List of characters

ANTIGONE	*daughter of Oedipus*
ISMENE	*daughter of Oedipus*
CHORUS	*Theban elders*
CREON	*new king of Thebes, uncle of Antigone and Ismene*
SENTRY	
HAEMON	*Creon's son*
TEIRESIAS	*a blind old seer*
FIRST MESSENGER	
EURYDICE	*Creon's wife*
SECOND MESSENGER	

Detail from a vase (c. 380–370 BC) showing a scene from the play.

PROLOGUE (1–90)

All Sophocles' extant plays begin with a scene involving two or more characters. The setting here is an open place, at dawn (13). Antigone and Ismene come from the gates of the palace (16). Euripides preferred to begin with a single character explaining the background to the play. Here Sophocles presents a dialogue between two sharply differentiated characters, and we learn the details of the situation gradually.

1 My own dear sister No translation can convey Antigone's unusual way of addressing her sister (literally 'very-sister of common blood'), which stresses the closeness of the tie of kinship.

1–2 the sufferings bequeathed by Oedipus Oedipus' crimes (see Background to the story, page vii) had infected Thebes with pollution (see note on page 14), for which Zeus, the supreme deity (see note on page 10), might exact retribution from subsequent generations. Now there is yet another, new misfortune.

6 the general Creon is now the king (155, 167). He had been regent when Oedipus' sons were young; when they shared the throne, he served in the army and is credited with saving Thebes from the Argive attack (1120). Antigone's impersonal reference to her uncle is significant; and by calling him 'general', she suggests that Thebes in the immediate aftermath of the war is under some sort of martial law: the general governs by decree (6, 22, 26, 28, 158, 182, 190).

- Notice the number of questions in Antigone's opening speech. What does this suggest about her manner and emotional state?

Friends and enemies

9 those we love (*philoi,* also 11) embraces all family and close friends, whom one had an obligation to help and protect, whereas it was considered perfectly acceptable to hate or harm anyone who was one's enemy. This could extend to denying them burial, as Creon has to all the Argives. Antigone objects to her brother, her *philos*, being treated as an enemy. In Sophocles' *Ajax* the Greek generals similarly refuse burial to Ajax, their disgraced colleague.

12 double blow The unique, incestuous way in which Eteocles and Polyneices died is stressed (see also 50–1, 166 and note on 140–2).

13 Argive army See Background to the story (page vii).

15 outside Greek women were expected to spend most of their time in the home. For the two sisters to be out of doors creates an atmosphere of secrecy and suggests that things are not normal (see also note on 1141).

ANTIGONE My own dear sister, Ismene, of all the sufferings bequeathed by Oedipus, can you think of one that Zeus has not given the two of us in our lifetime? There is no pain, no ruin, shame or dishonour that I have not seen in your sufferings and mine.

And now, what is this proclamation they say the general has just made to the whole city? Do you understand it? Have you heard it? Or don't you yet know that punishment fit for enemies is coming to those we love?

ISMENE Not a word has come to me, sweet or painful, Antigone, about our loved ones; not since our two brothers were torn away from us, dying on the same day by a double blow. Since the Argive army left, just last night, I know of nothing new; whether good fortune is coming, or more suffering.

ANTIGONE I was right; that is why I brought you outside the palace gates, to hear the news in private.

ISMENE What is it? You are clearly troubled by your news.

ANTIGONE Is Creon not honouring one of our brothers with burial, and leaving the other in disgrace? He has buried Eteocles in the ground, they say, observing justice and custom, so that he is honoured among the dead below.

Honours due to the dead

Antigone is concerned to pay her brother due honour (*timē*, 21). The honour due to a dead man was to have his body washed and dressed (see 868) by women of his family and to be burnt or buried, with appropriate libations (see note on 401) and formal laments sung by women (see also note on 1156). To leave a corpse unmourned and unburied, as carrion for birds and beasts of prey, was to treat it, and so the gods of the underworld (67), with dishonour. But Athenian law in the 5th century BC allowed that burial in Attic soil could be refused to those guilty of sacrilege, treason or tyranny.

25 delicious Antigone's bitterness is reflected in her language; see also the sarcastic description of Creon as 'noble' (26).

27 to you and me The edict applies to all citizens (7) but to the sisters in particular, who, as the last survivors of the family, would be responsible for the funeral rites.

- What do the words **to me, I tell you** reveal about Antigone?

30 public stoning by the citizens is a particularly violent punishment; it may seem to Creon apt for a public enemy.

The demands of nobility

Antigone expresses the view (32) that those of noble birth should show superior moral qualities. The incestuous nature of the sisters' birth – Oedipus was married to his own mother (47) – seems not to affect Antigone's view of her own nobility, which she is concerned to prove. She thinks it requires her to honour her brother – even at the cost of her life (32, 42, 63–4, 87–8). This is an extreme view: though the Greeks in general thought it important to honour the dead with burial, we have no evidence that they would risk their own death to achieve it (see the Chorus' view, 204). They were familiar with the practice of casting out without burial those guilty of certain crimes, including treason, so we cannot assume that they would applaud Antigone's extreme position.

The position of women

A woman was normally always under the authority of a male. Before marriage her male authority (*kurios*) was her father or next of kin; once married, her *kurios* was her husband. Women could not vote, stand for office or speak in the law courts; they probably were not admitted to the theatre. For a young woman to flout the authority of her *kurios* as Antigone does would be extraordinary in the Athens of Sophocles' time. Ismene's more 'normal' attitude, accepting women's conventional 'bounds' (60), throws into relief Antigone's stance.

But they say it has been proclaimed to the citizens that, after his miserable death, the body of Polyneices must not be buried in a tomb, nor mourned; he is to be left unlamented, unburied, a delicious hoard for the watching birds to feast on!
This is the proclamation that they say the noble Creon has made to you and me – to me, I tell you – and he is coming here to make the announcement clear to those who do not know. He does not treat the matter lightly; whoever disobeys him in any respect will face death by public stoning in the city.
Now you know how things stand; soon you will show whether you are noble by birth, or a coward from a noble family.

ISMENE My poor sister, if this is how things are, what can I do to prevent or change them?

ANTIGONE Consider whether you will share the work and the action with me.

ISMENE What work? What are you risking? What do you mean?

ANTIGONE Will you lend your hands to mine, to lift the body?

ISMENE What? You intend to bury him, when it has been forbidden to the city?

ANTIGONE Yes, my brother and yours, even if you wish he were not. I will not be caught betraying him.

ISMENE You dare? When Creon has forbidden it?

ANTIGONE It is not for him to keep me from my own.

ISMENE Ah! Think, sister, how our father died: hated, disgraced, driven by the crimes he had himself uncovered to tear out both his eyes with his own hands. Then mother – his mother and wife, a double title – destroyed her life with a twisted noose.
Then the third disaster: our two brothers in a single day wrought their shared destiny at each other's hand, the wretched pair, shedding their own blood.

Ismene's point of view

Ismene tries to make Antigone see the situation realistically, in the context of the state: she talks of the city (40), and citizens (69), the law (53), the power of the king (54, 56); she describes in graphic detail the family disasters, and talks of the weakness of women (55). Death by stoning would be a fate even worse than all the horrors which the sisters have already suffered (52–3). She acknowledges the claims of the dead (58), but bows to superior force.

Moral issues were the subject of much debate in Sophocles' time. Ismene's views seem to relate to the argument that 'Might is Right', a view vigorously expressed in Book 1 of Plato's *Republic* by Thrasymachus, who claims that 'right' is simply a code of behaviour imposed on a state by its ruler (see also note on 197).

Human and divine law

In the striking oxymoron **the crime of holy reverence** (65) Antigone sets out the debate which underlies the conflict of the play: what human law forbids may be a pious act. By burying Polyneices, Antigone claims to be not only paying the honour due to her brother, but also respecting the laws honoured by the gods (67). See note on page 34.

76 You will be much more hateful Antigone still treats her brother as a *philos*, though he was a traitor; but in hating Ismene, she begins to treat her as an enemy (see note on 9, also 85).

- How different is Antigone's attitude to her sister from Creon's treatment of Polyneices?

Antigone and Ismene, New York Shakespeare Festival production 1982.

And now the two of us left alone – think how we will die, most miserably of all, if in defiance of the law we transgress the decree and power of the king. We must remember that we were born women, not to fight against men; and that since we are ruled by stronger hands, we must listen in this matter, and in others still more painful.

I, at least, will beg those beneath the ground to forgive me, since I am coerced in this; I will obey those who are in power. It is senseless to overstep our bounds.

ANTIGONE I will not press you. Even should you wish to do it in the future, I would not be pleased to have you work with me. Be as you will; but I will bury him. It is noble for me to die doing this. I will lie there with him, loved by the one I love, guilty of the crime of holy reverence. I will have to please those below longer than those here, for there I will lie forever. You, if you like, go on dishonouring the laws honoured by the gods.

ISMENE I do not dishonour them; but I am powerless to act against the citizens.

ANTIGONE You can hold on to that excuse; but I will go to raise a burial mound for the brother I love.

ISMENE No, poor woman! I am so afraid for you!

ANTIGONE Do not fear for me; look after your own fate.

ISMENE At least don't reveal what you do to anyone; keep it secret, and I will do the same.

ANTIGONE No! Shout it out! You will be much more hateful for your silence, if you don't proclaim it to everyone!

87 this terrible fate Antigone is ironic – 'this disaster you speak of'.

Antigone's exit

Antigone's departure alone for the open country would have made a striking exit in the Greek theatre (see note on 15).

Antigone and Ismene

- Examine Antigone's arguments. What makes her determined to bury her brother?
- What are Ismene's arguments for refusing to help Antigone? Do they seem reasonable? Is she just being weak, or saying that Antigone is in the wrong?
- With which of the two characters do your sympathies lie?
- What does Antigone's language tell us of her emotional state?
- What impression do you get of Antigone from this scene? Heroic? Reckless? Fanatical? Noble? Foolhardy? Intemperate?
- How would you describe her treatment of Ismene?
- What are Ismene's feelings towards Antigone?
- What are the dramatic advantages of beginning the play with a dialogue of this sort?

PARODOS (ENTRY OF THE CHORUS) (91–158)

At the time of the first production of *Antigone* there would have been fifteen chorusmen. They would have entered, singing this ode, from the sides (*parodoi*) and spent the rest of the performance in the open space of the *orchēstra* (see Introduction to the Greek Theatre, page 110). Viewed from above by the audience in the tiered seating, their dance and choreographed movement were an important element in the expressiveness of Greek theatre. Lyrical passages (in which the words were sung) are centred in the text.

As the sisters separate – Ismene going into the palace, Antigone leaving to bury her brother – the Chorus of Theban elders enter. Subsequent references to them (799, 904, 962) suggest that they are of noble birth. They have been summoned to hear Creon's proclamation (157). In highly figurative language, with many echoes of epic poetry, they salute the dawn, and exult in their victory over the Argives. (For the details see the Background to the story, page vii.)

- At this moment of private tension, what is the effect of the arrival of these men in a mood of public celebration?

95 Dirce One of the rivers of Thebes.

98 The white-shielded soldier The coming of dawn ('eye of the golden day' 94) allowed the Thebans to contemplate the rout of the Argive troops, who carried white shields.

ISMENE You have a hot heart for chilling deeds.

ANTIGONE But I know that I am pleasing those I should most please.

ISMENE If you are really capable of it; but you are in love with the impossible.

ANTIGONE When I have no strength left, then I will stop.

ISMENE Even to start to pursue the impossible is wrong.

ANTIGONE If you say that, you will earn my hatred, and be hated by the dead man too – and rightly. Allow me and my folly to suffer this terrible fate; for I will suffer nothing as bad as an ignoble death.

ISMENE Go, if you will. But be sure that, though you are mad to go, you are truly dear to those who love you.

CHORUS

Rays of the sun!
Fairest light that has ever dawned
Over seven-gated Thebes,
You appear at last, eye of the golden day,
Rising above Dirce's streams!
You have driven headlong
In bridle-tearing flight
The white-shielded soldier who came from Argos
In all his battle array.

102 Polyneices There is a play on the meaning of the name: literally 'man of many quarrels'.

103 eagle The image of the bird (white wings) is blended with that of the Argive army, and then into the picture of an eagle attacking and being repelled by a dragon (118) (for the identification of Thebes with a dragon, see Background to the story, page vii).

114 the god of fire was Hephaestus.

116 Ares, the god of war (who favoured the Trojans in the Trojan War) has also helped the Thebans (132–3).

Zeus

In the battles of Greek myth, the gods took sides and regularly intervened. **Zeus who turns battles** (137) has supported the Thebans. As the supreme deity, reigning on Mount Olympus, and god of justice, he punished arrogant pride (*hubris*) – any attempt by mortals to go beyond their natural and rightful lot. The arrogance of the Argives (119, 122) incurred his displeasure, which Zeus, being originally a sky-god, showed with his thunderbolt (123). Zeus had many other roles: guardian of law and morals, of suppliants, guest-friends, the family and the home, of strangers and beggars, and god of oaths.

124 He struck down the man Though not named, this is clearly Capaneus, one of the seven Argive warriors, whose fall was often represented in art. He boasted that not even Zeus could keep him out of Thebes, and was destroyed by a thunderbolt as he reached the top of the wall.

132 on our right hand In the Greek Ares is called 'our trace-horse'. In the four-horse chariot race the trace (right-hand) horse had to pull hardest at the turning post. So the phrase came to describe a particularly vigorous and valued comrade or ally.

The Chorus, National Theatre production, London, 1984.