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Choral Presence in Athenian Tragedy

Recent scholarship has begun to abandon the ideal of a singular definition of the role of the Chorus in Athenian tragedy (usually some variation on Schlegel's "idealized spectator"). Choruses can be shown to function across a range of dramatic roles (e.g. C. Calame, in Goldhill & Osborne 1999, 128-9), and the supposed empathy between Chorus and audience must be complicated by John Gould's observation that the choral collective is typically a group with marginal social status (J. Gould, in Silk 1996, 220). While maintaining the plurality of Choral roles, we should not, however, rush to over-emphasize marginality. This paper shows that one Choral function is that of an "internal audience," in a sense other than that term has conventionally been used. Inside the dramatic world, characters act as social performers, and in some tragedies the Chorus is marked as being the audience of their performance. Thus, even when silent, the Chorus should at times be viewed as a socio-linguistic force affecting the discourse of the individuated characters. Through the choral presence, tragedy is able to capture the kinds of public performance dynamics that were seen and felt in Athenian public life most notably in the Assembly and the courts, where a few vocal actors played out their conflicts to a watching public.

Agon scenes from two Sophoklean tragedies, *Antigone* and *Aias*, provide examples of what I mean by the force of choral presence. If socio-linguistic and pragmatic categories are used to analyze the two characters' discursive goals and maneuvers, it becomes clear that a third element, the dramatic audience (the Chorus), is affecting the conflict. *Antigone* attempts to appropriate Kreon's forensic interrogation to proclaim her own *kleos* (502). But *kleos* necessarily requires a public. She explicitly recognizes the Chorus as the vehicle of her glory with the demonstrative *toutois* at line 504. In turn, Kreon's earlier political concern with the Chorus (218-9) blossoms into mimetic motivation for his participation in an *agon* with *Antigone*, contrary to his expressed views on restraining women's speech. He can not simply execute her, but must engage in argument in order to regain control of public opinion.

In the second half of the *Aias*, the successive *agones* between Teukros and the Atreidai are a precarious power-play in which each side attempts to get their way while yet avoiding civil war between the Salaminian contingent and the rest of the Greek army. It is the Choral presence which gives weight to Teukros' threats of violence for violence and gives motivation to the Atreidai's attempts to use words rather than force. Menelaos initially tries to regain control through a performance of authoritative discourse. Teukros, however, circumvents that control as he explicitly addresses the Chorus (*andres*, 1093), invoking them as a judging audience for a bout of ritual abuse or "flyting" (J. Hesk, APA paper 2003). Menelaos, like Kreon, is thus forced by the choral presence into an unwelcome discursive paradigm for the agonistic exchange.