CURSES AND BLESSINGS IN ANCIENT GREEK OATHS

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Like most ancient peoples, the Greeks used oaths to verify statements of fact and to give added weight and security to a wide variety of social, political and fiscal agreements. And they often enforced the compliance and truthfulness of these oaths by sanctioning them with a balanced pair of conditional self-blessings and self-curses, such as we find at the end of the well-known Hippocratic oath:\(^1\)

> If I fulfill this oath without violating it, may it be granted that I enjoy a happy life and profession, honored always among men. But if I violate it and perjure myself, may the opposite befall me.

There are, in fact, quite a number of oaths that have this simple kind of binary sanction, which first describes blessings and then briefly mentions curses, like the proverbial carrot and stick, to encourage good behavior with a promise of reward and to discourage bad behavior with a threat of punishment. In oaths of this more balanced type the curse is usually shorter and very tame. Indeed, it often consists, as it does here, of a simple negation of the blessing.

There is also evidence, however, for the popularity of Greek oaths that greatly emphasize their curses by making them longer and much more vivid. See, for example, the self-curse described in this account of a dramatic oath apparently sworn by Greeks living on the island of Thera in the sixth century B.C.E.:\(^2\)

> On these conditions they made an agreement, those who stayed there (i.e. on Thera) and those who sailed on the colonial expedition, and they put

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curses on those who should transgress these conditions and not abide by them. . . . They molded wax images and burnt them up while they uttered the following imprecation, all of them, having come together, men and women, boys and girls: “May he, who does not abide by these oaths but transgresses them, melt away and dissolve like the images—himself, his seed and his property. But to those who abide with these oaths let there be many good things for themselves and their offspring.”

In this case, a city in some kind of crisis (probably famine or over-crowding) is forced to make an unpopular decision: to send away a percentage of its people to form a colony. In anticipation of strong resistance and non-compliance, the city forces its own citizens to take a solemn oath to comply with the agreement and they resort to a very memorable public ceremony to ensure that the Theran people do not violate their oaths. In contrast to the balanced and the rather subdued sanction in the Hippocratic oath quoted earlier (a blessing followed by a shorter curse) the Theran people utter a very frightening self-curse first and then a much shorter blessing. The curse, moreover, is emphasized even more by a vivid and horrific ritual that involves the destruction of waxen images, a device that clearly works according to the principles of “sympathetic” or “persuasively analogical” magic: the Therans collectively wish that those who violate their oaths, along with their families and their property, might melt away and dissolve like the wax images that were melting before their eyes.

My goal in this essay is to describe and then explore the differences between oaths (like the Hippocratic) that end with a careful balance of conditional self-blessings and self-curses, and those more fearful oaths (like that of the people of Thera) that have a very lopsided sanction: a powerful and emphasized curse followed by a shorter blessing or in some cases by no blessing at all. How does one explain the difference between the two forms? Is it a problem

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3 I use the traditional terms “sympathetic” and “sympathetically” advisedly throughout this article. S. J. Tambiah, “Form and Meaning of Magical Acts: A Point of View” in R. Horton and R. Finnegan (eds.) Modes of Thought (London 1973) 199-228, dismisses the common view that “sympathetic magic” is based on poor observation of empirical analogies. He distinguishes instead between the operation of “empirical analogies” (used in modern scientific discourse to predict future actions) and “persuasive analogies” (used in rituals in traditional societies to encourage future action). Such rituals do not betray inferior observation skills, but rather they reveal a profound belief in the extraordinary power of language. Cf. G. E. R. Lloyd, Magic, Reason and Experience (Cambridge 1979) 2-3 and 7.