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Edited by Renaud Gagné and Marianne Govers Hopman

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CHAPTER I

*Introduction**The chorus in the middle**Renaud Gagné and Marianne Govers Hopman*

There is something distinctive about choral mimesis in Greek tragedy. The tragic chorus is never just a group of old men or captive women, never just a ring of ships or dolphins or the circle of stars of its imagery, or masked citizens dancing in the theater – never just one chorus. It will rarely be entirely circumscribed by its fictional character, narrative, or performance at any one moment. In a genre defined by impersonation, it can push the referential limits of embodiment and enactment beyond any strict equivalence. Its boundaries, like its movement, are always shifting. If the central characters are simultaneously here and there, on stage and in the play, the chorus can simultaneously be here, there, and elsewhere, now and then, this and that, meld one into the other, and pass freely between these different levels through the semantics of word, sound, and movement. Its well-known ability to reference itself and its own dance in performance, or to ‘project’ itself on other, distant choruses, is part of a much wider pattern of mimetic transfer set in motion by the choral song.¹ Without ever breaking the dramatic illusion, the chorus can radically shift the focus from one level of reference to another and create greater depth through a superimposition of semantic layers.

The choral odes of tragedy deal in dense interweavings of correspondences and highly integrated parallel meanings. Most choral songs paint an intricate tableau of multiple embedded messages; their verses typically follow many different paths at the same time and the richness of their

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¹ For ‘choral self-referentiality’ and ‘choral projection’ in drama, see Henrichs 1994/5 and below p. 25.

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allusions quickly leads the spectator to a state of cognitive overload. They revel in abrupt transitions and oblique side glances, the lure of roads not taken and the overabundance of possible interpretations. Dionysos is their true 'nominal audience'. Behind every simple level of meaning hides another one, and every level comments on the next. The referential complexity of the average ode is staggering, the stimulus overwhelming; it communicates information at a greater entropy rate than any other part of drama. Although every chorus ultimately shapes a specific voice for itself, no two spectators will hear or see the exact same ode, and no audience member will be able to seize all the possible layers of thought and imagery, the nuances of connotation, the implications, the indices and citations, and the contradictions of the temporary world opened by the song in the rapid cut and thrust of sound and movement, the total spectacle of theatrical performance. But most will notice the remarkable multiplicity of dimensions at play in the choral song, the exuberant richness of correspondences between them, something of the common direction they take, bridges with the other odes of the play, continuities and discontinuities, and echoes that span over the rest of the drama. The choral song sets up a vast range of correspondences between realities.

Choral poetry carves its own unique register of representation in tragedy. It does not just adapt the forms and grammar of older and contemporary choral lyric, or reflect ritual, or echo performance, and it obviously does not just act or comment on characters 'in character'. The referential shifts of the chorus are not necessarily a reflection of ritual, and they often enough have nothing to do with Dionysos, at least on a surface level; the ability of the ode to link different realities cannot be reduced to its Dionysiac or cultic dimensions, as important as they might be, or to the putative legacy of its origins. Whatever its deep cause, the special communicative power of the tragic ode is grounded in its ability to freely link and combine, to serve as a direct intermediary between various levels of reference, and incorporate all strands into the rest of the choral narrative and the whole of the play. This is what we would like to call 'choral mediation'. Choral mediation is an umbrella term encompassing all the mimetic transfers that allow different levels of reference to interact and complete each other. The dramatic chorus can mediate between actors and audience. It can mediate between words, rhythm, music, and dance. It can mediate between genres. It can mediate between authorities. It can mediate between the conventions of drama and ritual. It can mediate between the many spaces and temporalities of story, tradition, and performance. All these levels of reference are intertwined with one another, and their integration into one poem makes for language

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of remarkable density. The extent of this figurative flexibility is a distinctive characteristic of the chorus in drama.

Euripides, *Electra* 699–746

It seems appropriate to begin with a concrete example. Let us take the second stasimon of Euripides' *Electra* to illustrate the process of choral mediation.²

ἀταλάν ³ ὑπὸ ἱματέρος Ἀργείων†	
ὀρέων ποτὲ κληδών ⁴	700
ἐν πολιαῖσι μένει φήμαις	
εὐαρμόστοις ἐν καλάμοις	
Πᾶνα μοῦσαν ἡδύθροον	
πνέοντ', ἀγρῶν ταμίαν,	
χρυσέαν ἄρνα καλλίποκον	705
πορεῦσαι. πετρίνοις δ' ἐπι-	
στάς κᾶρυξ ἰαχεῖ βάθοις·	
Ἀγορὰν ἀγοράν, Μυκη-	
ναῖοι, στείχετε μακαρίων	
ὀψόμενοι τυράννων	710
φάσματα ἰδέματα. ⁵	
χοροὶ δ' Ἄτρειδᾶν ἐγέραιρον οἴκους.	
θυμέλαι δ' ἐπίτναντο χρυσήλατοι,	
σελαγεῖτο δ' ἀν' ἄστν	
πῦρ ἐπιβώμιον Ἀργείων·	715
λωτὸς δὲ φθόγγον κελάδει	
κάλλιστον, Μουσᾶν θεράπων,	
μολπαὶ δ' ἡὔξοντ' ἐραταί ⁶	
χρυσέας ἄρνός τ' ἐπίλογοι†	
Θυέστου· κρυφίαις γὰρ εὐ-	720
ναῖς πείσας ἄλοχον φίλαν	
Ἀτρέως, τέρας ἐκκομί-	

² The text reproduced here is that of Diggle's *OCT* with some modifications. Although it is obviously corrupt at places, the basic meaning of all lines is relatively secure; see the recent discussion of the main textual problems in Willink 2005.

³ For ἀταλάν instead of ἀταλᾶς, see Denniston 1939: 137–38; Willink 2005: 12.

⁴ The (debatable) fact that κληδών and φήμη are 'virtually synonymous and interchangeable' is not a compelling reason to follow Willink's intervention in the text (2005: 13). The transmitted meaning is indeed intelligible as it stands.

⁵ Although the metre is problematic in this line and the next, it seems preferable to keep the transmitted δέματα instead of the emendations δειγματα or δεινά, and χοροὶ instead of χοροῖ<σιν> or the more radical κῶμοι; see Denniston 1939: 138–9; Cropp 1988: 150; Willink 2005: 14–15.

⁶ Although the ἐπίλογοι of the next line is certainly corrupt, the transmitted text of that line is clear enough without the 'rival songs' suggested by Murray's ἔτεραι (adopted by Kovacs); cf. Cropp 1988: 150–1; Willink 2005: 16.

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ζει πρὸς δώματα· νεόμενος δ'
 εἰς ἀγόρους αὐτεῖ
 τὰν κερόεσσαν ἔχειν 725
 χρυσεόμαλλον κατὰ δῶμα ποίμναν.
 τότε δὴ τότε <τάς> φαεν-
 νὰς ἄστρον μετέβασ' ὁδοῦς
 Ζεὺς καὶ φέγγος ἀελίου
 λευκὸν τε πρόσωπον ἰοῦς, 730
 τὰ δ' ἔσπερα νῶτ' ἐλαύνει
 θερμᾶ φλογὶ θεοπύρῳ,
 νεφέλαι δ' ἔνυδροι πρὸς ἄρκτον,
 ξηραὶ τ' Ἀμμωνίδες ἔδραι
 φθίνουσ' ἀπειρόδροσοι, 735
 καλλίστων ὄμβρων Διόθεν στερεῖσαι.
 λέγεται <τάδε>, τὰν δὲ πί-
 στιν σμικρὰν παρ' ἔμοιγ' ἔχει,
 στρέψαι θερμὰν ἀέλιον
 χρυσωπὸν ἔδραν ἀλλάξαν- 740
 τα δυστυχίᾳ βροτείῳ
 θνατᾶς ἔνεκεν δίκας.
 φοβεροὶ δὲ βροτοῖσι μῦθοι
 κέρδος πρὸς θεῶν θεραπείαν.
 ὦν οὐ μνασθεῖσα πόσιν 745
 κτείνεις, κλεινῶν συγγενέτερ' ἀδελφῶν.
 Eur. *El.* 699–746

Once on a time a tender lamb taken from its mother
 in the Argive mountains
 (so runs the tale in our age-old legends)
 did Pan, warder of the fields,
 breathing sweet-voiced music
 on well-joined reeds,
 bring forth, a lamb with lovely fleece of gold.
 And standing on a platform
 of stone a herald shouted,
 'to assembly, to assembly,
 men of Mycenae,
 to see the august portent
 of your blessed rulers!
 And choruses hailed the house of the Atridae.
 The altars⁷ of wrought gold were strewn,
 and in Argos fire gleamed

⁷ It is difficult to see how θυμέλαι can be read as 'temples' (so Kovacs) rather than 'altars'; see Denniston 1939: 139; Cropp 1988: 150; Willink 2005: 16.

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on many an altar.

The pipe, servant of the Muses,

gave forth its fair melody.

And lovely were the songs that swelled in praise
of the golden lamb because of the words of

Thyestes: for with illicit love

he won over the dear wife

of Atreus and removed

this portent to his own house, and then coming

into the assembly he cried out

that he had in his house

the horned lamb with fleece of gold.

Then, then it was that Zeus changed the bright courses of the stars,

the light of the sun

and the pale visage of the dawn

and made it march to the West's expanse

with its divine and burning heat.

The clouds heavy with rain went toward the Bear,

and the dwelling place of Ammon wasted away

dry and bereft of water,

robbed of the lovely rain that falls from Zeus.

That is the story men tell, but the credit

it receives from me is but slight,

that the gold-visaged sun should turn,

altering its torrid station

to cause mortals grief

for the punishment of their wrongdoing.

But tales fearful for mortals are a benefit

for the worship of the gods,

the gods you forgot, kinswoman of glorious brothers,

when you murdered your husband. (trans. Kovacs, modified)

On one level, the poem is fully integrated to the narrative progression of the play. As Orestes sets out to kill Aegisthus and Electra prepares the trap for her mother, the chorus sings of the mythical background that prepared the present calamity in the previous generation. The group of young Argive girls presents a distinctive perspective on the events. It condemns Clytemnestra and shows a direct engagement on the side of the two siblings. Its tone and motivation are perfectly adapted to its fictional identity. The chorus, here as elsewhere, participates in the action of the drama and functions, up to a certain point, as a character in the play.

Up to a certain point, then. For the limit of the analogy between chorus and character is of course very quickly reached. Beyond such superficial correspondence of action, no member of the audience would ever confuse

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the choral ensemble and the cast of characters.⁸ Visually, the chorus dominates the tragic spectacle, with its fifteen members forming a persistent background for the evolution of the three actors. Able to speak in unison, in sequence, or in discordant tones, it embodies the voice of a group, a collective, in contrast to the emphatically individual voice of the characters. The presence of the group on stage when all the characters have left evolves in a different space than the rest of the play, one no longer entirely bound to the dramatic fiction. There is no deixis of immediate location in the choral ode, the chorus doesn't mention the fictional space of the action, and its words at first are seemingly not addressed to any internal audience within the play. Yet the chorus is right there in the space of performance. As it sings of other times and places, it forfeits all reference to its immediate surroundings, as if it were no longer contained by any one location.

The choral ode is entirely danced, a choreography that further separates the group from the characters, the immediate narrative sequence from the dramatic space. Its words are accompanied by the music of the *aulos*, and the *aulētēs* stands in the orchestra, in plain sight of the audience, dressed in bright, colourful robes that make him stand out from the chorus – the 'unsung hero of the genre', in the words of Peter Wilson.⁹ It is a song that the music and the dance modulate. Its lyric metre, melody, and rhythm completely distinguish it from the regular iambic speech of the characters. The Doricising dialect of the verses also contrasts with the purely Attic language of the trimetres. There is a deep formal difference between the choral ode and the character speeches that frame it. The ode weaves its words in a complex web of song, music, and dance. Word echoes song and step. In contrast to the naked simplicity of the characters' acted speech, its aesthetics are based on a multiplicity of correspondences between media – or intermediality, a distinctive form of choral mediation.¹⁰

The semantics of the ode follows a similar principle of multiple references. The song's expression of space, for instance, simultaneously points in different directions. The ode relates the tale of the golden lamb given to the Atreids a generation ago. In its narrative of the event, it describes a movement from the mountains of Argos, where the beast is given by Pan, to the heart of the city. It is on the 'platform' (βᾶθρον) that the herald proclaims the presence of the golden lamb, conveying the entire city to witness it in

⁸ See Baur 1997. ⁹ See Wilson 2005: 186.

¹⁰ The use of the term 'intermediality' in this volume follows the definition of Wolf 2005. It is strictly limited to the dialogues between media – what Wolf calls 'semiotic complexes' – set in motion by choral odes. The intermediality of the chorus, in this perspective, is a type of choral mediation.

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the agora.¹¹ The open, public space of the agora is followed by a reference to the altars of the city, gleaming with gold for the celebration of the event as the city rejoices. The golden lamb is a *phasma* (711), a ‘vision’ of kingship, or rather tyrannies, to come.¹² The gold of the sacrificial animal is echoed in the gold of the altars, and the vision of the divine gift paraded for all to see.

But what does it all mean? The public spectacle of the *phasma* is interpreted in the light of the songs that are sung at the altars throughout the city, and these songs present the lamb as a sign of Thyestes’ rule. These songs of joy are utterly wrong. For the animal has been stolen, the ode tells us, in secret. Thyestes has seduced the wife of Atreus κρυφαῖς εὐνοαῖς and brought the golden animal in his own house. Going back to the agora, he proclaims that the lamb is in his house (723–6). That δῶμα is obviously distinct from the *oikos* mentioned earlier as the object of public praise and celebration performed by people in the agora. Ἀτρειδῶν is not an inaccuracy, an attention slip from the poet, as commentators puzzled with the reference to the sons of Atreus at this moment in the poem have struggled to explain, but a link to the palace of Atreus as the seat of a different line, opposed to the line of Thyestes. The poem articulates a clear tension between *oikos* and agora, and between the houses of Atreus and Thyestes.

A first movement brings the lamb from the mountain to the city. A god, Pan, leads the animal from the wilds, and a herald introduces it to the agora. The great rejoicing of this spectacle is presented in terms of altars bedecked with gold throughout the city – the gift is to serve as an affirmation of power and an occasion for communication with the gods. The result is a disaster. The hidden seduction that took place within the *oikos* has corrupted the gift of the gods. Possession of the beast has passed from one house to another because of the adultery of a man and a woman. The secret deception of what took place behind closed doors completely denatures the meaning of the spectacle presented for all to see in the agora, on the altars, in song. The agora is inside the city, but outside the house. This is the pivotal space in which the contest for power is played out for all to see. But the determining event takes place behind closed doors. Beast and adultery are intrinsically linked in that tale. The entry of the animal from the savage outside inside the civilised space of the city is directly paralleled in the intrusion of the closed space of the *oikos* on the open

¹¹ See Roisman and Luschig 2011: 183–4.

¹² On the golden lamb in the play, see Rosivach 1978. The second stasimon is no ‘escape ode’, *pace* Csapo 2009: 98–9. The first strophe begins with the separation of the tender lamb from its mother and it continues with misunderstanding and terror. The ode is ominous from the first to the last.

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space of the agora. The outcome is a public lie. The songs of the civic choruses sing a premature, misdirected joy. The adultery of Thyestes with the wife of his brother is in fact an affront against the communal bonds that hold the world together. The hidden crime of the household will have cosmic dimensions. What started out as a gift from the gods will lead to divine punishment.

Zeus reacts immediately (τότε δὴ τότε . . .) to Thyestes' proclamation on the agora by changing the very course of the universe. The direction of the stars, the winds, and the sun is reversed.¹³ What used to go east now goes west, what was south now is north, what was humid now becomes dry, the sun now rises in the east. This state is a calamity, an enduring sanction for the infortune of all mankind. The transgression of one man in the hidden space of a house has consequences for the whole of the cosmos and all that live in it. The fundamental categories set in place by the golden lamb have been overthrown by one crime.

In fewer than fifty lines, then, the second stasimon of the *Electra* is able to bring the audience from the mountains of Argos to the agora, from the recesses of the household to the movement of the stars and the four corners of the world. The ode contains no reference to the immediate surroundings of the action in the play. Rather, it relates a narrative set elsewhere, and quickly brings the tale from place to place in an abrupt succession of locations. Contrary to the song of the first stasimon (452–3), the story is not subordinated to any perspective; it can evolve anywhere, and transport the audience with it.

A striking feature of the ode's expression of space is the chorus' ability to ground all of these locations in the here and now of performance. When it sings of Pan blowing sweet music in his harmonious pipes, a direct link is established between the sound of the poetic reeds and the sound of the *aulos* in the orchestra. The celebrations that sweep through the city following the introduction of the golden lamb are also accompanied by the sound of the reed: 'the λωτός flute, servant of the Muses, was singing its most beautiful song'. As the scene changes from the wild mountains of Pan to the public space of the city, the wind instrument continues to be heard, and both reeds of song are embodied by the *aulos* of performance. The λωτός of city celebrations accompanies the songs of joy of the Argives at the news of the prodigy. These songs are referred to as μολπαί, the specific

¹³ For the early traditions of the feud between Atreus and Thyestes, see West 1987: 254–5; Cropp 1988: 151; Gantz 1993: 545–50.

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dance and song combination of choral performance.¹⁴ The ode emphasises that these *μολπαί* are indeed sung by choruses. The rejoicing in the city, furthermore, takes place around the golden altars ‘spread out’ for the event, and these altars are described as *θυμέλαι*.¹⁵ *Θυμέλη* is a remarkable word for the occasion, as its main association is with the theatrical space of the orchestra, most probably with the altar that stood right in the middle of it.¹⁶ The choral dance of drama, in particular, is often described as a movement around the altar, with strophe turning one way, antistrophe turning the other, and epode sung without movement.¹⁷ Again, the space of the song finds a direct correspondence in the space of performance. The words *χοροί* and *θυμέλαι* are placed at the end and the beginning of two strophes, right when the *μολπή* of the chorus changes direction. As the ode relates the image of choruses singing and dancing their *μολπαί* at the sound of the flute around the *θυμέλη*, the sound and movement on stage function as an embodiment for the tale. The dominant usage of the imperfect in these lines allows for a closer identification between the unfolding narrative and its enactment by the chorus. As the fictional location of the dramatic space disappears from view, the ode establishes a strong connection between the presence of the chorus in the orchestra and the distant events it depicts.

As the story moves from place to place, the ode marks a certain continuity. The gold of the animal is reflected in the gold of the altar, reflected in turn in the gleam of the fires that shine on the *βωμοί* of the city, and the gleam of the stars and the sun that shine in the sky.¹⁸ The sound of the rustic flute of Pan echoes the sound of the flutes that rhythm the sacrificial celebrations in the city, and the chorus of civic festivities is followed by the chorus of the stars. As the ode sings of the civic choruses in the first antistrophe, its circular dance turns in one direction around the altar.¹⁹ As it sings of the new ‘roads’ of the stars in the second strophe, it reverses that

¹⁴ The effect of the musical references in the text would have been particularly striking if the ode is indeed a distinctive example of the New Music style, as Csapo 2009 argues. The contrast between the emphatically modern sound of the *aulos* in the orchestra, the rustic flutes of Pan, and the ancient sounds of the *aulos* in mythical Mycenae would make for an interesting effect.

¹⁵ Attempts to identify the specific type of *θυμέλαι* evoked in the image (e.g. Denniston 1939: 139) as portable altars of a certain sort impose a precision that the text does not demand; cf. Willink 2005: 16. The basic image of the line is that of altars bedecked in gold throughout the city.

¹⁶ See still Gow 1912: 233–7; Park Poe 1989.

¹⁷ See Färber 1936: 14–18; D’Alfonso 1994: 20; Csapo 2008: 280–1.

¹⁸ χρυσέαν 705; χρυσήλατοι 713; σελαγείτο 714; χρυσέας 719; χρυσεόμαλλον 726; φέγγος 729; χρυσωπὸν 740.

¹⁹ For the possibility of circular choral dancing in tragedy and comedy, see Ferri 1932/3; Davidson 1986; Csapo 2008: 282–4; Meineck in this volume: n. 12.

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direction. The change is emphatically marked by the reduplicated τότε at the beginning of the strophe (726). The song tells of the reversal of direction imposed by Zeus on the sun and the stars. While they previously went one way, they now go the other way. That change of direction is formally mirrored by the change of direction of the choral dance, and the location of the story, again, embodied in the space of performance. The ability of the chorus to freely project location outside the space of the drama and ground it here and now by recurrent reference to its own movement and the space of the theater is one of its most distinctive characteristics. The chorus constantly moves between levels of reference. It can evolve in different spaces simultaneously.

It also has the ability to juxtapose different temporalities. The tale it tells is set in the past, removed in time from the moment of the dramatic action. It is not now within the play. The narrative follows a sequence, with the different stages of the story clearly demarcated. The entire tale of the ode, more remarkably, is framed as a rumour of the past, a distant riddle.²⁰ The story of the golden lamb is something that ‘remains’ (μένει) in ‘grey-haired legends’, says the beginning of the song. If it is old from the perspective of the Argive chorus, it is truly ancient from the perspective of the Athenian chorus. The persistence and stability of this hoary legend contrasts with the movement of the hoary Pan and the hoary beast and the energetic dance of the chorus. The last antistrophe of the song questions the veracity of the tale it has just related, the stars’ change of course. As the chorus reverses direction once again at the beginning of a new stanza, it brings attention to the illusion of tradition and its function. The reversal of direction of the strophe echoes the στρέψαι of the sun.

The tale whose truth is denied is told anonymously, without any agent: λέγεται (737). It offers only little credence to the chorus, a πίστις σμικρά. The singular παρ’ ἑμοίγε contrasts the voice of the individual chorus with the nameless tradition. The plural βροτοῖσι follows in the gnomic statement of the next sentence, expanding the significance of the chorus’ statement to all mortals. Fearful stories, the φοβεροὶ μῦθοι (743), are a profit for the service of the gods.²¹ They are old, they have no witnesses, no πίστις. These myths are not true. But they are useful. Their narrative

²⁰ See Moreau 1991 on the rich meaning of κληδών as an enigmatic code.

²¹ Cf. the δείματα of line 711. It is interesting in that regard to note that there is not even the hint of a mention of the unholy meal of Thyestes in the ode, surely one of the most striking elements of the tradition, and the most frightful. It simply does not belong to the perspective of the chorus and its focus on adultery; see Roisman and Luschnig 2011: 181.