

THE THEBAN LEGENDS

CADMUS

He was a prince of TYRE. Jupiter fell in love with his sister EUROPA, having first changed himself into a bull, then carrying her off to Crete. Her father, AGENOR, ordered Cadmus to look for EUROPA with punishment of exile if he failed to find her.

Naturally Cadmus could not track her down and so he became an exile. Finally he visited the oracle of Phoebus and asked whether there was any land where he could settle down. This was the reply:

"In a desert place you will meet a cow, one which has never been yoked or drawn a plough. Follow her as she goes and in the place where she first lies down on the grass, there you must found your city, and you must call the place BOEOTIA, or COWLAND."

No sooner had he left the oracle than he saw such a cow. He followed it and when it finally sank down on the grass he gave thanks to the gods and kissed the earth.

Next he had to make a sacrifice to Jupiter for which he needed spring water for the libations. Cadmus sent his men to a forest where they found a cave overgrown with bushes. Out of it flowed a spring of living water. However, hidden inside the cave was a serpent sacred to MARS. Its eyes sparkled with fire, its body was swollen with poison, three tongues flickered from between 3 rows of teeth.

As soon as the men dropped their buckets into the water the serpent reared up and killed them, some with its coils, others with its fangs or foul breath.

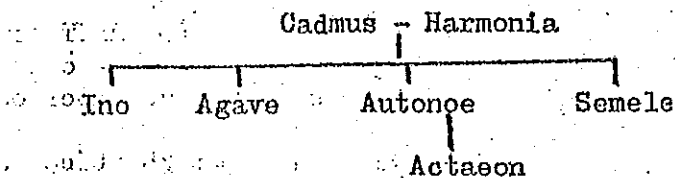
When his men did not return, Cadmus went in search. Faced with serpent, he threw a huge stone with sufficient force to knock down a city wall. The serpent however was protected by its scales and suffered no injury. Cadmus then threw his javelin, success! It passed through the serpent's scaly back and lodged in its backbone. Now the beast writhed and arched in agony, proving more dangerous still to Cadmus who hid behind his shield and fended off the jaws of the serpent with his spear. Finally, Cadmus thrust his spear through the beast's throat and pinned it to a tree.

He had little time to enjoy his victory. A voice suddenly and mysteriously boomed out, "Son of Agenor, why are you looking at this dead serpent? A time will come when you will be turned into a serpent and people will be looking at you."

Cadmus froze with fear but then Pallas, his patron goddess suddenly appeared. She instructed him to plough the land and sow the dragon's teeth in it; from it would spring men started to rise up from the furrows, a whole crop of warriors with their shields. Cadmus thought he had a new enemy to fight - but one of the men fought each other. Soon there were only 5 left. One of them ECHION threw down his weapons and proposed peace. The rest agreed and it was with their help that Cadmus now built his city, called THEBES.

ACTAEON

After the foundation of Thebes, Cadmus was given the daughter of Venus and Mars, Harmonia, to be his wife. He had four daughters



Cadmus' happiness at his grandson's birth was short-lived. Actaeon was to die, not because he did anything wrong, but because he made a mistake.

Actaeon had been hunting - the mountain-side was stained with blood from the hunt. The sun was high in the sky and so Actaeon, with gentle words, called to his hunting companions and said

"We have done well today, now it is time to rest."

There was a valley in the forest where they had been hunting. It was called Gargaphie and was sacred to the huntress goddess Diana. At one end was a natural cave, with a spring, and a pool of water. Here Diana, when tired from hunting was accustomed to bathe.

This day, too, Diana came to the pool, and assisted by Nymphs, took off her armour and weapons and prepared to bathe. Just then, Actaeon happened to wander through the grove when the nymphs saw him they filled the air with their startled cries. They tried to shield Diana - but she stood out above them, naked, blushing she looked for her arrows but they were out of reach, so she picked up some water and poured the avenging stream over his hair. Then she said, foretelling the fate that would befall him.

"Now, tell, if you can, how you have seen me naked." As she spoke, she made stag's horns grow out of his head, lengthened his neck, pointed his ears, turned his hands into hooves, arms became long legs - his body became spotted with rough hide. She made him frightened too.

He ran away, astonished at his own speed.

Seeing himself in a pool he tried to say how unhappy he was but he could only groan. Tears fell down his face.

As he stood, wondering what to do, he was spotted by his own hounds. The whole pack, eager for the chase came running after him. He found himself being hunted by his hounds, trying but unable to tell them who he was.

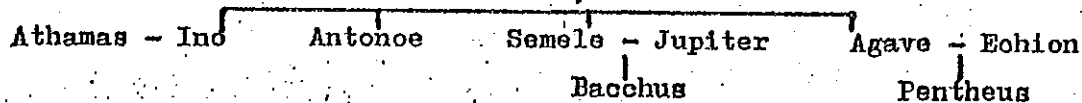
Finally, one of them sunk its teeth into his back, followed by the others, dragging him to the ground and sinking their fangs into him. Soon all his body was covered in wounds - his cries, not human nor quite like that of a stag, filled the air. He sank down to his knees as if begging a favour but his friends, kept egging on the hounds and calling out for the absent Actaeon. The stag turned its head on hearing the name but the friends just assumed Actaeon was too lazy to be there.

The anger of Diana was only appeased when Actaeon's life was over.

The End of Cadmus

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Cadmus -- Harmonia



Juno hated the whole family of Cadmus because of Jupiter's affairs: first with Europa (sister of Cadmus), then with Semele (Cadmus' daughter). She was determined to get revenge and so decided that she would turn her hatred upon Cadmus' daughter Ino who had helped to bring up Bacchus after his mother's death. Since Bacchus had already shown how powerful madness can be (remember that Pentheus had been killed through an act of madness) she thought it appropriate for Ino to be driven mad.

Juno visited the underworld and called upon the Avenging Furies to drive Athamas mad. Without question, one of them, the terrible Tisiphone cloaked herself in bloodstained clothes, wrapped herself in poisonous snakes and came to the house of Athamas. She threw 2 of the snakes at Athamas and his wife Ino. The snakes injected the poison of madness into their veins then retreated with Tisiphone back into the underworld. In his madness Athamas hunted his wife and children as if they were lioness and cubs. One of his sons he dashed to the ground. The other toppled over a cliff, still in the arms of his frenzied mother. Venus, however, took pity on them and persuaded Neptune to turn them into sea-gods.

Cadmus was not to know this. Filled with grief he left his city, as if to escape the curse. He tried to understand why such terrible things were happening to his family.

"I wonder whether the serpent, which I killed with my spear and whose teeth bore a crop of men, was a sacred serpent. If it is perhaps the death of this serpent that ^{the} gods have been avenging on my family, then I pray that I may turn into a serpent myself and have a long snaky body stretched out on the ground."

As he was speaking, this is exactly what began to happen. His wife, trying to embrace him looked on in horror and pleaded that she also might turn into a snake. Her wish was granted and together they glided off into a nearby wood. To this day they are not frightened of men, and do not hurt them. They remember what they once were, and are mild gentle snakes.

Questions

1. Produce a large-scale family tree of the house of Cadmus, illustrating as much of it as you can.
2. The story of Cadmus and his family and descendants shows how ordinary humans can fall foul of the gods, and how such hostility can pass from generation to generation. Now make up a mythological family of your own and, in a series of short stories describe the fortunes and fate of its members. Start with a family tree -- like the one you have already made for Cadmus. Remember to include divine interventions, prophecies and fabulous creatures.

Pentheus was son of Echion (who had helped Cadmus build Thebes) and Agave, daughter of Cadmus and Harmonia.

Pentheus met his death by offending the new god Bacchus (son of Jupiter and Semele, Pentheus' aunt).

Bacchus (Dionysus)

He was the god of wine, hated by Juno for obvious reasons. He was worshipped first in the east, but brought by his revellers to the west. He appealed mainly to women who danced and sang in adoration. He was a god of fertility and incredible power. The Thebans refused to worship him and so were driven to legendary madness and power.

There was a famous blind Prophet in Thebes, Tiresias, honoured by most but Pentheus scoffed at holy things and laughed at his prophecies. Tiresias had a prophecy for Pentheus:

"The day is at hand when the new god Bacchus will arrive in this land and when he does you must honour him and build temples to him. Otherwise you will be torn into 1000 pieces; your blood will stain the forests and the hands of your mother and her sisters."

Pentheus ignored the warning and threw the prophet out of his house.

Bacchus did arrive as predicted. All joined in and revelled in the new religion, singing and dancing behaving like madness, believing that they were possessed of the god. Only Pentheus was angry:

"Children of the serpent's teeth! What is this madness? How can a small unarmed boy with garlands and perfumed hair defeat you. Do not fear the clashing of cymbals and vulgar drunken crowds. Fetch me the boy at once and I shall deal with this imposter."

Cadmus advised Pentheus to be more wise but he just became more stubborn.

Soon the slaves returned, covered in blood, dragging a young man with his hands tied. It was not Bacchus himself, but one of his priests. Pentheus, blazing with anger was ready to put the man to death at once, as an example to the rest - but he allowed him first to speak about himself and explain how he came to be mixed up in the new religion.

His name was Acoetes from Maeonia of poor parents, a simple fisherman who had taught himself the ways of the sea. Once he had stopped on the island of Chios and his men had found a young man drowsy with wine, who by his looks and manner was obviously a god. Acoetes wanted to show Bacchus (for that was the boy's name) respect, but the men mutinied and instead of taking him to Naxos where he lived, wanted to take him elsewhere to be sold as a slave. And they would have done if something incredible had not happened: The ship stuck in the water, ivy grew up the oars and mast, the men, in terror jumped overboard and turned into fish. Only Acoetes survived and naturally became a follower of Bacchus.

Pentheus was not impressed by the story and sent the man to the torture chamber. But before anything could be done to him, the doors were flung open and the chains fell from him, and he was gone.

Pentheus remained obstinate: he went himself to Mount Cithaeron which was the special meeting place of the revellers and watched the sacred mysteries with unclean eyes.

Agave, his mother saw him. She was driven mad and was the first to hurl her wand of ivy. Thinking he was a huge wild boar she urged on the rest of the women to pursue him. Now, at last he was ready to admit his guilt and condemn himself - but it

too late. As Pentheus stretched out his arms in supplication Agave seized it and tore it off. Ino tore off the other arm. Agave tore off his head. His whole body was torn to pieces by terrible and ignorant hands.

Agave carried the head back to Cadmus in triumph. Only gradually did he make her realise her error.

With such a fate to warn them, the Thebans adopted the new religion, burned incense and sacrificed before the altars of Bacchus.

1. Who was Pentheus?
2. Write a short description of the god Bacchus.
3. Who was Tiresias?
4. Summarise the content of Tiresias' prophecy.
5. Why does Pentheus refer to his people as "children of the serpent's teeth"?
6. Summarise Acoetes' story, explaining why he had become a follower of Bacchus.
7. Write a short character study of Pentheus.

Laius, a descendant of Cadmus became the King of Thebes. He had been warned by an oracle that, if he had a son, this son was fated to kill his own father. Naturally when his wife, Jocasta, bore him a son, they decided the baby would have to be killed. Soon after the baby was born, a spike was thrust through his feet and he was given to a shepherd to take out and leave on the mountainside to be eaten by the wild beasts.

However the shepherd did not have the heart to leave the child to die and so he took it to Corinth where it was adopted by King Polybus and his wife Merope who were childless. They gave him the name of Oedipus, or "Swollen feet", because of the spikes with which they had been pierced.

So in Corinth, Oedipus grew to manhood, believing himself to be the son of Polybus and Merope. One day, however a drunken man mocked him for not being the true son of his parents. Oedipus, despite Merope's reassurance was very anxious about this and decided to consult the advice of Apollo's Oracle at Delphi. What he heard froze him with terror:

"Unhappy man," said the oracle, "keep far away from your father! If you meet him, you will kill him. Then you will marry your mother, and have children who will be fated to Crime and misfortune."

Oedipus resolved never to return to Corinth where he might harm his "mother" and "father". Instead he walked into the mountains. At a crossroads he was overtaken by an old man in a chariot with servants running alongside. Oedipus was pushed aside and mocked. This was treatment he could not tolerate and immediately struck first one then the others in the party. All were killed except one who managed to limp back to Thebes with the news that King Laius had been killed.

Oedipus with no idea that he had killed his own father went on his way towards Thebes. From the country people he learned not only that King Laius had been killed but also that the land was terrorized by the Sphynx, a monster with lion's body and the head of a woman. To every one it met the Sphynx posed a riddle. If you failed to answer it the Sphynx took your life. With the knowledge that the man who freed the country of this monster should have Queen Jocasta for his wife and himself become King of Thebes, Oedipus decided to have a go.

"What is it that in the morning walks on four legs, in the midday walks on two, and in the evening on three?" asked the Sphynx.

"It is Man," replied Oedipus. "In the morning of his childhood he crawls on hands and knees; in the midday of his youth he walks on his two legs; in the evening of his old age he needs a stick to support himself, and so he goes on three legs."

The riddle was solved and the Sphynx threw herself from the rock and died. Oedipus married Jocasta, not knowing that she was his mother. He ruled Thebes wisely for many years and his wife bore him four children; the twins Eteocles and Polynices, and two daughters Ismene and Antigone. But the prosperity of Thebes did not last. A plague fell upon the land; people and crops began to die, the air was filled with ravens and vultures. The people turned to Oedipus to deliver them from this evil, just as he had done before with the Sphynx. Oedipus sent Creon, the brother of Jocasta to Delphi to ask the gods how Thebes could be rid of the plague. The answer given by the gods was that the plague had been sent because of the murder of Laius and because the murderer had not yet made atonement for the bloodshed.

Oedipus, at once set up a murder inquiry, not realising that it was he who had committed it. Eventually he found out the truth from the old blind prophet Tiresias who would rather not have told Oedipus what he knew - but Oedipus insisted. Oedipus was horrified at the thought that he had killed his own father so he questioned Jocasta about her former husband. She tries to persuade him not to listen to Tiresias' words.

"Even Apollo's oracle," she said, "sometimes tells lies. For example Laius was told that he would be killed by his own son, but the only son we ever had was

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killed and eaten by wild beasts on the mountain side."

Oedipus followed up this story by interrogating the old shepherd. But he admitted that he had not killed the child but had taken it to Corinth instead. Jocasta realised the truth - the oracle had indeed been fulfilled about their son. Here he was, with the marks of iron still on his feet. In despair she went off and hanged herself.

Oedipus, too, slowly realised the full horror of what he had done. Shaken out of a stupor by Jocasta's death-cry he went and found her hanging by her buckled girdle. He took the pins from the buckle and with them pierced his eyes. Blinded in this way he went into exile, guided by Antigone and Ismene. At last he found peace in a little town called COLONUS, near Athens. The famous Theseus ruled Athens and he gave Oedipus sanctuary because an oracle had said that the place where Oedipus died would be famous and prosperous.

So Oedipus died at last, revered by the people of Colonus and Athens as a hero, and at last, loved by the Gods.

Questions

1. Tell the story very briefly in your own words.
2. Write a character study of Oedipus, suggesting reasons why Oedipus should be regarded as a hero at the end.
3. Make a list of all the oracles or prophecies which occur in this story and discuss how they affect the course of the story.

When the blind Oedipus left Thebes the kingdom was divided between his two twin sons, Eteocles and Polynices. It was arranged that each brother should rule for a year, and, since Eteocles had been born first, he held the kingship for the first year. It soon became clear that the hatred and jealousy between the brothers would lead to trouble for the city. Before the end of his first year of rule Eteocles drove Polynices from Thebes, making himself sole ruler.

Polynices, determined on his revenge, went to the court of Adrastus, King of Argos. Adrastus welcomed him, gave him his daughter in marriage and supported his claim to the throne of Thebes. He then planned an expedition against Thebes. There were seven captains of the army -- of which Adrastus and Polynices himself were two. Another captain was Amphiaraus, not only a famous warrior but also a prophet. He discovered that only one of the seven would return alive from Thebes and so he went into hiding. Eventually his wife was bribed into revealing his hiding place and Amphiaraus was persuaded to go to the war. However, annoyed with his wife he made his son Alcmaeon swear that if he did not return he would avenge his father's death by killing his mother.

The great army reached Thebes. Eteocles awaited the attack inside the walls. Before the battle started, he consulted Tiresias who prophesied: "Great indeed is the army that is coming against you. There will be death upon death. As for Thebes herself, she can only be saved by the sacrifice of the youngest child of Cadmus' blood." Creon, brother of Jocasta and uncle of Eteocles heard the prophesy with horror for his own son, Menoeceus, was the youngest descendant of Cadmus. He wanted to smuggle the boy to safety but the young boy himself had heard the prophesy and chose to hurl himself over the city-walls, as his contribution to the war effort!

The battle began. Death was heaped upon death. Blood lay thick on the ground. Champions fell on both sides. So great was the slaughter that Eteocles sent a message to the invading army proposing that the war should be settled by single combat between himself and Polynices. And so it was agreed. But so even was the contest that none could say which of the two would win. Swords carved the flesh from arms and shoulders; blood streamed to the ground, and still the brothers fought grimly, neither giving way. Even when loss of blood made their blows weaker, their anger was as strong as ever, and in the end each sank to the ground in death, each having won the victory and each having been defeated.

The twin death, instead of bringing an end to the war only signalled a fresh start to the hostilities. Six of the seven generals of Argos were indeed slain, only Adrastus survived to return home. Thebes remained unconquered -- but at what a price! Creon, uncle of the two sons of Oedipus, became King. He wanted to bring back peace and restore the strength of his city with good government, yet his first act was to bring more trouble to the family of Oedipus and to himself.

Questions

1. Do you think the arrangement made between Eteocles and Polynices to rule Thebes was a good one? Why did it go wrong?
2. Was Polynices right to seek help from a foreign King to attack Thebes or would you consider him to be a traitor?
3. Which of the two sides do you consider to be fighting with Right on their side?
4. Can you think of a modern parallel of this story in which 7 men seek to put right an injustice?
5. What reward was promised to the "seven against Thebes" if they were successful. What reward could they expect?
6. Pick out the true heroes in this story. Who are the cowards or villains? Give reasons for your choices.

Antigone

Creon became King of Thebes at a time when the city had lost half its army in the civil war. The war was over. Eteocles, the king, was dead; dead also was his brother, Polynices, who had come with the army of the Argives to fight for his own right to the kingdom.

Creon, as the new king, decided first of all to show his people how unforgivable it was to make war upon one's own country. To Eteocles, who had reigned in Thebes, he gave a splendid burial; but he ordered that, upon pain of death, no one was to prepare for funeral or even sprinkle earth upon the body of Polynices. It was to lie as it had fallen on the plain for birds and beasts to devour. To make certain that his orders were carried out Creon set a patrol of men to watch the body night and day.

Antigone and Ismene, sisters of Polynices, heard the King's orders with alarm and shame. They had loved both their brothers, and hated the thought that one of them should lie unburied, unable to join the world of the ghosts, mutilated and torn by the teeth of dogs and jackals and by the beaks and talons of birds. Ismene, despite her feelings, did not dare oppose the king, but Antigone stole out of the city by night and, after searching among the piled up bodies of those who had fallen in the great battle, found the body of her brother. She lightly covered it with dust, and said for it the prayers that ought to be said for the dead.

Next day it was reported to Creon that someone had disobeyed the king's orders and scattered earth over the body of Polynices. Creon swore an oath that if the guilty person should be found, he or she should die for it. He threatened the guards also with death if they failed to find the criminal, and told them to uncover the body again.

That same day Antigone again stole out of the city to complete her work of burying her brother. This time, however, the guards kept better watch. They seized her and brought her before King Creon. Creon's only concern was that his orders had been disobeyed:

"Did you know," he asked Antigone, "the law that I made and the penalty I laid down for those who broke the law?"

"I knew it," Antigone replied, "but there are other laws, made not by men but by the gods. There is a law of pity and of mercy. That law is to be obeyed first. I have obeyed that, I will, if I may, obey the laws that are made by men."

"If you love your brother," said Creon, "more than the laws of the country and your king, then you must bear the penalty, loving your brother in the world of the dead".

"You may kill me with your laws," Antigone replied, "but to me death is less of an evil than would be treachery to my brother or cowardice when the time came to help him."

Creon only became more angry at her confidence. Now her sister Ismene, who had been too frightened at first to back up Antigone, came forward and asked to be allowed to share Antigone's punishment; but Antigone would not allow it. Nor would Creon listen to any appeal for mercy. Not wishing to have the blood of his niece upon his own hands he gave orders that she be put into an underground chamber, walled up and left to die.

So she was taken away to a slow, lingering death.

She had been about to marry Haemon, the King's son but now was entering the house of death, to be the bride of Hades.

Haemon himself begged the king to be merciful, pointing out that neither he nor the rest of the people of Thebes approved of so savage a sentence. Antigone had broken the law, he agreed but she had also acted as a sister should.

The king, however, only became more angry, disgusted that his son should speak against him in this way.

Next came Tiresias to warn Creon that the gods were angry with him both for his merciless punishment of Antigone and for leaving the body of Polynices to be desecrated. Creon should have remembered how often the prophet's words had come true, instead he merely insulted him, accusing him of taking bribes from Haeman to try and save the life of a criminal.

Tiresias replied "This very day before the sun sets you will pay twice, yes with two dead bodies, for the sin which you could easily have avoided. As for me, I shall keep far away from one who, in his own pride, rejects the gods and is sure to suffer."

Creon now, for the first time, began to have second thoughts. What if he were wrong, too harsh, too hard? He consented, at last, to do as he had been advised. He gave orders for the burial of Polynices and went himself to release Antigone from her prison. Joyfully Haeman went ahead to break down the wall - but only to find that Antigone had made a noose and had hanged herself. Haeman could not bear to outlive her. He drew his sword and plunged it into his heart before the eyes of his father.

As for Creon, he had scarcely time to lament for his son when news reached him of another disaster. His wife had heard of Haemon's death and she too had taken her own life. So the words of Tiresias were fulfilled.

Questions

1. Was Creon right to show his people that it is "unforgivable to make war upon one's own country"?
2. Can you suggest another way he could have done it without creating further problems for himself and Thebes?
3. Write a short essay of about one side with the title "Antigone -- criminal or Saint?"
4. Examine carefully how Creon ^{acts} ~~says~~ and behaves in this story and write a short character study of him.