Written by Sophocles around 440 B.C., the title character in Antigone represents one of the most powerful female protagonists in theatrical history. Her conflict is a simple yet poignant one. She gives her dead brother a proper burial against the wishes of her uncle, Creon, the newly crowned King of Thebes. Antigone willingly defies the law for she devoutly believes that she is doing the will of the Gods.

In this monologue, the protagonist is about to be entombed in a cavern. Although she believes she goes to her death, she contends that she was justified in offering her brother his funeral rites. Yet, because of her punishment, she is uncertain about the ultimate goal of the gods above. Still, she trusts that in the afterlife, if she is at fault, she will learn of her sins. However, if Creon is at fault, the fates will surely inflict revenge upon him. The following excerpt is reprinted from Greek Dramas. Ed. Bernadotte Perrin. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1904.

ANTIGONE: Tomb, bridal chamber, eternal prison in the caverned rock, whither I go to find mine own, those many who have perished, and whom Persephone hath received among the dead! Last of all shall I pass thither, and far most miserably of all, before the term of my life is spent. But I cherish good hope that my coming will be welcome to my father, and pleasant to thee, my mother, and welcome, brother, to thee; for, when you died, with mine own hands I washed and dressed you, and poured drink-offerings at your grave; and now, Polyneices, 'tis for tending thy corpse that I win such recompense as this. And yet I honored thee, as the wise will deem, rightly. Never had I been a mother of children, or if a husband had been moldering in death, would I have taken this task upon me in the city's despite.

What law, ye ask, is my warrant for that word? The husband lost, another might have been found, and child from another, to replace the first-born; but, father and mother hidden with Hades, no brother's life could ever bloom for me again. Such was the law whereby I held thee first in honor; but Creon deemed me guilty of error therein, and of outrage, ah brother mine! And now he leads me thus, a captive in his hands; no bridal bed, no bridal song hath been mine, no joy of marriage, no portion in the nurture of children; but thus, forlorn of friends, unhappy one, I go living to the vaults of death. And what law of Heaven have I transgressed?

Why, hapless one, should I look to the gods any more--what ally should I invoke--when by piety I have earned the name of impious? Nay, then, if these things are pleasing to the gods, when I have suffered my doom, I shall come to know my sin; but if the sin is with my judges, I could wish them no fuller measure of evil than they, on their part, mete wrongfully to me.
Antigone's final speech is one of the most discussed passages in one of the world's most famous works of literature, but surprisingly little attention has been given to its rhetorical design. One cause of this, certainly, is its problematic central section; the debate on the authenticity of Antigone's reasoning about her decision to bury her brother has raged since 1821 and has too often distracted scholars from considering the speech as a whole. In addition, the speech has often been approached as an expression of Antigone's feelings, a final revelation which goes to the heart of the matter at this final moment, so that rhetorical design and argument are hardly to be expected. According to Jebb (who deleted 904-20), 'In her latest words, Antigone expresses her confidence in the love which awaits her beyond the grave; and also the trouble which overclouds her trust in the gods, who know her deed, and yet have permitted her to suffer this doom'. For Gerhard Miller (who also rejects 904-20), the speech is 'a portrayal of Antigone's isolation amongst her fellow-men, amongst whom she can speak only in monologue form'. For Bernard Knox it 'resembles a soliloquy, a private meditation. It is an attempt to understand the real reasons [for her action] ... Now in the face of death, oblivious of the presence of Creon and the chorus, with no public case to make, no arguments to counter, she can at last identify the driving force behind her action...'; and 904-20 can be seen as authentic once we see that this speech has a different and deeper revelatory purpose than her earlier speech to Creon. When the rhetorical nature of the speech has been more fully recognized, the results have not been entirely satisfying. August Jacob, the first to delete some of it (905-13), did allow it the rhetorical purpose of proving to Antigone's fellow-citizens that she had acted for good reason, but he could not see how 905-13 served this purpose or could be reconciled with her earlier declarations. Tycho von Wilamowitz saw the brother-argument as mere rhetoric unrelated with the characterization of Antigone or with any larger dialectic in the play. Schadewaldt, treating only 904-20 as argumentative, concluded that the speech as a whole shows us an Antigone who has abandoned her sense of absolute rightness and is assailed in her final moments by Doubt. George Steiner finds throughout Antigone's final scene 'manifold virtuosities of rhetoric ... concentrated and deployed to their highest pitch around Antigone's rites of death'; but he treats the speech as essentially inward-looking and the brother-argument (if genuine) as formulated to convince herself. I would not deny that the speech is 'true' to Antigone's motives and feelings, or that Sophocles handles these consistently, or that he achieves a multiplicity of pathetic effects. But any analysis should start by recognizing that the whole speech is shaped rhetorically as a public address. Antigone is stating a position, not merely pondering her fate. In what follows, I shall offer an analysis of the speech as a rhetorical whole. Defending 904-20 is not my main purpose, and I shall not discuss the debate on its authenticity extensively," but my analysis will suggest that this passage is an integral part of the speech even if its text contains a few problems. A more exact definition of the speech's character and purpose will also assist with some central questions in the interpretation of the play.