2013

The Choral Plot of Euripides' Helen

Sheila Murnaghan

University of Pennsylvania, smurnagh@sas.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.upenn.edu/classics_papers

Part of the Classics Commons

Recommended Citation (OVERRIDE)


This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. http://repository.upenn.edu/classics_papers/134

For more information, please contact libraryrepository@pobox.upenn.edu.
The Choral Plot of Euripedes' Helen

Abstract
In ancient Greek culture, the chorus was a social and religious institution, a musical form, and a medium for the telling of stories, but also a situation, an event, an experience, about which there were stories to be told. As the tragedians transformed traditional choral performance into the acting out of mythical narratives, they drew on those stories, both directly and indirectly, as sources and models for dramatic action. My concern here is with the chorus as a subject of tragedy as well as feature of tragic form, and with the place of choral experience in the inner world of the tragic plot. Most theories of the tragic chorus go outside that world to find the chorus' meaning: the chorus is identified with the playwright, whose views it supposedly voices; with an ideal audience (most influentially by Schlegel); or with the original fifth-century audience, whether as citizens of the polis (Vernant), ordinary observers of the rich and famous (Griffith), soldiers-in-training (Winkler), or regular participants in religious rituals (Henrichs). But the circumstances of being in a chorus, or of being an individual who interacts with a chorus, are also significant as elements within the fictional scenarios acted out on the tragic stage.

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Classics

This book chapter is available at ScholarlyCommons: http://repository.upenn.edu/classics_papers/134
In ancient Greek culture, the chorus was a social and religious institution, a musical form, and a medium for the telling of stories, but also a situation, an event, an experience, about which there were stories to be told. As the tragedians transformed traditional choral performance into the acting-out of mythical narratives, they drew on those stories, both directly and indirectly, as sources and models for dramatic action. My concern here is with the chorus as a subject of tragedy as well as feature of tragic form, and with the place of choral experience in the inner world of the tragic plot. Most theories of the tragic chorus go outside that world to find the chorus’ meaning: the chorus is identified with the playwright, whose views it supposedly voices; with an ideal audience (most influentially by Schlegel); or with the original fifth-century audience, whether as citizens of the polis (Vernant), ordinary observers of the rich and famous (Griffith), soldiers-in-training (Winkler), or regular participants in religious rituals (Henrichs).¹ But the circumstances of being in a chorus, or of being an individual who interacts with a chorus, are also significant as elements within the fictional scenarios acted out on the tragic stage.

The hexameter narratives that constitute our earliest surviving Greek texts contain several accounts of choruses, some of them descriptions of the chorus as an institution, in its recurrent, timeless, uneventful aspect. In the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, we find permanent, canonical choruses in both the divine and the human spheres: the Muses on Olympus (189–206) and the Delian Maidens in the world of mortals (156–64). But in the following example from the *Iliad*, the chorus figures as the situation out of

---

which a narrative develops. This is a brief story embedded in the catalogue of the Myrmidons in *Iliad* 16:

The next battalion was led by warlike Eudoros, a maiden’s child, born to one lovely in the dance, Polymele, daughter of Phylas; whom strong Hermes Argeiphontes loved, when he watched her with his eyes among the girls dancing in the choir for clamorous Artemis of the golden distaff. Presently Hermes the healer went up with her into her chamber and lay secretly with her, and she bore him a son, the shining Eudoros, a surpassing runner and a quick man in battle. But after Eileithyia of the hard pains had brought out the child into the light, and he looked on the sun’s shining, Akton’s son Echekles in the majesty of his great power led her to his house, when he had given numberless gifts to win her, and the old man Phylas took the child and brought him up kindly and cared for him, with affection as if he had been his own son.

(179–92, trans. Lattimore)

This episode neatly illustrates the function of the chorus as the site where a character, and in particular a female character, enters into narrative. Polymele’s timeless epithet χορεύω καλή, ‘beautiful in the dance,’ is instantiated on a specific occasion, when her beauty in the dance causes her to stand out, to be noticed and to inspire the love of an onlooking male. From that point on, things begin to happen. A man catching sight of a beautiful woman is a trigger for the onset of desire which, as Peter Brooks points out in his influential study, *Reading for the Plot*, is the principal engine of narrative. This might occur in a number of settings: in the bedroom of an eastern king, as in the Gyges story, which initiates the entire narrative of Herodotus’ *Histories*, or at an Athenian funeral, as in the reality-based narrative contained in Lysias’ First Oration, *On the Murder of Eratosthenes*, but in the Greek world in general, the most likely and the most socially sanctioned setting for this event is a choral performance by a group of young women, in which one in particular is the leading, or outstanding member.

What follows in Polymele’s case is a condensed and sunny version of a familiar plot, or rather of two familiar plots that are often combined: a woman’s entrance into marriage and a mortal woman’s abduction by a god, with whom she becomes the mother of a hero. In most versions, these stories are more fully elaborated and more complicated, involving the conflicts and

---

unexpected developments that make fictional plots interesting. A woman’s entrance into marriage does not always go smoothly, and being chosen by a god can lead to disgrace, exile, secret suffering, or even death, as in the stories of Danae, Io, Creusa, and Semele. The combination of a divine and a mortal mate brings multiple complications, with Hermes often figuring, not as the divine lover, but as a mediating figure who helps to move women between other mates; and the woman’s father rarely is so ready as Polymele’s father Phylas is to accept her semi-divine son.

Book 6 of the Odyssey offers a more famous and more complexly handled instance of the integration of a choral scenario into epic narrative. Nausicaa emerges as a distinctive character with a role to play in Odysseus’ nostos in a scenario that is not literally a chorus, but that is closely similar to, and explicitly modeled on, a choral performance. Athena, the architect of the plot, motivates Nausicaa’s presence at the seaside by playing on Nausicaa’s status as a woman on the verge of marriage; Nausicaa goes to the shore to wash clothes in anticipation of her marriage, with a group of companions, among whom she is the clear leader. Once the laundry is done, they play a game with a ball that is an only slightly displaced version of choral dance. The poet actually labels the game a dance – a μολίπη – as he also identifies Nausicaa as its leader, “among them white-armed Nausicaa led the dance” (101). This line is followed by a simile, in which Nausicaa is compared to Artemis. In the simile, Artemis is not literally in a dance either; she is playing in the mountains with the nymphs and wild animals. But the choral resonance of this scene is clear from the description of her happily watching mother:

Leto rejoices in her heart
for the head and brow of Artemis rise above all the others,
and she is conspicuous among them, but all are beautiful.

(106–8)

Artemis is clearly different, but not too different.

The significance of Leto’s fond watching is evident from Artemis’ identity as the mythic prototype of the maiden chorus leader, as in the Olympian choral performance at the beginning of the Homeric Hymn to Apollo (197–9, 204–5, cf. Hymn to Artemis 11–20, Hymn to Aphrodite 117–20), and from the analogous human situation that Odysseus invokes when he praises Nausicaa shortly afterwards. After comparing Nausicaa to Artemis for her beauty and stature, he goes on to surmise that the spirits of her mother and father ‘are perpetually warmed with happiness because of you, I seeing such a shoot joining in the chorus’ (156–7). In his own simile, and in the speech
Sheila Murnaghan

He gives to Odysseus, Homer acknowledges the musical occasion that is the source of his plot motifs, which have been integrated into heroic narrative. In borrowing those motifs, he also adapts them. Both the possibility that Nausicaa might be abducted by a god, and the possibility that she might be married to a distinguished human, are evoked in Odyssey 6, but Nausicaa is given a different fate, becoming a helpful accomplice to Odysseus’ return to Ithaca and to Penelope.\(^3\)

Like epic, tragedy adapts and reuses the scenarios of nondramatic choral lyric, but more complexly, because tragedy is itself a choral performance: it represents an adaptation of nondramatic lyric both in its form and in its content. Formally, tragedy represents a reworking of the choral configuration of chorus and leader. This reconfiguration is described by Aristotle in his terse account of the origin of tragedy ἀπὸ τῶν ἑαρχόντων τῶν διθύραμβον, “from those leading off the dithyramb” (Poet. 4.1449a10–11). It is not possible to assess the accuracy of Aristotle’s assertion here and, even if true, this is clearly not the whole story of how the complex hybrid form of tragedy came into being. But it is undoubtedly telling as an etiological construct that indicates how its maker understood the developed phenomenon whose origins he was projecting.

Whatever he might be able to tell us about the history of tragedy, Aristotle here highlights the way that tragedy combines a chorus with individuals, who are distinguished, separate, even isolated, but who always play out their stories in association with larger groups. This understanding is also evident in his subsequent comment that the chorus should be understood as one of the actors and should συναγωγεῖσθαι, “participate in the action,” or “make a positive contribution to the play,”\(^4\) as in Sophocles rather than Euripides (Poet. 18.1456a25–7). Aristotle’s historical narrative – his plot of tragedy’s birth through the leaders stepping away from the group – captures one movement in the dynamic of shifting closeness and distance between chorus and characters that contributes to the dramatic unfolding of individual tragedies.

In adapting choral forms, tragedy increases the separation between choruses and leaders. Actors’ speeches differ formally in their dialects, meters, and musical register from the songs of choruses; within the myth, choruses are assigned roles in which they are more different from the main characters than are typical nondramatic chorus members, who are closely similar in

---

\(^3\) On the episode as a reworking of motifs related to the roles of dance and play in courtship, see Lonsdale 1993: 266–10; on the episode as a “displacement of eighth-century festival life,” see Ford 1992: 118–19.

age, status, and local origin to their leaders. It is now a truism that tragic choruses take on the roles of socially marginal figures – women, foreigners, slaves, the old – although it is also increasingly acknowledged that chorus' marginal identities do not restrict their voices or cancel their traditional ability to speak from the cultural center.\(^5\) In part, marginal identities help to further tragedy's focus on the chorus-leaders-turned-protagonists. To sharpen that distinction, the chorus is shifted into a more distant relationship through imagined differences of status, locality, or age. But marginal choral identities are also a reflection of the fact that these choruses have been pulled, along with the characters, into the mythic plot. Tragic choruses are caught up in fictional situations in which marginalizing things happen to them, as they do not to real choruses: they are captured, enslaved, deported, left behind; time passes and they grow old.

The fictional scenarios into which tragic choruses and characters are alike incorporated involve a further displacement of their underlying choral situation. Tragic plots place their characters in settings in which choral singing and dancing, as a festive occasion that brings pleasure to mortals and does honor to gods, is unthinkable. Tragic choruses, because they are not as thoroughly in character as the actors and retain the self-referentiality of nondramatic choruses, often call attention to the impossibility of choral performance under the circumstance in which they find themselves; this is a defining feature of tragedy, which has been illuminated especially in the work of Albert Henrichs. Tragedy is built on the paradox that its choruses sing and dance in circumstances in which festive singing and dancing are inappropriate, and this paradox is expressed in multiple ways: in the famous question of the chorus of the _Oedipus Tyrannus_ who respond to seeming evidence that oracles are going unfulfilled and criminals are going unpunished by asking τι δεῖ με χορεῖν; “why should I dance?” (896); in falsely euphoric choruses which are moved to dance and sing because they misunderstand the circumstances in which they find themselves (for example, the chorus of Sophocles' _Ajax_, overcome with an impulse to dance and sing when it wrongly believes that Ajax has decided not to kill himself (693–717)); in what Henrichs terms “choral projection,” accounts of joyous choral performances located in other, more suitable times and places; and in onstage choral performances that are tinged with the mournful strains of lament, a form of music often figured as antimusical.\(^6\)


\(^6\) On choral self-referentiality, see Henrichs 1994/5, Henrichs 1996a. Swift 2010 surveys tragedy's allusions to other choral genres, concluding that those allusions are "usually ironic... used to create
Sheila Murnaghan

160

Again without making assumptions about the origins of tragedy, we can turn to satyr play for a model of how drama's transposition of the personnel of a chorus into a mythic plot has the effect of putting them in a situation in which they cannot fully be themselves. In Euripides' Cyclops, the recipe famously articulated by François Lissarague, 'take one myth, add satyrs, observe the result,' yields a situation in which a satyr chorus has been injected into the world of Odyssey 9 as slaves of the Cyclops Polyphemus. As a result, they find themselves trapped in what their leader Silenus calls an ἀχοροῦ... χθόνα "a land without dances" (104, cf. 63-4), exiled from the festivity that is their proper element. That is not to deny that the satyr chorus, like the tragic chorus, nonetheless dances and sings: the chorus of the Cyclops enters dancing their signature dance, the sikhinis, but their dance is flagged by their leader Silenus as strange and out of place (37-40), and it meshes with their fictional activity, doing double duty as the frantic chasing of unruly sheep.

In the case of tragedy too, the formal status of actors and choruses as dislocated participants in a festive choral performance is sometimes echoed in the fictional circumstances of the characters, whether choruses, who may look back in memory or forward in imagination to occasions of dancing outside the action of the drama (what Henrichs terms "choral projection"), or protagonists, especially female protagonists, who may be identified as displaced chorus leaders. One example of a displaced chorus leader is Hecuba in Troades. Alone on stage after the departure of Athena and Poseidon, Hecuba sings a song that she defines as μοῦσα... τοῖς δυστήνοις, "the music of the wretched"; ἀτας κελαδείν ἀχορεῦτος, "to cry out disasters that do not let us dance" (120-1). There she measures her misfortune through her physical displacement and the decline that goes with it, from her past offstage status as flourishing leader of ritual performances in the house of Priam to her present onstage condition as miserable leader of impromptu lamentation beside the tents of Agamemnon.8

a sense of mismatch between the ideals of the genre and what the audience sees happening onstage" (172); as she notes, lament is the one such genre that is not evoked ironically (173). On lament as a form of anti-music, see Sappho's admonition that a threòus would not be proper in a house that serves the Muses (fr. 150 V) and Segal's account of tragedy's self-presentation as "negated music" (1993: 16-20). On the tragic chorus' exile from festivity in relation to tragic politics, see Murnaghan 2011.

7 Lissarague 1990: 236.
8 On this passage in the context of the play's pervasive identification of the fall of Troy with the destruction of Trojan ("Phrygian") music, see Battezzato 2005b: 80-3.
Alas, what sort of place do I now sit in,
hard by the tents of Agamemnon!
I am taken away as an aged slave from my house,
my head ravaged in grief
pitiable! But, O
unhappy wives of the Trojans with swords of bronze,
women unblest in your husbands,
Ilium is burning: Let us wail aloud!
Like a mother bird to her winged brood,
I lead off the song of lamentation,
not at all the same song
that I led off, as Priam leaned upon his scepter,
with the confident beat of chorus leader’s foot
in praise of Troy’s gods. (138–52)\(^9\)

Like epic, tragedy draws on choral situations as generators of narrative. It reworks those situations as occasions of significant action, while drawing out their darker dimensions and their capacity to go awry, so that they no longer fulfill their expected social and ritual functions. The experiences of chorus leaders provide patterns, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, for the struggles of tragic protagonists, whether men who are military or political leaders or the women embarking on marriage who are the focus of this discussion, figures whose stories are defined by extreme and consequential versions of the distinction and separation from others that belong to leaders of choruses.

The cases of Hecuba and, as we will see, of Helen in the Helen, represent the explicit use of choral experience in the construction of tragic scenarios.

\(^9\) Quotations from the plays of Euripides are taken from the Loeb editions by David Kovacs (1999, 2002).
An example of the implicit rehearsal of choral dynamics is provided by an episode in Sophocles’ *Trachiniae*, Deianeira’s meeting with Iole, the captive woman with whom Heracles is in love. As Deianeira is forced to look with her own eyes on her replacement as Heracles’ wife, she enacts a bitter version of the experience of seeing one woman stand out from a group. When news arrives of Heracles’ impending return, the chorus of Trachinian women sings a misguided ode, envisioning a joyous remarriage of Heracles and Deianeira, at the end of which a group of young women appears. This group is pointed out by the chorus and acknowledged by Deianeira with a redoubled stress on her own vision. “I see them, friends; my watchful eye / did not fail to catch sight of that company” (225–6). She asks Lichas who they are, and he identifies them as a group of captives, a role often assigned to tragic choruses.10 Lichas then gives a strategically edited account of the sack of Eurytus’ city, suppressing Iole’s role as the object of Heracles’ desire and goal of his campaign. Once that is over, Deianeira reverts to the group of captive women. She pitied them all but zeroes in on Iole, in effect overriding Lichas’ attempt to keep Iole from standing out and attracting notice.

σὺ δυστάλαια, τίς ποτ’ εἶ νεανίδων;
ἀνανδρὸς ἡ τεκνοῦσα; πρὸς μὲν γὰρ φύσιν
πάντων ἄπειρος τῶν δὲ γενναία δὲ τίς.
Ἄλαια, τίνος ποτ’ ἔστιν ἢ δείη βροτῶν;
τίς ἡ τεκνοῦσα, τίς δ’ ὁ φιτύσας πατήρ;
ἐξειπ’ ἐτεί νυν τῶν δὲ πλήσατον ὁδίσεια
βλέπωνος, ὀσφυλή καὶ φρονεῖν οἶδεν μόνη.

Unfortunate one, who among girls are you?
Still unmarried, or already a mother? From the way you look,
not yet experienced in all of that, but clearly someone of noble birth.
Lichas, whose daughter is this stranger?
Who is her mother? Who is the father who begot her?
Tell me. For she is the one among these girls I pitied most
when I saw her: she is the only one who knows how to feel. (307–13)

Deianeira’s first bland-seeming question, ‘Unfortunate one, who are you?’ starts the process of differentiation: Iole is one, unidentified but particular, individual (*τις*) among girls (*νεανίδος*). She stands out, in a way that is hard to specify, earning Deianeira’s particular pity and somehow showing a unique consciousness of her circumstances, being the only one who knows *φρονεῖν*, “how to feel.” It is hard to say exactly how Iole distinguishes herself,
aside from somehow seeming noble, and commentators have variously concluded that she is the most demonstrative, or the most restrained, among the suffering girls. This confusion points to the way that it is the very fact of being distinguished that is at issue here. Lychas tries to deflect Deianeira’s question, but his response nonetheless contains a roundabout clue to the mystery: “What do I know? Why are you asking me? Maybe I in birth she is not among the humblest people in that place” (314–15). Deianeira then tries to get Iole to speak up and identify herself, as if she were an actor who could step out of the chorus and take a leading role in the play, but Lychas, once again ready to discourage Iole’s emergence as an object of attention, assures Deianeira that it would be out of character for Iole to say anything, since she has only been able to grieve and weep since she left her father’s house: “Well, (if she does), she will emit an utterance (διηχει γλῶσσαν) not at all comparable to what has been in the past” (322–3). Only after the girls have silently entered the house, does Deianeira learn the bitter truth of Iole’s distinguished name and particular attraction for Heracles from the messenger.

Deianeira undergoes the wrenching, humiliating experience of recognizing Iole as her own replacement by noticing that she stands out among a group. Deianeira’s act of noticing is both an index of her own empathetic nature and a bitter variant on the mother’s delight at her daughter’s dancing or the bridegroom’s discovery of his mate in the most brilliant member of the chorus. It recalls Deianeira’s own experience of being singled out as a bride, which represented for her, not a happy initiation into a new phase of life, but the onset of unremitting troubles. When she describes in the prologue the contest for her hand between her terrifying suitor Achelous and her seeming savior Heracles, she recalls her fear “that my beauty would someday bring me grief” (24). The play traces the painful consequences of eye-catching beauty in the fortunes of both Deianeira and her double and rival Iole.

To be the woman who stands out is, in the context of the chorus, to occupy the privileged position of the choregos; in the context of the tragic plot, it is to be in a situation that is full of danger, and tragedy realizes this danger in its many explorations of how a woman’s entrance into marriage can go wrong. The rest of this discussion focuses on one such exploration, Euripides’ Helen. The Helen features a protagonist with an especially pronounced choral identity, and so illustrates well the twofold

---

11 See Easterling 1982: 117.
role of the chorus in shaping tragic plots. The presentation of Helen and her circumstances is promoted both by the idea of the chorus as an offstage phenomenon, repeatedly invoked throughout the play, and by the actual onstage chorus, which has its own role in communicating Helen's story.

Helen is the mythological figure who best exemplifies the dangers of conspicuous female beauty, both for herself and for others, and also a figure with strong choral associations. As Claude Calame has detailed, Helen played a prominent role in Spartan myth and cult as "the incarnation of the choregos," and Richard Martin has suggested that Helen's identity as a chorus leader underlies aspects of her portrayal in Homer as well.\(^\text{13}\) Helen's beauty is so powerful that, for her, to be the one who stands out and is chosen is not a transient stage of life leading to the obscurity of a successful marriage, but a recurrent syndrome. As a child or young woman, she is the object of rape or attempted rape by Theseus and Perithoos. As a bride, she is first chosen by almost all of the Greek heroes, then assigned to Menelaus, only to be chosen all over again by Paris. In the version of her story dramatized by Euripides, she is protected from the consequences of being chosen by Paris by the substitution of the phantom who goes to Troy in her place and by her sequestration in Egypt, but in Egypt she attracts notice and is chosen all over again, this time by the boorish Egyptian king Theoclymenus, which leads to the crisis with which the Helen opens.

Throughout the play, Euripides casts Helen's story as that of a dislocated chorus leader. Her removal to Egypt is closely modeled on the motif of a woman's abduction by a god, and in particular on the story of Persephone, as Foley and others have shown.\(^\text{14}\) Helen has been brought to Egypt by Hermes, who often figures as an agent in such stories;\(^\text{15}\) she was picking flowers when Hermes snatched her away, as Persephone was when snatched by Hades in the version of her story told in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter. In making this situation the subject of narrative, the Hymn to Demeter slightly displaces its choral character, as the Odyssey does in the case of Nausicaa: Persephone is simply playing (παίζω, 5, cf. 425) with her companions, the Oceanids.\(^\text{16}\) But Euripides, in the second stasimon of the Helen, gives Persephone, or rather gives Persephone back, a choral setting. The

---

\(^\text{13}\) Calame 1997: 191–202; Martin 2008: 124. She is also celebrated in that role in Themistocles’ epithalamium for her (Id. 18).


\(^\text{15}\) For example, in the false tale Aphrodite tells Anchises about how she was snatched from dances in honor of Artemis at Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite 117–20.

\(^\text{16}\) The Oceanids provide the identity of a fictional tragic chorus in Aeschylus’ Prometheus Bound. When Persephone lists her companions at 418–24, she includes Artemis, the archetypal Olympian leader or sponsor of choruses. Lonsdale registers the choral associations of this scene by translating παίζω, at 423 as “playing and dancing” (1993: 222).
Great Mother, who is also a version of Demeter, is described as searching for “the daughter snatched from the circling dances of maidens” (1312–13). Further, as Laura Swift has recently shown, the Helen is pervaded throughout by the language and themes of the traditional partheneion, or maiden song.  

Through mythological exempla, Helen herself articulates the choral pattern of her story. In one of her many laments and bitter comments on the burdens of being conspicuously beautiful, she compares herself to other women of myth who also suffered for their beauty, but not as much as she does, because those other women were turned into animals and so were freed from the ordeal of consciousness.

O lucky maid of Arcadia long ago
Callisto, who left the bed of Zeus
with limbs that go on all four,
how much your lot surpasses mine
since by taking the form of a shaggy beast
[with violent eye, the form of a lioness]
you have put from yourself the burden of pain!
And you too, Titan daughter of Merops, are blest,
you whom Artemis once chased from her band as a golden stag
because of her beauty. Yet my loveliness
has ruined, ruined Troy’s citadel
and the Greeks, doomed to death.

Helen’s first example is Callisto, whose name alludes to her exceptional beauty, who was raped by Zeus. Her second is an otherwise unknown figure, the daughter of Merops. In this case, the misfortune that is caused by beauty and mitigated by metamorphosis is described, not as abduction by a god, but rather as expulsion from the chorus. The rare and precise

term used for this experience, ἔξωρομένα, attested first here and hardly anywhere else, accentuates the element of separation from her companions that goes with a woman’s selection for either marriage or abduction, and the myth gives it a particular cause, the anger of Artemis.

While we know nothing more about Merops’ daughter, the anger of Artemis does figure in the story of Callisto, from which we can extrapolate the elements that were probably present in both myths. Callisto was a companion of Artemis, to whom she had sworn a vow of chastity. When Zeus had made her pregnant, Artemis was enraged and cast Callisto out of her band of virgins, after which she was transformed into first a bear and then a star. She gave birth to a heroic son, Arcas, who in some versions was given by Zeus to Hermes’ mother Maia to raise.

The details of Helen’s two exempla combine to provide a double account of a woman’s separation from her companions because of her fateful beauty: she is both pulled away from them by Zeus, who singles her out and seduces or rapes her, and pushed away from them by Artemis, for whom she is no longer a fitting companion. These myths provide an Olympian paradigm for the process of female coming-of-age, with Zeus as the desiring bridegroom, Artemis as the perennial chorēgos, and Hermes as the figure who helps make the story work out, in this case by lending his own mother Maia as a foster mother for the heroic child. The motif of Artemis’ expulsion makes the young woman’s inevitable estrangement from her companions into the result of a purposeful and punitive act, underscoring the isolation that is often her fate and that is especially foregrounded in tragedy.

In another myth, told by Pausanias, Artemis succeeds in preventing for herself the experience of rape that leads, for her transient mortal companions, to departure from her band.

[The river-god] Alpheios fell in love with Artemis. When he realized that he would not be able to win her with persuasion and pleading, he dared to plot violence against her. So he went to an all-night festival in Letrinoi, which Artemis was conducting along with the nymphs who were her playmates. But Artemis suspected Alpheios’ plot and smeared mud on her own face and on the faces of the nymphs who were with her. So Alpheios, when he arrived, could not distinguish Artemis from the others, and since he wasn’t able to pick her out, he went away without succeeding in his attempt. (Paus. 6.22.8)

Artemis realizes a god’s freedom from change by cleverly avoiding the distinction that she punishes in others. The layers of mud that make every member of Artemis’ band look the same provide a suggestive model,
or aetiology, for the masks of dramatic chorus members, which make individual performers indistinguishable.

The mythical analogues of Persephone, Callisto, and the daughter of Merops define Helen’s unhappy situation in Egypt as an experience of disturbed or distorted choral performance. When that situation is resolved, and the closing sequences of the play set a happy ending in motion, Helen’s future is defined explicitly as a return to orderly, recurrent, festive choral performances, with Helen’s reinstatement in her former position as a chorus leader in Sparta. As she and Menelaus make their escape from Egypt, the play’s chorus of Greek captive women voices a prayer for Helen, which takes the form of choral projection.

I think she will find the daughters of Leucippus by the river or before the temple of Pallas, as she arrives home at the time of the dances or revels of Hyacinth and their nightlong feasting. Hyacinth, whom Phoebus, trying to hurl far the round discus, killed, and thereafter to the land of Lacedaemon the son of Zeus gave order to keep a day of sacrifice. And <she may see> the calf she left in the house, <Hermione,> whose marriage torches have not yet gleamed. (1465–74)

Helen’s projected future condenses and combines several choral situations and resonates closely with archaic Spartan music as we know it from
various sources, notably the poetry of Alcman, and as we have come to understand it through the seminal analysis of those sources by Claude Calame. In particular, Helen will reassert a leading position among choruses of women constituted around the transition to marriage, providing a mythic prototype for the many such choruses that characterized Spartan religious and musical life. She joins forces with a pair of sisters—effectively the rudimentary core of a chorus—the Leucippides who, as the daughters of Tyndareus, are her cousins and, as the wives of the Dioscuroi, her sisters-in-law. Like Helen, the Leucippides had strong associations both with maidenhood and with marriage and served as the mythic prototypes for choral performers in certain Spartan rituals. She will also celebrate the Hyacinthia, a major Spartan festival, in which there were choral performances involving all classes of citizens, including young women. Like an ideal chorus leader, and also like the mother who closely watches the dance, Helen will stand by an unmarried girl, her own daughter Hermione, repairing the loss caused by her abduction.

This composite vision of Helen’s future fixes her simultaneously in the roles of marriageable leader of a maiden’s chorus and married woman looking on as her daughter performs in such a chorus, omitting the rocky transition between those two roles that motivates Helen’s appearances in narrative and dramatic plots. Euripides’ Helen will return to a multi-layered existence that answers to the nostalgia voiced by Homer’s Helen when she tells Priam that she wishes she had never gotten involved in the plot of the *Iliad*:

\[
\text{ως δήλων θάνατος μοι ἀδείων κακός ὀππότε δεύρο
υἱὲι σῷ ἐπόμενῳ βάλαμον γυναικὸς τε λιποῦσα
παιὰν τε τηλυγέτην καὶ δυναλίκην ἐρατείνην.}
\]

and I wish bitter death had been what I wanted, when I came hither following your son, forsaking my chamber, my kinsmen my grown child, and the loveliness of girls my own age.


Here too a timeless idealized stasis, involving several life stages at once, serves as a foil to Helen’s participation in a narrative, specifically the masterplot of Greek mythology, the “plan of Zeus,” in which the Trojan War is a major episode.

The gap between involvement in narrative and choral celebration is further evoked in the festivity through which unconnected Spartan revelers

---

19 On “family association” as “a semantic feature essential in defining the band of young women,” see Calame 1997: 31.
mark the painful circumstance of Hyacinthus’ killing by Apollo. When mythic characters like Helen and the Leucippides become prototypical choral celebrants, they must be divorced from their troubled histories. The Leucippides’ story also involves abduction, as they were snatched from the altar by the Dioscuri, on the verge of marrying a pair of Messenian princes, but this traumatic circumstance is evidently resolved by their happy marriage to the Dioscuri. In the case of Helen, her return to her choral role goes hand in hand with denial that she ever left it in any significant way. This is emphasized at the end of the ode, when the chorus calls on the Dioscuri to “strike from your sister’s name / the reproach of a barbarian marriage” (1506–7).

Once the Helen’s action is over, Helen will retrace her steps to the musical setting from which she was diverted when Hermes snatched her up to play her part in Zeus’s plot, much like the satyr chorus of the Cyclops, who will escape their bondage to Polyphemus and return to their joyful service to Dionysos—both she and they freed from their entanglement in adventures modeled on a richly plotted epic narrative, the Odyssey. Through this projected offstage conclusion, and the play’s many other choral allusions (only some of which have been treated here), Euripides, like Homer in Odyssey 6, points to the lyric sources of his own genre. Helen’s return to Sparta is also a musical return, to one of tragedy’s points of origin, in the nondramatic choral lyric of the Peloponnesus.

Euripides’ interest in revisiting tragedy’s origins within tragedy, particularly in the later stages of his career, is most evident in the Bacchae, and the Dionysian elements foregrounded there tend to dominate our understanding of the Peloponnesian lyric elements in tragedy. We focus on the dithyramb and on the contributions of Corinth and Sicyon, pointed in those directions by Aristotle, with his claim that tragedy derived from the dithyramb, and by Herodotus, with his tale of Cleisthenes of Sicyon transferring tragic choruses from Adrastus to Dionysos (Histories 5.67). The Helen contains multiple allusions to the dithyramb, among them the dolphin chorus summoned up to escort Helen home at the beginning of the same ode. But in his account of Helen’s happy return, Euripides lays particular stress on the partheneion, a form that was as much associated with Sparta for the classical Athenians as it is for us.

22 Calame 1997: 188.
23 On the Odyssey as a significant intertext of the Helen, see Burian 2007: 9–11 and the further bibliography cited at 9 n. 21.
24 On the dolphin chorus as a representation of dithyramb, see Casp 2009.
For evidence of the Athenian identification of Spartan music with the *parthenoeion*, we can turn to the song that ends Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* (1296–1315). There, as the successful outcome of the sex strike is celebrated with joint singing and dancing, the Spartans are enjoined to perform a song of their own. The result is a song that both represents Spartan music in its formal features, including its markedly Spartan dialect and its many allusions to the *parthenoeia* of Alcman,\(^\text{25}\) and offers an explicit account of Spartan music in its content. The chorus calls on the *Môa Lakaina*, the Spartan muse, to travel from Laconia and make an appearance in Athens, sounding the same notes as the chorus of the *Helen* does. The Spartan muse is asked to honor the local objects of cult with whom Helen will also reconnect: Apollo of Amyclae, Amyclae being the setting of the Hyacinthia; Athena of the Bronze House, before whose temple Helen might meet the Leucippides; and the Dioscuroi themselves. And the chorus proposes to celebrate Sparta specifically as the scene of young women’s dances: “Let us sing in praise of Sparta, / where choruses for the gods / stamp their feet / where girls like fillies / kick up the dust / on the banks of the Eurotas,” culminating in a vision of Helen as their chorus leader: “and Leda’s daughter leads them / the holy, upright choragos” (1305–15). This epiphanic image encapsulates the identity that Euripides’ Helen is finally able to reclaim after her enforced wanderings and Egyptian ordeal: an honorable, revered figure, who represents Spartan women in their roles as wives and potential wives and who stands as an emblem of Spartan music, an avatar of the Spartan muse.

In the *Lysistrata*, a plot hatched on the Athenian acropolis, which is led by an exemplary Athenian woman, and which echoes Athenian cults and institutions, frees the Spartan muse from the inhibiting effects of war and revives Spartan music. In the *Helen*, a similar result is achieved through another Athenian institution, tragedy itself, a fictional mimesis that is performed on the slopes of the Acropolis even if it has the more exotic setting of Egypt. Euripides’ plot frees Sparta’s muse-like heroine from her damaging association with the Trojan War and sends her back to preside over a restored musical culture. Euripides here reverses the direction of musical history, making tragedy, Athens’ innovative form of choral drama, the source and guarantor of the nondramatic lyric genre that it has borrowed and adapted.\(^\text{26}\)

\(^{25}\) On the song’s relationship to the poetry of Alcman, see Bierl 2011.

\(^{26}\) Thus music of a type viewed with nostalgia by critics of the new music is made to follow from the Spartan muse figure’s participation in Euripides’ new-fangled καρνη Ελένη (Aristoph. *Thesm.* 850).
The large contribution to tragedy of young women's song of the kind associated with Sparta is evident from the preponderance of female choruses,27 a feature of early tragedy that Euripides embraced in his later plays,28 and from the many tragic plots concerned with women's transitions to marriage, which are at least as common as male-centered plots drawn from the heroic legends of the Troy cycle. Play after play recasts the successful ritual passage from maidenhood to marriage as an unhappy tale of a woman whose transition to marriage is incomplete, threatened, or flawed, and who is supported in her difficulties by a chorus of sympathetic young women. Some of the most obvious examples include, in addition to those already discussed here (the Helen and the Trachiniae), Sophocles' Electra and Euripides' Electra, Medea, Hippolytus, Ion, and Iphigenia in Tauris. Aeschylus' Supplices is a further example, in which the chorus itself figures in the role of troubled bride.29 Those female protagonists often express their disturbing distinction by highlighting their difference from groups that are constituted as choruses, whether the chorus of the play or an analogous onstage or offstage group. In the Trachiniae, for example, Deianira greets the chorus of younger, unmarried women by expressing the wish that they should never have to experience what she did, then launches into an account of her painful entrance into marriage (142-3). In Euripides' Bacchae, Agaue, in her deluded belief that she has hunted down a lion cub when she has really dismembered her own son, enters the stage by herself boasting to her father that she has outperformed her sisters, a group of women with strong choral associations both inside and outside Euripides' play (1234-5).30 Not only is the maiden song a major element in the poetic mix that constituted tragedy, but it is one that had to come from elsewhere, since Athens itself lacked a strong tradition of choral performances by actual women, as opposed to the prominent fictive women of its dramatic choruses.31

By making his heroine traverse the space between the tragic stage and the nondramatic ritual chorus, Euripides reaffirms the continuities between the two genres at a point in the evolution of tragedy at which it seemed

Deborah Steiner (2011) makes a similar argument about the musical imagery that runs through the entire third stasimon. On her reading, that imagery retrojects the new musical style of late Euripidean tragedy onto a series of archetypal, originary choruses, "making it seem that what is musically/chorally new more properly restores choreia to the form and structure which it - in the late fifth-century imagination - originally possessed."


28 Euripides' use of female choruses in most plays from the 420s on can be related to their greater suitability for the musical and emotional extremes of the new music. Csapo 2000: 424-5.

29 On the choral plot of the Supplices, see Murgaghan 2005.

30 Murgaghan 2006: 104-5.

Sheila Murnaghan

172 to be leaving its choral roots behind. As one of Euripides’ later plays, the Helen exemplifies the attenuation of tragedy’s choral element that was characteristic of the period and linked to the emergence of new music, with its stress on passionate solo song performed by increasingly virtuoso actors.32 In its fictional role, the chorus of the Helen exemplifies the general obscurity of tragic choruses. They are ordinary Greek captives, and while Helen suggests she will try to arrange their return to Greece, their future is not an urgent matter like her own. Formally, they exhibit the diminished role characteristic of late Euripidean choruses. The number of their lines is relatively few, and they are silent for a large stretch of the action. They share the parados with Helen, whose role involves in general a large component of song, in an anomalous structure of alternating strophe and antistrophe. After this, they sing only a few scattered lyrics until the first stasimon, which begins only at line 1107.

And yet the chorus of the Helen is hardly negligible. When they do finally start performing odes, they sing three memorable stasima, all with strong musical themes: the first an invocation of the lamenting nightingale; the second telling the myth of the Great Mother and her daughter; the third forecasting Helen’s homecoming in Sparta through a sequence of images with rich choral associations, of which Helen’s imagined return to Spartan festivals is only one.33 That account of Helen’s return is indispensable, since it completes the play’s presentation of Helen’s story as a sequence of separation from the chorus, miserable isolation, and happy reunion. Only through the chorus’ powers of projection does the essential element of nostos enter the Egypt-bounded space of the tragic plot.

Not only does the Helen’s chorus articulate Helen’s return to her role as chorus leader, they also anticipate it, in their own role as Helen’s supporters, a loyal and sympathetic group of temporary companions that substitutes for the close kinswomen that she will ultimately rejoin, keeping alive in exile, in an attenuated form, the identity as chorēgos that Helen has lost along with her friends, her husband, her daughter, and her reputation.34 This is characteristic of the tragic chorus, which serves in part to represent in a muted key, even under the direst circumstances, happier aspects of experience from which the protagonists are in danger of being wholly cut off: community, survival, successful ritual, and musical performance. This

33 For further discussion of the Helen’s thorough-going engagement with musical themes and musical history, see Barker 2007, Ford 2010, Steiner 2011.
34 On the Helen’s chorus as substituting for her lost companions, see Allan 2008: 100–1; on the chorus of the Iou as performing a similar function for Creusa, see Murnaghan 2006: 110–11.
The choral plot of Euripides’ Helen

quality of the Helen’s chorus is reflected in the clustering of their songs late in the play. As Helen begins to emerge from the entanglements of Zeus’s plot and moves towards a renewed choral role, she is attended by a chorus that is itself more overtly choral. But it is also evident in the chorus’ earliest appearance in the parados.

After the initial episode of her meeting with Teucer, Helen is left alone on the stage. There she sings a lament for her overwhelming troubles, in which she stresses the burden of solitude, and longs for the answering voice of a mourning chorus; she appeals in particular to a group of mythical singing maidens, the Sirens, to join her. Helen’s strophe is answered in the antistrophe by the entrance of the play’s actual human chorus.

κυανοειδές ἀμφ’ ὕδωρ
ἔτυχον ἔλικα τ’ ἄνα χλόαν
φοινικάς ἀλίῳ
πέπλως χρυσάεισιν
< τ’ ἐν > αὐγαῖοι θάλπτουσ’
ἀμφ’ δόνακος ἐρυεσιν’
ἐνθὲν οἰκτρὸν ὦμαδοι ἐκλυον,
ἀλυρον ἔλεγον, ὡ τι ποτ’ ἔλαιεν
<λαμπροσίν> αἰάγμα-
σι στένουσα νύμφα τις,
οὰ Ναῖς ὅρεσι φύγα
νόμου ἱέσσα γοερόν, ὑπὸ δὲ
πέτρινα γύαλα κλαγμαίσι
Πανὸς ἀναβοῦ γάμους.

Near waters of deep blue
and shoots of tender green I chanced
to be drying on standing reeds
my deep-dyed
dresses in the sun
<and> its golden rays.
There I heard a noise to stir my pity,
a lament not fit for the lyre, uttered
in <loud> complaint
by some wife:
so would a Naiad in flight
on the mountains utter a woeful plaint
as in some rocky glen
she cried out that she is being ravished by Pan.
(170–90)

The antistrophe ends with one of the play’s many comparisons of Helen
to the victim of rape by a god, in this case a solitary nymph who cries out
Sheila Murnaghan

174

As first the chorus explains that, when they heard as she is chased by Pan. But first the chorus explains that, when they heard this cry, they were at the water's edge doing laundry. They are thus doubly the group of companions from which a chosen woman is positioned as the typical snatched away: the Sirens, for whom they substitute, figures in some versions of the Persephone myth as Persephone's companions; their own activity identifies them with Nausicaa's companions in Odyssey 6. These comparisons reinforce Helen's depiction as a woman who has been isolated and caused to suffer by multiple iterations of abduction; but by responding to her cry the chorus also mitigates her isolation and sorrow. Her return to her own companions is still in the future, but Helen's restitution to her proper role as chorus leader is already anticipated as the play's chorus reacts to her voice, comes to her side, and answers her song. A fundamental constituent of tragic form, the entrance of the chorus, enacts in advance the outcome that the tragic plot will only gradually and incompletely bring about.

In a recent discussion, Andrew Ford illuminates the relationship of this fictional sequence to the play's pervasive engagement with musical history. The chorus' answer to Helen's outburst dramatizes the conversion of emotion into art, as a rough cry generates a piece of music, and thus forms a first step in the evolution of fully developed ritual performance.

Taken together, the songs of Helen intimate a genealogy that traces song to the inarticulate grieving of abandoned women. Solitary cries of pain are converted into musical art when others come to share the mourner's burden: a chorus gives articulation and shape to a soloist's lament and creates the possibility of future repetitions, formal and controlled, in which ceremonial choirs of women elaborate that first cry into an art which can be repeated at regular intervals to please the gods.

Through the musical resonances of its action, the Helen clarifies what tragedy achieves by reconstituting choral performance as fictional mimesis.

17 Swift compares Helen here to the chorus leaders in Alcman's surviving parthenêia, Hegesichora, Agido, and Astymelousa (2010: 223).
18 Other tragedies in which the entrance of the chorus is fictionalized as a sympathetic response to the troubles of a protagonist (whether rumored, overheard as a cry, or forming the basis of a summons) include: Sophocles, Ajax, Trachiniae, Electra; Euripides Iphigenia in Tauris, Medea, Heracleidae, Hippolytus (where the chorus has heard the news of Phaedra's suffering while doing laundry, 121-30), Andromache, Troades. In contrast, Iole's inability to emit any γνώμοσαν (Trach. 323) in her extreme grief is related to the way she does not emerge as a tragic character, although Delaneira's sympathetic interest and Iole's distinction among a group of women are signs that, in a different play, she might.
19 Ford 2010: 283.
Leaders and choruses are alike shifted out of the protected, uneventful setting of overt ritual festivity to undergo the hazards of particular experiences; they undergo those experiences in tandem, but without necessarily enjoying the close and perfectly calibrated relationship that is built into their roles in performance. Yet, because they enter the plot together, they are capable of retaining or reconstructing some approximation of that relationship; when they do, they temper tragedy’s presentation of individual suffering with intimations of the communal solidarity and continuity that choral performance represents.

The female lament, a heartfelt, spontaneous, form more linked to private experience and uncontrolled emotion than the full-fledged male-authored threnos, provides an apt model for the skewed, provisional chorality found within the tragic plot, much as the partheneion, a form designed to promote the departure of its leaders, provides an apt model for tragedy’s amplification of the distance between chorus and characters. If female lament, as depicted in epic and tragedy, is not an ideal musical occasion, its particular combination of performers and its pronounced antiphony do nonetheless suggest the definitive choral configuration of an individual surrounded and supported by a group among whom she stands out. In lament, the individual stands out for her suffering rather than her excellence, but the myths of Helen and others show how closely interwoven those two forms of distinction can be, and the group, through its presence and its echoing expressions of sympathy, serves to mitigate the individual’s isolation.

The parodos of the Helen has a darker double in the parodos of Troades, which begins with the monody sung by Hecuba quoted above (98–121). Hecuba, bereft of country, children, and husband, rolls back and forth in a wretched anti-dance, and voices troubles “that do not let us dance,” which are identified with the destructive acts of Helen (131–7) – here infamous reality rather than the false rumor bewailed by Helen in the Helen. But like the Helen of the Helen, Hecuba manages to assemble a chorus to mitigate her solitude. Her call to the unhappy Trojan wives to join her lamentation (142–5) is answered by the entrance of the chorus, who arrive in two half-choruses that then merge into a single band. The entrance of both groups is motivated by concerned response to Hecuba’s cry: “Hecuba, what do you utter, why do you cry aloud? / What is the meaning of your speech? /

40 On the distinction, see Swift 2010: 304–22.
41 On the antiphony of traditional female lament, see Swift 2010: 306–7; Alexiou 2002.
Through the walls of the tent / I heard the cries of woe you are uttering” (153–5, cf. 176–8).

For the duration of the play, Hecuba and the other Trojan Women form a temporary choral group through which to better confront and articulate their wretched fate. The temporary character of this group is tied up with the wretchedness of their fate, for they are destined to disband as each member is sent off with a new master. This theme is highlighted already in the parodos, as the chorus speculates about possible destinations and expresses preferences among them (197–229), and further developed in the subsequent scene in which Talthybius reveals which Greek victor each of the most prominent Trojan women has been allotted to, and the chorus members wonder out loud about their own assignments (230–93). The temporary character of the analogous grouping in the Helen is cause for rejoicing rather than grief, reflecting the altogether different and happier resolution of the Helen’s plot, but both of these chronologically close (Troades 416, Helen 412), musically self-conscious plays call attention to the distinctive way in which tragedy reimagines the relationship of chorus leader and choral group in its imitation of pathos.

The difference between these two versions of fictional choality is also softened by the “surprisingly favorable terms”43 in which the chorus members of Troades envision their futures in the Greek settings of Argos, Phthia, Corinth, Sicily, and Thurii – just as long as they are not sent to Sparta (208–29). This positive note may be related to the positive advocacy in both of these plays of new musical forms that share the emotional intensity of lament. Furthermore, Easterling has suggested that the envisioned futures of the Troades’ chorus members represent a form of choral projection, alluding to future performances of the play in a variety of locations, including the Greek west.44 If that is the case, the post-play future of this chorus inverts and complements the post-play future envisioned for Helen in the Helen, projecting the future dissemination of contemporary tragedy throughout the Greek world rather than looking back to tragedy’s archaic roots in Sparta.45

The lament improvised by Helen and a fortunately-met group of Greek captive women on the banks of the Nile is not an ideal choral performance,

43 Goff 2009: 46.
44 Easterling 1994. Cf. the similar ode at Hecuba 448–74, in which one of the chorus’ possible futures involves joining the Delian maidens.
45 The complementarity between Troades, with its many similarly suffering female characters, and the Helen, with its more singular heroine, is perhaps suggested at Helen 1113–16, where the chorus calls on the nightingale to help them sing laments on two themes: “Helen’s grievous troubles / and the sorrowful fate / of the daughters of Troy / at the hands of Greek spearmen.”
such as those delighted in by the Muses or by the Delian maidens or by Helen herself with the women of Sparta. The Helen's fictional chorus cannot make up for the closer choral groups whom Helen has lost, and she will not really be herself again until she is reunited with her daughter and her sisters-in-law. But their joint song is a work of art that imposes order on pain and a step in the process by which grief is converted into renewed enjoyment of life. And the stranded captive women, together with Helen, do exemplify the partial, differently constituted version of chorality that occurs when choruses and their leaders have been transposed to the tragic plot, subject to the temporal and spatial dislocations of narrative: a new configuration in which the leader is dangerously prominent and registers the consequences of that prominence, most often in extended dialogue or passionate solo lyrics, but also, as here, in shared song. That song may take the bitter form of lament in sad circumstances, but it enacts nonetheless the essential symbiosis of leader and group that is a definitive feature of choral mousikē.
CHORAL MEDIATIONS
IN GREEK TRAGEDY

EDITED BY
RENAUD GAGNÉ AND
MARIANNE GOVERS HOPMAN

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS