
No, I know I am pleasing those I should most please.

**Ismene**
If you can, but no, you lust for what is beyond your means. 90

**Antigone**
Well, when my strength fails, I shall cease once for all. 28

**Ismene**
From the outset, to hunt for what is beyond your means is not fitting.

**Antigone**
If you say this, you will be hated by me
and justly be deemed an enemy to the one dead.
No, let me and the foolish counsel I offer 95
suffer something dreadful, but I shall not
suffer anything that will keep me from dying nobly.

Footnotes to scene 1

11. Antigone's name means "Against the Family." "Against" carries both the sense of "close to" and "opposed to." When Antigone first speaks she is yet without a name but her language stresses closeness. She addresses her sister with a hyperbole whose overstatement of filial closeness is further enhanced by her use of the dual number. Beside the singular and plural, Greek has a set of inflections for expressing pairs, most often, common pairs like two oxen or two eyes. Antigone encloses Ismene with language that makes them such a natural pair, and Ismene acknowledges this with dual forms of her own.

12. The daggers indicate that Greek text is corrupt and cannot be reconstructed. Translation of daggered words is approximate.

13. Antigone introduces military imagery with her first words. The generalship was an elected office among the Athenians and had both military and political importance. At the time of the Antigone, it was the office held by, among others, Pericles. For the imagery of Antigone, see Robert F. Goheen, The Imagery of Sophocles' Antigone: A Study of Poetic Language (Princeton 1951).

14. The Greek has also been translated as "in the present night." This version places the action of the prologue during the night when the Argives were retreating.

15. Dramatic action depends upon two pieces of information. Antigone says: "I kept fetching" or "I kept calling" Ismene (19) as opposed to "I called" her. Secondly, unlike Ismene who has been in the house (8-9), Antigone knows what has happened in the city. Although how she learned of Creon's decree is left unsaid, the difference is not incidental. The theater of Dionysus had no
curtain to open and show Antigone before the house. Antigone and Ismene either enter together from the house or Antigone comes in silently by one of the gangways, that is, the path to and from city, calls out to the house, and Ismene enters from the house. In the first instance, Antigone's roaming in the city is left to dialogue; in the second, it is represented visually before the audience.

16. "Deeply blue" attempts the two connotations of the Greek: the color purple, and a disturbance of the sea or mind.

17. *Taphos* (tomb) also designates "funeral rites," "funeral feast," and "the act of performing funeral rites." All of these meanings are present, with "tomb" being foremost because of the idea of "covering."

18. After Oedipus' death, Eteocles and Polyneices agree that they will each rule Thebes as its king in alternate years. During his time in exile, Polyneices marries Argeia, daughter of Adrastus, king of Argos. When after a year Eteocles refused to abdicate, Adrastus and Polyneices lead an army of Argives against Thebes. The brothers meet at the seventh of Thebes' seven gates, Polyneices on the outside and Eteocles on the inside of the city; they slay one another. For the myths of the house of Laius, Oedipus, Eteocles, and Polyneices, see Apollodorus, *The Library* 3.5.7-6.8, in Michael Simpson, *Gods and Heroes of the Greeks: The Library of Apollodorus* (Amherst 1976) 143-48.

19. Public stoning, carried out by all the people, was an execution reserved for transgressions that injured the whole community. As such, it could not be murder.

20. "Noble birth" and "base born from good stock" are concepts that assert male values of ethical and moral superiority based on birth.


22. Antigone's military image uses the common words for being captured and for handing a city or allies over to the enemy.

23. At this point, Antigone and Ismene no longer speak to one another in the dual.

24. The military image evokes the land warfare of the day, essentially a pitched battle fought by men, called hoplites after their shield (*hoplon*) at close quarters on level ground in a single melee. For hoplite warfare, see Victor Davis Hanson, *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece* (Oxford 1989).

25. The usual translation her words, "having criminally done holy things," implies criticism of Antigone's decision to perform rites for Polyneices. Antigone's language allows two meanings:
first, that she will do every thing holy and secondly that she will do holy things in a criminal way. Antigone must the mean the first, since she cannot be criticizing her own action, but Sophocles allows the audience to hear both meanings simultaneously.

26. Antigone proposes to conduct a cremation burial of the sort provided Elpenor:

Then, I sent my companions to Circe's house
to bring back Elpenor's dead body.
We quickly cut wood, and where the shore jutted out furthest, we performed his burial rites, grieving and shedding tears profusely. But after the body and its armor were burned, we heaped a mound and, dragging a grave stele,
we affixed on top of the mound a handy oar (Homer, *Odyssey* 12.9-15).

A pit is dug as deep as six feet, and its bottom furrowed with channels for ventilation. Combustible material is placed into the pit, and bier is laid on top upon which rest the corpse. After the fire reduced the body to dust, a large mound of earth is heaped over the pit and the offering ditches. See figure.

27. The image intimates that the sisters are now navigating the ship of their fortunes on different voyages.

28. Antigone implies that she will be dead.

**NEXT SCENE**

**Chorus of Theban Elders** [ singing] Ray of the sun, the most 100 beautiful light of lights ever to appear to Thebes of seven gates, you appeared at last, O eyelid of a golden day. Over Dirce's streams you came, and 105 the man shielded in white, come from Argos in full armor, you propelled into headlong flight with your bridle gleaming brightly. (31)
Coryphaeus [reciting]
Stirred up against our land
through Polyneices' contentious quarrels,
screaming shrilly,
he flew into our land like an eagle,
covered in snow-white wings
amid weapons manifold and
helmets crested with horse-hair.

Chorus of Theban Elders [singing]
Arresting flight above our houses,
threatening with blood thirsting spears
in a circle the mouth of our seven gates,
he departed before he sated his jaws with our blood,
before Hephaestus' pinewood blaze seized our corona of towers.
Such was the din of Ares that strove against his back,a din hard for the dragon's foe to subdue.

For Zeus exceedingly hates
the boasts of a big mouth, and seeing them coming on with a mighty flow,
in haughtiness of ringing gold,he hurls the brandished fire at him who was already rushing to scream victory at his finish line high on our battlements.

Coryphaeus [reciting]
Swung outward, he fell on ground that repelled him,
the fire-bringer who, 'till then, was reveling in frenzied bacchic onslaught
and breathing the blasts of most hostile winds.
But things went another way.
Smiting heavily, he apportioned
one doom for this one, another for that one,
mighty Ares, our trace-horse on the right.

Seven captains at seven gates,
marshaled as equal against equal, left behind bronze homage for Zeus Turner, except the pair filled with hate who, born of one father and one mother, leveled mutually victorious spears against one another and gained,
both of them, a share in a common death.

But since Victory has come, Victory who brings renown, who reflects back to chariot-rich Thebes its own joy, distanced from the recent wars, 150 now clothe yourself in forgetfulness. Let us go to all the gods' temples in all-night dancing. May earth-shaking Bacchus of Thebes be our leader.

[Enter Creon, attended by slaves (491)]

**Coryphaeus**
Here the king of the domain, 155†Creon, son of Menoeceus† . . . new** in the new chances of the gods, is coming. What cleverness is he rowing that, by common proclamation, he has set forth this special assembly 160 of old men for discussion.

**Creon**
Gentlemen, the gods who heaved and tossed the city on high seas have set its affairs straight again. You I have summoned by messengers apart from the rest because I know well that you always revered the power 165 of Laius' throne, and again when Oedipus righted the city and when he was destroyed, you still continued with steadfast thoughts toward their children. Since they perished in a twofold fate 170 in one day, striking and being struck with murderous pollution among kinsmen, I hold all the power and throne according to nearness of kin to the dead.**

Now, there is no way to learn thoroughly the essence 175 of the whole man as well as his thought and judgment until he has been seen engaged in ruling and making laws. For, in my opinion, whoever, in guiding a whole city, does not adhere to the best counsels, but from fear of something keeps his tongue locked, 180 that man seems to me now and before this to be most evil. Whoever deems a philos more important than his fatherland, this man I say is nowhere.
I for one--may Zeus who always sees all know this--never would I keep silent on seeing ruin
approaching the citizens instead of safety, neither would I ever regard as my philos
an enemy of the land, since I am aware that this land is the one who carries us safely and,
while sailing upon her upright, we make our philoi. By these laws do I enlarge the city.

Now, I have issued proclamations, brothers to these laws for the citizens concerning the children of Oedipus.
Eteocles, who perished fighting for this city, fully proving his bravery in the spear battle, let them conceal him with a tomb and perform all the rites
that go to the bravest dead below.
The kindred blood of this man, Polynoeices I mean, the exile who, on returning home, wanted to burn his fatherland and the temples of his family's gods from top to bottom with flames, and wanted to taste common blood, and lead the rest into slavery, this person, it has been proclaimed to the city that no one honor with a tomb or lament with cries, but let him lie unburied, his body devoured by birds and by dogs and mangled for the seeing.
Such is my thought. Never by me, at any rate, will evil men have precedence of honor over just men. But whoever is well-disposed to this city, dead and alive, equally will be honored by me at any rate.

Coryphaeus
These are what please you, son of Menoeceus, Creon, about the one hostile and the one friendly to this city.
To use every law, I suppose, is within your power regarding the dead and us who are living.

Creon
Take care that you be watchers of my orders.

Watchman informs Creon that Polynoeices’ body has been taken

Footnotes to scene 2: 30. The river Dirce was on the west side of Thebes.

31. Helios is imagined as the driver of his four-horse sun chariot in pursuit of the fleeing Argives. The image of light shining off the horses' bridles is uncertain.

32. "Quarrels" (neike n) plays on the name Polynoeices (He of Much Strife or Many Quarrels).
33. The "eagle" with "snow white wings" represents the Argives as the "dragon," the Thebans. Warriors are commonly compared to animals in Homer, while similes of birds embellish the attacks of his warriors.

34. One Argive used by synecdoche for all the Argives, the "them" of line 128.

35. Hephaestus, god of fire, is synonymous with his element, but other associations may be present. Hephaestus made Harmonia a necklace for her wedding with Cadmus (Apollodorus, The Library 3.4.2). Polyneices obtains the necklace and, with it, bribes Amphiareus' wife Eriphyle to persuade her husband to join the expedition against Thebes. Amphiareus refused Adrastus since, being a seer, he foresaw that all except Adrastus would perish.

36. Ares, divine embodiment of the berserker spirit of war, is the father of the dragon that Cadmus slew in the foundation myth of Thebes. Cadmus sowed the beast's teeth in the ground, and there sprung up armed men. These fell to slaying one another, and the five remaining Spartoi (Sown Men) became the ancestors of the Theban nobility. Cadmus atoned for the dragon's slaughter by serving Ares for eight years (Apollodorus, The Library 3.4.1-2). Sophocles uses dragon metaphorically for Thebans.

37. The man is usually identified as Capaneus, one of the seven leaders of the Argive king Adrastos' army, who had sworn an oath to lay waste Thebes with or without the consent of the gods (Aeschylus, Seven Against Thebes 423-31; Euripides, Phoenician Women 1172-86 and Suppliant Women 496-99).

38. The finishing lines referred to here are ropes or groves in a stone slab that mark the line where the runners line up evenly at the beginning of a race and to which they return.

39. The elders describe the man as a reveler enthused by the god Bacchus, that is, Dionysus. Sophocles may be using the stem bakch- to denote madness but a secondary reference to Dionysus seems unavoidable. Bacchus is a name, perhaps Lydian in origin, for Dionysus, and so his female worshipers who were aroused by the god to an ecstatic state, were called Bacchae (female Bacchuses) and Maenads (woman maddened with Dionysus).

40. In a four-horse racing team, the outer horses drew by ropes (traces), while the inner ones were harnessed to the yoke or collar. The chariot went down the right side of the course, turned around a post, and came back on the left. In the turn, the driver spurred the outer or right horse, at the same time slackening its reins. He then left it to the horse to resist centrifugal forces and pull the chariot around through the turn. See Homer, Iliad 23.334-43 for a description. The horse became a byword for a trusty helper in a time of need.

41. "Zeus Turner" is the god in his capacity as the maker of a "turning." When one side or part of a side in the clash of lines could no longer withstand the pressure of the pushing, it could weakened and collapse into rout--the moment of "turning."

42. A word meaning "ruler" is commonly inserted in the lacuna.
43. The Coryphaeus' verb derives from the same verb as the prothesis, the "laying forth" or wake, thus alluding to the Creon's denial of this ritual for Polyneices.

44. That is, the grandsons of Laius and sons of Oedipus, Eteocles and Polyneices.

45. By the fourth century, nearness of kin (anchisteia) had been defined by law to children of first cousins. W.K. Lacey (The Family in Classical Greece [London 1968] 28-29) describes this kinship group as "the group which was entitled, in due order, to succeed to vacant estates, and had legal duties and responsibilities in case of death within the group, especially if it was death by violence; the anchisteia was obliged to bury its own dead, and to seek vengeance, or at least purification, for the violent death of any of its members."

46. The Greek denotes a living body, not a corpse.

47. The Greek also denotes "custom." Since Creon has been making "laws" (177; 449), "law" would be what he would have heard, but "custom" is always present. "To use every custom" expresses a very different sentiment, one the Coryphaeus implies, it seems, by his qualifying "I suppose."

48. The Greek implies a "protector" or "guardian" for the corpse as well as watchmen to be "lookouts" for anyone who invades the domain he has asserted over Polyneices' corpse.

49. The reader must await the Watchman's words, but the spectator can see that the man stops often and turns around as if to leave, only to resume his progress toward the house.

50. The manuscripts have a verb that means "you take aim," a military image like that of the following verb. We have adopted an emendation that maintains the imagery but leads more smoothly into the second verb. The Watchman, as it were, returns to ranks and surrounds himself with defenders.

51. With the participle s�man�n (to announce), Sophocles keeps the sound of the absence s�ma (marker by with a grave, a mound) upon the ears of those in the audience. We have tried to indicate the presence of a word with the root s�n- by the English "mark."

52. Also: "skin" or "body."

53. The Greek pausai combines the explosive sound of the first syllable, "pow!" with the hissing sibilants of the second, "ssssssai," a far more violent sound than the English "stop." The effect surely was intensified by the Greek aversion to the sound of "s."

54. The Greek denotes both an established usage or custom and the current coin, that is, money.

55. Hades is used for both the god and the place.

56. Creon threatens the watchmen with being hung from a pole and left to die.
57. The Watchman's beeline for the gangway and the refuge in the countryside away from Creon visualizes his resolve. Thus the scene begins and ends on the spectacle of a single figure traversing the cavea of the audience.

NEXT SCENE

Chorus of Theban Elders
Many things cause terror and wonder, yet nothing is more terrifying and wonderful than man. This thing goes across the gray sea on the blasts of winter storms, passing beneath waters towering 'round him. The Earth, eldest of the gods, unwithering and untiring, this thing wears down as his plows go back and forth year after year furrowing her with the issue of horses. (58)

This thing ensnares and carries off the tribe of light-minded birds, the companies of wild beasts, and the sea's marine life with coils of woven meshes--this keenly skilled man. He has power through his ways over the beast who traverses the mountains and haunts the open sky. (59) The shaggy-maned horse he tames with yoke, and the untiring mountain bull.

Both language and thought swift as wind and impulses that govern cities, he has taught himself, as well as how to escape the shafts of rain while encamped beneath open skies. All resourceful, he approaches no future thing to come without resource. From Hades alone he will not contrive escape. Refuge from baffling diseases he has devised.

Possessing a means of invention, a skillfulness beyond expectation, now toward evil he moves, now toward good. By integrating the laws of the earth and justice under oath sworn to the gods, he is lofty of city. Citiless is the man with whom ignobility because of his daring dwells. May he never reside at my hearth
or think like me, 
whoever does such things.375

footnotes to the beginning of scene 3

58. That is, mules "who are better than oxen for dragging the jointed plow through the deep fallow (Homer, Iliad 10.352-53).

59. Namely, the wild goat.