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Analysis of *Preface to Plato* by Eric Alfred Havelock

Introduction

Preface to Plato by Eric Alfred Havelock seems to be a response to Plato's famous publication *The Republic*. In *The Republic*, Plato attacks Greek educational institutions, especially poetry (Gulley 31). Eric Havelock believes that attack on poetry should be looked at on a serious insight. The hostile attitude of Plato towards poetry can be traced to the traditional domination of this genre in Modern Greek culture. Poetry denominates in the Greek culture because of the technological aspect. Most of the events of Greek culture had to be preserved in a way that would make it easy to be memorized. Memorizing the non-literate culture is significant for the cultural stability of Greek society. In his attacks, Plato picks up on Homer, who he sees as a source of technical and moral instructions. In *Preface to Plato* Alfred Havelock records that *Iliad* was used as an encyclopedia which was stored orally. Plato's attacks are based on the emotional identification utilized in the process of poetic construction. Plato believes that content should be presented as a continuous narrative with the use of specific images. In the second part of the *Preface to Plato* by Alfred Havelock shows the rational culture of Greek society. Literate people in Greece believed that sentences should be analyzed and described normatively in both explicit and abstract forms. Plato, therefore, subscribed to the scholarly Greek version of the language of science and ethics.

Summary of *Preface to Plato* by Alfred Havelock

Havelock begins the book by offering a condemnation on *The Republic* by Plato by stating that it does not serve its purpose. Havelock writes that the book by Plato has been widely regarded as a commentary on the politics, justice, and order of the state. However, the book does not serve its original purpose as only one-third of the book stays true to its original objective. The remaining two-thirds of the book, Plato uses to discuss other matters that are not statecraft. The bulk of the issues that Plato writes about focus on the attack he places on the Greek traditional education institutions. The Greek educational systems have been there for quite some time and have survived centuries of modernization. Havelock traces the origin of the education system to the 1200 BCE after the collapse of the Mycenaean Civilization. The Phoenician alphabet was adopted in the Greek culture around 700 BCE and has been in use ever since. The traditional educational system of Greece involved passing down crucial information such as laws, mores, culture, and history orally. Verbal transition of information was done through rhymes, such as poems. The very system that maintained the Greek tradition and culture is what Plato attacks. The reason for using rhymes was because there was no writing in the Greek culture. The first section of the book involves Havelock taking the reader through *the Iliad* in detail to show how the ethical, historical, and cultural heritage of Greece was passed down to future generations.

Havelock states that *Iliad* was routine for Greeks as it began at a young age and was promoted through festivals and public events. The citizens were expected to master the words verbally and recite them until they memorize them. The project of memorizing traditions and culture gave rise to teachers and minstrels. The teachers were chosen from the people who had a quicker understanding and processing of information passed down to them. Homer and Hesiod became the faces of the traditional education system due to their higher capacity in

understanding and mastery of the cultures. Havelock, therefore, views *The Republic* as a criticism of the Greek educational system. Consequently, he states that if it is viewed as a criticism, then “the logic of its total organization becomes clear” (Havelock 13). In the second part of the book, Havelock throws a look at the literate culture of the Greek in which Plato expects people to think and not just say anything before having thought about it. Havelock views the traditional system of Greek education as “the Homeric state of mind” (Havelock 134). Havelock writes about the quest by Plato to have the Greek society to change the education system to that of analysis and thinking. Havelock believes that Plato considers the traditional education system of Greece to be lacking analysis and scientific rationalism.

Analysis

In the book *Preface to Plato*, Havelock identifies issues surrounding poetry and further explains the historical context of poetry in the Greek tradition. The main objective of the book is to refute the claims by both Plato and Socrates that poetry has no place in the Greek tradition due to its lack of content and complexity. Havelock, therefore, completely supports his claims on the importance of the Greek traditional system of education (Neeley 194). He explains the historical origin of the system and how it has kept the traditions and culture of the society stable. By explaining the origin of the traditional system of education, Havelock gives the audience insight into how the Greeks have used the system, and it cannot just be discarded. Havelock uses materials provided by both Homer and Hesiod, who were the most trusted teachers of poetry in Greek history. Homer was the author of the most trusted Greek history and literature, which are the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The two poems are the focal works of ancient Greek literature and describe the origin of Greek tradition and culture. Hesiod, on the other hand, is one of the most respected poets of Greek literature that has been used as a point of reference in many Greek

materials. By depending on the literature such as the *Iliad*, Havelock has reputable sources that he draws his arguments from, hence, forming an essential knowledge for his works (Halverson 148). Havelock also focuses on *The Republic* by Plato in which he uses as the center point to shed light on the Greek traditional education system. The focus Havelock gives allows him to respond to several issues raised about poetry as a reputable mode of education. He, therefore, takes the opportunity to respond and defend the *Iliad* and many other poetry works that formed part of the Greek tradition on education. The *Preface to Plato* is, therefore, a scholarly response to Plato's attack on the Greek system of education. The work by Havelock could be improved by increasing his focus on more materials by other authors who seek a change in the educational system of Greek. Havelock should also not view Plato's work as a call to abandon Greek traditions rather than a call to amend some of it.

Works Cited

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