



Midterm Essay

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Course

Introduction to English Drama

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"Voices of Fate and Morality: The Chorus in *Oedipus Rex* and *Doctor Faustus*"

A chorus is a group of actors who speak, sing and dance together as one body. They occupied a prominent place in both ancient Greek tragedy and Renaissance drama who acted as observers and commentators on the unfolding narrative during the course of a play. In *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles and *Doctor Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe, the chorus serves multiple roles by reflecting the thematic concern of the play through moral commentary, helping audience to follow complex plots with the exposition and background information, setting the emotional tone to evoke intended atmosphere for connecting the audience with the characters, shaping the overall structure of the play through framing the actions of its narrative flow and highlighting themes of fate and free will to guiding the audience's interpretation of the protagonists' journeys.

Firstly, In *Oedipus Rex*, the chorus acted as a character who represented the collective voice of the citizens in the form of Theban elders. They were active participants in many plots to reflect the concerns of people of Thebes and to advise Oedipus on his key decisions. When Oedipus accused the Creon, the chorus warned him by saying "Hasty counsels are not safe" (**Sophocles, 429 BCE**). In contrast, the chorus in *Doctor Faustus* was the omniscient narrators who were detached from playing any character. It appeared at key moments to provide reflective commentary on Faustus' decisions, such as in the prologue, where the chorus introduced Faustus as "swollen with cunning of a self-conceit" (**Marlowe, 1604**). This difference in characterization reflects the contrasting roles of the chorus in Greek tragedy and Renaissance drama.

Secondly, The chorus provided the moral lessons in the plays, a function which was also explored in both plays. In *Oedipus rex* the chorus provided directions to Oedipus on actions he shouldn't take since they will make matters worse for him. They told the Oedipus not to anger and charged him not to make any hasty actions. For example, when Oedipus declared his intentions to punish Creon, the chorus told him, warning him that his vengeful actions would in turn harm him by saying "When nothing is gained by knowledge, it is better to be wise and to suffer" (**Sophocles 429 BCE**). Likewise, in *Doctor Faustus* he used the chorus to pass moralistic

messages to both Faustus and to the audience concerning the evils of ambitions. In the beginning of the play, to express Faustus' desire as unhealthy and reckless they compared it to the case of Icarus who flew above his head with waxen wings. "Waxen wings did mount above his reach" (**Marlowe, 1604**). In both plays there is the focus on the virtue of moderation, and the punishment of pride. However, in *Oedipus Rex*, the chorus interacts with the protagonist directly while the chorus in *Doctor Faustus* comes across as a commentator to the story telling the audience what they need to know.

Thirdly, The chorus in both plays also advanced the plot by providing exposition and background information. In *Oedipus Rex*, the chorus recounted the backstory of Laius' murder and the prophecy that led to Thebes' curse, ensuring that the audience understood the stakes of the drama. They reminded the audience of Oedipus' previous heroism while setting up the irony of his eventual downfall by saying "Thou, O mighty Oedipus, didst quell the Sphinx" (**Sophocles, 429 BCE**). In *Doctor Faustus*, the chorus similarly provided key exposition, particularly at the beginning and at the end of the play. In the prologue, the chorus provided context for Faustus' dissatisfaction with conventional knowledge and his turn to necromancy by saying "Faustus was glutt'd now with learning's golden gifts" (**Marlowe, Prologue, 1604**). Though both the chorus provided essential information which helped to drive the plot, the chorus in *Oedipus Rex* was more integrated into the action, while the chorus in *Doctor Faustus* served as a framing device.

Fourthly, The chorus also has the other important function of setting the author's emotional tone in the both plays. In *Oedipus Rex*, the chorus has the responsibility to give the impressions of the Theban citizens in terms of their feelings of hope and hopelessness when the truth about the identity of Oedipus comes to the surface. First they wish for liberation and hope that Oedipus who is depicted as a savior of Thebes in the past will help them again: "Blessed mayst thou be to us again as once before" (**Sophocles, 429 BCE**). Moreover, while watching the play and with the increasing revelation of Oedipus' story the tone of the chorus turns into a scared and terrified one which is close to the feeling of the spectators. Thus, in *Doctor Faustus*, the same character gradually builds in the audience the atmosphere of menace since the very beginning of the play people will suffer due to Faustus' deeds. The chorus states, "Faustus is gone: reference to consider his terrible fall" (**Marlowe, 1604**) that creates a depressing and pathos-filled mood that

precedes the events of the play. Each of the choruses plays the role of regulating the feeling of the audience towards the events that happen on the stage and the overall mood of the plays.

The interaction between the chorus of the play and the divine is the last similarity between the two plays. In *Oedipus Rex* for instance, the chorus invokes the gods and thus ascribes a reflection of the Greeks' belief in the fate and the will of the divine. For instance, at some point they invoke Apollo, Athena, and Artemis in their words, "Ye powers defend us!" (**Sophocles, 429 BCE**) While referring to plays of Sophocles this reaffirms the helplessness of the people and their reliance on gods to help the city out of the ongoing problem. It is worthy to note that the chorus here acts as a link between the gods and the mortals and thus, highlights the idea of the course of destiny. Unlike the music used in the play, the chorus in *Doctor Faustus* interprets the sins of Faustus who rejected god and the effects of his contract with Lucifer. Play is built within the framework of Christian belief in predestination and free will, and the Chorus is evidence of moral and spiritual deterioration of Faustus. The imagery of the "cut is the branch that might have grown full straight" (**Marlowe, 1604**) puts Faustus in a spotlight. While in *Oedipus Rex* the chorus prays to the gods for intervention the chorus in *Doctor Faustus* contemplates the ramifications of people's deeds.

In conclusion,, the main idea that can be derived from the use of the chorus in both works is the fact that the chorus serves as the guiding force that directs the spectators' interpretations of both the plot and themes of each tragedy as well as their moral messages in an explicit manner. By their moral, suggested course of action, role in the progression of the story, tone and their ability to communicate with the gods, the chorus helps to enrich the experience of receiving the narratives. In *Oedipus Rex* the chorus is much more active and it represents the culture of Greek society in the time period which the play was written in and set but the chorus of *Doctor Faustus* is the narrator of the play as it were and comments on the moral and obviously the spiritual aspect of the play. Still, one must note that the chorus in both plays is one of the major components that let the audience see the tragic outcomes of the main characters' greed, overestimation of their abilities, and the eternal struggle between destiny and individual choice.