

ANTIGONE

Mythological Background to the Theban Trilogy

Laius and Jocasta, king and queen of Thebes, have been childless for some time when Laius decides to consult the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi. The Oracle prophesies that any son born to Laius would kill him. When Jocasta subsequently bears a son, Laius attempts to prevent the prophecy's fulfillment by having the baby's ankles pierced and tethered together so that he cannot crawl. Jocasta then gives the boy to a servant to abandon on a nearby mountainside. However, rather than leave the child to die of exposure, as his parents intended, the servant gives the baby to a shepherd from Corinth who then passes the child on to another shepherd.

Eventually the infant arrives at the house of Polybus and Merope, King and Queen of Corinth. As they are without children of their own, they adopt the little boy and name him Oedipus ("swollen foot"), an allusion to the swelling caused by the piercing of his ankles.

After living for many years as the child of Polybus and Merope, Oedipus is taunted by a drunken guest who questions whether he is actually his parents' child. When Oedipus immediately confronts the king and queen with this information, they reassure him that he is their son. Nevertheless, he is so troubled by doubt that he looks to the Oracle at Delphi for guidance, the same prophetic voice that his birth parents had consulted. At Delphi, he is told that he is destined to murder his father and marry his mother. To avoid such a disastrous fate, he decides not to return home to Corinth, but to travel instead to Thebes, a city not far from Delphi.

On the way to Thebes, Oedipus comes to the village of Davlia, where three roads intersect. There he encounters a chariot driven by his birth-father, King Laius. When Oedipus refuses to yield the right of way to Laius, a fight erupts in which the king tries to run Oedipus down with his chariot. This results in Oedipus killing both Laius and all the king's attendants. The slaughter is witnessed by a slave who happens to be passing by at the time.

Continuing his journey to Thebes, Oedipus encounters the Sphinx, a terrifying creature - winged lion with a human female face - who embodies a curse that Thebes has been suffering under. The Sphinx stops all travelers to the city and asks them this riddle: "What walks on four feet in the morning, two in the afternoon and three at night?"

Giving the right answer is crucial since the Sphinx kills and devours any traveler who is unable to do so. The response Oedipus provides - - "Man: as an infant, he crawls on all fours; as an adult, he walks on two legs and; in old age, he uses a walking stick" - - proves to be correct and the Sphinx, distraught that the riddle has been answered correctly, throws herself off a cliff allowing Oedipus to proceed safely to Thebes.

Prior to Oedipus's arrival, Creon, Queen Jocasta's brother, had announced that any man who rids the city of the Sphinx will be made king of Thebes and given the hand of the widowed Queen Jocasta in marriage. Since Oedipus turns out to be that man, he becomes king and weds Jocasta, thereby fulfilling the rest of the Oracle's prophecy. Oedipus and Jocasta have four children: two sons Eteocles and Polynices; and two daughters, Antigone and Ismene.

Oedipus Rex

Many years after the marriage of Oedipus and Jocasta, a plague of infertility strikes the city of Thebes, blighting crops, livestock and the people. Oedipus vows that he will end the pestilence and sends his uncle Creon to the Oracle at Delphi to seek guidance. When Creon returns from Delphi he advises Oedipus that for the plague to be stopped, the murderer of the former King Laius must be brought to justice. Hearing this, Oedipus curses the killer of Laius and decrees that when he is found, he will be exiled. Creon then suggests that they seek guidance from the blind prophet Tiresias. When the revered prophet warns Oedipus not to pursue the killer of King Laius, the two get into a heated argument and Tiresias is provoked into revealing that Oedipus himself is the killer. Oedipus angrily blames Creon for what he considers Tiresias's false accusations, and the two argue. Jocasta enters and tries to calm Oedipus by telling him the story of her first-born son and how he died. But instead of calming him, the story upsets Oedipus since it leaves open the possibility that he may actually be the murderer of Laius and the cause of the plague. At this point, a messenger arrives from Corinth with the news that King Polybus has died. Hearing that the man he believes to be his father is dead, Oedipus is instantly relieved since he concludes the prophecy can no longer be fulfilled. Yet he knows that Merope is alive and so refuses to go the Corinth. To ease Oedipus's concerns about attending the funeral, the messenger tells him that he was, in fact, adopted. Jocasta, finally realizing that Oedipus is her son, begs him to stop his search for Laius's murderer. However, Oedipus misunderstands her motivation, thinking she is ashamed of him because he might have be of low birth. Jocasta, now in extreme distress, flees into the palace and hangs herself. In the meantime, Oedipus asks the

herdsman who had been ordered to leave him to die on the mountainside as an infant if the messenger's story is true. The herdsman tells Oedipus that the infant raised as the adopted son of Polybus and Merope is actually the son of Laius and Jocasta. With this revelation, Oedipus finally confronts the reality that the man he killed so many years ago at the place where three roads meet, was his own father, King Laius, and that he has married his mother, Jocasta.

Oedipus searches for Jocasta only to find she has killed herself. Taking the pin from a brooch on Jocasta's gown, Oedipus punctures his eyeballs and blinds himself. He is driven into exile, accompanied by his devoted daughter Antigone who acts as her blind father's guide. But, unlike Antigone, his sons are completely indifferent to their father's suffering. Oedipus is so deeply offend by his sons' disregard that he calls down a curse on Eteocles and Polynices - - that they may die at each other's hands

Oedipus at Colonus

Oedipus, now a blind beggar whom Antigone leads by the hand, wanders for years throughout the Greek countryside. After Oedipus's departure from Thebes, his uncle Creon and his two sons, Eteocles and Polynices, arrange to share the kingdom, with each son taking an alternating one-year reign. However, when Eteocles refuses to cede the throne after his year as king, Polynices is forced to leave Thebes. The dispossessed brother then travels to Argos where he marries the daughter of the Argive king and raises an army led by seven champions, one to assault each of the seven gates of Thebes and regain the crown for Polynices.

In the meantime, after years of wandering, Oedipus and Antigone arrive in Athens, where he learns that a grove of trees in the Athenian village of Colonus is sacred to the Eumenides. He immediately realizes that this will be the site of his grave and prepares to die. The Delphic Oracle, however, has predicted that whatever city becomes the burial place of Oedipus will be victorious in the Theban war and Creon, who is allied with Eteocles, decides to find Oedipus and force him to go back to Thebes. For the same reason, Polynices wants to carry his father off to Argos. Before either of them can act, however, Oedipus meets with Theseus, the King of Athens, and tells him he wishes to die and be buried at Colonus. The king extends his protection and when Creon arrives to forcibly carry off Oedipus and Antigone, he is thwarted by Theseus. Likewise, when Polynices shows up at Colonus, he cannot induce his father to go to Argos with him. Shortly after Creon and Polynices depart, Oedipus, accompanied by Theseus, goes off into the sacred wood where the blind old man dies and is buried. Only the

Athenian king knows what occurred during Oedipus's final minutes and where his grave is located.

Antigone

The siege of Thebes by the Argive army led by Polynices culminates in the repulsing of the Argives and, in fulfillment of their father's curse, the death of Polynices and Eteocles at each other's hands. Upon their death, Jocasta's brother Creon takes the throne and with his first decree declares that, as punishment for making war on Thebes, Polynices' body must be left on the plain outside the city to rot and be eaten by animals. In contrast, Eteocles is buried with traditional honors. Antigone considers the treatment of Polynices' body to be unjust, immoral and against the laws of the gods, and she determines to bury her brother regardless of Creon's decree. She tries to persuade her sister Ismene to join her, but Ismene, feeling that such action is beyond the capability of a woman, refuses. So Antigone buries her brother by herself. Creon's guards quickly discover what she has done, capture Antigone, and bring her before Creon. She tells him to his face that she was well aware of his law but chose to break it, because "divine law" is superior to that made by man. Creon attempts to persuade her to his point of view, but when she rejects his arguments, he becomes enraged and decrees that she will be buried alive. Antigone is then imprisoned in a cave where she is left to die. But rather than submit to the death that Creon has imposed, she hangs herself. When Creon's son Hæmon, who's in love with Antigone and engaged to marry her, discovers her body, he kills himself. By this time Creon has decided to relent, but his son is already dead. Almost immediately afterwards, Creon's wife, Queen Eurydice, blaming her husband for the death of both Haemon and a second son who was slain defending Thebes, kills herself. Creon, seeing that his willfulness has caused the death of all whom he has loved wants to die immediately, but that is not the fate the gods have in store for him. Instead, as the chorus reminds him, he must live to understand "the mighty blows of fate . . . at long last will teach us wisdom."

Analysis and Possible Discussion Points

Sophocles was younger than Aeschylus and *Antigone* was produced circa 442 BC, roughly twenty years after the *Oresteia*. And, unlike *The Oresteia*, Sophocles' tragedy is presented as unfolding in a society where justice is administered by the state (even if embodied in a single individual) rather than by the family. But that evolution creates a new issue - - whether one should follow the unwritten laws of the family and clan (and,

more abstractly, the laws of the gods) honored from time immemorial or the conflicting dictates of the state.

Does Antigone represent religion and Creon law?

Is Creon a more modern figure than Antigone?

Antigone may seem to be more sympathetic figure to modern individualistic sensibilities, but during the Third Reich, *Antigone* was performed in Nazi Germany 150 times in sixteen different productions.

What do you think the Nazis saw in the play?

Germans who were against Hitler, including members of the White Rose Movement, were heartened by these performances.

What do you think these anti-Nazi Germans saw in the play?

Antigone was also staged by the French playwright Jean Anouilh in Paris in 1944 and in his production the heroine was clearly intended to represent the French resistance.

Why did the Nazi authorities tolerate the play's production?

To a considerable extent the meaning of the play depends on what an individual member of the audience brings to it.

Both Antigone and Creon go to extremes and both are deaf to arguments in favor of the other's position.

Is Antigone a heroine for rejecting the inhumane laws of a totalitarian state or a religious fanatic who would present a serious danger to any state governed by the rule of law?

If an American citizen were to travel to Syria, kill a number of US soldiers, and die fighting for the Islamic State, should his family be allowed to bring his body back to the US and give him a traditional burial?