Ever since Aristotle opened the discussion on the role of the chorus in Greek tragedy, theories of the chorus have continued to proliferate and provoke debate to this day. The tragic chorus had its own story to tell; it was a collective identity, speaking within and to a collective citizen body, acting as an instrument through which stories of other times and places were dramatized into resonant heroic narratives for contemporary Athens. By including detailed case studies of three different tragedies (one each by Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles), Claude Calame’s seminal study not only re-examines the role of the chorus in Greek tragedy, but pushes beyond this to argue for the ‘polyphony’ of choral performance. Here, he explores the fundamentally choral nature of the genre, and its deep connection to the cultic and ritual contexts in which tragedy was performed.

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CHORAL TRAGEDY

Greek Poetics and Musical Ritual

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The theatre festival smells of the harvest season, parties, and feasts of Dionysos, of auloi, tragedies, Sophocles' songs, thrushes, and the versicles of Euripides

Aristophanes, Peace 530–2
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At least since the moment when Aristotle (Poetics 1456a) wrote that the chorus of Greek tragedy should be ‘like an actor, as in Sophocles’ (though not in Euripides), theories of the chorus have continued to proliferate, and to provoke disagreement. The chorus is indeed a grounding problem both for antiquity and for today, and for performance as much as for literary criticism. The chorus is a problem on the one hand because it is a singing and dancing collective on stage in the midst of dramas which seem to be fascinated by the powers and dangers of decisions, actions and suffering of particular individuals. Aristotle indeed seems to want to make the chorus into another individual – ‘like an actor’ – rather than discuss its constitution as a group. The first problem thus is the chorus as dramatic form. What are we to make of this group on stage that refuses any simple claim of realism in its collective singing and dancing? In the history of modern performance, the chorus has consequently found many directorial responses, from, paradigmatically, Max Reinhardt’s ‘Theatre of Five Thousand’, with its huge, mass chorus for Oedipus Tyrannus, to Rob Icke’s Oresteia, where the chorus of Furies becomes a single, silent old woman. On the other hand, how the chorus’s lyric songs relate to the action, or, more simply, what these dense poetic constructions mean, has provoked an equally intense history of debate, from the claim that Euripides’ choral odes are detachable from the plays, that is, that they are no more than beautiful songs as a break from the action, to the insistence that tragedy’s very core is in the choral performance, which could lead Nietzsche to insist that tragedy’s birth was ‘from the spirit of music’. Is the chorus the heart of tragedy or a break in the action? The great strength of Claude Calame’s book Choral Tragedy is not just his awareness of this long history of criticism of the chorus, but also, and most tellingly, his insistence

on what he calls the *polyphony* of the choral performance, both in terms of its formal structure and in terms of its semantic content.

The subtitle of Calame’s volume, the latest in this excellent series bringing translations of exceptional classical scholarship from around the world to a wider anglophone audience, is *Greek Poetics and Musical Ritual*, and both parts of this phrase separately, and the connection between them, provide a guide through Calame’s project. Let us begin with ‘Musical Ritual’. Aristotle was the first scholar we know to have sought the origin of tragedy in ritual. Many thinkers since – anthropologists, literary historians, religious historians – have followed his lead. For this line of analysis, tragedy’s chorality stems from its original form as a song in honour of Dionysos, which gradually became institutionalized into a festival with actors who responded to the choral narrative, gradually and experimentally transforming into the form of theatre we know from the later fifth century in Athens.² It is worth underlining that any evidence for such a teleological narrative is extremely hard to find beyond Aristotle and later speculation, often based on Aristotle, and it is far from clear that Aristotle had any better evidence than we do for such a prehistory. Calame, in contrast to this tradition of historical reconstruction, recognizes that the tradition of lyric poetry embodied most strikingly by Stesichorus, who wrote narratives of thousands of lines of mythic narrative for performance, offers a literary strand that fed into tragedy in a way that the narrative of Dionysiac ritual represses. More importantly, he also delineates the multiple layers of ritual within a play. First, the chorus itself remains a form of ritual performance. The group is constituted as a group within what we can call a religious framework (although the category of religion needs many qualifications when we are talking of the fifth-century city). To sing and dance as a collective is part of festival culture, a way to worship a god and to perform a sense of community before and for a community. Calame’s own earlier work *Les Choeurs de jeunes filles en Grèce archaique* (1977, Rome, 2 vols.) is one of the seminal discussions of this social function of chorality. In tragedy the chorus both performs such a role before the city and even discusses such a role; as the chorus of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* famously sings, if the prophecies are not true, and the divine order is collapsing, ‘Why should I be in a chorus?’, *ti dei me choreuein*? – or ‘Why should I dance?’, as it is often translated. In a similar if more extended manner, the chorus of the *Bacchae* is a chorus of

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¹ Lesky 1983 gives the standard view well; Burkert 1966 is more speculative; Sourvinou-Inwood 2003 discusses many aspects of tragedy as a religious event; Scullion 2005: 23–37 swims against the tide with customary robustness.

² Lesky 1983 gives the standard view well; Burkert 1966 is more speculative; Sourvinou-Inwood 2003 discusses many aspects of tragedy as a religious event; Scullion 2005: 23–37 swims against the tide with customary robustness.
worshippers of Dionysos in the theatre of Dionysos in a festival of Dionysos. They honour Dionysos at these two interconnected levels, in the world of the festival and in the world of the play. The performance of the chorus of tragedy, what is more, is framed by a set of rituals on the days before the plays and the days of the plays themselves, which represent the city to itself through forms of collective procession, sacrifice and singing. The chorus of tragedy is very much part of festival culture.

Second, however, the chorus also performs rituals within the play; it prays and sings what can be called hymns. The performance, which is in the festival of Dionysos, represents other forms of ritual and, in particular, plays often dramatize rituals of mourning, antiphonal song between an individual mourner, and a collective of consolatory mourners. Sophocles’ Electra, for example, in which the heroine refuses to cease mourning, repeatedly constructs the relation between the heroine and the women of the chorus as a scene of ritual lamentation. Third, the language of ritual becomes a way of understanding the action of the play, as mobilized by the chorus. Thus the sacrifice of Iphigenia in the Oresteia opens a series of images of corrupt sacrifice through which the violence of the play is articulated – as eagles killing a hare can be called a sacrifice, and Clytemnestra, for example, is imagined to murder her husband, Agamemnon, in a parody of a libation and sacrifice. Most upsettingly, in Euripides’ Bacchae, the young King Pentheus is ripped apart by his maddened mother and her sisters, in a form of sparagmos imaged as a corrupt religious ritual – overseen by the god Dionysos himself. A formative horror of the play is that the god smilingly instigates such a transgressive worship. Calame is particularly intent on showing how these different levels of ritualization interact to create the texture of tragedy. His iconic moment is Ion in Euripides’ Ion, who begins the play on the steps of the temple of Apollo, singing in honour of the god Apollo, through addressing his broom – an individual taking on the lyric voice, honouring a god in an individual hymn – deliberately and, in dramatic terms, shockingly to celebrate the mundane act of sweeping the steps – in the festival but also in a play in which Apollo’s role will be central and ironically questioned. As Calame argues, it is impossible to discuss the chorus adequately without taking account of this polyphony of ritualization.

Calame’s phrasing is precise here: ‘musical ritual’. What links Ion to the chorus in part is the fact that they both sing. For Calame, there is an
integral link, when it comes to theatre, between the ritual and the music. Rituals are accompanied by music – the aulos at a sacrifice, the song at the festival, the singing choruses of initiation rites – and music always tends towards sacrality – the dithyrambic competitions for Dionysos, the song at the symposium, the hymn. Singing elevates speech into another register, as dance transforms movement. One of the essential dynamics of tragedy is the interplay between the chorus’s collective singing and the actors whose iambic verse is, as Aristotle declared, the closest to usual human speech. But actors sing too, and the shared lyric voice, with its echoes of other lyric, ritual forms, is deeply embedded in the texture of tragic performance.\(^5\)

‘Greek poetics’ may seem a provocative term; is there something specifically Greek about tragic aesthetics? Of course, what we call Greek tragedy is all from Athens and mainly from the last half of the fifth century, and it is all written in Greek. But there are deeper senses in which the word Greek is not merely descriptive of the provenance or context of the genre of tragedy. Tragedy cannot be fully appreciated without acknowledging that tragedy is repeatedly rewriting the inherited and authoritative narratives of Homer for the new social and political circumstances of the fifth-century city and its democracy – part of a Greek literary tradition. Many of the characters of tragedy and the plots of its plays find their source in Homer’s epics and the epic cycle in particular. Tragedy is constitutionally an intertextual genre, a hybrid form. There are many ways in which this interaction with the literature of the past takes shape, but a foundational mode of transformation is turning the hexameter narrative poetry of Homer, which was publicly recited in Athens at the festival of the Great Panathenaia, into the dramatic, enacted stories of drama in iambic verse and sung lyrics, for performance at the Great Dionysia.\(^6\) Where Homer’s poetry was performed by a bard, a solo voice, drama brings together masked and costumed actors and chorus, talking, singing, interacting. The chorality of tragedy is one way that narratives of the past are made stories for the present, and become integrated into the ritual and political world of the contemporary city. The narrative of the origin of drama, familiar from Aristotle onwards, that sees tragedy as a development out of a ritual chorus into the theatre, where the chorus becomes less and less integral, does not acknowledge that the chorus is part of what actually made tragedy a modern and challenging rewriting of traditional stories, a new genre, with a new political purchase.

This challenging rewriting of tradition is most evident in the political force of the chorus as a dramatic form. The chorus is constitutionally a collective, a group that shares an identity, and sings and dances iconically as a group. Most commonly in Euripides, as Calame notes, it is a community of women, either married women as in Hippolytus or Medea who speak from their experience as mothers, or, more contingently, in the Phoenissae, say, a group of pilgrims who have been stranded by war. For Aeschylus’ Oresteia, it is a group of elders, political advisors to the king, as too in Sophocles’ Antigone. It is very rare to have a chorus that simply reflects the audience as a group of citizens, adult males. The dynamic of every play, however, revolves around the interaction of an individual or set of individuals and this collective. Just as each individual in a tragedy has a narrative arc, so too does the chorus. The range of narrative arcs for the chorus is as varied and complex as it is for the individual actors. In Aeschylus’ Agamemnon, the elders develop a contested and difficult relationship with Clytemnestra, as old men, persuaded gradually and unwillingly by a powerful woman, who express deep anxiety about the state of affairs in the city, an anxiety which is fulfilled with the murder of the returning king, Agamemnon, which prompts the chorus to break into fragmented individual voices in its confusion and inability to respond with any instrumental action to the violence. They signally fail to appreciate what Cassandra is trying to tell them. Yet when Aegisthus, Clytemnestra’s lover, enters they articulate a more forceful opposition to their usurpation of rule, that prepares the way for the reversals of the following plays. Their long odes set the action in a deep contextual framework, repeatedly veined with their own miscomprehensions, fears and hopes. The chorus’s story, both as participants in the narrative and as storytellers, is integral to the emotive and semantic polyphony of this richest of dramas. In Euripides’ Medea, by contrast, the chorus of women of Corinth is persuaded easily by Medea in the first scene to help her. Like an archetypal hero, they declare ‘I will act’, drasō. Their support is based on their sympathy, as women, for the abused and suffering wife, Medea. But as the play unfolds through Medea’s manipulation and then violent destruction of her enemies and finally her own children, their sympathy becomes an increasingly desperate complicity as they fail to stop Medea from infanticide. Their story, integral to the drama, is the gradually horrified recognition of the dangers of sympathy. Our understanding of the hero’s narrative is formed in and through its dynamic interaction with the chorus’s narrative and response.

This dramatized tension between collective and individual speaks with a particular force in the political frame of the democratic city. The
constitution of democracy demands a commitment to the collective. Such a commitment is integral to the ideology of the city; taking part in the institutional collectives of the assembly, the law court, the army is a requirement of citizenship. Recognizing the claim of the city of an individual’s efforts is a repeated tenet of democratic belonging. At the same time, the inherited values of individual glory and achievement forms a continuity from Homeric heroes’ search for fame to the democratic politician’s search for his place in history. How democracy as a principle deals with individual desire, will and achievement is a constant question of political theory. The chorality of Greek tragedy dramatizes before the city the very question of the dangers and lures of individual striving for exceptional excellence in and against the claims of a collective good. The fascination and horror of tragedy’s heroes, for whom going too far is both excellence and transgression, is repeatedly expressed against the collective voice of the chorus. As such, the chorus is fully part of the modern politics of a democratic genre.

Yet, as we have already noted, the chorus of Greek tragedy is often made up of figures who do not simply represent the political collective of democracy or of a city. The chorus of plays like Oedipus Tyrannus or Antigone are men involved in the politics of city, for sure, and in Sophocles’ Philoctetes the chorus of sailors may well have found echoes with an audience many of whom rowed in the Athenian navy. But far more commonly, choruses seem to be made up of more marginal characters – like the young slave women of Aeschylus’ Choephoroi, or, even more alienatingly, the Furies of Aeschylus’ Eumenides, or the wild eastern Bacchants of Euripides’ Bacchae.7 With what authority, then, can the chorus speak? Calame insists we explore with care the status of the voice of the chorus. He acknowledges how influential Schlegel has proved to be, thanks to his brief discussion of the chorus as an ‘ideal spectator’, and correctly points out both that the use of the word ‘ideal’, or, better, ‘idealized’, needs to be properly understood within the philosophy of (German) idealism, and that an oversimplified perspective on Schlegel has often led to oversimplified accounts of the chorus that treat its pronouncements as the voice of the author or the determinative account of the play’s action. Schlegel’s influence is evident, however, also in Vernant’s influential description of the chorus as an ‘anonymous and collective being whose role is to express through its fears, hopes and judgments, the feelings of the spectators who make up the civic community’.8 Yet even Vernant’s more nuanced description is inadequate in part because the chorus also

repeatedly just gets things wrong—like the chorus of Sophocles’ *Ajax*, which mistakenly celebrates the hero’s salvation just as he is going to kill himself—and, in part, because, as we have just seen, the chorus does not merely mediate audience response but has its own story too. Consequently, Rehm argues, the chorus can ‘support, ignore, question, or reject the actions of the central characters, reorienting our response to the rhetoric as they do. They compel us to experience the drama as an everchanging dynamic relationship’ (1992, 61). Yet, as Calame insists, the chorus is not simply an actor (whatever Aristotle may wish), because it is a collective, speaking within and to the collective of the citizen body. Hence the need to address the status of its voice with particular care.

The chorus makes a claim on the authoritative voice of the collective in democracy, on the one hand, and the authoritative voice of mythic tradition, on the other. It reaches towards a generalizing truth, based on the values of the community, embodied in traditional wisdom and myth, the embodiment of the community’s self-understanding. Yet the chorus also speaks with all the contingency of an actor (as Aristotle would say), replete with partial understanding, complete misrecognition, hope, fear and desperation. The choral voice is constructed in the *tension between* these two trajectories—and the playwrights experiment with the potentiality of such a tension. The chorus of *Antigone* can sing with immense profundity of the very nature of humanity—but also respond to the argument of Creon and Haemon with a partial explanation of how sexual desire motivates young men, and, finally, to intervene—contingently and too late—in the particular events by suggesting to Creon that he has got things wrong and should listen to Teiresias’ warning. The chorus of Euripides’ *Bacchae* are wild women who shockingly celebrate the death of the king—but they insist that they sing what the common people believe. A chorus *mobilizes* the voice of authority—both in the form of myth, the will to see a story within the paradigms of the authority of tradition, and in the form of the generalizations of collective wisdom, the tradition of shared truths. And in this mobilization a chorus can both create profound reflections on the action, which transcend the contingencies of events, and yet offer clichés that fail to deal with complexities of the action before them (and many other positions between these extremes). The variety of choral engagement thus resists the sort of easy summary that phrases like ‘ideal spectator’ encourage, but rather requires a constant and attentive appreciation of the polyphony of the choral voice. It is thus precisely the multiple resources—the affordances—of the choral voice that Calame insists we pay attention to, and

that he demonstrates in the close readings of the individual plays that follow his more general, theoretical explorations.

Choreuein – the verb that signifies participation in a chorus – is usually translated as ‘dance’, however, and it is in the performance of the dancing, singing chorus that Calame ends with a very stimulating reflection on how the chorus dances space into being. The chorus of Euripides’ Ion enters and excitedly describes its experience of the temples at Delphi; its dance and song mark out the imaginative space of the drama, a space layered with the historical depth of the mythic images the chorus describes. The chorus’s dance marks out the orchestra as an institutional space, and repeatedly choruses create an imaginative space, ‘a cockpit [to] hold the vasty fields’ of tragic action. It is always a space that the chorus’s voice also deepens with a map of other stories, other landscapes of narrative. This cosmography is a definitional voice of tragic theatre. As Calame shows in his analysis of Hippolytus, such imaginative creation of space becomes part of the politicization of the narratives of the past as the scene of Troizen becomes closer and closer to the scene of Athens. The choral voice and the choral body – choreuein – is an instrument through which the stories of other times and other places become telling narrative for contemporary Athens.

‘Greek poetics’ and ‘musical ritual’ thus come together in the experience of tragedy. Chorality is constructed between such poetics and such ritualization. Claude Calame asks that the attention we pay to the chorus of drama keeps these different vectors in mind, together – the ritualization of the choral voice and dancing, the politics of theatre, the intertextuality of ancient poetics, the rich voicing of the past through song, the role of dynamic reflection and participation in narrative through storytelling, the dramatic mobilization of different forms of authoritative language, the dance of embodied space that becomes an imaginative landscape linking past and present – what, in short, he terms the polyphony of form and the polyphony of meaning. Choral Tragedy helps us see why the chorus has been such a problem over the centuries, thanks in part at least to the sheer complexity of its formal and semantic richness. It may help – we can hope – reduce the oversimplifications that plague discussions of the chorus in what Calame insists is the necessarily failing search for the Dionysiac essence of tragedy. Choral Tragedy is a book to engage with and find stimulation from – as the choral voice encourages.
Preface to the English Edition

The least one can say is that there persists a strong interest for the choral traditions – or ‘song cultures’ – of ancient Greek cities. One need only mention, where anglophone scholarship is concerned, the recent publication (2021) of Deborah Steiner’s volume encompassing a range of ‘choral constructions’; in preclassical Greece, ‘chorality’ underlies the making of tripods and cauldrons, but also representations of birds in flight or of the movements of animal herds, the choral aquatics of groups of nymphs and ships alike, the catalogues of young women associated with dance, the choral accompaniments to weaving and the manufacture of clothing, or again the sequence of the letters of the alphabet. Chorality thus denotes the work of craftsmen as well as the representations of groups of animals or men and women, as well as, of course, the ritual and religious practices distinguished by the musical performance of songs composed by poets.

This vein of scholarship is complemented in the francophone world by Vincent Azoulay’s and Paulin Ismard’s discussion of the political dimension of chorality (2020). Taking their cue from the political recompositions of the Athenian community following the Peloponnesian War, they have shown that the history of Athens can be explained as ‘choral history’. This chorality finds expression in the debates, the rivalries, the oppositions and the recompositions of collective entities led by a coryphaeus, which expressed themselves as choral groups with polyphonic emotions in a divided city.

When it comes to the verbal manifestations of chorality, the field has been informed by the novel ‘choreonarrative’ approach, appropriately embodied polyphonically by the Europe-wide choral group led by Laura Gianvittorio-Ungar and Karin Schlapbach (2021). With choral dance as its point of departure, the red thread running through the choreonarrative approach enables the identification of the choreographic movement governing in turn the various narrative forms. Choreographic rhythm goes hand-in-hand with shkémata, gestures and figures, and, through these, the expression of emotions, whether this be in fifth-century Athenian comedy
and tragedy or in the many modern and contemporary appropriations of these genres. Especially noteworthy are two choreonarrative studies of Iô’s sung account of her wanderings as she is tormented by the spectre of Argus in Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound* and, more still, of the messenger’s account of Neoptolemus’ death in Euripides’ *Andromache*.

Tragedy is largely absent from the first two volumes mentioned above, yet chorality calls for interrogation more than ever in connection with these dramatized ritual representations of the great heroic sagas in so-called classical Athens. Should tragedy not be thought of as ‘choral tragedy’?

The question impinges all the more insistently since the attempt by two Oxford scholars to reduce the manifestations of the ‘Lyric of early Greece’ to ‘textual events’. Budelmann and Phillips (2018) claim that the anthropological approach sensitive to the different dimensions of the context of performance should be discarded because it ignores the aesthetic effects and emotions conjured up by these ‘lyric’ poems addressed by individual authors to an audience equally made up of individuals. To the anthropological approach one should prefer, according to Budelmann and Phillips, a literary approach that is sensitive to the aesthetic effects provoked in individual listeners by poems that they assimilate to the modern and fluid category of ‘lyric’. On this view, every listener constructs for him- or herself the fictional world made available by the ‘lyric’ poem and by its poet as author of the text, thus turning it into a subjective aesthetic experience. Such an approach is leaving aside the fact that the musical performance of a melic poem, with its ritual gestuality and its equally ritual context, implies also a poetic semantics and, through this, an aesthetics. These poetic semantics and aesthetics cannot be reduced to those of a simple text.

The choral nature of melic song danced to a musical accompaniment on an instrument instigates a collective and practical engagement, of social, cultural and emotional order. In order to animate the poetic world created in the song and the relationship with the performers and the audience, this engagement is inscribed in the poem itself – for instance, in the alternation of the enunciative forms of the singular and plural first persons that render the poem a true act of song, or in the subtle enunciative and semantic polyphony that animates, as we will see, the choral songs of tragedy in particular. In this regard, the very notion of a ‘textual event’ is nothing more than a counterproductive oxymoron.

Be that as it may, this severe interpretative regression is an opportunity to reaffirm the various choral dimensions of the poetic recreation and ritual dramatization, in the sanctuary of Dionysos Eleuthereus, of the foundational heroic sagas of the Greek cities and their cultures.
It follows that a further dimension must be added to the reflections here presented on choral tragedy: that of orchestics. Several recent works can come to our aid, first among these the sophisticated study by Matteo Capponi (2021) of the complementarity in Attic tragedy between the verbal gestures corresponding to speech acts and the terms that point to physical gestures. Capponi examines the protagonists’ interactions with the chorus in Aeschylus’, Sophocles’ and Euripides’ ‘Electra’ tragedies, and this approach would benefit from being extended beyond the kómmos to all the choral songs in these three plays. Promising too, for an approach that privileges the orchestic dimension, is the volume on antiquity in a series covering the cultural history of dance which is being edited by Michel Briand.10 Mention must of course also be made of the various contributions edited by Laura Gianvittorio (2017) in the volume Choreutika: Performing and Theorising Dance in Ancient Greece. Her research group’s studies on the choral songs of tragedy have been collected in this new edition.11

Finally, with specific reference tragic chorality, these last years have been marked, on the one hand, by Naomi Weiss’ monograph on The Music of Tragedy (2018a), which focuses on the chorus’s references to choreia in its musical and choreographic dimensions in Euripides’ late tragedies. On the other hand, we have to consider the publication of the various contributions collected under the title Paths of Song: The Lyric Dimension of Greek Tragedy (Andújar, Coward and Hadjimichael, 2018). The most pertinent contributions for the purposes of our discussion have been flagged in the chapters that follow, not least in recognition of the ways in which they have enriched my thinking.

This English edition has benefitted not just from a bibliographical updating but also from the comments of its translator, Vanessa Casato, whose critical reading of the text has given me several opportunities to refine and on occasion even correct the text. Many thanks to her particularly for having eased in English my usual French abstract ‘tournures’.

Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to Renaud Gagné and Jonas Grethlein for welcoming this translation of La tragédie chorale in their ‘Classical Scholarship in Translation’ series for Cambridge University Press.

10 Briand (forthcoming).
11 I deliberately sidestep the sophistic controversy initiated by Felix Budelmann 2013 with his study of the ‘Greek Festival Choruses In and Out of Context’, founded on a series of reflections arising from a literary reading of Alcman’s First Partheneion and Pindar’s Ninth Paean and involving also tragedy. In the play of binary oppositions, the distinction between ‘in’ and ‘out of context’ is as irrelevant as that between ‘chorus-as-art’ and ‘chorus-as-ritual’ is deceptive. See on this subject Naerebout’s intelligent response (Naerebout 2017: 54–6), usefully included in the collected volume on Choreutika.
Note on the Translations

All translations are the translator’s own, unless otherwise stated. Where Loeb Classical Library translations have been consulted, the following editions have been used.


Methodological Prelude

I believe I am not talking nonsense when I assert that this problem of origin has not yet even been posed seriously, far less solved, despite the many attempts to sew together and pull apart again the tattered shreds of ancient historical evidence in various combinations. This evidence tells us most decisively that tragedy arose from the tragic chorus and was originally chorus and nothing but chorus.


Bali, August 1976 – Bali, October 2014. Sukawati, Pura Puseh Batuan – Campuhan, Pura Gunung Lebah. Two village communities, two Hindu ‘temples’, two cultic spaces. At Sukawati, almost forty years ago, the Galungan festival is taking place to commemorate the triumph of the *dharma* on the *adharma*. It marks the beginning of the Balinese New Year and involves a long sequence of ceremonies punctuated by dances and dramatic performances. At Campuhan, a village close to Ubud now taken over by tourists with their shops and hotels and addiction to consumerism, a ritual ceremony is being carried out to purify the god’s statues in the temple. The ceremony culminates with the *ngenteg linggih*, a sequence of sophisticated purification rituals, and the *padudusan agung*, which involves performances of music, dance and ‘theatre’. At both events, the men and women of the village assemble in a large procession; they wear ritual costume and carry towards the ‘sanctuary’ statues of the gods symbolically seated on their golden thrones. Inside the sanctuary itself, perched on colourful and intricate structures, is a multitude of ‘sacrificial’ offerings. The officiating brahmins pronounce prayers for each of the participants while moving through a sequence of ritual gestures of ‘blessing’. At the conclusion of the ceremony lasting several days, dramatic performances take place to the accompaniment of flutes and the *gamelan* percussions ensemble; there are dances by girls, dances by women and performances of *barong* featuring the demon Rangda before an informal
The performers wear elaborate ceremonial costumes in bright, vivid colours. The men, women and children who attend the purification rituals – the ‘audience’, so to speak – also wear ceremonial apparel, as do the few Westerners who watch the ceremony.

There is much here that is evocative for the anthropologically minded Hellenist, but while these festivals might suggest a point-for-point comparison with the Great Dionysia, the famous classical Athenian festival that included elaborate ‘musical contests’, any such comparison must ensure that key terms are firmly enclosed in inverted commas. The Athenian contests in the arts of the Muses featured dithyrambic performances by choruses of fifty boys and fifty men, and performances of comedies by masked actors and choruses in burlesque costumes; these were followed by the tragic competition, featuring sequences of three tragedies capped by a satyr play in which masked actors and choruses chanted dialogue dramatizing heroic stories drawn from the imposing heritage of Athenian and panhellenic narrative poetry. Part of this long ritual sequence of competitively performed song and drama accompanied by processions and sacrifices to the god forms the subject of this volume. The immediate comparison with my opening examples is rendered all the more compelling by the fact that, in the Balinese ‘temples’ of Sukawati and Campuhan just as in the Athenian sanctuary of Dionysos Eleuthereus, the ritualized song and dance performances occur inside the sacred enclosure reserved for the divinity’s worship. In modern-day Bali, the space in the courtyard that is fitted out for these representations is called jaba pura; in fifth-century-BCE Athens, the space where the chorus performed was the formally demarcated orchestra, a dedicated space where the actors also moved.

The comparison will have to stop here. This brief comparative prelude was merely intended to open up a field of Möglichkeiten (‘possibilities’), in Wittgenstein’s sense:¹² possibilities of signification for dramatic and ritual performances whose ethnographical and anthropological contexts evidently lie beyond our knowledge, in both geographical and chronological terms as far as ancient Greece is concerned.

Let us then set aside this simple mode of comparison, which though evocative is also methodologically problematic; we will return to it briefly in our conclusions. Its main purpose here was to lend some ritual colour and some musical rhythm to an object of study that is known to us only from a few extant ancient texts. ‘Temple’, ‘sanctuary’, ‘sacrifice’, ‘blessing’; all these words have been placed in inverted commas because their meaning...

¹² See Borutti 2015: 15–18.
Methodological Prelude

has been moulded by long use in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. It is important, on the other hand, to reach back to emic categories and practices, and to consider musical performances in the Greek sense of the term, that is to say, events involving poetic composition, singing, musical accompaniment and choreographed gesture. Our concern here is with poetical and vocal practices realized as ritualized musical performances of which the written texts that have come down to us are nothing more than distant traces. Far from any idea of ‘literature’, these vocal and ritual poetic practices, with their aesthetical effects, are to be grasped not as ‘textual events’ but as ritualized sung utterances in specific contexts of performance and specific institutional, political, religious and cultural settings.

Since Greek tragedies are manifestations of cultural poetics in action, their textual traces call for a combination of three approaches: an interpretation based on a semantics of utterances whose enunciative strategies often have a performative function; a pragmatic ethnopoetics aimed at reconstructing the semantic and aesthetical effects of these sung and ritualized utterances; and, finally, a cultural and social anthropology allied to a history of religions, in order to explicate the extra-discursive reference of the dramatic ‘here-and-now’ of these ritual and musical performances.

The heroic action dramatized by Greek tragedy cannot fully be understood without accounting for the various ways in which it was situated in the specific political, religious and cultural contexts of fifth-century Athens. Through the mediation of some remarkable poets (in emic terms ‘chorus teachers’, khorodidáskaloi), these specific cultural realities gave shape to our tragedies; conversely, as poems in action, the tragedies referred within their fictional world to these realities and thereby imbued them with new meaning. From the point of view of ethnopoetic history, as we will see, Attic tragedy can be viewed as the sung and dramatic offspring of two forms of melic poetry: on the one hand, the citharodic nome – a narrative form with inserted dialogues composed in epic diction and sung by a citharode with the accompaniment of a dancing chorus; and, on the other hand, the various ritual and cultic forms of choral and musical melos (such as the pean for Apollo and the hymns to other deities), including song, instrumental accompaniment and dance.

Our effort, then, must be one of cross-cultural translation by means of discourse analysis aided by ethnopoetic history and cultural anthropology.

13 The aims of this new ethnopoetics are outlined and illustrated in Calame et al. 2010. I am indebted to Kati Basset for valuable advice during my second stay in Bali.
Our engagement with another culture’s expression in song will inevitably be asymmetrical, inasmuch as that culture is geographically and (especially) chronologically remote from ours. But it is precisely this disconnection from a culture that must be viewed as ‘other’ that compels us to adopt a critical stance towards our own operative concepts, however necessary these may be. A self-aware engagement with this other culture invites us in turn to look at ourselves from the outside, irrespective of any genealogical relationship between the Greek tragedy of classical Athens and the French tragedy of the seventeenth century or that of German Romanticism. Our mode of reappropriation must be at once anthropological and erudite.

In French scholarship, the standard approach to Attic tragedy is still heavily influenced – implicitly or explicitly – by Aristotle’s Poetics. Through a genealogical or normative comparison with epic poetry, Aristotle presents tragedy as an essentially narrative form, one that is centred on μῦθος (understood as ‘plot’) and its ‘characters’, that is, the protagonists of the dramatic action. We will turn to this issue at the beginning of Chapter 2. If Sophocles’ and Euripides’ tragedies are defined as ‘the mîmesis of a noble action brought to completion, having a certain extension, expressed in rhythmical language’, the last two of Aristotle’s six constitutive elements of tragedy are explicitly discarded from the Poetics; there is no discussion of ὁπίσι, ‘vision’, that is, the scenic aspects of tragedy, and, above all, none of μελοποίία, that is, the poetics of (melic) song. It follows that the focus is immediately narrowed to the tragic action and its protagonist, the tragic hero (who is often a woman), with no regard to the musical and ritual dimension of tragedy or the important role played by the chorus’s sung interventions, with their melic diction and rhythm.

Since the developments that revolutionized the humanities in the 1970s, Greek tragedy has, of course, ceased to be considered solely as ‘art’ (or ‘literature’); it is no longer understood merely as the dramatization of a hero’s encounter with his or her destiny, as the Romantic definition of ‘tragic’ would have it. Instead, it is now viewed also as a social and cultural institution. Thus, if ‘the city turns itself into theatre’, this is not to say that tragedy reflects society straightforwardly, for according to this view the chorus, a ‘collective and anonymous entity’ engaging in contrastive dialogue with the actors, is held to express the affective and moral feelings of an audience that corresponds to the civic community. In a further development in French scholarship, Attic tragedy is understood not so much as the city’s own representation of itself, questioning the political through the

intermediary of tragic fiction, but rather as an ‘ineffable’ lamentation and mourning acted out on the stage for a community of mortals rather than of citizens.16

Another recent view of Attic tragedy developed in France turns away from the perspectives opened up by the social sciences and humanities to conclude that ‘through tragedy, theatre traces theory’, that is to say, tragedy produces its own theory, for example, in the plays of Aeschylus. An essentialized notion of ‘tragedy’ appears to have replaced ‘the tragic’. According to this view (Greek) tragedies rework the past, with all its uncertainties, reversals and discontinuities, to elaborate a set of theories regarding cultural and religious norms, and they do this through the intermediary of ‘staged individuals’ and by means of a ‘theorizing chorus’. Thus ‘tragedy analyzes and discerns’ civic normativity.17 Note how in all this not a word is said about the poetic and choral arts of the Muses as ritual and cultural practices. Does this not signal a return to a form of essentialism, if not with respect to ‘the tragic’, then at least with respect to ‘tragedy’?

Hence — to anticipate the chapters that follow — my stark admonition. The fault lies with Aristotle, who established an approach at once descriptive, genealogical and normative towards Attic tragedy as a representational depiction of actions. This focus on dramatic action and its articulation into plot through the devices of reversal and recognition does away with all that belongs to the dimensions of musical ‘performance’ and pragmatics — even though in the end the author of the Poetics must recognize that music and spectacle give tragedy an advantage over epic by offering up something for the audience’s gaze to fasten upon (enargéis).18 Nevertheless, this mistaken approach persists; Aristotle would establish for tragedy ‘a literary reception rather than a ritual coenunciation’. But is it enough to ‘understand the ritual and musical workings of tragedy by ceasing to view it merely as representation? In wishing to rid oneself of mûthos, does one not then run the risk of ‘tragic insignificance’?19

It is clear that the few tragedies that survive complete do not generally follow the German Romantic model of plot or the tragic principle calling for the fated expiation of a transgression. Does this mean that, if Greek tragedies are not tragic, ‘they were something else and we will never know what?20 There is no doubt that there has been an effort to drain Greek tragedy of its poetic and musical reality. Ethnopoetics can now aid us in