

What are the roles/functions of the Chorus in Oedipus the King?

The chorus in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* consisted of 2 sub-choral groups and a *koryphaios*, the leader of the chorus. The two *hemichoria* were made up of inexperienced Athenians, whilst the *koryphaios* was either talented or more experienced. The chorus had 2 main functions; lyrical and mechanical. Thus these functions provided the chorus with many roles, although only a few will be mentioned in this essay. One of them was to introduce the characters and offer important background information. Another one was to summarize the episode in the form of a choral ode. They also had to clarify and narrate the play, voice the opinion of the audience and engage the main actors in dialogue.

One of the functions of the chorus is the lyrical function. The lyrical function helps Sophocles, the playwright to result with Freytag's pyramid by regulating the development of the plot. The chorus has the role to voice the opinions of the audience and other characters, such as the Thebans. This allowed Sophocles' to keep his actor group small whilst staging his play realistically. "Respect him— he's been no fool in the past" demonstrates how the chorus can voice the opinion of other nonexistent characters, Thebans in this situation. The chorus also sometimes represents all Thebans, for example in this case: when the Messenger tells Oedipus that he must ask for the help of the people, "Does anyone know that herdsman" it is the chorus that answers. The chorus also engaged in a lyrical dialogue, or *kommos* with a character, in this case Oedipus. Usually the leader of the chorus converses with Oedipus, but sometimes the chorus also speaks "Where's she gone, Oedipus". All of these ways help Sophocles to establish facts and affirm the outlook of society.

As mentioned in the introduction, one of the functions of the chorus in Oedipus Rex is a mechanical one. This usually meant that whenever the chorus or the leader spoke, the result was fluidity in the development of the play's plot. One of the roles of the chorus was to introduce the characters and offer background information. This mechanical function allowed the spectators to follow the play's plot easily. Sophocles used this role frequently, "look, they bring him on at last, the seer [Tiresias]" and "Put your requests to Creon, here he is" shows this. "Thebes [is] like a great army dying" further evidences how Sophocles uses the chorus to describe the condition of the city. This role is like a technical helper that allows the playwright *id est* to give information to the audience without muddling up the credibility of the plot.

The next role is to clarify and narrate the story. Through the above mentioned technical helper (the chorus), Sophocles could also narrate parts of the story that did not take place on stage. *Exempli gratia*: "I saw it all, and with all the memory that's in me you will learn what that poor woman suffered", through the questions of the chorus, the audience acquires the information.

Another one of mechanical function roles of the chorus was to separate the episodes through the choral odes. Technically seen, this role allows the actors to change the scene, change their costumes and rest. This may be a reason why the stasimon was so long.

During the stasimon, the chorus had to summarize what happened in the episode, this was accompanied by music and dance. “Screams for the Healer, children dead in the womb and life on life goes down” recapitulates the previous “act”, stasimon. In the choral ode, the chorus also reminded the audience of the relation of the play to the gods, “Apollo, lord of the light”. This role is primarily religiously didactic and is used to point out the significance of the event that occurred. At the time Sophocles wrote *Oedipus the King*, there were people who were beginning to doubt and undermine the existence and role of the gods. In this way, through this play, Sophocles was able to remind the citizens that the gods controlled everything.

It is also the job of the chorus to end the play, and add a philosophical morsel. This morsel and the message of the chorus are didactic, this way Sophocles could teach the audience about the consequences of an action. The chorus, in this case teaches the spectators about the importance of obeying and believing in the gods. The tone of the chorus, in various parts suggests that the only reason that Oedipus suffered so much is because he tried to evade destiny, thus, undermining the power of the Greek gods.

In *Oedipus the King*, the chorus is the ‘perfect’ audience. It reacts to the action on stage as one is expected to, and the chorus also helps structure the play with the stasimones. The *koryphaios* often engages in *kommos* with Oedipus, also the *hemichoria* narrate the play and gives the spectators background information. The chorus has a vital role in the play, as it structures it and gives the actors a break. It also is a technical helper to both the actors and the playwright, no matter its amateurism. To summarize, without the chorus *Oedipus the King* would not have been the masterpiece that it is now.

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