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Antigone Re-Crystallized:
Ancient Myth in Modern Times

Books have been the traditional medium for studying history or enjoying historical fiction, and movies have begun to take on that role as well; however, there is another up-and-coming medium that may yet prove itself to be invaluable in recounting ancient tales: that of the comic book. I chose to study this medium in order to adapt the ancient Greek play *Antigone* for my capstone project, and propose that it may be the ideal medium for the translation of myths, particularly those written out by the ancient Greek playwrights.

I shall start with a look at mythology; of particular interest is how a given story shifts to survive in different cultures and through different times. This is discussed by the scholar Walter Burkert through his term "crystallization," which can be summarized thus: a story – whether myth, folktale, or fairy tale - can keep its basic structure, but each culture will apply its own views and values to the tale and adjust its telling accordingly (Burkert 27). One example is the story of Cinderella, which has recognizable equivalents in the Arabian Nights, in Chinese and Native American lore, and even a Greco-Egyptian tale recorded as far back as the first century BC by the historian Strabo. Each of these is a rags-to-riches story of a girl who overcomes animosity from her peers (often her sisters), falls in love with someone above her status, and ultimately marries him (often with the help of an object or magical helper). The Disney movie we are familiar with is partially based on the German and French tales, adjusted for our modern sensibilities; for example, Disney Cinderella's evil stepsisters did not cut off their heels or toes to fit into the slipper, nor were their eyes pecked out by vengeful birds in the end. While the Grimm brothers

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loved such gruesome injuries and death, you would be hard-pressed to find modern children's movies with even a drop of blood. These are tales being re-crystallized for a modern, American audience.

Now, when we walk into a theater to see "Troy" or "300", we do not expect the movies to be perfect adaptations of the original stories nor to be precisely accurate to historical fact – we expect an entertaining story that lasts no more than a few hours. We would watch documentaries or read a book for the original, full-length story. Yet literary translations have their own shortcomings; it has been my experience that they fall somewhere on a scale between accuracy to the original language or beauty of the translation; and recent translations often focus on accuracy. I have wondered if this is the reason why modern readers often assume Classical literature and its adaptations are dry and uninteresting, which then raises the question: why can we not have translations or adaptations that are both accurate and appealing to modern audiences?

I believe that I have found my answer in the form of the graphic novel. Comics share with movies the distinction of being one of the most modern storytelling media, sharing rapid innovations and captive audiences. Yet the graphic novel has the advantages of budget and time over the latter; comics can be created by a very small team, or even by a single determined individual, with only paper and pen if necessary, and special effects do little harm to the budget. Thus, its crystallizations can happen quickly. A movie, on the other hand, can require hundreds of participants and millions of dollars to produce – and that price climbs as it gets more fantastic. Also, while a movie is limited to three hours at the most, usually about two, and thus requires a great deal of manipulation in order to make a story fit into the allotted time, a comic has the advantage

of being any length that the author desires in order to complete the story, from Eric

Shanower's seven-volume Age of Bronze series, to my miniscule 23-page project.

Despite being considered a "low" form of art, comics have proven themselves to

be quite appealing to a modern audience from a broad range of ages and locations.

However, as discussed by Scott McCloud, C. W. Marshall, and George Kovacs, amongst

others, comics' roots go back thousands of years. McCloud defines comics as "juxtaposed

pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or

to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer;" by this definition, he traces the history of

comics back through the Bayeux tapestry to ancient Egyptian wall paintings and Mayan

manuscripts (McCloud 9-15). Marshall and Kovacs in their book "Classics and Comics"

discuss how ancient mythology and the study of the Classics both directly and indirectly

influence a good number of modern stories. Take the comic *300*; directly influenced by

the Classics in that it tells a historical tale of the Spartans, though amazingly fantasized; it

is also indirectly influenced in the fact that its heroes are portrayed fighting practically

naked, which, while historically inaccurate, is a reference to "heroic nudity" in Greek art.

It quickly became apparent that comics match up well with ancient Greek plays –

besides the obvious fact that both are scripted, a comic can explore the visual aspects of

plays that are rarely performed in our modern world, and thus have lost their visual

appeal and dramatic impact. One must consider the fact that when a play was written in

ancient Greece, it was meant to be performed once and once only. They were religious

practices, and the gods demanded *new* things, which drove playwrights to create ever

more innovative stories at tremendous expense to the city. The audience would have no

warning of what was to come, even with familiar mythology, as there were so many

possible variations to the myth, and the playwright could choose to follow any of them, or even create an entirely new story altogether. Action, visual appeal, and dramatic impact was immediate and cutting edge.

Modern comics culture is very similar. The very nature of comics lends the same immediacy to storytelling; visually depicted action along with spoken words holds the reader in the present tense; melodramatic scenes mimic the theatre; and there is a constant drive for the author to come up with something new, original, sinnovative, cutting-edge; even if that means re-writing previously established facts and story lines.

When considering an adaptation of a story, one must also consider translation, though not particularly of the language itself, but of the culture – reception theory indicates that each audience will interpret a text based on their own culture and experiences, so an audience which is very different from the one the author intended, such as a modern American audience versus the original ancient Greek, may very well miss the intended meaning. The play *Antigone* is now often considered a Romeo and Juliet story, due to the double-suicide acted out in the finale by the lovers Antigone and Haemon, but it is so much more than that – there are deeply imbedded themes of obligations to the gods and loyalty to family and city that were plain as day to an ancient Greek audience, but are not so readily apparent to a modern reader who has not studied their culture. Thus, my primary goal in my own project was to bring a better understanding of these themes to the casual reader, which indicated a greater need for adaptation than for translation.

The main method of my adaptation was to change the setting – specifically, turning it into a Prohibition-era mafia story. One of my greatest motivations for this

choice was the story before the opening of the play, when Antigone's two brothers,

Eteocles and Polynices, conduct a civil war against each other, and not only end up

killing each other on the battlefield, but cause a great deal of chaos and death within the

city that they were fighting over. When all is said and done, their successor, Creon,

blames Polynices for the war and orders that he not be honored with a burial, and that

anyone caught doing so will be put to death. This is a rather difficult concept to bring into

the modern world, unless, for example, we were to set it in some small country plagued

with tyranny, but then the mafia story offered a more engaging solution – bloodbaths that

spill out onto the streets are certainly not unheard of, no one is allowed to harm the

capitol-f Family – those who dare to are severely punished - and the leader has every

right and power to "off" anyone who goes against his word.

Now, Antigone introduces the plot of the play by announcing that she *will* bury

Polynices, despite Creon's order – she feels that it is her obligation to her brother and to

the gods to ensure that the proper rituals are performed, or Polynices' spirit will not be

allowed to pass into the underworld and thus a curse will be laid upon her family and the

city. With the rest of her family dead, Antigone was the only one who could or would

perform the rites, and she felt that she had no one else left to live for. Thus, she was more

than willing to sacrifice her life for this purpose. This was a cultural concept that was

very difficult to get across. The modern world puts little faith in curses, and after death

we find the spirit more important than the abandoned physical body. In this instance, I

rely heavily upon scripting rather than visual art to get the point across, particularly by

leaving in many of Antigone's references to her obligations, rather than cutting them out

for a lack of space, and thus indicating their importance to her.

Of particular interest, however, is the character of Haemon – the Romeo to Antigone's Juliet, though perhaps not as much as one might think. Haemon is Antigone's fiance, but also the son of Creon, which creates a rather large conflict of interest when Antigone is set for execution. In one of the pivotal scenes in the play, Haemon approaches Creon in an attempt to make him reconsider his decision, and the conversation quickly becomes heated before Haemon leaves. Modern reception of this scene is often darkly colored by our cultural perspective; Haemon is criticized for deferring to his father and not fighting harder for Antigone's sake, but such criticisms do not take into account the social pressures that would make such a fight very difficult and thus very unlikely. On the one hand, women were a lower class of citizen – men were hardly thought to be able to love such vain and stupid creatures; on the other hand, one must *always* respect one's parents above anyone or anything else; so for Haemon to argue with his father for the sake of his lover was unspeakable. Helene Foley, in her article "Antigone as a Moral Agent", portrays Haemon as a mediator between Creon and Antigone's widely contrasted moral stances; he "aim[s] to make her seemingly antisocial female rebellion an intelligible stance that citizens can consider appropriate and even praise," but Foley goes on to add that, typical of Theban tragedy, the play is not optimistic about the possibility of understanding (Foley 195). In the audience's eyes, Haemon *was* fighting for Antigone, and it was incredibly inappropriate. His deference to his father was, honestly, his only choice, and he pushes it to the very limits for Antigone, but that is difficult for us to see.

With that, we may be able to see his suicide at the end of the play in a different light. Let us consider the scene: Haemon has just disturbed one of the most strictly held

cultural mores, shouted at his father, and then ran off to find his lover. He arrives to find her hanging by her own veil – his horrible deeds all for naught - and is so grief-stricken that his wailing attracts his father's attention. When Creon arrives at the scene, concerned for his son despite their earlier argument, Haemon flies into a rage, spits in Creon's face, draws his sword, and attacks – and then realizes what he's done. Though he missed and Creon is shaken but unharmed, Haemon attempted to *kill* his own father, and for a *woman* no less! Overcome by grief, fury, and shame, he falls upon his own sword and dies, still clutching her body.

Haemon's love for Antigone was significant in his final action, but it was certainly not the only factor at play. I personally would hesitate to place this directly alongside Romeo and Juliet, and so my adaptation is not really a love story, as the play *Antigone* was not entirely a love story, either; I strive to clarify the many motives behind Haemon's actions.

If we want the ancient myths to survive – and of course I believe that they have more than enough entertainment value to do so – we need to re-crystallize them into a form more accessible for modern audiences. Despite the stigmas against comics as an art form, they allow an author the freedom to adapt the language, clarify cultural differences, and bring back the immediacy and visual impact that were once so crucial in Greek theatre. Thus, comics and graphic novels are a perfect vehicle for recreating ancient myth, and particularly Greek plays.

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