SCENE: Before the Palace of Creon, King of Thebes. A central double door, and two lateral doors. A platform extends the length of the façade, and from this platform three steps lead down into the “orchestra”, or chorus-ground. TIME: Dawn of the day after the repulse of the Argive army from the assault on Thebes.

PROLOGUE

[ANTIGONE and ISMENE enter from the central door of the Palace.]

ANTIGONE:
Ismene, dear sister,
You would think that we had already suffered enough
For the curse on Oedipus:
I cannot imagine any grief
That you and I have not gone through. And now —
Have they told you of the new decree of our King Creon?

ISMENE:
I have heard nothing: I know
That two sisters lost two brothers, a double death
In a single hour; and I know that the Argive army
Fled in the night; but beyond this, nothing.

ANTIGONE:
I thought so. And that is why I wanted you
To come out here with me. There is something we must do.

ISMENE:
Why do you speak so strangely?

ANTIGONE:
Listen, Ismêne:
Creon buried our brother Eteoclês

1 Oedipus, once King of Thebes, was the father of Antigone and Ismene, and of their brothers Polynæscës and Eteocles. Oedipus unwittingly killed his father, Laios, and married his own mother, Iocaste. When he learned what he had done, he blinded himself and left Thebes. Eteocles and Polynæscës quarreled. Polynæscës was driven out but returned to assault Thebes. In the battle each brother killed the other. Creon became king and ordered that Polynæscës be left to rot unburied on the battlefield as a traitor.

[Editors’ note]

Commented [KM1]: ALLUSION: The story of Oedipus is explained briefly in the footnote. WHY does she bring it up? She is about to break the terrible news of Creon’s decree forbidding the burial of Polynæscës, and referring briefly to the great tragedies their family has already suffered is a way to ease into it, rather than just hitting Ismene with the news with no preparation. WHY is the “curse” significant? She argues that the situation with Polynæscës is a continuation of that curse. WHY does she think that? She clearly believes that the gods are willing to punish children for the sins of their parents (even if the parents didn’t even know they were doing wrong). WHY else does she bring it up? Antigone is part of a series of plays that deal with the family history of Oedipus. Alluding to the curse of Oedipus at the very beginning of the play is a signal to the audience that the two stories are connected and reminds them that Antigone and Ismene were two of Oedipus’ children.

Commented [KM2]: DICTION: Antigone’s speech to Ismene is written in high, formal style. WHY? This sounds more like a formal speech to a crowd or a king, not to a sister. WHY? She wants to impress the seriousness of the situation on her. WHY? The consequences extend beyond death. WHY? The gods will punish those who break their laws. WHY? The gods demand a certain reverence for life and respect to the bodies of the dead.
With military honors, gave him a soldier’s funeral.
And it was right that he should; but Polyneïcês,
Who fought as bravely and died as miserably,--
They say that Creon has sworn

No one shall bury him, no one mourn for him,
But this body must lie in the fields, a sweet treasure
For carrion birds to find as they search for food.
That is what they say, and our good Creon is coming here
To announce it publicly; and the penalty —
Stoning to death in the public square!

There it is,

And now you can prove what you are:

A true sister, or a traitor to your family.

ISMENE:
Antigone, you are mad! What could I possibly do?

ANTIGONE:
You must decide whether you will help me or not.

ISMENE:
I do not understand you. Help you in what?

ANTIGONE:
Ismene, I am going to bury him. Will you come?

ISMENE:
Bury him! You have just said the new law forbids it.
ANTIGONE:
He is my brother. And he is your brother, too.

ISMENE:
But think of the danger! Think what Creon will do!

ANTIGONE:
Creon is not enough to stand in my way.

ISMENE:
Ah sister!

Oedipus died, everyone hating him
For what his own search brought to light, his eyes
Ripped out by his own hand; and Iocaste died.
His mother and wife at once: she twisted the cords
That strangled her life; and our two brothers died,
Each killed by the other’s sword. And we are left:
But oh, Antigone,
Think how much more terrible than these
Our own death would be if we should go against Creon
And do what he has forbidden! We are only women,
We cannot fight with men, Antigone!
The law is strong, we must give in to the law
In this thing, and in worse. I beg the Dead
To forgive me, but I am helpless: I must yield
To those in authority. And I think it is dangerous business
To be always meddling.

ANTIGONE:
If that is what you think,
I should not want you, even if you asked to come.
You have made your choice, you can be what you want to be.
But I will bury him; and if I must die,
I say that this crime is holy; I shall lie
down With him in death, and I shall be as
dear To him as he to me.

It is the dead
Not the living, who make the longest demands:
We die for ever…

You may do as you like
Since apparently the laws of the gods mean nothing to you.

ISMENE:
They mean a great deal to me, but I have no strength
To break laws that were made for the public good.

ANTIGONE:
That must be your excuse, I suppose. But as for me,
I will bury the brother I love.

ISMENE:
Antigone,
I am so afraid for you!

ANTIGONE:
You need not be:
You have yourself to consider, after all.

ISMENE:
But no one must hear of this, you must tell no one!
I will keep it a secret, I promise!

ANTIGONE:
Oh tell it! Tell everyone
Think how they’ll hate you when it all comes out
If they learn that you knew about it all the time!

ISMENE:
So fiery! You should be cold with fear!

ANTIGONE:
Perhaps. But I am doing only what I must.

ISMENE:
But can you do it? I say that you cannot.
ANTIGONE
Very well: when my strength gives out, I shall do no more. 75

ISMENE:
Impossible things should not be tried at all.

ANTIGONE:
Go away, Ismene: I shall be hating you soon, and the dead will too. For your words are hateful. Leave me my foolish plan: I am not afraid of the danger; if it means death, 80 It will not be the worst of deaths — death without honor.

ISMENE:
Go then, if you feel that you must. You are unwise, But a loyal friend indeed to those who love you. [Exit into the Palace. ANTIGONE goes off. L. Enter the CHORUS.]