

An investigation into how 'moral obligation' and its associated values are represented and translated in Sophocles' and Euripides' Electra.

Moral obligation is, according to Collins English Dictionary, 'Arising from conscience or the sense of right and wrong'. This conundrum is one that affects the keys protagonists of the tragic story of the line of Pelops has been told many times and forms the basis of many Greek plays. The plays of Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides also deal with the aftermath of the final murder, that of Clytaemnestra and her lover. It is within this background that I would like to study the idea of moral obligation and how it effects and motivates the characters involved. Clytaemnestra states (Sophocles, Translator Watling, E.F., 'Electra and other plays', 1953, lines 524-526, Penguin Books) that Electra should have obeyed her duty whilst Electra holds her duty to watch she feels is a higher order. Many of the Greek plays share the concept of a duty to many things including their husbands (Alcestis), ancestors (Orestia), the Gods and to principles. I would like to understand the conflicting views of obligation through just one short story, the revenge of Electra and Orestes.

The idea of duty, revenge, obligation justice and honour are all areas that the Greek theatre makes use of and I feel that gaining a better understanding of these, especially that of obligation will greatly help in my understanding of the attitudes of both the playwright, and that of characters in the plays. Why do some characters feel that they must do something because their conscience tells them or perhaps because they feel it is the 'right' thing to do?

Key Objectives

I have a list of objectives that I wish to achieve when I produce the final essay on this subject. These objectives may not be equal in the amount of work required but they are all questions that I wish to be answered. These are as follows:

- The literal meaning of ‘moral obligation’, (definitions from Scott and Liddell plus Oxford Classical Dictionary.) Does the definition match the usage in the plays?
- The meaning and context of ‘duty’ and ‘obligation’ in my chosen plays (select themes from the plays and then identify how the main characters perceive duty and how they use it to argue their cases.
- The individual playwrights ideas on moral obligation and a comparison of them. This will obviously cause problems especially as the main writers are very different in character and period (Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles).
- A comparison of the duties of men and women to themselves and others. This can only take up a small space in this work so some more recent reading would be preferable, ideally related to the plays studied.
- The role of the Gods and religion with respect to right, wrong and obligation.

I plan on discovering what moral obligation is and why the protagonists of the story have such differing views upon it. Finally I will need to identify areas for further study and research. I would expect that a more broad range of source material would help with a more detailed work; especially by incorporating Aeschylus’ plays thus allowing my study to encompass several ‘ages’ in Greek theatre and attitudes.

Methodology

The final essay will need to follow a tight course if it is to achieve all of my objectives. To do this I will first have to select one or two pieces of literature to form my primary assessment on. Sophocles' and Euripides' *Electra* and Aeschylus' *Orestia* are the main plays of interest with the *Orestia* offering a unique perspective as it encompasses the entire tragic story in a trilogy. Sophocles' *Electra* has an advantage as I have just studied the play in a similar direction towards the meaning of justice that is directly relevant to this study. The *Orestia* may be too much to work with only 3,000 words available for the final essay though it would be useful for a more thorough analysis at a later date. A contrasting pair of tragic and melodrama from Sophocles and Euripides will be my preferred choice for now. The translations by Watling (Sophocles, Translator Watling, E.F., '*Electra and other plays*', 1953, Penguin Books) and Davie (Euripides, Translator Davie, J., '*Electra and other plays*', 1998, Penguin Books)

The two plays will need to be split into several key themes that can then be compared to each other rather than as one play versus another. These themes can comprise of such events as Clytemnestra player, her argument(s) with *Electra*, the scene of the final murders and the motivations and character of Orestes. I would like to choose no more than 4 key themes from the plays given me a total of 8 extracts to compare and analyse. Euripides' version of *Electra* differs in that it acts as a kind of parody of Aeschylus' version of events, especially in that *Electra* and Orestes commit suicide. This perhaps represents slightly different attitudes expressed by Euripides towards the duty to a murdered father and to the responsibility that comes with that act. It may not be ideal to compare similar passages but there are themes of similarity

such as the Clytaemnestra justification of her murders that is relevant to all accounts. The way that Orestes bitterly protests (Sophocles, Translator Watling, E.F., 'Electra and other plays', Introduction pg 9, 1953, Penguin Books) in Euripides play at what he 'must' do highlights the struggle between his obligation and what he feels he should do.

Recent studies into both the plays and the concepts will be critical in assisting my understanding of the problems portrayed in the plays. Zimmerman (Zimmerman, M.J, 'The Concept of Moral Obligation', 1996, Cambridge University Press) discusses a range of philosophical problems concerning obligation and its application and whilst not directly related to the field of Classics could be highly useful. Two recent pieces by Blundell, (Blundell, M.W. Block Three Offprints, 'Helping Friends and Harming Enemies', 1989) and Adkins, (A.W.H. 'Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values', Oxford 1960) were looked at in my study of Dike and contained some useful material on the similar areas of moral obligation and duty. They will be both useful and familiar to me. These studies tie in perfectly with the idea of moral dilemmas and duty and will contrast well with the non-classical work by Zimmerman.

For study in the role of the Gods the work by Burkert and Raffan, (Burkert, W and Raffan, J, 'Greek Religion', 1987, Blackwell Publishers) is a good starting point. This book contains some excellent material on the religion of the Greeks themselves and how it affected their lives, especially with regards to important decisions. To back this up the work by Price (Price, S, 'Religions of the Ancient Greeks', 1999, Cambridge University Press) examines how religion affected political as well as social life.

Possible Problems

There are several key problems that I will find upon my study of this subject, the first of which is the selection of source material to make use of. Even with the study of the actually plays the material is covered by three of the most famous playwrights, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. The in-depth study of the story of Electra and Orestes is out of the question for a work this small and by selecting one or two plays I will be hampering a full understanding of the topic of duty. This is a necessity given the space available and I must be very careful not to over extend and make it clear where further work could and should be carried out.

The second problem is that of studying the plays in translation. This creates many difficulties, especially when comparing different plays by different playwrights and translators. Much of the original meaning can be lost and it is up to me to use varied translations and rely upon other more recent literature and analysis to bridge any gaps. The greatest problem of all however is space. This topic could easily form the part of a major dissertation on the idea of moral obligation in the plays of a particular playwright or across a genre. I must not try to produce a mini dissertation but a concise answer to my question.

Bibliography

Collins English Dictionary, Millennium Edition, 2000, pg 1010, Harper Collins

Sophocles, Translator Watling, E.F., 'Electra and other plays', 1953, Penguin Books

Euripides, Translator Davie, J., 'Electra and other plays', 1998, Penguin Books

Bibliography for final essay

Liddell and Scotts, 'Greek-English Lexicon', Intermediate, 1889

This definitive volume is essential in the study of the primary meanings of the words and concepts I am planning on studying.

Feyerabend, K, 'Greek-English Dictionary', 1918, David McKay Publishing

Though much smaller in scale than LS work it is better for 'getting started' and subsequent study can then progress to LS.

Collins English Dictionary, Millennium Edition, 2000, Harper Collins

Important for the modern usage of the terms I am studying.

Sophocles, Translator Watling, E.F., 'Electra and other plays', 1953, Penguin Books

An excellent translation with a very useful introduction and analysis of the play and its place in Greek theatre and tradition.

Euripides, Translator Davie, J., 'Electra and other plays', 1998, Penguin Books

An ideal contrasting play to that of Sophocles with a slight twist on the 'conventional' plot. Davie's edition also contains some important notes on the text.

Hornblower S, Oxford Classical Dictionary, 1996

Standard reference for moral ideas, obligation, duty, honour and justice that are all relevant to my work. The articles on religion are also of much importance along with the additional material on the playwrights studied in the essay.

Blundell, M.W. Block Three Offprints, 'Helping Friends and Harming Enemies', 1989, pg 331

Zimmerman, M.J, 'The Concept of Moral Obligation', 1996, Cambridge University Press

Though unrelated to the study of Classics the material covered is what much of Classics is all about! The sections on problems concerning obligation are of the most importance to this work.

Adkins, A.W.H. 'Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values', Oxford 1960)

This study ties in perfectly with the idea of moral dilemmas and duty. This will contrast well with the non-classical work by Zimmerman.

Williams. B, 'Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy', 1985, Cambridge

Williams' work covered a wide range of ethical and morals areas and his research is relatively recent.

Kitto, H.D.F, 'Greek Tragedy', 1997, Routledge

An excellent general work covering all of the key playwrights and their plays. The information on the key dilemmas of each play and the differing approaches used is of great importance to my study.#

Burkert, W and Raffan, J, 'Greek Religion', 1987, Blackwell Publishers

This book contains some excellent material on the religion of the Greeks themselves and how it affected their lives, especially with regards to important decisions, moral dilemmas and of duty.

Price, S, 'Religions of the Ancient Greeks', 1999, Cambridge University Press

A useful companion to the work of Burkert and Raffan, especially in the differences between regions and cities over a period of time.