

Perseus vs oedipus. similarities and differences

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Greek heroes are considered important portion of Greek Mythology besides gods. There are many epics, oral tales, and tragedies about Greek heroes, along with cult shrines and festivals dedicated to them. In order to study Greek heroes, scholars provided different method to analyze Greek heroes, some of the ideas are even useful to understand heroes in modern literature and real life heroes. Baron Raglan is one of the scholars studying about the biographies of heroes, and he developed a list of twenty-two actions of the life of a hero in heroic tales. This list is supposed to suit all heroes, but it actually does not apply very well to some heroes, such as Odysseus.

However, sometimes it turns out that two seemingly different heroes share similar traits and both fit in the criteria well. In terms of the lives of Perseus and Oedipus, during three stages of their lives: birth, adventure, and death, the two heroes follow the list very well.

Perseus is a mythological hero who is most famous for beheading Medusa. Before his birth, Acrisius, Perseus's grandfather, learned from the oracle that his daughter's son would kill him. Trying to prevent the prophecy from happening, Acrisius hid his daughter, Danaë in a bronze chamber. Zeus fell in love with Danaë and visited her in the shape of a stream of gold. After Perseus was born, Acrisius got more afraid and set Perseus and his mother adrift at sea in a chest, which floated to an island of Seriphus. A fisherman called Dictys rescued them and took the responsibility of raising Perseus. Dictys's brother Polydectes, who is the king of Seriphus, fell in love with Danaë, but he could not get access to her because of Perseus, so he sent Perseus away and assigned him to get the head of Gorgon Medusa, whose gaze turned creatures into stone. With the help of Hermes and Athena,

Perseus got five items: sickle, winged sandals, the kibisis, a shield(mirror), and invisible cap of Hades, accomplished his quest. On his way back, he found the princess of Ethiopia, Andromeda was bound to a rock and about to become a prey of a sea monster. Falling in love with Andromeda, Perseus killed the monster, rescued Andromeda, and married her. He tried to avoid the oracle, but once when he competed in an athletic games, he accidentally killed Acrisius by throwing the discus, thus fulfilling the prophecy. In the end, Perseus became the king of Tiryns, later Mycenae and Midea.

Oedipus is a hero most famous for killing his father and marrying his mother. After consulting an oracle at Delphi, Oedipus's father learned that his son was going to kill him. In order to avoid the prophecy, Oedipus's father ordered a shepherd to kill him. However, the shepherd felt pity to the child and secretly brought him to the king and queen of Corinth, who raised Oedipus up as their own child. After Oedipus grew up, he learned from the oracle that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Trying to stop the prophecy from happening, Oedipus fled from Corinth and came to Thebes, his actual hometown. When Oedipus came to Thebes and beat Sphinx by answering its riddle, he killed king Laius, not knowing that he actually killed his own father. Later he married Iocasta, the queen of Thebes. However, the prophet Teiresias informed Oedipus that the oracle had already been fulfilled. After knowing the truth, Iocasta hanged herself and Oedipus blinded and exiled himself. In his later part of life, he cursed his sons to die in each others' hands.

Regarding the origins and early lives of both heroes, they followed Raglan's list well. Perseus's mother Danaë is a royal virgin, and his father is Zeus, but they are not near relative. Perseus's circumstantial was also different because of the oracle, which led Perseus's grandfather attempt to kill him by drifting him and his mother in the sea. He was raised by a fisherman in Seriphus and did not know about his childhood. Oedipus's mother, Iocasta, is a queen, and since Oedipus is her only child with Laius, she can be described as a royal virgin. Oedipus's father is a king of Thebes, but he is not a near relative of Iocasta. Oedipus's circumstantial is unusual because of the oracle. When he was born, his father tried to kill him, but the shepherd who was supposed to kill him brought him to the king and queen of Corinth, and he was fostered by his step parents in another country, without any knowledge of his origin. Oedipus is not the son of a god, but he was reputed to be the son of a god and citizens looked up to him because he successfully save the country from suffering. Comparing to Raglan's list, both Perseus and Oedipus follow most of the criteria except for the one maintaining that the parents are near relative.

Both heroes followed Raglan's list in terms of the processes of achieving fame. For Perseus, he did not return to his hometown because he tried to avoid the prophecy, and he did not went to his future kingdom until he finished his adventure. He beheaded Medusa, who can be ascribed as a monster. He also defeated a sea monsters, and married a princess after that. He became a king but no document mentions how he reigned. For Oedipus, after he reached his manhood, he left Corinth to avoid the oracle that he was going to kill his father and went to Thebes, his hometown as well as his

future kingdom. He defeated the man eating Sphinx by answering its riddle. Due to his success, Oedipus was offered to be the king of Thebes, and he accepted it and married the queen of Thebes. According to the priest from Thebes, Oedipus provided his citizens “with good omen.” The word of the priest shows that he reigns uneventfully and prescribes laws. During the middle part of both heroes life, including taking adventure in his future kingdom and achieving fame, there are some differences: Perseus did not return or go to his future kingdom on reaching manhood, and the no one mentions how he reigned his country, but Oedipus follows Raglan’s list perfectly.

Raglan’s list can apply to both heroes very well in terms of later part of both heroes lives and their deaths. As for Perseus, the later part of his life is barely depicted. He was driven away from Argos, where he was born because he was ashamed of accidentally killing his grandfather. He died mysteriously because of lack of descriptions. He had seven sons and two daughters with Andromeda, none of his sons succeeded him, but one of his descendent later also ruled over Mycenae. His burial place is unknown, but he had cult shrines in Athens, Seriphos, and Argos.

As for Oedipus, later gods became angry at Thebes and caused a plague among the country because the murder of the king Laius brought “defilement” to the country. After the truth about Oedipus was revealed, Oedipus blinded himself and intended to exile himself out of his country. His death is kind of mysterious because there are not that many books writing about his death. Homer maintains in Iliad that Oedipus died and buried at

Thebes. However, in Oedipus at Colonus, the ending of Oedipus is different. He died at Colonos near Athens according to Apollo, and he died mysteriously at a spot only known to Theseus. In both versions, Oedipus had a holy sepulchre. Oedipus's children were Eteocles, Polynices, Antigone, and Ismene. Eteocles and Polynices killed one another because of Oedipus's curse. Antigone tried to stop Creon from forbidding anyone to bury the body of her brother, but got caught, and finally hanged herself. Even though no one mentions Ismene, she did not succeed him. In conclusion, comparing to Raglan's list, Perseus mostly follows the list except that he did not lose favor with gods, and his burial place, not at the top of a hill, is unknown. Oedipus follows most criteria except two: one is that he died at the top of a hill, another is that his body is not buried.

All in all, the fact that Perseus follows sixteen of the criteria and Oedipus follows nineteen of them shows that Raglan's list is mostly useful when analyzing the pattern of lives of heroes, in terms of their birth, adventure, and death. Perseus and Oedipus seem to be really different from each other. For example, Perseus complete his tasks because of his power and helps from gods, while Oedipus defeated Sphinx by using his knowledge. However, the biographies of both heroes are actually similar. Not only these two heroes, by studying Raglan, it is easier to see the general trend of biographies of Greek Heroes.