

Chorus as a “Team Personage” and Protagonist in Aeschylus Tragedy “The Suppliant Women”

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Ancient tragedy is alive and popular in the modern theater scene worldwide and in Georgia, leading to a constant revisit of ancient texts, the creation of new translations and diverse interpretations. This constant and intensive process expands the scope of research on ancient tragedy and facilitates the generation of new knowledge in connection with modernity. Chorus, the oldest and most significant component of tragedy, is a subject of research not only in philology but also in theater. The perception of chorus in science is not unambiguous due to its complex nature, allowing for a variety of interpretations. The aim of the study is to determine the role of the chorus in Aeschylus' tragedy “The Suppliant Women”, because its importance is particularly evident with the example of this tragedy. By analyzing the parts of the tragedy's text, observing its content, and interpreting the text as a performance, It can be assumed that the chorus acted on the stage as a protagonist. This assumption significantly changes the perception of the text as the main reference for the theater. The ancient dramatic text is constantly performed on the modern stage, which allows for an exploration of the tangible connection between antiquity and modernity. It also demonstrates that the chorus is not solely an observer, commonly seen as the embodiment of the so-called public opinion, but also an active character, making and executing decisions. In the case of “The Suppliant Women”, the chorus performs the role of the central character, without whom the tragedy would remain incomplete. Chorus is the protagonist. © 2025 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.

Aeschylus, chorus, tragedy

The core issue of the study is: to what extent can the chorus be perceived as a character and does it perform the function of a protagonist in some tragedies? In the article, The discussion will not be focused on the profound layers of the chorus's meaning, which intersects with issues in philosophy, psychology, and sociology. Instead, the study will be concentrated on the peculiarity of the

chorus in Aeschylus' “The Suppliant Women”. R. Gordesiani, while noting the significance of the chorus in Greek tragedy, defines its scope and writes: “The chorus never represents an individual. It was a representation of society in general or a part of society, expressing public opinion vocally and plastically through words, song, and dance. The tragedy commenced with the chorus's entrance and

concluded with their departure. The chorus filled the pauses between actions, occasionally participating directly in the action with brief retorts[1].

In contrast to Sophocles and Euripides, the significance of the chorus is notably greater in Aeschylus's works. This is attributed to the proximity to the origins of tragedy during Aeschylus's time. Researchers approach this issue from various angles, considering different aspects to explain it. Notably, most of Aeschylus's tragedies are titled after a specific group of people, a group that also embodies the chorus within the tragedy. Out of the 7 tragedies by Aeschylus that have reached us, 4 bear names of a chorus. Additionally, 45% of those tragedies, of which a small fragment or only the title has survived, bear the name of Chorus. The distribution of lines in Aeschylus's tragedies is also worth noting, where a significantly greater number of lines belong to the chorus compared to any individual character. Chorus lines in the extant tragedies of Aeschylus are distributed in the following percentages: Persians – 45%, Agamemnon – 49%, Choephores – 42%, Eumenides – 41%, Prometheus Bound – 18%, Seven Against Thebes – 48%, The Suppliant Women – 60%. It is evident that the mere number of lines alone cannot determine the function. However, the consistent number of lines, the choice of tragedy titles, and the textual content analysis all suggest that, for Aeschylus, the chorus in some cases had more functions beyond simply being a group expressing public opinion. It can be assumed, that in certain tragedies of Aeschylus, the chorus, through the intensity of the action and self-analysis of its own function, equals the typical acting character in the tragedy. To illustrate this, the study will consider the tragedy “The Suppliant Women”.

Until 1952, “The Suppliant Women” was considered the oldest tragedy of antiquity because of the dominant role of the chorus. But now it is dated between 465-460 years. Tragedy took first place, probably in 463. And most modern studies identify it as the second tragedy of the trilogy (The

Egyptians, The Suppliant Women, the Danaids, and the satirical drama Amymone), contrary to the opinion that the tragedy was the introduction to the trilogy” [2]. Frequently, researchers attribute the substantial presence of the Chorus in Aeschylus' tragedies to its ancient association with the dithyramb. As evidenced by this brief quote, this explanation did not prove to be reliable. The example from this tragedy demonstrates that the chorus's prominent role is not solely due to its antiquity or its proximity to the dithyramb. Rather, it emerges as a choice by the author – a poetic and theatrical solution.

The quantitative aspect of the chorus in “The Suppliant Women” tragedy remains a subject of considerable debate. Apart from the three individual characters – Danaos, Pelasgus, and the messenger – there are 50 Danaids, 50 of their maids, 50 Egyptians in absentia, and participants in the public assembly, whose choices significantly impact the fate of the suppliant women. Today, it is acknowledged that Aeschylus did not violate the established limitations when presenting this tragedy. He featured the complete chorus with 12 members, leaving the rest to the imagination of the experienced Athenian audience. Oliver Taplin explores the silent characters whose presence on stage is confirmed by the lines of the tragedy. He notes that the appearance of horses and chariots on stage was not uncommon in early Greek tragedy. Taplin believes that Pelasgos entered the stage accompanied by a bodyguard and several chariots. Additionally, he highlights the uniqueness of the tragedy The Suppliant Women, stating: “The Suppliant Women is a straightforward play, and that is its strength” [3].

The transition from dithyramb to tragedy marks the shift from narrating the action to enacting it. During the dithyramb, the chorus narrates the story; it does not participate, engage, suffer or experience the events. In this case, it acts as an external observer, perceiving events from a distance or, more precisely, recollecting and telling us stories

from the past. The chorus, in this case, is essentially a storyteller. After Thespis introduced the first actor on stage, the portrayal of action began, initiating the principal theatrical concept that continues to drive theater today: here and now. The actor doesn't narrate the character's story but embodies the character himself, experiencing the story firsthand. He acts as Aristotle defines the essence of tragedy in poetics, and tells his story through action. On this path of development, the chorus retained its initial role assumed during the performance of the dithyramb, as observed by readers and researchers. Nevertheless, the story depicted in the dramatic text significantly influences the Chorus, thereby preventing it from remaining an external observer. Simultaneously, the tragic chorus embodies a distinct entity, resembling a collective yet specific group characterized by defined age, gender, social status, and notably, its position. Moreover, it's vital to note that the Chorus is frequently directly engaged in the action, to the extent that the outcome of the action directly impacts it, as it represents a member of the contemporary society within the narrative. Within all dramatic texts, the chorus stands as a direct contemporary of the action, distinguishing itself from the dithyramb singing chorus that, in modern times, narrates stories from the past – safely distanced in time from the tragic event.

In the work published by Petcu and Medeleanu in 2020, the chorus is described as a "collective character", which I consider an interesting definition, and when discussing *The Suppliant Women*, we read: "the protagonist is the chorus itself" [4]. Let us briefly recall the content of the tragedy: fifty daughters, with their father Danaos and fifty maids, escape from their homeland, Egypt, arriving at the shores of Argos to ask for help. They fled from hated marriage with their cousins, seeking protection and asylum from Pelasgus. They also sought protection from the fifty Egyptians, who also soon arrived on the shores of Argos. In this tragedy, who can be identified as the protagonist? Who is the story about, whose fate is decided and without

whom the action would not take place? The answer is quite evident. Instead of naming an individual character, we will have to name the entire composition of the chorus, as it represents a unified, inseparable, and indivisible body. Is it possible to discuss chorus's character as a character of a personage?

The tragedy begins with a submissive plea, a ritual supplication that then gathers intensity. The pleading Chorus, asking for help, first appeals to the gods, primarily Zeus, believing in a direct connection with Zeus as a descendant of Io. Subsequently, a shift occurs as the tone changes from pleas to intermittent threats and demands. The Chorus displays its character right from the start. It cannot simply be an observer or a third person who is not involved in the action, merely narrating events. Right from the start, it becomes evident from the content that the central figure in this tragedy is the Chorus – daughters fleeing from unwanted marriage. They themselves ask for help, demonstrating unwavering determination in their quest. They not only plan to act but also actively engage in action. In *Parodos*, they unveil their drastic plan crafted for dire circumstances. A public, collective suicide stands as their final recourse, intending to both frighten the gods and the king. The Chorus confronts Zeus in a tone of ultimatum, not seeking but demanding his attention and protection. He does not reserve to make his possible death a final triumph of Hera, because the Danaides consider themselves to be the last descendants of Io.

Consequently, the chorus emerges as active right from the start, as evident in the text from the *parodos*: the initial request transforms into a demand. Before the action begins, the Chorus asserts its strength and distinctive character, so vivid and discernible that one can perceive it as possessing shared qualities that define a single person rather than a crowd.

The active participation of the Danaides' chorus in the tragedy's action doesn't align with a passive

role of the observer. Researchers try to determine its original character and purpose to outline the extent of its involvement. Consequently, there have been numerous attempts to characterize the function of the chorus, including terms such as collective character, congregational character, and team character. In my opinion, the mentioned event is more accurately defined by the term team character. A team represents a group of people united by a common characteristic. An analogy with a sports team illustrates this parallel most distinctly. For example, a football team is a group of people of the same gender and of roughly similar age and physical abilities who are all motivated by a shared goal and collaborate together to achieve it. A team cannot isolate a single player and start their own separate game. The team is bound by specific rules, and if they are breached, the team is dissolved and ceases to exist. Once a team is divided into individuals, it no longer maintains its essence, losing its ability to collaborate towards a shared goal. In team sports, victory is attributed to the team, not the individual athlete; the team becomes the champion. In tragedy, similarly, the chorus embodies a collective of like-minded individuals working together as a unified entity to achieve a common goal. The members of the chorus avoid disagreements or internal opposition, thereby working collectively as a team.

While researching the significance of the chorus in the tragedy "The Suppliant Women", several stages were identified. The initial stage involves direct observation of the Greek text. According to Taplin, this method enables the perception of the action, as it contains clues that, when read correctly and visualized appropriately, facilitate the reconstruction of the theatrical action. In the study attention will be focused on the peculiarity that chorus refers to itself using the first person singular pronoun - I (ἐγώ).

In the tragedy „The Suppliant Women“, the Chorus refers to itself multiple times using the first person singular pronoun. In two of these instances,

the lines belong to the Coryphaeus, while in the remaining cases, they solely belong to the Chorus. „The initial emergence of theater began when lyrical exclamation and storytelling led to a deity speaking in the first person. Thus, gradually, tragedy evolved from an epic lyrical poem into theater, which was represented by the characters initiated by the exclamation of the chorus" [5]. This quote talks about the development of the medium between the text and the listener, the viewer, the process when the narrator became a performer, an actor, as if crossing the line between the story and reality and stepping into the story. This shift completely turned the point of perception, as the external observer was turned inside and began to exist there, act, and through that act show the development of the story. "Following this logic, being a mere observer or claiming the title of an ideal viewer becomes challenging, particularly when the chorus refers to itself in the first person, declaring "I" "ἐγώ"

τὼς καὶ ἐγὼ φιλόδου-
τος Ἰαονίοισι νόμοισι 68-69

[Even so I, indulging my grief in Ionian strains,]

These lines are encountered in the third stanza of the Parodos, indicating that they are uttered by a chorus, at least by one half, but not by one person.

εἴρηκας ἀμφὶ κόσμον ἀψευδῇ λόγον.
ἐγὼ δὲ πρὸς σὲ πότερον ὡς ἔτην λέγω,
ἢ ῥήτορ' ἱεροράβδον, ἢ πόλεως ἀγόν; 246-248

[You have not spoken falsely about our clothing. But, for my part, how am I to address you?]

In epeisodion I, the Coryphaeus addresses Egeus. This example might appear relatively weak because the Coryphaeus speaks alone at this point, as indicated in the text. He uses the first-person plural pronoun "we" when referring to the Chorus and the singular pronoun "I" when speaking of himself.

τούτῳ μὲν εἶπας, καὶ τεταγμένος κίοι:
ἐγὼ δὲ πῶς δρῶ; ποῦ θράσος νέμεις ἐμοί; 504-505

[You told him, and let him go as directed. 505
But what of me? What am I to do? Where do you
assign security to me?]

Komos, Coryphaeus

ἄφυκτον δ' οὐκέτ' ἂν πέλοι κακόν:

κελαινόχρως δὲ πάλλεται μου καρδία. 784-785

[The evil is no longer escapable; 785 my heart
is darkened and trembling:]

Stasimon II, antistrophe I "My heart" is
simultaneously uttered by the chorus. It is evident
that the multiplicity of voices conveys a unified
sorrow and organic unity. The identity of a chorus
is an indivisible whole, resembling that of a person.

ἔγγαιος ἐγὼ βαθυχαῖος

†βαθρείας βαθείας, γέρον. 859-860 [6]

[I am a native here, of ancient nobility 860 . . .
old man.]

II epeisodion, I antistrophe. It is obvious, that
these lines are also collectively uttered by the
chorus (half of it). It vehemently addresses the
messenger of the Egyptians. The last example most
clearly reflects the mood conveyed by the first-
person singular pronoun, intensifying the anger and
toughness evident in the content. It distinctly
portrays the chorus as a unified, tense, battle-
oriented body capable of expressing itself as "I".

Similar moments are not found in the tragedies
of Sophocles and Euripides. As the observation
shows, the epithet "team" most accurately conveys
the essence of the Danaides' function, as this term

encompasses both the concept of a multitude and
individuality. The concept of teamwork embodies
unity and multiplicity concurrently. It is also
characterized by a completely definite purpose, as
it typically clarifies the nature of the team, its
purpose, and whom it represents.

It is believed that the tendency to perceive the
Chorus as a team character can be observed in other
tragedies by Aeschylus and appears to be nearly
regular, but obviously this is a matter for further
research. It is especially important that when
staging Aeschylus' tragedies, specifically "The
Suppliant Women", we should take into account the
fact that Aeschylus emphasizes the Chorus as a
unified entity to such an extent that the Chorus can
even assume the role of the protagonist.
Considering all the above mentioned, in the tragedy
"The Suppliant Women", the chorus should not
function solely as a narrator or evaluator on stage,
but rather should be actively engaged in the action
as the primary actor, who will be assume as the
central conflict presented in the tragedy.

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თანამედროვე თეატრალურ სცენაზე მსოფლიოსა და საქართველოში ძველი ბერძნული ტრაგედია ცოცხალია და პოპულარული, რაც უძველეს ტექსტებთან მუდმივ დაბრუნებას, ახალი თარგმანების შექმნასა და მრავალფეროვან ინტერპრეტაციას განაპირობებს. აღნიშნული უწყვეტი და ინტენსიური პროცესი ზრდის ანტიკური ტრაგედიის კვლევის დიაპაზონს და თანამედროვეობასთან კავშირში ახალი ცოდნის შექმნის საშუალებას იძლევა. ქორო ტრაგედიის უძველესი და უმნიშვნელოვანესი ნაწილია, რომლის მნიშვნელობის კვლევა მიმდინარეობს არა მხოლოდ ფილოლოგიაში, არამედ თეატრშიც. ქოროს აღქმა მეცნიერებაში არ არის ერთმნიშვნელოვანი, რადგან იგი კომპლექსურ მთლიანობას წარმოადგენს და მრავალფეროვანი ინტერპრეტაციის საშუალებას იძლევა. ნაშრომის მიზანია, ქოროს როლის განსაზღვრა ესქილეს ტრაგედიაში „მავედრებელი ქალები“, რადგან ამ ტრაგედიის მაგალითით, განსაკუთრებით, თვალსაჩინოა მისი მნიშვნელობა. ტრაგედიის ტექსტის ელემენტების გაანალიზება, შინაარსზე დაკვირვება და ტექსტის მოქმედებად წარმოდგენა ქოროს ფუნქციის ახალი ტერმინით განსაზღვრის საშუალებას იძლევა - „გუნდური პერსონაჟი“. როგორც ჩანს, ზოგიერთ ტრაგედიაში ქორო მოქმედებდა, როგორც პროტაგონისტი. ეს დაშვება მნიშვნელოვნად ცვლის ტექსტის, როგორც ძირითადი მინიშნების, აღქმას თეატრისთვის. ანტიკური დრამატული ტექსტი გამუდმებით იდგმება და თამაშდება თანამედროვე სცენაზე, რაც ანტიკურობასა და თანამედროვეობას შორის ხელშესახები კავშირის კვლევას შესაძლებელს ხდის და გვიჩვენებს, რომ ქორო შეიძლება იყოს არა მხოლოდ დამკვირვებელი, ე.წ. საზოგადოებრივი აზრი, როგორც ზოგადად მიღებულია მისი აღქმა, არამედ აქტიურად მოქმედი „გუნდური პერსონაჟი“, რომელიც იღებს გადაწყვეტილებებს და ასრულებს მათ. „მავედრებელი ქალების“ შემთხვევაში კი ქორო არის ცენტრალური პერსონაჟი, რომლის გარეშეც არ შედგებოდა ტრაგედია. ქორო არის პროტაგონისტი.

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