

BOOK REVIEW

Choral Meditations in Greek Tragedy. Edited by RENAUD GAGNÉ AND MARIANNE GOVERS HOPMAN. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. ix + 429. Hardcover, \$110.00. ISBN 978-1-107-03328-3.

The chorus, in all its spectacular ritual, social, poetic, kinetic, and musical dimensions, stood at the heart of ancient drama. Such has become a tenet of scholarship on tragedy, yet until recently few volumes have sought to examine *choreia* as a medium across the surviving tragedians. This collection of essays, which originated in a 2009 conference at Northwestern University, is a welcome contribution to the study of the chorus in Athenian tragedy. Its sixteen essays, diverse in focus and methodology, bring together a group of leading scholars to investigate how the chorus' centrality to the tragic experience is tied to its role as a mediating presence between tragedy's multiple constituencies and levels of discourse. The Editors' term "choral mediation" is flexible and elastic and the contributors interpret it widely to include the chorus' mediation of the play's action and of the space and time of the theatrical experience, its negotiation of the different components of its own dramatic and ritual identity, and the layers of literary tradition and cultural knowledge that it folds into its voice.

The arc of the volume progresses from the theoretical to a series of chapters on each of the surviving tragedians in chronological order; roughly halfway through the volume, the focus shifts to consider the tragic chorus from the perspective of other ancient texts and finally from the point of view of its modern receptions. The Editors' Introduction is followed by a further introductory chapter by Claude Calame, who revisits his earlier work on the different semantic levels of the choral voice to demonstrate how these levels combine in tragedy into an "enunciative polyphony," as seen in two case studies from Aeschylus. Aeschylus is also the focus of the next two chapters. Marianne Govers Hopman, whose elegant contribution on the *Persians* reflects this play's growing popularity, challenges readings that prioritize a polarization of Greeks and barbarians in the play to consider how the chorus *qua* chorus leads the audience to join its lament. Jonas Grethlein approaches Aeschylus from the perspective of temporality, convincingly demonstrating how a series of choral odes from the *Oresteia* create a

temporal “panopticon” that is central to the chorus’ mediation of mythical and ritual time. Simon Goldhill’s chapter on Sophocles’ lyric voice is the only contribution on Sophocles, analyzing the *Ajax*, *Electra* and *Trachiniae* to argue that the metrical patterns of the chorus’ song chart a narrative of interaction between chorus and actors.

Euripides, the most self-referential of the surviving tragedians, gets the most attention. Laura Swift considers how, in the *Medea* and *Ion*, the chorus’ dramatic identity contains conflicting aspects and therefore brings to the fore issues of group belonging. Sheila Murnaghan reads Euripides’ *Helen* in terms of its “choral plot,” that is, as a narrative centered around Helen’s shifting relationship with the chorus; when read alongside the section of Hopman’s piece on Xerxes’ shifting integration with the Aeschylean chorus, the chapter shows Euripides taking an established dramatic technique to its limits. Kowalzig’s chapter on one of Euripides’ most intriguing plays, the *Iphigenia in Tauris*, takes the volume into compelling new territory, moving outside the imagined world of the play to argue that the chorus of the *IT* stages a cross-cultural encounter between Athenian and Pontic religious and economic interests in the realm of an Artemis whose maritime and transcultural powers are foregrounded within the play. Anton Bierl closes this section with his chapter on the *Bacchae*, Euripides’ choral tragedy *par excellence*, developing his earlier work on Dionysiac metatheater to demonstrate the self-referential processes by which the ritual and dramatic identities of the chorus coincide in this play.

The next four chapters examine the tragic chorus from a range of ancient perspectives. Gregory Nagy returns to an extraordinary passage of Greek literature, the Delian Maidens of the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*. He uses this act of archaic lyric *mimesis* to interpret the mimetic actions of the tragic chorus as a mediation between solo and group voice. Plato’s *Laws*, a central text of ancient choral theory that is rightfully receiving increased scholarly attention, is the subject of Lucia Prauscello’s essay. She argues that in Plato’s *Magnesia*, the power of the chorus lies in its embodied mediation of human society and human-divine relations. In the first of a pair of chapters looking at the tragic chorus from the point of view of its sister genre, comedy, Jeffrey Henderson examines how comic choruses mediate between audience and actors in Aristophanes’ political comedy. Renaud Gagné follows this with a fascinating study of the little-known *Alphabetic Tragedy* of Kallias, whose staging of the Ionic alphabet via the bodies of its 24-member comic chorus produces an innovative mediation of form, communication, and authority.

REVIEW OF Gagné and Govers Hopman, *Choral Meditations in Greek Tragedy* 3

The final series of chapters on modern receptions of the tragic chorus is one of the volume's highlights. The reader is offered a further way to understand "choral mediation," since tragedy's multiple layers of reception, on the page and in performance, are shown to act as a final mediation by which we become inheritors of these works and interpret them anew. Joshua Billings traces the modern understanding of the chorus as a collective with a dramatic role quite different from tragedy's protagonists back to the German Idealists, as Hegel and Hölderlin sought to define community in the light of revolution. Fiona Macintosh's essay investigates the later implications of these German thinkers' reinvigoration of the theoretical debate about the Greek chorus, as she examines the short-lived fascination with the dancing chorus in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain. Peter Meineck closes the volume with a study, taking the form of analysis and interviews, with four modern theatre directors, collectively spanning the years 1968 to 2009, who work with the Greek chorus. Their concerns as practitioners highlight many of the themes discussed in the volume as a whole, including the chorus' shifting focalization of action and affect, its ritual dimension, and its mediation of theatrical space.

This excellent volume occupies a distinctive place within the growing body of scholarship on the Greek chorus. It will be of great interest to scholars working on Greek tragedy and on ancient performance culture more broadly.

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