

## Imitating Philoctetes: the mimetic mode of the chorus in the Parodos and the first Stasimon of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*

Several previous studies have identified moments in Sophocles' odes where the chorus are mimetic and/or draw attention to the 'here and now' of their own performance (e.g. Calame 1999: 126-127, Easterling 1997: 157, Heikkila 1991, Henrichs 1995, Davidson 1986, Nagy 2013: 247, Weiss 2018: 52, Piperias 2021), but no special attention has been paid to the *Philoctetes*. In this paper I argue that the chorus of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* use their song and dance to dramatize Philoctetes' offstage sounds and actions mimetically for the audience in their first two odes. In doing so, they communicate their sympathy for him and guide the external audience's emotional response toward empathy for the tragic hero.

In the Parodos, I demonstrate that the chorus act as a 'musical interpreter' of Philoctetes' vocal behavior, by imitating Philoctetes' nonverbal offstage sounds in their onstage song. Although the chorus cooperate in Odysseus' intrigue throughout the play (Schein 2013, 18), in the Parodos they declare their sympathy to Philoctetes. As interpreters on stage, they frame Philoctetes' groaning as "a crash that has been plainly heard" (προυφάνη κτύπος, 203), suggesting a connection to their own onstage vocalizations. Their comments on the alternating directions of Philoctetes' sound (ἢ που τῆδ' ἢ τῆδε τόπων, 204) evoke the experience of the audience who see and listen to the chorus's own spatial alternations on stage. The chorus repeatedly emphasizes Philoctetes' vocal qualities (ἐτύμα φθογγά "the true voice" 205-206, βαρεῖα αὐδὰ "the loud cry" 208) while also singing themselves. Through their mimetic imitation, they make these described vocalizations resonate with their present performance on stage.

In the same vein, the chorus introduce themselves in the first Stasimon as Philoctetes' choral proxies, by merging their performance with his vocal and bodily expressions of suffering. The spatial restrictions of his isolation have forced Philoctetes to confront his own voice and bodily pain. In deciding to communicate the tragic hero's torments to the external audience, the chorus use their body and voice to tell on stage the so-far-untold experiences of the isolated, tragic hero. In

doing so, they employ language suggesting a connection between Philoctetes' sufferings and their own *choreia*. Thus, the βαρυβρῶς (“gnawing”, 693) wound also stands in for the chorus' loud voice, while the phrase ἀντίτυπος στόνος (“echoed lament”, 693) refers not only to Philoctetes' “groaning lament evoked in response” (Schein, 2013: 233 *ad* 692-5), but also to the structure of their own song, that is, antistrophic response. When they say that Philoctetes “was creeping and crawling either this way or that” (εἶπε δ' ἄλλοτ' ἄλλ<αχ>ᾶ / τότ' ἄν εἰλούμενος, 703), the chorus deploy their artistic stage movements to replicate Philoctetes' disorderly body behavior.

Despite Odysseus' commands, the chorus of sailors sympathizes with Philoctetes. And this emotional involvement allows the chorus to transcend their diegetic function and deploy their mimetic role, thus imitating the voice and movements of Philoctetes through their own *choreia*.

### Bibliography

- Calame, C. 1999. “Performative aspects of the choral voice in Greek tragedy: civic identity in performance.” In: S. Goldhill and R. Osborne (eds.). *Performance Culture and Athenian Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.125-153.
- Cavalcante de Lima, A.M. and E.B. Fernandes Freitas. 2012. “Do trágico e do cômico: o processo de ridicularização em *Filoctetes* de Sófocles.” In: Ana Maria César Pompeu et alii (eds.). *O Riso no Mundo Antigo*. Fortaleza: Expressão Gráfica e Editora, pp.303-310.
- Clark, J.T. 2021. “Off-Stage Cries? The Performance of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* 201-218, *Trachiniae* 863-870, and Euripides' *Electra* 747-760.” *HSCP* 111: 79-99.
- Davidson, J.F. 1986. “The Circle and the Tragic Chorus.” *G&R* 33.1: 38-46.
- Easterling, P.E. 1997. “Form and Performance.” In: P.E. Easterling (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.151-177.
- Heikkilä, K. 1991. “Now I have the mind to dance: the references of the chorus to their own dancing in Sophocles' tragedies.” *Arctos: Acta Philologica Fennica* 25: 51-68.

- Henrichs, A. 1995. “«Why Should I Dance?»: Choral Self-Referentiality in Greek Tragedy.” *Arion* 3: 56-111.
- Kitzinger, M.R. 2008. *The Choruses of Sophokles' Antigone and Philoktetes. A Dance of Words*. Leiden: Brill.
- Nagy, G. 2013. “The Delian Maidens and their relevance to choral mimesis in classical drama.” In: R. Gagné and M.G. Hopman (eds). *Choral Mediations in Greek Tragedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.227-256.
- Piperias, P. 2021. “Οψεις χορικής αυτοαναφορικότητας στην *Ιφιγένεια την εν Αυλίδι* του Ευριπίδη.” *Ariadne* 27: 81-94.
- Schein, S.L. 2013. *Sophocles. Philoctetes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Weiss, N.A. 2018. *The Music of Tragedy. Performance and Imagination in Euripidean Theater*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.