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From Ritual to Narrative: Collective Enunciation and Public Communication of the Chorus in Ancient Greek Tragedy—A Case Study of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex

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Abstract. How was public meaning generated and transmitted in the pre-mass communication era? Through the lens of the ritual view of communication, this paper conducts a textual analysis of the choral odes in Sophocles' Oedipus Rex—including the parodos, the first, second, and third stasima, and the exodus song—to explore the chorus's operation as a collective communication subject. The study finds that, through multimodal performances—unison chanting, circular dance, and masks—the chorus sequentially accomplishes crisis framing, moral-explanation encoding, and emotional communitas. The chorus transforms a royal secret into a public catastrophe for the polis, provides a moral explanation for the plague, acts as an emotional proxy for the audience, and finally solidifies the tragedy into a shareable moral memory in the form of maxims. This paper argues that the chorus is not a dramatic remnant, but rather a prototype of public communication in the pre-mass communication era: communication is ritual, and the collective voice is meaning confirmation. At the same time, the paper points out the exclusive limitations of the chorus's collective expression and clarifies that textual analysis of a single play does not equate to a reconstruction of actual audience reception.

Keywords: ancient Greek tragic chorus, Oedipus Rex, ritual communication, collective enunciation, public communication

1. Introduction

Before the advent of mass communication technologies, what kind of subject sustained the generation of public meaning? The chorus in ancient Greek tragedy provides a crucial case. Existing scholarship has largely followed poetic or aesthetic paths. Aristotle emphasized that the chorus should act as a participant in tragic action [1]. Goldhill noted that, through its collective voice, the chorus defines the public character of events [2]. Sourvinou-Inwood argued that tragic performance functioned as a public memorial ritual of the Athenian polis [3]. Yet these studies seldom ask a communication-centered question: how did the chorus operate as a medium of civic public communication? Liu Hailong has reviewed the traditions of interpretive empiricism and critical theory in communication studies [4], and Carey's "ritual view of communication" clarifies this point

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further by locating the essence of communication in a community's confirmation of meaning in shared time and space [5].

This paper takes Oedipus Rex as its core text and treats the chorus as a communicative practice through which the civic community confirms meaning by collective enunciation. The title "From Ritual to Narrative" does not imply any diachronic shift from ritual to narrative function across historical periods. It refers instead to what happens within the dramatic space of this play: inherently ritualistic performances such as unison chanting, circular dance, and masks intervene directly in how plot meaning is expressed and constructed. In that sense, ritual itself drives narrative.

Methodologically, the paper offers close readings of the parodos, the first, second, and third stasima, and the exodus song. It draws on specific lyrics and uses the ritual view as its primary analytical perspective; encoding/decoding theory and the concept of "structure of feeling" serve as supplementary tools. The aim is to explain what the chorus "says," how it "confirms meaning," and "who is excluded." Oedipus Rex is selected as a single-case study because of its canonical status and because its choral odes are structurally clear enough to support an in-depth examination of communicative functions. Future comparative studies may extend this approach to other Sophoclean or Euripidean works.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

Scholarly work on the ancient Greek tragic chorus is extensive. Aristotle granted the chorus a participatory status in the Poetics [1]. Goldhill analyzed from a poetic perspective how the chorus defines the public character of events through its collective voice [2]; Sourvinou-Inwood emphasized its ritual function in a religious context [3]. Recent studies have further incorporated the chorus's voice and body into analysis: Panosa Domingo points out that music and soundscapes themselves constitute part of the ritual framework of tragedy [6]; D'Angour, through research on choral dance steps and bodily movements, demonstrates that the rhythm and spatial trajectories of circular dance perform non-verbal communicative functions [7]; Sánchez i Bernet specifically analyzes the chorus's invocation of Dionysiac hymnic dance in the parodos of Oedipus Rex and interprets the chorus as a sacred intermediary in the ritual [8]. Yet these studies seldom systematically analyze, from a communication perspective, the operational mechanism of the chorus as a collective communication subject.

This paper uses James Carey's "ritual view" as its main analytical framework and combines it with Hall's encoding/decoding theory, Williams's "structure of feeling," and the media theories of Innis and McLuhan to analyze the communicative mechanism of the chorus in Oedipus Rex.

These theories do not do the same work. The ritual view runs through the whole analysis because it explains how the chorus confirms shared meaning through collective co-presence in a religious space. Put simply, it addresses why collective chanting can produce consensus. Hall's encoding/decoding model was originally developed for mass media, but this paper draws on its "encoding" dimension to show how the chorus selects specific interpretive categories and turns empirical disaster into a shareable moral narrative.

Williams's "structure of feeling" is used differently. It helps explain how the chorus acts as an agent of communal emotion by channeling individual fear into emotional expressions that are recognizable at a collective level. Innis's bias of communication and McLuhan's "the medium is the message" clarify another part of this process: the communicative logic carried by the chorus's voice, dance, and masks as non-verbal media. Their forms themselves participate in meaning construction rather than merely transmit content.

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The discussion section then adds a critical perspective. It examines both the boundaries of what can be said through the chorus's collective voice and the exclusivity built into collective expression, so that this study can reflect on its social limitations.The above theories jointly serve the textual analysis of specific passages in Oedipus Rex, rather than constituting an independent theoretical review.

3. Core analysis: the chorus's triple communicative functions and ritual sealing in Oedipus Rex

The chorus performs three communicative functions in the play: crisis framing, moral-explanation encoding, and emotional communitas. The exodus song brings the first three layers together as a ritualized sealing, completing the solidification of meaning, rather than standing as a parallel "fourth function."

3.1. Parodos: crisis framing

In the parodos, the chorus enters as the elders of Thebes, chanting the misery of the plague and invoking Apollo: "Children, latest generation of old Cadmus... our city, as you see, is shaken violently" [9]. Its core function is to transform a royal secret into a public catastrophe. Using the first-person plural "we" and "our city," the chorus redefines the hidden murder of the former king as a public issue demanding the attention of the entire city. This framing, through the acoustic force of collective recitation, allows the plague to be understood as a collective divine punishment for the pollution of the polis [3]. In lines 209–215 of the parodos, the chorus's invocation of Dionysiac hymnic dance precisely embodies its ritual role as a sacred intermediary [8]. Thus, the chorus accomplishes crisis framing.

3.2. First stasimon: moral-explanation encoding

As the prophet reveals Oedipus's guilt, the first stasimon turns to a lament on hubris (arrogance): "Arrogance breeds the tyrant... may destiny behold him advancing to insolent speech" [9]. The core communicative function of this ode is moral-explanation encoding: the chorus transforms the empirical disaster of the plague into a moral judgment on "hubristic transgression." Drawing on the "encoding" concept in Hall's theory [10], the chorus's collective chanting as a group of elders can be understood as a form of public-level meaning encoding—the chorus selects the explanatory framework of "hubris, divine punishment and fate," simplifying the complex real crisis into a shareable moral narrative: the plague is not accidental, but an inevitable punishment for those who defy the divine will. This encoding is not a personal monologue, but a public performance of collective consensus—through the collective form of the stasimon, the chorus transforms the moral judgment of the elder class into a public explanation at the level of the polis, providing a legitimized moral narrative for the crisis.

3.3. Second and third stasima: emotional communitas

When the truth is exposed, the second stasimon begins with "Fate, I tremble before you," and the third repeatedly chants "Behold the end, you mortals" [9]. The core function of these two odes is emotional communitas: through its collective voice, the chorus amplifies awe toward fate, transforming individual fear into a shared emotional experience of the community, and integrating emotion into the communal "structure of feeling" [11]. Recent studies note that the lyrical language

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of Sophocles' chorus itself possesses an emotional bearing function, and its collective chanting form reinforces the publicness of suffering expression [12]. The term "communitas" here refers to the spontaneous, undifferentiated sense of togetherness generated in ritual performance, rather than the political sense of "communization."

3.4. Exodus: ritualized sealing

The exodus closes with a maxim: "Call no man happy until he has crossed life's final day, free from pain" [9]. This is not an informational closing remark, but a seal of meaning confirmation [5]. The chorus solidifies Oedipus's fate into a public lesson, transforming personal suffering into the moral memory of the polis through collective chanting [3]. At this point, the performance constitutes a complete communication cycle: from defining the crisis to encoding morality, from communitas to sealing the lesson.

4. The chorus's voice, dance, masks, and space: the communication of non-verbal media

The realization of the above three communicative functions relies on the concrete operation of the chorus as a multimodal medium. Carey points out that meaning confirmation in communication rituals depends not only on texts but also on the shared media forms of participants [5]. The following section analyzes, from four dimensions—collective voice, dance and circular movement, masks, and theatrical space—how the chorus supports its communicative functions through the logic of non-verbal media.

The primary medium is collective voice. The acoustic co-presence generated by fifteen performers chanting in unison dissolves individual voices into a collective sound. This can be understood through recent research on tragic soundscapes—music and soundscapes themselves constitute part of the ritual framework [6]. In Oedipus Rex, "our city" is sung by fifteen voices in unison; the linguistic "we" and the acoustic "we" reinforce each other, strengthening the publicness of the crisis. This sense of acoustic co-presence directly serves the realization of crisis framing in the parodos.

The second medium is dance and circular movement. Originating from the circular tradition of dithyramb, the circular trajectory marks the boundary of the performance area on the orchestra floor, signaling to the audience that "a sacred ritual is taking place here" [7]. In the parodos, the circular entrance synchronizes with the collective call of "our city." The rhythm and spatial trajectories of the circular dance thus become bodily rhetoric for crisis framing, visually reinforcing the function of the collective voice in setting the public agenda through sacred boundaries.

Masks dissolve individual expressions, replacing them with the typified visage of "elders." What the audience sees is not an individual actor, but the elder group speaking; thus, the mask becomes a visual medium of identity encoding. The typified elder visage constructed by masks provides authoritative visual support for the moral-explanation encoding in the first stasimon, making the judgment of the elder class appear as a civic consensus.

Finally, the theatrical space also plays a role. The open-air circular theater, hillside seating, and central orchestra constitute a natural communication apparatus, where the act of communication itself is ritual participation [3]. McLuhan argued that media forms themselves reshape perception and publicness [13]; Innis noted that the embodied oral performance of the chorus represents a time-biased medium [14], whose strength lies in the intergenerational transmission of memory and moral education—though this "time bias" applies more to the textual transmission of the play than to the ephemeral live performance itself. The collective co-presence in the open-air theater thus channels

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the effect of emotional communitas into the ritualized sealing of the exodus, ultimately transforming personal suffering into a civic moral memory that can be transmitted across generations.

5. Discussion: the communicative significance and limitations of the chorus's collective expression

The preceding analysis shows that, through lyrical encoding, emotional agency, and ritual sealing, the chorus transforms individual experience into a shared moral memory of the polis, realizing the reproduction of public meaning. This communication involves the co-construction of meaning within the community in a shared religious setting.

However, from a critical perspective, such collective expression has clear limitations. The chorus represents the group of Theban elders—elderly, male, citizen, aristocratic. Their voice is the "sayable" within the boundaries of a specific class. When the chorus issues the admonition "Behold the end, you mortals" in the third stasimon, this warning is issued from the standpoint of the elders, in the linguistic form of the elders (collective unison, universalized maxims); the voices of other identities in the play never enter this collective voice. Jocasta (female), whose lines after discovering the truth do not align with the chorus's explanatory framework, is never incorporated into the collective representation. Kousoulini's research on women's choruses in tragic contexts points out that the apotropaic chants used by women's choral traditions to cope with crises are marginalized in the context of public tragedy [15]; this conversely suggests that the elder male voice of the chorus is not the "voice of the entire polis," but an institutional performance of citizen identity in democratic Athens that excludes other voices. While acting as a producer of consensus, the chorus is simultaneously a guardian of boundaries.

This understanding holds brief implications for modern communication studies: publicness relies not only on an "individual voice-to-platform diffusion" model, but also requires reflection on the boundaries of inclusion in collective voices, the mechanisms of emotional communitas, and the durability of ritualized memory.

6. Conclusion

Taking Oedipus Rex as an example, this paper analyzes from a communication perspective how the chorus participates in the construction of public meaning through collective enunciation and performative forms. Grounded in Carey's ritual view of communication and drawing on Hall's encoding model, Williams's structure of feeling, and the media theories of Innis and McLuhan, the study reveals that the chorus operates not merely as a poetic remnant but as a collective communication subject in the pre-mass communication era. Through the triple interweaving of collective voice, bodily media (circular dance and masks), and religious space, the chorus sequentially accomplishes three communicative functions: crisis framing in the parodos, moral-explanation encoding in the first stasimon, and emotional communitas in the second and third stasima. The exodus song then serves as a ritualized sealing, transforming Oedipus's personal suffering into a maxim that solidifies the tragedy as a shared moral memory for the polis.

This ritual communication perspective moves beyond the narrow understanding of communication as mere "information transmission", revealing its essence as the meaning confirmation of a community through collective co-presence. At the same time, the paper exposes the inherent boundaries of such collective expression: the "shared meaning" confirmed by the chorus's collective voice is always constrained by the identity scope of the "sayable". Representing the elderly, male, citizen aristocracy of Thebes, the chorus speaks from a specific social position that

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excludes alternative voices such as Jocasta's, thereby acting simultaneously as a producer of consensus and a guardian of boundaries. Based on textual analysis, this paper takes a single dramatic text as its main material, so its findings cannot be directly equated with the actual reception of ancient audiences. Future research may draw on comparative analyses of additional plays or archaeological findings for further verification.

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