

God and Dionysus: Oedipus' Invincible Destiny

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Abstract

In this paper, the origination of Oracle for the former king of the city-state of Thebe and how Oedipus becomes the “scapegoat” is introduced first; then the Dionysian spirit in Oedipus the King is discussed. Oedipus the King is a classic drama written by Sophocles, an ancient Greek writer. Oedipus was cursed by God for the sins committed by his father. He fought against fate without hesitation, but finally he failed to violate the oracle and had to go on the path of self-exile. This paper will focus on the interpretation and analysis of the Oracle, destiny and Dionysian spirit, and explore why the hero Oedipus fell.

Keywords

Oedipus the King, Oracle, Destiny, Dionysian Spirit

1. Introduction

Oedipus the King is an excellent ancient Greek drama. In the form of art, the play reflects people's thoughts on philosophy and life at that time. At the same time, some Dionysian essence of Oedipus itself is worth exploring, especially in the face of a choice between sensibility and rationality. The early Dionysian spirit refers to the tragic intoxication that is integrated with the life noumenon of the universe from personal pain and destruction. Although Oedipus could not escape the snare of fate and was destroyed, his unyielding will to fight against fate is still the most valuable. The tragedy of King Oedipus is no longer a personal tragedy, but a tragedy belonging to all mankind. His experience also is meaningful for our modern society. Therefore, this paper analyzes and discusses the tragedy and Dionysian spirit in King Oedipus.

2. Innocent “Scapegoat”: The Fate of Being Tricked by the Oracle

2.1. Past of Thebe

At the beginning of the script, a picture of hell on earth was described as: the wheatears wither, the cattle die of plague, women miscarry... Famine and plague are invading the whole city-state. The citizens of the city-state kneel under the guidance of the priest to pray for God’s help outside the palace of Oedipus the King. The messenger brought back the instructions of God and unveiled a forgotten past of the city-state of Thebe happened several years ago.

Laius, the former king of the city-state, did not control his desire and committed a sin, which was cursed by God. The Oracle forbade him to reproduce children. If he violated it, his son would be doomed to kill his father and marry his mother. Raios (the queen) was so afraid of the Oracle that she ordered his loyal servants to throw the newborn baby into the wilderness to be executed. The servant did not kill him by taking pity on the young baby, but handed him over to the shepherd of Corinth. The king of Corinth had no children for many years, and so the shepherd gave the young baby to the king. From then on, the child brutally abandoned by Thebes became the adopted son of the king of Corinth, Oedipus.

At a banquet, the minister’s gaffe broke his dream. Oedipus was deeply perplexed by the bad name of “impostor son”. So he went to Delphi temple to pray for the Oracle without telling his adoptive parents. God did not answer his question, but told him the prophecy many years ago, which made Oedipus panic. In order to avoid the Oracle, he ran away from Corinth and vowed never to return.

Under the invisible guidance of fate, he came to the vicinity of the city-state of Thebe and met an old man on the path. He clashed with the old man and killed him by mistake due to his youth. He did not know that the dead old man was his biological father, Raios, the king of Thebes. Oedipus went on and was stopped by the Sphinx. Sphinx was keen on solving riddles. All passers-by in Thebes must solve the riddles she asked, or they would die without a place to bury. The appearance of the Sphinx caused panic in the city of Thebe. However, Oedipus easily solved the riddle of Sphinx, saved the whole city-state from fire and water, and was regarded as a hero by the citizens of the city-state. He inherited the throne and married the widow of the former king. They have four children. Oedipus secretly rejoiced that he had escaped the will of God, but he did not know that the prophecy of “Killing Father and marrying mother” had been quietly fulfilled on him.

2.2. “Sacrificial” Goat

Aristotle evaluated Oedipus king as a “perfect” tragedy. The tragic nature is reflected in that Oedipus had been informed of the Oracle, but he did not comply with the guidance of the Oracle and yield to his established destiny. Instead, he bravely fought against the fate, hoping to reverse the fate and avoid the unfortu-

nate curse. However, the reality is cruel. Oedipus failed to disobey the sign of God and lost to a powerful fate. It is sad and lamentable that a hero admired by all the people fell down, but Oedipus, as the “scapegoat” of the city-state of Athens, sacrificed voluntarily to prevent disasters for the city-state, which is commendable (Liu & Ma, 2018).

At the beginning of the Oedipus king, the priest led the citizens of the city to hold branches wrapped with wool in front of the Oedipus temple, praying that Oedipus could save the city again and find a way for the citizens to live from the disaster of plague and famine. The original text reads: “because the city-state, as you saw with your own eyes, is bumping in the blood red waves and can’t lift its head ... The most hateful God of plague with fire came to the city-state, making Cadmus’s home desolate, and the murky realm of Pluto is full of laments and cries.” (Sophocles, 2021)

The city-state was as terrible as Shura field under the shadow of epidemic and natural disasters. However, at this time, Oedipus the King came on stage at the call of priests and citizens. Sophocles took this opportunity to send an important message: the messenger had returned who was sent to ask the instructions of the gods and tell everyone that the city-state can be saved as long as they follow the advice of Phobos the King that “remove the pollution hidden here”. The “polluter” here is the “sacrifice”, and we know that the “sacrifice” is Oedipus.

Ancient Greeks have a tradition of holding “Dionysus Festival” every year. Ancient Greek drama originated from the sacrificial ceremony of Dionysus. Dionysus is ill fated, so most of the dramas on Dionysus Festival are Su dramas. Before the performance of Su opera, goats are often used as sacrifices, and the performing song team often plays the appearance of goats. Therefore, Su opera was also called “sheep man” drama in the beginning. In ancient Greek, it originally meant “song of goats”, which has a strong religious meaning.

“There is no city-state without sacrifice” (Fustel de, 2006), which was still in an ignorant era. Sacrificing and praying for God was one of the important contents of the city-state life in the ancient Greeks. People believed that God would indicate the direction of their life by giving blessing or punishment, which was used to replace human beings to accept punishment or repair the relationship between man and God. Fraser was called “public sinner”, that is, the “scapegoat”. It was not uncommon in ancient Greek works that people transferred disasters by sacrificing “scapegoats”. Agamemnon angered the goddess Artemis, and the two sides of the war were deadlocked. So Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia and begged the goddess to forgive him. The compassionate goddess replaced Agamemnon’s daughter with a sika deer. The ancient Greek custom of “substituting for sin” was also recorded in golden twig written by Fraser’s (Fraser, 2006): “When the city-state suffers from disaster, people select an ugly or deformed inferior, take him out of the city-state, beat him with cotton dates and wild fig twigs, burn him with fire, and scatter the burned ashes into the sea to achieve the purpose of driving away disasters and evil spirits.” How-

ever, in *Oedipus the King*, Sophocles chose to tell the story of “killing the king”, that is, it was not the inferior people in the city-state who were elected to be executed, but the superior people with opposite identities. The citizens of ancient Greek city-states generally believed that the king or priest had the ability to communicate with the gods, and the disasters in the city-states were related to the decline of their vitality. Therefore, the king or priest should be responsible for the disasters. The corresponding plot can also be found in *Oedipus the King*: “Everyone says and believes that you saved us with the help of God... Save our city! Keep your reputation! When we think of your rule in the future, don’t let us leave such a memory: you saved us before and then made us fall”. Chinese scholar Ye Shuxian proposed that the structure, plot and narrative advancement of *Oedipus the King* show that it is an ancient Greek disaster ritual play (Ye, 2010). People’s cries, even including moral kidnapping, pushed Oedipus to a dead end: exchanging personal sacrifice for the rebirth of the whole city-state.

2.3. Duality in *Oedipus the King*

“Each of you only mourns for yourself, not for others; but my grief is for the city, for myself and for you... I can’t sleep. I’m not awakened by you. You know how many tears I shed and think about it again and again”. It can be seen from this paragraph that Oedipus is a king full of empathy and responsibility. He sincerely felt deep pain for the suffering of the citizens of the city-state. So after receiving the instructions of God, he actively looked for the person who polluted the city-state and tried to be a hero of the city-state again. He answered the riddle of Sphinx and went to the city of Cadmus to exempt people’s taxes for singers... Oedipus embodied his wisdom, integrity, kindness and courage in the process of saving the city of Thebe again and again. These are very noble and valuable characters.

However, the oracle comes true on Oedipus. He inadvertently acted as a murderer who killed his father and a incest who married his mother, which brought to Oedipus another identity: the sinner of the city. As the chorus sang, “the Oracle will always work and hover over him”. Oedipus was doomed to never break free from the shackles imposed on him by the Oracle because of his father’s sin (Yang, 2020).

In drama and film and television works, it is no stranger to the “duality” setting of the character’s identity. Taking the South Korean popular TV series “Mouse” as an example, the protagonist Zheng Balin is ostensibly a good policeman who is willing to help others. He replaces his poor grandmother to take his granddaughter home, help residents move, and save seriously injured birds from passers-by’s car... He has always been loved by residents in this area, and was even known as “the son of the national”. However, on the dark side, he tortured and killed kittens, kidnapped children, and committed brutal murders. People didn’t know his true face until the truth came out.

Compared with Zheng Balin, the “duality” of Oedipus is more complicated,

because Oedipus is absolutely innocent on the level of consciousness. When he was a baby, his father cruelly nailed his left and right heels and threw him into the mountains. He had never seen his biological parents; In order to avoid damaging the adoptive parents by hearing the Oracle in Delphi temple, he voluntarily gave up his status as the successor of Corinthian state and went wandering; Killed his biological father on the road for the purpose of self-defense; The answer to the riddle of Sphinx was right. He was loved as king by the citizens of Thebe and married his biological mother by mistake... These are the results of the Oracle acting on Oedipus, not his nature. In fact, Oedipus was not a moral Corruptor, but it was such a great hero who made great achievements for the city of Thebe, and finally reduced to the end of blinding his eyes and self-exile.

Although he solved the Sphinx mystery, is Oedipus really wisdom? The poet repeatedly questioned this through Oedipus and Tiresias. The poet repeatedly hinted that Oedipus' wisdom was only mortal, superficial and limited. It was precisely because of this limited intellectual ability that Oedipus failed to solve his own riddles in time, although he could solve them; Due to his lack of understanding of nature, he attributed the culprit to himself when the city-state faced the plague. Although this is a heroic choice to bear the tragedy of life alone, he did not choose to solve the mystery of the plague and defeat the plague through wisdom, but chose to blind his eyes and expel himself. Although this is a manifestation of responsibility to the city-state, it is also an act of compromise to fate. It can be seen that Oedipus integrates a variety of contradictions and conflicts, which makes him finally move towards the tragic fate.

3. The Birth of Tragedy: Dionysian Spirit Found from Oedipus the King

3.1. Dionysian Celebration

Dionysus, the God of wine, is the son of Zeus and Semele, the princess of Thebe. He is also one of the twelve main gods of Olympus. His birth caused the envy of Hera, the queen of heaven. Zeus was afraid of Hera's revenge, so he fostered the young Dionysus in the home of the mountain fairies. The pan God, half man and half sheep, taught him knowledge and accompanied him on his travels. During the journey, Dionysus mastered all the secrets about wine and taught the people there the skill of growing grapes and the method of making good wine. The followers of Dionysus are famous for their noise and disorder. They have fun and drink a lot. When they are crazy to the extreme, they will use violence. Therefore, Dionysus is also known as the "God of Carnival".

Herodotus, an ancient Greek historian, believed that the sacrifice of Dionysus was first introduced into Greece from Egypt by a man named Melampus, but he did not "understand all the dogmas". The doctrine was gradually supplemented and perfected by wise people after it was introduced, so that the sacrificial tradition of Greece was harmonious and different from that of Egypt (Pan, 2020). In ancient Greece, women who took part in the Dionysian sacrifice parade usually

wore Ivy crown, wore deer skin, held the Dionysian Scepter wrapped with ivy and decorated with pine cones at the top, sounded hand drums and cymbals, dressed as Dionysian believers, walked in the mountains, waved scepters and torches, waved and shouted: “bakkos, roar”, and the believers in a state of madness would destroy everything encountered in the sacrifice parade, and even eat human flesh, because they think it can be integrated with the gods (Ji, 2018).

In every spring, when the vines grow new leaves, or when the grapes mature in autumn, the ancient Greeks held a grand Dionysian sacrifice ceremony. Aristotle recorded in his poetics that the origin of ancient Greek Su drama was the sacrifice of Dionysus.

3.2. The Reflection of Dionysian Spirit in Oedipus the King

At the early stage, the Dionysian spirit refers to the tragic intoxication integrated with the noumenon of cosmic life from personal pain and destruction. In the birth of tragedy, Nietzsche declared that “God is dead” and gave a new connotation to Dionysian spirit, that is, to get tragic intoxication from the absolute meaninglessness of life. He corresponded Dionysus with Apollo, the God of the sun, and believed that they represented the power of sensibility and rationality respectively. The Greeks respected the order represented by Apollo in art and architecture, and embraced Dionysus’ extraordinary chaos and disorder in tragedy and intoxication. In contrast to the order and conservatism represented by Apollo, in the modern world, the irrational spirit of Dionysus has become a liberating force, symbolizing the subversion of order and the pursuit of freedom. Nietzsche believes that the world is nothingness and meaningless. Only in a dramatic release of passion can people find the true meaning of life. Compared with the spirit of Helios, which emphasizes rationality and order, the spirit of Dionysus emphasizes more passion, adventure, breaking taboos, excessive persistence and so on. Dionysus is often associated with nouns such as excess, fanaticism, joy and disorder, and has become a symbol of the ancient Greeks’ praise of life.

The Dionysian spirit has existed in China for many years. It originated from Taoist philosophy. Zhuang Zhou thought that man is an integral part of nature. He advocated absolute freedom and to comply with the nature. “that on the Miao-ku-yi mountain there lives a divine one, whose skin is white like ice or snow, whose grace and elegance are like those of a virgin, who eats no grain, but lives on air and dew, and who, riding on clouds with flying dragons for his team, roams beyond the limit of the mortal regions” (Lin, 1942). Chuang Tzu would rather be a free tortoise wagging its head and tail in a rotten mud pond than a swaggering horse bound by others. The essence of Chinese Dionysian spirit lies in the pursuit of absolute freedom, forgetting life and death, wealth and honor.

In the history of ancient Chinese literature, many litterateur owned Dionysian spirit. Li Bai was able to achieve “I do not board the ship even the emperor invites me, because I am an immortal living in wine”. Du Fu wrote in a poem: “Though I am drunk due to depression in a strange land, the poem I write now

is so perfect that it seems I get the help of Gods.” Zhang Yuannian once wrote: “Who knows how many flowers flying after rain? One can feel freedom only when drunk.”

Not only for poetry, but also in painting and artistic calligraphy unique to Chinese traditional culture, the Dionysian spirit is more lively. For example, Zheng Banqiao’s calligraphy and painting can only be obtained when he was drunk after entertained with dog meat and wine. Zheng Banqiao once wrote a poem to laugh at himself: “It’s better to admire the full moon when all others have leaved, but I hate it is too late to send me the wine once when I face the moon. I laugh at those who ask for my painting come when I was drunk though they do not like drink.” Wu Daozi, the saint of painting, only start painting when he is drunk. Wang Xizhi, the “sage of calligraphy”, wrote the preface to the *Lanting* with a brush when he was drunk. “It is so beautiful and strong that no calligraphy works overtake it.” When he woke up, he “wrote dozens of works, but there is no one can be compared with the one painted after drunk.” The Dionysian spirit in China is long-standing.

From the perspective of Western classical literature, Oedipus also has Dionysian spirit. Nietzsche proposed that Dionysian spirit is a strong will to surpass the empty debate between pessimism and optimism and oppose them at the same time. To truly practice Dionysian spirit, first, we should recognize the tragedy of life, that is, we should be opposite to false or superficial optimism; Second, we should overcome the tragedy of life, which is different from Schopenhauer’s pessimism. Then Oedipus, the hero of Thebes, thought he had escaped the shackles of the Oracle, he was dragged into the cold reality by fate when he had reached the top. Oedipus’ life is full of tragedy, as if the author had deliberately arranged the ending of Oedipus: under the intervention of the Oracle, Oedipus could not achieve a satisfactory outcome, whether obedience or resistance. In fact, Sophocles is a devout religious believer, and the oracle in his plays has decisive power (Jiang, 2020).

Oedipus may have got what he wanted in his life, but they were all broken in front of him: the parents he once relied on were not related by blood, and his biological parents abandoned him early; His beloved wife was proved to be his biological mother; His proud cities now regard him as unclean. Nietzsche believes that the Dionysian spirit represents the catharsis of emotion, the survival experience of abandoning the traditional bondage and returning to the original state, and the great pleasure of human life in the desperate and painful cry of disappearing the unity of the individual and the world. When the truth was revealed, Queen Iokaste hanged herself and directly pushed Oedipus into a desperate situation. He sincerely repented for what he had done. Even if he was innocent in heart and mind, he still fulfilled his commitment to the city-state, assumed his responsibility as king of Thebe for the last time, expelled himself—the pollution of the city of Thebe—and pushed the plot to a climax again.

The Greeks established a prosperous city-state civilization with their own wisdom and strength. “Man is the measure of all things” fully shows the confi-

dence and pride of the Greeks. But when the Greeks really began to explore mankind itself, the Peloponnesian War ended the era of Pericles, and an Athenian plague destroyed the exploration spirit and desire of the Greeks. The aura of the gods on Olympus had become dim, but the fifth century BC was still in a period of ignorance and chaos. The Greeks were eager to get rid of the rule of God, but they knew nothing about themselves, which made them pay more attention to communicating with God, praying for the guidance of the Oracle, and blindly obeying the oracle. Oedipus showed different qualities from others. He knew the content of the Oracle, but did not follow the guidance of the Oracle for a moment. Even if his fate was so unbearable, he never denied the existence of life, which was essentially different from Schopenhauer's pessimism. To some extent, Oedipus conquered the tragedy of life, echoed Nietzsche's theory, and became a major representative of Dionysian spirit (Xu, 2021).

As the smartest man, Oedipus guessed the riddle of Sphinx and saved Thebe; When the God brought the plague with fire to Thebe, he bravely took responsibility and tried to get rid of the plague and restore the peace of the earth. If these are his rational side, they represent the spiritual side of the sun god. Then, after receiving the Oracle, knowing that the fate cannot be changed, he still excessively and persistently pursued the truth and fought against it, never giving up, so as to step into the abyss of tragedy step by step; Although he violated many taboos without knowing it, he still chose to be responsible for these sins after he got the truth. He saved the city-state of sin by gouging out his eyes and self-destruction. He disintegrated and returned to self-redemption in the extreme pain of fighting against fate, reflecting the unremitting pursuit of the essence of life by Dionysian spirit. It can also be said that it is the Dionysian spirit that makes the tragic result—the inevitable fate of Oedipus.

A series of tragic destinies of Oedipus stems from his breaking one of his own self limitations, and breaking such self limitations twice. In the early stage, he pursued the extreme Apollo spirit, and in the final outcome, he wanted to achieve a certain Dionysian essence by means of self destruction.

4. Conclusion

Aristotle mentioned in poetics that “tragedy is the imitation of a serious and complete action with a certain length. Its medium is a ‘decorated’ language, which is used in different parts of the play in different forms. Its imitation method is to relieve these emotions by arousing compassion and fear with the help of characters’ actions rather than narration” (Aristotle, 1996). Oedipus the King tells the fall of a hero, but faith and destruction are originally one case with two sides. Oedipus’s faith was destroyed in front of the oracle and fate, and he could only go to the destruction ending step by step. However, the theme of self-consciousness and freedom were loudly praised in Oedipus the King, the strong will never yield to fate, and the inquiry spirit of discovering oneself in loss and confusion all refer to the journey that human beings can eventually step out of the barrier and explore the origin of life.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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