

SOME ANTIGONE BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Antigone is the third (and only great) play in the Oedipus trilogy. The first is the absurdly overrated *Oedipus Rex*; the second, the excruciatingly tedious *Oedipus at Colonus*.

The Greek playwright Sophocles wrote the Oedipus trilogy in the 5th century BC. Scholars believe he wrote *Antigone* first. He should have stopped there.

After hearing a prophecy that he'd kill his father and marry his mother, Oedipus,¹ a young Prince in his 20's, quite understandably fled from his "parents," the King and Queen of Corinth, and traveled by chariot to Thebes, a city-state on the other side of the mountains. On the one lane road leading to Thebes, Oedipus encountered an older fellow, also driving a chariot, coming toward him in the opposite direction. In the first case of testosterone-induced road rage in literature, both demanded that the other get out of the way; both refused; both drew their swords; they fought; Oedipus hacked the older fellow to pieces and arrived at the gates of the city, where he answered a riddle² which 1) had been concocted and asked by a treacherous Sphinx, 2) had perplexed the best minds in Greece, and 3) entitled Oedipus, as the riddle solver, to marry Jocaste, the recently widowed Queen of Thebes whose husband, an older fellow named Laius, had recently been found hacked to pieces on the one lane road leading out of town. Although Oedipus disclosed to Jocaste that he'd recently hacked an older fellow to pieces on the one lane road into town, and although Jocaste disclosed to Oedipus that she and her husband, King Laius, had long ago hired an assassin to kill their

¹ "Oedipus," which translates as "club foot," was appropriate: Oedipus limped, as if with a club foot, from an injury suffered in infancy and inflicted by an unexpectedly tenderhearted assassin

² What first walks on four legs, then two, then three?

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newborn son³ because a blind prophet who lived in a cave with birds had told them that one day this newborn son would kill Laius and marry Jocaste, both concluded that the Oedipus's victim couldn't—just couldn't!—have been Laius⁴; and that Oedipus couldn't—just couldn't—be Jocaste's son. The newlyweds, proving that not just love is blind, got to work, pretty much immediately, having four children: two boys, Polyneices and Eteocles; and two girls, Antigone and Ismeme. They should have waited.

As the play progresses, Oedipus and Jocaste find out what we knew all along and then some: the older fellow found hacked to pieces on the road out of Thebes was Laius; that the assassin, in a moment of unexpected tenderheartedness, hadn't tossed the infant off a cliff but had instead taken him to Corinth, a city state on the other side of the mountains, and gave him to the King and Queen, who raised him as their son; that the infant was, indeed, Oedipus; that Oedipus's sons and daughters were also (ooooooooo, guh-ross!) his brothers and sisters; and that the prophecy had come true: Oedipus had killed his father and married his mother.

These discoveries so troubled Jocaste that she hanged herself and turned blue in the palace.

These discoveries plus Jocaste's suicide/color change so troubled Oedipus that he took a brooch from Jocaste's gown and used its pin to pry out his eyes.

³ The assassin's instructions were to bolt the infant's feet together and to throw him off of a mountain cliff.

⁴ Neither knew that Oedipus was the ADOPTED son of the King and Queen of Corinth.

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These discoveries plus Jocaste's suicide/color change plus Oedipus's self-mutilation had some troubling repercussions.

Oedipus exiled himself from Thebes and wandered from town to town with his daughter/sister Antigone acting as his guide and his other daughter/sister Ismeme acting as his messenger to and from Thebes. When Oedipus finally (and, at least for this reader of *Oedipus at Colonus*, mercifully) died, Antigone returned to Thebes, where she found things had changed.

In Antigone's absence, Creon, Jocaste's brother and Oedipus's uncle/brother-in-law, became the King of Thebes and arranged that Eteocles and Polyneices, Oedipus's sons/brothers, should "co-rule" with him on an alternate year basis: Eteocles would be the "co-King" the first year, Polyneices the second, Eteocles the third, and so on. When year one ended, however, Eteocles refused to yield to his brother, who formed an army which attacked Thebes. During the war, eventually won by Thebes, Eteocles and Polyneices killed each other.

Because Eteocles had defended Thebes, Creon gave him a hero's burial; because Polyneices had attacked Thebes, Creon refused to bury him at all and declared the state would execute anybody who even tried.

Polyneices lay unburied on the ex-battlefield, where vultures, dogs, carrion flies, etc. circled, waiting for him to ripen before beginning to dine, something Antigone couldn't allow, not just because she found the idea of vultures, dogs, carrion flies, etc. eating her brother

