

## Age, Birds, and Lament: Choral Poetics and Cohesion in Euripides' *Herakles*

This paper argues that Euripides' *Herakles* is organized in a triadic thematic structure of recurring motifs—age and youth, avian imagery, and the language of lament—whose patterned recurrence unifies the choral odes and modulates the play's emotional tone (*pathos*). Rather than describing physical action, these motifs trace a parallel movement of emotional and symbolic action: the choral songs establish interconnections that guide how the audience perceives and processes the catastrophic murders in the final scenes.

My approach is based on a close reading of the text with attention to lexical echoes and placement. I focus on linguistic registers related to age and youth, birds, and markers of lament, drawing on the diction and tone of mourning, that, taken together, let the chorus' language work as a quiet thread of memory and orientation for the audience.

The *parodos* presents the Theban elders as frail and restricted in movement, identifying them as “grey birds” (*πολιὸς ὄρνις*), a cluster that already blends weakness, avian imagery, and a lamenting undertone (110–18). The first *stasimon*'s praise of youth and aversion to old age (640–70) can be read metapoetically: the chorus thematizes its own ageing voice and body as a performance parameter that shapes song (Alexiou 1974; Swift 2010). Shortly after, the chorus utters a paean to Apollo (687–700), which evokes Delian festival song—not as a literal change of identity, but as a choral re-voicing that briefly reshapes notions of age and gender in performance and lightens the tone (Gagné & Hopman 2013). Avian figures (e.g., *κύκνος ἀοιδός*, 691–94; *ὡς τις ὄρνις ἄπτερος*, 1039–41) repeatedly map lament onto birdsong—a conventional tragic association (Weiss 2017)—which in the *Herakles* is employed with unusual consistency to cue transitions between hope, stasis, and collapse.

These patterns are not confined to the chorus. The same imagery recurs in other voices and helps align speech with a choral framing: Megara's comparison of her children to nestlings under wings (70–72), Amphitryon's self-presentation as enfeebled by age (229–35), and later communal cries of mourning converge with the chorus' bird and lament imagery, reinforcing cohesion at the level of the whole ensemble.

This analysis suggests that the interplay of age, bird, and lament imagery guides the audience's response to the protagonist's frenzy and its aftermath, shaping the emotional and interpretive trajectory of the play and easing the passage from stunned grief to the final outcome of Theseus' intervention (Papadopoulou 2005). By offering a play-specific, line-based account of how these images recur, shift register, and change role, the paper shows how a small imagistic set—age, birds, lament—quietly holds the play together from within, refining how we read cohesion and choral “re-voicing” in Euripidean drama.

### Bibliography

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