

THE TRAGIC CHORUS AS A DELIBERATIVE BODY?

With this *festschrift* we honor Alexander Gavrilov as a distinguished scholar and prime organizer of a vigorous *équipe* of Hyperboreans. But I take a particularly personal pleasure in contributing, since A. K. (as I have become accustomed to call him) made it possible for me to connect the three corners of a personal and professional triangle that began to take shape almost exactly one century ago, when my paternal grandmother traveled from Riga to St. Petersburg (to her, always “Petrograd”) and enrolled at the *Bestuzhevski Kursi* for women – women were not yet admitted to the university. Her teachers included M. I. Rostovtzeff, who eventually made his way to Yale, my employer since 1972. I first met A. K. in 1991, when he took part in a session of the American Philological Association devoted to “Classics in East Europe” organized by Gregory Nagy, the Association’s president that year. A friendship immediately took root, and I have found A. K. a most gracious ξένοσ in St. Petersburg several times since then.

I will here seek to demonstrate, as I have elsewhere, but with different specific readings as targets, that some Hellenists have mistakenly assimilated an aspect of the real world of classical Athens to its tragic drama.¹ I start with a demonstration, uncontroversial I believe, that the deliberative bodies of Athens were heterogeneous in ways participants and spectators clearly experienced. Then I remark on an onstage, notional, audience – the tragic chorus. My conclusion will be that the basic homogeneity of the tragic chorus was incompatible, both in the abstract, constitutional sense, and in terms of immediate sensory experience, with the heterogeneity of mass bodies of the Athenian democracy. For that reason, among others, the tragedians inevitably chose means other than the chorus to depict democratic, or proto-democratic, procedures.

Isocrates, advertising (as often) his own craft, termed the deliberative process within a single man a sort of rhetorical process,² perhaps not an

¹ This article substantially reproduces an address I gave at the 2009 FIEC conference in Berlin. I am very grateful to Nicholas Baechle for his comments.

² Isocrates, *Antidosis* 256: μετὰ [τούτου τοῦ] λόγου καὶ περὶ τῶν ἀμφισβητησίμων ἀγωνιζόμεθα καὶ περὶ τῶν ἀγνοουμένων σκοπούμεθα: ταῖς γὰρ πίστεσιν, αἷς τοὺς ἄλλους λέγοντες πείθομεν, ταῖς αὐταῖς ταύταις βουλευόμενοι χρώμεθα, καὶ ῥητορικοὺς μὲν καλοῦμεν τοὺς ἐν τῷ πλήθει λέγειν δυναμένους, εὐβούλους δὲ νομίζομεν, οἵτινες ἂν αὐτοὶ πρὸς αὐτοὺς ἄριστα περὶ τῶν πραγμάτων διαλεχθῶσιν.

entirely absurd claim. Aristotle comes close to saying that rhetoric vanishes in symbouleutic deliberation or if only one man is judging,³ and for once the philosopher might be further from the mark than his vain, intellectual inferior. Only in an imaginary world or a despotism masquerading as some form of democracy do political assemblies or juries often reach unanimous decisions: A. K. may recall votes taken by the Supreme Soviet. In the ἐπιτάφιος, Thucydides makes Pericles attribute an astonishing comity to the Athenians' dealings with each other,⁴ but he is speaking not of deliberative bodies, but of the temper of daily life, and the fundamentally Panglossian genre of ἐπιτάφιοι demands unqualified, even incredible, praise of the city. By contrast, Athenians came to courts and assemblies fully expecting conflict. Obviously, principals in the ἀγών were there to argue, but there were also bound to be disagreements, often expressed in shouts, among the men present to cast votes, and even among the spectators.⁵ Historians and writers on rhetoric seldom address deficiencies in the ὁμόνοια of deliberative bodies; rarer still is their advice on how to cope with a heterogeneous audience. Members of the élite, these writers evidently found detailed attention to unruly crowds distasteful, and the practical challenge posed by the heterogeneity of the ὄχλος intractable.

It is worth referring to a few well-known scraps of explicit evidence before moving on to the indirect. Thucydides' account of Cleon's speech in the Mytilene debate (3, 38, 6) refers to a portion – presumably it was a majority – of Athenians in attendance at the ἐκκλησία who lacked the capacity to address the meeting. In the debate on the Sicilian expedition, Thucydides represents Nicias as appealing to the older citizens (6, 13, 1; 24, 4). In the *Phaedrus* Plato has Socrates claim that all sentient beings above the level of animal retain some memory of reality from their souls' brief ride in the region above the firmament, and that successful rhetoric is guided by knowledge of the soul.⁶ Aristotle's advice in the *Rhetoric* is directed to speakers, but in a long section of Book II he comes close to explicit acknowledgment of differences within the audience: "One great advantage that a speaker finds in maxims stems from the want of

³ *Rhet.* 1354 b 29 – 1355 a 1, but cf. 1414 a 11–14.

⁴ 2, 37, 2: ἐς τὴν πρὸς ἀλλήλους τῶν καθ' ἡμέραν ἐπιτηδεύματων ὑποψίαν, οὐ δι' ὀργῆς τὸν πέλας, εἰ καθ' ἡδονὴν τι δρᾶ, ἔχοντες, οὐδὲ ἀζημίους μὲν, λυπηράς δὲ τῇ ὄψει ἀχθηδόνας προστιθέμενοι.

⁵ V. Bers, "Dicastic *thorubos*," in P. Cartledge and D. Harvey (eds.), *Crux* (London 1985) 1–15; A. Lanni, "Spectator Sport or Serious Politics? οἱ περιεσθηκότες and the Athenian Lawcourts," *JHS* 117 (1997) 183–189; J. Tacon, "Ecclesiastic *Thorubos*: Interventions, Interruptions, and Popular Involvement in the Athenian assembly," *G&R* (Second series) 48 (2001) 173–192.

⁶ All humans have, at least, beheld τὰ ὄντα: *Phaedrus* 249 e 4 – 250 a 2. Rhetoric as soul directed: *Phaedrus* 270 a – 271 d.

intelligence in his hearers, who love to hear him succeed in expressing as a universal truth the opinions that they hold themselves about particular cases” (1395 b 1–3). Since Aristotle has already said (1395 a 3) that “the use of maxims is appropriate only to elderly men,” he must have supposed that older men in the audience would react differently from younger men. Advising on the use of enthymemes, Aristotle remarks that “educated men lay down broad general principles; uneducated men argue from common knowledge and draw obvious conclusions.”⁷ Aristotle nowhere suggests that there exist deliberative bodies highly uniform in respect of age, experience, and intelligence.

But of course we do not need to rely on discursive treatments of rhetoric in estimating the uniformity of juries and assemblies. The rules governing attendance virtually guaranteed there would be a mixture of economic interests and ages. The βουλή and δικαστήρια admitted citizens thirty years of age and older; minimum age for the ἐκκλησία was eighteen. The institution of ecclesiastic pay in the 390s must have attracted a greater portion than before of men for whom a few obols were not beneath contempt.⁸ The poor predominated in both bodies, but “predominated” does not mean “monopolized,” and chances are good that a mixture of economic profiles was common. The geographical distribution of ecclesiasts and dicasts from across Attica is much harder to determine, and its influence on voting quite obscure in normal circumstances: enemy occupation of one’s farm could be expected to powerfully influence a citizen’s vote, but normally the issue at hand would have lacked that sort of differential impact. Still, it must have made some difference that juries and assemblies were not entirely dominated by residents of the ἄστυ, the large size of Attica notwithstanding.⁹

Aside from more or less persistent age and wealth differences among ecclesiasts and dicasts, there must have also been random difference among Athenians assembled to vote on matters of great importance. Cleon’s scolding of the Athenians as θεαταὶ μὲν τῶν λόγων, ἀκροαταὶ δὲ τῶν ἔργων might be Thucydides’ own highly tendentious formulation (3, 38, 34), not Cleon’s own words, but we meet similar complaints in a fictional speech, Gorgias’ *Defense of Palamedes* (DK B 11 a 22–23) and in Demosthenes (4, 46–47). Law court speakers often ask jurors acquainted with a man involved in

⁷ “We must not, therefore, start from any and every accepted opinion, but only from those we have defined – those accepted by our judges or by those whose authority they recognize; and there must ... be no doubt in the minds of most, if not all, of our judges that the opinions put forward really are of this sort” (*Rhet.* 1395 b 30 – 1396 a 2).

⁸ M. H. Hansen, *The Athenian Assembly* (Oxford 1987) 46–48.

⁹ At Plato (or [Plato]) *Alcibiades II* 114 b 6 ff., Socrates makes the dubious argument that persuasion of one ecclesiast and of all ecclesiasts is a single activity.

a case to communicate their knowledge to other jurors.¹⁰ Differences of opinion and point of view make for boisterous meetings, and my guess is that an Athenian associated deliberation in popular courts with contentious uproar. More optimistically, making explicit reference to audiences at non-political events, Aristotle (*Politics* 1281 b 7–11) compares a mass of men judging to a sort of composite being: “...each part of the crowd can have a portion of excellence and wisdom, and as the crowd of assembled men becomes one man, with many feet and hands, so it can become in respect of moral character and understanding. Therefore the crowd actually judges musical and poetic works better; various men have various parts [of understanding], all together have all parts.” This multiplicity of perception and reaction was also likely to have been manifested in a spectrum of disparate facial expressions, gestures, and sounds.

The most persistently puzzling component of Attic tragedy, the chorus, a *sine qua non* even after the suppression of the democracy and the replacement of amateur χορευταί by professionals, is by contrast with real deliberative bodies, a fundamentally *homogeneous* quasi-audience. The chorus’s own rhetoric, its performance technique, and its own susceptibility to the rhetoric given the actors, rule out, as I see it, some readings of tragedy currently enjoying wide acceptance. The chorus’s function was a matter of explicit controversy at least as far back as Pratinas *TGF* 3, and the topic makes very brief, (and contradictory) appearances in the prescriptive remarks of Aristotle’s *Poetics* (1456 a 24–27) and the pseudoaristotelian *Problemata* (922 b 26). Changes in the style and magnitude of this component of tragedy are of course manifest in the texts. The chorus has, moreover, been brought into the enduring debate over the relation of tragedy to politics and to ritual, a controversy kept heated to a vigorous boil among Anglophone, or at least Anglographic, scholars. I cite (without the clutter of bibliographical detail) well-known recent publications by, *inter alios*, C. Calame, S. Goldhill, J. Griffin, John Gould, P. Rhodes, Peter Wilson, S. Scullion, and F. Budelmann, and long before them, by the Cambridge ritualists, Pickard-Cambridge, and T. B. L. Webster, who in his revision of Pickard-Cambridge’s *Dithyramb, Tragedy, and Comedy* fathered the notorious *volte face* on its author.

From our earliest to our latest attestations, the chorus is protean and frustrates easy generalization. One feature, however, appears stable throughout, from the *Persians* to the last plays of Sophocles and Euripides, and perhaps even the *Rhesus*, deviant as that play is: the chorus is a body that, by definition and in fact, sings and dances as a group, or as group that (infrequently) divides for short intervals. I have in mind the chorus *per se*, singing and dancing, not, for instance, the single trimeter lines that

¹⁰ Bers (n. 5) 12.

the twelve χορευταί of the *Agamemnon* speak to express their individual opinion when they hear Agamemnon screaming from inside the palace,¹¹ nor the κορυφαίος speaking trimster. Although there has been much relevant work in the forty years since its publication, M. Kaimio's monograph¹² remains the definitive statement on the collectivity and individuality of the choral group. In Aeschylus, she writes, "The chorus is represented as a very homogeneous mass," and "Aeschylus' usage of the number reflects the function of the chorus as the community surrounding the actors and feeling the consequences of the actors' behavior and decision" (p. 240–241). Feeling consequences, I would stress, does not in itself constitute making important decisions. In Sophocles, "Each member of the chorus is an individual, but the reactions of these individuals in the situations of the drama are homogeneous" (p. 243). Kaimio does use the word "heterogeneous" to describe Euripides' chorus, but immediately adds important qualifications: "[T]he feelings expressed by the chorus more often reflect the feelings of the actors than characterize the chorus as human beings capable of an independent way of thought" (p. 244). She goes on to remark that "If the poet wishes to express the different reactions and opinions of different people, the conventional chorus of drama is not the vehicle best suited to this purpose" (p. 245). Where there are differences within the chorus, we should add, they are far from significant in their effect on the plot.¹³ Finally, Kaimio observes (p. 245–246) that Euripides "points to the new era of ἐμβόλιμα," a shift, in my view, tantamount to a deracination of the chorus as an organic part of the tragedy in the enactment of a μῦθος.

Two recent contributions relevant to my theme deserve attention. In "Deianeira Deliberates," Edith Hall describes the βουλή as a government organ unremittingly at work, and she points out that the βουλευταί currently in office are reported to have "sat together in privileged seats at the front of the theatre to watch characters like Deianeira attempt deliberation."¹⁴ Then she adds, "But the tragedians' interest in the mechanics and psychology of decision-making was perhaps fed even more by the real-life experience of their Athenian citizen spectators in a place where they were always entitled to gather and not only deliberate but decide on policy – the Assembly."

¹¹ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1346–1371.

¹² M. Kaimio, *The Chorus of Greek Drama within the Light of the Person and Number Used*, Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum 46 (Helsinki 1970). Summary at 239–247.

¹³ In his work devoted to the Euripidean chorus, M. Hose offers this generalization: "Der tragische Chor agiert stets en bloc, er stellt eine homogene Gruppe dar" (*Studien zum Chor bei Euripides* I, Beiträge zur Altertumskunde 10 [Stuttgart 1990] 16).

¹⁴ "Deianeira deliberates: precipitate decision-making and *Trachiniae*", in S. Goldhill and E. Hall (eds.), *Sophocles and the Greek Tradition* (Cambridge 2009) 69–98, esp. 91–92.

She then describes Deianeira's catastrophic deliberations in Sophocles' *Trachiniae* as akin to the *δυσβουλία* of the *ἐκκλησία* disparaged by Cleon in the Mytilene debate. Hall's reading links an individual character's experience to the process of large decision-making groups (her phrase: "fed by real-life experience"), an interpretive step that prompts me to raise some questions: Given the gestalt of Attic tragedy, an amalgam *inter alia* of the visual, the musical, and the specifically linguistic, would a citizen be likely to think – even preconsciously – of the chorus as a stand-in, not just for his own democratic city in a general sense, but for its organs, the *βουλή*, *ἐκκλησία*, *δικαστήρια*? Would he agree, if asked, that a *mimēsis* of those bodies' collective activities had been achieved, or at least attempted, by the chorus? Hearing and watching Deianeira, would he recall gruesomely bad decisions dictated by emotions in the *ἐκκλησία*, or rather would he think of disasters in his own or other's households? My answer: predominantly, and perhaps only, the latter. Hall attributes significance to the seating arrangement in the Theater of Dionysus: the *βουλή* seated as a body, up front and relatively close to the orchestra and playing area. Now, I am generally skeptical of interpretations that connect experiences that on their face involve experiences far more different than alike, but *if* seating matters, it must make a difference that the dramatic chorus was, unlike the dithyrambic group, not the representative of any one tribe; rather, it was drawn – *χορευταί*, *κορυφαῖος*, trainers, *ἀδλητής* – from the entire city.

An article by K. Hawthorne¹⁵ has the merit of acknowledging, from the outset, an argument put forward by John Gould and others that the notion of choral authority is very hard to sustain for a chorus made up of women, especially foreign slave women. Hawthorne leaves to one side plays with status-marginalized choruses and restricts his argument to three Sophoclean plays, the *Ajax*, *Antigone*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*. That approach allows him to offer a more credible argument for the chorus as a partial stand-in for fully enfranchised Athenian citizens. Hawthorne puts it this way: "A free, Greek, male chorus possesses a greater cultural potential for physical or political action than the typical marginal chorus, and thus it might be expected to own some measure of socio-political authority in relation to the characters. Specifically, even when silent, such a chorus may take on the role of rhetorical audience for the characters who act as social performers inside the dramatic world." In explanation of his term "rhetorical audience," he writes that it is "an observer of words and action, but in fact the reason for those words and actions... [A]s characters

¹⁵ K. Hawthorne, "The Chorus as Rhetorical Audience: A Sophoclean *AGÓN* Pattern," *AJPh* 130 (2009) 25–46. I wish to acknowledge Prof. Hawthorne's response, *per litteras*, to the use I made of his work in my FIEC lecture. I hope to explore our difference of opinion at greater length in future work.

in tragedy maneuver and pursue their discursive goals, they may not only argue about issues among themselves, but also perform to the members of the chorus as present *representatives* [my emphasis] of the community. Thus through the choral presence, a playwright can create a *mimēsis* of public performance dynamics, versions of which were seen and felt in Athenian political life in the Assembly and the courts, where a relatively few vocal actors played out their conflicts before, to, and through the medium of a watching public.” (27–28). Hawthorne’s is a promising approach, but I believe there are obstacles to accepting it, at least as the basis of a general description of the chorus.

Commenting on the *Ajax*, Hawthorne makes keen observations on the quarrel of Teucer and Menelaos, but being a scrupulous scholar, he notes (p. 31) the chorus’ discomfort with being invited to “rebuff” Menelaos, and that the chorus scolds Teucer for his biting words. We are hearing, I would say, a notably diffident *vox populi*. In any case, we must not forget that the issue of burial is at the end resolved by a single Greek leader, Odysseus. The chorus of the *Antigone* might seem to have a male chorus closely resembling a sovereign citizen body, even though the men are Thebans, not Athenians – not even Salaminians. Still, Hawthorne could argue that the chorus’ words in the *parodos* suggest a formal consultation with, if not an Athenian ἐκκλησία, at least a γερονσία: Creon has, I note, summoned a γερόντων λέσχην (160). In his *Lexicon Sophocleum*,¹⁶ F. Ellendt glosses λέσχη as ἀγορά or συνέδριον, terms at least not incompatible with the notion of authentic deliberation. But the chorus are timorous in Creon’s presence (509) until he asks their advice, some five hundred lines later (1099), a very long time in a tragedy, and of course too late to avert the catastrophe. In the *Oedipus at Colonus* Sophocles uses a chorus that, like the chorus of the *Antigone*, deviates from the Athenian assembly in consisting only of old men; still, the Athenian setting might have suggested, or reinforced, the audience’s impression that the chorus resembled the ἐκκλησία of the real city. It might bolster Hawthorne’s argument that Oedipus address the group as ἄνδρες τῆσδε δημοῦχοι χθονός (1348), and perhaps δῆμος is an oblique allusion to the word in its technical sense as a synonym for ἐκκλησία. As Hawthorne observes, the old men attempt physical intervention to rescue Antigone from Creon, but members of the real deliberative bodies of the city are never reported as doing any such a thing. Most important, the chorus not only defers to Theseus, but are told that he was the sole witness of the apotheosis and that he knows things that are to be passed on only to a chain of individuals, not to the city at large (1530–1532). By implication, no man outside that chain will ever be able by force of πειθῶ in the democracy of the distant future to extract the full story. Thus even in Hawthorne’s three

¹⁶ *Editio Altera Emendata* (Berlin 1872).

examples, the strongest to be found in extant tragedy, the playwright locates authority far from the proposed “rhetorical audience.”

We should also consider how the dramatic tradition affects audience expectation. The Aeschylean precedents point to a wide gap between the chorus and political sovereignty, though the playwright has teased the Athenians with allusions to democracy. The *Suppliants* has an astounding anachronism: the Argive king defers to a citizen assembly, but that body is not depicted on stage. Its vote is, remarkably, unanimous (607),¹⁷ but the audience knows that fact only from a narrator. In his article, “Aeschylus, the Past and the Present,” P. Vidal-Naquet rightly insists that in the *Suppliants* of Aeschylus “the chorus cannot be said to present the people.”¹⁸ In Hawthorne’s best example, the *Oedipus at Colonus*, the chorus is, as Vidal-Naquet points out in another article, “a fraction of the political assembly,” and Theseus “is careful to make that distinction.”¹⁹ We may add that Creon names the Areopagus as the Athenian body with the authority to reject a parricide (947–949). These are all significant instances of constitutional precision. The point would not be lost on Athenian citizens in the audience.

Another reason for my skepticism about linking the tragic chorus to Athenian courts, Council, or Assembly is the persisting heterogeneity of truly democratic political and judicial bodies. In Homer, the massed voice of the army shouts its assent, and when there is dissidence in ranks, it takes the unlovely form of Thersites (the earliest voice of the proletariat in Soviet accounts), who speaks without the scepter in his hand, hence without authority to speak. The opinion of the Spartan assembly was determined βῶη καὶ οὐ ψήφῳ (Thuc. 1, 87, 2). In Athens under the radical democracy, things were different. The sovereign Athenian δῆμος consisted of individual πολῖται who, when they went to see tragedy, could not have perceived the chorus in performance as it sang in near or perfect unison and danced in patterned movement as a plausible *mimēsis* of its own deliberative bodies. The tragic poets could grant their choruses neither the freedom of effective polyphony nor the authority to decide an outcome – unless its deliberation was offstage and later reported, which never happens.²⁰

¹⁷ See H. F. Johansen and E. W. Whittle, *Aeschylus: The Suppliants* (Copenhagen 1980) ad loc.

¹⁸ English translation by J. Lloyd in P. Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy* (New York 1990) 249–272, esp. 257.

¹⁹ “Oedipus Between Two Cities”, in Vidal-Naquet (n. 18) 338–339. In my opinion, Vidal-Naquet stumbles in describing Theseus as the “King-cum-Ecclesia.” I would call him a king whom no collective body would think of opposing.

²⁰ Vidal-Naquet took the unanimity of the offstage Argive assembly as normative for tragedy, the genre that, as he puts it, “expatriates” political conflict, whereas he treats the divided vote in the fledgling Areopagus as an apparent anomaly (333). I think

Now I return to Aristotle's image of a body of men, passing judgment *en masse* and to what we know of Athenian collective behavior. Whether each member of the composite votes, as at political and judicial meetings, or reacts to the performance at a competitive musical event where a very small subset serves as judges, we have a heterogeneous, often boisterous, collection of men. This is an aspect of group dynamics that, I submit, made a strong, often repeated, impression on the audience's senses and its interpretation of the staged action. We need to be cautious in identifying cues apparently bridging the real world and the world of art in the absence of clear corroborating signals. To be sure, the chorus hears, and sometimes remarks, on words meant to persuade. But in my opinion the adult male citizens of the Athenian democracy reflexively distinguished characters or groups with authority to decide from those lacking that authority. They would be attentive to explicit statements on issues of authority when the tragic authors put them into the mouths of trustworthy characters, like Theseus. Moreover, they knew very well the style in which their deliberative bodies responded to arguments and the chorus' sharp divergence from that mode. I conclude – and hope that A. K. will agree – that they would have rejected the notion that the tragic chorus was a stand-in for their Council, courts, or Assembly.

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Автор полемизирует с попытками современных ученых усмотреть в хоре греческой трагедии более или менее прямое отражение афинского народного собрания или Совета в процессе принятия решений. В статье указывается на гетерогенность представительных органов демократии в противоположность однородному составу трагического хора.

he has it backwards: the Argive assembly is the anomaly. But I must acknowledge that our body of evidence for voting assemblies in tragedy is extremely small, since the playwrights located virtually all of the plays we know about *in illo tempore* and needed to swerve from too close a resemblance to contemporary political forms. Another off-stage report of an ἐκκλησία, in Euripides' *Orestes*, is marked by strong disagreement among speakers and, evidently, a less than unanimous vote (944).