

Analysis of the role of the chorus in ancient greek plays essay sample

[Literature](#), [Mythology](#)



Introduction: In Greek plays, the chorus invariably adds complexity and depth to the play and the message it is trying to portray. However to say that the chorus hinders or impedes our understanding of the play is a grievous inaccuracy. Just because an element adds to the complexity of the play, it does not necessarily mean that it would detract the audience's understanding of the play. In this instance the opposite is true of the chorus. The role of chorus as shown in Sophocles' Oedipus King actually extends our understanding of the play in that the chorus commentate on the action, analyse the meaning behind the actions. Which bring about a deeper and more intimate understanding of the characters and what drives them to act as they do, which equates to a deeper insight of the play.

In Oedipus the king, the chorus commentates and speculates on each major event that occurs in the play. The chorus act as the citizens of Thebes in the play. In their prayer to the gods at the beginning they explain the setting in detail " Beyond all telling, the city reeks with death in her streets, death-bringing. None weeps and her children die, none by pity mother at ever alter kneel. Golden Athena, come near to your crying! Apollo hear us and heal!" this chant of the chorus, gives us (the audience) a detailed description of the background, as we can see the images of women kneeling to prayer to the gods, death and mourning of the people of Thebes, it gives us insight into everyday Theban life. When Teiresias reveals to us that it is Oedipus that is the cause of the plagues and he alone is the one that brings destruction to Thebes, we are shocked.

As we see Oedipus as an intelligent and kind man from the care and kindness that he shows the people of Thebes. So the chorus, seeing this dilemma tries to analyse the information that has been brought to light “ Was there a quarrel between the house of Labdacus and the son of Polybus?” they ask. This wondering sets our minds down another path. Instead of just believing or disbelieving Teiresias on face value we are lead to think on a different path, could there have been some plot, to kill the king Thebes? Could there have been an argument between the two houses? By speculating and commentating on the events that unfold in the play, the chorus leads us to ponder on what has just occurred within the play and to bring in new paths of thought that we might not have thought about. This adds to the complexity instead of just watching as the play unfolds, we are drawn in to participate in finding out what has happened. We are integrated into the play, which adds to our enjoyment of the play.

The chorus always take on the opinions of the general or mainstream public of the time. They question and counsel the main characters according to these beliefs and aim to calm, soothe the characters in their time of distress. They act as a kind of advisor to the characters, this role they simplify the action and the quickens the awkward and slow moving parts of the play. When Oedipus was convinced of Creon’s guilt in plotting against him and wanted to punish him by death for his crimes, it is the chorus that acts as the advisor. They knew that Jocasta would persuade the king against acting rashly so they counselled “ Persuade, madam, persuade the king to go

awhile apart.” This prompted from the chorus to queen Jocasta stopped the execution of Creon.

When Oedipus jumped to the conclusion that he did kill king Laius counselled “ Sir, these are terrible words. But yet to hopeful, until you learn the whole truth from our witness.” Through the chorus’ counselling the plot is smoothed out. There would have been a great delay for the queen realise what was going on and then counsel against Oedipus’ rash actions. With the chorus’ lines the queen was able to quickly intersect the argument and persuade Oedipus to think on the issue. Then again, with the king’s guilt, the chorus’ advice gave Sophocles a neat way to finish the scene with out Oedipus being too distraught. This enhances the flow of the play, and smoothes out any unwanted emotions or perceptions that Sophocles did not want the audience to have.

This combined role of the chorus as a thought provoking device, a smoothing out tool, creates a deeper and more complex story line. The chorus both lead audiences to ponder on the issues that might arise from the information that has been given. As well as simplifying the situation so that we are more able to understand the plot. The role of the chorus is a far cry from being a hindrance to our understanding of the play they are actually a help in that they guide in our analysis on the actions of the characters. Which in turn offer us a more intimate relationship with the characters.