Antigone Background Notes

The Oedipus Cycle

I. King Laius of Thebes goes to the Oracle of Delphi
   A. Any son Jocasta bears will kill him
   B. Laius takes Oedipus & pierces Oedipus’ foot with a spike
   C. Orders a Theban shepherd to abandon Oedipus on Mt. Cithaeron
      1. Disobeys & gives Oedipus to a Corinthian shepherd
      2. Gives Oedipus to King Polybus of Corinth to adopt

II. Oedipus is raised without knowledge of his true background
   A. Taunted at a banquet as a young adult about his past
      1. Goes to the Oracle of Delphi to hear the truth
         a. He will marry his mother & kill his father
         b. Decides never to return to Corinth (thinks Polybus & Merope are his parents)

III. Meets a stranger at a crossroads (Kng Laius) riding in a carriage
   A. carriage driver orders Oedipus out of the road & Oedipus refuses
      1. driver runs over Oedipus’ foot
      2. the rider (Laius) strikes Oedipus with a staff
   B. Oedipus kills the rider & all but one servant (runs away)

IV. Oedipus continues his travels & arrives in Thebes (which is distressed)
   A. Theban king dies en route to the Oracle trying to find the answer to the Sphinx’s terror
      1. Sphinx eats some of the Thebans each day they can’t answer his riddle
      2. Riddle: “What creature walks on four legs in the morning, on two at noon, and on three in the evening, and is weakest when it walks on most?”
B. Creon (the regent) offers the throne to anyone who solves the riddle and ends the terror
   1. Oedipus answers the riddle ("man") & also receives Jocasta to marry

V. Oedipus & Jocasta rule happily for years until a plague strikes
   A. Creon goes to the Oracle of Delphi
      1. asks for the answer to ridding the city of the plague
      2. must drive out the murderer of Laius to end it
   B. Tiresias backs up the Oracle & accuses Oedipus

VI. Meanwhile, King Polybus dies & the Corinthians want Oedipus to rule
   A. Corinth sends a messenger (the Corinthian shepherd from before)
      1. Oedipus does not wish to return (fears the original prophecy)
      2. messenger tells Oedipus the truth about his birth
   B. Oedipus searches out the Theban shepherd to verify this
      1. the Theban shepherd confirms the story
         a. Jocasta hangs herself
         b. Oedipus blinds himself with her brooch
         c. Creon takes over the throne again & banishes Oedipus
         d. Oedipus leaves & the plagues ends

VII. Antigone goes with Oedipus (although supposed to marry Haemon)
   A. Oedipus curses his sons for their lack of loyalty & assistance
   B. Eteocles & Polyneices share the throne yearly until Eteocles refuses to relinquish command
   C. Polyneices seeks help from Adrastus (future father-in-law)
      1. Adrastus brings an army from Argos
      2. attacks the seven gates of Thebes
D. While Adrastus attacks, Polyneices goes to Colonus, a suburb of Athens, to find Oedipus (rumored to be hiding there)
   1. Oracles forecast victory to whoever Oedipus endorses
   2. Oedipus curses Polyneices & sends him away
   3. Oracle later says whoever buries Oedipus’ body in Thebes will win the war
      a. Creon (helping Eteocles) tries to kidnap Oedipus
      b. Theseus helps Oedipus by driving Creon away
      c. Oedipus dies soon & Theseus buries him in Attica, another suburb of Athens
      d. only Theseus knows the location of the grave

VIII. Antigone returns to Thebes
   A. Adrastus (and his army from Argos) and Polyneices continue to attack the seven gates of Thebes
      1. Polyneices & Eteocles meet on the battlefield
      2. Both die in the ensuing fight
   B. Creon buries Eteocles with honors
      1. decrees that Polyneices’ body (and his men) should rot in the sun outside the city
      2. This violates Greek law
         a. body must be properly buried
         b. proper prayers must be spoken
         c. an obulous must be placed with the body for Charon
      3. Without all of these procedures completed, the shade cannot rest (stuck outside the gates of Hades—like limbo)