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# Lyric Genre Interactions in the Choruses of Attic Tragedy

## Abstract

This article aims at exploring the traces of the choral lyric genres in tragic choruses, with special regard to the allusive presence of the paian, the epinikion, the partheneion, the hymenaios, and the threnos. The retracing in a dramatic context of elements belonging to these traditional genres and to their correspondent ritual occurrences brings about an intriguing web of correspondences in which these lyric patterns are developed, combined or even radically refashioned depending on the peculiarities of the single tragic plots. The investigation of the choral-lyrical passages is conducted by means of a close reading of the interactions between the pragmatic dimension of what we may define as 'lyric paradigms' that underlie ritual performances and the individual choral songs in order to show how the tragic choruses may mirror and possibly perpetuate pre-existent lyric genres.

It is an unquestionable fact that lyric parts in Attic tragedies echo the pre-existent conventions of choral lyric genres, implying a generative relationship between traditional poetic genres and drama, the variety of meters and the dialectal nuances notwithstanding.<sup>1</sup> This legacy, descending from the lyric (and not simply choral) tradition, can be recognized in the tragic parts defined as lyric in so far as they are meant to be performed musically and sung by a tragic chorus. To deny this kinship would be tantamount to negating the existence of a poetic tradition axiologically and chronologically inferior only to the Homeric epos. Therefore the point of my discussion is not to prove this connection but to trace the path leading to it, to draw its boundaries and to determine its most tangible possibilities of interaction. The extent to which

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1. For an extensive survey on the issue of choral lyric genres see Swift 2010 (see also my review: Bagordo 2015). Her intriguing suggestion that “[w]e must read tragedy not only as drama but as choral song” (Swift 2010: 1) will surely bring on further discussion and critical examination. On the same topic see also Rodighiero 2012; on lyric tradition in the Euripidean monodies see De Poli 2012.

the lyric tradition has played a mediative and filtering role among the various *ritual practices* is a more complicated matter perhaps destined to remain unresolved. The difficulty of drawing conclusions from literary evidence in order to reconstruct the underlying ritual performances can be seen, with regard to Sophocles, in the many clues regarding the merging of lyric genres in the first stasimon of *Trachiniae*, and the *paian* in the *parodos* of *Antigone* respectively (Rodighiero 2012: 79-88, 134-7). As for *Antigone*, Rodighiero's aporetic conclusion can be easily applied to all similar cases: "Would it be conceivable to detect in the opening verses of the chorus of *Antigone* a trace, albeit vague and maybe hardly perceivable, of the boisterous dance the Greeks used to enact rhythmically stomping their feet while striking up a victory *paian*?" (ibid.: 137).

Music and singing, particularly in choral form, had an extraordinary relevance to several aspects of Greek culture. The audience of a tragedy could find in the choruses a poetical reflection of the multifarious daily rituals which had already been formalized and institutionalized in lyric genres. Consequently, the concept of interaction seems the most appropriate one to define this kind of echoing, not limited to formal and purely literary aspects; indeed, this concept also allows the examination of tragic allusions to lyric genres as a way to evoke a whole cultural system which intersects the normative assumptions and inherited conventions permeating the poetic tradition.

Over and above particular intertextual instances (allusions, reminiscences, etc.), only sporadically present in tragedies as a whole (and therefore not just in the choruses),<sup>2</sup> the lyric legacy of tragedies consists in a wide range of motifs, themes, and resonances, not necessarily tied to the verbal fabric of tragic choruses. However, the examples of the three levels of interaction ("low", "medium", and "high") put forward by Laura Swift (2010: 28-31) show the difficulty of dispensing with the unpretentious, yet effective, idea of intertextuality in order to adopt the more ambitious one of interaction. For instance, the example of "medium-level interaction" between the *parodos* of Sophocles's *Antigone* and a fragment of a Pindaric *paian* (fr. 52k, 1 Sn.-M.) would be unthinkable without the literal quotation of Pindar's powerful image (ἄκτις ἀελίου: "sunbeam") in the *incipit*; conversely, suggesting that the term *παιώνιος* in Aeschylus, *Suppliant Women*, 1066, where it refers to the hand of Zeus and is used with the common meaning of 'healing', may recall, even though as an example of low-level interaction, the paeanic genre, appears a little rash, to say the least. A different case is the one of the epithet *καλλινικός*, whose many occurrences in Euripides's *Heracles* indubitably refers to the epinician genre.

2. About these occurrences see Garner 1990 and Bagordo 2003.

The choral lyric genres whose traces can be found, in more or less indirect form, in tragic choruses are the *paian*, the *epinikion*, the *partheneion*, the *hymenaios*, and the *threnos*. These five genres can interact or be interrelated with tragedy even through the mere presence of a certain imagery connected to them. Consequently, it appears natural (and so it must have appeared to the Athenian spectators) that some favourable ground had to be set for one specific lyric genre to be recognizable at every possible level of explicitness, from the most covert and veiled to the most evident. Considering the nature of lyric genres, whose performance was linked to a specific *Sitz im Leben*, perhaps to some noteworthy events or circumstances in the citizens' lives (be they private or public, secular or religious), it is not surprising that their occurrence or their reference in a tragedy prompted the introduction of elements that usually accompanied those same events in real life. Accordingly, the celebration of an engagement or of a wedding would call for the presence of hymeneal elements (1a), while a funeral would require threnodic ones (1b); a ceremony of healing, an apotropaic ritual or the request of divine intervention were proper to the *paianes* (2a), while the celebration of a victory, be it military or athletic, would recall the epinician tradition (2b). A few examples may help clarify this point:

(1a) *hymeneal elements*: see, for instance, the chorus's description, full of hymeneal terms and referring to the ritual praxis, of the wedding of Heracles and Iole in Eur. *Hipp.* 545-54, of Peleus and Thetis in Eur. *IA* 1036-197 and of Paris and Helen in Aesch. *Ag.* 699-716 or, as recounted by Helen herself, in Eur. *Hel.* 639-41, 722-4. Also, see the motif of the wedding with Thanatos, often accompanied by an inverted *makarismos*, concerning, for example, Cassandra in Aesch. *Ag.* 1156-9, Antigone in Soph. *Ant.* 813-6, 876-8, 891, 916-18, and Polyxena in Eur. *Hec.* 416.523-4, 609-18.

(1b) *threnodic elements*: in addition to the several conventional cases of ritual lamentation, to which we will return later, see the commonly 'perverted' *threnos* pronounced by someone who faces a destiny of death: Cassandra in Aesch. *Ag.* 1322-30, Clytemestra in *Cho.* 926, Ajax in Soph. *Ai.* 859-65 or Antigone in *Ant.* 806-82.

(2a) *request of divine intervention*: consider, for instance, Chalkas's plea to Apollo to protect the Greeks against Artemis's wrath in Aesch. *Ag.* 146-50; Pythia's prayer to Apollo to fight back the Erinyes in Eum. 60-3; or the priest's appeal to Apollo to save his town from the plague in Soph. *OT* 149-50; or, on the contrary, the ironic invocation in paeanic terms to Persephone, a goddess related to death and not to salvation, in Eur. *Hel.* 175-8.

(2b) *epinician tradition*: see, for instance, the portrayal of the Trojan war as an athletic contest in Aesch. *Ag.* 62-6; Deianira's employment of sport imagery in describing how Heracles rescued her in Soph. *Trach.* 20-36, thus supporting the hero's image as a sports champion. The same status, already asserted by

Zeus, *Agonios* (26), is also referred to in the Euripidean *Alcestis*, as explicitly stated for example at lines 843-9, where Heracles himself declares his will to challenge Thanatos to a duel.

## The paian

In tragedies, the *paian* is related to the sphere of illness, recovery, and death, often expressing tension or irony, although it may also have a celebratory function.<sup>3</sup> While more easily recognisable than other genres thanks to the presence of the refrain (a paeanic epithet like *paian* or *paion*), it only occasionally rises to a strategic role in the economy of the drama. In many cases the refrain is simply an isolated warning light inside other lyric contexts. An instance of this can be found in Soph. *Phil.* 827-32:

“Υπν’ ὀδύνας ἀδαής, ὕπνε δ’ ἀλγέων,  
 εὐαῆς ἡμῖν ἔλθοις, εὐαίων,  
 εὐαίων ὦναξ· ὄμμασι δ’ ἀντίσχοις  
 τάνδ’ αἴγλαν, ἧ τέταται τανῦν.  
 ἴθι ἴθι μοι, Παιών.

[Sleep, ignorant if anguish, ignorant of pains, come to us with gentle breath, come bringing felicity, bringing felicity, lord! Over his eyes hold this brightness that now extends before them! Come, come, Healer! (trans. by H. Lloyd-Jones)]

The term *παιών*, inserted in a hymn to Hypnos, recalls the healing dimension of the *paian*, but also refers to a divinity unrelated to the cult of Apollo. One may wonder if the inclusion of this term was sufficient for the audience to recognize the hymn as a *paian*, even discounting a possible ironic disposition of the song which joins together the elevated tone of a prayer and the more intimate and unpretentious modulation of a lullaby.<sup>4</sup>

The paeanic traces that we find in Sophocles’s *Oedipus Tyrannus* stand closer to the characteristically Apollonian field of redemption. In this tragedy the central theme of light (and consequently of sight) finds its origin in the imagery of luminosity of the *paian*, which, however, originally had only a redeeming value. The ambiguous traits it acquires in Sophocles, which have it swing between the request of healing and the terror for divine retribution, are totally absent from the original genre:

153-7      ἐκτέταμαι φοβερὰν φρένα, δέματι πάλλων,  
 ἰήιε Δάλιε Παιάν,

3. On this particular aspect see Käppel 1992 and Rutherford 2001.

4. On this mingling of tones, see Avezzù 2000 and Rodighiero 2012: 148-9.

ἀμφὶ σοὶ ἀζόμενος· τί μοι ἢ νέον  
ἢ περιτελλομέναις ὥραις πάλιν ἔξανύσεις χρέος;  
εἰπέ μοι, ὦ χρυσέας τέκνον Ἐλπίδος, ἄμβροτε Φάμα.

[I am prostrated, my mind is shaken by terror, Delian healer invoked with cries, in awe of you, wondering what thing you will accomplish, perhaps new, perhaps coming again with the revolving seasons. Tell me, child of golden Hope, immortal oracle! (trans. by H. Lloyd-Jones)]

186-8     παίων δὲ λάμπει στονόεσσά τε γῆρυς ὄμαυλος·  
τῶν ὕπερ, ὦ χρυσέα θύγατερ Διός,  
εὐῶπα πέμψον ἀλκάν.

[Loud rings out the hymn to the Healer and the sound of lamentation with it! For these things, golden daughter of Zeus, send the bright face of protection! (trans. by H. Lloyd-Jones)]

Likewise, the paeanic calls to Apollo, with which Admetus and the chorus try to avoid the Queen's death, are essential to the plot of Euripides's *Alcestis*:

91-2     εἰ γὰρ μετακοίμιος ἄτας,  
ὦ Παιάν, φανείης.

[O God of Healing, may you come bringing respite from disaster!]

220-5     ὄναξ Παιάν,  
ἔξευρε μηχανάν τιν' Ἀδμήτῳ κακῶν  
– πόριζε δὴ πόριζε· καὶ πάρος γὰρ  
†τοῦδ' ἐφεῦρες† καὶ νῦν  
λυτήριος ἐκ θανάτου γενοῦ,  
φόνιον δ' ἀπόπασσον Ἄιδαν.

[Lord of Healing, contrive for Admetus some escape from disaster. – Yes, devise a way. For you found one for him before. Now too be his rescuer from death, check deadly Hades. (trans. by D. Kovacs)]

In this tragedy we can still find some references to luminosity, which are sometimes suggested by the chorus themselves:

82-3     ἔτι φῶς λεύσσει Πελίου τόδε παῖς  
Ἄλκηστις.

[whether Pelias' daughter still lives and looks on the light, Alcestis.]

122-3     εἰ φῶς τόδ' ἦν  
ὄμμασιν δεδορκῶς.

[if he still looked upon the light of the sun.]

436-7     χαίρουσά μοι εἰν Ἄϊδα δόμοισιν  
τὸν ἀνάλιον οἶκον οἰκετεύεις.

[farewell, and may you have joy even as you dwell in the sunless house of Hades! (trans. by D. Kovacs)]

## The epinikion

Notable traces of the epinician genre can be found in tragedies, most of which are connected with the characters of Heracles and Orestes.

The contrast between the tradition depicting Heracles as a hero, whose deeds perfectly suit the epinician repertory, and his tragic dimension is apparent, for instance, in Euripides's *Heracles*. The first *stasimon* (ll. 348-450) has often been considered as a sort of *threnos*. However, this judgement does not stand a close examination, and even the presence of Apollo, which could hint at a *paian*, is misleading and the laudatory nature, typical of the epinician, prevails. First of all, having the chorus declare to be consciously performing a eulogy, that is, an encomium (ll. 355-6 ὑμνήσαι στεφάνωμα μόν-/χθων δι' εὐλογίας θέλω),<sup>5</sup> is an often recurring theme in Pindar's epinicia – see two significant examples of *incipit* in Pind. *O.* 2.1-2 and *O.* 3.3-9:<sup>6</sup>

*O.* 2.1-2

Ἀναξιοφόρμιγγες ὕμνοι,  
τίνα θεόν, τίν' ἥρωα, τίνα δ' ἄνδρα κελαδήσομεν;

[Songs, rulers of the lyre, what god, what hero, what man shall we celebrate?]

*O.* 3.3-9

Θήρωνος Ὀλυμπιονίκαν  
ὕμνον ὀρθώσαις ... Μοῖσα δ' οὐτῶ ποι παρέ-  
στα μοι νεοσίγαλον εὐρόντι τρόπον  
Δωρίῳ φωνᾶν ἐναρμόξαι πεδίλω  
ἀγλαόκωμον ... φόρμιγγά τε ποικιλόγαρυν  
καὶ βοᾶν αὐλῶν ἐπέων τε θέσιν  
Αἰνησιδάμου παιδι συμμεῖξαι πρεπόν-  
τως, ἅ τε Πίσα με γεγωνεῖν.

[While I honor renowned Acragas by raising my song in praise of Theron's victory at Olympia ... With this in view the Muse stood beside me when I found a shining new manner of fitting the splendid voice of the victory procession to the Dorian sandal ... to blend harmoniously for the son of Aenesidamus the embroidered song of the lyre and the cry of the flutes with the arrangement of words, and Pisa bids me to raise my voice. (trans. by D. Arnson Svarlien)]

Further epinician elements which are worth to be taken into consideration are the presence of a strong simile, the emphasis on the lyre, the mention of the *laudandus*'s family, the chorus's assertion that their song is a reward to the hero's *aretè*, the reference to Heracles's labours as δρόμοι (l. 425 δρόμων τ'

5. "I wish to praise as a coronal to his labors", trans. by D. Kovacs.

6. See also *O.* 4.1-5, *P.* 2.1-6, 9.1-4, *N.* 5.1-5, *I.* 1.1-12.



ἄλλων ἀγάλαματ' εὐτυχῆ),<sup>7</sup> and the widespread presence of typically Pindaric-Bacchylidean compounds. This is enough to characterize Euripides's Heracles as a sporting champion; in fact, this does not come as a surprise if you consider that the foundation of the Olympic Games was ascribed to him. In addition to that, he is mentioned, and fulfils a topical role, in many epinikia by Pindar.<sup>8</sup>

In the second *stasimon* of *Heracles* (637-700), at least two important *topoi* of the epinikion have been recognized: the comparison between the strength of youth, embodied by Heracles, and wealth (637-49),<sup>9</sup> and the connection between the praise of the nature of *aretè* and the role of the poet who glorifies it.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, the third *stasimon* (763-814) is not devoid of elements characteristic of the *epinikion*. They especially emerge in the gnomic tone employed in describing the inherent dangers of excessive wealth and power, and in the glorification of the hero's homeland, Thebes – a reference to the local legend meant introduced in order to praise the contemporaries (792-7). Yet, the apex is represented by the significant use of *καλλίνικος*: this epithet has cultic connotations, but in celebrating Heracles's triumph it characterizes the triumph itself as a sports victory:

781-9 Ἴσμήν' ὧ στεφαναφόρει  
ξεσταί θ' ἑπταπύλου πόλεως  
ἀναχορεύσατ' ἀγυαί  
Δίρκα θ' ἅ καλλιρρέεθρος,  
σύν τ' Ἀσωπιάδες κόραι  
πατρὸς ὕδωρ βᾶτε λιποῦσαι συναϊδοὶ  
Νύμφαι τὸν Ἡρακλέους  
καλλίνικον ἀγῶνα.

[Go gaily in garlands, River Ismenus, and O ye smooth-worn streets of the city of seven gates, strike up the dance, and Dirce too with your lovely streams! Come as well, daughters of Asopus, leave your father's waters and join me in singing, Nymphs, of Heracles' glorious victory! (trans. by D. Kovacs)]

In doing so, this term hinges on a deep-rooted epinician tradition (Pind. *P.* 5.106, *N.* 3.19, 4.16) that can be traced back to a refrain composed by Archilochus (fr. 324 *W.*<sup>2</sup>):

τήνελλα καλλίνικε  
χαίρε ἄναξ Ἡράκλεις  
αὐτός τε καιόλαος, αἰχμητὰ δῶω.

7. "The glorious successes of his other quests", trans. by D. Kovacs.

8. For a bibliography on the *epinikion* see Bagordo 2011: 243-6.

9. See also Pind. *O.* 1.113-4, *P.* 5.1-5, *I.* 3.1-3.

10. See Pind. *O.* 1.115-6, *P.* 3.114-5, *N.* 9.6-10.

[Tenella gloriously triumphant, / hail lord Heracles, / both you and Iolaus, a pair of warriors. (trans. by D. Gerber)]

For a reference to Archilochus, see Pind. *O.* 9.1-2:

τὸ μὲν Ἀρχιλόχου μέλος  
φωναῖεν Ὀλυμπία, καλλίνικος ὁ τριπλὸς κεχλαδῶς.

[The resounding strain of Archilochus, the swelling thrice-repeated song of triumph. (trans. by D. Arnson Svarlien)]

Orestes is another hero whose deeds are described by the chorus as athletic victories. The most obvious passage can be found in Euripides's *Electra* 860-5:

θεὸς ἐς χορόν, ὦ φίλα, ἴχνος, ὡς νεβρὸς οὐράνιον  
πήδημα κουφίζουσα σὺν ἀγλαΐᾳ.  
νικᾷ στεφαναφορίαν  
†κρείσσω τοῖς† παρ' Ἀλφειοῦ ρεέθροισι τελέσ-  
σας κασίγητος σέθεν· ἀλλ' ὑπάειδε  
καλλίνικον ῥῶδαν ἐμῶι χορῶ.

[Lift your feet in dancing, dear friend, leap heaven-high like a fawn in your rejoicing! Your brother has completed, has won a crown of victory greater than that by the streams of the Alpheus! Accompany with your song of triumph the steps of my dance! (trans. by D. Kovacs)]

In this passage the dactylo-epitrite metre also recalls the epinician genre, while the chorus themselves define their own song as *kallinikos*, repeating the same word used by Electra when hailing Orestes in 880-1:

ὦ καλλίνικε, πατρὸς ἐκ νικηφόρου  
γεγῶς, Ὀρέστα, τῆς ὑπ' Ἰλίῳ μάχης.

[O Orestes, glorious in victory, son of the man who won the prize of victory in the war at Troy. (trans. by D. Kovacs)]

and, above all, Orestes's triumph, that is, his revenge, is also explicitly compared to an Olympic victory.

## The *partheneion* and the *hymenaios*

In the choruses of Euripides's *Iphigenia in Tauris*, *Helen*, and *Hippolytus*, and of Aeschylus's *Suppliant Women* we can retrace significant echoes of the kindred genres of *partheneion* and *hymenaios*.<sup>11</sup> These virginal and nuptial chants

11. On the *partheneion* see, in particular, Calame 1977 and on the *hymenaios* see Contiades-Tsitsoni 1990 and Baltieri 2011.

represent two contiguous and often combined moments. The characters of Iphigenia and Helen paradigmatically show a problematic attitude, to say the least, towards the passage from virginity to adulthood. This is partly true also for the Euripidean *Electra*. After she has reluctantly married a peasant, her ambiguous liminal position between *parthenos* and *gynè* confines her to a state of miserable isolation. When the chorus urges her to join the celebration of the Heraia with the other Argive maidens – defined as ‘brides’ at l. 180 (Ἀργεΐαις ἅμα νύμφαις) – she replies that her daily and only toil will be wailing (*El.* 167-212). As she resignedly points out, her situation, reflected in the material bleakness of her life, makes her unsuitable for the rite:

310-3 ἀνέορτος ἱερῶν καὶ χορῶν τητωμένη.  
ἀναίνομαι δὲ γυμνάς οὐσα παρθένος,  
αἰσχύνομαι δὲ Κάστορ', ὦ πρὶν ἐς θεοῦς  
ἐλθεῖν ἔμ' ἐμνήστευον, οὐσαν ἐγγενῆ.

[bereft of festivals and deprived of dances. For since I have no clothes I shun the maidens, shun likewise Castor and Polydeuces, who before the went up to heaven were suitors for my hand since I was their kinswoman. (trans. by D. Kovacs)]

The end of the second stasimon of Euripides’s *Iphigenia in Tauris* is an interesting case in point:

1143-52 χοροῖς δ' ἐνσταίην, ὄθι καὶ  
παρθένος εὐδοκίμων δόμων,  
παρὰ πόδ' εἰλίσσουσα φίλας  
ματρός, ἡλίκων θιάσοις  
ἐς ἀμίλλας χαρίτων  
ἄβροπλούτου τε χλιδάς  
εἰς ἔριν ὀρνημένα, πολυποίκιλα  
φάρεα καὶ πλοκάμους περιβαλλομένα  
γένυσιν ἐσκίαζον.

[May I take my place in the choruses where once as maiden of illustrious family near my dear mother I whirled in dance, and competing in grace with the throngs of my agetates and vying with them in luxury born of soft-living wealth I put on a veil of many hues and let down my tresses to shade my cheek. (trans. by D. Kovacs)]

The interaction here is not limited to the *hymenaios* nature of the ode, but it also includes elements of the *partheneion*: its self-reflective nature, the focus on superficial aspects such as clothing,<sup>12</sup> accessories and hairdressing, girlish gestures, and allusions to a sort of beauty contest. All these elements can be detected in Alcman’s *partheneia*, the best known among them.

12. In this regard, see also Eur. *El.* 190-2: μεγάλα θεός· ἀλλ' ἴθι καὶ παρ' ἐμοῦ χρῆσαι / πολύπηνα φάρεα δῦναι / χρύσεά τε χάρισιν προσθήματ' ἀγλαΐας [“Great is the goddess. Come, then, and borrow from me robes of thicks weave to put on and gold to add to the pleasures of the feast” (trans. by D. Kovacs)].

Analogies with Alcman's *partheneia* (PMGF 1 and 3) can also be found in Euripides's *Helen*. In the *parodos*, the exchange between Helen and the chorus of Sirens, also alluded to as *παρθένοι* (virgins), draws a connection between the Sirens themselves and Persephone, consequently inferring an association with death, too. This makes way for the representation of the transition between maidenhood and womanhood, which becomes particularly evident at lines 184-90:

ἔνθεν οἰκτρὸν ὄμαδον ἔκλυον,  
 ἄλυρον ἔλεγον, ὅτι ποτ' ἔλακεν  
 <λαμπροῖσιν> αἰάγμα-  
 σι στένουσα Νύμφα τις,  
 οἷα Ναῖς ὄρεσι φύγδα  
 νόμων ἰεῖσα γοερόν, ὑπὸ δὲ  
 πέτρινα γάλα κλαγγαῖσι  
 Πανὸς ἀναβοᾷ γάμους.

[There I heard a noise to stir my pity, a lament not fit for the lyre, uttered in loud complaint by some wife: so would a Naiad in flight on the mountains utter a woeful plaint as in some rocky glen she cries out that she is being ravished by Pan. (trans. by D. Kovacs)]

Helen, here described as a *nympha*, a bride and a ravished nymph at the same time, reproduces the archetypical *topos* embodied by Persephone, whose passage to sexual maturity is marked by her abduction by Hades. In the third stasimon, the cult of the Leucippides and the dances for Hyacinthus recall, as is in Alcman fr. 1 PMGF, the initiation of Spartan girls and the related *partheneia*:

1465-77 ἧ που κόρας ἄν ποταμοῦ  
 παρ' οἶδμα Λευκιπιδας ἧ πρὸ ναοῦ  
 Παλλάδος ἄν λάβοι,  
 χρόνῳ ξυνελθοῦσα χοροῖς  
 ἧ κόμοις Ἰακίνθου  
 νύχιον ἐς εὐφροσύναν,  
 ὄν ἔξαμιλλασάμενος  
 τροχὸν ἀτέρμονα δίσκου  
 ἔκανε Φοῖβος, εἶτα Λακαί-  
 να γᾶ βοῦθυτον ἀμέραν  
 ὁ Διὸς εἶπε σέβειν γόνος·  
 μόσχον θ' ἄν λίπετ' οἴκοις  
 <δέρκοιτ' ἄν Ἑρμιόναν,>  
 ἄς οὐπω πεῦκαι πρὸ γάμων ἔλαμψαν.

[I think she will find the daughters of Leucippus by the river or before the temple of Pallas, as she arrives home at the time of the dances or revels of Hyacinth and their nightlong feasting. Hyacinth, whom Phoebus, trying to hurl far the round discus, killed, and thereafter to the land of Lacedaemon the son of Zeus gave order to keep a day of sacrifice. And <she may see> the calf she left in the house, <Hermione,> whose marriage torches have not yet gleamed. (trans. by D. Kovacs)]

The state of preservation of Alcman's texts allows us to take him as the natural point of reference for the *partheneia* genre and its survival in tragic choruses. The same can be said of Sappho with regard to the *hymenaios*, that is, the song traditionally associated with nuptials. Like the *paian*, the *hymenaios* often carries out the task of creating a joyful atmosphere, which sometimes clashes ironically with the ruinous events of tragedy.

An instance of the hymeneal mode is perhaps briefly perceivable in the third *stasimon* of Euripides's *Hippolytus*:

1137-41 ἄστέφανοι δὲ κόρας ἀνάπαυλαι  
Λατοῦς βαθεῖαν ἀνά χλόαν·  
νυμφιδία δ' ἀπόλωλε φυγᾶ σῶ  
λέκτρων ἄμιλλα κούραις.

[Bare of garlands will be the resting-places of Leto's daughter in the deep greenwood.  
The rivalry of maidens to be your bride has been brought to an end by your exile.  
(trans. by D. Kovacs)]

Nuptial imagery is here paradoxically employed in the allusion to maidens quarrelling over a bridegroom, who is in fact chastity-vowed Hippolytus. This ambiguity is enhanced by a further ironic note in the reference to his devotion to Artemis (1137-8). The inversion of the nuptial motif is fully accomplished at the end of the *stasimon*. A reversed *makarismos*, which replaces the vocabulary of happiness and good luck with the one of sorrow and misfortune,<sup>13</sup> is followed by Hippolytus's forsaking of his father's house. His desertion is described in terms reminiscent of the hymeneal language such as the verb πέμπειν, usually employed to describe the 'escorting' of the wedding couple to the altar, and the epithet *syzygiai*, normally attributed to the Graces:

1148-50 συζύγιοι Χάριτες, τί τὸν τάλαν' ἐκ πατρίας γᾶς  
οὐδὲν ἄτας αἴτιον  
πέμπετε τῶνδ' ἀπ' οἴκων;

[Ye Graces that dance your round, why do you not accompany this man from his father's land and from this house? (trans. by D. Kovacs)]

Likewise, in the exodus of Aeschylus's *Suppliant Women* the hymeneal elements are circumscribed to a few scant allusions, and one may reasonably wonder whether they were sufficient to have the audience recognize it as a nuptial song:

1026-33 ποταμούς δ' οἱ διὰ χώρας  
θελεμὸν πῶμα χέουσιν,  
πολύτεκνοι, λιπαροῖς χεύμασι γαίας

13. For this and similar cases in tragedy, see Halleran 1991: 114.

τόδε μιλίσσοντες οὐδας.  
 ἐπίδοι δ' Ἄρτεμις ἀγνὰ  
 στόλον οἰκτιζομένα, μηδ' ὑπ' ἀνάγκας  
 γάμος ἔλθοι Κυθερείας·  
 Στύγιον πέλοι τόδ' ἄθλον.

[but of the rivers that pour their tranquil waters through this land, to drink for health and for fertility, softening the soil of the land with their oil-smooth streams. May chaste Artemis watch over this band in pity, and may Cytherea's consummation not come to us by compulsion: may that prize be won only in Hades. (trans. by A.H. Sommerstein)]

The allusion to human fertility, hinted at by the epithet *πολύτεκνοι* applied to rivers, is later made explicit in the reference to a forced, if soon refused, wedding; in fact, the chorus of the Danaids wish for the triumph of chaste Artemis over Aphrodite. In this passage we can perceive some kind of internal interaction deriving from the Danaids' traditional status, rather than from the circumstances of the drama.

This song of refusal, albeit ambiguous since the fertility of the rivers is praised and the refusal itself refers to a *forced* marriage, is counterbalanced by the subsequent song. Probably sung by the first semi-chorus, it acknowledges Aphrodite's charm as equally irresistible to the Danaids themselves, while the goddess is tellingly paired with the one presiding over nuptial knots, that is, Hera:

1034-7 Κύπριδος δ' οὐκ ἀμελεῖν, θεσμός ὄδ' εὐφρων·  
 δύναται γὰρ Διὸς ἄγχιστα σὺν Ἑρᾷ,  
 τίεται δ' αἰολόμητις  
 θεὸς ἔργους ἐπὶ σεμνοῖς.

[But it is a wise rule not to ignore Cypris; for she holds power very close to Zeus, together with Hera, a goddess of cunning wiles who is honoured for awesome deeds. (trans. by A.H. Sommerstein)]

In the following lines, other related deities, such as Pothos, Peitho, and Harmonia, are evoked, while the ending sanctions the inexorability of both fate's and Zeus' will, which levels all women and, in the case of the Danaids, defines the inevitability of their unwanted wedding with the sons of Aegyptus (1050-1 μετὰ πολλῶν δὲ γάμων ἄδε τελευτὰ / προτερᾶν πέλοι γυναικῶν).<sup>14</sup>

14. "[A]nd this outcome, marriage, would be shared with many women before you", trans. by A.H. Sommerstein.

## Threnos

As regards the ritual lamentation (*threnos*), there is a noticeable discrepancy between the praxis of the age and its poetic representation. Solon's laws, issued to avoid inordinate forms of mourning, clashed with the tendency, on the part of tragic heroes, to be excessive even in their grieving.<sup>15</sup> The Sophoclean *Electra*, whose prolonged wailing is at odds with Clytemestra's contemptuous attitude towards mourning, and Admetus in Euripides's *Alcestis* are emblematic of this inclination. Yet, such interesting cues are already present in Aeschylus.

In the *kommos* of Aeschylus's *Persians* (908-1077), which is in itself a long lamentation sung by the chorus for the defeat against the Greeks, we can spot, especially in the finale, some reminiscences of a funerary procession, which attribute to the lament a form recalling funeral mores.<sup>16</sup> The chorus themselves assert the barbaric, Eastern nature of the *threnos* they are intoning, and their consequent foreignness to the Greek world:

935-40    πρόσφθογγον σοι †νόστου τὰν†  
          κακοφάτιδα βόαν, κακομέλετον ἰάν  
          Μαριανδυνοῦ θρηνητήρος  
          πέμψω πέμψω πολὺδάκρυν.

[In response to your return I shall send forth, send forth with many tears to shout of woeful words, the cries of woeful thoughts of a Mariandynian dirge-singer. (trans. by A.H. Sommerstein)]

The Greek style of lamentation differs from the Persian one, in that the Greek style was regulated by a certain self-control and measure, even in codified forms. Another feature that we may infer from the language and gestures employed by the Persians in their wailing is a succession of feminine behaviours. These include the use of the term γόος and other derived words (1047 διαίνομαι γοεδνὸς ὦν "I wet my cheeks in mourning", 1050 ἐπορθίαζέ νυν γόοις "Now raise a high-pitched wail", 1057 ἄπριγδ' ἄπριγδα, μάλα γοεδνά "With clenched hands, with clenched hands, very mournfully!"), the beating of their chests and heads (1046 ἔρεσσ' ἔρεσσε καὶ στέναζ' ἐμήν χάριν "Row, row with your arms, and groan for my sake", 1054 καὶ στέρν' ἄρασσε κάπιβόα τὸ Μύσιον "Beat your breasts too, and accompany the action with a Mysian cry"),

15. On the lyric form of lamentation, see Alexiou 1974 and Cannatà Fera 1990; on form and function of lamentation in tragedy see Schauer 2002.
16. The metric form is also significant: the *kommos* opens with the anapaests recited by Xerxes and goes on with the chorus's intervention (922) which also includes lyric anapaests. This alternating of anapaestic sequences, recited and lyric, is typical of those parts of the tragedy in which "the emotional level fluctuates" (West 1982: 122). Similar examples can be found in *Electra*'s lament in Soph. *El.* 86ff. or in *Creusa*'s lamentation in Eur. *Ion.* 859-922, as well as in *Heracles*'s death scene in Soph. *Trach.* 971-1003.

the plucking of their hair (1062 καὶ ψάλλ' ἔθειραν καὶ κατοίκτισαι στρατόν “And pluck your hair, and voice your pity for the army”; replaced by beards in 1056 καὶ μοι γενείου πέρθε λευκῆρη τρίχα “Now, please, ravage the white hairs of your beard”) and the tearing of their clothes (1060 πέπλον δ' ἔρεικε κολπίαν ἀκμῆ χερῶν “Tear the folds of your robe with your hands”).<sup>17</sup>

In the *kommos* of the Aeschylean *Agamemnon* the chorus painfully ask themselves who will take care of Agamemnon's burial and perform the funerary rites accompanying them with an adequate lamentation (1541 τίς ὁ θάψων νιν; τίς ὁ θρηνησῶν “Who will bury him? Who will sing his lament?”). Then, addressing his murderer, Clytemestra, they express their fear that she will be the one and wonder who will deliver the eulogy at the grave, as this person would need to show a sincere disposition and shed real tears:

1548-50 τίς δ' ἐπιτύμβιον αἶνον ἐπ' ἀνδρὶ θείῳ  
σὺν δακρύοις ἰάπτων  
ἀληθείᾳ φρενῶν πονήσει;

[Who that utters praises over the tomb of a godlike man, accompanied by tears, will do that task with sincerity of heart? (trans. by A.H. Sommerstein)]

These references evoke real funerary customs. In addition to this, a proper directory of mourning practices is supplied by the *parodos* of *Choephoroi*: the bystanders should offer libations, beat and scratch their faces, and tear their robes.

Similar instructions about ritual lamentation are confirmed by the chorus of Euripides's *Orestes* who prematurely bemoan the prospective deaths of Orestes and Electra by cheek scratching, head beating, and self-mutilation. The praxis is sealed by gnomic considerations about the frailty and unpredictability of human destiny:

976-81 ἰώ, ὦ πανδάκρυτ' ἐφαμέρων  
ἔθνη πολύπονα, λεύσσεθ' ὡς παρ' ἐλπίδας  
μοῖρα βαίνει.  
ἕτερα δ' ἕτερον ἀμείβεται  
πήματ' ἐν χρόνῳ μακρῷ  
βροτῶν δ' ὁ πᾶς ἀστάθμητος αἰών.

[Ah, ah, you race of mortals, full of tears, trouble-laden, see how fate defeats your expectations! Different woes come by turns to different men over the length of days, and beyond our power to reckon is the whole course of human life. (trans. by D. Kovacs)]

In the *kommos* of Sophocles's *Electra* (86-253), during the exchange between Electra and the chorus of Mycenaean women, the latter often draw on a

17. The translation of the quoted passages is by A.H. Sommerstein.



repertory of funereal consolations. The conflict is about the manner in which they should voice their lament: while Electra does not want to contain her grief, indulging in the excesses of a disorderly lamentation, the chorus urge her not to isolate herself from the rest of the world in her wild and uncontrollable mourning; see 153-5:

οὔτοι σοὶ μούνα,  
τέκνον, ἄχος ἐφάνη βροτῶν,  
πρὸς ὃ τι σὺ τῶν ἔνδον εἶ περισσά.

[Not to you alone among mortals, my child, has sorrow been made manifest, a sorrow that you suffer beyond others in the house. (trans. by H. Lloyd-Jones)]

The call for moderation, which had fallen on deaf ears in the *kommos*, is reiterated at ll. 1171-3:

θνητοῦ πέφυκας πατρός, Ἥλέκτρα, φρόνει·  
θνητὸς δ' Ὀρέστης ὥστε μὴ λίαν στένε·  
πᾶσιν γὰρ ἡμῖν τοῦτ' ὀφείλεται παθεῖν.

[You are the child of a mortal father, Electra, remember, and Orestes was mortal; so do not lament too much! (trans. by H. Lloyd-Jones)]

In Euripides's *Alcestis*, the chorus confront Admetus for being excessive in mourning his dead spouse. At first they try and comfort him by reminding him that his misfortune is not an isolated one and that all men share the same destiny of death:

416-9 Ἄδμητ', ἀνάγκη τάσδε συμφορὰς φέρειν·  
οὐ γάρ τι πρῶτος οὐδὲ λοίσθιος βροτῶν  
γυναικὸς ἐσθλῆς ἤμπλακες· γίγνωσκε δὲ  
ὡς πᾶσιν ἡμῖν κατθανεῖν ὀφείλεται.

[Admetus, you must endure this misfortune. For you are not the first or last of mortals to lose a noble wife. Know that death is a debt we all must pay. (trans. by D. Kovacs)]

Afterwards they suggest a positive and decidedly normative paradigm that shows how to bear bereavement in a composed and acceptable way:

903-10 ἐμοὶ τις ἦν  
ἐν γένει, ᾧ κόρος ἀξιόθρη-  
νος ὤλετ' ἐν δόμοισιν  
μονόπαις· ἀλλ' ἔμπας  
ἔφερε κακὸν ἄλις, ἄτεκνος ὦν,  
πολιὰς ἐπὶ χαίτας  
ἤδη προπετῆς ὦν  
βίотου τε πόρσω.

[I had a kinsman whose son, full worthy to lament, perished at home, an only child. But still, he bore his sorrow in measure, though he was without an heir and already sunk down toward gray old age and far on in years. (trans. by D. Kovacs)]

The interaction between the pragmatic dimension of the *threnos*, which has in the epitaph its material *pendant*, and the tragic choral song finds its fullest realization in the lines in which the chorus, after voicing some general gnomic-philosophical considerations and acknowledging the merciless nature of Necessity, imagine Alcestis's funereal epigram. The epigram contains every convention and topos, from the passer-by stopping in front of the sepulchral monument to the farewell formula, from the praise of the deceased to the anticipation of a blissful afterlife:

906-1005 μηδὲ νεκρῶν ὡς φθιμένων χῶμα νομιζέσθω  
 τύμβος σᾶς ἀλόχου, θεοῖσι δ' ὁμοίως  
 τιμάσθω, σέβας ἐμπόρων.  
 καί τις δοχμίαν κέλευ-  
 θον ἐμβαίνων τόδ' ἔρει-  
 αὔτα ποτὲ προύθαν' ἀνδρός,  
 νῦν δ' ἔστι μάκαιρα δαίμων·  
 χαῖρ', ὦ πότνι', εὐδὲ δοίης.  
 τοιαῖα νιν προσερούσι φῆμαι.

[Let not the grave of your wife be regarded as the funeral mound of the dead departed but let her be honored as are the gods, an object of reverence to the wayfarer. Someone walking a winding path past her tomb shall say, 'This woman died in the stead of her husband, and now she is a blessed divinity. Hail, Lady, and grant us your blessing!' With such words will they address her. (trans. by D. Kovacs)]

## Conclusion

These examples, chosen for their representativeness, have been selected with the intention to offer an account, albeit partial, of a tangled and composite reality. Our aim has been to show how the tragic choruses, acting as bearers of definite conventions and motifs, mirror and, in a way, perpetuate pre-existent lyric genres. Thanks to their ties to a specific *Sitz im Leben*, these genres crossed and interacted with pragmatic realities, deeply rooted in Greek culture.

Once inserted in the fabric of tragedy, the lyric elements were necessarily denaturalized and deprived of the context for which they had been conceived.<sup>18</sup> Thus, they relinquished the role they had hitherto played in ritual praxis and

18. This aspect has been efficaciously foregrounded by Rodighiero, who pointed out how "[t]he potential codes of a genre are necessarily de-contextualised every time they are grafted on a tragedy" (2012: 9).

delegated the task of recreating this function to a new setting, a new performing situation (either a drama festival or a single performance), and new actors, that is, a tragic chorus or, alternatively, the characters of the tragedy. This redirecting of their function very much depended on the ability of the playwright to attract the attention of the audience towards particular expectations of an audience already absorbed by the dramatic action. Modern readers are free to speculate on the import and success of each of these *literary* operations, always keeping in mind that the risk of attaching excessive significance to the presence of lyric elements in the tragedies is directly proportional to their opaqueness. Even relatively clear coordinates, as those shown in the quoted examples, do not allow us to be reasonably sure that only the most perceptive people who sat in the audience would devote our same attention to these phenomena. However, because of their very nature, they could at times kindle some univocal lyric reminiscences through the inclusion of the least and yet most powerful poetic device, such as the paeanic refrain ἦ ἰε Παιόν (“O Healer”). Nevertheless, from another point of view, the choral parts were sometimes so firmly tied to the economy of a drama that even a whole song would not suffice to make their lyric legacy recognizable.

*English translation by Carlo Vareschi*

## Abbreviations

*PMGF* Davies, Malcom (ed.) (1991) *Poetarum Melicorum Graecorum Fragmenta: Alcman Stesichorus Ibycus*, post Denys L. Page, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1991, vol. 1.

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