

Fromm LifeLong Learning Institute
Greek Drama Course,
Winter 2009

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Antigone
by Sophocles

Tragedy has a characteristic structure in which scenes of dialogue alternate with choral songs. This arrangement allows the chorus to comment in its song in a general way on what has been said and/or done in the preceding scene. Most tragedies begin with an opening scene of expository dialogue or monologue called a *prologue*. After the prologue the chorus marches into the orchestra chanting the *parodos*. Then follows a scene of dialogue called an *episode*, which in turn is followed by the first *stasimon*. The alternation of episode and stasimon continues until the last stasimon, after which there is a final scene of dialogue called an *exodos* 'exit' scene'. The *exodos* is in general a scene of dialogue, but, as in the case of episodes, sometimes songs are included, especially in the form of a *kommos*. Line numbers correspond to David Grene's translation (Chicago, 1991)

1. Prologue: 1-117

Antigone asks for her sister Ismene's help in burying their brother Polyneices. Ismene refuses, and Antigone rejects her sister.

2. Parodos: 118-178

The chorus enters, rejoicing and thanking the gods that the attack of Polyneices has been defeated and Thebes is safe.

3. First Episode: 179-367

Creon enters, and reveals his plan to bury Eteocles but leave Polyneices unburied. A sentry enters, and reports that someone has tried to bury Polyneices. Creon is angered, and threatens the sentry.

4. First Stasimon: 368-420

The chorus dances and sings its Ode to Man ("Many are the wonders, none is more wonderful than what is man.")

5. Second Episode: 421-639

Antigone is brought before Creon, and confesses that she buried her brother. She and Creon argue, and Creon decrees she will die. Ismene is led in, and claims she helped her sister. Antigone rejects her help.

6. Second Stasimon: 640-682

The chorus reflects on the destiny of Antigone's house, fate, and the nature of a divine curse.

7. Third Episode: 683-848

Haemon argues with his father Creon, and leaves. Creon decrees that Antigone be entombed alive in a cave.

8. Third Stasimon: 849-869

The chorus sings a song about the power of the god Eros.

9. Fourth Episode: 870-1001

Antigone, lamenting her fate to the chorus, is led to the cave.

10. Fourth Stasimon: 1002-1041

The chorus compares Antigone's fate and imprisonment to that of three others: Danae, Lycurgus, and Cleopatra.

11. Fifth Episode: 1042-1192

Teiresias enters, and tells Creon he has made a grave mistake. Creon realizes his mistake, and rushes to bury Polyneices and release Antigone.

12. Fifth Choral Ode: 1193-1225

The chorus invokes Dionysus, the god who protects Thebes.

13. Exodus: 1226-1444

A messenger reports the deaths of Antigone and Haemon. Euridyce, Creon's wife, commits suicide. Creon grieves.

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The story of the house of Labdacus between *Oedipus Rex*
and *Antigone*, as told by Sophocles and Aeschylus

1. *Oedipus at Colonus*, the last play of Sophocles, was produced after his death (405 BC). It takes place a mile from Athens where Sophocles was born. The story picks up the aged and blind Oedipus wandering with his daughter Antigone. They have stumbled onto the holy ground where the Furies of revenge have been renamed the Kind Spirits (Eumenides), a story told in the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus. Athenians tell them they cannot stay there, but Oedipus knows from prophecies that this is where he is to die. Athenians then promise he can stay until they find out who he is. Oedipus is counting on the piety of Athens, which offers refuge to strangers. He believes he suffered unfairly from the horrible crimes he did, because he did them unknowingly, and he promises a benefit in exchange for sanctuary.

His other daughter Ismene arrives with news that her brother Polyneices has gone to Argos, because the younger brother has taken his share of the kingship and banished him. Because prophecy has indicated that benefits will come to the land where Oedipus will be buried, Creon will come to take him back to live outside the border. Oedipus recounts how, after his excessive rage had subsided, his sons did nothing for him as he was driven out of Thebes. Oedipus sends Ismene to perform a ceremony to expiate the spirits of the place. He explains to the Athenians that he killed Laius out of self-defense and did not know Laius was his father; likewise he did not know he was marrying his mother. Thus he believes he did not sin, is not unclean, but was a victim of prophecy.

King Theseus of Athens arrives, and Oedipus offers him the gift of his presence as a lasting grace and asks for his protection. Theseus proclaims Oedipus a citizen and says no one will take him away. Theseus goes off, and Creon arrives with armed guards to get Oedipus, who calls him a scoundrel for denying him exile when he wanted to leave and for throwing him out after he wanted to stay in Thebes. Creon has seized one of his daughters and orders his men to take the other too; the Athenians begin to struggle with the Theban guards. The Athenians are threatening to capture Creon when Theseus

arrives with his armed men. He dispatches them to rescue the daughters, while he accuses Creon of violating Athenian laws on individual rights. Creon yields. Oedipus once again justifies his past actions, and Theseus makes Creon release the daughters.

Polyneices has come from Argos, where he has organized a rebellion against his brother in Thebes. Despite his anger, Antigone persuades her father to talk with the traitor. Polyneices argues that he was unjustly banished; he has married the daughter of Adrastus and formed an expedition of seven noble warriors against his brother. Oedipus complains he was driven out of Thebes when Polyneices was king, and he predicts that his curse will result in the brothers killing each other. Antigone tries to talk her brother out of attacking his homeland, but Polyneices is ashamed to back down now and leaves. Finally as thunder is heard, Oedipus asks for Theseus to be the only witness of where he will die. He exits nobly, scorning help. A messenger returns to describe how Oedipus died without lamentation, illness, or suffering. Antigone intends to go back to Thebes to try to stop the impending war, and the Athenians conclude that things are in the hands of God. In this play, Sophocles contrasts the wisdom that comes from experience and acceptance before blessed death even after a horrendous life against the weak and mean-spirited violence of the sons who fight for power. The greater lawfulness of Athenian ways is contrasted to the violence of Thebes.

2. In 467 BC Aeschylus won first prize for *The Seven Against Thebes*. The play begins shadowed by the curse of Oedipus against his sons for mistreating him. Because Eteocles had refused to give Polyneices his rightful turn as king of Thebes, the latter raised a force from Argos and attacked the seven gates of Thebes with groups of men led by seven select warriors. Eteocles, after belligerently refusing to debate with the chorus of Theban women, discusses with the messenger the seven opponents and the Theban defenders at each gate. Eteocles chooses to go to the gate where his brother Polyneices will attack. In the battle the city is saved, but the two brothers kill each other. Their dead bodies are brought in as their sisters Antigone and Ismene lament the destructive war. At the end a herald proclaims that the corpse of Eteocles will be buried but that of Polyneices, the traitor to Thebes, is to be cast out. Antigone declares that she will bury her brother's body even though the herald forbids it, a conflict later portrayed in Sophocles' *Antigone*. *The Seven Against Thebes* is a dark play about violent conflict, and at the end even the chorus is divided.