

CLAS 211
Dwayne Meisner
Research Paper

The Influence of the Chorus in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*:
Visualizing ποιητικός & μίμησις
Idella Maeland

Abstract

The *Oresteia* by Aeschylus is a trilogy of tragedies with a heavy choral focus, not unlike the many plays of ancient Greece. What separates the *Oresteia* from other tragedies of the time, however, is the unique application of the chorus to the plays *Agamemnon*, the *Libation Bearers*, and the *Eumenides* that make up the trilogy. When studying choral odes and Greek tragedy in general, one must consider the way in which the Greeks interpreted tragedy and literature: the idea of *mimesis*, as Aristotle describes in his ancient writings, and the Greek concept of *poetics*. I argue that, in terms of Classical history, poetry was not considered to be a specific genre of literature but, rather, an embodiment of all forms of art that reflected *mimesis*, i.e., representation through the use of artistic means. The idea of tragedy being a form of poetry is brought forth by Aristotle in *Poetics* and is supported by the scripts of tragic plays such as the *Oresteia*, particularly in the poetry of the chorus. It is understood that the chorus provided a great focus of attention for tragic authors like Aeschylus specifically because many of his plays were titled with the name of the chorus (two thirds of the *Oresteia*), which was made up of groups of individuals who added their own interpretations of the Greek world into the plays themselves, being everyday, male, Greek citizens. Members of the chorus' reactions to the situations presented to them depend on their social status within the plot. The chorus' role in the tragedy demonstrates the influence of epic poems such as the works of Homer on Greek theatre and can be traced back to the roots of art forms like films and modern theatre productions that we enjoy today.

Considering the influence that the Homeric tradition of poetry had on the Greeks, it can also be understood how the chorus fulfilled the role of supporting the importance of ceremony and cultural practices. The play the *Libation Bearers* in particular highlights the importance of lamenting (and avenging) deceased relatives as the chorus themselves play an active role in the plot by encouraging a brother and sister to summon the spirit of their murdered father during a choral ode. The poetic devices used in the songs of the chorus, such as the metre, are crucial in setting the pace for the audience, creating suspense. The chorus also visualizes these emotions as they not only chant in poetic rhythm, but also dance while dressed in costume. All of these elements that make up the chorus of the *Oresteia* combine to create an impactful performance that showcases Aristotle's concept of artistic representation and an intense visual portrayal of poetry--a concept that embodies all of literature.

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Greek tragedy has, and will continue to be, influential to all of modern literature. The Classical concepts used in Greek plays have allowed us to not only have a better historical outlook on how the ancient Greeks lived, their social structures, and mythological stories, but they also give us information about from where our modern forms of literature evolved. The poetry used in ancient plays are showcased by the chorus and display how the epic poetry of Homer to Dithyrambic poetry eventually grew into the dramatic recitation of poetry with a complex plot and (tragic) story, usually based in the mythological past. Aeschylus was an influential tragedian who wrote plays with a heavy focus on the chorus. The importance of the chorus is clear when studying his trilogy the *Oresteia*, in his incorporation of every-day citizens who helped drive the plot while also incorporating traditional elements of dance, song, and musical accompaniment to the plays. All aspects of the tragedy and especially the chorus envelop Aristotle's concept of mimesis--combining visual, musical, and poetic representation into one performance. The chorus serves as a reminder of where tragedy evolved from--the musical recitation of epic poetry--and demonstrates the remnants of the past poetics that continue to influence forms of art today.

Aristotle, the Tradition of Poetry & the Concept of *Mimesis*

The influence of the chorus on Greek tragedy, specifically the *Oresteia*, can be understood through the Greek concept of what makes something *poetic* and how poetry is involved in all types of artistic representation. When modern readers study the chorus of Aeschylus, along with

other Greek tragedians, it is clear that the spoken words of each character are poems in themselves, written in a specific metre and using poetic devices such as metaphor. In modern literature we separate poetry and theatre as two distinct genres; we view poetry as a piece of writing (typically shorter than other literary works) that makes use of particular devices like rhyme and rhythm. Usually, except in the case of epic poetry, a poem does not have a plot but rather attempts to expand on certain ideas, concepts, or experiences. The Greeks, however, saw poetry and tragedy as one in the same. It is through the study of Greek literature that we can see how poetry has evolved overtime and how today we consider it a genre separated from theatre. In the theatre's origins in the Classical world, all artistic forms of writing were thought to be kinds of poetry in the Greek mind. In *Poetics*, Aristotle explains that the "poetics" (ποιητικός) of both epic poetry and tragedy are "representations of life" (20). The Greek word is "mimesis" (μίμησις), which more specifically translates to "representation by means of art" (20). When studying the ancient oral tradition of reciting Homer's epic poetry, it seems as though it would be a natural step to eventually incorporate visual elements of acting and dancing while chanting poems, because the Greeks had already been performing poetry for hundreds of years before the birth of tragedy. Aristotle states that "epic poetry...and the poetry of tragic drama, and, moreover, comedy and dithyrambic poetry, and most flute-playing and harp-playing" are all examples of mimesis (17). He also claims that theatre evolved from the performance of dithyrambic poetry--oral poems and chants that included music and dance to Dionysis (19). Aristotle states that "all the literary genres mentioned make use of rhythm, language, and melody, whether separately or in combination" (17), meaning, all literary genres of *poetics*. Aristotle recognizes that there are different forms of *poetics*, as some are completely oral and some have visual

elements, but they are all *poetry*. In this way, ancient Greek literature has clearly been influential to our modern-day poetry, which would include books, plays, and poems, but also movies and television; if Aristotle could, perhaps he would also argue films to be a form of modern poetics. As noted by John Herington, “the Greeks possessed no word that really corresponded to our *art*, just as they possessed none that really corresponded to our *literature*” (105). The intense role that Greek poetry and other forms of *mimesis* had on the ancient civilization is evident through their complex poetic history.

In terms of the tragic Greek chorus, it is important to consider the original poetry from which the chants originated and the metric style along with the language and poetic devices that were used. The *Oresteia* trilogy incorporates many complex pieces of poetry, including an intense use of extended metaphors, a metre that changes depending on dramatic action, and the specific language in which it was written. Some scholars believe that Aeschylus was probably influenced by Anacreon, a Greek lyric poet who met Aeschylus when he was just beginning to write plays (Herington, 110). An old Greek manuscript even refers to Aeschylus’ poetic style as “Anacreontean,” according to John Herington (110). Although we cannot know for certain if Anacreon was a poetic influence to Aeschylus, tragedy writers did bring together music from festivals, dances, and symposiums into their plays--specifically into the choral odes--meaning that the sound of lyric in tragedy would have been a familiar sound to a Greek audience, regardless if there was a specific influencer or not (Herington, 112). Herington notes that Aeschylus “is represented as having continued the high proportion of lyric to dialogue but as having deliberately adopted a different lyric style” (109). In Attic tragedy, the characters’ dialogues were written in a Doric dialect even though the actors would have been predominantly

Athenian. This dialect uses more long α sounds in Greek (Herington, 113). Why this more archaic-sounding Greek was used is not exactly known, but it is notable that the Doric dialect was spoken in places like Boeotia and Lesbos, where poetry was very popular (as the famous poet Sappho was from Lesbos). The long α sound--rather than the long ε from Attic dialect--was perhaps associated with poetry because of the cities in which poetry was prevalent, and playwrights simply continued using the traditional Doric language that was associated with poetry (Herington, 114). The two metres most prominently used in tragedy are iambic tetrameter and trochaic tetrameter catalectic, and these metres were popular in poetry long before tragedy's birth. Better understanding the poetry that later evolved into Greek tragedy is an important step in learning how the ancient civilization combined poetry along with other forms of *mimesis* to capture its audiences.

Poetry was important to ancient Greek culture as a form of artistic representation, and through this art the significance of cultural values were reaffirmed. This concept of rationalizing the values and traditions of the ancient Greeks through *mimesis* is told through Aeschylus' choruses. Reciting poetry through the chorus medium was an essential part of the religious, ceremonial and cultural practices of the Greeks--choral odes were used as a way to remember and respect particular moments (Swift, 26). L.A. Swift states that the choral odes in tragedies use "motifs from lyric to trigger awareness of a genre, and to evoke a mood influenced by that genre" using "verbal and imagistic cues" (27). So, when an audience was watching a chorus perform their ode in a tragedy such as *The Libation Bearers*, they would be reminded of the lamentation ceremonies, burial practices and their respect for the dead, making the performance powerful because of the emotional experiences tied to them. During the large ode in the middle of *The*

Libation Bearers, Electra, Orestes, and the chorus all sing songs to their murdered father together--lamenting his death, but also summoning him to help them take revenge on Clytemnestra. In Strophe B of the Kommos, the chorus of young women cry:

One dies, and is lamented.
 Light falls on the man who killed him.
 He is hunted down by the deathsong
 For sires slain and for fathers,
 Disturbed, and stern, and avenging. (327-331)

In this case, along with others throughout tragedy, the group of Libation Bearers represent the pain and suffering felt by death, and they reaffirm the Greek idea of revenge and justice. In other words, the chorus “symbolizes and reaffirms the values associated with these events” (Swift, 36), as the chorus of Libation Bearers further establish the importance of respecting the dead and, later, the Furies symbolize the importance of justice. Poetry was “the prime medium for the dissemination of political, moral, and social ideas” (Herington, 3). Although tragedy reinforces social order and values, it “also has the peculiarity of calling into question the normative codes themselves” (Segal, 25). The idea of the chorus being rooted in Greek culture further supports Aristotle’s idea of representation through *mimesis*, because not only was the chorus stylistically beautiful to watch, but they also represented Greek everyday life. Because the chorus was present long before the invention of dramatic tragedy, for the ancient Greeks, “choral lyric [had] a natural reach into the past and the future” (Goward, 22). The chorus reminds the audience of the mythological past and how the conflict of the tragedy began, which further establishes the importance of cultural practices, while also allowing the playwright, audience, and even the chorus themselves to have their own take on these traditions and mythologies.

The Collective Chorus & its Individuals

The individual members who made up the chorus are important to the Greek tragedy because they added their own influence to the texts themselves, especially in Aeschylus' tragedies. According to Renaud Gagne and Marianne Govers, the Greek chorus was made up of "non-professional citizens" and "a playwright's opportunity to put on a play was synonymous with and depended on his ability to secure a chorus from the polis" (26). When writing a tragedy, the playwright would have to keep in mind that each member of the chorus would add their own individuality to the play itself because "the chorus combines the voices of the poet and that (or those) of the spectators" (Calame, 27). This idea fits with Aristotle's ideas about poetry and representation--the tragic chorus is relatable because they are not only speaking the words of the playwright, but also their own words as "non-professional citizens." Even though the playwright may have written the words himself, the chorus demonstrates their own individuality while working collectively in a group with their performance of the odes. This placed the average citizen in the mythological past and gives the every-day person a voice among the great heroes and villains of the past. Although, ironically, Greek plays were performed by an all-male cast, the tragic chorus was a place where a group of women played an important part in the mythological world--a role which women were not typically allowed to play at this time. In terms of Aeschylus specifically, 59% of his known tragedies had a chorus of women, a percentage which dropped by the time of Sophocles' plays (Calame, 37). In the *Oresteia* alone, two of the three plays in the trilogy had a chorus of female Libation Bearers and the Fury goddesses, just one example of the chorus giving groups of more marginalized people a role in the mythological past.

Women in Ancient Greece were often dismissed and there were many sexist elements of Greek culture, as are sometimes reflected in Greek tragedy. However, the significant female presence in the choruses of Aeschylus show the significant role women had in the plots of the plays--reenactments of mythology that were believed by the Greeks to have actually happened. Although Aristotle claims that Aeschylus put less focus on the chorus in his plays than there was in the past (21), Aeschylus still gave great attention to the chorus' role in his plays because of their extended odes, but also because roughly half the existing plays of Aeschylus are named after the choral group; two of the three plays in the *Oresteia* are named after their choruses of women. According to Claude Calame, "the choral voice is heterogeneous," (38) meaning it is diverse in character and content. The chorus adds to the "tragic action" and "participates in the heroic identity of the characters," but also "often assumes a position of 'social marginality'" (39). In this way, the members of the chorus react to situations based on their social status and how involved they are in the plot of the drama. We see this in the chorus of elders in *Agamemnon*, when they are reluctant to believe female characters like Cassandra, when she received a prophetic vision from Apollo. They refuse to understand her. The chorus leader, speaking on behalf of his fellow elders, states, "I can make nothing of these prophecies" (1105) following his previous statement "we want no prophets in this place at all" (1099) when Cassandra speaks of "a house that god hates" and "kindred blood shed" (1090-1091). The dismissal of Cassandra (and, therefore, dismissal of important elements of the plot) by the chorus leader shows that the chorus partakes in the story differently, depending on their social standing. Because they are older men, they would be "more concerned with political issues" whereas choruses of women would be more "concerned with domestic and religious affairs" (Calame,

40). In Homeric poetry and other examples of Greek literature, old age is associated with wisdom, and the elders are therefore expected by the audience to have enough life experience to have proper judgement on characters like Cassandra and Clytemnestra, but they actually appear ignorant and in denial (Dhuga, 3). Perhaps, then, the chorus is a representation of old age (a theme we also see between the young and old gods in the *Eumenides*) and how the chorus' age "seems to serve as a performance metaphor for the chorus' inability to exercise decisive action" (Dhuga, 2), and their inability to intervene with the plot, no matter how badly they may want to. This contrasts against the *Libation Bearers* and the *Eumenides*, where the female choruses are greatly concerned with Orestes' quest to avenge his father and the Furies' have a religious obligation as goddesses who avenge the murder of blood relatives.

The Critical Roles of Aeschylus' Choruses--Not Just Background Music!

Interaction between the chorus and the characters within the *Oresteia* demonstrate that the chorus, remnants of the epic poetry that lead to the evolution into theatre, are still greatly important to Aeschylus as the group collectively acts as a character that can drive the plot itself. As noted by D.J. Conacher, there are three instances in each play in the trilogy in which choral action directly affects the plot of the play and, in turn, the world that the Greeks lived in. In *Agamemnon*, just as the chorus refuses to believe Cassandra, the elders also have a similar prejudice towards Clytemnestra. Even after Agamemnon's death they are astonished at her crime and essentially curse her, driving her out of town, stating "you shall go homeless now" (1410). When Clytemnestra threatens them by saying "you shall be taught--too late, for sure--to keep your place" (1425), they still respond by telling her "big are your thoughts" but "your

speech is a clamour of pride” (1426), even though Clytemnestra clearly has the capacity to take action to her words and thoughts, considering she had just murdered a man. She exits with Aegisthus, exiled by the disgusted chorus, thus ending the first play of the trilogy. The outrage of the chorus of elders sets up for the chorus of Libation Bearers in the following play, in which “the whole action of the *Choephoroi* concerns the deeds of vengeance, the necessary purification (itself polluting) which the returning exile Orestes must perform” (Conarcher, 330). Throughout the *Libation Bearers*, the chorus of young women who reinforce the cultural expectation in Greek society of presenting libations to dead loved ones also reinforce Orestes’ drive for justice and further reassure him that he must follow Apollo’s orders to avenge Agamemnon. The Libation Bearers fulfil the role of representing important aspects of Greek culture, while also reaffirming religious beliefs of justice. During the extended choral ode to the dead Agamemnon featuring Orestes and Electra, the chorus initially invokes the spirits of the underworld, stating “Helpers are gathering underground” (376), and after this, Orestes and Electra both cry out to Zeus. Although Orestes is initially summoned to kill Clytemnestra by Apollo, the chorus influences him and his sister to actually call upon the spirit of their dead father to insure a successful revenge. This is a dramatic influence by the chorus on the plot that also occurs when the Libation Bearers directly intervene when they ask if Aegisthus will returned armed and tell the nurse not to give him Clytemnestra’s orders (767-782). In the *Eumenides*, the Furies clearly drive the plot as they chase Orestes in their quest to kill him for murdering his mother. Their involvement in the court scene with Athena and their demand for revenge shows a dynamic between the old gods (the Furies) and the young gods (Athena and Apollo), but also has an impact on the present Greeks who would have been watching Aeschylus’ plays when they were

first performed. The Furies' threats to curse Attica not only dramatically change the plot by forcing Athena to appease them, it also changes the outcome of literal Athens as a real-life city for the audience watching the play. To a group of people who believed this trilogy to be an inspired reenactment of the mythological past, if the Furies were not to be appeased by Athena and therefore turned in to the Eumenidies, their city of Athens would be literally cursed by the goddesses. In this way, the chorus of the Furies play a role in the story of history, as was believed by the ancient Greeks, just as the role of poetry and *mimesis* did before the invention of tragedy.

The Complexity of the *Oresteia's* Chorus in Structure & Content

Aeschylus' chorus in the *Oresteia* is complex not only in its metaphors and poetic devices, but also in a structural analysis. The parados of *Agamemnon*, the longest Greek choral ode in existence, provides a narrative and poetic frame for the structure of the entire trilogy. As Anne Lebeck states, the parados of *Agamemnon* must be long because it "serves as an introduction not to one play but three" (7). The different themes that will be prominent throughout the trilogy are all identified in this ode, among them being blood relations & bloodshed, vengeance, justice, and appeasement of the old and new gods. Three different types of *mimesis* are brought together by Aeschylus in the chorus: spoken, chanted, and sung poetry, along with dance to accompany it. All of these forms of *mimesis* are identified in the first choral ode of the trilogy, highlighting the critical role played by the chorus. The parados of *Agamemnon* is an example of how Greek playwrights incorporated multiple different metres in one ode, as John Herington states, creating a "vast range of association, tone, and tempo which thus became possible in tragic song as never

before” (122). In translation, it is hard for a modern audience to fully appreciate the great effort put into making an ode sound the way it would have in ancient Greek, with strong metrical rhythm chanted by a chorus of multiple people; it surely would have been a powerful visual and auditory experience to witness the chorus’ entry in *Agamemnon*. Anne Lebeck indicates that “two pairs of trochaic stanzas are framed by a dactylo-iambic narrative at the opening and an iambic-choriambic narrative at the close” (8). This complex, changing metre suits the deep illusions and changing narratives of the plot in the *Oresteia*. The metaphor of the birds that is introduced in this ode is a present theme throughout the trilogy.

The bird metaphor that is developed in the first choral ode of the trilogy is an extensive form of *mimesis* and a complex poetic device, indicating a theme of deciding between right and wrong. The sacrifice of Agamemnon’s own daughter, Iphigenia, is alluded to in the *parados*, a mythological story which the Greek audience would have been familiar with. The metaphor is initiated in the line “as eagles stricken in agony” (49) as the chorus continues to elaborate on the birds guarding their nest. The eagles “tore a hare, ripe, bursting with young unborn yet” (119) to feed their young that the chorus names “sons of Atreus” (123). The chorus states that Artemis “is sick at the eagles’ feasting” (137). Although we know little about how the chorus would have actually looked when performing, one can imagine that their dance at this moment in the ode would have mimicked the movements of an eagle. If this were to be truly how the Greeks performed metaphors--by taking on the physicality of the subject being used symbolically--it would be a physical representation of the bird told through artistic expression. In other words, the dances that the chorus did to accompany their chants (as we know they did only through the evidence of vase paintings), are yet another form of poetic *mimesis*: “the metaphors and images

of the play are brought onto the stage and not left solely in the realm of verbal ornamentation” (Scott, 156). Poetic devices such as metaphor or simile, which are already forms of mimesis themselves, are even further represented through visual performance combined with the auditory experience of listening to the poetry.

The discussion of how the chorus would have visually expressed metaphors, such as the bird metaphor in *Agamemnon*, brings to question how the choral lyric would have been performed as a whole. Because of the lack of stage directions, it is unknown whether certain lines of the chorus were meant to be spoken individually or collectively. Perhaps this was left open by Greek playwrights to leave it up to the chorus to decide what they preferred. However, there is some evidence within certain lines of Aeschylus’ works to indicate that individuals of the chorus would have spoken separately at some moments. “The strophic form,” William Scott says, “is thus not of necessity confined to one and only one voice” (153). In particular, beginning at line 475 of *Agamemnon*, the Epode is thought to have been separated into individual chorus members speaking the following lines, as indicated by dashes in the Lattimore translation:

If this be real
 who knows? Perhaps the gods have sent some lie to us.
 --Who of us is so childish or so short of wit
 that by the beacons’ messages
 his feart flamed must sink down again
 when the tale changes in the end?
 --It is like a woman indeed
 to take rapture before the fact has shown for true. (478-484)

The confusion about how to separate these lines of the chorus are sparked by the multiple questions in this Epode. The questions posed in this stanza are unlike other questions of the chorus in “Aeschylean lyric,” as stated by William Scott, “usually the repeated questions are parallel in content and do not change their topic as radically as in this passage” (153). Scott

defines “Aeschylean lyric” as lines “not in iambic trimeter, that is, nonspoken lines” (Fn. 13). In other instances in the *Oresteia*, Scott claims, the chorus asks a question and do not directly answer it, but rather add on to the question and directs the audience to an answer (155). An instance of this layering of questions by the chorus in *Agamemnon* is:

But you, lady,
daughter of Tyndareus, Clytaemestra, our queen:
What is there to be done? What new thing have you heard?
In persuasion of what
report do you order such sacrifice? (83-87)

If Aeschylus did intend for his chorus to be split into individual groups to speak certain lines, perhaps this change in the role of individual chorus members is what caused Aristotle to claim that Aeschylus placed less focus on the chorus than playwrights before him. When the lines of the chorus splits into twelve couplets beginning at line 1348, this, as Scott describes it, is a “shattering of choral unity [that] is typical of Aeschylean dramatic writing” (156). When Aristotle states that Aeschylus “reduced the choral element and gave primacy to the spoken word” (21), perhaps he was actually trying to understand how the older Greek concept of the tragic chorus fits into the more modern styles of the lyric. Thus the *mimesis*, or representation of the individual rather than the collective in the chorus, has changed and adapted with new ideas brought forth by newer playwrights.

Concluding Thoughts about *Mimesis* & the Significance of Tragedy

When interpreting the role of the chorus in the *Oresteia*, the remnants of the origins of poetry become evident in the blurred separation and lack of distinction between artistic genres and literature. Aristotle’s *Poetics* provides an accurate frame for how the Greeks conceived of poetics

and *mimesis*, and the chorus of Aeschylus demonstrates the importance of representing ceremonial and cultural practices through art, and also the everyday citizens who made up the chorus acting as representations of the more marginalized members of Greek society. The chorus pushes the concept of *mimesis* further by not only reinforcing societal practices and people, but also visually symbolizing metaphors that are prevalent throughout the *Oresteia*. The complex metrical structure and language that Aeschylus uses in his poetry of the chorus continues the Classical tradition of poetry while also reaffirming the tragic action. Tragedy was not only important for entertainment purposes for the Greeks, but it also told stories of the mythological past and allowed for playwrights and actors alike to interpret their mythology for themselves and include their own creative inputs. As we continue creating new artforms today, even as technology changes how we view art and poetry, the tradition of studying old forms of art will continue to be important. Art is, as Aristotle states, how we represent ourselves, and a lot can be learned from studying how humans have portrayed themselves thousands of years ago and comparing them to now. Literature is a representation of history, and by learning the good and bad events throughout history we can learn to better our species, as Aeschylus himself states in *Agamemnon*, “wisdom comes alone through suffering” (177-178).

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