



The Chorus as the Voice of the Demos: Proto-Democratic Expression in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*

Aziz ur Rehman^a, Humaira Masud^{*b}, Muhammad Hamza Zahid^c

- a. Higher Education Department, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan
- b. Department of English, National University of Modern Languages, Lahore Campus, Pakistan
- c. Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University, Mardan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the function of Chorus in *Oedipus Rex* is discussed as the voice of the demos in general, and the covert expression of proto-democratic voice in the middle of a monarchic story. Though the traditional interpretation has focused on the themes of fate, tragic irony and personal misfortune of Oedipus, the emphasis in this study has been on the civic and moral dimension of the Chorus as a mediator between the ruler, the citizenry of the people and God. Qualitative analysis of the Chorus in the context of close reading and reference to context highlights six key interventions and how the Chorus embodies communal anxiety, provides moral guidance, challenges authority, and considers ethically and civically. The theoretical framework incorporates Aristotle moral conception of a tragedy, the concept of Chorus by Goldhill to be the mediator of the city, the concept of rational communal judgment put forward by Dodds and the concept of collective consciousness put forward by Vernant and Vidal-Naquet. The findings have confirmed that the Chorus is always a voice of the majority will, an intermediary in the process of decision-making, and a voice of the moral consciousness, which are a part of the elements of proto-democracy—responsibility, consultation, civic control. This paper comes to the conclusion that Sophocles is strategic in the way he instills the early ideas of democracy in the Chorus and that *Oedipus Rex* is not only a tragedy of the individual, but a tragedy that is used to show the dynamics between authority and the civic voice.

1. Introduction

Sophocles and the Greek tragedy have been a touchstone for the intellectual, cultural and political life of the ancient Athens. Contrary to the interpretation of these actions as mere entertainment, they were firmly embedded in the civic life of the Athenian community and featured as a means of reflection and questioning of social values, moral issues and political structures. With the introduction of democratic activities in Athens, where the citizens were actively engaged in both the government and the discussion, the tragedy came into being. As other critics have pointed out in *Poetics*, tragedy imparts serious actions and calls them upon to contemplate and to reason about issues of “morality” and “intellectuality” (Aristotle, trans. 1996). It is in this socio-political paradigm that Greek tragedy is such an important place to analyze the interplay between power and the general will and especially in its drama and characterization.

Oedipus Rex is one of the surviving tragedies and it is considered to be a seminal book that not only dwells on the theme of fate, knowledge and being a ruler but also gives an indirect insight into the dynamics of civic participation. Although the plot

* Correspondence to: Department of English, National University of Modern Languages, Lahore Campus, Pakistan
E-mail address: humasud@numl.edu.pk (H. Masud).



anticipates King Oedipus as a strong sovereign who will do anything to find out what is causing the plague in Thebes, the introduction of the Chorus adds a group aspect that makes it difficult to consider concentrated authority. The Chorus which is usually made up of Theban elders acts as a representative group which senses the concerns and fears of the people and makes judgments about ethical issues. Instead of being mere audience members, the Chorus actively contributes in the dramatic action by addressing Oedipus, doubting the events, and having ethical anxieties. In doing this they speak for the demos or the people, and thus for a form of an early public voice in the dramatic form (Goldhill, 1997).

The Chorus and its function in Greek tragedy has been the subject of many classical studies and critics have also noted the dual function of the chorus, as narrator as well as a consciousness of the society. The Chorus functions as a voice for the community and an intermediary between the audience and the characters in the play, and is believed by scholars such as Simon Goldhill to provide interpretation for the audience members and to voice the community's ideology (Goldhill, 1997). In *Oedipus Rex*, the Chorus has been loyal to the king but is not afraid to speak out doubting, fearing or morally concerned by some disturbing news that comes to meet him. This is a dynamic relationship between the group perspective and the king's authority, which surfaces a clash between the vision and the perspective of the group and the vision and perspective of the king. Although the political system presented in the play is not democratic, the presence of the Chorus can be said to be proto-democratic, that is, ones in which participatory speech and group thinking exist in the hierarchical system.

Although the available literature on *Oedipus Rex* is rich, the themes of tragic irony, fate and free will, and the psychological aspects of the character have been the major focus of criticism. The political implications of the play have been comparatively less stressed on, especially the role of the Chorus as a medium of sharing the opinion of the people and civic awareness. This paper endeavours to remedy that by looking at how the Chorus works in the drama as the voice of the demos, and as voice of proto-democratic in the text. The study tries to decipher the way in which the play deals with authority, legitimacy and collective agency through the dynamics between the Chorus and Oedipus, thus offering a subtle understanding of the political undertones of the play.

The main objectives of the research are twofold;

- To discuss the role of the Chorus as the voice of the demos in *Oedipus Rex*.
- To discuss the expression of proto-democratic form in the discourse and the actions of the Chorus in the play.

1.1. Research questions

1. What is the role of the Chorus as the voice of the demos in *Oedipus Rex*?
2. How does the Chorus exemplify proto-democratic expression of the play?

1.2. Significance of the Study

The research is important because it provides re-reading of *Oedipus Rex* in terms of political analysis which precondition the relevance of collective voice to a text that is traditionally understood in terms of fate and individual tragedy. It demonstrates that although the monarchical climate, it is possible to demonstrate the signs of democratic consciousness through the dramatic performance, particularly in the chorus. Furthermore, the paper is part of a long series of discussions that is currently taking place in the field of literary and cultural criticism, as it illustrates how classic texts can be re-read in order to uncover socio-political processes within the text. However, this research is limited to a textual analysis of the Chorus in *Oedipus Rex* and further comparison of other tragedies or playwrights is not included. In this narrowed down method, the paper will attempt to give a deep and consistent reflection on the interaction of authority and collective voice in one of the most influential works of Greek literature.

2. Literature Review

Critical scholarship of *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles has been immense and varied with most of the writings revolving around the themes of fate, tragic irony, knowledge, and human sufferings. The classical critics, starting with Aristotle in *Poetics* have focused on the formal excellence of the play, especially the perfect application of plot, recognition (anagnorisis) and reversal (peripeteia) (Aristotle, trans. 1996). According to Aristotle *Oedipus Rex* is the greatest tragedy because it is serious in morals, emotional and has the collapse of a noble character which is due to a combination of destiny and mistake. However, this type of classical treatment is at least predominantly centred on the hero character, and is likely to overlook other important large-scale socio-political considerations which are also inscribed in the play.

Scholars have extended the boundaries of the play in the contemporary criticism and examined the philosophical and psychological implications of the play. Scholars like Sigmund Freud have gone on record explaining the play in terms of

psychoanalysis, making it possible to define the so-called Oedipus complex that prefigures unconscious urges and family conflicts (Freud, 1900). Although this reading by Freud has been very influential, it leaves the whole emphasis absolutely on the inner mind of the main character, and thus, disregards other important aspects of the play, such as the role of the Chorus. Similarly, the existential and structuralist critics have also taken up the issue of the limitedness, truth and destiny of man, once again confirming Oedipus as a lonely tragic character.

Even though such emphasis is predominately on the main character, several scholars have acknowledged the significance of the Chorus in Greek tragedy. Other critics, such as Simon Goldhill, maintain that the Chorus is an important link between action and audience, it interprets choric values, and it conveys the audience's values (Goldhill, 1997). Goldhill claims that the Chorus is not merely decorative, but also rooted in the form of tragedy, the ideology and performative form. As a character in the play, the Chorus represents the voice of the elders of Thebes, and of the fears and hopes—and the moral interests—of the rest of the community in *Oedipus Rex*. Their responses to what Oedipus does as well as the way the crisis plays out sheds light on the people's concepts of power and justice generally.

Other scholars have been able to explain more political implications of the Chorus. These studies include Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet who have tried to examine Greek tragedy within the grand narrative of Athens' civic life, in which they propose that tragedy was a way of resolving social and political conflicts (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, 1988). According to them, the Chorus represents the voice of the body of citizens and this was the development of the democratic consciousness in Athens of classical times. This view is in line with the opinion that Greek tragedy cannot be completely comprehended without referring to its connection with the political institutions and practices of that era. The performative context of tragedy, often performed at civic celebrations such as the Dionysia further cements the connection of tragedy to the people discourse and a sense of community.

Besides this, E. R. Dodds in his work, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, points out the conflict between rational and irrational powers of the Greek world, which he characterizes as the dramatic tension that is strongly developed in *Oedipus Rex* (Dodds, 1951). Dodds' analysis does not focus as much on the Chorus as the larger cultural context in which the play operates, in which the rationale of man is always undermined by the will of gods and doubt. The Chorus can be seen in this regard as a kind of group organism attempting to describe these conflicting emotions which alternately invoke the sense of divine justice and trigger panic.

The criticism of recent years has begun to shed light on the literature/political-theory connection, making new interpretations of *Oedipus Rex* possible. The new historicism and cultural materialism scholars emphasize the context of the literary text. In this view, one can interpret the Chorus as a symbol of the demos, i.e. the people, whose voice is representative of early civic and popular opinion. Although the political structure in the play is monarchical, the presence of the Chorus who participate actively in the entire process in the play can be said to be proto-democratic manifestation. The Chorus asks him/her questions, advises him/her, and in reply becomes a kind of dialogue that is symbolic of democratic practices, but indirect.

Furthermore, other scholars such as Josiah Ober have been able to describe the features of democracy in the ancient Greek city of Athens, which focused on public orations, discussion and democratic decisions (Ober, 2008). Although Ober is more of a historian and a political scientist than a literary critic, he offers a convenient model of how the aspects of the democratic thought may find their reflection in the written works. Using these insights in relation to *Oedipus Rex* makes it possible to re-consider the Chorus as a more than dramatic convention; it is a symbolic image of civic body, the one that is involved in interpreting and reacting to authority.

Despite these encouraging contributions, however, there is always the obvious absence of a thorough analysis of the Chorus as proto-democratic articulation in *Oedipus Rex* in the literature. There are many works that acknowledge the presence of the Chorus, but do not look into the political significance of the Chorus and the collective voice. This paper aims to fill this void by analyzing the play's Chorus as the voice of its people and its contribution to the expression of the early democratic consciousness in the play.

In conclusion, the existing literature is a good basis to start dealing with the theme and structural complexity of *Oedipus Rex*; although it is generalist and based on an individual and psychological interpretation of the play, it doesn't completely neglect collective and political interpretations. The attention is drawn to the Chorus, its role in the drama and socio-political context, and this is the reason that the present research is anticipated to offer a fresh insight into the topic, shifting the focus from the voice of the community to the authority voice. By doing this, it will help to understand the Greek tragedy more fully as a civic discourse and commentary on the changing political conceptions in Greece during the ancient period.

3. Research Methodology

In the study the researcher used a research method which is qualitative research, while qualitative research is the most appropriate research method used by a researcher who is interested in analyzing texts and meanings, socio-political backgrounds without the need of numbers. A qualitative methodology is used to allow the researcher to lead into a thorough analysis of how the Chorus in *Oedipus Rex* serves as the voice of the demos, and how proto-democratic expression comes through the dialogue, reflections and experiences the Chorus has with Oedipus. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research is more appropriate than quantitative research to study complex human phenomena and experiences, and cultural phenomena, such as the study of the relationship between literature, society and politics in ancient Greek tragedy.

Close reading is one of the two techniques that were used in this research and it is a technique that offers systematic detailed analysis of text. Close reading enables the researcher to analyse the lines, actions and reactions of the Chorus as it relates to the developing plot, the moral and ethical concerns suggested, and the voice of the crowd that the Chorus represents (Greenham, 2018). The emphasis is on the language, the structure, the symbolism and the repetition in order to investigate the patterns of proto-democratic expression, either by challenging the king or by advising him or by expressing the opinion of the people.

In addition to close reading, there is also the contextual analysis whereby the play is given the context of the socio-political situation in Athens at the time of its composition. It is by historical accounts of Athenian democracy, civic engagement, and the role of public speech that one might come to a better understanding of what the Chorus stands for, what its values and fears are, and how the Chorus embodies the values and fears of the citizenry (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, 1988). With the help of the text and the historical context, some conclusions can be drawn concerning the possible interpretation of the drama of Sophocles as a political action, although it is set in a monarchy.

Only the words of *Oedipus Rex* are selected, and attention is given to the speeches of the Chorus, and to their interaction with one another. All choral odes and their answer to the actions of Oedipus were examined so as to determine the manner of collective judgment, morality and giving opinions.

As a whole, this paper has been undertaken through the qualitative analysis of literary works based on close reading and contextual interpretation to understand how the Chorus is the voice of the demos. The research which combines a textual analysis and a socio-political analysis will try to give a response to the following questions:

1. What is the role of the Chorus as the voice of the demos in *Oedipus Rex*?
2. How does the Chorus exemplify proto-democratic expression of the play?

Such approach allows having a thorough perception of not only the literary, but also the political aspects of the Chorus and its importance as the channel of the early democratic consciousness in the tragedy of Sophocles.

4. Analysis of the Chorus in *Oedipus Rex*

In *Oedipus Rex*, the Chorus serves as the social conscience of Thebes that stands in between the ruler, the citizens and the audience. Since the very beginning of the play, it is the social panic of the town during the plague, stressing the fact that the ruler and the people are dependent on each other. When the Chorus says, "*You pray to the gods? Let me grant your prayers. But you, Oedipus, let him who knows, speak first!*" (79–81), it is not simply providing narrative exposition; it brings out the need of wisdom and rational leadership by the citizens. The Chorus recognizes the authority of Oedipus, but at the same time, he claims that the rule should be knowledgeable and wise, which confirms the idea by Goldhill (1997), that the Chorus is a representative of the society and a balance between the rulers and the citizens. Therein, the Chorus has a somewhat proto-democratic role, as it is the collective thinking taking place within a monarchical context.

The Chorus joins Oedipus on his relentless pursuit of the truth about the death of Laius, and urges him to beware, "*We pray the gods grant you strength, Oedipus, but beware that your zeal may bring disaster*". In this instance, the Chorus is the civil control, that is, one that is concerned with people without challenging authority. Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (1988) demonstrates these interventions, arguing that Greek tragedy functioned as a means to consider ethical issues, such that the reason of society could check the individual. The line shows that Chorus is also part of what may be called proto-democratic discourse as citizens are not passive actors but instead an indirect audience in the governance process of the city.

The Chorus also speculates on moral and philosophical issues, apart from the short term events. When the storm of the crisis has grown to a certain level of intensity, it will see, "*Wisdom is by far the greatest part of joy, and reverence toward the gods must be guarded above all*". The acts of man are put in the context of God and society to remind the ruler and the people what man can and cannot know. Dodds (1951) believes that these poems are a reflection of the rationality of the community in this

form in which the collective voice is situated between the human and the divine. The Poetics (trans. The moral and cathartic function of the tragedy is stressed by Aristotle (1996), and The Chorus expands on this and connects the moral thinking with the civic life.

When Oedipus mistakenly accuses Creon of treachery, the Chorus gets in the way of the discreet counseling: "*Those who jump to conclusions may go wrong*". In this self-interjection, the Chorus is portrayed as a civic mediator: Reason takes the place of authority. It upholds the idea that the leadership is not only held responsible to divine judgment but also to the judgment of the community (Goldhill, 1997). The Chorus is always negotiating as a group between power and morality, contributing to the constant opposition between personal influence and social representation in comparison with what occurred in earlier counsel on the plague.

The Chorus also speaks everyone's wishes and concerns when there is a crisis. It speaks of the city's woes and implores God at the play's start, "*Look at us, passengers in the grip of fear, watching the pilot of the vessel go to pieces*." The Chorus uses this metaphor to depict Oedipus as the ship's captain whose success in steering the ship is essential to the well-being of the people of the city. The passage conveys not only the fear of the community when dealing with the plague, but also that leadership ought to be protecting the welfare of the people. The Chorus represents the voice of the people, not just a witness to the action; it has a moral and civic role to play in the polis. Greek tragedy, as Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (1988) suggest, presents the king as the highest authority in political matters and, at the same time, holds his behaviour to the people's gaze and to their demands. The Chorus thus represents an early concept of the nature of civic engagement, and a way of holding royal power to account for the public good and moral values of citizens.

In its final song, the Chorus assures us that "*Count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last*": Human life is fragile and uncertain, and even the best of things must be forfeited and deferred. This closing exercise turns Oedipus' personal tragedy into a universal moral lesson, with the aim of reminding the reader that human good fortune always has the potential to turn bad, and that no one can ever judge a person's life before it has concluded. In this communal introspection, the Chorus connects the personal with ethical and civic principles, urging the audience to engage with power in a humble, wise, and moral way. The Chorus, as E. R. Dodds (1951) suggests, functions as a bridge between the individual tragedy and the moral judgments of the audience, allowing them to judge political authority in terms of a communal morality. As part of this function, the Chorus is a voice of protest against the play's proto-democratic discourse, representing the values of the community and calling the rulers to account based on the criteria of justice and human responsibility.

In each case: the Chorus is the demos, the big moral judgment, governmental surveillance, and moral direction. There is proto-democracy in the literary evidence as the Chorus speaks for the people, holds back the power and brings the story into the values of the community. Comparing these scenes, warning Oedipus, philosophizing on wisdom, instructing moderation, and speaking out hope collectively, provides insight into the ongoing role of the Chorus as the moral, civic, and, in some way, the democratic conscience of the city. The work of Goldhill and Vidal-Naquet on civic consciousness and the work of Dodds on rational mediation, as well as the work of Aristotle on the moral framework, can be observed as instances of the strategic use of ancient democratic concepts by the Chorus in their interventions – these show the interrelationship between authority and the voice of the collective in *Oedipus Rex*.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In this paper I have examined the significance of the Chorus in *Oedipus Rex* as the group voice of the demos, and how the group voice is an expression of a proto-democratic voice in a monarchical context of Thebes. The qualitative approach to the study was informed by two research questions: how the Chorus is the voice of the demos and ways it can be a reflection of proto-democratic expression. The study used qualitative method that involved close reading of the text, contextual analysis and theoretical analysis.

A re-evaluation of six important choral interventions demonstrates that it is always the opinion of the people, morality and civic control that reflect the Chorus. At the outset of the play, the Chorus is generally fearful of the epidemic and wants Oedipus to be informed and wise; in action "*You pray to the gods? Let me grant your prayers. But thou, Oedipus, permit him he knows speak first!*" 79. This is proto-democratic expression, since the Chorus admires authority and demands the significance of grouped thinking at the same time (Goldhill, 1997). In the same way, the Chorus warns Oedipus of the possible outcomes of his inquiry at one point (224-226) when it tells him that they hope the gods will be on his side, yet he must be careful that his eagerness does not lead to his downfall, and this can also be viewed as an indirect mechanism that limits power, as it is the communal thought, which is similar to the democratic control (Vernant & Vidal-Naquet, 1988).

The Chorus offers philosophical and ethical commentary throughout the narrative, which is used to bridge the human action, the will of the Gods, and the requirements of civil responsibility. Its pondering of wisdom and reverence (196-198) puts the

human choice in moral and social contexts, which is in line with Dodds (1951) argument that the Chorus represents the mediator between the individual error and the social values. Another instance of the Chorus restraining Oedipus is the way he rushes to accuse Creon without even considering other information (No man can be wise in all things, and no man is free of error). The lesson of patience and obedience to the laws of the gods, provides an example of proto-democratic speech in the use of collective judgment and proves that collective rationality can affect the use of power even in a monarchy.

Moreover, the Chorus expresses the hopes of the people and general exposure (O city, afflicted with the plague, may the gods heal us through the hand of those who act wisely, we mortals are but shadows, born to trouble and grief, but still, we must honor what is just and true. The presence of these interventions emphasizes its dual purpose as a narrative and civic instrument that embodies moral, emotional and ethical sides of the demos. A comparison of these examples shows that they are recurrent, the Chorus is always placed between the authority of Oedipus, the will of the gods and the common good, and these are the earliest manifestations of the democratic consciousness inherent in Greek tragedy.

Finally, the paper concludes that the Chorus in *Oedipus Rex* is a proto democratic institution, that is, collective moral judgment, civic responsibility, and collective supervision. The political structure of Thebes is monarchical, but, through the Chorus, Sophocles manages to incorporate the voice of people into the play and incorporate civic logic and morality in the dramaturgy. This is in accordance with the theoretical views of Goldhill (1997) on civic mediation, Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (1988) on collective consciousness and Aristotle (Poetics, trans. 1996) views on the moral role of tragedy in the demonstration of the relation between the personal power and the communal voice

Recommendations

1. The future research might involve comparative studies of the Chorus with other Greek tragedies, e.g. Agamemnon with Euripides, The Bacchae to see how proto-democratic expression is conditioned by various political settings.
2. They can also look at performance and reception, that is, at the audience's perception of the Civic voice of the Chorus at the Dionysia, and the interpretation of the text in the light of the political practice in history, relating literary interpretation and historical political practice.
3. This paper asks the reader to rethink classical tragedy as a political philosophy, and to get a sense from the ethical and moral content of the chorus of how the civic sense developed in ancient Greece.

This thesis shows that *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles is not only the investigation of the individual tragedy but also the work as an advanced reflection of the concept of collective judgment, the initial democratic principles and the correlation between the power and the voice of the citizen.

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