THE THEBAÏD;

or,

THE BROTHERS AT WAR.

A TRAGEDY.

1664.
INTRODUCTION TO THE THEBAID.

This play, which was first acted in 1664, when Racine was in his twenty-fifth year, is a tragedy founded upon the "Seven against Thebes" of Aeschylus and the "Phoenician Women" of Euripides. The part of Hamon is borrowed from the "Antigone" of Sophocles, and free use has been made of Rotrou's tragedy of the same name. The author, in the preface to this drama in his collected works, begs the reader's indulgence for its imperfections, in consideration of the early age at which he wrote it. He apologizes for the wholesale slaughter of nearly all the characters at its close on the ground that he has therein only followed tradition. Love occupies but a subsidiary place in the development of the plot, the main theme being the hatred between the sons of Oedipus, as inheritors of the curse pronounced against the latter for the parricide and incest of which he was unwittingly guilty.

The influence of Corneille is strongly marked in this the earliest of Racine's published plays; and neither in matter nor style is there more than a faint promise of original genius.
CHARACTERS.

Eteocles, King of Thebes.
Polynices, brother of Eteocles.
Jocasta, mother of those two princes, and of Antigone.
Antigone, sister of Eteocles and Polynices.
Creon, their uncle.
Hemon, son of Creon, lover of Antigone.
Olympia, confidential friend of Jocasta.
Attalus, confidential friend of Creon.
A Soldier of the army of Polynices.
Guards.

The scene is laid at Thebes, in a room of the palace.
THE THEBAÏD;

OR,

THE BROTHERS AT WAR.

ACT I.

Scene 1.

JOCASTA, OLYMPIA,

JOCASTA.

Olympia, are they gone? What grief is mine,
To pay with weeping for one moment's rest!
For six long months mine eyes have open'd thus
Only to tears, nor ever closed in peace:
Ah, would that death might seal them up for aye,
Ere they behold this darkest deed of all!
Have they encountered?

OLYMPIA.

From th' high city wall
I saw their hosts for battle all array'd,
Their bright arms flashing in the sun; then left
The ramparts straight to bring you word; for there
I saw the king himself march, sword in hand,
Before his troops, teaching the stoutest hearts
Surpassing eagerness to dare the worst.

JOCASTA.

No doubt remains, Olympia, they are bent
On mutual slaughter. Let the Princess know,
'And bid her hasten hither. Righteous Heav'n, Support my weakness. We must after them, Part these unnatural brothers, or else die Slain by their hands. The fatal day is come, Bare dread of which has fill'd me with despair? Of no avail have been my prayers and tears; The Fates not yet their wrath have satisfied.

O Sun, that givest light to all the world, Why hast thou left us not in deepest night? Shall thy fair beams on deeds of darkness shine, Nor horror turn thine eyes from what we see?
Alas, such portents can appal no more, The race of Laius has made them trite;
Thou canst unmoved behold my guilty sons, For crimes more heinous yet their parents wrought;
Thou dost not shudder if my sons forswear Their solemn oaths, unnatural murderers both, Knowing them from incestuous union born, Rather would'st wonder were they virtuous.

Scene 2.

Jocasta, Antigone, Olympia.

Jocasta.

My daughter, have you heard our misery?

Antigone.

Yes, they have told me of my brothers' rage.

Jocasta.

Let us then hasten, dear Antigone, To stop, if it may be, their fratricide. Come, let us show them what they hold most dear, And see if they will yield to our attack, Or if in blinded frenzy they will dare To shed our blood, ere each the other slays.

Antigone.

Mother, 'tis over! Eteocles is here!
Scene 3.

JOCASTA, ETEOCLES, ANTIGONE, OLYMPIA.

JOCASTA.
Your arm, Olympia! Anguish makes me weak.

ETEOCLES.
Mother, what trouble ails you?

JOCASTA.
Ah! my son!
Do not I see your raiment stain'd with blood?
Is it your brother's blood? Is it your own?

ETEOCLES.
No, Madam, it is neither. In his camp
My brother Polynices loiters yet,
And will not meet my challenge face to face,
But only sent an Argive force, that dared
Dispute our sally from these walls; rash fools!
I made them bite the dust; their blood it is,
Which you may see.

JOCASTA.
But what did you intend?
What sudden impulse led you, all at once,
To pour your troops upon the plain?

ETEOCLES.
'Twas time
I acted as I did, for, lingering here,
My fame grew tarnish'd, and hard words arose
From all the people, blaming me for sloth,
When loom'd already Famine's dreadful form;
I heard regrets that they had crown'd me king,
Complaints that I had fail'd to justify
Their choice to that high rank. So, come what may,
I must content them; Thebes from this day forth
Shall captive be no more; no troops of mine
Being left to overawe, let her decide,
Alone, the issue. I have men enough
To keep the field; if Fortune aid our arms,
Bold Polynices and his proud allies
Shall leave her free, or perish at my feet.

JOCASTA.

Heav'ns! Could you let such blood your arms defile?
Has then the crown for you such fatal charm?
If only to be gain'd by fratricide,
Would my son wear it at a price so dear?
Does honour urge? With you alone it rests
To give us peace without recourse to crime,
And, vanquishing your savage wrath this day,
Your brother satisfy and reign with him.

ETEOCLES.

To share my crown! And call you that to reign?
To tamely yield what my own right has giv'n!

JOCASTA.

You know, my son, how birth and justice grant
This dignity to him as well as you;
How Oedipus, ere ending his sad course,
Ordain'd that each of you his year should reign,
And, having but one kingdom to bequeath,
Will'd you should both be rulers in your turn.
To these conditions you subscribed. The lot
Summon'd you first to pow'r supreme, and so
The throne you mounted, unopposed by him,
Unwilling now to let him take your place.

ETEOCLES.

No, Madam; to the sceptre he has lost
All claim, since Thebes refused to ratify
Our compact, and, in making me her king,
'Tis she, not I, who barr'd him from the throne:
Has Thebes less reason now to dread his pow'r,
SCENE 3.]

THE THEBAID.

After six months of outrage at his hands?
How could she e'er obey that savage Prince
Who arms against her Famine and the Sword?
How could she take for king Mycenæ's slave,
Who for all Thebans hatred only feels?
Who, to the king of Argos basely bound,
Links him in marriage to our bitterest foes?
For Argos chose him for his son-in-law,
In hopes that by his means he might behold
Thebes laid in ashes. Love had little part
In such foul union; fury lit the torch
Of Hymen. Thebes, t'scape his chains, crown'd me,
Expects thro' me to see her troubles end,
Must needs accuse me if I play her false,—
I am her captive, I am not her king!

JOCASTA.

Say, rather say, ungrateful heart and fierce,
Nought else can move you like the diadem.
Yet I am wrong; it is not royal rank,
But guilt alone, that has a charm for you.
Well, since your soul so hungers after that,
Why stop at fratricide? Slay me as well.
Seems it small sin to shed a brother's blood?
I offer you my own. Will that suffice?
Thus then will you have vanquish'd all your foes,
Removed all checks, committed every crime,
No hateful rival to the throne be left,
And you be greatest of all criminals!

ETEOCLES.

What will content you, Madam? Must I leave
The throne, and crown my brother king instead?
Must I, to further your unjust design,
Own him as lord who is my subject now,
And, to advance you to your height of bliss,
Yield myself up a prey to his revenge?
Must I submit to die?—
JOCASTA.

What words are these?
Good Heav'ns! How ill you read my secret heart!
I do not ask you to resign your sway;
Reign still, my son, for such is my desire;
But if my many woes can pity stir,
If in your breast you keep some love for me,
Or if your own unblemish'd fame be dear,
Then let your brother share that high estate;
Only an empty splendour will be his;
Your pow'r enhanced thereby will sweeter prove;
Your subjects all will praise the generous deed,
And ever wish to keep a prince so rare;
This noble act will not impair your rights,
But render you the greatest of all kings,
As the most just. Or, if you will not bend
To meet a mother's wish, if, at such price,
Peace seems impossible, and pow'r alone
Has charms for you; at least, to give me ease,
Suspend your arms. Grant to your mother's tears
This favour, while I seek your brother's camp:
Pity perchance may in his soul reside;
Or I at least may bid my last farewell.
This moment let me go, e'en to his tent,
And unattended; this shall be my hope;
My heart-felt sighs may move him to relent.

ETEOCLES.

Mother, you need not go; here may you see
Your son again, if in that interview
You find such charms. It rests with him alone
To effect a truce. This very hour your wish
May be fulfill'd, this palace welcome him.
I will go further, and, that you may know
He wrongs me in imputing treachery,
And that I play no hateful tyrant's part,
Let sentence be pronounced by gods and men.
If so the people will, to him I yield
SCENE 4.]

THE THEBAÍD. 11

My place; but let him bow to their decree,
If it be exile; yea, I pledge my word,
Free and unfetter’d Thebes shall choose her king.

Scene 4.

JOCASTA, ETEOCLES, ANTIGONE, CREON, OLYMPIA.

CREON.
The sally has alarm’d your subjects, sire;
Thebes at your fancied loss already weeps,
While horror and affright reign everywhere,
And people tremble gazing from the walls.

ETEOCLES.
Soon shall their vain alarm be quieted.
Madam, I go to join my gallant troops;
Meanwhile you may accomplish your desires,
Bring Polynices in, and talk of peace.
Creon, the queen commands here in my room,
Prepare the people to obey her will;
Your son, Menæceus shall be left behind
To take and give her orders; him I choose,
For, high repute with all to valour join’d,
His merits will the timid reassure,
And give no handle to the enemy.
Command his service, Madam.

(To CREON.)
Follow me.

CREON.
What, sire!—

ETEOCLES.
Yes, Creon, I am so resolv’d.

CREON.
And do you thus resign your sovereign pow’r?
ETEOCLES.
Whether I do or not, ne'er vex yourself;
Fulfil my bidding, and come after me.

Scene 5.

JOCASTA, ANTIGONE, CREON, OLYMPIA.

CREON.
What have you done? Madam, what course is this,
To make the conqueror seek ignoble flight?
Your counsel ruins all.

JOCASTA.
Nay, all preserves;
For thus, and thus alone, can Thebes be saved.

CREON.
What, Madam! when, (our state being strong as now,
Contingents of six thousand men and more
Swelling our ranks and promising success,) 
The king lets victory from his hands be snatch'd!

JOCASTA.
There may be conquest, yet no glory won;
Shame and remorse oft follow victory.
When brothers twain for mutual slaughter arm,
To part them not may be to lose them both:
Or if one conquer, to have suffer'd him
So to prevail were his worst injury.

CREON.
Too high their wrath has ris'n—

JOCASTA.
It may be calm'd.

CREON.
Both wish to reign.
JOCasta.
And so in truth they shall.

CREON.
Kings' majesty admits no partnership;
'Tis no commodity to be resign'd,
And then resumed.

JOCasta.
They shall accept as law
The interest of the State.

CREON.
Which is to have
A single king, who, governing his realms
With constant sway, accustoms to his laws
People and Princes. But alternate rule
Would give two tyrants, when it gave two kings.
One brother would the other's work destroy
By contrary decrees; they'd ever be
Scheming to exercise despotic pow'r,
And public policy would change each year.
To put a period to their sovereignty
Means to give greater scope for violence.
Both in their turn would make their subjects groan;
Like mountain torrents lasting but a day,
Which any barrier makes more dangerous,
Ruin and misery must mark their course.

JOCasta.
Nay, rather shall we see the brothers vie
In noble schemes to win their country's love.
But, Creon, own that all your trouble springs
From fear lest peace should render treason vain,
Seat my sons firmly in the throne you seek,
And break the snares you set to catch their steps.
As at their death there falls by right of birth
Into your hands the sceptre, natural ties
Of common blood between you and my sons
Make you regard them as your greatest foes,
And your ambition, aiming at the crown,
Inspires a hatred which they share alike.
With dangerous counsels you infect the king,
And make a friend of one to ruin both.

CREON.

I nourish no such fancies; for the king
My high respect is ardent and sincere;
And my ambition is not, as you think,
To reach the throne, but to maintain him there.
My sole concern is to exalt his pow’r;
I hate his foes, and there lies all my crime:
I care not to deny it. But, methinks,
This crime of mine finds no like feeling here.

JOCASTA.

I am his mother, Creon; if I love
His brother, is the king less dear for that?
Let cringing courtiers hate him as they may,
A mother’s tender heart beats ever true.

ANTIGONE.

Your interest herein is one with ours,
The king has enemies that are not yours;
You are a father, and amongst his foes,
Consider, Creon, that your son is found,
For Polynices has no warmer friend
Than Hæmon.

CREON.

True, nor am I less than just;
He holds in my regard a special place,
Which is, as it should be, to hate him more
Than any other; in just wrath I wish
That all might hate him as his father does.

ANTIGONE.

After such valiant deeds as he has wrought,
The general feeling has another bent.
CREON.

I see it, Madam, and I grieve thereat,
But know my duty when a son revolts;
All these grand exploits that have won him praise
Excite my just resentment. For Disgrace
Is ever constant to the rebel's side;
His bravest actions bring his greatest guilt,
The prowess of his arm but marks his crime,
And Glory scorns to own Disloyalty.

ANTIGONE.

Heed better Nature's voice.

CREON.

The dearer he
Who does th' offence, the more the ill is felt.

ANTIGONE.

But should a father carry wrath so far?
You hate too much.

CREON.

You are too lenient,
In pleading for a rebel you transgress.

ANTIGONE.

The cause of Innocence is worth a word.

CREON.

I know what makes his innocence for you.

ANTIGONE.

And I what makes him hateful in your sight.

CREON.

For Love sees not like common eyes.

JOCASTA.        Beware

Of what my wrath can do, when you abuse
The liberty which may be stretch'd too far
And bring down ruin on your head at last.

ANTIGONE.
The public good weighs little on his soul,
And Patriotism masks another flame.
I know it, Creon, but abhor a suit,
Which 'twere your wisdom to leave unexpress'd.

CREON.
I'll do so, Madam; and, beginning now,
Will rid you of my presence. For I see
To pay you my respect but points your scorn:
My son,—more happy,—shall supply my room.
The king has summoned me, and I obey.
Hæmon and Polynices,—send for them.
Farewell.

JOCASTA.
Yes, wicked schemer, both will come,
And with united efforts foil your plots.

Scene 6.

JOCASTA, ANTIGONE, OLYMPIA.

ANTIGONE.
The traitor! What a height of insolence!

JOCASTA.
All his presumptuous words will turn to shame.
For soon, if our desires are heard in Heav'n,
Peace will ambition's retribution bring.
But every hour is precious, we must haste
And summon Hæmon and your brother too;
I am prepared to grant them to this end
Whate'er safe conduct they think fit to ask.
And gracious Heav'n, if Justice may give pause
To my misfortunes, then incline to peace
the heart of Polynices; aid my sighs,
Take eloquent my trouble and my tears!

ANTIGONE (alone).
If Heav'n can feel compassion for a flame as innocent as mine, then bring me back
My Hæmon faithful still, and grant to-day that with my lover Love himself may come.

ACT II.

Scene 1.

ANTIGONE, HÆMON.

HÆMON.
What! Will you rob me of the face I love
So soon, when I have suffer'd a whole year
Of absence? Have you call'd me to your side
To snatch away again so sweet a prize?

ANTIGONE.
Shall I so soon, then, cast a brother off,
And let my mother seek the gods alone?
Ought I to shape my duty to your wish,
Think but of love, and care for peace no more?

HÆMON.
No duty bids thee thwart my happiness;
They can consult the oracle full well
Without us. Let me rather at your eyes
Question my heart's Divinity: what fate
Is mine. Should I be overbold to ask
If their accustom'd sweetness welcome still
The thought of my affection, nor resent
My ardour? Can they pity where they wound?

1.
While cruel absence dragg'd its weary course,
Say, have you wish'd me to be faithful still?
Though you how Death was threat'ning, far from you,
A lover who should die but at your knees?
Ah! when such beauty penetrates the soul,
When the heart dares to lift its hopes to you,
How sweet to worship charms divinely fair!
What torture when they vanish out of sight!
Each moment's separation seem'd an age;
And I had long since closed my sad career,
Had I not trusted, till I might return,
That absence would to you be proof of love,
And my obedience in your memory dwell
To plead for me while banish'd from your face;
And that each thought of me would make you think,
How great must be the love that thus obeys.

ANTIGONE.

Yes, I knew well that such a faithful soul
Would find the pain of absence hard to bear;
And, if I may my secret thoughts reveal,
The wish would sometimes come that you might feel
Some shade of bitterness, to make the days,
Parted from me, seem longer than before.
But blame me not, for mine own heart was full
Of sorrow, and but wish'd that you might share
Its load, grown yet more heavy since the war
Brought your invading forces on this land.
Ah! with what anguish did I then behold
My dearest on opposing sides array'd!
With countless pangs my heart was torn to see
Loved ones without our walls, loved ones within:
At each assault a thousand terrors clash'd
In conflict, and a thousand deaths I died.

HÆMON.

Tis pitiful indeed; but have I done
Aught but as you yourself directed me?
In following Polynices I obey'd
Your wish; nay more, your absolute command.
A friend's devoted heart I pledg'd him then,  
Quitted my country, left my father's side,  
Thereby incurring his indignant wrath,  
And, worst of all, banish'd myself from you.

ANTIGONE.

I bear it all in mind; Hæmon is right,  
In serving Polynices, me you serv'd.  
Dear was he then to me, and dear to-day,  
All that was done for him was done for me.  
We loved each other from our tenderest years,  
And o'er his heart I held unrivall'd sway;  
To please him was my chief delight, to share  
His sorrows was the sister's privilege.  
O that such pow'r to move him still were mine!  
Then would he love the peace for which I yearn;  
Our common woe would so be lull'd to rest,  
And I should see him, nor would you from me  
Be parted.

HÆMON.

He abhors this dreadful war;  
Yea, I have seen him sigh with grief and rage,  
That he has been compell'd to make his way  
Thro' bloodshed to regain his father's throne.  
Hope that the gods, touch'd by our miseries,  
Will soon the rift between the brothers heal;  
May Heav'n restore affection to their hearts,  
And in their sister's breast keep love alight!

ANTIGONE.

That latter task indeed, ah! doubt it not,  
Were easier far than to appease their rage.  
Well do I know them both, and am assured  
Their hearts, dear Hæmon, are more hard than mine.  
But sometimes Heav'n works marvels past belief.
Scene 2.

ANTIGONE, HÆMON, OLYMPIA.

ANTIGONE.
Now let us hear what said the oracle.
What must be done?

OLYMPIA.
Alas!

ANTIGONE.
What! were you told
That war must still be waged?

OLYMPIA.
Ah! worse than that!

HÆMON.
What woe is this the angry Pow’rs portend?

OLYMPIA.
Prince, hear the answer for yourself, then judge:
"Ye Thebans, thus doth Fate ordain,
That if ye would from war be freed,
The last hope of the royal seed
With blood outpour’d your land must stain."

ANTIGONE.
How has this offspring of a hapless race
Deserv’d such condemnation, oh, ye gods?
Was not my father’s death vengeance enough,
That wrath must follow all our family?

HÆMON.
Lady, this sentence is not aim’d at you,
For virtue shelters you from punishment.
The gods can read your innocence of heart.
ANTIGONE.

Tho' innocence affords no trusty shield,
Yet 'tis not for myself I fear their stroke.
The guilt of ÓEdipus will slay his child
Waiting without a murmur for her death.
But if I must my ground of dread disclose,
It is for you, dear Hæmon, that I fear;
From that unhappy stock like us you spring.
I see too plainly that the wrath of Heav'n
This baleful honour will to you extend
As unto us, and make our princes wish
Their birth had been from lowest of the low.

HÆMON.

Can I regret a destiny so grand,
Or shrink from meeting such a noble death?
To be descended from the blood of kings
Is glorious, e'en if we must lose that blood
Soon as receiv'd.

ANTIGONE.

If any sin is ours,
Should Heav'n for that take vengeance upon you?
The father and the children might suffice,
Without more distant quest for guiltless blood.
Th' offence that we inherit 'tis for us
To expiate. Then slay us, heav'nly Pow'rs,
But spare the rest!

My sire, dear Hæmon, brings
Your utter ruin now, and I, perchance,
Yet more than he. Punishment falls on you,
And on your House, because my father sinn'd,—
And you have loved his daughter, which has wrought
More harm than incest and than parricide.

HÆMON.

My love, say you? Is that a fatal crime?
Can it be wrong to love celestial charms?
And since my passion meets such sweet response,
How can it e'er deserve the wrath of Heav'n?
My sighs concern you and your heart alone,
For you it is to judge if they offend:
As to your potent sentence they appeal,
Shall they be blamable or innocent.
Let Heav'n decree my ruin if it will,
Still shall the causes of that fate be dear,
Proud shall I be to die because I claim
Kinship with royalty, and happier still
To die your subject. In this common wreck,
Why should I wish to live a life forlorn?
The gods would all in vain my death delay,
Their mercy would be foil'd by my despair.
But after all perchance our fears are vain,
Patience!

Lo, Polynices and the Queen!

Scene 3.

Jocasta, Polynices, Antigone, Hæmon.

Polynices.

Cease to oppose me, in the name of Heav'n:
I plainly see peace is impossible.
I hoped the eternal justice of the gods
Might against tyranny declare itself,
And, weary of the sight of so much blood,
Might grant to each of us his proper rank;
But, since they back injustice openly,
And side with guilt, I can no longer hope,
When Heav'n itself favours unrighteousness,
That a rebellious people may be just.
Shall then a shameless rabble judge my cause,
Whose base self-interest, tho' remote from his,
Inspires the zeal that serves my enemy.
The multitude admit not Reason's sway.
Victim already of this people's scorn,
Me they have banish'd, nor will take again
Th' offended prince, whom they a tyrant deem.
And as to honour's dictates they are deaf,
They think the aim of all the world, revenge.
Their hatred owns no curb, but, started once,
Holds on its course for ever.

JOCASTA.

If, indeed,
This people have such fear of you, my Son,
And all the Thebans dread your sovereignty,
Why, when they steel their hearts against your plea,
Thro' bloodshed seek the sceptre they withhold?

POLYNICES.

Is it the people's part to choose their lord?
Soon as they hate a king must he resign
His crown? And by their hatred or their love,
Is his right limited to mount the throne,
Or leave it? With affection or with fear
Let these regard me, as they will; what birth,
Not their caprice, has made, they must accept,
And pay respect if they refuse to love.

JOCASTA.

When subjects hate their king, he then becomes
A tyrant.

POLYNICES.

Nay, a lawful prince can ne'er
Be call'd such. None deserve that odious name
With rights like mine, nor does a people's hate
Make tyrants. Rather name my brother so.

JOCASTA.

He's loved by all.

POLYNICES.

A tyrant 'tis they love,
Who by a hundred tricks of meanness tries
To keep the footing he has gain'd by force;
Who learns from pride lessons of humbleness,
His brother's tyrant, but his people's slave.
To keep the sceptre to himself, he bends
Submissive, and, to make me hated, courts
Contempt. Not without cause do they prefer
A traitor, for the people love a slave,
And fear to have a master. To consult
Their whims were treason done to royalty.

JOCASTA.

Has discord then for you such matchless charms,
Already weary of the armistice?
After such troubles shall we never cease,
You, to shed blood, and I, to weep in vain?
Will you grant nothing to a mother's tears?
Daughter, restrain your brother, if you can;
Erst was your love the only check he own'd.

ANTIGONE.

Ah! if his soul is deaf to pity's voice
For your sake, can his former love for me,
Estranged by absence, leave me room for hope?
Scarce in his memory have I still a place:
He knows no pleasure but in shedding blood.
No longer may we trust to find in him
The gallant prince who shuddered at the thought
Of crime, whose generous soul with kindness teem'd,
Honour'd his mother, and his sister loved:
Now Nature's ties for him are idle dreams,
That sister he disowns, that mother scorns;
And his Ingratitude, long nurs'd by Pride,
Holds us as strangers, yea, as enemies.

POLYNICES.

Charge not that sin on my sore troubled soul:
Say rather, Sister, you yourself are changed,
Say, the unjust usurper of my rights
Has robb'd me of a sister's tenderness.
The same as ever, I forget you not.

ANTIGONE.

Hard heart, is this to love as I love you,
To rest unmoved by all my painful sighs,
To doom me still to sorrows manifold?

POLYNICES.
Sister, is this to love your brother then,
To urge entreaties justice must refuse,
To wish to wrest the sceptre from my hand?
Ye gods! Then Eteocles himself is kind!
A tyrant wrongs me, yet you favour him.
Unfairly.

ANTIGONE.
Nay, I hold your interests dear.
Think not these eyes are false that weep for you;
My tears conspire not with your enemies.
That peace for which I yearn would be to me
Torture—should Polynices lose thereby
A throne. The only favour that I seek
Is for a longer space to look on you,
My Brother; suffer me to see your face
A few brief days, and give me time to find
Some means that may restore you to the rank
Which you inherit, without loss of blood
So precious. Can you now refuse to grant
This little favour to a sister’s tears,
A mother’s sighs?

JOCASTA.
What have you yet to fear?
Why wish so soon to leave us? All this day,
Is it not all included in the truce?
Must it be ended ere ’tis well begun?
See how your brother, laying down his arms,
Permits our meeting,—is your will more stern?

ANTIGONE.
Yes, Brother, his compassion passes yours;
His mother’s tears can move him, and our grief
To-day has forced him to disarm his wrath.
You call him cruel; you are worse than he.
HÆMON.

My lord, no danger presses; you may well
Let their entreaties even yet prevail.
Grant to their earnest wish this day, ungrudg’d,
Perchance they may devise some happy scheme
To heal the quarrel. Nor let Eteocles
Have pow’r to say that, were it not for you,
Peace might have been. Thus will you satisfy
A mother and a sister, yea your own
Honour.

What brings this man with looks perturb’d?

Scene 4.

JOCASTA, POLYNICES, ANTIGONE, HÆMON, A SOLDIER.

SOLDIER (to POLYNICES).

My lord, the truce is broken, and the fight
Rages once more; Creon attacks your host;
The Thebans at their king’s command renounce
Their oath; and scarce can brave Hippomedon,
Filling your place, withstand the general charge;
He order’d me to tell you so, my lord.

POLYNICES.

The traitors! Come, my Hæmon, we must go.
(To the Queen.) Madam, you see how well he keeps his
word.
Straight will I meet his challenge and attack,
Since he will have it so.

JOCASTA.

My Son, my Son!—

He hears me not. Cries are as vain as tears.
Go, dear Antigone, with wingèd feet,
Beg Hæmon to do all he can to part
Your ruthless brothers.

Ah! strength fails my limbs,
Too weak to move. One task remains—to die!
ACT III.

Scene 1.

JOCASTA, OLYMPIA.

JOCASTA.
Olympia, go, and view the dreadful sight;
See if their rage has found no obstacle,
If one or other owns no touch of shame.
They say Meneceus is gone to urge
The claims of peace.

OLYMPIA.
Some noble purpose arm’d
His spirit, beam’d heroic in his eye,
And you must hope, dear Madam, to the end.

JOCASTA.
Go, look, Olympia, and then bring me word
Of all you see; lighten this anxious heart.

OLYMPIA.
How can I leave you thus in solitude?

JOCASTA.
Go, I would be alone; if such can be
My lot, with such a multitude of woes!

Scene 2.

JOCASTA.
Ah! will these sad afflictions last for aye,
Nor e’er exhaust the vengeance of the gods?
Will they inflict a thousand cruel deaths,
Yet hurry not my steps towards the grave?
Less terribly severe would be their wrath,
Were it to strike the guilty once for all!
How infinite their punishments appear,
When life is left to those that suffer them!
Heav'n knows that since that thrice accursed day,
When I first found I had become the wife
Of mine own son, the sufferings I endured
Surpass'd the keenest torments of the damn'd.
Yet, righteous gods, did an unconscious crime
Deserve such wrath implacable?  Alas!
I knew him not, that luckless son of mine.
'Twas you yourselves who led him to my arms,
Yourselves that open'd wide the horrid gulf.
Such is the justice of these mighty gods!
They bring our footsteps to the brink of crime,
Force us to fall, and then are merciless.
Do they delight in leading men astray,
To make them very types of misery?
And can they not, when they would vent their wrath,
Find criminals to whom the crime is sweet?

Scene 3.

Jocasta, Antigone.

Jocasta.

Well, is all over? one or other slain,
Comes the proud victor to add matricide
To slaughter of a brother? Daughter, speak.

Antigone.

Heav'n is appeas'd, the oracle fulfill'd.

Jocasta.

What! My two sons are dead?

Antigone.

Another life,
Worthy of all its royal ancestry,
Has purchased peace for Thebes, for you repose,
Yea, for our country sacrificed itself.
I ran to call back Hæmon and your son,
But ere I started they were far ahead;
They heard me not, and vainly did I call
With cries of anguish on the name of each.
They both flew swiftly to the battle-field;
And, as for me, mounting the ramparts' height,
I, with the people there, watch'd in alarm,
That seem'd to freeze our blood, the thickening fray.
Just at that fatal moment there steps forth,
Between the embattled ranks, our country's hope,
The youngest yet most honour'd of our blood,
The Prince Menceceus, worthy to be call'd
Brother of Hæmon and too good to be
The son of Creon; in his zeal to show
His love for Thebes, in th' ears of either host
He cries:—"Halt! Heav'n forbids th' unnatural strife!"
To these commanding accents all give heed,
Astonish'd at so strange a spectacle,
And check the dark'ning tempest of their rage.
Then straightway he continues:—"Learn," says he,
"The kind decree of Fate, whereby full soon
Ye shall behold a limit to your woes.
I am the last descendent of your kings,
Whose blood, so Heav'n has will'd, must now be shed.
Welcome this blood then that my hand shall spill,
And welcome peace, beyond your hopes regain'd."
Thus speaks he, and therewith deals the death blow:
And when the Thebans saw their hero fall,
As tho' peace were but pain at such a cost,
Trembling they view'd that glorious sacrifice.
I saw th' afflicted Hæmon leave his place,
And fondly clasp his brother's blood-stain'd form,
While Creon in his turn threw down his arms,
And turn'd in tears toward his dying son.
Seeing them so absorb'd, all else forgot,
Both armies drew apart and left the field.
With agitated pulse and stricken soul,
I could not look upon a sight so sad,
Tho' full of admiration for that prince Heroic.
JOCASTA.

I too must admire the deed
That makes me shudder. Is it possible,
Ye gods, that after this Thebes still should find
No path to peace? Cannot this death sublime,
Which even moves my sons to cease from war,
Content you? Shall this noble victim die
Rejected? If to virtue you incline,
As crime you hate, if ye reward as well
As punish, shall not guilt be wash’d away
By this pure blood?

ANTIGONE.

Such virtue cannot fail
Of recompense, his life has more than paid
The debt we owe the gods; a hero’s blood
That of a thousand criminals outweighs
In worth.

JOCASTA.

You little know the wrath of Heav’n,
That to my sorrow gives relief awhile,
But, ever, when I think its hand is stay’d,
Makes ready to destroy me utterly.
This night it seems to wipe my tears away,
To show me when I wake new scenes of blood.
The hopes of peace with which it flatters me
A cruel oracle for aye forbids;
It brings my son, and bids me look on him,
But ah, how dearly purchased is that joy!
My son is deaf to all my earnest pray’rs,
Leaves me in sudden haste, and takes the field.
Thus ever cruel burns the wrath of Heav’n;
It only mocks us when it seems appeas’d,
And grows more fierce; it interrupts its blows,
To make them fall the heavier, and withdraws
Its arm to crush me.

ANTIGONE.

Let us hope all good
From this last wonder.
JOCASTA.

Can I, while my sons
Remain unreconciled? The younger heeds
Nought but his rights; the other only hears
The people’s voice, and Creon’s, whose base greed
Robbs all his son’s devotion of its fruit.
That gallant prince to save us dies in vain,
His father harms us more than he can help.
That faithless sire of two young heroes—

ANTIGONE.

Ah!
My Mother, see, he comes, and with the King.

Scene 4.

JOCASTA, ETEOCLES, ANTIGONE, CREON.

JOCASTA.

’Tis thus, my Son, then, that kings keep their word!

ETEOCLES.

Madam, this fray was not begun by me,
But by some soldiers, Argives and our own,
Who, having quarrell’d with each other, drew
Their comrades on to help them, till at length
A mere dispute into a battle turn’d:
A bloody one it doubtless would have been,
And settled once for all our rival claims,
Had not Menæceus by his noble end
Held back the arms of all the combatants.
That prince, last offspring of our royal race,
Transported with a patriotic love,
The fateful answer of the gods took home,
And gave himself to Death right willingly.

JOCASTA.

Oh, if Menæceus loved his country so
That Life’s sweet charm paled in comparison,
Cannot that self-same love at least avail
To check the fierce ambition of my son?
His grand example bids you follow him,
But not to die, nor even cease to reign:
You may by slight concession yet do more
Than all his blood outpour’d on our behalf.
Cease but to hate your brother, nothing else,
And you will bless us better than that death
Of self-devotion. Is it harder, say,
To love a brother, than, despising Life,
To rush into Death’s arms? Easier for him
To shed his blood, than you to cherish yours?

ETEOCLLES.

His virtue I admire no less than you,
And even envy such a glorious death.
Yet must I tell you, Madam, ’tis a task
More difficult to quit a throne than life.
Glory full oft makes us in love with death,
But few kings deem it glorious to obey.
The gods required his life, nor could the prince
Without disgrace refuse the sacrifice.
But as from him our country claim’d his blood,
So doth she bid me keep my throne and reign;
And there, until she oust me, must I stay.
Let her but speak, and straight will I submit;
Yea, Thebes shall see me, to appease her Fate,
Lay down the sceptre, and my life as well.

CREON.

My son is dead, nor do the gods require
Another victim. Let no blood of yours
Mingle with his. To give us peace he died,
Live you to grant it to our just desires.

ETEOCLLES.

What! even Creon on the side of peace?

CREON.

For having loved too long this barbarous war,
You see how Heav'n has whelm'd me in despair:
My son is dead.

ETEOCLES.

And he must be aveng'd.

CREON.

On whom should I take vengeance for this stroke
Of misery?

ETEOCLES.

Your foes are those of Thebes:
Avenge her and yourself.

CREON.

Among her foes
I find your brother, and my elder son:
How can I spill the blood that you and I
Partake? And, one son lost, take my revenge
Upon the other? 'Twould be sacrilege
To slay your brother, and to slay my son
Would outrage Nature. Shall I stain my hand
With blood so sacred, or with blood so dear?
Can a good father by such cruel aid
Believe his heart? 'Twere ruin, not revenge!
One thought alone is like a healing balm,
My sorrows may at least your sceptre serve.
I shall have comfort, if the son I mourn
Brings by his death assured repose to Thebes.
Peace Heav'n has promis'd to Menceeus' blood:
Complete, my liege, what he has well begun,
Grant him the price he has a right to claim,
Nor fruitless let his self-devotion prove.

JOCASTA.

Since you are led to feel for our distress,
Menceeus' blood may work more wonders yet.
After this miracle, let Thebes take heart,
That which has altered you will change her lot.
Henceforth is peace no longer desperate;
Nay, 'tis assured if Creon willeth it so.
Soon will those iron hearts in pity melt:  
My sons may well submit to pow'r that bends  
The mind of Creon.

(to ETEOCLES.)

Let this change in him  
Move you, my son, to lay your arms aside,  
And banish savage hatred from your breast.  
Give comfort to a mother, and console  
Creon; restore to both of us a son.

ETEOCLES.

To grant your wish would turn me from a king  
Into a subject. Polynices claims  
The sovereign pow'r o'er me as well as Thebes;  
With sceptred hand alone will he return.

Scene 5.

JOCASTA, ETEOCLES, ANTIGONE, CREON, ATTALUS.

ATTALUS (to ETEOCLES).

Sire, Polynices begs an interview;  
A herald has arrived to tell us so.  
He offers either to come here himself,  
Or in his camp await you.

CREON.

It may be  
That, grown more mild, he fain would end this war,  
So long protracted, and ambition owns  
A check; by this last battle taught to-day  
Your pow'r at least is equal to his own.  
The Greeks have served his fury long enough,  
Yea, and the royal father of his bride,  
Preferring solid peace t' unstable war,  
Keeps, as I hear, Mycenæ for himself,  
And makes him king of Argos. Brave indeed,  
But prudent too, he seeks but to retreat  
With honour. By this offer he means peace;
Scene 6.]

To-day must see it ratified, or else
For ever broken. You may thus secure
A firmer seat; let him have all he asks,
Except the diadem.

ETEOCLES.

And that alone
Is what he craves.

JOCASTA

See him at least.

CREON.

Yes, meet
His wish; alone you will transcend our pow’r
To make the ties of blood again prevail.

ETEOCLES.

Let us then go to him.

JOCASTA.

In Heaven’s name,
Rather await his presence here, my Son.

ETEOCLES.

Well, Madam, be it so; and let him have
Safe conduct, and all due security.
Now let us go.

ANTIGONE.

If peace this day return
To Thebes, to Creon we shall owe the boon.

Scene 6.

CREON, ATALUS.

CREON.

'Tis not the weal of Thebes that touches you,
Proud Princess; and your soul untamable,
That seems to flatter where it scorn’d so long,
Thinks less of peace than of my son’s return.
But we shall see ere long if her disdain
Will hold the throne as cheap as Creon’s heart;
Soon shall we see, when Heaven has made me king,
Whether the son’s luck will eclipse the sire’s.

ATTALUS.

Who would not marvel at a change so rare!
Creon himself declaring now for peace!

CREON.

You think that peace then is the goal I seek?

ATTALUS.

It needs no musing to think that, my lord;
And seeing, as I do, your eager zeal,
Much I admire the generous resolve
Which makes you bury hatred in the tomb;
Menoeceus, dying, did no nobler deed,
For he who can resentment sacrifice
For patriotism, would not spare his life.

CREON.

Ah! doubtless he who can constrain his will
To love his foe may make a friend of death.
But why should I forego my dear revenge,
And undertake my enemy’s defence?
’Twas Polynices really slew my son;
Should I become his abject advocate?
And were I e’en to crush this deadly hate,
Could I the better cease to love the crown?
Nay, you shall see me, with unshaken zeal,
Alike abhor my foes and long for pow’r.
The throne is ever my most cherish’d hope:
I blush to be a subject where my sires
Were kings; I burn to reach the same high rank.
This is the object I have had in view
Since I could see. Now for two years and more
Each step has brought me nearer to my goal:
The fury of my nephews I have fed,
'Tis my ambition makes me foster their’s;
'Twas I who first made Eteocles refuse
To let his brother reign, therein unjust,
But strong thro’ my support, lent for a while,
To dispossess him later, and myself
Place on the throne.

**ATTALUS.**

But if so keen for war,
Why do you snatch the weapons from their hands?
Since their dissension is what you desire,
How comes it that they meet by your advice?

**CREON.**

The war has proved more fatal to myself
Than to my foes; the gods are too unkind;
The plan I form’d is made to work my woe,
'Tis mine own hand they use to stab my heart.
Soon as the war was kindled, chastisement
Began for me, when Hæmon left my side
For Polynices; I it was who fann’d
The brothers’ enmity, and found a foe
In my own son. The broken truce, to-day,
Was due to me, 'twas I who roused the strife
That led to bloodshed, till the desperate deed
Of my Menceeus cut the chain I wove.
Still have I left a son, whom still I love,
A rebel tho’ he be, and rival too;
Him would I save when I destroy my foes;
To lose them both would be too dear a price.
Besides, the Princes hate each other so,
Be sure they never will consent to peace;
Well know I how to make the venom work,
'Till they would rather die than be at one.
Brief may be enmity with other foes,
But when the bonds of Nature have been snapt,
Nothing can re-unite the sunder’d hearts
Which ties of love so strong have fail’d to hold:
When brothers hate, their hatred knows no bounds.
But absence cools their wrath, for when a foe,
One whom we most detest, is out of sight,
Resentment loses half its bitterness.
Be not surprised then I would have them meet;
I wish their eyes to reinforce their rage,
That they, with hatred cherish'd not expell'd,
May feel their false embraces stifle them.

ATTALUS.

More than aught else you have yourself to dread,
Remorse may torture brows that wear a crown.

CREON.

The throne, when once attain'd, brings other cares,
Remorse weighs lightly in comparison.
The mind that is engross'd with present pow'r
Dwells not upon the visions of the past;
It separates itself from what it was,
And deems its life began with sovereignty.
Come, let us go. Remorse affects me not,
Nor do I own a heart that guilt can scare:
All the first steps to crime some effort cost,
But easy those that follow, Attalus.

ACT IV.

Scene 1.

ETEOCLES, CREON.

ETEOCLES.

Yes, Creon, to this spot he soon will come,
And here we may await him, both of us,
Then learn what he would have; upon my word
I think this meeting augurs little good.
I know his overbearing temper well;
He hates me with a hatred unimpair'd,
Whose course, I ween, no mortal may arrest;
And I, I hate him always, that's the truth.
CREON.

But if he now at length resigns his claim
To royalty, your hatred should subside.

ETEOCLES.

I think my heart will never be appeas’d; ’
’Tis not his pride, it is himself I hate.
Relentless is our mutual enmity;
’Tis not a twelvemonth’s work, ’twas born with us,
And its dark venom, Creon, reach’d our hearts
As soon as life itself. We were sworn foes
In tenderest childhood; yea, before our birth
That enmity began, fatal effect
Of our incestuous blood and parentage!
While yet imprison’d in the self-same womb,
We struggled hard, and made my mother feel
Where our divisions had their origin.
They flourish’d in the cradle, as you know;
E’en to the tomb perchance they’ll follow us.
It seems as tho’ the dire decree of Heav’n
Would brand the incest of our parents thus,
And in our persons let the world behold
The blackest hues of hatred as of love.
Whilst I await his coming, Creon, now,
Think not I hate him less than I have done:
The nearer his approach, more odious he,
And my abhorrence must before his eyes
Break forth; I would not have him quit his claim,
He must be made to fly, not thus retire.
I will have no half-measures for my hate,
I dread his friendship more than all his wrath.
To give my animosity full scope,
I’d have his rage at least sanction my own;
And, since my heart cannot betray itself,
To hate him freely, I would have him show
Hatred for me. His rage is still the same,
As you will see; still covets he the crown;
Still curses me for keeping him therefrom;
More easy he to be subdued than won.
CREON.
Subdue him then, my lord, if he remains
Stubborn; however arrogant he be,
He’s not invincible; and, when his heart
Is deaf to reason, prove what can be done
By your resistless sword; tho’ I love peace,
I will be first to take up arms again;
I ask’d for their suspension it is true,
But more I wish that you should ever reign.
Rather may war blaze forth and never end,
Than Polynices should return with peace;
Let others boast her charms, I scorn them then;
War’s honours please me, so we lose not you.
Thebes by my mouth implores you, crush us not
Beneath the heel of that ferocious prince:
She yearns, like me, for peace, if possible;
But, if you love her, grant her chief desire,—
To keep her king. Yet to your brother give
A patient ear; and, if you can, conceal
Your wrath—but someone comes.

Scene 2.

ETEOCLES, CREON, ATALUS.

ETEOCLES.

Are they at hand?

Will they come, Attalus?

ATTALUS.

Yea, Sire, they’re here,
And, meeting first the Princess and the Queen,
To the next chamber will proceed anon.

ETEOCLES.

Well, let them enter. Waiting which approach,
My wrath grows hot. How we do hate a foe
When he is near us!
CREON.

Ah! he comes

(Aside.) Fulfil
My efforts, Fortune; madden both with rage!

Scene 3.

JOCASTA, ETEOCLES, POLYNICES, ANTIGONE, HÆMON,
CREON.

JOCASTA.

Thus are my wishes crown'd with glad success,
Since Heav'n has brought you both together here.
After two years of absence, each beholds
Once more a brother, in this palace where
Your days began; and I, beyond my hopes
Made happy, may embrace you both at once.
Henceforth, my Sons, dwell thus in unity,
Owning the bonds of brotherhood, and trace
Each in the other's countenance his own;
But to judge better, take a nearer view;
Heed the strong tie that kindred blood proclaims.
Come, Eteocles; and Polynices, come,
Approach each other.—What! you both draw back?
Why this cold greeting? Why these dark'ning frowns?
Is it that each, with mind irresolute,
Waits till his brother makes the first advance,
(Deeming it generous to be last to yield,)
So both refuse to offer an embrace?
What strange ambition this, that but to crime
Aspires, confounding honour with revenge!
This shameful strife should make the victor blush,
The noblest will be first to own defeat.
Which has the greater courage, show me now
By being first to triumph over rage,—
What! neither stirs! Let Polynices give
A friendly greeting; coming from afar,
You should begin; embrace your brother now,
And show him—
ETEOCLES.

Madam, little boots it thus
To mask the truth; such greetings are misplaced,
Let him explain, speak, and resolve my doubts.

POLYNICES.

What! Have I yet to make my wishes known?
Surely the past has made them manifest:
Has not the blood in many a conflict shed
Declared sufficiently my claim to reign?

ETEOCLES.

These selfsame battles, and that blood, outpour'd
So oft upon the crimson-mantle'd earth,
Have told full plainly that the throne is mine,
And, while I live, cannot to you belong.

POLYNICES.

You hold your seat unjustly, as you know.

ETEOCLES.

Wrong suits me well, so I but banish you.

POLYNICES.

Th'o' you refuse to leave it, yet therefrom
You'll be perchance thrown down.

ETEOCLES.

And if I fall,
'Tis like you'll share my ruin.

JOCASTA.

Ah! to find
Blasted such budding hopes! Was it for this
I urged so oft this fatal interview,
Infaming discord? Is this then to treat
Of terms of peace? Drive out your deadly thoughts;
And, in the name of Heav'n, forget your wrath.
Is it your mother arms your hands anew?
Here you are met, not on the bloody field,
But in your home, my Sons, where you were born:
At each familiar sight subdue your rage,
Nor let your common birthplace lack respect;
All that is here speaks but of peace and love;
These princes and your sister blame your strife,
Nor least myself, who ever have for you
Suffer'd and toil'd, and would, to quell your feud,
Give up——

They turn their heads and heed me not!
Alas for stubborn hearts as hard as stone!
The voice of Nature meets no echo there!
(To Polyneices.) And you, whom I supposed of milder mood,—

POLYNEICES.

I only claim what he has promised me,
For he is perjured if he reigns alone.

JOCASTA.

Untemper'd justice oft is injury.
I cannot contradict your right to rule;
But you upset the throne you fain would mount.
Are you not weary of this frightful war?
Would you lay waste this land without remorse,
And to obtain the kingdom ruin it?
Is it then o'er the dead you wish to reign?
Thebes has good cause to dread that prince's sway
Who floods her fair domains with streams of blood:
Will she obey one who has wrong'd her thus?
You are her tyrant ere you are her king.
Ah! to grow great means oftentimes to grow worse,
And virtue wanes when sovereignty is won.
Raised to the throne, alas, what will you be,
Since you are cruel now, debarr'd from pow'r?

POLYNEICES.

If I am cruel, 'tis by stern constraint;
I am not master of the deeds I do.
I see myself with shame forced to commit
Acts most abhorrent, and the people's fear
Is all unjust. No longer will I wound
My country's peace, her groans afflict my soul.
Too copious streams of guiltless blood have flow'd
Incessant; I must heal her miseries;
Nor Thebes nor Greece shall mourn or suffer more,
I will confront the author of my ills,
His blood or mine suffices for to-day.

JOCASTA.

Your brother's blood?

POLYNICES.

Yes, Madam, even his:
A fitting end to this inhuman war.
Such is the errand which has brought me here,—
To challenge you myself; nor did I dare
To speak of it to others than to you,
For any other would have blamed the thought,
And no one here have been my deputy.
So I am mine own herald. 'Tis for you
To prove that you can keep what you have seized.
Show yourself worthy of a prize so fair.

ETEOCLES.

Your challenge I accept, and that with joy,
Creon knows well it was my own desire;
It gave me less delight t' accept the throne.
You show that you deserve the diadem
Which at the point of this my sword I beg
To offer.

JOCASTA.

Hasten then, and pierce this heart,
With me commence your cruel enterprise;
Forget that it was I who gave you birth,
Remember only that your brother drew
His life from me; and, if you seek his blood,
In my unhappy bosom find its source.
I am the common enemy of both,
Being the mother of your hated foe,
Who never but for me had seen the light.
If he must die, shall I not die as well?
Nay, doubt it not, for I will share his death;
You must include us both, or neither slay.
Perfect your clemency or cruelty,
And take my life, or spare your enemy.
If Virtue charms you, and if Honour guides,
Blush, ye barbarians, at a crime like this;
Or if to each of you such sin is sweet,
Then blush, barbarians, to commit but one.
Nor is it love, indeed, that stays your hands,
If, when you seek his life, you save my own:
Your cruelty would grudge forsooth to spare
Me too, if I one moment stood between
The throne and you. Is this the way to treat
A mother?

POLYNICES.

I would spare my country.

JOCASTA.

Ay.

And kill your brother.

POLYNICES.

Nay, but punish guilt.

JOCASTA.

His blood will make you guiltier far than he.

POLYNICES.

Must then this hand of mine a traitor crown?
And must I service seek at foreign courts,
Quit my ancestral realms, a vagabond,
And pay submission to the laws he scorns?
Shall I become the victim of his greed?
What! Is the crown the heritage of crime?
Has he not set at nought each right he owes?
And while I am an exile, he is king.
JOCASTA.

But what if Argos grants you, too, a crown?

POLYNICES.

Am I to seek elsewhere what right of birth
Bestows? And, craving his alliance, bring
Nothing myself, but owe to his good will
All future rank, banish'd from mine own throne,
And suing humbly to a foreign prince?
No, no, I cannot cringe to pay him court.
To whom I owe my life will I too owe
My sceptre.

JOCASTA.

From the father of your bride,
Or from your own, you may accept the gift
As one of equal price.

POLYNICES.

They differ much,
One makes me king, the other but a slave.
What! Shall my greatness be a woman's work?
Thereat my very soul might blush with shame.
Shall then I owe my sceptre to my love,
And only as a bridegroom reign a king?
Nay, my own right shall raise me to the throne,
Or I renounce it. With unborrow'd pow'r,
Let mine be sole command, hated perchance,
Yet well obey'd, if not for love, from fear.
In fine, I will be master of my fate,
And scorn to wear a crown that is not mine.
My birth entitles me to reign, or else
I wish no succour but my own right arm.

JOCASTA.

Do more, my son, hold fast this bold resolve,
And let your arm alone your fortune win;
Disdain the steps that other sovereigns tread,
And let your own hands carve the way that leads
To greatness. Crown yourself with famous deeds,
And be your diadem the victor's bays;
Conquer and reign; let martial glory add
New lustre to the purple that kings wear.
What! Can my son's ambition be content
To wield the sceptre each alternate year?
Let that brave heart, which nothing can subdue,
Seek for some throne which you may mount alone:
Thousands there are 'mid which your sword may choose,
But stain not this one with a brother's blood.
Your triumphs then will bring your mother joy,
And e'en your rival aid your victories.

POLYNICES.

Would you that I, flatter'd with these vain dreams,
Leave a usurper on my father's throne?

JOCASTA.

If you, indeed, wish him such grievous ill,
Raise him yourself to this ill-omen'd throne,
So plunge him in a deep abyss of woe;
For baleful lightnings and the curse of crime
Beset it. Yea, your father and his sires,
Soon as they mounted, saw themselves cast down.

POLYNICES.

What tho' I meet the thunderbolts of Heav'n,
Rather mount there than crawl upon the ground.
My heart is envious of such misery,
Eager to rise, e'en if to fall with them.

ETEOCLES.

Nay, I will spare you such a fruitless fate.

POLYNICES.

Your ruin, trust me, shall precede my own.

JOCASTA.

My Son, the people love his rule.
POLYNICES.

To me

'Tis hateful.

JOCASTA.

They support him.

POLYNICES.

And the gods

ETEOCLES.

Not so, 'tis they forbid your quest,
Since they have giv'n to me this sceptre first;
And, when they made the choice, they knew full well
That he who once is king would king remain.
No realm can brook two masters; and one throne,
How great soe'er, will grant them scanty room;
Each will be cumber'd by his second self,
And one ere long must find himself upset.
You see how I abhor this impious wretch,
Then judge how I can let him share my crown.

POLYNICES.

And I, so hateful are you, wish no more
To share with you the light that's free to all.

JOCASTA.

Go, kill each other then, I stay you not,
But rather urge you to these savage lists;
Since all my efforts can effect no change,
Why tarry longer? Wreak your wild revenge.
Surpass, if possible, your fathers' crimes;
By mutual slaughter show your brotherhood;
Your life, bestow'd thro' guilt of deepest dye,
Must be by no less wickedness cut off.
Why should I blame the fury that goads on
My sons, for I have ceased to pity them?
Yea, they have taught this heart to turn to stone,
And I will teach the cruel how to die.
Scene 4.

Antigone, Eteocles, Polynices, Haemon, Creon.

Antigone.

Mother—
Ah, what is this? Can nothing touch
Their hearts?

Haemon.
No, nor their savage purpose shake.

My brothers—

Eteocles.
Come then, let us choose our ground.

Polynices.
Yea, with all speed.
Sister, farewell!

Eteocles.
Good-bye,

Sweet Princess!

Antigone.
Stop, my Brothers! Let the guards
Hold them perforce; join all your pains to mine;
'Tis to be cruel to show false respect.

Haemon.
Dear Lady, nothing more can stop them now.

Antigone.
Ah, noble Haemon, 'tis to you I turn,
And only you. If still you love me, still
Love goodness, and can fratricide prevent,
To save me from despair, these wretches save.
ACT V.

Scene 1.

ANTIGONE.

What wilt thou do, unfortunate Princess?
Now that these arms have clasp'd a mother dead?
Canst thou not follow where her feet have led,
And end, with life, this burden of distress?
Wilt thou reserve thyself for future woe?
Full soon the fatal issue shalt thou know
Of those fell arms thy brothers wield in fight.
Their fierce example whets the knife for thee;
While thou art shedding tears in piteous plight,
They shed each other's blood with savage glee.

What limit is there to my woes but death?
Ah, whither else can grief like mine repair?
Life or the grave! A mother calls me there,
A lover here would keep my vital breath;
In the dark underworld for me she waits;
Love interdicts what reason best dictates,
For death I cease to long.
What motives bid me die this very hour!
Yet ties to life how strong,
When love exerts his pow'r!

Yes, love forbids my soul to wing her flight;
The victor's voice is one I know full well:
Tho' hope is dead, no more with me to dwell,
Thou livest, and would'st have me share this light;
Thou say'st that I shall draw thee to my grave,
That, if I love thee still, I ought to save
Life's torch alight for thee.
Hæmon, thou see'st how thou my heart canst move,
Tho' death seem sweet to me,
I live for thee and love.

If e'er thou doubtedst of my faithful flame—
But fatal tidings, lo, Olympia brings!
Scene 2.

ANTIGONE, OLYMPIA.

ANTIGONE.
Well, dear Olympia, have you seen this crime

OLYMPIA.
Hastening in vain, I came when all was o'er,
Down from our ramparts saw the people run,
Some weeping, others calling out to arms;
And in a word to tell what caus'd their fear,—
The King is dead, his brother's sword has won.
Of Hæmon too they tell, how with stout heart
Long he endeavour'd to hold back their rage,
But all his efforts fail'd to win success.
Such was the drift of many a vague report.

ANTIGONE.
Yes, I am sure that Hæmon's generous heart
Ever abhorr'd such signal wickedness:
Oft I implored him to prevent this crime,
And know he would have done it if he could.
But, ah, their fury would not brook control,
Eager to quench its fire in streams of blood.
Now, savage Princes, ye are satisfied,
For Death alone could peace between you bring.
Ye thought the throne too strait to hold you both
(No distance that could part you seem'd enough),
And wish'd that Heav'n, to make your quarrel cease,
Might leave one living and the other dead.
Worthy of pity, both, a hapless pair!
Yet are ye less unhappy than myself,
As being all unconscious of those ills
That fell upon you, while I feel them all!

OLYMPIA.
But your misfortune were more hard to bear,
Had Polynices been the prey of Death;
He was the object that engross'd your care,
The welfare of the King touch'd you far less.

ANTIGONE.
'Tis true, I loved him with a love sincere,
More fondly than his brother. Why was this?
What gave him the warm wishes of my heart?
He was both blameless and unfortunate,
But, ah, that generous spirit lives no more,
'Tis crime that sets the crown upon his head:
His brother now commands more sympathy,
Grown dearer since the Fates have proved unkind.

OLYMPIA.
See, Creon comes.

ANTIGONE.

Downcast, as well may be:
The King being dead, he fears the victor's wrath,
His evil counsel has bred all these woes.

Scene 3.

ANTIGONE, CREON, OLYMPIA, ATTALUS, GUARDS.

CREON.
What heard I, Madam, as I enter'd here?
True is it that the Queen—?

ANTIGONE.
Yes, she is dead.

CREON.
Great gods! In what strange fashion was the torch
At last extinguish'd of a life so sad?

OLYMPIA.
Her grave she open'd for herself, my lord;
She seized a dagger, and one moment more
Saw her days ended and her woes as well.
ANTIGONE.
Nor stay'd to know that she had lost a son.

CREON.
Ah, Madam, 'tis too true the angry gods—

ANTIGONE.
Charge with my brother's death yourself alone,
Nor for your deeds accuse the wrath of Heav'n.
'Twas you who brought this fatal conflict on:
He trusted your advice, and so he died:
Thus kings become victims of flatterers,
Who lead them to destruction, while they fan
Their passions. Ye it is that hurl them down;
But in their fall they drag their flatterers
Behind them, as is now the case with you.
His ruin brings us sorrow, you disgrace:
The wrath of Heav'n has link'd your fate with his,
And you, perchance, must weep as well as we.

CREON.
Too true, alas! for cruel Destiny
Makes you lament two brothers, me two sons.

ANTIGONE.
Two brothers, and two sons! What mean your words?
Did Eteocles then perish not alone?

CREON.
What! have you yet to hear this tale of blood?

ANTIGONE.
I know of Polynices' victory,
How Hæmon's efforts made to part them fail'd.

CREON.
That duel had result more terrible.
My losses and your own you know not yet,
But now shall learn them both. Woe worth the day!
ANTIGONE.

Stern Destiny, accomplish thy revenge!
Oh, surely this must be thy final stroke!

CREON.

Madam, you saw with what impetuous rage
The princes went to take each other's life,
How forth they rush'd, with equal ardour fired,
And hearts that ne'er agreed so well before;
Each thirsting, panting for the other's blood,
Their hatred bound them closer than their birth,
And seem'd to reconcile their enmity;
When eager most to slay, appearing friends.
First did they choose their ground whereon to fight,
Near either camp, and underneath the wall.
'Twas there, recovering their fatal wrath,
The horrid conflict they at last began.
With threatening gestures and an eye of flame,
They sought a passage thro' each other's breast;
Then quick as lightning fell their furious strokes,
Till both seem'd fain t' outstrip the feet of Death.
My son, who sigh'd with sorrow in his soul,
Bearing in mind your orders, fair Princess,
Between them ran, despising for your sake
Their strict commands that kept us all aloof.
He push'd them back, and, praying, held their arms,
Exposing to their frenzy his own life,
So he might part them, but he strove in vain,
For ever they renew'd their close attack.
But still with heart undaunted he persists,
And turns aside a thousand rattling blows,
Till the King's weapon with too cruel thrust,
(If aim'd at him or not I cannot tell,)
Stretches my son, expiring, at his feet.

ANTIGONE.

And me my sorrow leaves e'en yet alive!

CREON.

I ran to raise and take him in my arms;
He knew his father's voice, and whisper'd low:—
"For my dear mistress I meet death with joy,
Your anxious love hastes to my help in vain;
These madmen more than I your succour need,
Part them, my Father, and leave me to die."

Thus speaking, he expired. That piteous sight
Check'd not the darkening tempest of their wrath,
And only Polynices seem'd to feel
Compassion's touch.

"Wait, Hæmon," he exclaim'd,
"And you shall be avenged!"

Grief gave his rage
New strength, and soon to his advantage turn'd
The tide of battle. Wounded in the side,
The King fell vanquish'd, weltering in his blood.

Transported with their feelings, either host
Resign'd itself to sorrow or to joy;
And Thebes, alarm'd at her disastrous loss,
Gazed from her ramparts with expectant fears.
Then Polynices felt triumphant pride,
Viewing his dying victim with delight,
And seem'd as 't were to drink his brother's blood.

"The grave," quoth he, "is yours, and mine the throne!
See in my hands the sceptre and the palm!
Go to the world below,—there blush with shame
At my success. To vex your dying hour
Yet more, think, traitor, that you die my slave."

He spake, and, with a gesture of disdain
Approaching where the King lay in the dust,
Stretch'd forth his arm to take the other's sword.
The King, tho' seeming dead, his steps had watch'd,
Biding his time, and his indignant soul
Was, as it were, arrested in its flight
By that grand passion for revenge, which still
Flatter'd his hopes and his last sigh delay'd.
The struggling spark of life, too well conceal'd,
Ensnared his conqueror to a fatal doom;
For at the instant when that savage brother
Essay'd to wrest his weapon from his hand,
He pierced his rival's heart; and his glad soul
With this its final effort left the world.
From stricken Polynices rose a cry
Of anguish, and his angry soul forth fled
To Hades. But dark wrath upon his brow
Was branded, tho' it wore death's pallid hue,
As threatening, one would say, his brother still,
More grim than ever, and more terrible.

ANTIGONE.

Fatal ambition, blinded by the gods!
Clear sequel of a cruel oracle!
Alone of royal blood we two are left,
And would to Heav'n that life was only yours,
And that despair, more speedy than its wrath,
Had made my mother's death prelude my own!

CREON.

'Tis true the flaming fury of the gods
Seems to have spent itself in dealing forth
Destruction on our house; their wrath has whelm'd
My soul, no less than it has tortured you.
They've robb'd me of my sons—

ANTIGONE.

And giv'n a throne!
A worthy recompense for Hæmon's loss.
But prithee let me mourn in solitude,
Nor seek the course of sadness to restrain,
As well might all my sorrows pass to you;
Far sweeter entertainment will you find
Elsewhere; the throne awaits you, and the voice
Of Thebes invites. Taste the fresh draught of pow'r.
Farewell. Our feelings are in ill accord:
I fain would weep, and you would reign a king.

CREON (stopping ANTIGONE).

Ah, Madam, be a queen, and mount the throne;
For this high rank belongs to none but you.
ANTIGONE.

Much rather, Creon, would I have you there,  
The crown is yours.

CREON.

I lay it at your feet.

ANTIGONE.

I would refuse it if the gods themselves  
Should offer it, and dare you to present  
The crown to me?

CREON.

Its glory in my eyes  
Grows pale before the honour I should feel  
In homage to your beauty. Well I know  
Myself unworthy, but if I may claim  
Such high distinction, if illustrious deeds  
May merit it, what must I do?

ANTIGONE.

As I  
Shall teach you.

CREON.

What, indeed, to win such grace  
Would be too much! But issue your commands  
And I am ready.

ANTIGONE (going away).

We shall see.

CREON (following her).

I wait

Your bidding here.

ANTIGONE (going away).

Remain.
Scene 4.

CREON, ATTALUS, GUARDS.

ATTALUS.

Say, is her wrath
Assuaged? Think you to bend her will?

CREON.

'Tis done,

Dear Attalus; no fortune equals mine.
You shall behold in me this happy day
Ambition throned and love supremely blest.
I ask’d of Heav’n the sceptre and her hand,
And graciously the gods have granted both.
To crown my head, and give my flame success,
Hatred no less than love they arm to-day,
Kindling two passions which, tho’ contrary,
Aid me alike, in her a tenderness
Which overcomes her late severity,
And in her brothers wrath implacable,
Opening the way to sovereignty for me,
As to her heart—

ATTALUS.

All smiles propitiously;
And were you not a father, happiness
Would be complete. Love and ambition find
Full scope; but Nature needs must mourn the loss
Of two such sons.

CREON.

Yes, it distresses me;
I know what from a father’s heart is due,
And such was mine. But I was born to reign,
And less I lose than what I think to win.
The name of father, Attalus, is trite,
A gift that Heav’n bestows on almost all;
A happiness so common I can slight,
Compared with what will make all envious.
A throne is not a boon of which the gods
Are prodigal; it parts us from the herd
Of mortals; few are honour’d with a dow’r
So precious. Earth has fewer kings than Heav’n
Has gods. Besides, you know how Hemon loved
The Princess, and his passion was return’d;
His suit, if he had lived, had ruin’d mine.
The gods bereave me of a son, but thus
They rid me of a rival. Speak of joy,
And not of sorrow; leave my raptures free
From sad remembrance of the shades of death.
Tell me of what I gain, not what I lose.
Speak of the throne, already mine,—of her
Whose heart will follow, fair Antigone.
All that is past is but a dream to me;
So late a father and a subject, now
A bridegroom and a king; so sweet a change
That—

But Olympia comes!

ATTALUS.

Ah, and in tears!

Scene 5.

CREON, OLYMPIA, ATTALUS, GUARDS.

OLYMPIA.

Whom wait you, Sire? The Princess is no more.

CREON.

No more, Olympia?

OLYMPIA.

Vain is all regret.
She had but reach’d the chamber next to this,
When, ere I could perceive her fell design,
Boldly she plunged into her beauteous breast
The self-same dagger which had slain the Queen.
Therewith a mortal wound did she inflict,
And, faint with loss of blood, fell suddenly.
Judge what my horror must have been to see
That sight; her soul was ready to take wing,
But first she murmur'd,—"'Tis for you I die,
Dear Hæmon,"—and life ended as she spake.
Cold in my arms I felt her lovely frame,
And thought my soul would quickly follow hers.
Far happier had my sorrow brought me down
To share with her the darkness of the tomb!

Scene 6.

CREON, ATTALUS, GUARDS.

CREON.

Ah, is it thus then that you flee from me,
Your hated suitor, and in cruel scorn
Could quench those lovely orbs that I adore,
And seal them close lest they should look on me.
Hæmon you loved, but less to follow him.
Than to escape from me, such haste to die!
And yet, tho' thus severe you may remain,
Hating my image e'en amongst the shades,
Letting your wrath outlive the breath of life,
I am resolved to follow where you lead;
There shall my odious presence vex you still,
Incessant sighs to you repeat my pain,
Which, if they cannot melt you, must torment,
No longer hoping for escape by death.
Let me then die—

ATTALUS (snatching his sword away from him).

A cruel wish, my lord!

CREON.

Nay, yours the cruelty who murder me
By saving life! Come to my succour, love;
Come rage and fury, end my hateful days!
Baffle those cruel friends that keep me here!
Fulfil your oracles, ye gods, yourselves!
Last relic of ill-fated Laius, I
Must perish, or your words be proved untrue;
Take back the fatal sceptre you have giv'n;
Antigone is gone, take all the rest:
I scorn your presents, and reject the throne.
The lightning's stroke is all I ask of you.
If deaf to pray'r, grant what my crimes demand,
And add another victim to your heap.
Vainly I sue, my own iniquities
Bring down upon my head the ills I caused.
Jocasta, and her sons, Antigone,
My children, whom my fierce ambition slew,
And all the others whom I sacrificed,
Already like dire Furies rend my heart.
Cease—
By my death your wrongs shall be avenged;
The lightning falls, the earth has open'd wide;
I feel a thousand torments all at once,
And go to find repose in Tartarus.

(He falls into the arms of the guards.)