Rhythms of the Chorus and Choral Odes in *Oedipus Rex*

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**Abstract:** This paper studies the structural rhythm of the chorus in *Oedipus Rex*, namely that of emanating from the relationship between the chorus and the structure of the play and from the place of the chorus in the succession of events. It will also address the internal rhythm within the choral odes themselves. The type of rhythm addressed in this study is the harmony emanating from the alternation chorus and episodes in the macrocosmic structure of the play, and the alternation of the strophes and antistrophes within the choral odes themselves. These alternations are supposedly repetitive, regular, and equidistant. However, any departure from these features dictates an explanation. The paper hopes to demonstrate that the chorus contributes another important dimension to the musical structure of the play and enhances the meaning of the tragedy.

1. Introduction

*Oedipus Rex* is considered one of the best dramas in the history of literature as it has survived over 25 centuries without losing its glamour and appeal to readers, scholars and directors of drama. It was the favorite Greek tragedy of Aristotle who considers it the model play with the model chorus [1] and Oedipus is the ideal character in an ideal tragedy [2]. The play is indeed a masterpiece in its plot and structure. In numerous places in the *Poetics*, Aristotle refers to it as example of a well composed tragedy in the sense that every part of it contributes to the whole and enhances the meaning of the play. The chorus is one of the components that contribute to the integrity of the plot and structure, according to Aristotle. Indeed, he considers the chorus an actor in the play [3].

The chorus in the tragedies of Sophocles has attracted a lot of attention of the critics. This is natural because Sophocles improved the role of the chorus by increasing the number of the elders to fifteen, making it interactive, and relating its odes to the plot, especially in *Oedipus at Colonus*, which probably has the strongest chorus in Greek tragedy. In *Oedipus Rex* the chorus is less interactive and weaker than that of *Oedipus at Colonus*. Generally, scholarship on the Sophoclean chorus has been always directed to the contents of the choral odes and the relationship between those odes and the plot [4, 5, 1, 6, 7; 8 and 9, among others].

There are numerous suggestions about the role of the chorus in Shophoclean dramas. Weiner [1] mentions some of the popular views about the role of the chorus among scholars. Some say that it serves as a "buffer between actor and the audience (p.206); others say that it is there to intensify the passions of the characters; still others think of it as an "Ideal Audience" (p. 206), so that the natural audience assesses it reaction to the events on the stage in light of that of the chorus; a fourth opinion is that the chorus turns "commonplace details to universal verities" (p. 206). Weiner suggests that the function of the chorus is to produce an Alienation Effect similar to that we find in Brecht. He describes that effect as "perhaps the most efficient and direct method of arousing emotions and passions of the audience while forcing it to think at the same time" (p. 211). Weiner also aligns with Nietzschean theory that tragedy is the outcome of "the marriage of the opposing attitudes of Apollo and Dionysus" (p.112). The characters accordingly represent the Apollonian values of intellect and reason, whereas the chorus represents Dionysian aspects of imagination and instincts.

This paper hopes to contribute a new dimension to the studies of choral odes, namely that of rhythm. Generally, there are various types of rhythm in *Oedipus Rex*. At the basic level, there is the rhythm stemming from the patterns of poetic meters as presented in William Scott [10]. At another level, there are the structural rhythms as those analyzed in David Porter [4]. Porter argues that the play demonstrates "a tightly controlled and highly significant parallelism between its overall movement and the rhythms of its component parts" (p.470). But what is rhythm?

Rhythm originally is related to the beats of music and the meter of poetry. It includes an alternation between two antithetical items or sounds. Thomas Arp and Greg Johnson [11] define it as a “"wavelike recurrence of motion or sound.”(p.838). They define rhythm in language as an
alternation between stressed and unstressed syllables (P. 838). Furthermore, they maintain that there is “interdependence between rhythm and meaning” in poetry (p. 838). Abercrombie (1967) argues that rhythm “in speech as in other human activities, arises from the periodic occurrence of some sort of movement, producing an expectation that the regularity of succession will continue” (quoted in [12 p. 18]. Schluter discusses “the principle of rhythmic alternation in language as a domain in prosody or suprasegmental phonology” (P. 17).

All these definitions include the element of repeated alternation at equal distance. This sort of rhythm is indigenous to us as it imitates the rhythm of our heart beats, our inhales and exhales of respiration and the numerous other regular rhythmic patterns in the human body. It is also similar to circadian rhythms of the alternation of day and night, sleep and wake, and the endless list of dual antithetical pairs that surround our lives and our world.

In this study, the perception of rhythm is in line with these definitions as there are numerous alternating items in Oedipus Rex. The study proposes that there are still other types of rhythm emanating from the choral songs, such as the rhythm emerging from the antithetical alternation of episodes and choral songs which produces a musical structure of the play. Also, there is the rhythm emanating from sequencing the binary antithetical sets of strophe-antistrophe in the choral odes. The rhythm secured from these successions contributes another important dimension that enhances the poetic structure of the play and the meaning of the tragedy. This paper will study the rhythm resulting from the design of clustering and constructing the choral odes in the hope to demonstrate the elaborate and thematically significant music in the flow of action in the play.

2. Rhythms Related to the Structure of Theater

In the Poetics, Aristotle considers the choral songs an integral part of the play like the prologue, scenes, and exodus. He also considers the choric odes integral to the action of the play exactly like the action of the other characters. Says Aristotle:

The Chorus too should be regarded as one of the actors; it should be an integral part of the whole, and share in the action, in the manner not of Euripides but of Sophocles. As for the later poets, their choral songs pertain as little to the subject of the piece as to that of any other tragedy. They are, therefore, sung as mere interludes- a practice first begun by Agathon. Yet what difference is there between introducing such choral interludes, and transferring a speech, or even a whole act, from one play to another. [3, chap. 18]

He further enumerates and defines the parts that compose the structure of a tragedy as thus:

The Prologue is that entire part of a tragedy which precedes the Parode. The Episode is that entire part of a tragedy which is between complete choric songs. The Exode is that entire part of a tragedy which has no choric song after it. Of the Choric part the Parode is the first undivided utterance of the Chorus: the Stasimon is a Choric ode without anapaests or trochaic tetrameters: the Commo is a joint lamentation of Chorus and actors. The parts of Tragedy which must be treated as elements of the whole have been already mentioned. The quantitative parts- the separate parts into which it is divided- are here enumerated. [3, chap. 12]

According to Aristotle's description of the structure of a tragedy, the chorus alternates with the prologue, the scenes, and exodus in a regular rhythm. The flow of the whole play looks like this:

Prologue > chorus > scene 1 > chorus > scene 2 > chorus > scene 3 > chorus > scene 4 > chorus > Exodos> chorus, as in figure 1.

These rhythmical patterns posit an external or macrocosmic musical design on the structure of the play. If we compare this sequence with the feet in the lines of the odes, it looks like an iambic hexameter line if we consider that episodes stand for unstressed syllables and the chorus for stressed syllables:

U / U / U / U / U / U/.

The resulting rhythm of the alternation is regular, antithetical, and equidistant. Similarly, the rhythm stemming from the alternation of the episodes and chorus generates another rhythm emanating from the regular alternation of the place in the theater designated for the actors of the episodes and that of
the choristers. So the fact that the actors utter their speeches on the stage (proskénion) and the chorus chants its odes in the orchestra produces the spatial rhythm of six sets of (stage > orchestra) alternations as in Figure 2:

Likewise, the altitude of the stage in Greek theater was at times higher than that of the orchestra area. This leads to another altitudinal spatial succession of six high > low alternations as in Figure 3.

Furthermore, the dialogue among characters on stage is merely spoken, whereas the odes of the chorus are sung. Again this creates another rhythmical cluster of six (speech > song) alternations as in Figure 4:

It is very clear that the very idea of having a chorus in Greek drama ensures a highly wrought rhythmical structure of the play at the macrocosmic level. But how do these spatial and structural types of rhythm help the meaning of the play?

Possible answer is that they intensify the tragedy and multiply our sympathy with the fallen character. This way Sophocles uses the formal rhythm of alternating scenes and choral songs to double emphasize the effect of tragedy. As the events move steadily towards the tragic end of the protagonist, the music, songs, and dances of the chorus escort him along his sad discoveries and accompany him toward his tragic fall. The human tragedy of Oedipus thus accompanied by music becomes crueler and more pathetic.

3. Rhythm of the Choral Odes

Beside the macrocosmic rhythms in the architecture of Oedipus Rex, the flood of rhythm persists and intensifies at the microcosmic level in the strophic odes of the chorus. It is obtained from the composition and the sequencing of the odes. Composition here refers to the binary antithetical sequence of strophe-antistrophe sets in each entry of the chorus. The alternation of strophe-antistrophe creates rhythm that is congruous with that of the iambic (/ ) feet of the songs themselves.

However, the rhythm resulting from the recurrence of the strophe-antistrophe sets is disturbed by any change in the composition or the number of such sets in each entry of the chorus. For instance, changing the composition to strophe-strophe or antistrophe-antistrophe disturbs the rhythm and makes the flow arhythmic, and naturally, incongruous with the poetry of the odes. The irregularity of the rhythm definitely has significance for a playwright like Sophocles, who is extremely careful in integrating the elements of the play into a perfect whole, and thus it dictates an explanation. In analogy with the poetry of the odes, we will have spondaic (/ ) or pyrrhic (U U) feet instead of the iambic (U / ) feet by changing the sequence in the choral odes.

The study proposes that whenever there is a conflict in the mind of the protagonist, or struggle with other characters, the strophe-antistrophe succession is confused in order to reflect the ailment in the mind of Oedipus or havoc in the action of the play, or a change in the attitudes or views of the chorus, or all these possibilities, as in the case of the Second Stasimon. There, the regular strophe-antistrophe changes to strophe-strophe followed by antistrophe-antistrophe and then straightens up to regular pattern.

Another irregularity in the rhythm of the choral songs is the number of strophe-antistrophe sets in the chorus entries after the scenes of the play. For example, after the prologue there are three such sets as in (Figure 5); after scene 1, there are two (Figure 6); after scene 2, there are 4 sets the first two of which are irregular (strophe- strophe, antistrophe-antistrophe), while the last two are regular sets, as in (Figure 7); after scene 3, interestingly, there is
only one set (figure 8); after scene 4, there are two
sets (figure 9); and after Exodus, there 2 sets in the
commons (figure 10). So the numbers of chorus
entries in the play are 3, 2, 4, 1, 2, 2 as the
panoramic figure of the play (figure 11) shows.
This variation in the number of entries also has
thematic significance and requires an explanation.
The study will discuss each element of the play and
the coral ode after it by way of probing the role of
the rhythmic meaning of these odes in the play. The
following sections will trace the flux of rhythm in
the odes of the chorus, and point out their
appropriation to and relation with the scenes that
precede them.

4. Regular Rhythm in Parodos

In the Prologue, the Thebans come as suppliants
to the steps of Oedipus' palace to invoke his help.
They are aware that he is not divine, but still they
resort to him, guided by their previous experience
of him as the savior of the city from the Sphinx.
They chant:

We come in supplication, turn to you,
The mightiest of mortals, Oedipus
To find some means of safety, whether
Gods inspire you, or some human council
helps.
Come best of mortals, set the city right!
But carefully. We call you savior now,
remembering your former services.
We wouldn't want your reign recalled as one
in which we stood upright and later fell.

(40-50)

The mood of the suppliants is that of trust and
confidence in the insights and perception of their
monarch. Oedipus' response is up to their
expectations. He has started his search for a
solution to the dilemma of Thebes even before they
call upon him. Indeed, he has sent Creon to Delphi
to seek help and learn what can be done to save the
city (67-75).

The answer Creon brings from Delphi is
enigmatic and confusing: "Lord Phoebus orders us
explicitly/ to purge an evil growing up in Thebes,"
reports Creon (96-7). This revelation sets Oedipus
on a course of investigation that ends only in Scene
4. The immediate shower of Oedipus-Creon
question - answer is itself rhythmical (85-135). It is
40-line ping-pong question - and - answer
uninterrupted flow, all in front of the suppliants.
Oedipus is ironically enthusiastic about uncovering
the truth of the murder of Laius as he aspires to
prove himself the savior of Thebes a second time,
and endeavors to safeguard against being himself
subject to such an end like that of his predecessor.

The genuineness of Oedipus in searching for the
murderer of Laius and the enigma of the divine
revelation enable Sophocles to establish the
dramatic irony of the play, i.e. Oedipus' search for
the criminal is in fact a search for himself, and a
search for his identity. He will discover at the end
of his search that he is the defilement that should be
ridden to save the kingdom. This way his
investigation will take him on a journey of gradual
discovery of his reality, misery, and destiny. At this
stage, neither Oedipus nor the chorus knows the
reality. Both traverse in darkness and ignorance
unaware of the calamity that has loomed around the
kingdom and the king. The chorus, though
apprehensive, demonstrates faith in the abilities and
perceptiveness of Oedipus. It is after that
exposition of the Theban crisis at the outset of the
plot, that Sophocles introduces Parodos of a ternary
rhythmic binary and regular alternation of strophe-
antistrophe songs of the chorus as in figure (5)
below.

The number of lines in the six hymns of the chorus
in Parodos is 9-9/ 8-8/8-9 lines. It is noticed that
the songs of 9 lines (hymns 1, 2, 6) are invocations
to the Olympian gods seeking their help to recover
the people of Thebes out of the current
predicament. The first hymn is addressed to
Apollo, the second to Athena, Artemis, and Apollo.
The sixth hymn is addressed to Apollo, Artemis,
and Bacchus. However, the songs of 8 lines (3, 4,
and 5) describe to the gods the misery of Thebes
and the Thebans.  It is the researcher's belief  that
the number of lines is a part of the rhythmic design
Sophocles provides the play as there is nothing
random in this masterpiece.

The alternation of antithetically arranged choral
ode enhances the physical dances and the music of
the chorus and creates the intended rhythm.
Noticeably, the regularity of the beats in the
Parodos reflects order and stability at this point as
in the prologue there is merely an exposition of the
tragedy of Thebes. Yet, simultaneously, the suppliants are optimistic and confident in the ability and wisdom of their King to find a solution to the plight of the city.

5. Regular rhythm in Ode 1

The second round of choral songs comes in Ode1 after Scene1. The choral songs are two sets this time and are one set less than the Parodos, as in figure (6).

The rhythm here is binary of two sets of strophe-antistrophe regular sequence in which the first set expresses confidence in the might of Apollo whose "arms are hot and bright, /and he will arrive in force" (470-71) and hunt the murderer of Laios down.

However, the second set of songs (strophe 2-antistrophe 2) in this ode expresses skepticism of the charges by diviner Tiresias that Oedipus is the murderer of Laius. The chorus' leader praises the seer at the beginning of the scene, but the choristers turn against him after the accusations he directs against their monarch. The chorus' leader describes him as a knowledgeable person who "sees eye-to-eye with lord Apollo" (285). Nevertheless, the chorus is bewildered by the unfounded charges of the old seer to indict Oedipus, who had previously proved himself heroic in saving the country from the Sphinx. Sings the chorus in Antistrophe 2:

I won’t believe the charge until
The truth stands straight and tall.

The winged maid attacked him then
by day before our eyes.
He prove a loyal citizen
and obviously wise.

I’d never want to think that he
committed such a crime.

(504-12)

The chorus here shows total faith in the King and expresses loyalty him, and, after confrontation between him and Tiresias, the seer in their minds turns into a merely blind old man spreading lies about their valiant monarch. In fact, the choral members take the side of Oedipus, reiterate his views, and identify with him. However, like him, they suffer from the same ironic blindness that will be disclosed at the end of the play.

Like in Parodos, Ode1 is rhythmical in sequencing the strophe-antistrophe songs. The number of songs, however, is less than in Parodos, probably because the elders are clearly confused and upset with the charges against their renowned sovereign.

6. Confusing and Erratic Rhythm in Ode 2

The rhythm of the chorus changes course after Scene 2 and becomes erratic or arhythmical. Following Scene 2 the writer introduces two strophes and two antistrophes entries followed by two rounds of strophe-antistrophe sets, as in figure (7).

This arrangement of the choral entries violates the regularity of the rhythm of the choral odes. If we seek analogy to poetry for illustration, the sequence of choric entries after Scene 2 compared to a line of poetry scans as thus: (U U) (/ /) (U /) (U /) where the strophe is the unstressed (U) and the antistrophe is the stressed syllable (/) and the meter will be a pyrrhic/spondaic/iambic/iambic tetrameter line. Compared to all other odes in the play, this ode stands unique among them in its irregularity.

The striking difference in rhythmic pattern between this ode and others requires an explanation. This ode comes after the Scene 2 which is devoted to the quarrel between Oedipus and Creon, which succeeds a previous clash with Tiresias in Scene 1. Oedipus and Creon reach a deadlock in the discussion of the allegations of Oedipus against Creon, a deadlock that incurs the intervention of Choragus and, later, of Jocasta. In this dispute, Oedipus contends that Creon has plotted against his life and his throne with Tiresias on the basis that the seer who charged Oedipus with the crime was recommended by Creon.
Oedipus uses deductive reasoning to prove that the Tiresias is an impostor and not a seer. He founds his argument on the failure of that false prophet to recognize the criminal when the crime was committed long ago.

Creon's rational inductive argument of pragmatic reasoning to refute the charges of the king is rejected by the tyrant Oedipus, who believes that the blind impostor has been directed against him by Creon. The latter points out the irrationality of conspiracy in general because it leads to anarchy. In such a case, he will lose power and social status. This argument fails to change the vengeful desire of Oedipus. It is worthy to mention here that because of this vehemence of Oedipus, the play is sometimes entitled "Oedipus Tyrannus" or "Oedipus, the Tyrant" among less sympathetic ancient scholars [7, p. 18].

At this adamancy of Oedipus, the writer breaks the usual rhythmical flow of the chorus by introducing two strophes succeeded by two antistrophes, followed by two regular strophe > antistrophe choric songs. The two irregular sets, however, do not include choric songs. They rather include the leader of the chorus interacting with the characters on the stage and giving advice to Oedipus to calm his rage and accept the argument and oath of Creon.

In fact, the intervention of Choragus marks a turning point in the play as he, for the first time, questions the judgment and motives of the King under the effect of anger, and asks him to calm his rage and "be ruled by" Jocasta. Choragus, however, swears and assures the King of his unremitting loyalty and allegiance.

Breaking the rhythm with two irregular sets has thematic and dramatic functions. Thematically, it reflects the confusion in the mind of the protagonist and the attitudes of the choristers towards him as well. For instance, when Jocasta tries to prove to him the futility and incredibility of the oracles by telling him the story of her destined child, Oedipus shakes with fear and panic. Also, the details about the place and time of the murder of Laius, trigger his suspicion and fright that he can be possibly the murderer and the defilement to be cleansed out of Thebes. He reacts to her description of the location of the crime, wondering "O Zeus! What's this? Have you been plotting too?" (738). Furthermore, the image of Laios which Jocasta describes and the image of the old man he killed at that time are identical. To this the frightened Oedipus responds, "Ah – Ahh! I may have placed an awful curse/ upon myself, not knowing what I did" (744-45).

Oedipus' reactions to the details of the story related by Jocasta reflect his growing disturbance. Later, when Jocasta informs him of the number of the companions that were with Laius, Oedipus responds with anxiety, "The truth is now becoming obvious" (754). The story provided by Jocasta about the birth and banishment of her destined child, the actions taken to reverse that destiny, and about the murder of Laius are originally meant to prove that the oracles of Delphi are useless and should not be taken seriously. But her proof backfires and provokes confusion and fear in the mind of Oedipus. Sophocles artistically reflects that confusion in the mind of the character by disrupting the regular rhythm of the choral songs.

Dramatically, the chorus in the play is given an interactive role. Represented by Choragus in Scene 1, the chorus recommends Tiresias to the King to help in identifying the criminal. In Scene 2, Choragus intervenes to calm the anger of Oedipus and Creon. In the two strophes and antistrophes after Scene 2, Choragus tries hard to appeal to Oedipus to accept the explanation of Creon. The vehemence of the King puts Choragus for the first time in doubt of the propriety of the King's judgment and intentions, and thus advises him to yield to Jocasta's view. This indicates a new attitude of the chorus towards Oedipus. Clearly, the choristers for the first time in the play start to have doubts and worries about the sagaciousness and correctness of the views of Oedipus. This indicates a major departure from the initial trust in his abilities given in the prologue and Scene 1. Sophocles reflects these uncertainties of the chorus and fears of the king by disrupting the regular rhythms of the chorus.

In the choral songs that succeed the initial four irregular entries, the rhythm goes back to normal regular flow with two sets of strophe > antistrophe entries. Interesting is the theme of these entries. In fact, there is an agreement among all critics that these songs are critical and essential to understanding the play.[13] Scodel holds that these four songs (891-864) "are among the most discussed passages in Greek literature," [13, p. 214]. Strophe I is an emphatic reminder of the need to abide by divine rules, avoid blasphemy, and show genuine reverence to the deities of heaven. Whereas, Antistrophe I warns that human hubris or disdain of the gods will lead to total destruction of a human being. The issue of pride is further emphasized in Strophe 2:

May evil fate reduce to dust  
the men of haughty word and deed  
who scoffs at gods and what is just  
to satisfy his wretched greed.  
(83-87)
This warning is followed in Antistrophe 2 by the chorus' complaint of the lack of respect for Apollo's oracle in the words of the Queen and Oedipus:

Apollo's everywhere denied  
bright honors. Piety died. (909-10)

The warning against blasphemy and the complaint of the chorus forebode destruction of these masters who disdain the gods and suspect their prophecies.

7. Optimistic Rhythm of Ode 3

Scene 3 opens with the Queen visiting the temple of Delphi as a suppliant carrying branches and incense, albeit her skepticism about prophecies. But her invocation Apollo there does not show genuine belief in Apollo's prophecies or at least respect of the holy temple. She resorts to Delphi only because it is the nearest and only after Oedipus has become irrational and is frightened by every tale he hears. Thus she appeals to Apollo:

… I turn  
to you, Apollo, being the nearest god.  
I bring these gifts and humbly beg your help.  
Provide some pious way to end our grief.  
We're at a loss completely, seeing the man  
Who steers our galley paralyzed by fear.  
(919 -23)

We learn from her invocation to the Delphic deity that Oedipus is in a miserable situation and is becoming frantically illogical. However, the queen swiftly converts to her usual disbelief in the prophecies the moment the Citizen of Corinth comes with the news of the demise of Polybus, the supposed father of Oedipus. With "O sacred oracles, where are you now?" (946), she welcomes the news of Polybus' death for a further proof that the prophecies are worthless and should not be taken seriously. Oedipus himself swiftly and happily, though ignorantly, turns against the prophecies. With relief, he vents out his conversion: "…Oracles are worthless. Polybus has taken them to Hades, one and all." (971-72)

The news of this messenger reverses the doubts ignited by the story of Jocasta in Antistrophe 2 after Scene 2. It reassures Oedipus and gives him temporary tranquility of mind. The messenger, however, revokes this tranquility quickly when he tries to clear Oedipus of all doubts about the prophecy in order to persuade him to go back to Corinth and be crowned there. Oedipus' reluctance in considering the idea of going back to Corinth because of his fear of Merope, his assumed mother, who is still alive, motivate the messenger to release the fatal secret that Polybus and Merope are not his real parents, but rather foster parents. He adds more fatal details as he certifies that he himself took Oedipus, who was a new born infant then, from another shepherd and gave him to Polybus and Merope. This tightens the noose around the neck of Oedipus, leaving him with one glamor of hope that can come from the testimony of the Shepherd, who was the person that gave him to the Messenger and who was the only survivor from among the companions of Laius and the only alive witness of his murder.

Following this Scene 3 is the shortest ode in the play of one strophe – antistrophe as in figure 8.

This ode is the most optimistic of the songs of the chorus in the play.

While Oedipus has his last chance to escape his doom through the testimony of the shepherd, the choral singers express an image of the origin of Oedipus that looks like wishful thinking, i.e. that he was born like nymphs of a divine origin. But in light of the succession of events, this ode posits the impossible as the only solution to save Oedipus. The optimistic mood could have been possible and appropriate after the Prologue, but not here when every incident points to Oedipus.

8. Rhythms of Scene 4

Scene 4 is the end of the investigation and discovery of the disastrous truth of Oedipus's fate. The long waited for shepherd appears in this scene. He witnessed the murder of Laius, and the marriage of the Queen to Oedipus. The shepherd, like Tiresias, hesitates to release the secrets he knows, but is forced to reveal them under the rage and threats of Oedipus. Finally the truth is out and the investigation is over, and the edict of Oedipus falls upon his head, as he is the defilement he has been after to be cleansed out of Thebes.

Ode 4 retains a regular rhythmic flow of two strophe- antistrophe sets as in figure 9:
Thematically, it is loaded with epithets of admiration and praise of the fallen hero. The chorus in Strophe 1 highlights the change in the life of Oedipus. The choristers consider Oedipus' achievement as the highest possible dream of any human being:

*If Oedipus's fate's the test,
No human state is truly blest.*

(1197-98)

The singers elaborate on the great achievements of the fallen monarch for the country, especially ridding Thebes of the Sphinx in Antistrophe 1. He was highly honored for that achievement. Sings the chorus:

*Our highest honor as the lord,
And King of Thebes were your reward.*

(1203-06)

These lines show a lot of sympathy for the King. He also derives the sympathy of the chorus as in the lines of Strophe 2 (1205-12).

The choral rhythmical antithetical flow of strophe-antistrophe best reflects paradox of the vision and blindness embedded in the play. Throughout the text, Oedipus as well as others around him enjoy eyesight but are denied insight. We are shown that those who have eyes are blind, whereas the blind seer can see. Thus retrospectively, we can recognize and understand the paradox in the confrontation between Oedipus and Tiresias in Scene 1. In that episode, one of the insults heaped on Tiresias is that he is "One nursed by endless night" (359), and "truly blind, in eyes and ears and mind" (363). To which the blind seer responds eloquently and rightly:

*You who belittled me for being blind
Have eyes but do not see your evil state*.

(411-12)

These lines in Scene 1 look as rhetorical and reciprocal verbal abuses emanating from anger. But when the truth is revealed at the end, they gather the power and meaning of irony. They prove that not only the characters are blind, but also the chorus is blind too. After all this a play about ambiguity and reversals in which everything is not what it is as Vernant [14] points out.

9. Wailing with the Fallen Protagonist

In Exodus the play reaches a resolution of Jocasta and Oedipus inflicting self punishment on themselves. The Queen hangs herself in her room, and Oedipus blinds himself with the brooches of the Queen. Exodus is succeeded by two sets of alternating Strophe–Antistrophe entries (figure 10), which is in line with previous flow of choral rhythm.

However, the strophes and antistrophes here are not songs of the Chorus, but rather ping-pong dialogues between the blind Oedipus and Choragus in which fallen hero wails his suffering and loss and Choragus expresses sympathy with him. The alternation in their utterances posits an internal rhythm that is parallel to that of the chorus. This regular interaction is carried further in the rhythmical exchange between Oedipus and Creon, which again alternates rhythmically till the end of the play.

Furthermore, the dialogue of Oedipus and Choragus in Strophe–Antistrophe entries after Exodus produces a spatial rhythm resulting from the alternation of the stage and the orchestra from which the two characters utter their speeches. Upon the shift to the Creon – Oedipus dialogue at the end of Antistrophe II, the stage-orchestra spatial rhythm stops and action goes back to the stage.

10. Conclusion

*Oedipus Rex* is a well designed play in which the Chorus imposes flux of rhythm and order. It turns the structure of *Oedipus Rex* into a musical construction and deepens the tragedy and heightens its pathetic effect on the audience with the regular parallel recurrence of the odes. The Chorus sings, dances, and plays musical instruments. But more musical is the formal rhythm stemming from the regular turns it takes, the timing of its interference,
and the place it performs its dances and chants its songs. Disturbing the regularity of the pattern reflects the disturbance of the protagonist's mind, the change of attitude and judgment of the wise elders towards their monarch, indicates a turning point in the plot. The Chorus of Oedipus Rex, like no other Greek chorus, guides our views, judgments, and attitudes. It floods the theater with music, and highlights the plight and sadness of protagonist. The choral rhythms escort the hero and marshal him to his doomed end. A panoramic view of the structure of the play demonstrates how the chorus turns the well-designed play into a musical architecture, as in figure 11.

The play in fact looks like a construction of frozen music, a symphony orchestrated by a perfect designer in which the episodes and the odes contribute to the music in progress. This a dramatic construction that is flooded with rhythm and music even at the nuclear level where the poetic utterances of the speakers follow a carefully calculated metrical, thus musical, design, and the odes of the choristers are strictly composed of iambic trimeter lines [7]. Sophocles is not only a playwright and an exact designer, but the conductor of the frozen symphony.

Modern producers find the Greek chorus challenging because only little knowledge is available about its dances and methods of production [15]. Scholars too have diverse views about its function and relation to the plot. This study means to ignite more research on the role of rhythm and music in Sophoclean and other Greek tragedies, as it hopes to encourage studies on rhythm in literature in general.

References


[9] Gagné, R.


