



OEDIPUS AND BEOWULF: THEIR SHARES IN CURSES

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KUS: 09/01-090209

Manuscript received: February 09, 2009; Accepted: October 27, 2010

Abstract: *King Oedipus* by Sophocles and *Beowulf* by an anonymous author are two great legendary tales that tell of two tragic heroes of pre-Christian era. The former one is derived from the Greek mythological story where gods and goddesses play an active role in the phenomena of human life where the worthy and noble king Oedipus suffers the unhappiest events a man can have in life. The latter one is derived from the oral formulaic tales of ancient Scandinavia where the mighty, warrior king Beowulf meets the tragic end after a life full of heroic events. Both of them reign in pagan period when man is bound to surrender to the whims of fate. Yet man is a free will agent by nature and it determines him against allowing fate to settle everything of his life. This paper shows that though both of the heroes finally succumb to their nemesis, knowingly or unknowingly they have shares in the curses they are under.

Keywords: Fate, *sapientia*, *fortitudo*, curse, temperance

Introduction

King Oedipus, written in 420 B.C Hellenic setting, is the story of a man's grim discovery, through persistent inquiry, that he is unwittingly guilty of patricide and incest, and his distraught reaction to that discovery. It offers miscellaneous interpretations and criticism that invite readers to apply diametrically opposed theories and concepts in reviewing the play's meaning. In accordance with the typical format of old Greek tragedies Sophocles also makes his way through certain amount of suspense of inquiry and following it, the discovery. Following the formula of Aristotle there arise recognition, catastrophe and catharsis. But Sophocles' *King Oedipus* is not only the story of an individual; rather it represents man and the events a man undergoes in his life. It is not a simple tale of a king's inward journey to his destruction nor is it the man's intellectual adventure to find out the answer to the fundamental question i.e. who he is; it is the story of an intellectual that tells what he does to himself with his intellect.

Beowulf – the legendary hero of the most ancient existing epic of the old Germanic culture -- written in Anglo-Saxon English is the symbol of courage, humanity and Kingly manners concomitant with his sense of responsibility. On the outset 'Heorot'—the magnanimous mead-hall made by King Hrothgar is found attacked consecutively by a monster named Grendel. This marauding monster captures the hold of the hall killing people every night. Beowulf, the Geatish warrior comes to the Danes' land to cleanse the 'Heorot'. He stands victorious in the combat with the monster and also kills the sea-monster, Grendel's mother who embarks to avenge the death of her son. Beowulf, returning to his own land reigns there for 50 years and at the last phase of his life, he confronts another challenge. This time, a dragon is his opposition. And at that combat Beowulf fails to come out successful to kill the dragon. It dies but before that it gives him the fatal wound that puts an end to the hero's life and he falls ultimately. Oedipus and Beowulf- both the tragic characters create a mixed feeling of horror, respect and woe.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53808/KUS.2010.10.1and2.0901-A>

The overpowering influence of fate is active in both the tales. But as they are heroes a complete stoic resignation to fate is absent in their characters. They fight against their foes; they win their fortune and make their own ways in accordance with their wishes and philosophies. They accept or decide to accept the rewards and punishments for their deeds. They do not regret for what fate has done to them.

The paper aims to examine the shares Oedipus and Beowulf possess in their downfall; or, to what extent they are responsible for the accursed ends of their lives apart from the allotment of fate for them. More specifically, by whose curse they fall.

Beowulf and Oedipus represent different time spans; the social constructs in which they reign are also different. *Beowulf* is the mythological allegory of Christian concept of human life whereas *King Oedipus*, from a classical point of view, is the standard-fixing statement of the story of rise and fall of human being. Both the texts have been analyzed and examined in multifarious ways and have been the source of interest for critics and readers offering scopes to have interpretations and counter interpretations since the first time they have come into focus. This paper tries to show that consciously or unconsciously, the heroes themselves are also responsible for incurring their respective afflictions and pitfalls. Apart from their subscription to the concept of 'hamartia', it is their social and individual standpoint that obliges them to inflict the curse upon themselves that is followed by their ultimate fall. The respective texts prove that well.

The lives of Beowulf and King Oedipus

Beowulf and Oedipus have some common aspects in their lives if we examine critically. Both are Kings, philanthropic rulers; both of them once enjoyed the golden days of prosperity and in later life surrender to the God-ordained fate that is unavoidable.

Oedipus is born as a prince, gets banished being abandoned by the parents to death but surprisingly survives and is brought up as a prince under another parenthood; by the decision of Fate, he ascends the throne of the land from which he was once expelled; in the most remarkable span of his life he gets married, begets children and reigns as a successful ruler though it is discovered later as the darkest period that brings forth hardship in his life.

Beowulf, in the nonage knows about his father's banishment for his failure to pay the Weirgield or life-money. King Hrothgar of Danes' land gives him asylum and monetary support; in his youth, Beowulf delivers the invaluable service to Hrothgar as a grateful beneficiary to free 'Heorot' overshadowed by the menace of the outlawed monster Grendel and stands victorious killing Grendel and his mother, the sea-monster following a tremendous combat in her morbid abode. He receives huge wealth as gift and then goes back to his land; he rules the land (supposedly there was no such heir to king Hygelac, the ruler of the Geats) for long fifty years. In his old age he is to face a fire-dragon whom he kills though he also receives a fatal wound and dies. So, it can be said that both Oedipus and Beowulf are heroes who achieve the glory of success in their early lives but catastrophically they meet their ends that make certain their positions as tragic heroes.

Role of fate

It is usually held that *Oedipus* is a 'tragedy of fate'. Fate is the major factor here which is thought to be active in the same role in *Beowulf* also, where the hero seems to fall prey to the plan of Fate. Oedipus is considered to be the most wretched one who stands unparalleled with the ill-fate; he is doomed even before he is born and is fated to be known as his father's killer and mother's husband. He tries enough to escape the prophecy but fails. There is no dissent in fact from taking him as a cursed one and commonly it can be believed that he has got what he deserves as the 'foulest sinner'. But it is not really that all his punishment and bereavement came as the consequence of his sin. Fate is not known to have construed any punishment for Oedipus; what it

construed is only the sin-if it can at all be called 'sin', because the sins he has committed are pre-settled and no choice is left for him to avoid that though he tried his best. The sins are serious but not so rare in mythology. Murder and incest are not unfamiliar. So the sin of Oedipus can not be called only one of its kind It is to note that the soothsayer never utters anywhere whether Oedipus will be punished or not and what type of punishment he will receive for his deeds; rather like the invincible horoscopic truth it announces the fate of the man which is no less tormenting than punishment *per se*. Oedipus himself imposes this more heart-piercing self-torture upon himself. His dreadful utterance and his heroic surrender to the punishment and agony leave aside the horror of fate. He is seen carrying on his own judgment, not that of the Delphic order and finally the lonely, perilous journey of that friendless and sightless king ends at his death. It can be said that he is no less responsible for the misery he suffers from.

In *Beowulf*, Beowulf himself decides to fight with the dragon. It is not because of compassionate reason nor is he bound to respond to the call of duty as he was in his first intervention fifty years ago. He is supposed to let the dragon remain as the sole owner of the hoard. Even the request of his chieftains not to annoy the dragon fails to resist him from doing so. Wiglaf says:

Nothing we advised could ever convince
the prince we loved, our land's guardian,
not to vex the custodian of the gold,
let him lie where he was long accustomed[...] (Heaney, 2000; Lines 3079-83).

Though Wiglaf explains that as "too cruel a fate / that forced the king to that encounter" (Heaney, 2000; Lines 3085-86) Beowulf's share in this affliction is not meager.

Man sometimes braves the adversity of making his own way by ignoring fate which is called heroism and that is reflected in the lives of the two heroes. Fate predominantly exercises its power in both the cases but it is also true that they invite the punishments; one by the foolish act of challenging a dragon on a very silly and immoral ground whereas another one by uttering the uncouth curses that ultimately fall upon him.

A study of King Oedipus

Oedipus utters banishment when the identity of the assassin of Laius is yet to be known as he says, 'His fate will be nothing than banishment'.

He goes on cursing:

I here pronounce my sentence upon his head:
No matter who he may be, he is forbidden
Shelter or intercourse with any man
In all this country over which I rule;
From fellowship of prayer or sacrifice
Or lustral rite is excommunicated;
Expelled from every house, unclean, accursed [...]. (Sophocles: Lines 36-42)

Unknowingly he commits the sin; more unknowingly, he inflicts the burden of curse upon himself: "If, with my knowledge, house or hearth of mine / Receive the guilty man, upon my head / Lie all the curses I have laid on others." (Sophocles: Lines 250-52)

Oedipus ironically includes himself in the train of the names of his ancestors; Agenor, Cadmus, Polydorus, Labdacus and Laius and swears to fight for Laius as he "would fight for [my] own father" (Sophocles: Line 264) and if anyone does not give his full effort in discovering the murderer, he wishes, 'the gods curse all that disobey this charge!' (Sophocles: Line 268).

Not only Oedipus himself, some others like Teiriasias also take part in cursing:
[...] upon your head
Is the ban your lips uttered
[.....]

You are the cursed polluter of this land. (Sophocles: Lines 350-53).

Teirasia casts away the humiliation done by Oedipus as he says: “You are to be pitied; uttering such taunts / As all men’s mouth must some day cast at *you*” (Sophocles: Lines 375-76).

In a way, Oedipus accepts the curse boasting that neither blind Teirasia nor any other human being, who can see, can do any harm to himself. Teirasia completes the curse saying, ‘Your enemy is yourself’. He refers directly to Oedipus as he says: “He that came seeing, blind shall go; / Rich now, then a beggar; stick-in-hand, groping his way / To a land of exile;” (Sophocles: Lines 452-54).

Oedipus without thought or fear goes on uttering fiery words against the undiscovered sinner who killed Laius. The chorus try to assume the curse but its not identified:

Was there a quarrel between the house of Labdacus
And the son of Polybus? None that we ever knew,
For which to impugn the name of Oedipus,
Or seek to avenge the house of Labdacus
For the undiscovered death. (Sophocles: Lines 500-04).

When the truth is yet to be discovered, Oedipus knows Polybus and Merope` as his parents and escapes to avoid committing sin against them. The truth creeps out from the darkness of innocence, that he (Oedipus) is the supposed murderer of the former king of Thebes; he startles and shivers in utter terror “Is this my sin? Am I not utterly foul?” (Sophocles: Line 821). None else has the least notion about what is going to happen. None of the citizens wish to see the “unclean one” on the scaffold. They only want to get rid of the sin. But Oedipus is aware of what he has done and says: “Ah, wretch! Am I unwittingly self-cursed?” (Sophocles: Line 745). He confesses: “On me is the curse that none but I have laid” (Sophocles: Line 819). He is self-accused and self-tortured as in a prophetic tone Creon utters to indicate the aftermath of the king’s harshness, seasoned with unheeded, unreasonable anger.(Sophocles: Lines 615-18) But more emphatic, more crucial is the curse when words are thrown from the king’s wife-mother, Jocasta’s lips, ‘O lost and damned!’ (Sophocles: Line 1070).

Oedipus wants to take the responsibility of what he has done. He is heroic enough to embark into the one - sided strife against fate whereas his father Laius wants to detente the whim of fate. He boasts unlike anyone else which could be called as ‘Hubris’(One common form of hamartia in Greek tragedies was hubris, that “pride” of overweening self-confidence which leads a protagonist to disregard a divine warning or to violate an important moral law.(Abrams, 1971) ; as he is the noble soul, subdued by ‘patricide’ and ‘incestuous sin’ and brings his life at the edge of utter ruin to get out of the hypnotic snare of the trilogy of sinful relationships of “Father, brother, and son: bride , wife and mother;” (Sophocles: Line 1404).After all, he does so only because he feels the indomitable psychological and humanistic urge to know, ‘*who I am*’ and fears not to face the crude reality and he owns the courage to tolerate it within himself if we leave aside his heroic atrocity to remove the scar from the land. He has, in fact, doomed himself. Nothing is left for God or Fate to do to him, as he says—“O God, what wilt thou do to me!”(Sophocles: Line 739) and never echoes Jesus Christ: “My God, my God, why have you left me?” (Bible, 1995: Psalm-22).

Oedipus is proud, kingly even in his catastrophe. In a psychoanalytical trait he cries out—not in repentance but in sheer recrimination to himself— “O Light! May I never look on you again...?” In limitless fury and self-indignation he shouts: “[...] hide me away, / Away! Kill me! Drown me in the depths of the sea! / Take me [...]” (Sophocles: Lines 1408-10).

Nowhere in the play, Oedipus accuses anyone except himself for the scar on his family, for the sacrilege he has thrown unto his blood, “On no man else / But on me alone is the scourge of my punishment.” (Sophocles: Lines 1411-12)

He blames neither the parents nor the shepherds who disregarded the Oracle's prophecy by letting the baby live on the earth only to experience the most heinous revelation of the truth of his life and to be burnt with infamy forever of such a rank except uttering a sad, remorseful reprimand 'Cursed be the benefactor / That loosed my feet and gave me life for death' (Sophocles: Lines 1356-58).

Nor does he blame gods or Fate for construing such a diabolic design for him; though only once he laments: "Apollo, friends, Apollo / has laid this agony upon me" (Sophocles: Line 1332-33) but instantly he takes on the charge of his blindness himself and says: Not by his hand; I did it. / What should I do with eyes / Where all is ugliness? (Sophocles: Lines 1334-36).

In utter self-hatred he curses himself-not to die, rather to suffer, until his poor soul has its purgation before he meets his wretched parents in the grave. And there he dares not go with his sight. So he incurs blindness upon himself. He seeks permission from Creon to leave the land, as he no longer wants to let his 'living presence' curse [t]his fatherland[of mine]...". He stops not here as it is not enough. He foretells the perpetual suffering of his life which, he knows, would not end by any common sickness or age or by any accident because that has sustained death earlier. His life, he says, is 'preserved for more awful destiny' (Sophocles: Line 1460).

A study of Beowulf: Beowulf like any other epic hero in the setting of a heathen warrior society incarnates the Latin formulation of vastly known heroic idealism i.e. *Sapientia et fortitudo* (wisdom and prowess). Beowulf can be called a tragic figure conclusively because,

"What makes Beowulf a tragic figure is his superabundance, his capacity for superhuman acts, his strength of thirty men, his exalted sense of social obligation, and his generosity—all these being characteristics that place him above ordinary human experience, to the point where, finally, he is destroyed by a dragon".(Lee, 1972).

In the metaphorical design of the poem, the dragon is death incarnate--the instrument of Beowulf's death and fall though the portrait of Beowulf is "... somewhat enigmatic and the manner of his death a paradox of defeat in victory" (Goldsmith, 1970). Once Beowulf was at the peak of prosperity and fame and as a mighty man he has always won victory and confidence of his patron as well as his people. But finally he falls. Why he falls or why he is to receive the fatal wound and loss is not sufficiently explained.

His motives for fighting in both the parts are important to identify and justify his share in his tragic fall. "He is more the knight than the adventurer in his early exploits, first fighting the giants and water-monsters who attacked the Geats" (Goldsmith 134). His great adventure at the 'Heorot' was not inspired by the spirit of self-exaltation; it was due to his sense of responsibility to humanity in disaster. But his last combat with the dragon can not justify any noble objective like that. Wiglaf's earlier censure of Beowulf's decision to go after the dragon and the forecast of a wretched future for the Geats as a consequence of his fatal combat can be meant as dramatic irony (Goldsmith 1970). Wiglaf repents:

Often when one man follows his own will
many are hurt. This happened to us.
... ..
The hoard is laid bare,
but at a grave cost; (Heaney, 2000: Lines 3075-85).

He is, as told in the narrative, old; but never is it mentioned that he has lost his strength or has been diseased and fatigued; rather he possesses the boldness to face the dragon alone. While he attacks Grendel and his mother, the sea-monster, a band of warriors accompany him, who are sincere and devoted and who do not hesitate to risk their lives to follow Beowulf's command. But in the last combat when the dragon constricts around the warrior-king's body, his retainers leave him behind and retreat into the woods forgetting their duty to be with their lord. Then, Lee

comments, “Loyalty dies, protection vanishes, and the good society disintegrates” (Lee, 1972). Confusion and hopelessness looms large on the society that overshadows the former glory and success of Beowulf. Metaphorically the dragon is the foe of man that brings death and destruction which has been roused to seek vengeance by the theft of a goblet.

In the first part of the poem Beowulf’s moral scruples along with his belief in the supreme power is evident. At that time he had the complete and moral support of his comrades that resisted him from flouting God’s law. His mission was to respond to the call of humanity and by that he endangered his own life only. He was then a rescuer, an emancipator who enjoyed the success with fame and wealth.

But after fifty years Beowulf is seen as a very different leader with power and responsibility.

“From a religious point of view, the search for fame which in the young prince was a part of loyal service to God and king, has become in the old ruler a much more selfish quest in which God is not acknowledged as the author of his strength and upholder of his power”(Goldsmith, 1970).

In the second part he himself testifies his ‘fortitudo’ or prowess giving a lengthy statement of the victorious adventures in his early life. Margaret E. Goldsmith criticises “...the decision to fight alone is foolish and splendid at once, like Ulysses’s decision to press on into the uninhabited world” (Goldsmith, 1970).

It is not known whether Beowulf turned malignant or not; but the question that is unavoidable is why he dragged his people into the curse or the bereavement of being leaderless as Wiglaf says,

.....
but often, repeatedly, in the path of exile
they shall walk bereft, bowed under woe,
now that their leader’s laugh is silenced,
high spirits quenched. (Heaney, 2000: Lines 3018-21)

In accordance with the former acts of nobleness and heroic qualities, the concluding line can be taken as one reason why his keenness to win fame has provoked him to such ‘foolish’ thing, to incur the curse upon himself as well as on his people which proved to be ‘calamitous’ to them. It can be taken as an example of *demesure* (intemperance), the opposite of the ideal of *mensura* (temperance). So, at the core of his heroic desire for glory there was nothing but selfishness and imprudence. In this way Beowulf “brings the code of personal heroism into question” (Goldsmith, 1970). Beowulf’s life along with his fall upholds the transience of all earthly things like beauty, fame, wealth or power and also proves the aphorism that man chooses things that must die and he must die with them.

But in another way it is the crude, bare-footed ‘greed’ that steps in to “sap the hero’s strength from within” and he follows the way of Adam “leaving the people once more in the power of the forces of destruction”(Goldsmith, 1970). It is the ultimate shape of the gradually increasing pride and avarice within the hero. He is supporting, at least not thinking to punish the goblet-stealer; it is a clear violence against moral values which is the perversion of *fortitudo* and is combated primarily by it. In the same way *militia* is the perversion or abandonment of *sapientia* which is combated by it (Kaske, 1971). It is a threatening to Christian concept of damnation and the treasure of the hoard bears a curse of that. Beowulf admits himself: “Doomed as I am and sickening for death”(Heaney, 2000: Line 2740).

At the last moment of his life he expresses his wish to have a look on the hoard of the dragon and commands Wiglaf to carry them before him:

I want to examine
the ancient gold, gaze my fill

on those garnered jewels; my going will be easier
for having seen the treasure....(Heaney, 2000: Lines 2747-50).

So, only for these material things of the world he endangers his life, not for any noble cause. In the last part of his life, his war is not actually against any misanthropic monster or dragon; rather with the force of temptation and for the cause of temptation. He upholds the concept 'temptation itself is warfare' and proves the old belief or allegory of creation that is, man is assigned for God's campaign but finally he succumbs to the temptation of greed and thus falls. His fight with the dragon has a decisive meaning also; a magnanimous, outstanding hero like Beowulf is supposed to fight with another mighty prince or hero of the enemy troop, not with the dragon; so this duel itself symbolizes his moral degradation; and it is not done as a juvenile delinquency. He does that with all the profits of experience and prudence in his maturity of life. And in doing so he renounces all his former glory that he achieved through vanquishing human foes. So it would not be wrong to say that this curse of fall has been inflicted upon him by himself, none else.

Conclusion

In evaluating Oedipus and Beowulf we can never forget that both of their lives are tales of fallen kings where defeat is the theme though they prove their courage and prudence in former conflicts. In both cases, woe triumphs over human endeavors to rise and to stand victorious. They are both imbued with superabundance of knightly valor and kingly wisdom and prowess to lead a nation. But they reject their lives and positions in misreading God have will and by ensnaring themselves into the maze of the concept of crime and punishment, rise and fall. Oedipus's misery comes through the way of his intemperance and impatient exploration to know himself in the universal question of identity crisis which transcends the barrier of the personal and gets universal. The misery gets severe by the curses and punishment pronounced by Oedipus himself. In *Beowulf*, Beowulf with the hope of a lasting place in the good book of human victory falls into the abyss of temptation; intemperance abolishes his wisdom and morality. So, intemperance and failure to resist temptation to take emotive decisions are common that work predominantly behind the tragic end of their lives. Oedipus's overindulgence to carry on the punitive duties fails to give him any intimation to leave some room for Fate or God. He ignores the prophecy of Delphi and admonitions of Teirasis and Jocasta not to go so far in the discovery in an arrogant kingly gesture. Oedipus heroically breaks through the closed door of self-revelation and finds himself there, tied up, incapable to come out of the deadlock which he himself has made. His former chivalry turns into ignominy and his ignorance into sin. Consequently, he bears a major share in the devastation of his life.

Beowulf deteriorates his fame and humiliates the heroic code by surrendering toward the strength of temptation which is unbecoming for a hero though once he fights against the immoral and evil incarnate (Grendel); he drinks up the poisonous cup of avarice that allures him to the dragon's cave of the hoard of ancient gold which symbolizes the biblical reference to the serpent and the poison that worked to expel Adam from heaven. Thus he also shares the responsibility for the curse that incur upon his life and upon his nation who are left leaderless in the darkness, unguarded and unprotected. Despite the active participation of Nemesis in both the cases both Oedipus and Beowulf are unwittingly responsible to a great extent for the afflictions they suffer at the ends of their lives.

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