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Constructing and rendering fate tragedy in ancient Greece: a comparative study of *Prometheus Bound* and *Oedipus the King*

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Abstract. This study aims to explore the construction and rendering of fate tragedy in ancient Greek drama through a comparative textual analysis of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* and *Sophocles' Oedipus the King*. Centering on the contrasting prophetic identities of the two protagonists, Prometheus as the prophet of fate and Oedipus as its recipient, the study analyzes the multidimensional construction of fate tragedy in these two plays. The research identifies three core shared elements (the chorus, analogous character role structures, and bodily harm depictions) and elaborates on how the two playwrights employ these elements to intensify the tragic effect of fate. Additionally, it examines modern performance and adaptation practices of the two classic tragedies, probing the modern re-staging, reinterpretation and re-intensification of fate tragedy as a dramatic motif. The findings reveal the sophisticated mechanisms of fate tragedy construction in the two works and provide new insights for the contemporary re-examination and aesthetic reception of ancient Greek fate tragedy.

Keywords: ancient Greek fate tragedy, *Prometheus Bound*, *Oedipus the King*, close reading, theatrical adaptation

1. Introduction

Prometheus Bound, Oedipus the King, and *Medea* are collectively known as the three great tragedies of ancient Greece. Among them, the first two present a remarkable structural symmetry in the roles played by their protagonists: one is a prophet, the other is trapped and suffers due to his inability to decipher the oracle; one is bound, the other is a perpetual fugitive in action; one is a god, the other is a human. Yet, despite these oppositions, neither can escape the grip of fate—their destinies are constrained by representatives of a higher power, suggesting that fate transcends both gods and humans. This shared condition raises a central question: how do these two tragedies, through their contrasting protagonists, construct and intensify the experience of fate? This paper seeks to answer this question by comparing the prophetic structures, character dynamics, and embodied suffering in *Prometheus Bound* and *Oedipus the King*. It further examines how modern adaptations re-stage and reinterpret these tragic mechanisms, offering new perspectives on the enduring power of fate in Greek tragedy.

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2. Opposite prophetic structures, similar tragic nature

These tragedies reveal that tragedies centered on fate are continuously formed through character interactions. There is always a receiver of fate, whose destiny is foretold by a prophet. The process of the tragedy's unfolding is the process of accepting fate. Fate is always difficult to accept initially, but the receiver of fate is ultimately propelled by the prophet and onlookers towards a miserable destiny.

2.1. The multilayered tragedy in *Prometheus Bound*

From the character dialogues in *Prometheus Bound*, it is evident that Prometheus is the prophet of fate, and as a god, he is also one of the recipients of fate. The story primarily unfolds with Prometheus, bound on the cliff, speaking of his own future destiny. Prometheus is chained to the Caucasus Mountains by Hephaestus under Zeus's command. He is a god with the power of prophecy and the will to save humanity. Yet, he utters laments and fears seemingly belonging only to mortals: "Behold me, what I suffer, a god at the hands of gods" [1]. He faces the deep valley, situated on land, enduring the scorching sun, wind, and rain day after day [2]. His predicament is also articulated by Oceanus: "You are skilled at advising others, but not yourself" [1]. Under absolute power, Prometheus invented various survival skills for humanity, but he himself has no cunning plan to escape his present suffering. Thus, he reveals the logic behind his own tragic fate: not even omnipotent fate decreed this outcome; skill can never surpass necessity.

From the immediate cause, Prometheus's predicament seems to stem from Zeus's oppression, but through his prophetic ability, he reveals that Zeus himself is destined for tragedy: he will be overthrown by his future wife, who will bear a son mightier than him. Later, he describes his situation to Io as the work of "Zeus's will and Hephaestus's hand" not a specific agent, but a cruel twist of fate. Even when threatened by Hermes, Zeus's spokesman who permits hurricanes to shake the earth, waves to surge skyward and the courses of the stars to be disrupted, he retains a posture of pride, which stands as further testament to this reality. Thus, Prometheus's tragic fate is twofold. First, he can help humanity progress but cannot save himself. Second, he knows the logic of existence and future events, yet is compelled to submit to their natural unfolding.

The design of the dramatic scene intensifies Prometheus's sense of being adrift within fate. His cliff is a fixed point from which he interacts with beings from all directions: the Oceanids in the chorus, Oceanus who comes to advise him, the tormented Io driven by fate, and Hermes arriving with Zeus's ultimatum. This distinctive mode of interaction underscores both the uniqueness of Prometheus, a god with a genuine devotion to humanity, and the singularity of his identity and divine faculties. Through his prophetic power, he reveals to Io the dangers awaiting her, once again fulfilling his mission to aid humanity. Simultaneously, this act demonstrates his defiance of tyranny in the name of absolute fate and justice. The selection of Prometheus's place of bondage—a lofty, exposed cliff in the Caucasus Mountains—is significant. The semicircular audience assumes the perspective of a central watchtower, observing Prometheus as the gods above do. The rock where he stands becomes a cell exposed to light. This gaze and surveillance deepen his seemingly unalterable fate. While Zeus tortures Prometheus, he also achieves surveillance over him [3]. Yet the tragedy lies in Prometheus's unwavering commitment to absolute justice, which makes it impossible for him to be subdued by fear under such absurd surveillance. He is not an object that can be disciplined through physical pain.

It is worth considering this spatial design as a thought experiment: had Aeschylus placed Prometheus on a cliff facing the sea, his situation would shift from being between heaven and earth to between heaven and sea, greatly increasing the uncertainty of his fate. His suffering, originally from wind and rain, would be amplified by the turmoil of the angry sea. He would watch the Oceanids emerge from and depart into the sea. He would see Io come from the stable land behind him, only to head toward the stormy seas. He would witness Hermes and others descending from the sky—yet these gods and those behind them offer no help for humanity's

betterment. Unlike the original cliff facing a narrow, linear gorge, a sea-facing Prometheus could become an observer, watching figures enter and exit the canvas from different directions, all engaging with him. His cliff becomes a convergence point for multiple fates, a transit station of destiny. Those who pass before him move from ignorance to knowledge of their own miserable fates. Yet, neither Prometheus nor they can alter this fate, which is controlled by none. This constitutes Prometheus's third layer of tragedy: he sees the future but is unable to fundamentally free humanity from suffering. However, this layer is ambiguous within the play. Although Prometheus firmly states that everything is predetermined, he also mentions, "No other god but me can clearly show him [Zeus] the way to escape this disaster" [1], suggesting he possesses the ability to change destiny by revealing it—a contradiction worth further investigation. "The sea's surge falls, lamenting, the deep groans, the dark caverns of the underworld wail, and the clear springs weep for your harsh sufferings" [1] personifies nature's lament for him, echoing his tragic fate.

2.2. The reverse pursuit and self-destruction in *Oedipus the King*

In *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus is the receiver of fate, constantly driven by the tragic prophecy. From his perspective, the tragic fate seems like a single point, but as the story unfolds, this point expands into a line, culminating in utter ruin. To escape Apollo's prophecy, he leaves his presumed parents, but this flight leads him directly into fate's trap. Readers, through constant hints from the prophets, gradually understand the truth and perceive the invisible thread of fate. Only Oedipus, the true recipient, remains incredulous, shrouded in ignorance, ultimately collapsing upon a series of revelations. This plot structure allows Aristotle's concepts of "discovery" and "reversal" to occur simultaneously. Creon and Teiresias know Oedipus's fate and the truth from the outset. They repeatedly hint and state clearly. For example: "I would not reveal my pain... lest I reveal you are the unholy polluter of this land... You are the murderer you seek" [4]. They also state: "Though you see now, then you will gaze into darkness" [4], and prophesy: "He shall be revealed as brother and father to his children, son and husband to his mother, and murderer and sower of seed for his father" [4]. Only after conversing with Jocasta does Oedipus begin to believe the prophecies might refer to him, first realizing he might be Laius's killer. He sees this as the cause for his exile. However, in the third episode, the news of Polybus's death provides false relief, allowing him to misinterpret the prophecy. The prophecy was troubling, but Polybus's death seems a release. But the messenger's subsequent denial of his identity forces Jocasta and the shepherd to recognize the truth. Finally, Oedipus realizes he has become "the son of parents whom I should not have been born to, married a mother I should not have married, killed a father I should not have killed" [4].

This differs from those who know their fate but cannot change it. Oedipus's tragedy is forged by his own resistance, by his own actions. He actively combats each tragic point of his destiny as he encounters it, yet simultaneously draws closer to the truth, steering himself towards the final catastrophic revelation. This causes his tragedy and the plague upon Thebes. Every word he speaks becomes a piercing dart after the truth emerges: "Whoever killed him might wish to kill me too... We will succeed, or perhaps fail" [4]. "If any of you, for friend or self, disobeys my command... I banish all from this land, for he is our pollution... If he is of my house, I shall bear the curse I laid on others" [4] are all self-prophecies. The line "I pray the gods to grant no crops to the disobedient, no children to their women" foreshadows the plague's retribution upon Thebes. Further analysis reveals Oedipus's active resistance as a form of pride. Upon learning his true destiny, he does not humbly accept it but, watched by the seers, marches step by step towards his tragic fate, culminating in the ultimate act of self-blinding. The Chorus's words clarify his inescapable fate, highlighting the motif: "Like a bull, he ranges through wild forests and rocky caves, wretched and alone, trying to flee the oracle from Earth's center, ever living, ever hovering above him" [4]. No individual will can overcome what is fated. As the Messenger finally states, "Self-inflicted sufferings are always the most painful" [4]. Thus, Oedipus's tragedy

can be summarized as twofold: first, the tragedy preordained by fate; second, the tragedy of striving against fate only to find it inescapable.

In summary, Prometheus, the prophet of tragic fate, and Oedipus, its recipient, ultimately cannot escape their predestined tragic fates despite the former's omniscience and the latter's desperate attempts to evade his destiny. Both plays repeatedly emphasize fate's immovable status as absolute necessity, deepening the reader's despair mingled with pity.

3. Similar methods of intensifying tragedy

Apart from the dramatic structure itself, the playwright's superb use of atmospheric techniques is equally indispensable in evoking such a sense of despair in the audience. Aeschylus and Sophocles adopt two distinct character-centric perspectives: one from a figure omniscient to fate and the other from a figure surrounded by those with foreknowledge of fate. Both playwrights, however, convey a comparable lament for the inescapability of fate. Three primary shared tragic elements can be identified: the use of the chorus, the structure of "watching" relationships centered on tragedy, and bodily harm.

3.1. The presence of the chorus

As the singers of one of Aristotle's six components of tragedy, song, the chorus features prominently in both plays [5]. Led by the coryphaeus, the chorus in Greek tragedy often serves as the audience's representative and a direct commentator. The chorus typically participates in dramatic action, and the final lines of the exodos are often sung by them. *Prometheus Bound* is distinctive because the Oceanids, the chorus, are highly involved, functioning almost as characters rather than mere singers. Moved by Prometheus's indomitable spirit, they decide to descend with him to Tartarus, disappearing with him in Zeus's thunderbolt. They embody audience emotion and participate significantly in dramatic action. They possess strong empathy, remarking upon first seeing Prometheus, "a mist of grief rises before my eyes", and directly criticize "Zeus, ruling by new laws, tyrannically" [1]. Yet, as goddesses outside the Olympian power structure, they also maintain a distance from the audience. When first learning Prometheus gave fire to humanity, they deem him guilty [1], contrasting with Io, who calls him "the common benefactor of humanity". The chorus's emotional connection with the audience and their divine perspective significantly contribute to the tragic effect [6].

In *Oedipus the King*, the chorus comprises Theban citizens. Their role is closer to that of spectators. As the prophecy unfolds, they too gradually recognize the truth, shifting from siding with Oedipus to objective observation, and finally aligning with the prophets, wishing Oedipus would set aside his pride and accept his grim destiny. For the proud Oedipus, this is futile. The chorus's odes further intensify Oedipus's tragic fate, amplifying the pathos. Besides their structural function, bridging episodes, the chorus provides the rational commentary Oedipus lacks in his emotional turmoil, offering objective criticism. They also directly lament for Oedipus and his family, crying out, "You who gave me new life, now darken my eyes".

3.2. Similar character roles

Both tragedies employ a structure involving a prophet, onlookers, and a receiver of fate, following a linear narrative (Table 1).

Table 1. Narrative paradigm structure of fate

Play Title Character role of fate	Prophets	Onlookers	Receivers
Prometheus Bound	Prometheus	Chorus (Oceanids)	Everyone, directly Prometheus and Io
Oedipus the King	Creon & Teiresias	Chorus (Thebans)	Oedipus, his wife, and children

Identifying these groups reveals the pattern of gazing within the dramas: the prophet and onlookers observe the receiver of fate. The prophet primarily declares the future destiny, while the onlookers propel the plot and express emotion. The tragedy's sorrow is socially validated through this observation, extending beyond the central character's internal experience, thereby deepening its tragic quality.

3.3. Bodily harm

Both gods and humans are subject to fate and physical suffering. The depiction of pain effectively evokes reader empathy. Prometheus is constantly chained to the cliff, exposed to the elements, his limbs immobilized —a state akin to physical disability, robbing him of agency. Some research suggests Prometheus's punishment is a metaphor for the torment of sleeplessness [2]. He remains perpetually upright and sleepless, another form of torture by the ruling power represented by Zeus.

Oedipus bears a scar on his ankles from infancy. This scar becomes the source of his name and crucial evidence for his identity. It marks both his rescue and the origin of his tragedy. After learning the truth, Oedipus blinds himself, elevating the sorrow and remorse to its peak. This self-inflicted wound signifies the end of his tragic journey (the culmination of his intense fate tragedy). If the city-state is analogized to a body, the plague symbolizes the collective punishment resulting from Oedipus's "pollution".

Furthermore, wounds symbolize their resistance against tragic fate. Prometheus, defiant and unyielding, sacrifices himself for humanity's welfare, refusing to reveal Zeus's impending overthrow, enduring continuous physical torment. Oedipus's ankle scar marks the beginning of his flight and struggle against fate. His self-blinding represents despair at his origin and a final act of defiance.

In summary, both plays intensify the fate tragedy through character arrangement and detailed design, comprehensively amplifying the tragic emotion from sensory and experiential perspectives.

4. Reinterpretations of fate tragedy in the modern context

These two tragedies were created more than 2,500 years ago. Can modern elements inject new vitality into them? Nowadays, these two dramas are frequently staged. Theatre directors, performers, and others continue to modernize the narratives of ancient Greek fate tragedy in various ways [7]. The following selects several typical cases in terms of dramatic genre, stage presentation and historical context for analysis.

4.1. Re-selection of theatrical forms

The tragic stories of *Prometheus Bound* and *Oedipus the King* are still performed today. Many international troupes have localized them, creating a fusion between Greek tragedy and their own national theatrical traditions. For instance, the Henan opera *King Oedipus* (俄狄王) adapts the compelling story of *Oedipus the King*, presenting the classic Greek tragedy through traditional Chinese opera forms. For its musical design, the production uses two key rhythmic forms to foreground the characters' tragic emotions: *gunbai*, a core Henan Opera pattern that conveys intense grief through free-form lyrics, and *jin-da man-chang*, a distinctive Chinese

opera technique for building drama in critical scenes. The *liushui* rhythmic pattern enhances conflicts during duets, strengthening the dramatic effect. The content adapts the poetic language of the original, incorporating Henan opera's interjectory phrases to elongate tones, creating a resonant effect. It also integrates the uniquely Chinese element of filial piety. In the third scene, the original Oedipus feels relief rather than grief upon hearing of Polybus's death ("Why should we heed the Pythian oracle? It foretold I would kill my father, but he is dead and buried, and I am here, having touched no sword" [4]). The Henan opera adaptation changes this. Due to plot constraints, the original Oedipus does not display genuine affection for his parents. However, the Henan opera imbues his character with filial connotations. For example, in the Henan opera, King Oedipus weeps upon seeing his father's testament. While expressing parental affection isn't required by the original narrative's logic, incorporating such performance elements can better resonate with domestic audiences, further intensifying the tragic emotion.

The Peking opera *Oedipus the King Warrior* (王者俄狄) reinterprets *Oedipus the King* by casting Oedipus as a wusheng. This aids audience understanding of Oedipus's resolute character. Its localized innovations are primarily twofold: first, it breaks the boundaries of Peking Opera's male role categories *sheng*, merging performance techniques from various martial and civil male roles into the character of Oedipus, especially incorporating the sonorous recitation of the laosheng in the climactic questioning and stabbing eyes scene. Second, it employs cross-gender performance techniques, having the wusheng manipulate the dan's long water sleeves. The blood-red long sleeves visually represent the bloody scene of Oedipus's self-blinding (Figure 1) [8]. This allows his wife, the catalyst for the tragic revelation, to participate in the blinding act, aligning better with the Chinese theatrical tradition that rarely features solo scenes.

Figure 1. Water sleeve in Peking Opera *Oedipus the King Warrior* (self-blinding scene)

4.2. Innovations in stage presentation

The staging of *Prometheus Bound* typically centers on Prometheus fixed on stage. However, variations in designing the "cliff" alter the dramatic portrayal. In one version, the mountain is a revolving installation resembling a mechanical watch face. Prometheus is suspended like Christ on the cross at the top of installation, overlooking everything. The chorus is not a single female figure as in ancient practice, but a group that sometimes rushes onto the watch face installation (Figure 2) [9] and sometimes follows Io into the distance (Figure 3) [9], visualizing the audience's focus through actor movement. Another version presents a very small Caucasus Mountains installation (Figure 4) [10]. Although his feet are bound, Prometheus can still walk, emphasizing his greatness as a humanity-friendly god and metaphorically representing his omniscient perspective. Some versions adhere strictly to ancient Greek performance conventions, following rigorous stage

blocking (Figure 5) [11], retaining masked traditions, and utilizing indoor theatre advantages to transform the originally open-air performance into one using ropes to guide actors, creating a sense of order. This constructs a strict divine-human hierarchy within a vertical plane, helping audiences engage more deeply with the ethical analysis and the perception of fate [12].

Figure 2. Actors climb the installation, listening to Io's story with Prometheus

Figure 3. Actors pursue the grieving Io as she departs

Figure 4. Miniaturized Caucasus Mountains in Macmillan Films' *Prometheus Bound*

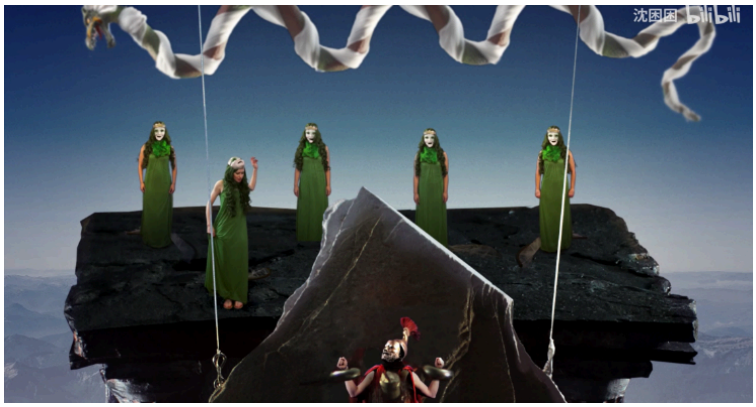

Figure 5. Traditional Masked Staging of T. Preston's *Prometheus Bound*

4.3. Reinterpretation through contemporary contexts

Oedipus the King was re-performed within the context of the COVID-19. The plague narrative implicit in the play was adapted for the stage, recreating the suffocating atmosphere of Thebes during Oedipus's time for audiences in the tense circumstances of 2022. Except for the actor playing Oedipus, who wore only a strip of white cloth over his eyes, all performers were clad in hazmat suits (Figure 6) [13], creating a deeply suffocating environment. The production re-explored the enduring philosophical question of "human choice and agency in the face of fate". This exploration enriched the plot and adjusted character traits. Oedipus was portrayed with an enhanced capacity for self-reflection. This change compensated for the sense of resolute powerlessness that often overshadows his rationality in the original version, reflecting modern humanity's proactive stance against the unpredictability of fate.

Figure 6. Hazmat Suit Costuming in 2022 Oedipus the King

5. Conclusion

In summary, this paper argues that *Prometheus Bound* and *Oedipus the King* construct a multi-dimensional mechanism for intensifying fate tragedy through prophetic structures, character interactions, and bodily narratives. Furthermore, an examination of modern adaptations of these two classic tragedies offers a novel

perspective, as contemporary and localized reinterpretations and re-stagings, a concept referred to as "secondary intensification", can also provide new insights for the present analysis.

Based on the core gaps in the existing research, future studies can further deepen the investigation of the construction mechanism of fate tragedy from the following two dimensions:

First, future work will introduce a gender perspective to examine the understudied role of female characters (such as Io, Jocasta, the Oceanid chorus and etc.) in our established narrative framework. Mapping these figures' role shifts between prophet, onlooker, and fate recipient, this research will complete our core fate tragedy narrative model. It will also reveal how gendered reworkings in modern adaptations drive the motif's secondary intensification.

Second, a systematic study of visual and spatial elements will fill a critical missing dimension in our established intensification framework. This work will bridge textual visuality, ancient theatrical practice, and modern stage design. It will formalize a fourth core intensification mechanism parallel to the three identified in this paper, and deliver fuller support for our theory of cross-temporal secondary intensification.

However, the intensification of fate tragedy has never been merely a matter of artistic technique; it is humanity's eternal inquiry into its own limitations. As modern people turn to "cyber fortune-telling" we can still look back to the profound sorrows experienced by ancient Greek gods and heroes, seeking within their narratives of fate tragedy an internal resolution to the inevitabilities each person faces.

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