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Antigone: Was She Real?

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The heavens release a whistling gust that spreads out over the waves. I am at peace. Brother. Salt water baptizes his ashes. I don't feel so alone anymore. Created a confidence in my life to live and love every minute of it.

I visited Kevin's room at home after he got sick. The bed made, the closet organized, the surfing posters cluttered along the walls, and letters scattered across the floor. The smell potent, I gagged as dead smoke stung my eyes, like poison, the cigar scent polluted my body. You could almost see the smell as it burned its way into the walls of his house. Beep . . . Beep . . . Nurses and doctors raced around the bed. I saw in slow motion. I wished it was a nightmare. I told myself, ''Wake up!'' In reality, I began to let go of him. Beep . . . God embraced Kevin, and Kevin's spirit embraced me. In Kevin's hand, I hold a bottle of ashes. The offshore wind blows strongly. I paddle to fight the current, to pay tribute to my riding brother. Salt water baptizes his ashes. I don't feel so alone anymore. The heavens release a whistling gust that spreads out over the waves. I am at peace.

Hughes Antigone: Was She Real?

The story of the martyred Antigone, of her fierce rebellion against her tyrannical uncle and her passionate love for her dead brother, comes at the end of a group of myths known as "the Oedipus cycle." Much of what we know about the history/mythology of ancient Greece comes from a handful of plays — all that's left to us of works by three Greek playwrights, Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides, all three of whom wrote more about Oedipus and his family than any other subject.

Sophocles' version of the story tells us that due to a warning by an oracle that if Oedipus lived he would grow up to kill his father, the king of Thebes, and marry the Queen, his own mother, he was sent away at birth to be left in some desolate area and allowed to die from exposure. The servant sent to perform this task took pity on the baby; and so, without telling anyone, gave him to a humble family who raised him as their own. Grown to adulthood, and unaware of his heritage, Oedipus set off to find his fortune in Thebes, one of the three most important city-states in ancient Greece. At a junction of three roads, he met a chariot driven by an imperious older man who refused to give him the right of way. Words led to blows, and Oedipus killed the unknown traveler. Continuing on his way, he was barred from entering the city by a sphinx who forced all strangers to guess a riddle, devouring those who failed. Having solved the riddle, and thereby freeing the city from the sphinx's oppression, Oedipus was welcomed by Thebes as a hero, and also by the Queen, who had just lost her husband, the king, in an incident on the road. (Can you hear the not too distant rumblings of the foreshadowing of events to come, Dear Reader?) As king, Oedipus had children by the Queen, two boys and two girls (the elder of the girls being Antigone); and ruled wisely and well for many years. The story as told on-stage opens at the moment when some sort of trouble has enveloped the nation. Having heard from the oracle that the suffering will continue until some unknown evil-doer is discovered, Oedipus starts an investigation. When it is revealed that it is Oedipus himself who is the sinner, having unwittingly killed his own father and married own mother, his Queen, Jocasta, hangs herself, and the despairing Oedipus puts out his own eyes. Creon, Jocasta's brother, takes charge, makes himself king, and Oedipus is forced into a homeless exile.

In Antigone, Sophocles presents a later chapter of the story. Before departing into exile, Oedipus left the kingdom to his two sons, to be ruled by them in tandem; one ruling one year and the other the next. (How well would this succeed, do you think, Dear Reader? Oedipus appears to have been a bit of a muffin-head when it came to politics.) At the end of the second year, Eteocles, with the backing of his uncle, Creon, refused to give the throne back to his older brother, Polynieces, who then went off to a neighboring kingdom, rounded up an army, and returned to fight his brother for the throne; thus providing the plot for the Sophocles' Antigone, Aeschyllus.

In attempting to resolve the issue of who would rule by means of single-handed combat, both brothers were killed, whereupon Creon gave Eteocles a magnificent funeral but refused even to bury Polynieces, adding the proviso that anyone who ignored his orders and gave Polynieces a funeral would himself, or herself, be buried alive. Creon appears to have no other reason than sheer cruelty to refuse Polynieces the rites of the dead, while Antigone's rebellion, though morally admirable, may seem on the hysterical side. At any rate, we have the sense that there is more to this story than meets the eye. In fact, many things about the myth of Oedipus are peculiar. For one thing, there's his name. We are told that it means "Swollen-foot;" and that he was called that...
Thebes, were astounded to uncover a tomb filled with riches beyond in Greece. The sphinx, never found anywhere in Greece as an object illne ss, diagnosed by modern doctors as one in which the adipose Pharaoh Akhnaton, ruler of Egypt at the peak of the so-called New rites also points to Egypt, as does the story's location, since the small name to Akhnaton, and who, not long after assuming Several things s ho w that th e Oedipus cycle did not, in fact, originate a riddle here; not the one the sphinx asked Oedipus, but the one we must ask ourselves, for ultimately the biggest question is why this collection of stories looms so large in the Greek pantheon of myths. What is there about this king with the odd name and the cruel Fate that should make him so important to the Greeks?

Several things show that the Oedipus cycle did not, in fact, originate in Greece. The sphinx, never found anywhere in Greece as an object of worship, derives, of course, from Egypt. The importance of burial rites also points to Egypt, as does the story's location, since the small Greek city of Thebes was named for the magnificent capital of Egypt at her zenith as the great empire of the day, when the earliest events in Greek history had not yet taken place. In November 1922, archaeologists digging in the Valley of the Kings in Egypt, not far from Thebes, were astounded to uncover a tomb filled with riches beyond their wildest dreams. King Tutankhamen's tomb remains to this day one of the things that everyone knows about Egypt; the second most well-known Egyptian object is probably the bust of the slender, elegant Queen Nefertete, found earlier in another archeological dig. Both these treasures play a part in this fascinating story.

Queen Nefertete was the mother of Tutankhamen and the wife of the Pharaoh Akhnaton, ruler of Egypt at the peak of the so-called New Kingdom, the period of Egypt's greatest power. Akhnaton was born the son of Amenhotep III, the greatest of Egypt's conquering pharaohs, who had raised Egypt to the heights of empire. With the death of Amenhotep, the empire was ruled by his widow, Queen Tiy, until the return of their son, Amenhotep IV, who soon changed his name to Akhnaton, and who, not long after assuming the throne, moved the capital to a new city which he created on the Nile, halfway between Thebes and Memphis; a city of unimaginable grandeur; excavated in the 1890s. But Akhnaton was peculiar. Not only did he choose to have himself and his family depicted over and over in almost total nudity, but he seems to have suffered from a disfiguring illness, diagnosed by modern doctors as one in which the adipose tissue shifts from the upper part of the body to the lower extremities, giving him an immense belly and thighs, with an extremely spindly neck, chest and arms. Anyone who has seen photographs of the art from this period will have noticed the extremely strange shape of the pharaoh. (Ah, yes, Dear Reader: "Swollen-leg")

In his book Oedipus and Akhnaton, published by Doubleday in 1960, Dr. Immanuel Velikovsky has linked together the history of this Egyptian pharaoh with the ancient Greek myth of Oedipus, leaving little doubt that the two are one, for as his brilliant deduction reveals, all elements of both stories match perfectly. In so doing, he was able to solve as well a mystery presented to scholars by the murals that depict Akhnaton's family, since they seemed to show that after a time, Akhnaton's mother, Queen Tiy, displaced his wife as Queen, and, to their conster­nation, had a child by him as well. Velikovsky has deduced that Akhnaton was raised by his mother's relatives in one of the middle eastern nations that regarded royal incest between mother and son as a matter of course (which if true, might shed some light on the attitude of the old testament prophets towards some of their neighbors). The Egyptians, however, regarded it with horror, so that when Akhnaton lost control of the army, and the Egyptian empire began to crumble, this strangest of all pharaohs was deposed, while he and his heirs thenceforth would be referred to in the records as "the Heretical Kings." Egyptian history and the record of the tombs shows that, after alternating rules, both of Akhnaton's sons died in battle, probably fighting each other in a war brought by the oldest against the younger. At the feet of the oldest son, who was hastily and rudely buried in a humble tomb, in a sarcophagus meant for someone else, archeologists discovered a beautiful but unsigned poem of farewell, "Call thou upon my name and I will never fail," while the younger son, Tutankhamen, was buried in the most magnificent tomb ever found in the valley of the Kings.

Thus, the tragic fall of the great Pharaoh Akhnaton and his royal family, which would have reverberated throughout all the nations that lined the Mediterranean, became part of the history, and then the mythology of ancient Greece, where it evolved into a tragedy with a shape and a meaning that was more to their taste. But what about Antigone? We know from the records that according to standard practice among Egyptian royalty, both of Akhnaton's and Nefertete's sons married their sisters. This helps to explain Antigone's passionate defiance of Creon, for she was not only Polynieces' sister, she was his wife, with a duty to her dead husband. Not far from both the humble tomb of the oldest son and the splendid tomb of Tutankhamen, archeologists discovered another tomb; this one very small, only seven feet square by six feet deep, carved into the rock. It contained no sarcophagus; nothing, in fact, but a pile of empty dishes and small oil lamps, and a some roots and berries. The entire plot hinges on the fact that nobody, not even the king himself, knew about his early history. So at what point does he acquire this very unusual name of "Swollen-foot" or "Swollen-leg"? The concern shown by Antigone over her brother's burial rites is also highly unusual, for nowhere else in Greek mythology is there any indication that such punctilious attention to burial rites will affect one's fate after death. There is also the figure of the sphinx, which appears nowhere else in Greek mythology; particularly one so unbalanced as to commit suicide over a riddle. Indeed, there is a riddle here; not the one the sphinx asked Oedipus, but the one we must ask ourselves, for ultimately the biggest question is why this collection of stories looms so large in the Greek pantheon of myths.