

Divine Agency and Human Agency: Rereading the Chorus in Sophocles' *Antigone*

The Greek tragic chorus has only recently begun to receive due scholarly attention (Thiel 1993; Bacon 1995; Foley 2003; Dhuga 2005). However, studies of choral identity in particular have tended to pay insufficient attention to rigorous philological scrutiny on the terms of the plays themselves due to forays, often speculative, into the so-called “social function” of Greek tragedy (Goldhill 1990, 1996; Gould 1996; Pelling 1997; Griffin 1998). As Saïd (1998, 283) has noted, “nowadays...scholars are mostly interested in the role of tragedy as questioning democratic ideology.” Notwithstanding, the “teleological notion of ‘function’” (Neander 1991) persists among readers of Greek tragedy. Although some of the scholarship concerning the intersections of tragic ritualism and the ancient audience’s religiosity has proven fruitful (Henrichs 1995; Budelmann 2000; Wilson 2000), students of Greek tragedy now often begin with the assumption that the chorus is dramatically (because socially) “marginal” (Gould 1996, 220)—paradoxically and precisely because of scholarly attempts to reconstruct classical Athenian concepts of civic ideology and social marginality.

Our understanding of Sophocles’ *Antigone* has especially suffered because of the critical primacy given to civic values and proto-democratic discourse over the play’s internal ethical calculus. I focus on *Antigone* because it has become a commonplace, based on new-historicist notions of “social marginality,” that both the chorus of Theban Elders and Teiresias are marginal to the dramatic events because they are elderly—whereas “the idea that old age brought with it practical wisdom is...a common feature of ancient literature” as early as Homer (Parkin 2003, 105-106). Far from being marginal, the chorus in *Antigone* not only is, I argue, central to the dramatic action but also, from a theological perspective, demonstrates that it has the experiential

equipment to solve the central conflict(s) of the play—here my claim is radical—already at verses 278-79. This paper furthermore proposes that we might more clearly understand *Antigone* as a whole through an examination of the musical design of the play’s lyric dialogues and the theologically competing claims made therein.

By drawing the aged *dramatis personae* of both Teiresias and the Chorus of Theban Elders closer to the centre of the dramatic action of the play, I shall steer away from critical over-emphasis upon civic ideology, and particularly away from the flawed and strangely persisting Schlegelian (1846) generalization that tragic choruses are “only witnesses” (Gredley 1996, 210). In the process, I hope that we shall arrive at a more philologically sound appreciation of the emotions, the politics, and the theology of Sophocles’ *Antigone* upon the play’s *own* terms. More broadly, after our reassessment of the chorus in *Antigone*, I shall conclude with the following suggestion not only to scholars but also to teachers of Greek tragedy: Because of the ongoing if not increasing role of the chorus throughout the short historical trajectory of Greek tragedy (Taplin 1988), we ought to engage closely the language of any given tragic chorus, and ought to resist the impulse to read the tragic chorus as a dramatically marginal entity based on rough excavations of social functions and social margins.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bacon, Helen. 1995. “The Chorus in Greek Life and Drama.” *Arion* 3:6-24.

Budelmann, Felix. 2000. *The Language of Sophocles*. Cambridge.

Dhuga, U. S. 2005. "Choral Identity in Sophocles' *Oedipus Coloneus*." *AJP* 126:333-62.

Foley, Helene. 2003. "Choral Identity in Greek Tragedy." *CP* 98:1-30.

Goldhill, Simon. 1990. "The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology." In *Nothing To Do with Dionysos?*, ed. John Winkler and Froma Zeitlin, 97-129. Princeton.

_____. 1996. "Collectivity and Otherness—The Authority of the Tragic Chorus." In *Tragedy and the Tragic*, ed. M. S. Silk, 244-56. Oxford.

Gould, John. 1996. "Tragedy and Collective Experience." In *Tragedy and the Tragic*, ed. M. S. Silk, 217-43. Oxford.

Gredley, Bernard. 1996. "Comedy and Tragedy—Inevitable Distinctions." In *Tragedy and the Tragic*, ed. M. S. Silk, 203-16. Oxford.

Griffin, Jasper. 1998. "The Social Function of Attic Tragedy." *CQ* 48:39-61.

Henrichs, Albert. 1995. "'Why Should I Dance?': Choral Self-Referentiality in Greek Tragedy." *Arion* 3:56-111.

Neander, Karen. 1991. "The Teleological Notion of 'Function'." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 69:454-68.

Parkin, T. G. 2003. *Old Age in the Roman World*. Baltimore.

Pelling, Christopher. 1997. "Tragedy as Evidence; Tragedy as Ideology." In *Greek Tragedy and the Historian*, ed. Christopher Pelling, 213-35. Oxford.

Säid, Suzanne. 1998. "Tragedy and Politics." In *Democracy, Empire, and the Arts in Fifth-Century Athens*, ed. Deborah Boedeker and Kurt A. Raaflaub, 275-95. Cambridge, Mass.

Schlegel, A. W. 1846. *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur I*. Vol. 5 of *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Eduard Böcking. Leipzig.

Taplin, Oliver. 1988. "Lyric Dialogue and Dramatic Construction in Later Sophocles." *Dioniso* 55:115-22.

Thiel, Rainer. 1993. *Chor und tragische Handlung im 'Agamemnon' des Aischylos*. Stuttgart.

Wilson, Peter. 2000. *The Athenian Institution of the Khoregia*. Cambridge.