

The Centrality of the Chorus in Euripides' *Phoenissae*

Commentators from antiquity to the present have found the chorus's connection to the Tyrian origin of Cadmus to be tenuous, even by Euripidean standards. The chorus are neither city elders nor advisors to the protagonist (Mastronarde 1992 and Papadopoulou 2008). On the other hand, scholars such as Marilyn Arthur (1977) find connections through imagery between the chorus and the rest of the play. For instance, the chorus knits together the past, present, and future of the Labdacids in Greece and Delphi, with the green shoots and waters contrasting with the blood of warfare. Laura Swift (2009) emphasizes the erotic and marital language of the women dreaming of washing their hair in the Castalian spring (222-225).

Given connections between the Labdacid chorus and the theme of warfare, the role of the chorus comes even closer to the focus of the play. Indeed, without the chorus of enslaved women, the play would have a gap in its range of those affected by conflict. The chorus alludes to these points in the parodos, when they state that Ares has come (240) and that the Phoenicians' and Thebans' sufferings will be shared (κοινά at 243, 244, and 247). Although the chorus anticipate their "service" (225) as "slaves" to Loxias (204-5), this is aspirational. The reality is their fear (236) after sailing the "unharvested (sea-)plains of Sicily" (210-11), a journey described with a unique epithet (ἀκαπίστων) reminiscent of the Homeric ἀτρύγετος. Among the many Homeric examples of ἀτρύγετος, the first, at *Iliad* 1.316, is especially relevant here: Agamemnon is about to order his henchmen to take Briseis (I.323). Such touches remind us that the chorus, despite leaving it unclear at times whose homeland is at stake (e.g., πατρίδι at 1031 without a descriptor) utter a "barbarian cry" (679 βαρβάρῳ βοῶ).

Phoenissae, like most tragedies, is not overtly political. Nevertheless, several points involving the chorus may indirectly reflect events outside the theatre. *Phoenissae* was staged ca. 411-408 BCE if assumptions about the number of speaking parts and meter are accurate. These concerns are relevant even if Euripides was in Macedon. In the third stasimon, as Menoeceus rushes toward his doom, the chorus vividly recounts the Theban response to another horrific event in their past, the depredations of the Sphinx. Among mothers' and daughters' laments, the city "cried out" (1037 ἐποτοτύζε) and the moans "in a thunder" (1029 βροντᾶ) sighed each time the Sphinx "disappeared" (1041 ἀφανίσειεν) one of the men. Although women's lamentations are normative, Euripides' language is not: ἐποτοτύζε is a *hapax* in extant Greek, while one of the few uses of ἀφανίζω in this sense appears at Thucydides IV.80.4-5, in which the Spartans "disappear" helots (cf. Hornblower and Mastronarde). Likewise, the Athenian oligarchy of the Four Hundred also "secretly" (VIII.61.2 κρύφα) assassinated the democratic leader Androcles (Vidal-Naquet).

The word "Phoenicians" itself has contemporary relevance. Throughout the fifth century BCE, Greeks tended to consider the peoples of the Persian empire interchangeable (Yates 2019). An obvious connection for the audience is Phoenician men from Tyre serving the Persian general Tissaphernes. The years 412- 411 mark the beginning of a murky intrigue among Tissaphernes and the exiled Alcibiades, the Athenians (especially oligarchs), the Spartans, and the Persians. Tissaphernes was supposed to support either the Spartans or the Athenians, depending on circumstances, and to provide Phoenician ships. As Thucydides indicates (8.46 and elsewhere), these ships never materialized (see Hornblower and Lateiner).

By bringing enslaved Phoenician women into the Greek ambit, Euripides expands the audience's sympathies while leaving the Greeks dominant (cf. Hall, 1994, re Greek

portrayals of domination over the Persians). Both Attic Colonus and pro-Spartan Delphi are linked through oracles about the fate of Oedipus. Meanwhile, the Thebes of myth is torn asunder by the kind of factional strife familiar to the playwright's contemporaries. Thus, Euripides, linking the pain of the Phoenician women to that of the Greeks, through genealogy, imagery, and current events, includes the chorus in the kindred suffering of war.

Bibliography

- Arthur, M.B. 1977. "The Curse of Civilization: The Choral Odes of the *Phoenissae*." *HSCP* 81: 163-185.
- Hall, Edith. "Asia unmanned: Images of Victory in Classical Athens." in *War and Society in the Greek World*. John Rich and Graham Shipley, eds. London/New York 1994: 108-133.
- Euripides. *Phoenissae*. Donald J. Mastronarde, ed. Cambridge, Camb. 1994
- Hornblower, Simon. *A Commentary on Thucydides*. 3 vols. Oxford 2011
- Lateiner, Donald. "Tissaphernes and the Phoenician Fleet (Thucydides 8.87)." *TAPA* 106 (1976): 267-290.
- Papadopoulou, Thalia. *Euripides: Phoenician Women*. London 2008.
- Swift, L.A. "Sexual and Familial Distortions in Euripides' *Phoenissae*." *TAPA* 139 (2009): 53-87.
- Vidal-Naquet, Pierre. *Assassins of Memory: Essays on the Denial of the Holocaust*. J. Mehlman, trans. New York 1992.
- Yates, David C. *States of Memory: The Polis, Panhellenism, and the Persian War*. Oxford 2019.