

The Manifestation of Morality in Greek and Shakespearean Theatre

Background

Among other responsibilities, the chorus in Greek drama often creates an “ethical and social framework” (Brockett 23) against which the characters and events are judged. As the use of the chorus declined, the main characters often provided the assessment of their deeds through their internal moral conflict. This shift from an externally imposed code of conduct in a play to one manifest internally correlates with the Western world’s conversion from polytheism to monotheism in the early part of the fourth century. Just as the worship of many gods, whose combined governing ruled the lives of mortals, was laid aside to worship one omniscient God, so too was the guidance of an all-knowing chorus replaced by the moral discernment of individual characters. Linking these two transformations offers insight pertinent to understanding the development of characters and play action before and after Emperor Constantine permitted Christianity in the Edict of Milan in 313 AD. Uncovering religious influences on moral decisions will provide the information needed to explain the development of lessons of redemption and morality taught by plays through peripeteia, a character’s recognition of moral truths and subsequent reversal of his or her actions to comply with it. Identifying who constructs the play’s moral principles is essential for both the characters and audience since differing values are implied by a moral choice founded on externally imposed regulations and one mandated by one’s own morality. Although much research has been done in regards to the purpose of the chorus, the duties of the main character, and the significance and meaning of peripeteia, no information exists that correlates these standard elements of theatre to each other or with the rise of Christianity; therefore, the assessment of these theatrical components is heretofore incomplete.

Plan

Before examining specific works, thorough research on the roles assumed by the chorus during the Greek Empire and the adaptation of those roles after the acceptance of Christianity will be completed. This information, along with an analysis of the definition of peripeteia, will be gathered to provide a foundation of knowledge necessary to examine specific works of theatre and their intended teachings. Not only will information be collected from published sources, but also, it will come from the practical experience of observing acting department chair Barta Heiner create the chorus of Euripides’ *Trojan Women* during winter semester 2003. After the initial research is concluded, the texts of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, and the play it was derived from, *Agamemnon*, will be considered. Then, after comparing written theatrical works to the information found, performances of a Shakespeare play and Greek drama will be viewed and evaluated.

Benefits

With the help of this research, modern actors will be able to calculate their characters' responsibilities in creating a standard of morality. This will allow them to appropriately represent the internal or external nature of morality and gauge their physical movement to accommodate the presence or absence of a chorus. This study will also help determine the extent of Christian influence in modifying the representation of life and human understanding in performance.

Budget

In order to implement the above plan, support from the ORCA Research Scholarship will be used to purchase necessary research materials and scripts (\$100). The scholarship will also enable attendance at the most historically accurate productions presented of Shakespearean plays and Greek drama in London and Stratford-upon-Avon (\$150). The remainder of the funds will be applied to travel expenses (\$600) and the continued study of theatre this coming spring at the Theatre and Media Arts London Study Abroad.

Conclusion

As a form of historiography, plays record of how life is viewed and represented. Understanding the ways life was depicted before and after Christianity's emergence will enable modern actors to calculate the role of religion in character and plot development. Research of the chorus' correlation to Christian thinking will exemplify the changes made in presenting morals to adjust for varying standards of morality. This study will also determine the source, internal or external, of morality, providing a foundation of knowledge for actors to use as they portray different characters, whether they be pagan, Hindi, Mormon, atheist, Catholic or otherwise.

Bibliography

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"Constantine the Great." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Online Ed. Kevin Knight. 1999. 23 Oct. 2001 <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04295c.htm>>.