

Nietzsche and Cult Practices in Greek Tragedy

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Abstract: Greek drama and its house, theater, is a specific and unique crystalization of many forces of culture that started coming together in the 6th century B.C. in ancient Greece; geographically they came from different parts of Greek lands but they seem to have coalesced in Athens. Among these forces we can count epic poetry, lyric poetry (especially choral poetry like the dithyramb), and cult practices, which were already interwoven in one form or another in earlier times. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche presents how these forces came together with an emphasis on the cult of Dionysus. In this paper, I would like to explore his thesis as I explore the presence of Dionysian rituals in tragedy, but take it further and examine, based on specific tragedies, the presence of rituals of other cults such as those of Apollo, Artemis, Athena, Demeter, Hades, Hermes, and Prometheus. Although Nietzsche's thesis that Greek theater evolved out of the cult of Dionysus may be correct, it is not sound to say that all gods were presented on stage through the mask of Dionysus. I will end my paper by reflecting on the difficulties of presenting gods on stage, which forced dramatists to invent devices like the 'deus-ex-machina.'

Ancient Greek tragedy is an aesthetic phenomenon that emerged in 6th century B.C. as a result of the conflux of many different forces of culture, including those of religion, poetry, and politics. This paper will focus on the relation between tragedy and religion in ancient Greece and precisely the presence of cult rituals and practices in tragedy. Cult practices in ancient Greece were pervasive and present in all aspects of life. As in many other ancient societies, these rituals were, among many others, those of sacrifice, or offerings of any kind, fertility rites, orgiastic rites, athletic practices, and divination and prophecy. Nietzsche's conclusion regarding the origin of tragedy in the cult of Dionysus has been confirmed by many other scholars of the 20th century. Nietzsche's point makes sense not only because the core of Greek drama, the chorus, may have originated from the practices of Dionysian revelers, but also because acting is specifically an ecstatic function. However, it is not only the rituals of Dionysus that are present in Greek drama, but also the rituals of many other Greek cults.

By presence, I do not mean direct presence, as these rituals are exercised within the cult domain, but rather rituals in their crystalized forms. The fact that other cult practices, other than those of Dionysus, are present in Greek drama does not disprove Nietzsche's thesis, but calls for a repositioning of how we view ancient Greek cults and their relations. What follows below is a survey of the presence of different cult practices in tragedy other than those of Dionysus; for the latter Nietzsche gives ample evidence in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Out of the extant seven tragedies by Aeschylus plus seven by Sophocles and nineteen by Euripides, we arrive at a total of thirty-six tragedies. Based on a survey of these tragedies, I developed the following method to pursue this project: 1) tragedies where a god is the hero of the drama (as in *Prometheus Bound*); 2) tragedies where a cult function repeats in different dramas, sometimes in more than one tragedian (for instance, the seer); and finally 3) specific cult rituals that are present as part of the development and the resolution of the drama. It cannot be within the scope of this short presentation to explore every single cult practice in the thirty-six extant Greek tragedies; therefore, this is a cross-section of a bigger study.

I. Cults and Tragedy

1. Gods as Tragic Heroes

Prometheus Bound by Aeschylus gives us an example of a god, though Titanic, as a tragic hero. Prometheus, as the bringer of fire to humanity at a cost to himself, symbolizes 'philanthropy', enlightenment, and suffering and also holds the secret knowledge of the future, an earlier form of cult of prophecy in ancient Greece. Although there is less evidence and knowledge about the earlier Titanic gods and cults, we can assume, based on this tragedy, that the cult of Prometheus included rituals of prophecy that helped humans with their dilemmas and opened up new paths for them. "Verily the day shall yet come when...the Prince of the Blessed shall have need of me

to reveal the new design...” (lines 168-170) He even forewarned the Titans that they would be overthrown by younger gods, but no one paid heed to his advice, and, as a result, Prometheus and his mother Themis, joined the new gods, and the Titans were overthrown as he prophesized (lines 205-230). Some of the rituals of Prometheus are revealed in the text, albeit not with any specific details: Prometheus found cures for maladies, marked ways for humans to read the future (taught them prophecy), showed how to interpret dreams, animal signs, and flame signs, and taught them the art of metallurgy, how to use bronze, iron, silver and gold (lines 480-505).

2. Common Cult Functions

One cult function that appears in many tragedies is prophecy, which often appears in the character of the seer. Blindness of the seer underlies his introspection. This is specifically a function of the cult of Apollo. Thanks to Herodotus and other Greek writers, we have more information about this cult’s rituals than those of Prometheus. We find the crystallization of this oracular ritual in characters like Cassandra and Teiresias. In Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* Cassandra, a priestess of Apollo brought from Troy, foresees the doom ahead of her and Agammemnon at the palace of Argos.

Cassandra: There is no escape; no, my friends, there is none any more.

...

Cassandra: The day is come; flight would profit me but little.

...

Cassandra: The house reeks with blood-dripping slaughter. (lines 1300-1310)

In the second sequel to the Agamemnon trilogy, *The Libation-Bearers*, Pylades invokes Apollo and counsels Orestes to follow the oracle, as he says: “What then becomes henceforth of Loxias’ oracles, declared at Pytho...?” (line 900) The invocation is carried on in the third sequel, *Eumenides*, where the priestess of Apollo opens the drama followed by Apollo himself. Here Apollo is present to confirm the fulfillment of his own prophecy and will help Orestes in his plight of being haunted by the ghost of Clytaemestra and pursued by the Eumenides, those avengers of matricide. However, the tragic conflict between Orestes/Apollo and Clytaemestra/Eumenides will not be solved at the level of prophecy and mother-right seeking. Another intervention will be needed, which I will visit later.

Oracular rituals of Apollo are present in other tragedies as well, most notably in Sophocles’ *King Oedipus*. Here Tiresias, the blind seer of Apollo, who speaks in riddles, is the holder of all truth, the mystery of which lies in the rituals of the Pythian. The chorus reveals this oracular mystery of Apollo:

Chorus:

Who—

who is the man the voice of god denounces

Resounding out of the rocky gorge of Delphi?

The horror too dark to tell,

Whose ruthless bloody hands have done the work?

His time has come to fly...

But he cannot outrace the dread voices of Delphi

Ringling out of the heart of Earth,

the dark wings beating around him shrieking doom

the doom that never dies, the terror—

The skilled prophet scans the birds and shatters me with terror! (lines 530-555)

These lines and many other passages of this trilogy reveal much about the oracular rituals that were practiced at the cult of Apollo. All of these rituals of Apollo's cult that permeate Greek tragedy cannot be confined to what Nietzsche calls 'Apollinian' inspired by Apollo's name. Nietzsche used the term 'Apollinian' to designate the principle of individuation and all that relates to it such as the image, dream, etc. The rituals of Apollo like those of divination exceed the limits of what Nietzsche calls 'Apollinian.' For instance, one must be in ecstasy, a Dionysian function, to be able to divine, and hence these demarcations among different cult functions are highly tenuous.

3. Specific Cult Rituals

Athena and the council of wisdom. In the conflict between Orestes who kills his mother to avenge his father and the Furies who go after matricides, as portrayed by Aeschylus in the *Eumenides*, Athena interferes as she creates a proto-typical court to mediate the conflict. She calls for moderation on both sides and soothes the raging Furies. Orestes, who is supported by Apollo, is saved, though transformed through the ordeal of being pursued by the blood-seeking Titanic goddesses. What we see in this drama are the vestiges of the cult of Athena and its exercise and "distribution" of justice. Here Athena is the judge and she executes justice with her wisdom. We can say that this dramatic court somehow reflects the justice system in Athens in 5th

century B.C., both of which can be traced to the cult practices of Athena, the overseeing goddess of Athens.

There are many other rituals of specific cults that are present in Greek tragedy such as burial rituals that appear in *Antigone*, *Ajax*, and *Suppliants*. Many cults were tightly sealed and their rituals could not be known outside the cult domains. Demeter's was such a cult and Aeschylus was chased and threatened with death for revealing the secrets of her rituals. This drama of Aeschylus where he presumably revealed Eleusian mysteries did not survive. In dramas that deal with Hercules such as *The Madness of Hercules* and *The Children of Hercules* by Euripides, we find rituals of Zeus and Hera. The list is long and would have been longer if we had more extant tragedies.

II. Nietzsche and Dionysus

Nietzsche had knowledge of many of the Greek cults and gods and had even given a lecture on Greek religion at Basel University, which he called *Der griechische Gottesdienst*. However, Nietzsche, in BT, considers other gods, heroes and cult functions as different dimensions and masks of Dionysus. "...all the celebrated figures of the Greek stage—Prometheus, Oedipus, etc.—are mere masks of this original hero, Dionysus. That behind all these masks there is a deity, that is one essential reason for the typical "ideality" of these famous figures which has caused so much astonishment..." (73) Here a question arises: why would different gods be present on stage through the masks of Dionysus, especially when we keep in mind that Dionysus was a recent comer into the Greek pantheon and was not liked by all gods? Either Nietzsche is wrong about the origin of Greek theater, despite the evidence, or, if he is right, there must be another explanation. At the outset I see two possible explanations, both of which need to be

researched: the first one is the role of hosting. If theater belongs to the cult of Dionysus, then Dionysus becomes the hosting god, as he hosts other gods and their cults. Hosting does not erase the hostility among gods; therefore, this can be a plausible explanation. In other words, we can host those to whom we are hostile. The second explanation has to do with the chiasmatic union of all gods and cults in ancient Greek religion, which may be the case for all archaic religions. Owing to our rational heritage, we categorize things, through which we establish fixed boundaries, where boundaries may be fluid and changing and where disparate beings may be interwoven with one another. Ancient Greek cults may have been more inter-penetrative than we understand. If this is the case, Nietzsche's thesis must be revisited and presented in a different light.

It is interesting to note that in the aforementioned lecture on Greek religion, Nietzsche not only does not privilege the cult of Dionysus but also sees dramatic dimension in all cults:

Almost all cults contain a drama, 'δράμα-drama,' a piece of the represented myth, which was based on the foundation of the cult. Its proper sense appears: it is the highest sign of devotion, to do and to suffer what a god himself has done and has suffered; shortly, so far as it is possible to trouble oneself to be him or his follower. This is worth as the means to move the god, to take part with him and to appear. At the festivals of Dionysus on Mount Parnas, one always believed that the god was always there, would be audible in Bacchic cries and cymbal sounds. One assumes this: when one creates same conditions, the same thing steps in; also the epiphany of a god that is always linked to blessing. It is a kind of pressure. One believed moderately to see a god, it was worth for nothing so difficult to move him to come. Not only by doing the same, but also insofar as one does the similar, one feels oneself near him. One thinks about the situation of women in the cult of Demeter; the bud that is planted in the bosom of the earth in order to bring forth fruits was an analog of sexual procreation. All women felt themselves similar to the mother earth and served her.¹

¹ *Nietzsche Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Berlin: DeGruyter, 1983, Volume II-5, p.374. (translation is mine)

As seen in this part of the lecture, Nietzsche gives examples from different cults to explain cult rituals. It is the genius of Greek polytheism, which sustained different human attributes and functions in their conflicting diversity. Nietzsche was well aware of this aspect of Greek religion and acknowledges it throughout his works, including in this lecture. Here is the opening sentence of the lecture: “There has never been such a worship like that of the Greeks: in beauty, splendor, multiplicity, and cohesion it is unique in the world and one of the highest creations of their spirit.”² There is no privileging of the cult of Dionysus in this lecture, which had only a few students. Can we then attribute the privileging of Dionysus to a rhetorical device on Nietzsche’s part, a device that lasts all throughout Nietzsche’s life as a thinker from his first book to his last? The goal of this rhetoric would be: the ecstatic practices and functions of Dionysus have fallen into oblivion and must be re-vitalized. I am in agreement with the goal of this rhetoric, but have to warn Nietzsche’s readers that the privileging of one cult or god over others, where such privileging has no basis, is the beginning of monotheism. Nietzsche had much to say on this subject, often critical of monotheistic trends; however, his spirit (contra monotheism) and his often-inflated rhetoric (privileging of one cult over others) may be at odds with each other in the claim that theater originated out of the cult of Dionysus.

Despite strong evidence regarding the origin of Greek theater out of the cult of Dionysus and the presence of many of its elements in it, there have been many opponents of Nietzsche’s conclusion since the publication of his *The Birth of Tragedy* in 1872. Willamowitz³ considers Nietzsche’s thesis unfounded and many of his points baseless speculations. Kerényi does not accept Nietzsche’s claim that Dionysus is the earliest hero of Greek tragedy; he claims that it is

² *Ibid.*, p. 363.

³ *Future Philology! A Reply to Friedrich Nietzsche’s The Birth of Tragedy*, tr. by G. Postl, B. Babich, and H. Schmid, *New Nietzsche Studies*, Volume Four: Nos. 1 & 2, Summer/Fall 2000, pp. 1-33.

Pentheus.⁴ Murray and Cornford propose that drama originated out of a celebration of the year-spirit,⁵ while stressing the importance of festivals in the culture of Greek drama. On the other hand, Ridgeway professes a tomb or a hero-cult theory,⁶ akin to how some scholars view the origin of contest culture in ancient Greece; according to this theory, tragedy is yet another form of honoring the dead hero whether it is Prometheus, Hercules, Oedipus, Pentheus, or Dionysus. Finally (for this paper, otherwise there are many other positions), Else detaches all cultic origin from Greek tragedy and sees it as an entirely new beginning;⁷ she sees it as a “unique event.” All of these theories regarding the origin of Greek tragedy emphasize some of its particular aspect, while having weak spots.

Conclusion

Nietzsche’s thesis regarding the birth of tragedy opened up a window of research into the ancient Greek world the practices and institutions of which have shaped Western culture for more than two millennia. One question that remains intriguing to me in this research has been the question of the presence of different cult rituals, including that of Dionysus, in Greek tragedy, especially in its early stage. The question of origin is always a difficult one since origins are often shrouded in mystery not to mention the fact that origins are said to be in different ways. Rather than a strictly historical origin, which may be the weakness of *The Birth of Tragedy*, one may reorient oneself to the genealogical origin—a method developed by Nietzsche later—of Greek tragedy

⁴ *Dionysus: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life*, tr. by R. Manheim, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976, p. 324.

⁵ G. Murray, "Excursus on the Ritual Forms Preserved in Greek Tragedy," in *Themis*, 2nd ed., ed. J. Harrison World Publishing, 1927, esp. p. 341.

F. Cornford, *The Origin of Attic Comedy*, London: Edward Arnold, 1914.

F. Ferguson, *The Idea of a Theatre*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949, p. 26.

⁶ William Ridgeway, *The Dramas and Dramatic Dances of Non-European Races*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915; reprinted by Benjamin Bloom, 1964, pp. 5-6.

⁷ G. Else, *The Origin and Early Form of Greek Tragedy* (WW Norton & Co., 1965) 2.

and raise the question as to what multiple, often agonistic, forces, specifically those of cult practices, were present in Greek tragedy, what affects they produced in the total experience of tragic spectacle, and what we can learn today from them whether they are rituals of sacrifice, burial, oracle, or *ek-stasis*.

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