

Although written before Oedipus the King, Antigone comes later in the legendary story of Oedipus and his descendants. One of its themes is the visitation of retribution on later generations — a 'cursed family' theme similar to the cursed house of Atreus in Aeschylus's Agamemnon. Antigone is strongly concerned with proper religious rituals, especially those due to the bodies of dead warriors — in this it resembles the conclusion of Homer's Iliad, and the struggle between Achilles + Priam for the body of Hector. Prophecy is important in Antigone; Tiresias, who had appeared in the Odyssey and would appear again in Oedipus the King, knows the future, but (like Cassandra in Agamemnon) is ignored. The integrity and safety of a city state under a dictatorship is a key part of Antigone (as in Oedipus the King). As in Agamemnon and Oedipus — but unlike the Homeric poems — the gods are frequently invoked in Antigone, but play no direct role in the actions, and do not appear onstage as characters.

Creon rules in Thebes. The sons of Oedipus + Jocasta — Eteocles + Polynices — have killed each other in civil war. Creon buried Eteocles properly, because he was defending the city, but leaves the body of the attacker Polynices to birds + dogs. As the play opens, Antigone — full sister of the dead brothers — insists on burying Polynices according to ritual. Her sister Ismene won't help her. Creon threatens anyone who buries Polynices with death. Antigone defies him. A messenger brings word that she has buried her brother. Creon condemns Antigone, over the objections of his son Haemon (Antigone's fiancé). Tiresias, the blind prophet, also warns Creon of coming disaster if he maintains his course. Creon insults Tiresias, but finally relents + buries Polynices properly. But it's too late — Antigone is already dead, Haemon commits suicide, and Haemon's mother Eurydice does too. Creon is left alone, friendless + without family, to contemplate the consequences of his impiety.