

Return to Bands of Maidens: Female Choruses and Euripidean Escape Odes

In Euripides' plays, characters and choruses who find themselves in desperate circumstances often express a wish to fly through the aether or disappear beneath the earth, a prayer that is sometimes called the double-barreled wish. In this paper, I discuss as a group moments when a female chorus expresses a wish for winged travel elsewhere – passages such as the second stasimon of *Iphigenia among the Taurians* 1089-1152, the third stasimon of *Helen* 1451-1511, the second stasimon of *Hippolytus* 732-75, and the first stasimon of *Bacchae* 370-431. These choral passages offer lengthy and elaborate escape prayers that embellish the conventional wish to take wing or disappear, focusing on the winged half, emphasizing upward flight rather than downward descent, and offering a bird's-eye view of imagined expanses of land and sea.

When female choruses in Euripides' plays express a wish onstage to travel elsewhere, where do they wish to journey and how are these imagined landscapes characterized? In Euripides' plays, as I argue, female choruses who wish for release from their impossible circumstances offer surprisingly similar visions of escape. Again and again they wish to return home (to an actual home or to a notional homeland) and they yearn for winged travel to places characterized by bands of maidens, *choreia*, and female *mousikê* (song, dance, and music). I suggest that the escape odes are bound up with the mythical-literary representations of the female life-cycle, the narrative of the transition of the maiden to *gunê*. The imaginative scenes sung by choruses in Euripides' plays represent a desire to reverse the female rite of passage.

At times, such escape fantasies intersect with the notion of "choral projection" (Henrichs), when the chorus imagine themselves dancing outside of the here and now of the dramatic performance. In recent decades, scholars (e.g., Padel, Swift, Dué) have rightly

interpreted such escape odes as connected with important issues within the play, thus representing a break from past interpretations, where the passages were seen as irrelevant, merely decorative, or a simple contrast to the onstage horrors. Building on this scholarship, as well as Murnaghan's work on both male and female choruses in tragedy – especially her attention to women in groups and her discussion of the expression of nostalgia by male choruses – I suggest that the escape odes intersect with a story pattern, common in archaic and classical literature, in which a *parthenos*, marked as distinctive within an erotic context, is separated from the larger group and married or abducted.

Athenian tragedy modifies the story pattern, and the choral odes offer a group perspective, a group such as one from which the maiden might have been abducted. The plays I discuss contain female choruses (the band of maidens) and elements are deployed such that the abduction story pattern resonates, creating a set of expectations for the Athenian audience. In each case, the female choruses are all extremely sympathetic to the protagonist and the individual is separated from the group. It is in response to this separation or impending separation that the chorus sings the ode that contains the escape wish. In *Iphigenia among the Taurians* and *Helen*, Iphigenia and Helen are returning to Greece leaving behind a chorus marooned in the Black Sea region and Egypt, respectively. The story pattern functions in different ways in *Hippolytus* and *Bacchae* with Phaedra and Dionysus serving as superlative leaders. In *Hippolytus*, the escape ode is sung as Phaedra is offstage committing suicide, and in *Bacchae*, Pentheus has just ordered Dionysus brought to him bound and has threatened to stone him to death when the chorus wish to travel to distant lands. The group, in each case, wishes to be reconstituted, and in the escape ode the chorus imagines travel to lands characterized by

scenes of female cohesion, bands of maidens, and *mousikê*. The choruses express a kind of nostalgia, a longing for home (*nostos*) or homeland with a decidedly parthenaic focus.

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