

## MJC ENGLISH, SEM II

### Sophocles: The Oedipus

#### Summary: 701-1470

The Chorus sees Creon's son Haemon approaching and wonders what he thinks of Antigone's arrest. When Creon questions him about his loyalties, Haemon replies that no woman is as important as his father and that he will obey Creon. Pleased, the king praises his son's wisdom. Haemon reports that he has heard it said among the people that Antigone does not deserve such punishment for her noble-seeming deed. He implores his father not to be so sure of his rightness. Insulted by the idea that his citizens should tell him how to rule, Creon vigorously defends his absolute authority, and Haemon responds that Creon is stubborn and proud. Creon, enraged, reels off insults at his son, calling him disrespectful and the slave of a woman. Haemon responds forcefully, and even darkly hints that Creon's murder of Antigone may cause the death of another person. Creon calls for Antigone to be brought out and murdered in front of her groom, but Haemon exclaims that his father will see him no longer and rushes off. Once his son is gone, Creon concedes that he will not kill Ismene, but he promises a living death for Antigone: he will enclose her, alive, in a tomb.

Creon goes back into the palace, and the Chorus sings of the power of love, which cannot be defeated by arms, and which can drive a sane man mad. When Antigone approaches, the Chorus announces that even it would rebel upon seeing the pitiful girl being led from the palace to her tomb. Antigone tells the elders her death will be noble, but the Chorus doubts her, regarding her nobility as pride. Antigone raves when the Chorus compares her to her father, and she cries out against the fortunes of herself and her family. Creon comes out of the palace, insists that Antigone is protesting too much, and tells the guards to take her to her tomb. Before leaving, Antigone gives one last defense: she would not have defied Creon if the unburied corpse were her husband's or her child's, for either could be replaced. Only for a sibling whose parents are dead, the last son of the terrible house of Oedipus, is she willing to accept such punishment. As she is taken away, she cries out that Thebes is ruled by cowards who punish her for revering the gods. Antigone is taken to her tomb, and the Chorus sings an ode describing the mythological figures who have shared Antigone's fate, walled alive in tombs.

#### Analysis

The Chorus and Creon both anticipate that Haemon will resist his father's decree, because they both know the power of eros, or erotic love, a topic introduced in this section. We can infer from Haemon's rage, his hints at suicide, and from the Chorus's ode on love that Haemon is indeed in the grip of passion. Even so, Haemon's arguments with Creon are rational. He says that reason is a gift of the gods, and he cautions Creon against being single-minded and self-involved, noting that there is no such thing as a one-man city. He asserts that everyone has to give way somewhat, listen, and change, and that no one is infallible. The Leader of the Chorus advises them to listen to each other, but Creon, although he as much as admits that he's a tyrant, refuses to be lectured. Haemon's and the Chorus's arguments against Creon's tyranny would have appealed to the democratic spirit of Sophocles' Athenian audience.

Given the play's themes so far, one would not necessarily expect the chorus to say that love is what has caused the play's strife. The Love Ode implies that perhaps neither Haemon nor Creon is really motivated by practical reason or right judgment, and that one or both is in the grip of blind passion. The chorus develops its earlier theme that humans should be humble, characterizing love as a force that is more powerful than "wondrous" man. Later, in the ode that describes Danae and other mythological figures, the Chorus describes people who have been sealed up in tombs while still alive. It uses what happened to these characters as a metaphor for fate, which traps all of us, in the sense that we aren't in control of our destinies.

It might be argued that love is one of the greater goods that the state exists to enable people to pursue—one of the greater goods that Creon overlooks when he argues that the well-being of the state is the highest good in human life. Creon argues that since Haemon's will should be subject to his, Haemon should not experience any conflict of loyalties. He goes on to contend that Haemon shouldn't even be attracted to Antigone if she is an enemy of the state. As he has throughout the play, Creon denies that ethical conflicts can arise, or that ethical decisions sometimes require deliberation. He insists upon remaining consistent with the views he has already stated, and asserts that he will not make himself a liar. Again, he commits sacrilege, dismissively referring to her hymns to Zeus.

Antigone's final speech is very strange. She says that she would not have suffered her ordeal for a husband but will suffer it for her brother because he is not replaceable. Yet we must

remember that she is martyring herself for a dead brother, not, as she suggests, for a live one. Her final, puzzling speech may suggest that her value judgments have become distorted.

A boy leads in Tiresias, the blind soothsayer of Thebes. Creon swears that he will obey whatever advice Tiresias gives him, since he owes so much to his past advice. Tiresias tells him that his refusal to bury Polynices and his punishment of Antigone for the burial will bring the curses of the gods down on Thebes. Hearing this, Creon curses Tiresias, calling him a false prophet who traffics in poor advice and rhetoric. Creon accuses all prophets of being power-hungry fools, but Tiresias turns the insult back on tyrants like Creon. The old prophet argues that the rites for the dead are the concern of the gods—mortals can rule only in this world. Unwilling to hear any more abuse, Tiresias has his boy lead him away. The Chorus is terrified by Tiresias's prophecy. Creon admits that he too is worried and will do whatever the citizens recommend. They call for him to free Antigone, and he reluctantly leaves to do so. Once he is gone, the Chorus prays to Dionysus to protect Thebes.

A messenger enters and tells the Chorus that a catastrophic event has taken place offstage: Haemon is dead by his own hand. As the messenger is leaving, Eurydice, Creon's wife, enters from the palace. She has overheard the commotion caused by the messenger's announcement and asks the messenger to tell her what has happened. He reports that just as Creon and his entourage had finished their burial of Polynices, they heard what sounded like Haemon's voice wailing from Antigone's tomb. They went in and saw Antigone hanging from a noose and Haemon raving. Creon's son then took a sword and thrust it at his father. Missing, he turned the sword against himself, and died embracing Antigone's body.

Hearing that Haemon is dead, Eurydice rushes back into the palace, followed by the messenger. Creon then enters, carrying Haemon's body and wailing against his own tyranny, which caused his son's death. Just then the messenger emerges and tells the king that the queen has committed suicide, brought to unbearable misery by her son's death. Creon weeps and raves wildly as Eurydice's body is brought forth from the palace. The messenger tells Creon that Eurydice called down curses on her husband for the misery his pride had caused just before she stabbed herself. Creon kneels and prays for death. His guards lead him back into the palace. The Chorus sings a final ode about how the proud are brought low by the gods.

## **Analysis**

Throughout the play, Creon has emphasized the importance of “healthy” practical judgment over a sick, twisted mind, but Tiresias informs Creon that practical judgment is precisely what he lacks—only Creon has a sick and twisted mind. When the catastrophes occur, the messenger directly points to the moral that the worst ill afflicting mortals is a lack of judgment (1373). We may well wonder what use judgment is given the limitations of human beings and the inescapable will of the gods. Perhaps the best explanation is that possessing wisdom and judgment means acknowledging human limitations and behaving piously so as not to actually call down the gods’ wrath. Humans must take a humble, reverential attitude toward fate, the gods, and the limits of human intelligence. At the end of the play, Creon shows he has learned this lesson at last when, instead of mocking death as he has throughout the play, he speaks respectfully of “death” heaping blows upon him (1413–1419).

Even though Antigone exhibits a blamable pride and a hunger for glory, her transgressions are less serious than those of Creon. Antigone’s crime harms no one directly, whereas Creon’s mistakes affect an entire city. We learn from Tiresias that new armies are rising up in anger against Thebes because of Creon’s treatment of their dead (1201–1205). More important, Creon’s refusal to bury Polynices represents a more radical affront to human values than Antigone’s refusal to heed Creon’s edict. Creon says at the beginning of the play that the sight of Polynices’ unburied corpse is an obscenity (231), but he clearly doesn’t understand the implications of his own words. Whereas Antigone breaks a law made by a particular ruler in a particular instance, a law that he could have made differently, Creon violates an unwritten law, a cultural custom.

The Chorus’s final speech is a remarkably terse list of possible lessons that can be learned from the play’s events: wisdom is good, reverence for the gods is necessary, pride is bad, and fate is inevitable (1466–1470). The Chorus claims that the punishing blows of fate will teach men wisdom, but it is hard to feel convinced by their words: Creon’s “wisdom”—his understanding of his crimes—seems, much like Oedipus’s, only to have brought him more pain. And Haemon, Antigone, and Eurydice can learn nothing more, now that they are dead. The Chorus, like the audience, struggles to find purpose in violence, though it is not clear that there is any purpose to be found.