Transformations of Choral Lyric Traditions in the Context of Athenian State Theater

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This sketch is about the continuities and shifts in the morphology of the ancient Greek chorus or khoros. I understand the fundamental meaning of khoros—this should be made clear at the very outset—as “song-and-dance ensemble,” with emphasis on both song and dance, although I also understand that either the song may dominate the dance or the dance may dominate the song in different choral traditions. As the discussion proceeds, I will try to justify this general understanding of the khoros as a medium that comprises both song and dance. From here on, I will refer to the khoros as the “chorus”—where I mean for the English word to include, not exclude, the component of dance. The range of my sketch extends from the traditions of archaic city-states other than Athens all the way to the complex social context of the festival known as the City Dionysia in the classical period of Athens.¹

For my present purposes, I use the term “archaic” to designate a period that becomes visible toward the end of the eighth century and that lasts until, let us say, the end of the Persian War in the year 479 before our era, and “classical” to designate a period starting from 479 and ending with the death of Socrates in the year 399 before our era. The appropriateness of my choosing the date of 399 as a terminus has to do with Socrates’ follower, Plato, whose writings tend to focus on Athenian State Theater as it existed in the time of Socrates’ public life, not as it existed in the later time when Plato actually composed his works. My choice of 479 as the earlier terminus has to do also with Plato, who idealizes choral lyric poetry as it existed before the Persian War. For Plato, as we will see, the forms of choral lyric poetry used to be “aristocratic” in this earlier era, but in the later era they supposedly lost their distinctness and became “democratized” by Athenian State Theater {41 | 42} in a process that he calls theatrokratia. Among the main topics to be addressed in my sketch is the Athenian “democratization” of the chorus, in response to earlier aristocratic models as evident in the compositions attributed to such lyric masters as Alcman and Stesichorus.

In considering the transformations of the khoros and choral lyric, I find it useful to focus on the contributions of the following five works:

¹ The background has been worked out in a book on the general subject of Greek lyric: Nagy 1990a.
1. **Claude Calame’s two-volume book on choruses in archaic Greece, especially the first volume (1977).** The subtitle of this volume, *Morphologie, fonction religieuse et sociale*, captures a central insight concerning choruses of female performers in particular and choruses in general, which Calame himself formulates in the course of his prodigiously exhaustive collection of data. The insight is this: the archaic Greek chorus has a fundamentally social and even religious function as a holistic expression of the given society in which the given chorus performs. A premier example analyzed by Calame is Alcman fragment 1 (as numbered in the PMG edition of Denys Page), the so-called *Partheneion*, the text of a choral composition destined for performance in archaic Sparta.

2. **John Herington’s book on the poetics of Greek theater (1985).** We know that choral lyric was meant to be performed, as Herington shows in this work, and he introduces the phrase *song culture* to emphasize the *performative* aspect of both poetry and song in the ancient Greek world. Another outstanding contribution of Herington’s book is its collection of evidence showing that the *performance* of a chorus is ordinarily a matter of a seasonally recurring *reperformance*. There are particularly striking examples from Sparta, such as the description in Sosibius FGH 595 F 5, by way of Athenaeus recurring *ancient Greek world.*

*Another outstanding contribution of Herington’s book is its collection of evidence showing that the performance of a chorus is ordinarily a matter of a seasonally recurring reperformance. There are particularly striking examples from Sparta, such as the description in Sosibius FGH 595 F 5, by way of Athenaeus 15.678bc, of choral performances at the Spartan Feast of the Gymnopaidiai, featuring reperformances of compositions attributed to Alcman and other archaic figures. We may note too the description in Polycrates FGH 588 F 1, by way of Athenaeus 4.139e-f, of choral performances at the Spartan festival of the Hyakinthia, where the compositions of Alcman were most likely a part of the repertory (witness the papyrus commentary to Alcman, PMG 10[a].5). I quote here the text of Polycrates’ vivid description: {42 | 43}*

*τῇ δὲ μέσῃ τῶν τριῶν ἡμερῶν γίνεται θέα ποικίλη καὶ πανήγυρις ἄξιόλογος καὶ μεγάλη· παιδεῖς τε γὰρ κιθαρίζουσιν ἐν χιτώσιν ἀνεξαρτήτως καὶ πρὸς αὐλὸν ἄδουντες πάσσας ἀμα τῷ πλήκτρῳ τὰς χορδὰς ἐπιτρέχοντες ἐν ὑμνῷ μὲν ἀναπαίστῳ, μετ’ οίχεος δὲ τόνοι τὸν θεόν ἄδουσιν· ἄλλοι δ’ ἔρ’ ἑπ’ ἑπόμενην κεκοσμημένων τὸ θέατρον διεξάγονται: χοροὶ τὲ νεανίσκων παμπληθεὶς εἰσέρχονται καὶ τῶν ἐπιχωρίων τινὰ ποιημάτων ἄδουσιν, ὀρχηστὰ τε [ἐν] τούτους ἀναμεμιγμένους τὴν κίνησιν θρακικὴν ὑπὸ τὸν αὐλὸν καὶ τὴν ὑδὴν ποιοῦνται. τῶν δὲ παρθένων αἰ μὲν ἐπὶ καννάθρῳ [καμάρωτοι] ξυλίνων ἄρμάτων φέρονται πολυτέλως κατεσκευασμένων, αἱ δ’ ἐρ’ ἀμίλλαις ἄρμάτων ἐξευγμένων ποιησθέντων, ἀπασά δ’ ἐν κινῆσι καὶ χαρᾷ τῆς θεωρίας ἡ πόλις καθέστηκεν. ιερεία τε παμπληθή θύσιος τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ταύτῃ καὶ δειπνίζουσιν οἱ πολίται πάντας τοὺς γνωρίμοις καὶ τοὺς δούλους τοὺς ἱδίους; οὐδεὶς δ’ ἀπολείπει τὴν θυσίαν, ἀλλὰ κενούσθαι συμβαίνει τὴν πόλιν πρὸς τὴν θέαν.*

But the middle day of the three days there is a variety-filled [poikile] spectacle [thea] and a great and notable gathering of all [paneguris]. Boys wearing girt-up khitons play the lyre,
sweeping all the strings with the plectrum as they sing the god in the anapaestic rhythm and at a high pitch. Others pass through the viewing area [theatron] on finely ornamented horses. Massed choruses [khořoi] of young men now enter and sing some of the epichoric songs, while dancers mixed in with them perform the ancient dance-movements to the pipe [aulōs] and the singing. Next maidens enter, some riding in richly adorned wicker carts, while others make their competitive procession in chariots yoked with mules. And the entire city is astir, rejoicing at the spectacle [theōria]. On this day they sacrifice an abundance of animal victims, and the citizens feast all their acquaintances and their own slaves. And no one is left out of the sacrifice [thusia], and what happens is that the city is emptied for the spectacle [thea].

Herington concludes, on the basis of this and similar testimony, that “some at least of Alcman’s compositions were still being reperformed well into the Hellenistic era [emphasis mine].”

3. Walter Burkert’s article on the performance traditions of Stesichorus (1987). Burkert is arguing against the theory that the performances of compositions attributed to Stesichorus were not choral but rather monodic, sung by a solo kitharōidos ‘lyre-singer.’ In defending the idea that the medium of Stesichorus is indeed choral, Burkert highlights a reference by the “Old Oligarch,” pseudo-Xenophon, in Constitution of Athens 1.13, concerning a lavish type of song-performance that reportedly became obsolete in Athens under the democracy: “Stripped of its polemical overtones, this remains an interesting account of musical events before the democratic revolutions.” There is an important point to be drawn here from Burkert’s work, that an “aristocratic” phase in the evolution of the chorus was succeeded by a “democratic” phase.

4. John J. Winkler’s article, “The Ephebes’ Song” (1990). The author stresses the ritual aspect of choral lyric performance in the theater, referring to the quasi-initiatory aspects of training and performance for the chorus of Athenian State Theater. His hermeneutic model for the hypothetical status of the chorus member as an initiate is the Athenian concept of

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5. This translation of Polycrates FGH 588 F 1 is based on that of Herington 1985:7, who goes on to say about Polycrates: “Even if he lived relatively late in the Hellenistic period, ... Sparta’s ritual and musical conservatism was such that he could well have witnessed a celebration of the Hyakinthia in much the same form that it would have had in classical times” (224n8; cf. Nagy 1990a:351, 371n168).
8. This theory that Stesichorean performance is monodic is argued by, for example, West 1971.
ephēbos: “In what follows, I will continue to {43 | 44} use the term ‘ephebe,’ meaning thereby young citizen-warriors in their years of military training, older than boys but not yet men, and probably well-off rather than poor.”12 At another point, he uses the half-facetious term “novitiate.”13 I suggest that the most accurate and appropriate term for describing the experience of the Athenian chorus members is in fact paideia in the sense of liberal “education”—which is precisely the inherited function of the chorus.14 For confirmation of the argument that the khoros had been the primary medium of paideia in the archaic period, I cite in general the usage of didaskein 'teach' and manthanein 'learn' in contexts pertaining to the khoros.15

5. My own inquiry into the subject of the khoros, as assembled in the book Pindar’s Homer (1990).16 In this work, I examine an ancient Greek concept that may help integrate the contributions of the four other works, as I have summarized them here, in order to achieve a broader understanding of the nature of choral lyric traditions. This concept is expressed by the Greek word mimēsis. I argue that the primary meaning of this word was ‘reenactment, impersonation’ in a dramatic sense, as in a chorus, and that the secondary meaning of ‘imitation’—which is a built-in aspect of reenactment—became the new primary meaning of this word only after the dramatic sense of mimēsis was destabilized.17 For present purposes, I use the word “dramatic” strictly with reference to traditional societies like those of archaic Greece, where drama entails an interaction of myth and ritual. As for myth, I define it tentatively as a given traditional society’s coding of truth-values through narrative.18 And I adopt, at least for the moment, Stanley Tambiah’s definition of ritual as “a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication.”19 Keeping in mind this broad working definition of ritual, I would go on to suggest that myth—or at least the performance of myth as song, poetry, or prose—can even be seen as an aspect of ritual, though of course myth is also potentially distinguishable from ritual.20

Applying the concept of mimēsis as formulated in number 5, I propose now to reassess what I said earlier about numbers 1 through 4. Let us start with numbers 1 and 2. In the case of number 1, Calame’s convincing analysis of choral lyric compositions {44 | 45}like Alcman’s Partheneion can be supplemented with the insight, supported by Herington’s observation as

13 Winkler 1990:35. 
15 Prime examples are Simonides, Epigrammata Graeca 27 and 28 [ed. Page]. 
16 Nagy 1990a, especially 339–413. 
outlined in number 2, that such compositions must have been locally reperformed, on a seasonally recurring basis, perhaps well into the Hellenistic period.\footnote{See Nagy 1990a, chap. 12.} Herington’s analysis must in turn be supplemented by Calame’s insight that the performance of a choral lyric composition like Alcman’s Partheneion is a matter of ritual. Unfortunately, Herington’s 1985 book nowhere mentions Calame’s 1977 book on the chorus. This absence of contact between the two works is particularly regrettable because Calame’s perspective on the ritual dimension of the chorus may have dissuaded Herington from his stance of resisting the application of the very concept of ritual to the early Athenian traditions of choral performance; Herington’s resistance is at least in part a reaction to the excesses of speculations about ritual and drama by scholars of previous generations.\footnote{Cf. Herington 1985:123–124.} More recent research, of course, even aside from Calame’s, has helped rehabilitate the study of drama as ritual; a key figure is Richard Seaford, whose work is meant to confirm “the unfashionable view that the performance of tragedy originated in the practice of ritual.”\footnote{Seaford 1984:14; cf. Nagy 1990a:30.}

The ritual dimension of choral performance is relevant also to number 3, to which we now turn. Burkert’s proposal that the compositions attributed to Stesichorus were meant for choral performance—and, I would add, for seasonally recurring choral reperformance—is linked to a passage that he adduces from the Homeric Hymn to Apollo, where the figure of “Homer” is represented as encountering a chorus of Delian Maidens at a festival on the island of Delos; Burkert interprets lines 162–165 as a reference to the “performance of choral lyrics.”\footnote{Burkert 1987:54.} In my own work, I have advanced the argument that the Delian Maidens in the Homeric Hymn to Apollo represent an idealization of choral lyric.\footnote{Nagy 1990a:43, 375–377.} Moreover, I argue that these Maidens are presented in the Hymn as archetypes meant to be reenacted in the local ritual context of real choral performances at Delos—in which context any real chorus members would be equated, for the ritual moment, with the archetypal Maidens.\footnote{Nagy 1990a:43, 375–377.} Such a reenactment would be mimēsis in the primary sense that I have just outlined.

Similarly in Alcman’s Partheneion, I argue that archetypal figures, including the primary archetypal figures named Hagesikhora and Agido, are being acted out by real chorus members in performances held on a seasonally recurring basis.\footnote{Nagy 1990a:345–370. Cf. Clay 1991.} We may reconstruct a similar principle at work in the earliest stages of Athenian State Theater: the chorus members of a tragedy would be reenacting an archetypal ensemble that is interacting with archetypal figures of {45 |
the heroic world, figures acted by actors playing roles differentiated out of the ranks of the chorus.²⁸

Burkert argues that the chorus of Athenian State Theater is strikingly different from the earlier type of chorus as depicted in the *Hymn to Apollo*, or as exemplified by the choral lyric compositions of Stesichorus: whereas the “Stesichorean” model of the chorus is aristocratic, the Classical Athenian model has been radically democratized, as we infer from the comments by the “Old Oligarch,” pseudo-Xenophon, in *Constitution of Athens* 1.13, about the displacement of old-fashioned choral events.²⁹

While I agree with Burkert’s associating such choral events as the idealized performance of the Delian Maidens with Stesichorean performances, I disagree with his assumption that the same kind of archaic choral events in Athens were performed by chorus members who were supposedly itinerant professionals.³⁰ It seems clear from the evidence assembled in Calame’s book that in the archaic period the performers in the chorus were not professionals, since choral participation at that time was grounded in the ritual heritage of the community; the nonprofessionalism of the chorus members persisted even in those historical contexts where the status of the choral poet-director became professional.³¹ There is an analogous situation in Classical Athenian State Theater, where the chorus members, unlike the first, second, and third actors, were decidedly nonprofessional.³²

In this light, let us reexamine Burkert’s formulation concerning the hypothetical professionalism of the archaic chorus members:

We have at least one piece of testimony that professional foreign musicians performed in Athens in the sixth century: the “Old Oligarch”—i.e. pseudo-Xenophon, *Athēnaiōn Politeia*—states that “the demos has abolished here [= at Athens] those who performed sports and music [that is, those who performed in athletic and songmaking events]. They decreed this

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²⁸ I have more to say below about the complex patterns of differentiation that led to the emergence of the first, second, and third actors and distinct from the chorus.
²⁹ Burkert 1987:52.
³¹ Nagy 1990a:85, 104, 106, 113, 188–190, 340–342, 343, 362, 379, 405. In the case of Pindar, I argue that the poet-director, as a stylized *khōrēgos* (in the archaic sense of “chorus leader”), is “a professional whose compositions are occasional, ostensibly performed by a chorus consisting of contemporary nonprofessionals”; the chorus as a group serves as “the impersonator, the actor, of the [poet-director]” (379).
was not honorable, because (in reality) they knew (but too well) that they could not do this themselves.”

The text goes on to say that the demos established institutions of khorēgia and gymnasiarkhia, where the rank and file are being led by khorēgoi ‘chorus producers’ and gymnasiarkhoi ‘athletics producers’ who are selected from the stratum of society that is rich enough to finance these activities, and thus “the demos thinks it proper to get money for singing, running, and dancing.” In Athens, the khorēgos ‘chorus-producer’ is not a performer, as he is in other cities in the archaic period: he has become differentiated as a contemporary nonperformer, whom the State appoints to produce and finance the performance.

I suggest that the obloquy of the “Old Oligarch” is being directed specifically against the institutional subsidization, initiated by the democratic State, of expenses incurred in choral performance. Such subsidization, I suggest further, is not in and of itself pertinent to what I maintain is the nonprofessional status of the rank-and-file chorus members themselves. In an earlier, more “aristocratic” pattern, we may posit the initiative of aristocratic families in the production and financing of choral events—and, for that matter, of athletic events as well. In the later, more “democratic” pattern, by contrast, it seems that the activities of producing and financing choral and athletic events were made the ultimate, although not the immediate, responsibility of the State. I propose that the demise of the earlier pattern in the case of democratic Athens had to do with the obsolescence of the archaic choral tradition represented by a figure like Stesichorus or even by a more contemporary figure like Pindar, a professional poet-director who evidently received fees from the rich and powerful families that commissioned his choral compositions. But the chorus, in the earlier aristocratic pattern, would have been comprised of nonprofessional members. If we are to look for differences, it would be enough to say that “the scale and the virtuosity of choral performance at festivals and other such events would be different in aristocratic and democratic settings, and that Stesichorus represents a decidedly aristocratic setting.”

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33 Burkert 1987:52. For the phrase tous de gymnázomenous...kai tēn mousikēn epitēdeuontas, I prefer the rendition that I suggest in square brackets, “those who performed in athletic and songmaking events,” over “those who performed sports and music.”
34 Calame 1977 (1):92–93; cf. Nagy 1990a:378. Whereas it is apt to translate khorēgos as “chorus producer” in the context of democratic Athens, it is better to render the same word simply as “chorus leader” in the context of other cities in the archaic period: cf. Nagy 1990a.
35 Nagy 1990a:362n124. Cf. Burnett 1988:129–147. While I disagree with Burkert’s views concerning “choruses of professionals” (Burkert 1987:52), I too think that the itinerant poet-director of archaic choruses was indeed professional (Nagy 1990a:340–341). Burkert himself says at another point: “one might as well imagine a traveling didaskalos selecting his chorus for training on the spot” (61n54); I only wish to add that such a poet-director would ordinarily train local nonprofessionals for his choruses.
In Plato’s works, the process of democratization in the Athenian songmaking traditions of choral lyric is conveyed by the negative term theatrokratia (Laws 3.701a), implying démokratia. This term theatrokratia describes the democratized state of the arts at Athens, in contrast with the aristokratia of the “good old days,” as in the era marked off by the Persian Wars (Laws 3.698b–700a), when there were still distinct eidê or genres. Five examples are mentioned, of which four are explicitly choral in nature: humnos ‘hymn’, thrênos ‘lament’, paian ‘paean’, and dithurambos ‘dithyramb’ (Laws 3.700b). These genres, as structurally distinct aspects of the poetic tradition, correspond to the structurally distinct aspects of aristokratia in Plato’s good old Athenian society (Laws 3.701a). What Plato takes back in time to the era of the Persian Wars can in fact be taken back even farther, all the way to the reformation of choral traditions in the founding of the City Dionysia at Athens: as I argue elsewhere, “the Theater of Dionysos at Athens, with its theatrocrahy of genres, has been appropriating and assimilating, ever since its inception, the traditions of songmaking that we can still see as independent and unassimilated forms in the repertoire of a figure like Pindar.”

Finally, we turn to the point raised in number 4, which is Winkler’s proposal that the process of reenactment in Athenian State Theater is for the chorus members tantamount to a process of initiation. True, Winkler’s initiation theory may seem at first sight implausible when we view in isolation the institution of the chorus as it functions in Athenian State Theater. It becomes more plausible, however, when we compare earlier non-Athenian traditions of choral performance, stemming from an era that preceded democratization. A vivid example is Alcman’s Partheneion, where the element of initiation in ritual performance by a chorus becomes evident from the exhaustive analysis provided by Calame’s book.

It seems to be a general trend in the history of Greek religion that institutions of initiation, as also other rituals, became ever more stylized in the context of a rapidly evolving city-state. Accordingly, we may expect that the theatrokratia of Athenian State Theater had effected a radical stylization in all ritual dimensions of choral performance. Moreover, given the complexity of the very institution of the chorus as it evolved in the historical context of

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36 Cf. also Laws 658a–659c, 669b–670b, and the comments at Svenbro 1984:231n133.
37 On the appropriateness of translating eidê as genres here, see again Svenbro 1984:225, 232n135.
40 Nagy 1990a:403.
41 Cf. the criticism at Vidal-Naquet 1986:137.
43 I explore this topic at length in Nagy 1990a:, chap. 4; cf. especially 125–126, 141–142.
Athenian State Theater, we may expect that the stylized traces of ritual initiation would have become considerably stratified and compartmentalized. And we may certainly expect the traces to survive more clearly in the chorus proper, as distinct from the differentiated first, second, and third actors. The clearest trace, I suggest, is the traditional nonprofessionalism of the chorus proper, as distinct from the professionalism of the actors.

Let us for a moment review whatever basic facts we can recover about the status of the chorus in the highly complex institution of the dramatic festivals of democratic Athens. I start with what we have already noted, that those who perform in a given drama are the khoros ‘chorus’ on the one hand and, on the other, the so-called first, second, and third actors. The chorus in Athenian drama ordinarily perform by singing and dancing to the musical accompaniment of an aulos ‘reed’, while the actors ordinarily perform by declaiming their assigned verses, without musical accompaniment. In Athens, to repeat, the khorēgos ‘chorus leader’ is no longer a performer: he has been set apart as a contemporary non-performer, a “chorus producer” whom the State appoints to produce and finance the dramatic performance. Meanwhile, the differentiated function of a performing chorus leader is further differentiated by another split in functions, with a more distinct “first actor” on one hand and a less distinct chorus leader on the other. This development is represented in the story of the primordial dramaturge Thespis, who is said to have invented the first actor. The dialogue between the Thespian “first actor” and the chorus leader manifests a differentiation of the dialogue between an undifferentiated khorēgos ‘chorus leader’ and the chorus, and the evolution of the “second actor” and “third actor” can be explained in terms of further splits in function.

The chorus represents a mediating principle between the heroes of the there-and-then and the audience of the here-and-now. The chorus reacts both as if they were the audience itself and as if they were eyewitness contemporaries of the heroes. The members of the chorus, who sang and danced the roles of groups such as old men or young girls, are “on the scene” in the mythical world of heroes.

For Athenian society, if we follow through on Winkler’s formulation, the ritual emphasis is on the experience of the pre-adult chorus and, through them, of the adult audience. I can accept this formulation if we add the qualification notionally to describe both “pre-adult” and “adult.” The audience is notionally “adult” to the extent that many of them would have already had the experience of membership in the notionally “pre-adult” chorus. There was surely a high value placed on the experience of the chorus members—an experience

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that must have included a deeply personal dimension—in undergoing the educational process of performing in the chorus of State Theater.

The chorus members in the seasonally recurring Athenian dramatic festivals are to be understood, at least from the ritual point of view, as citizens-in-the-making. At the moment of their performance, the rank-and-file chorus members are marginal to society as chorus members. They are notionally precivic, not yet civic. Moreover, they act out mostly marginal members of society in the world of heroes, such as old men, young girls, prisoners of war. Their acting out such roles conforms to the ritual function of the chorus as an educational collectivization of experience. Their experience of paideia ‘education’ in the chorus is like a stylized rite of passage, or initiation, which leads from the marginality of precitizenship into the eventual centrality of citizenship. From the standpoint of tragic action, the focus of attention is on the heroes, played by the actors. The hero along with his or her suffering is central while the chorus, as witness, is marginal. Although the chorus becomes emotionally involved in the experience of the hero, it also maintains an emotional distance by being marginal to the drama of the heroic action and central to the ritual engaging the audience. As I have argued elsewhere, “What is [passive] pathos or action experienced by the hero within the world of tragedy is [active] drāma, that is, sacrifice and the performance of ritual, from the standpoint of the outer world that frames it. This outer world is constituted by the audience of the theater, who become engaged in the drāma [through the intermediacy of the chorus] and who thereby participate in the inner world that is the pathos of the hero.”

In this sense, the pathos experienced by the hero is a primal “ordeal” while the reactive pathos experienced by the audience—and mediated by the chorus—may be translated simply as “emotion.” Such a distribution of translations for pathos, that is, “ordeal” for the hero and “emotion” for the audience, seems pervasively workable in a reading of Aristotle’s Poetics. One commentator has put it nearly this same way, in defining Aristotle’s concept of pathos as a “misfortune” on the objective level and an “emotion” on the subjective level.

The audience, through the chorus, reacts subjectively to the experience of the hero, and this reaction translates into the personal experience of an individual in bringing the world of heroes into synchrony with the world of the individual’s present-day society. These worlds of the heroic past and the civic present share the stages of life through which an individual passes, such as birth, initiation, marriage, having children, divorce, growing old, death, and perhaps a hoped-for rebirth. There are personal experiences in these ordeals of transition, such as the primal pain of being born, the intensity of playing games, the thrill of sexuality, the pangs of falling in love, the toils of hunting, the labor of giving birth, the exertion of athletics, the shock of combat, the tedium of aging, the throes of dying. The chorus reacts to such

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47 Nagy 1990a:388.
ordeals on the part of the hero. In this way, a chorus member can be made to experience, to feel personally, the painful process of “growing up.” This personal experience is achieved by way of performance in the notionally pre-adult chorus, which is acting on behalf of the notionally adult audience in reacting, through the ritual experience of song and dance, to a given mythical action experienced by a given hero of drama. There is a built-in dramatic ambiguity in the chorus’s identification both with the heroic world of the dramatic action and with the civic world of their dramatic acting.  

I propose to bring my presentation to a close by briefly reconsidering in this light an ancient Greek example of reenactment as genuine initiation. I have in mind the prophecy spoken by the goddess Artemis as a consolation to the dying virgin hero in lines 1423–1430 of Euripides’ *Hippolytus.* These lines describe, briefly but clearly, a ritual of female initiation, pictured as seasonally recurring in the past, in the present, and for all time to come in the city of Troezen, where the local girls customarily cut their hair and sing songs of lament for the death of Hippolytus as a formal sign of their coming of age. The myth of the hero’s death and of Phaedra’s unrequited love for him (1430) is described as a sad love song, ‘a troubled thought that happens with songmaking’ (*mousopoios...merimna*, 1428–1429).

I note in passing, for purposes of further comparison, the observation of Vladimir Propp about love songs in Russian folk traditions: “the songs are about unhappy love more often than about happy love.” He goes on to note that traditional Russian women’s songs at weddings, including the bride’s songs, involve instances of formal lamentation; in fact, “the wailing of the bride is one of the richest and artistically complete forms of ancient peasant

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49 This ambiguity is highlighted in the case of Euripides’ *Bacchae*, as discussed by Segal 1982:242–247. Segal points out that in this particular drama, Euripides seems to go out of his way to stress the partiality of the chorus, in their dramatic role as devotees of Dionysos, toward a position that is ostensibly antithetical to civic values, given that these values are being represented for the moment by Pentheus, the antagonist of Dionysos. Still, from a Dionysiac point of view, the chorus of the *Bacchae* is ritually observant, so that these devotees of Dionysos exemplify ritual moderation while at the same time the women of Thebes, figures of the heroic world who have now also become devotees of the god, exemplify mythical excess. As an example of dramatized choral sympathy between the heroic world and the civic world, I cite Segal’s description (247) of the Dionysos ode of Sophocles' *Antigone*, which “had juxtaposed the infinite reaches of the circle of stars, led by the god in his fiery 'chorus,' with the secure, geometric space of the theater (*Antigone* 1146–1154).”

50 In trying to come to terms with this passage, I have learned much from Goff 1990:112–129 and Pucci 1977:165–195.

51 In Bacchylides 19.11, the same noun *merimna*, which I translate here as “a troubled thought,” refers to the thought-processes of the poet himself as he is pictured composing his song. For more on this *mousopoios...merimna*, see Segal 1993:120–121.


Given that weddings are elaborate rites of passage in Russian folk traditions and that “many wedding songs were never performed outside the wedding ritual,” we stand to gain a wealth of comparative insights from detailed descriptions of women’s songmaking in the context of weddings, especially in view of Propp’s conclusion that traditional Russian wedding songs “are so closely related to love and family lyrics that they cannot be studied outside the framework of women’s folk lyrics in general.”

With specific reference to the ancient Greek girls’ initiation ritual described in lines 1423–1430 of Euripides’ Hippolytus, one commentator has noted that “the Athenian audience felt strongly the continuity of legendary past and present,” and that “there is an evident emotional satisfaction in the feeling that the events and persons one has been witnessing live on in effect or name into the life of the present day.” I have highlighted the commentator’s use of the word “emotional” here because it captures the subjective level of pathos in Aristotle’s reading of tragedy: on this level, as I have argued here, pathos can be translated as “emotion.”

Still, it remains to ask how the choral lyric of real-life girls who are experiencing initiation by lamenting Hippolytus and the unrequited love of Phaedra in the real-life community of Troezen translates into the “emotional satisfaction” of the Athenian audience of State Theater. I suggest that the song of initiation performed on a seasonally recurring basis by the girls’ chorus in Troezen is dramatically replayed, or, better, preplayed, as the songs performed by a notionally pre-adult chorus in Athenian State Theater who are reenacting a chorus of young women in Troezen as they sing and dance the choral lyrics of Euripides’ Hippolytus. With reference to the second choral lyric, where the chorus emotionally identifies with Phaedra’s most intimate thoughts in an exquisitely poeticized escapist reverie while she is killing herself offstage (732–775), one critic has noted the “intersubjectivity” of the chorus and the hero. This perceptive line of thought can be extended: in the sacred space of

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54 Propp 1975:19–20. I should also stress in general the important performative distinction, which affects the process of composition/recomposition in Russian folk lyric, between singing that is combined and singing that is not combined with dance (Propp 14); also important, for purposes of comparison with archaic Greek choral traditions, is the traditional presupposition in certain forms of song-and-dance that one girl in a given performance will be selected, through the performance, as better in beauty or skill than the other girls, so that the song becomes in effect her praise-song by virtue of formally making an admission or acknowledgment of her poeticized superiority (Propp 15).


56 Propp 1975:18. Of special interest for the study of archaic Greek choral traditions is the Russian tradition of the ritual unplaiting of the maiden’s braid as a preparation for the wedding, where the unplaiting is accompanied by songmaking, and where the bride’s girlfriends sing in the name of the bride (Propp 23).

57 Propp 1975:18.

58 Zeitlin 1985:195n41, 199n72.
Athenian State Theater, the pathos or primal ordeal of a hero like Hippolytus or Phaedra becomes identified with the pathos or emotion of the audience as well, all through the intersubjectivity of choral performance. It has been remarked that, when the maidens of Troezen mourn for Hippolytus, they mourn for themselves. So too the audience of the drāma that is Athenian State Theater experience the pathos of the hero through the pathos of choral song and dance.

Bibliography


