# 10

## The Nostalgia of the Male Tragic Chorus

### Sheila Murnaghan

For the ancient Athenians, tragedy was a species of choral poetry, a spectacular new development within a long tradition of group performances combining song and dance. Modern discussions and receptions of tragedy have generally focused on what was added as tragedy left its purely choral roots behind: individual speaking actors impersonating the main characters of a myth. But recently critics have paid more attention to tragedy's ongoing choral element, investigating not only the particular choruses of individual plays, but also the tragic chorus's connections to non-dramatic lyric and to the ritual contexts in which most choral song was performed.[1] We are gaining a clearer understanding of what the chorus became when it appeared in tandem with the clamorous individuals who dominate tragic plots.

Athenian drama came into being as the leaders of choruses emerged from the group and began to imitate characters in the myths that were being retold. The details of this process are unknown, but by the time of our first extant tragedies, in the second quarter of the fifth century BC, two distinct actors were a standard feature of each play, and three soon after that. Outside the drama, the role of chorus leader also developed into the figure of the *chorêgos*, a rich individual who assumed the expenses of a tragic presentation, especially the funding, training, and outfitting of the chorus. Being a *chorêgos* was at once a form of involuntary public service, since this role was required by the city of its wealthiest citizens, and an opportunity for self-promotion, since the *chorêgos* gained enviable visibility and glory from a successful production.[2]

Within the drama, the chorus, which had constituted the entire personnel of the performance, was overshadowed by the actors, but never wholly

[1] See especially Bacon (1995), Henrichs (1995, 1996), Goldhill (1996), Gould (1996), Calame (1999), Foley (2003), Mastronarde (2010), and Swift (2010).

[2] The definitive treatment of this institution is Wilson (2000).

eclipsed.[3] Rather the chorus underwent several forms of partial displacement from its previously central and self-consciously performative role. Like the actors, it entered mimetically into the myth, taking on the role of a collective character, but never as completely. The chorus always retained elements of its previously undisguised identity as a group of singers and dancers, both in its performance mode (which included clearly demarcated episodes of formalized singing and dancing) and in its self-presentation.

In addition, the fictional identities adopted by choruses involved social displacement, in relation both to the high position of the main characters and to the real circumstances of the chorus members, who were the most privileged members of Athenian society, male citizens in the prime of life. Choruses most often represent groups of people who are socially marginal or otherwise disqualified from action: women, slaves, foreigners, the old. At the same time, choruses retain the authority to articulate central communal values, even if they sometimes speak from the more limited perspectives of their assumed identities. In this respect too, their displacement from their traditional role in non-dramatic lyric is only partial.[4]

Finally, the chorus's integration into the tragic plot entails displacement from the circumstances represented by choral performance itself. In Greek culture, choral performance was widely understood as an expression of ideal conditions: a joyful, timeless enactment of an orderly community, with vigorous participants acting in harmony and displaying just the right degree of hierarchy—with enough, but not too much, difference between leaders and followers. The performers might be singing about painful experiences and dysfunctional circumstances, but the occasion itself was affirmative. This disjunction is well illustrated by the chorus of gods in the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, an ideal ensemble that served as a prototype for human choruses, who embodied for their mortal communities a temporary state of Olympian joy. Led by Apollo and surrounded by dancing goddesses, the Muses 'sing all together with a beautiful voice, | of the immortal blessings of the gods | and the sufferings of mortals, which they endure at the hands of the deathless gods | as they live out their lives, witless and helpless . . . ' (*Hymn Hom. Ap.* 189–92).

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[3] It is generally assumed that the tragic chorus still had a leader, referred to in modern scholarship as the *coryphaeus*, who spoke for the group in dialogue with the actors. But that figure has no distinct identity; our sense of his presence is not secured by textual evidence, but rests on the assumption that all choruses had leaders (cf. Dem. 21.60) and the seeming unlikelihood that a group of performers spoke in unison during spoken dialogue. Wilson (2000: 134, 353 n. 92).

[4] On choral marginality and its compatibility with cultural memory and authoritative speech, see Gould (1996) and Goldhill (1996). On choral authority, see also Mastronarde (2010: 98–121). For the important point that choral identities 'are precisely the categories excluded from dancing in a chorus of citizens', see Mullen (1982: 52).

As mimesis, tragedy implicates its choruses in those mortal sufferings, drawing them into mythical scenes of conflict and disorder, removed in time and space from the annual Athenian celebration in which the plays were presented. Tragic choruses find themselves in situations in which joyful singing and dancing are impossible, in which the most appropriate musical form is the lament. Yet they go on singing and dancing, combining mournful songs with adapted versions of other, more festive genres. Their periodic formal odes respond to the mythic plot but also evoke the immediate occasion of dramatic performance. And, even though choruses enter the world of the myth, they are not directly affected by the catastrophes of the tragic plot. As perennial survivors, they retain a timeless detachment from the events they help to convey.

The interplay between the chorus's part in the tragic action and its underlying status as a group of performers is a distinctive feature of tragic style, which reflects broader cultural assumptions about particular social roles and the significance of singing and dancing. The chorus's movements in and out of character give shape to the plot and produce shifts in emphasis between catastrophic episodes of tragic pathos and the continuous social order symbolized by chorality. The doubleness of tragic choral identity has been most thoroughly studied in relation to the ritual dimensions of choral performance.[5] This discussion focuses instead on the fluctuating identities of male choruses in particular and on their place in tragedy's presentation of public life, locating the tragic chorus at the intersection of musical culture and politics.[6]

Tragic choruses take on male roles somewhat less often than female roles.[7] Likely reasons for this include women's association with lamentation, tragedy's stress on female protagonists who invite attendance by female supporters, and the social disenfranchisement of women, which makes female choruses natural outsiders. Choruses representing men are less automatically marginal than those representing women and less different from the actual performers under the masks and costumes. Their interactions with the protagonists would thus have resonated more closely with contemporary Athenian politics, in which the relationship between highly placed, often aristocratic leaders and more ordinary citizens was a central and highly charged issue.

Male tragic choruses are marginalized to some degree through age: most are cast as old men whose scope for action is restricted, with only a few portraying men of military age. The preponderance of older male choruses may have been

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[5] Henrichs (1995, 1996). Henrichs also highlights the ironic use of choral self-referentiality to create moments of false closure, when the complications of the plot appear to be resolved but are not.

[6] This is an expansion of Murnaghan (2011: 258–64).

[7] Foley (2003: 13), with further bibliography.

a way of focusing attention on the suffering protagonists without foregrounding the issue of their pronounced distinction from everyone else. As Helene Foley puts it in a thoughtful overview of tragic choral identity: 'Socially marginal choruses make [awkward] issues of leadership oblique or implicit, whereas . . . choruses consisting of soldiers potentially raise such delicate questions more directly.'[8] But, even obliquely and implicitly, the experiences of older choruses bear significantly on the protagonists' performance as leaders. Those choruses' assignment to a marginal position is not absolute, but variable, and, as we will see, comparable to that of younger men. And both older and younger male choruses do, at times, express a nostalgic longing for their lost centrality, competing for sympathy with the protagonists who have pushed them to the edges of the action.

In strictly political terms, old men are not marginal in the same way as women or slaves: choruses of old men usually depict citizens of the community in which the play is set and are often treated as trusted advisers. But they are limited by their unsuitability for physical action, and their age means that they have entered the realm of time and change, which is the province of the tragic plot, but which choral performance itself disavows. Being old means not being able to dance, and thus having no place in the idealized community of the chorus.

In Greek culture, advanced age was generally seen as a disqualification for choral participation, which was physically demanding.[9] The plight of the superannuated dancer is among the hardships of old age bemoaned in lyric poetry. Alcman appeals to a group of young girls, such as those for whom he wrote songs: 'No longer, o sweet-sounding, holy-voiced girls | can my limbs carry me. Would that, would that, I was a cerylus [a male halcyon thought to be carried on the wings of females when too old to fly]' (26 *PMG*). Sappho also contrasts herself with girls who can still enjoy the gifts of the Muses: 'but in my case, old age has seized my once tender body . . . my knees will not carry me | though they once were light like fawns for dancing' (58 Voigt).

Such expressions of nostalgic regret were complemented by a popular notion that being in choruses was rejuvenating, so that, if old people were dancing, they were effectively no longer old.[10] This rejuvenation was linked to

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[8] Foley (2003: 12). On tragedy's engagement with the Athenians' often ambivalent attitudes towards their leaders, see Griffith (1995, 1998), stressing the people's dependence on, and admiration for, prominent aristocrats; Seaford (1994: esp. 344–6), stressing their need to free themselves from aristocratic domination.

[9] Foley (2003: 5).

[10] There may be hints of rejuvenation in both the Alcman and the Sappho poems. Alcman's image of the old cerylus kept aloft by female birds suggests vicarious animation through the dances of young girls. Bierl (2009*b*) proposes that Sappho later in the same poem redeems her situation by identifying herself, in her role as a chorus leader, with Eos, the dawn goddess and a mythological figure of perennial youth.

wine and the powers of Dionysus and thus forms an important theme of Anacreontic poetry, which celebrates the joys of social gatherings marked by drinking and music: 'when the old man dances | he is old if you look at his hair | but young at heart.'[11]

In Euripides' *Bacchae*, the surviving tragedy that is most directly concerned with Dionysus, this rejuvenating effect is dramatized in a scene in which two old men, the Theban king Cadmus and the blind prophet Teiresias, are inspired by Dionysus to dance (Eur. *Bacch.* 170–209). An ancient proverb, which may lie behind this episode, extends the benefits of Dionysian inspiration beyond the dancer to the entire society: 'when the old man dances, all is well.'[12] An old man dancing betokens a society that is inclusive and harmonious, in which differences of many kinds can be made to disappear. Thus the comic resolution of Menander's *Dyscolus* requires, not only a wedding that unites rich and poor, urban and rural, but a final episode in which two servants force the anti-social old grouch Cnemon to attend the wedding feast and join the dance.

The social benefit of old men dancing receives an extensive theoretical grounding in Plato's late dialogue *Laws*, in which *choreia* is identified as an indispensable source of civic health, both as an expression of social order and as the principal means of educating good citizens.[13] The three speakers who conjure up an ideal city over the course of the dialogue are themselves old men, and their city is shaped by the good sense and moderation that come with age. These attributes of the old are manifested in their dances, which involve restrained and harmonious movements and songs on uplifting subjects. To assure that such dances take place, the Athenian who leads the discussion institutes a chorus of older men, aged 30 to 60, in addition to choruses of boys and of younger men. When one of his interlocutors find this prospect *atopos*, 'out of the ordinary', the Athenian insists that the practice will maximize the good influence of the most trustworthy citizens; he also stipulates that men over 40 should be allowed greater amounts of wine to stimulate their participation in the chorus of elders, which is under the patronage of Dionysus. The conviviality that Dionysus sponsors is itself rejuvenating: 'a tonic so that we may recover our youth and, through forgetfulness of care, the temper of our souls may become softer instead of harder, like iron melting in a fire' (Pl. *Leg.* 666b7–c1).

The Dionysian chorus of elders sets the tone for the entire city. They select the most appropriate songs, 'and singing, they both themselves enjoy a

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[11] *Anacreonta* 39.3–5; cf. 1, 7, 47, 51.53; Ladianou (2005: 51–4); P. A. Rosenmeyer (1992: 60–1).

[12] Slater (2000: 117–21).

[13] On *choreia* in the *Laws*, see Mullen (1982: 53–7), Lonsdale (1993: 21–43), and Peponi, Chapter 1, this volume.

harmless pleasure in the moment and become leaders for the younger men through their appropriate embrace of the finest manners' (Pl. *Leg.* 670d8–e1). For ordinary old men like the dialogue's three speakers, the institution of choruses for younger men still provides an opportunity for rejuvenation (in a more mediated form) and for shaping the next generation.

> While our young men are prepared to dance themselves, we old men think that we are spending our time well when we watch them, rejoicing in their fun and their festivity, since our own nimbleness is now deserting us. Longing for that and clinging to it, we propose in this way contests for those who are best able, through reminiscence, to reawaken our youth.   (Pl. *Leg.* 657d1–8).[14]

Whether the old men in question are actually dancing, or whether their nostalgia is assuaged by the dancing of others, these scenarios present young and old in perfect harmony: one generation replicates another to perpetuate a stable, unchanging, ideal community. This is a fundamentally conservative vision, in which the perennial youth of the old results from the willing adoption of traditional values by the young. In real communities, marked by factional politics and historical change, generational conflict is an inescapable fact of life and a locus for multiple forms of cultural and political division. In classical Greece, this may have been less the case in Sparta, the city on which the *Laws* is most closely based, than in Athens, the city that is addressed, however indirectly, in tragedy. In general, there is more automatic deference towards the old in oligarchic and collectivist societies than in democratic and individualistic societies,[15] and, in late-fifth-century Athens, political divisions deepened by increased wealth, empire, new forms of education, and the growing power of rhetoric were often cast in terms of a generation gap.[16] Thucydides' account of the decision to mount the Sicilian expedition of 415 provides a prime illustration of the way political conflict could be expressed in generational terms.

   Thucydides presents the decision through a debate in the Athenian assembly between two leaders, the older Nicias, who argues against the expedition from a position of conservative caution, and the younger Alcibiades, who favours it from a position of imperialist expansionism, as well as personal ambition.[17] Nicias casts the issue as a conflict between sensible, unassertive elders and heedless, disrespectful youth.

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[14] Cf. *Anacreonta* 53, where the speaker first regains youth by looking at the νέων ὅμιλον ('company of young men'), then himself 'takes wing' and dances.

[15] Falkner (1995: 152).

[16] Strauss (1993: ch. 5, esp. 145–8).

[17] On Alcibiades as the most notorious representative of unruly and insubordinate youth during that period, see Strauss (1993: 148–53).

Seeing this man's supporters sitting here, I feel alarmed. For my part, I call on the support of the older men among you. Do not be cowed, if you are sitting next to one of them, for fear of seeming weak if you do not vote to go to war. Do not, like them, fall foolishly in love with what is far off.     (Thuc. 6.13.1)

Nicias' words conjure up a dystopian image of communal division, in which men who are sitting together in the assembly are sharply opposed, and their interactions are unequal and uncivil. In his response, Alcibiades disingenuously links his own cause to the overcoming of this generational divide.

Do not be deterred by Nicias' arguments for non-intervention and his pitting of young against old; instead, in our accustomed way, like our fathers who when young, taking counsel with their elders, raised the city to its present condition, let us now in the same manner try to take it further.     (Thuc. 6.18.6).

Alcibiades' strategy is more successful than Nicias', with the result that old and young are united in the collective folly of the expedition (Thuc. 6.24.3).

This outcome reflects the deterioration of Athenian leadership since the death of Pericles fifteen years before. Alcibiades, Pericles' nephew, clearly manifests the detrimental self-seeking that, in Thucydides' view, characterized Pericles' successors, even if Thucydides portrays him less negatively than many of his other critics did (presenting Alcibiades as himself a victim of vicious rivalry and attributing the claim that Alcibiades was aiming at tyranny to public opinion). Nicias links Alcibiades' faulty advice to his excessive desire for financial gain and personal aggrandisement: 'Do not allow this person to shine brilliantly as an individual by putting the city in danger. Remember that such men harm the public interest as they spend their private wealth' (Thuc. 6.12.2). Alcibiades responds that his reputation for excess is due to envy, and his conspicuous outlays have brought glory to the city, while involving him in risks that justify his being *mê ison*, 'not on an equal footing' (Thuc. 6.16.4). Among these outlays, he includes performing the role of *chorêgos*, the funder of dramatic performances who represented, like the tragic actor, an outgrowth of the traditional chorus leader.

Numerous unsympathetic sources portray Alcibiades' behaviour in the role of *chorêgos* as aggressively self-promoting, arrogant, and abusive. They claim that he made eye-catching appearances in dazzling purple robes, used violence against his rivals, and showed disdain for the rules governing poetic competition. One accuser describes him as having struck a competing *chorêgos* during a dithyrambic contest while relying on his wealth and power to prevail nonetheless with the judges; the speaker goes on to draw an explicit connection between this and Alcibiades' other transgressive acts and the terrible things done by tragic protagonists.[18]

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[18] Andoc. 4.23. On Alcibiades as a *chorêgos*, see Wilson (2000: 148–55).

Thucydides' account of the Sicilian debate reveals, in the context of a historical narrative with notable tragic colouring,[19] the conceptual link between an excessively prominent individual and the disempowerment and intimidation of the old. This association makes the group of old men a natural identity for the tragic chorus, whose involvement with high-placed individuals may compromise their ability to dance, or to enjoy the participation in civic life that old men dancing symbolize. The rejuvenation experienced by old men who drink and dance makes age a fluid condition that varies in intensity as choral identity also does in general. The old man who dances is a paradox that matches the two-sided tragic chorus.

A number of critics have pointed out that older figures in tragedy are not always marginalized. They can be sidelined during war or slighted by disrespectful younger men, as in Nicias' account of the Athenian assembly, but they can also be treated as respected advisers and voices of communal authority. In a recent study, U. S. Dhuga shows in detail that tragic choruses representing old men are not necessarily ineffective or uninvolved in the action. Tellingly, Dhuga finds a strong correlation between choral vitality and good leadership: 'the greatest determinant of an old man chorus' activity or passivity is the chorus' relationship to the ruler.'[20] Within the mythic plot, a responsible political leader has the same effect as Dionysus at a symposium or choral revel.

In two tragedies with idealized Athenian settings and restrained, proto-democratic leaders, Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* and Euripides' *Heracleidae*, choruses of old men are active in the reception and defence of a suppliant who is also old. Their fictional identity enhances their role as sympathetic supporters of tragic protagonists whose personal misfortunes are amplified by the trials of old age.[21] At the same time, their sense of their age is also mitigated by their situation in a justly ordered city.

The chorus of the *Oedipus at Colonus* responds to Oedipus and his long sufferings with an ode on the irreversible horrors of getting older, a process in which the loss of youth first brings awareness of political strife.

> When youth has gone,
> With its blithe obliviousness,
> What trial does not follow?
> What ordeal is lacking?
> Envy, factions, strife, battles
> And slaughter. Then the hateful fate takes hold:

[19] Greenwood (1996: 38–9, 87, 98–107).

[20] Dhuga (2011: 9). See also the important observation that in plays with bad leaders 'old age appears in varying degrees to be a performance metaphor for inaction within political contexts that do not afford the choruses . . . strong advisory power' (p. 46).

[21] On the ordeal of old age as a tragic theme, especially in the plays of Euripides, see Falkner (1995: 169–71).

> Final, powerless, unsociable,
> Friendless old age . . .
>
> (Soph. *OC* 1229–37)

As citizens of Athens, however, they are themselves sheltered from the ill-effects of political conflict, and they experience a certain exemption from age that they locate in their city. Immediately after an ode in which they celebrate Colonus as a place of timeless beauty where 'revelling Dionysus always walks . . . nor do the choruses of the Muses shun it' (Soph. *OC* 678–9, 691–2), Creon appears. Antigone and Oedipus call on the chorus to live up to this praise with a guarantee of Oedipus' safety, and it gives a ringing answer: 'Fear not. You will have it. Even if I happen to be old | the strength of this land has not grown old' (Soph. *OC* 726–7). The chorus stands up to Creon and even tries to restrain him physically from kidnapping Antigone and going after Oedipus, until their younger king Theseus arrives to take over.

The elders of Colonus do not break the illusion of their fictional role, but they do display a physical energy linked to conditions under which old men might be expected to dance: Dionysus is present and the city is properly ordered. Among the many choruses that do break the dramatic illusion, the most famous is the contrasting chorus of Sophocles' earlier Oedipus play, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Theban elders who respond to mounting evidence of transgression involving the royal family—oracles circumvented, a murderer unpunished—by asking τί δεῖ με χορεύειν; ('Why should I dance?') (Soph. *OT* 896).

In the *Children of Heracles*, the chorus members combine a sympathetic response to old age with countervailing references to themselves as dancers.[22] At the centre of the play is an offstage battle, in which the forces of Athens defeat an army of Argive invaders who are pursuing the children of Heracles and their aged leader Iolaus. Iolaus insists on joining the battle despite his obvious frailty, and the chorus tries to deter him, insisting that 'there is no way that you can get your youth back again' (Eur. *Heracl.* 702–8). But, as we learn from a messenger's speech, Iolaus does recover his youth during the battle, in a miraculous recapitulation of Heracles' marriage to Hebe, the goddess of youth. Onstage, the chorus subtly re-enacts Iolaus' offstage rejuvenation through shifting references to choral song. Before the battle, the chorus members sing an ode in which they promise uncompromising defence of the suppliants (in terms that make them virtual fighters) and call on Athena's aid. To secure her support, they evoke the city's unflagging worship, embodied in dances of the young:

> For the honour of many sacrifices
> Is always yours, and the waning

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[22] On the self-referentiality of this chorus, see Henrichs (1996: 50–4).

> Day of each month never lacks
> Songs of the young, dances of choruses.
> On the windy hillside
> Sacred shouts rise up
> With the beating feet of girls.
>
> (Eur. *Heracl.* 777–83)

In a manner reminiscent of Alcman, the chorus of old men relies for support on the dancing of young girls. But when they have heard the news of the battle, they present themselves as dancers and associate the joys of the symposium with pleasure in a happy ending.

> For me dancing is sweet [ἐμοὶ χορὸς μὲν ἡδύς], when the clear
> Flute graces a feast,
> And Aphrodite might be there.
> There is pleasure to be had
> In seeing the good fortune
> Of friends who seemed to be without it.
>
> (Eur. *Heracl.* 892–7)

In Euripides' *Heracles*, a chorus of old men dwells even more openly on the dynamics of dancing and old age, while contending with a tyrannical ruler, Lycus, who has usurped the Theban throne in Heracles' absence and threatens Heracles' wife, children, and old father Amphitryon. They enter the scene emphatically not dancing: they lean on staves, they compare their steps to the foot-dragging of a yoked calf pulling a wagon uphill, and they hope to revive their former vigour only so they can support one another when they fall.[23] They compare themselves to ἰηλέμων γέρων ἀοιδός . . . πολιὸς ὄρνις ('old singer of laments, the grey bird') (the swan, who sings just before death) and label themselves ἔπεα μόνον ('nothing but words') (Eur. *HF* 110–12). When they try to defend Amphitryon, Lycus turns on them and points to their further marginalization under his regime: 'you old ones . . . remember: my tyranny has made you slaves' (Eur. *HF* 246–51); they know themselves to be οὐδέν ('nothing') (Eur. *HF* 314), unable to protect Amphitryon.

But, when Heracles unexpectedly returns, the chorus's tune begins to change. It performs an ode in which the first strophe and antistrophe are devoted to the awfulness and unfairness of old age, but in which the second strophe is a declaration that it will go on singing and dancing nonetheless.

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[23] Cf. Hecuba in Euripides' *Trojan Women*, who, in her initial monody, responds to her age and miserable circumstances by twisting her back and spine in a rocking motion that goes with crying out ἄτας . . . ἀχορεύτους ('undanceable troubles') (Eur. *Tro.* 116–21). Battezzatto (2005: 80–1). Cf. also the chorus of old men in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, which similarly describes itself as weak and dependent on staves (Aesch. *Ag.* 72–82). See Dhuga (2011: 75–128) for a thorough comparison of the choruses of the *Heracles* and the *Agamemnon* as old men contending with non-Athenian, tyrannical rulers.

I will not stop joining
The Graces with the Muses,
The sweetest yokemates.
May I never be bereft of music!
May I never lack for garlands!
Old singer that I am,
I still cry out to Mnemosyne,
Still I sing a victory song
For Heracles,
With wine-giving Dionysus,
With the song of the seven-stringed tortoise shell
And the Libyan flute.
Not yet will I stop honouring
The Muses, who set me dancing.

(Eur. *HF* 673–86)

The opportunity to sing a victory song for Heracles energizes these old men and makes them lifelong singers and dancers.[24] In the final antistrophe, their earlier swan song is recalled, but it too has been transformed and rejuvenated: instead of a lament, it is now a paean, a song of thanksgiving, equated with the paean sung by a perennial chorus of young women, the Delian maidens.[25] The chorus's next ode is performed while Heracles defeats Lycus inside the house. It announces that its songs have changed; it wants to dance; and it calls for choruses throughout Thebes, for βέβακ' ἄναξ ὁ καινός, ὁ δὲ παλαίτερος κρατεῖ ('the new ruler is gone, and the former one is in power') (Eur. *HF* 769–70). The play is only half over, and the terrible next chapter in which Heracles goes mad and kills his family is still to come; the chorus will soon revert to laments or τίν' Ἄιδα χορόν ('some dance of Hades') (Eur. *HF* 1026–7).[26] But, in a self-referential move that brings closure to the first stage of the action, they show how the right (time-honoured and legitimate) leader allows old men to defeat time, recover their youth, and dance.

The Athenians who embarked on the Sicilian expedition paid a harsh price for their willingness to be led by Alcibiades. Thucydides labels the subsequent defeat the most wretched in Greek history and a case of total destruction: 'infantry, fleet, and everything else, all was lost, and of the many who went, few returned home [ἀπονόστησαν]' (Thuc. 7.87.6). Critics have noted the epic flavour of the verb used here for returning home, *aponosteo*, which is related

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[24] On epinician associations throughout the choral odes of the *Heracles*, see Swift (2010: 123–33).

[25] On the significance of the Delian maidens here, and the self-presentation of this chorus generally, see Henrichs (1996: 54–62).

[26] This is pointedly paradoxical, since dancing is antithetical to Hades, which is labelled ἀνυμέναιος ἄλυρος ἄχορος (wedding-song-less, lyreless, chorusless) by the chorus of *Oedipus at Colonus* (Soph. *OC* 1221–2). On the theme of 'negated music' in tragedy, see Segal (1993).

to the noun *nostos*, a key Homeric term for homecoming, the ultimate goal and reward of heroic endeavour.[27] *Nostos* is also, of course, the root of the modern word 'nostalgia', which was first coined in the seventeenth century to indicate a longing for home rather than a longing for past time such as might be inspired by political decline or a burdensome old age.[28] But temporal and spatial dislocation can go hand in hand, as is shown by the post-Periclean Athenians, who live into a time of decline, in which they are carried off to a faraway place, never to return. This connection unites the two types of male chorus found in extant tragedy: old men, such as those already discussed, and younger men of military age, who figure in two plays of Sophocles dealing with the Troy legend, *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*.

The interconnectedness of old age, nostalgia, failed leadership, and lost homecoming can be seen in another play with a chorus of old men, Aeschylus' *Persians*, our earliest surviving tragedy and one with only two actors and an especially prominent chorus.[29] The Persian elders have been left at home while all the younger men have gone to war against Greece, but they do not suffer because of their age. They are highly respected guardians (Aesch. *Pers.* 4), and they never mention the physical debilities or other humiliations of old age. They suffer because of their concern for the absent army, experiencing first an anxious longing for those who have gone, then a wrenching grief when news arrives of the devastating defeat at Salamis.[30] Their main role is to lament their departed compatriots. And yet, their suffering is nonetheless an effect of the passage of time. The Persian defeat results from a generational shift: the rash young Xerxes has taken over from his father Darius and led his subjects to their deaths.

The chorus spells out the implications of this change in Persian leadership after they and the queen have briefly reawakened the past by raising the ghost of Darius. When the ghost departs, after decrying the excesses of his heedless, overreaching son, the chorus sings a nostalgic lament for Darius' reign.

> *O popoi*, what a great and excellent
> Life of civic order [πολισσονόμου βιοτᾶς] was ours, when the old
> all sufficing undamaging invincible
> godlike King Darius ruled the land!

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[27] Allison (1997: 512–15); Greenwood (2006: 88). Rood (1998: 242–6) points out that Thucydides' usage should be understood as reflecting the broad *nostos* tradition, as seen in tragedy and in Herodotus' *Histories*, rather than as a specific allusion to Homer.

[28] On the history of the term, see Boym (2002: 3–4); Matt (2007: 469–71).

[29] First produced in 472, *The Persians* pre-dates Thucydides and may well have influenced his reference to the failed *nostos* of most of the Athenians, as Rood (1998: 246) suggests.

[30] On the chorus's enactment of longing for the departed army as a prominent form of action in the play, see Hopman (2009).

First we proved ourselves glorious on military campaigns,
and then a system of laws [νομί(σ)ματα] steadfast as towers, regulated everything (?)
Our men returned home again from wars
successfully, uninjured and unharmed.

(Aesch. *Pers.* 852–61, trans. E. Hall)

Despite textual and interpretative problems in this passage, it is clear that
the reign of Darius is presented as a time of good government and the rule of
law, similar to the idealized past Athens of the *Heracleidae* and the *Oedipus at
Colonus*. In a particularly pointed contrast, Darius' superior leadership is
identified with the successful *nostos* of all of his followers. Furthermore, for
the chorus, Darius' reign was more congenial simply because it occurred when
they were young. When the ghost first appears, he addresses them as Πέρσαι
γεραιοί ('old men of Persia') but also as ἥλικές θ' ἥβης ἐμῆς ('agemates of
my youth'), stressing their close bond and chronological parity (Aesch. *Pers.*
681–2). Closeness in age is a common feature of non-dramatic choruses and
one of the factors that promotes equal relations among their members and
between their members and their leaders.[31] For the Persian elders, the reign of
Darius better matches the ideal of chorality, both because Darius was an
inherently better leader than Xerxes and because he was less sharply distin-
guished from those who followed him. Their present laments are not explicitly
set against past dancing, but they do recall with regret an earlier, better time
when, in the prime of life and under a better leader, they went out to fight and
returned unharmed.

This image of Darius is ahistorical in general terms and specifically contra-
dicts the account of his defeat at Marathon given elsewhere in the play.[32] But it
is rhetorically effective: the nostalgia of the *Persians'* old chorus accentuates
the dysfunction of Xerxes' regime by opposing it to an internal Persian past
that (however improbably) echoes its external present vanquisher, thriving,
democratic Athens. The chorus's relationship to this idealized past helps to
naturalize the oddly hybrid tenor of their laments, which blend bitter expres-
sions of personal loss with characterizations of Xerxes' regime that sound like
Athenian patriotic rhetoric.

The Persian chorus condemns Xerxes for his failure to assure the *nostos* of
his men. In their long central lament, the chorus members emphasize his
agency by dwelling on his name:

Xerxes led them away, *popoi*
Xerxes destroyed them, *totoi,*

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[31] Calame (1997: 27–9).
[32] Cf. Aesch. *Pers.* 244. For further discussion of 'the recuperation and idealization of Dareios,
as perfect king-and-father, master-and-god', see Griffith (1998: 57–62).

Sheila Murnaghan

Xerxes wrong-headedly drove everything on
in seafaring ships.

(Aesch. *Pers.* 550–4, trans. E. Hall)

They commemorate their lost countrymen in detail, causing many of their names to be sounded, first in a long introductory expression of concern (Aesch. *Pers.* 1–64), then in their encounter with Xerxes, in which they require him to specify the men he has lost (Aesch. *Pers.* 955–1006).

In the *Persians'* choral account of a justly doomed military disaster, champions of the subordinates deprived of *nostos* have a prominent voice. In contrast, the epic prototype of the *nostos* plot, the *Odyssey*, presents its story through a narrative voice aligned with Odysseus, the leader who returns from war in solitary triumph. Concern for the fate of Odysseus' men is registered in the poem, but effectively neutralized. The narrative opens with a pre-emptive claim that Odysseus tried to bring his men home, but they sealed their own fate through reckless folly (Hom. *Od.* 1.5–9). At the end of the poem, the father of a dead suitor protests Odysseus' wholesale elimination of all rivals, both the men he took to Troy and lost and the slaughtered suitors (Hom. *Od.* 24.426–9). The result is a revolt by the suitor's relatives, but this is quickly squelched through a show of power from Odysseus followed by a truce imposed by Athena. The poem ends with an ἔκλησις ('amnesty') (Hom. *Od.* 24.485), and the lost companions are officially forgotten along with the dead suitors. Odysseus' failure as a leader is revealed, but he is exempted from any consequences.[33]

The choral form of tragedy allows the ordinary men who follow a prominent leader to be heard directly, and Sophocles' two surviving Trojan War plays make use of that opportunity.[34] The chorus of Salaminian sailors attached to Ajax in the *Ajax* and the chorus of sailors attached to Neoptolemus in the *Philoctetes* are both strikingly concerned with *nostos*.[35] When the chorus of the *Ajax* realizes that Ajax has dealt with his humiliation by killing himself, their first words are ὤμοι ἐμῶν νόστων ('There goes my homecoming!') (Soph. *Aj.* 900). Throughout the play, they lament their dislocation from Greece to

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[33] On the leader's failure to save the men who depend on him as a pervasive theme of both Homeric epics, see Haubold (2000).

[34] So, evidently, did Aeschylus' lost *Myrmidons*, which presented Achilles' withdrawal from the army and decision to return as told in *Iliad* 9 and 16–18. Surviving fragments suggest that the Myrmidons who formed the chorus were sharply critical of Achilles for his selfish inactivity, accusing him of betrayal (frs 131, 132 Radt). His response was a stark silence (famous in antiquity for its dramatic effect), which would have dramatized the complete estrangement of chorus and leader; this may have been overcome by the end of the play through shared lament for the death of Patroclus. On the play and the trilogy of which it formed part, see Michelakis (2002: 22–57).

[35] This concern with the homecoming of ordinary sailors of is one of several ways in which the play resonates with Thucydides' account of Athens in the last stages of the Peloponnesian War. Greenwood (2006: 98–107).

Troy, which is closely tied to the destructive passage of time.[36] In one ode, they contrast the unchanging nature of their near-Athenian home with the wearing length of their exile:

> Oh glorious Salamis, I know that you
> Still stand, sea-stroked, favoured by gods,
> Prominent for all to see,
> While for me time has grown old [παλαιὸς ἀφ' οὗ χρόνος]
> As miserable beyond counting, I live on,
> Stuck on the grassy ground of Ida
> Worn down by time...
>
> (Soph. *Aj.* 596–605)

Like old men who feel their age, warriors on campaign are cut off from the joys of the symposium; this exclusion from festivity creates a significant contrast with the performers playing the sailors, who were dancing in Athens and were exempt from military service in order to do so.[37] In a later ode, the sailors curse the man who invented war and forced them and countless others into scenarios of proliferating trouble, πόνοι πρόγονοι πόνων ('griefs generating griefs'). 'It was he who denied me the delicious fellowship of garlands and deep cups, the sweet clanging of flutes...' (Soph. *Aj.* 1192–1210).

The chorus of the *Philoctetes* is distinguished by its especially tight integration into the action of the play. The sailors are closely identified with their leader Neoptolemus and offer little in the way of detached commentary or general reflection. Neoptolemus is portrayed as a young man finding his moral compass, faced with choices that will define the relationship of the younger generation to the older: as he struggles to live up to his dead father Achilles, he has to choose between two living father figures, the wronged Philoctetes and the devious Odysseus. Following Neoptolemus' lead, the chorus supports his initial choice to enact Odysseus' scheme to lure Philoctetes from Lemnos to Troy (which cannot be conquered without him); this requires pretending that Neoptolemus will take Philoctetes home to Greece. The chorus speaks up forcefully, if duplicitously, to urge Neoptolemus to fulfil Philoctetes' desire for homecoming (Soph. *Phil.* 507–18). Later, when Neoptolemus and Philoctetes have gone inside the cave and the chorus is alone on stage, they sing an ode in which they express compassion for Philoctetes and end by declaring that Neoptolemus will take him home (Soph. *Phil.* 719–29).

This passage is a critical puzzle, since the chorus is well aware that Neoptolemus' promise to Philoctetes is a ruse and he intends to take

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[36] Tragedies with Trojan settings are 'specifically concerned with the *loss* of spatial coordinates for the chorus' (Goldhill 1996: 246).

[37] Wilson (2000: 79).

Philoctetes in the opposite direction, to Troy.[38] A possible solution stems from
the observation that the chorus seems here to disengage from the immediate
dramatic moment: they freely imagine an ending that fits better with their
sense of justice than with the exigencies of Odysseus' plot, and they speak from
a longer perspective, looking beyond the immediate aftermath of the action, to
the time when the war will be over.[39] They take a more farsightful view of
Neoptolemus as well, suggesting the fundamental decency that will later cause
him to abandon his trick and honour his promise to Philoctetes, so that the
intervention of Heracles is required to get Philoctetes to Troy.

As the actors prepare to leave for Troy, the chorus caps the action with
another premature reference to homecoming: 'let us all set off together | once
we have prayed to the salt-sea Nymphs | to come as saviours of *nostos* [νόστου
σωτῆρας]' (Soph. *Phil.* 1471). These speeches may be odd from the standpoint
of dramatic construction, but the sailors are fulfilling their identity as a chorus
both by situating the play's action within a longer span of time and by
foregrounding the goal of homecoming. *Nostos* is an appropriate concern
for them both as Homeric warriors and as choral performers, since *nostos* is
an important theme in choral lyric as well as in epic. In epinician poetry,
successful *nostos* is the occasion of performance: the song marks and facilitates
the victor's return home from the games.[40] In a play that ends with its
characters' stories unconcluded, the chorus gestures towards a stronger kind
of closure—both an end to Philoctetes' mythic adventures and a return from
the realm of myth to the time and place of performance.

Modern critics sometimes judge the choruses of the *Ajax* and the *Philoctetes*
negatively, charging them with short-sighted self-concern, as if the tragic
chorus has an obligation to be self-effacing and to direct our attention and
sympathy only to the more important and compelling actors. One of Sopho-
cles' most sensitive interpreters describes the chorus of the *Ajax* as 'simple-
minded and self-centred' and the chorus of the *Philoctetes* as having an
attitude of 'weak pity and strong self-interest'.[41] But those choruses deserve
to be read more positively as speaking for the many who are sacrificed to the
ambitions of the glorious few.[42] Their advocacy is more muted than that of the
Persian elders; their self-seeking leaders are Greek heroes, not a barbarian
despot, and they are themselves, like all choruses, destined to survive. But they
too are living up to their identity as a chorus, making a claim for communal
well-being and reflecting, in their shifting powers as both characters and
dancers, the performance of their leaders, who fail when they leave the chorus
too far behind.

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[38] For a survey of possible solutions, see Gardiner (1987: 31–6).
[39] Kitzinger (2008: 106–8).
[40] Crotty (1982: 104–38); Kurke (1991: 15–34); Rutherford (1997: 49).
[41] Winnington-Ingram (1980: 23, 294 n. 44).        [42] So Gardiner (1987: 76).

# Choruses, Ancient and Modern

Edited by
JOSHUA BILLINGS, FELIX BUDELMANN,
AND FIONA MACINTOSH

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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