

World Literature assignment

What is the role of the chorus in “Oedipus the King” the “Lysistrata”

To answer this question we first need to understand what was the nature and the function of the chorus in the ancient Greek theatrical plays. I will examine the role of the chorus in both theatrical plays, followed by examining by whom the choruses were represented in the two plays and finally present the functions of each chorus in both theatrical plays.

In ancient Greek plays, there was also the **Chorus**. The choruses were a group of men, who played roles of either male or female characters, such as the Elders, Old Women. The two plays I chose feature a group of elders in “Oedipus” and a split chorus of men and women in “Lysistrata”.

They spoke together, and their speeches often made comments on what's going on in the play. This particular feature of speaking together is being used a great deal in “Oedipus” as it is a tragedy and the council of men which is the chorus speaks at the same time to put emphasis on the tragic event that just happened. This feature is also used in “Lysistrata” but because it’s a comedy when the chorus is speaking together is rather likely to give its opinion and not sum up an event or announce an important event.
QUOTE

These speeches break up the whole play into little parts, making it more interesting. Music was probably used in these Choral Odes, and this also motivated the interest of the audience. Perhaps sometimes it even left the audience on the edge or relaxed them. This effect which is discussed later on in the essay is used in “Oedipus” as it is a tragedy.*LYSISTRATA SONG QUOTE*

The chorus also interacted with the main characters, telling them what to do, or giving advice. This is a feature mostly presented in “Oedipus” rather than “Lysistrata” because the chorus is acting as the council in “Oedipus” and it’s bound to give advice

which it does, where as in “Lysistrata” the chorus goes along with the plot and does not stand out as an advice maker or problem solver.

The things they said were often about human nature, or something very universal. In “Oedipus” we see the chorus which is either in the form of the council or in the form of peasants to keep bringing up the theme of unnatural which is a very immense theme in the play. It is the chorus that brings news of the unnatural child and the curse it brought on their land and now is punished by the gods. Same thing happens in “Lysistrata” where the play is evolved around a natural theme, sex. This puts together what is happening to the characters in the play seem relevant to everyone watching the play.

The chorus usually performed on the *orchestra* which was right in the front of the stage which accounts for its important role in plays.

In “Lysistrata” there are two choruses. There is a Chorus of old men and a Chorus of old women and both have very different opinions of what is occurring in the play. They both want to see different outcomes of the war. The women want peace, while the men want the war between the Athenians and the Spartans to go ahead. “Lysistrata” also had a chorus of Athenians and a Chorus of Spartans as the Athenians were fighting the Spartans at that time where the women stopped giving sex to the men.

I believe that the reason for so many choruses in “Lysistrata” is because there are many different sides in this play and by this meaning the two opposite sexes and the two opposing cities. The Chorus of Old women represents the female population in the play and for what they stand for, or in this case stand against, wanting the war to end. The chorus of Old Men represents the male warriors who are trying to persuade the women to stop their strike and the Spartans and the Athenians were fighting against each other in the war. All of the choruses represent feelings of the groups mentioned above.

In “Oedipus” there is only one chorus and one of its primary functions is to act as bystanders throughout the play reacting to situations and usually observing everyone around them and also offering their opinion acting as a council at some points at regular intervals throughout the play. An example of this is when Oedipus irrationally accuses Croon of conspiring against him, the Chorus responds “To one who fears fall, his words seem good; O king, swift counsels are not always safe”. This makes them important in

this role as they are often the voice of reason during heated moments, the voice of fear and confusion during Oedipus' downfall which seems to mirror the audience's reaction and emotion in many situations throughout the play. The things the Chorus advises such as the one mentioned above are in fact reasonable and would have been the right things to do by Oedipus but he does not take their advice. The chorus is also used as a receptive audience to things that have been said behind the scenes. An example of this is when Jocasta has realized the truth about who Oedipus really is and the second messenger comes to describe the scene inside the palace to the chorus: "within the porch, straight to the couch she rushed, her bridal bed, and to her hair". A very important part of the story is told to the audience through the chorus here which highlights its role in the play.

The Choruses in "Lysistrata" also serve to connect the events of the story within the Greek religious and historical tradition. The songs of the men and women constantly refer to other mythological and historical events that are similar to those that happen on stage. This similarity between the two choruses is also seen in "Oedipus the king" where a lot of mythological background and a lot of mythological figures such as Apollo, the Oracle and the Sphinx are mentioned and brought into the plot by the chorus at the very beginning of the play where the chorus as citizens is gathered outside the palace and choose the priest to tell him about the oracle and the angry god. This is important in the plot of the play as it is evolving around the anger of the gods and the prophecies of the Oracle.

Both choruses in "Lysistrata" have a leader that is to a certain extent the spokesman for the group. The leader out voices the thoughts of the chorus who back up what the leader said by agreeing with him/her. An example of this is where the two choruses meet and "Chorus of men: Monsters, enough! – Our patience is now gone it's time for you to tell why you barricaded here upon our hallowed citadel. Leader: now question her, and test her out, and never own she's right." This reinforcement given by the Chorus here gives the feeling of unity between the leader and the Chorus.

The chorus in "Oedipus" however does not have a leader and this is, I believe, because it offers a type of narrative for the audience as at the end of the first scene, the

chorus clarifies the diseased state which is the city of Thebes has descended into “still breeding plague, un-pitied infants lie..and wives and mothers, grey with hoary age..by every alter mourn”.

In “Lysistrata” the action and relationship between the two choruses parallels the action of the story as tensions between men and women increase, so does the fighting between the choruses. When peace is declared the choruses join together as one. This dynamic between male and female choruses reveals the dependency between the domestic and political lives of the Athenian people. This parallel’s in the plot such as Sparta and Athens, like Myrrhine and Kinesias, like the leader of men and the leader of women, the choruses find reconciliation when the state declares peace. So the chorus in essence acts as another story line in the background to emphasize the split and the fighting in the play and perhaps make it more comic.

As “Oedipus the King” is a tragedy we see the tragic events hit the audience one after the other but a medium was needed to keep the continuity of the play. In modern theater the plays are normally split into scenes and acts. However in a Greek tragedy to keep the continuity of the plot without having normal brakes they had these natural gaps by having a narrative section. This ruled out the necessity of having breaks in the action that was tacking place and in a way kept the audience informed of what was going on.

However the chorus in “Lysistrata” does not really act the same way in this particular role. In “Lysistrata” because it is a comedy the chorus as we mentioned before is active in the play and did not really stop in between the scenes to recap on the scene or to explain what had happened behind the scenes. The chorus in “Lysistrata” fighting its own battles during the play was always active and communicated mostly thorough the leader, unlike in Oedipus where the chorus had no leader and expressed its own opinions acting as council and informers. These main differences between the choruses are mainly there due to the different genre each act has which it need its chorus to act and do different things in order to keep the going.

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