Jane Ellen Harrison and the Greek Chorus

The Greek chorus is having a moment. The surge of interest among classicists in choral performance, referred to as 'chorality', has restored to the chorus to center stage, starting with the landmark work of Calame, *Les choeurs du jeunes filles en grèce archaïque* (1977) and followed more recently by the volumes of Gagné and Hopman (2013) and Billings, Budelmann, and Macintosh 2014, among others. But the chorus generated a similar amount of attention just over a hundred years ago, both among classical scholars and popular imagination. A pivotal figure in the reception of the Greek chorus during this period was the first female classical scholar, Jane Ellen Harrison (1850-1928). This paper examines Harrison's ideas about the chorus and then discusses briefly their influence on the contemporary writers H.D. (1886-1961), Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), and the dancer Isadora Duncan (1877-1927).

The demise of the chorus as a cultural and literary form in the Roman era contributed to its post-classical status as an enigmatic anomaly, a 'problem' debated and theorized by German idealist thinkers (Billings 2013). Almost two centuries later, the Greek chorus had become surprisingly popular in a variety of contexts, including scholarly debates about the origin of Greek tragedy and the layout of the ancient theater, productions of Greek tragedy in colleges and on the professional stage, modernist poetry, and even modern dance. This 'rebirth' of the chorus can be attributed in part to Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* published in 1872, which singled out the chorus for its "astonishing significance" (*Birth* 129). Rejecting Schlegel's concept of the chorus as the 'ideal spectator', Nietzsche considered the dramatic chorus to be "the Dionysian-musical substratum of tragedy" (*Birth* 110), whose function was to stir the minds of the spectators "to a pitch of Dionysian frenzy" (*Birth* 70).

The imprint of Nietzsche's ideas is most clearly seen in Harrison's influential theory of the chorus popularized in *Ancient Art and Ritual* published in 1913. She held that tragedy originated not simply in choral performances in honor of Dionysus but songs performed by his female worshippers. Drawing on Dörpfeld's controversial view that the actors and chorus performed on the same level, without a stage, Harrison further argued that the chorus served as the "centre and kernel and starting-point of the drama" (123) and yet at the same time represented its most alien component. Tragic plays, she says, owe "their peculiar, their incommunicable beauty largely to this element of the chorus which seemed at first so strange" (122).

The chorus as a female voice both foundational to Attic drama and yet marginal and exotic clearly influenced Virginia Woolf, who gives the scholar a cameo in *A Room of One's Own*, and H.D., who encountered the scholar's ideas indirectly through classicist Gilbert Murray, particularly his book *Euripides and his Age*. Around 1908, Duncan began thinking about the Greek chorus in relation to dance, also gravitating toward Euripides (Daly 1995: 145). Her aim was "to revive the Greek drama and the Greek chorus" in solo performance (Daly 1995: 145; Zanobi 2010: 240). Inspired both by Nietzsche and Harrison, who accompanied one of Duncan's performances with a dramatic reading of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and Theocritus' *Idylls* (Zanobi 2013: 7-8 and n. 34), she found in the chorus not only the possibility of dancing as a form of Dionysiac ecstasy, an intoxicating surrender of the self, but also an impersonal, abstract "vehicle of emotion." Harrison's conceptions of the Greek chorus as a classical scholar thus helped to shape an aesthetic central to female literary and artistic production which in turn influenced its popular reception in the early twentieth century.

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