

BOOK REVIEW

The Hidden Chorus: Echoes of Genre in Tragic Lyric. By L. A. SWIFT. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. xiv + 451. Cloth, £83.00/\$130.00. ISBN 978-0-19-957784-2.

In this excellent book, a revision of her 2007 Oxford D.Phil. thesis, Laura Swift studies Greek tragedy's engagement with lyric poetry, and more specifically with the values she sees as inherent in five lyric genres: *paian*, *epinikion*, *partheneia*, *hymenaios*, and *threnos*. She begins with issues concerning genre itself: reasons for identifying genres, problems in defining them, motives for her selection, and first thoughts on how lyric genres operate within tragedy. To define genres, she relies on a model of "core" and "secondary or symptomatic" features; the core feature of each of her genres is a purpose linked to the occasion for which songs of that genre were composed: "A Greek lyric genre has a purpose to fulfil in the world outside the poem (for example, praising a god, celebrating a marriage) which purely literary genres do not" (15). The purpose dictates the values: "generic interaction relies on the idea that lyric genres embody a certain set of values: the values bound up in and expressed by the occasion to which the song responds" (374). Chapter 2 places lyric poetry in various fifth-century Athenian contexts. Swift surveys Athenians' participation in and other exposure to choral performance; considers the likelihood that they were familiar with famous songs from earlier periods and from outside Athens; and investigates attitudes to elite material in democratic Athens. On this last, she concludes that they were "aspirational": the recognition by average citizens that, say, sympotic culture was rooted in aristocratic values did not keep them from wanting to participate in it. Here and throughout, Swift's writing is a pleasure to read: unfailingly clear, reasonable, generous, and persuasive.

The next five chapters, each devoted to one of the chosen genres, all follow a similar plan. Swift defines the genre, surveys first non-tragic and then tragic instances of it, and singles out particular tragedies for longer close readings. She occasionally devotes a section to genre-specific issues such as funerary legislation or the socio-political context of *epinikion*. The close readings are the book's greatest strength. Examples are drawn from all three tragedians and from throughout

the fifth century. Swift is well-read and up-to-date, and she is a skilled interpreter. As she writes in her first chapter, “we rarely (if ever) in tragedy find something which could be an example of a piece from another genre incorporated wholesale into a play, and we rarely find a direct allusion to a particularly famous piece” (27). That is why her approach has almost nothing in common with that of A. Bagordo in his *Reminiszenzen früher Lyrik bei den attischen Tragikern* (München, 2003), since Bagordo’s project consists of weighing arguments for and against “specific and intentional references to particular lyric passages” (27 n. 48). Instead, “Tragedy’s use of lyric aims to appeal to the widest possible audience; we are not dealing here with a guessing game for the elite” (41). Swift’s method is to identify “allusions” (a word she retains for convenience, while admitting that “generic interaction” better captures her meaning) to those features (diction, meter, theme, and above all purpose) that allow the Athenian spectator “to recognize that the genre is being evoked and to connect his own assumptions about this form of poetry with what he sees on stage” (42). Unsurprisingly, the material is concentrated in lyric forms (both choral and monodic), but Swift observes that in examples of “high-level interaction” between tragedy and a lyric genre, relevant features tend to occur in spoken parts as well and sometimes stretch across an entire play. Since she is not looking (primarily) for verbal reminiscences, but for themes and other aspects of the fictional and performative situation, and since she builds her interpretations on sequential reading and, to a degree, integration of generic interaction with other important themes and ideas, she provides satisfyingly full interpretations of several whole scenes and plays. Space does not permit a detailed examination of these readings. They naturally provoke disagreement here and there, and some are more daring or original than others, but they all repay close study.

Swift’s strong association of each lyric genre with a fairly simple purpose linked to a real-world occasion has several advantages: it makes it easy to agree that every spectator could take the point of generic interaction, sharpens the contrast between non-tragic and tragic lyric, and aids the clarity of Swift’s own exposition. But it is certainly not beyond question. For one thing, it leads Swift to exclude from her study lyric poetry that for one reason or another we cannot associate with a clear purpose: hence no *dithyrambos* and, to take an example of an individual poet whose undoubtedly influential work does not fit Swift’s scheme, no Stesichorus. But then Swift makes no claim to comprehensiveness. A more serious consequence, I think, is the risk of flattening out lyric values as they become, in effect, a foil for tragic complexity. Swift’s method works best for

hymenaios, *threnos*, and *epinikion*, since it is indeed plausible that the essential values associated with weddings, funerals, and celebrations of athletic victories were clear, simple, and unchanging. Sixth-century funeral legislation adds a layer of potential meaning to tragedy's use of lament, but does not affect the values of *threnos* itself; likewise the political overtones of *epinikion* in democratic Athens (put to excellent use in the discussion of *Herakles*). The case of *partheneia* is hard to assess, since much of what Swift says about this genre has as much to do with cultural assumptions and patterns of female (ritual) experience as with lyric poetry; also, evidence about the performance occasions of girls' songs is unusually scarce, so that the danger of circular argument increases.

As for *paian*, Swift conscientiously engages the recent flood of work on the genre, but her view of the values it represents in tragedy gradually reduces to a pious expectation that the gods (Apollo in particular) will be just and beneficent, so that when they prove not to be, tragedy's use of the genre invites spectators to juxtapose the lyric world-view with the tragic. Here and elsewhere, Swift reflects productively on Robert Parker's model of "gods cruel and kind," but the performance contexts and contents of *paianes* are perhaps too varied for her apparently simple equation of lyric and cultic values to be fully persuasive. Swift may not have understood, or may not agree with, all the implications of what Ian Rutherford calls paianic ambiguity, a matter not just of the existence of *paianes* that include both apotropaic and celebratory elements (Swift's 63 n. 7, citing I. Rutherford, *Pindar's Paeanes* [Oxford, 2001] 7), but of a complex moral and religious outlook that Swift seems to disallow (Rutherford, 115-26). Admittedly, some of Rutherford's best examples are tragic, but this leads to another question: does acquaintance with earlier tragic adaptations of a lyric genre eventually shape spectators' conception of it? Swift does not say, nor does she really do justice to the variety of settings other than direct participation in ritual in which Athenians encountered lyric poetry (e.g. sympotic reperformance, school). Possible differences among cultic settings themselves raise another issue. Finding the right way to distinguish between musical/poetic performances that are very firmly linked to goal-oriented ritual and those that are not is difficult; the opposition "religious" vs. "secular," though surely too crude, conveys something of what is at stake. But however we define it, some such spectrum of difference certainly existed (and to say this is not to commit to a theory of unidirectional change, much less decline, as is sometimes claimed). Some lyric genres changed their position on the spectrum over time, and different performance contexts probably also inflected instances of the same (?) genre with different religious and non-religious meanings.

For the fifth century, the most troublesome genres in these terms are precisely *dithyrambos*, *paian*, and tragedy itself, so that it seems risky to attribute a simple religious outlook to *paian* and reserve subtle generic play for tragedy.

One of Swift's basic principles is that when a tragic chorus evokes a lyric genre, it operates on three levels: not only as a chorus of Athenian citizen performers and as characters within the fiction, but as "a *chorus* evoking other forms of choral performance" (*threnos*, *parthenia*, etc.), thereby "allud[ing] to the roles that real-life choruses play in response to similar situations" (375). Her title *The Hidden Chorus* refers to this third level; she dubs the phenomenon "metachorality" (376) and briefly compares and contrasts it with metatheatricality. Although she saves the coinage for her conclusion, the stimulating idea runs throughout the book. Swift says that "The prevalence of tragic metachorality stands in stark contrast to the relative lack of metatheatricality," but I doubt this is true if one defines metatheatricality (something Swift does not do) as she defines metachorality. Thus a Euripidean *agon* is metatheatrical in the sense that each contestant is not just an actor and a fictional character, but instantiates a social role (litigant) that exists outside the theater. Other forms of speech and action by actors evoke other performances (as speaker in the assembly, participant in prayer or sacrifice, and so on), each with its associated diction, themes, and values. In fact, metachorality is clearly a *subset* of metatheatricality so defined. But no matter: there are other reasons why choral performance—in ancient Greek theater, fiction, and life—is of undoubted importance, and Swift gives us interesting ways to think about it, along with sensitive and intelligent readings of several tragedies.

JOHN GIBERT

University of Colorado at Boulder, John.Gibert@Colorado.edu