

For the greater good
of the community: the
chorus and the
importance of the
"city..."

[Literature](#), [Play](#)



As a kind of collective character onto itself, the Chorus in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* assumes multiple functions and qualities that, together, effectively blur the lines between the private and public spheres of the drama. Evidenced in the text by their roles as observers and instigators, as well as social commentators, and then in the film-version of the play by their strong physical omnipresence and claustrophobic-like staging, the members of the Chorus represent the proverbial "village" (or Thebes, the "city-state"), privileging not the sanctity of the self, but the interest of the greater good. Ultimately, by pointing to the religious-ritual roots of the drama, it is this village/city-state role that legitimates Oedipus' eventual exile, casting it as a good sacrifice vital to the preservation of the community. One of the ways in which the members of the Chorus in *Oedipus Rex* assert the supremacy of the community over the self, thereby embodying the notion of the "city-state," is by acting as both attentive bystanders and active promoters of the events in the play. As the eyes, ears, and voice of the citizenry, the Chorus-as-city-state is a keen observing-body that main characters depend upon to summarize recent plot developments. For example, in Scene II, when Queen Iocastê first learns of the heated exchange between Oedipus and Creon, she demands of the Chorus, "First, tell me what has happened" (*The Oedipus Cycle*, 36). In a slightly less straightforward manner, the Chorus in Ode I also fulfills this important summarizing function by restating the prophetic dilemma at the center of the play's emerging tragedy: "The Delphic stone of prophecies/Remembers ancient regicide/And a still bloody hand/That killer's hour of flight has come" (25). Thus, the main players' and audience's reliance on the Chorus to recapitulate important events, reinforces the value

of its by-stander function. Although this position as “ collective eyewitness” alone conveys a sense of the Chorus’ strong significance to the play, its members effectively expand the scope of their important “ city-state” role by moving beyond mere spectatorship, to actively complicate and shape the course of the drama. For example, there are several moments in Oedipus Rex when the Chorus (or Choragos) makes observations that advance the progression of the tragic story. For example, in the beginning of the play, when Oedipus is wondering how to identify the murderer responsible for the plague befalling Thebes, the Chorus quickly suggests consulting Teiresias: “ A lord clairvoyant to the lord Apollo/As we all know, is the skilled Teiresias/One might learn much about this from him/Oedipus” (15). Although Oedipus had already sent for Teiresias (i. e. prior to hearing these comments), it is through the expository vehicle of the Chorus’ remarks and first-ever mention, that the pivotal figure of the seer is introduced into the play. However, the Chorus also provides insights that counsel or motivate characters to take preferable, wiser courses of action. For example, in Scene III, Oedipus learns that he is not the biological son of his father, King Polybus, but in fact an infant orphan discovered by a local Corinthian shepherd. When questioning the identity of the shepherd, demanding that these confusing matters finally be “ made plain” (56), the Chorus answers Oedipus’ challenge: “ I think the man he means is that same shepherd/You have already asked to see. Iocastê perhaps/Could tell you something” (56). Because the Chorus’ suggestion that Iocastê might have more information prompts the King to question his wife, the Chorus is here serving as the very impetus for character behavior, provoking actions whose consequences will

prove central to the story's climax and ultimate conclusion (i. e. the disclosure of back-story details). Furthermore, this response recapitulates (and reinforces) the significance of the Chorus' observer status, framing it as somehow distinct and superior to the limited capabilities of the main characters. Because Oedipus cannot link past and current story points, or recall the directives he has just issued (" I think the man he means...You have already asked to see"), it is evident that his abilities to see and think clearly have been compromised, perhaps by the damaging confluence of his passions and pride. By contrast, the Chorus successfully makes the correlation, thus demonstrating the kind of preternatural intuition, or capacity for logical reasoning, King Oedipus lacks. An additional element of the Chorus' complex bystander/instigator role, highlighting the paramount importance of the community (and thus further substantiating this overall " city-state" representation), is the uncanny ability of the Chorus members to foreshadow future events. For example, in Scene III described above, Iocastê sees no positive benefit or purpose to Oedipus' continuing an investigation into his birth. When her husband refuses to cease his inquiries, she leaves the stage in anger, prompting the Chorus to muse, " I fear this silence;/Something dreadful may come of it" (57). As confirmed by the falling action of the play, this statement is significantly prophetic, forecasting both the full disclosure of Oedipus' true birth origins, and then the Queen's subsequent suicide. Therefore, the Chorus' foretelling capacity underlies the notion that even an individual's most intimate revelations are understood first by the public, and are therefore matters of community, rather than personal, interest. In this way, the Chorus upholds the importance, the

primacy, of the city-state over the individual. This essential hierarchical pitting is evident, also, in the social commentary the Chorus presents throughout the play. Another mode by which the Chorus in *Oedipus Rex* strengthens its representational role as the “city-state, reaffirming the preeminence of the public over the private, is by acting as the social consciousness of the play. Frequently, the Chorus comments upon the actions and decisions of the primary characters, cultivating an air of constant judgment or critical ubiquity. More than simply highlight the shortcomings of the main characters, however, the Chorus abstracts these faulty qualities, erasing their close association to the individual by placing them within a larger social context. In other words, the Chorus’ commentary reflects a concern not for how these flaws impact each character, but rather how they might affect the well-being of the city-state. For example, members of the Chorus reprove Oedipus for the pride (*hubris*) and anger he exhibits as elements of the tragic back-story unfold. In the first Scene, after Teiresias reveals that Oedipus is the very “pollution” (19) or contagion responsible for the plague on Thebes, Oedipus refuses to accept this truth, calling Teiresias a “decrepit fortune-teller” (21). Instead, he exalts his ability to have solved the Sphinx’s riddle—a task in which all other men had failed—thereby casting himself as the savior of Thebes. Therefore, his pride manifests itself not only in his disbelief of the gods (on whose behalf Teiresias speaks), but in the brazen celebration of his distinct, admirable qualities as grounds to invalidate Teiresias’ words. Oedipus’ anger surfaces when he accuses Teiresias of conspiring with Creon, suggesting that Teiresias’ claim is simply part of this grand plot. In response to this brash display, the Chorus

comments, “ We can not see that his words or yours/Have been spoken except in anger, Oedipus/And of anger we have no need. How can God’s/will/Be accomplished best? That is what most concerns us” (22). Therefore, as a kind of collective social consciousness, the Chorus does not meditate or focus on Oedipus’ pride and anger as they relate to him specifically, nor does it regard these emotions as objects of his sole possession. Rather, Oedipus’ hubris belongs to the public, and is of importance, worthy of the Chorus’ attention, precisely because it threatens the possible salvation of the afflicted city-state. By contextualizing personal drama within matters of broader social concern, the Choral Ode is another method by which the members of the Chorus act as social commentators that privilege the greater, communal interest. Through the call-and-response interplay between its Strophe and Antistrophe, the Choral Ode stages the moral and theoretic debates at the center of Oedipus Rex. As a kind of solo-performance for the Chorus, the Odes are the most significant, eloquent, and compelling expression of the concerns and questions the Chorus wishes to consider. Therefore, they are the key channels through which the Chorus delivers its social commentary, allowing the members to speak of the actions of the main characters in ways that relate back not only to the communal good, but to the larger themes of the play. For example, Ode II presents the Chorus as once again contemplating the issue of pride, a quality Oedipus has (fatally) exhibited throughout the narrative. However, the Chorus seems to ponder the notion of pride on a far more abstract level, divorced from the specific character of the King. Specifically, in Antistrophe 2, the Chorus concludes: Zeus, if indeed you are lord of allThroned in light over night and

day, Mirror this in your endless mind: Our masters call the oracleWords on the wind, and the Delphic vision blind. (47)Here, the Chorus worries that if the kind of pride that Oedipus (one of its “ masters”) personifies ultimately trumps Fate (rendering, “ the Delphic vision blind”), then perhaps gods do not rule or determine the course of mankind. In this case, life is not guided by some overseeing force, but is instead subject to the fickle whims and caprice of a fallible humanity. Therefore, in Ode II, the Chorus discusses pride not merely as a matter unique or confined to King Oedipus’ personal experience. Rather, it engages the problem of pride on a larger scale, as the basis for one of the play’s broader investigations: the debate of the power of man over the power of the gods. In this way, the Odes devalue the concept of the “ self,” and reinforce the Chorus’ “ city-state” representation. That the Odes punctuate and interrupt the “ main” narrative of the drama, indicates how the structure of Oedipus Rex stresses the Chorus’ constant presence. This presence is further reinforced through the crowded, tight staging of the film-version of the play. The Chorus’ omnipresence in Oedipus Rex is another narrative and theatrical vehicle by which the drama undermines the self and privileges the community (or city-state). As a moral reference point and source of critical commentary, the Chorus’ influence is pervasive. However, they are also a ubiquitous physical form. Chorus members consistently remain on the stage while other characters come and go. In this way, the Chorus implicates itself in the play’s setting, suggesting that it is the permanent backdrop against which the play is unfolding. The result is an oppressive, steady appearance whose claustrophobic-like effect is best captured in the film of the play. In the video version, the members of the

Chorus inhabit the same stage as the primary characters, thus reducing the surface area of the theatrical arena, and manifesting the fundamental lack of division between the private and public spheres. They emulate the specific actions of the main players, physically recapitulating the idea these individuals, these members of royalty, are not entities in and of themselves, but simply subsumed members of the greater political corpus. For example, in Scene III of the play, Iocastê prays to Apollo, imploring him to cleanse Thebes and relieve the city from the tortures of plague. During this scene in the film, she is surrounded (overcrowded) by the members of the Chorus, who imitate her particular hand movements as she offers her sacrifice (the sweeping of her arms, the clasping of her hands, etc.). Therefore, not only do they echo Iocastê's gestures, but, by virtue of their large number, the members of the Chorus seem to overpower and co-opt the Queen's very character. Therefore, the Chorus removes the "personal" element from Iocastê's moment of appeal, and renders the instance of prayer a necessary public event. In so doing, it exacts both an effacement, and a handicapping, of the self. Reinforcing the sense of claustrophobia evoked by the Chorus, its members' crowding of the sage, their narrow, tight placement, reduces the "breathing room" that would afford main characters full expression of their personas. Therefore, the cumulative effect of the Chorus' "cinematic" depiction is, once again, a general renunciation of the self that exalts the community, and thus legitimates the assertion that the Chorus embodies the "city-state" in Oedipus Rex. Greek drama has its roots in ancient religious rituals that concern the cycles of nature, or the changing of the seasons. As an attempt to exert a kind of "human magic" upon the natural world, these

rituals sought to correct a disruption in nature through a necessary sacrifice. As seen specifically with the ritual of the “scapegoat,” this sacrificial subject was a paragon within the village, the “best” the community could offer the gods. With the sacrifice of this idealized human form, society would be cleansed and concordance with nature restored. Oedipus represents this very figure, the kind of man, the mythic tragic hero, whom Northrop Frye identified as superior in “kind” to other men. A sort of “scared monster,” he is a virtuous King who nonetheless embodies an evil so wicked, it has triggered a profound disturbance of the natural order. In *Oedipus Rex*, that evil has translated into the plague on Thebes, suggesting that the King holds the heart of the city, its sickness and possible salvation, within his own self. In this way, Oedipus is the State. He and the people of Thebes are one in the same, a relationship Oedipus recognizes every time he insists the public (the “Chorus”) hear the latest developments of the unraveling story. Also, he seems to intuit the necessity of his own purification “sacrifice,” demanding that Creon cast him into exile at the end of the play. Therefore, by representing the Theban city-state, the Chorus foreshadows Oedipus’ ultimate expulsion, legitimating it as the only possible means for the restoration of peace and order. However, by pointing to the religious-ritual basis of the play, the Chorus also reinforces the inextricable relationship between Oedipus and the State, describing an important component of the democratic process, and introducing a theoretical debate (the question of the power of man vs. the State vs. the Gods) that will persist throughout The Oedipus Cycle.