What do we know for a certainty about the tragic Greek chorus? We know that it numbered fifty at the beginning of the 5th century B.C.; we know that it was probably Aeschylus who lowered that number to twelve, and it was probably Sophocles who raised that number to fifteen, where it stayed for the remainder of the century. We know that the chorus was confined, either completely or mainly, to that part of the theatre known as the orchestra, and since the meaning of that word is dancing place, we can only conclude that dancing was a major part of what the chorus did. But of greater significance, we know that the poets considered the chorus extremely important; we know that, if for no other reason, because all of the extant tragedies contain choruses, and because of the large number of lines given to the choruses. If there is a direct correlation between the number of lines and the importance attached to the chorus by authors, then Aeschylus considered the chorus more important than either Sophocles or Euripides, but clearly they all considered the chorus important.

We therefore know what the chorus did; it danced and sang. How it danced and sang is a question that can never be answered. But to what end did it dance and sing? What was its role, what was its function? What did it do that the actors did not do?

Aristotle's principal (in truth his only) statement on the tragic chorus comes in Chapter 18 of his Poetics. Here is the Butcher translation:

The chorus too should be regarded as one of the actors; it should be an integral part of the whole, and share in the action, in the manner not of Euripides but of Sophocles. As for the later poets, their choral songs pertain as little to the subject of the piece as to that of any other tragedy. They are, therefore, sung as mere interludes—a practise first begun by Agathon. Yet what difference is there between introducing such choral interludes, and transferring a speech, or even a whole act, from one play to another?1

The paragraph begins with a major ambiguity: "The chorus too should be regarded as one of the actors." Who is to regard it so? The audience? the poet? the other characters? the chorus itself? This aside, Aristotle seems to be saying that someone ought to regard the chorus as a character, a "collective character" to be sure, but a character to the same degree as Oedipus or Heracles or Medea are characters. I
assume that Professor Peter Arnott agrees with this, for I have seen at least three of his marionette Greek tragedies and it seems clear to me that he regards his chorus as another character. Professor Kitto certainly agrees with this interpretation; in his translation of this sentence he even retains Butcher's ambiguity: "The Chorus must be regarded as one of the actors." Many theories have taken on the qualities of known truths and thus are difficult to track down at their sources. One hears somewhere along the way that the chorus exists to elevate commonplace details into universal verities. One hears that the chorus acts as a buffer between actor and audience. This theory seems to imply that there will always be some slack between the two, and it is the role of the chorus to take up that slack. One hears that the chorus exists to transform the passions of the characters, which are necessarily diffused, into sharp focus. One hears that the chorus is an Ideal Audience, that the audience may measure its response to that of the chorus. But this is surely wrong, for frequently choruses misunderstand what is happening in the tragedy while the audience understands, and frequently choruses make comments on the action which seem positively stupid or inappropriate. Furthermore, the Ideal Audience theory must give way to Aristotle, who seems to have said that the chorus must be regarded as an actor. Least, but perhaps not last, one hears that the chorus functions as a decoration. But what, we may well ask, is it supposed to decorate?

As diverse as these theories may be I detect at least one common thread: the more closely the chorus is integrated into the fabric of the play, the more it resembles a "collective character," the better. And because Euripides' choruses seem to be less a "collective character" than those of Sophocles, the Sophoclean choruses are often praised while those of Euripides are criticized. Richmond Lattimore, for example, has said that Euripides "wrote some lovely lyrics [in his choral odes] but often . . . they have nothing to do with what is going on in the play." Professor Arnott asks of Euripides' choruses, "Do they not . . . grow somewhat tedious, particularly in some of the plays of Euripides where the content is negligible?" Kitto, who is unusually severe with Euripides' choruses, thinks that the Medea chorus, because it is not relevant to the play, is a total failure.

The basic notion, then, is that the choruses' lines ought necessarily to have something "to do with what is going on in the play." Moreover, because Euripides' choruses seem to have less to do with what is going on in the plays than do Sophocles', they are necessarily less successful. This is all somewhat confusing. Lattimore, for example, would have us believe that Euripides was capable of writing lovely lyrics, but that he was not capable of incorporating them into his tragedies; he could write lovely lyrics, but not relevant ones. Then Aristotle concludes by rapping the knuckles of the "later poets" whose choruses are so nondescript that they fit

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5 Kitto, pp. 275-6.
into one tragedy as well as another; they have nothing to do with what is going on in
the play; their content is negligible. Thus lacking relevance and therefore dramatic
quality, the choral odes are sung as mere interludes, as theatrical (as opposed to
dramatic) elements.

Everyone, it seems, prefers dramatic choruses to undramatic ones. Indeed, Pro-
fessor Kitto goes so far as to say that Sophocles invented a new function for the
chorus, and that function was to make it "always dramatic." I think that it might
be wise at this point to define what we mean by dramatic. Dramatic elements in a
play are intrinsically functional elements, elements without which the play could not
operate. I use the word dramatic as an antonym of theatrical. A dramatic element
must actually work toward furthering or developing plot or character; it is literary
and is unrelated to production. A novel or a poem may be dramatic. Theatrical, on
the other hand, is not directly related to drama. It derives from theartov, a seeing
place; indeed, the variant theart is a looker-on, a viewer. Hence, that which is
dramatic is abstract and is concerned solely with the art of telling a story. That
which is theatrical is concrete, is in the visible realm, and is concerned with illustra-
tion. If a dramatic element were removed from a unified play it could not operate
fully or it would lack coherence. On the other hand if a theatrical element were
removed the production might suffer, but the reader would miss little. The plot
would still operate with its full force. Thus, the Tyrannos would be unthinkable
without the characters of Oedipus or Jocasta; so, if the chorus is, as Kitto says,
dramatic, if it were expunged the tragedy ought to be equally unthinkable.

We can certainly test the "dramatic-ness" of the Tyrannos chorus (the model
Greek tragedy with the model chorus). The chorus's first utterance does not even
approach being dramatic. It is a lyric ode of some 115 lines in which it merely speaks
of its suffering. This could certainly be deleted with no loss to the story. At 1.276 the
chorus begins a dialogue with Oedipus in which it seems to be functioning
dramatically. It suggests that Teiresias be summoned, but by Oedipus's reply that he
has already sent for the seer, he denies the chorus a functional role. During the
Oedipus-Teiresias episode, the chorus tries unsuccessfully to intrude itself into the
conversation by offering platitudes which go unheeded and unacknowledged. Dur-
ing the interval between Teiresias's exit and Creon's entrance the chorus sings another
lyrical ode, utterly lacking in dramatic value. It sings of the tracking down of Laius's
murderer, and reiterates its loyalty to Oedipus. During the Oedipus-Creon episode
the chorus interrupts the conversation with such meaningless commonplaces as,
"His words are wise, king, if one fears to fall. Those who are quick to temper are not
safe."

But there is no need to go on; the chorus does not greatly change in this regard. In
a word, if my definition of dramatic is correct, the Tyrannos chorus is simply not
dramatic; surely it is not more dramatic than many of Euripides' choruses, and it is

Kitto, p. 165.
1 O.T. II. 616-7. All quotations from the tragedies are from the Grene and Lattimore edition, and will
be cited in the text.
considerably less dramatic than, for example, the choruses of the Ion and the Bacchae. Either Aristotle is dead wrong when, referring to the Tyrrannos as the model tragedy, he suggests that the chorus should be regarded as one of the actors (as is clearly the case with Aeschylus's tragedies) or our interpretation/translation of the Poetics is wrong. Our test of the dramatic-ness of the Tyrrannos chorus has shown it to be a total failure.

But there is even more to be said about the failure of choruses to be dramatic; they are frequently anti-dramatic. As a single and almost random example of a phenomenon that occurs again and again in Greek tragedy, take the heated quarrel between Creon and his son Haemon in the Antigone. At one point, after a fine speech by Haemon in which he respectfully chides his father, pointing out that it is not a disgrace to make a mistake and later to recognize and correct it, the chorus interrupts with this bland (and dramatically worthless) comment: "Oh, king, give heed if sense be in his words;/ Heed thou thy sire too—both have spoken well" (ll.724-5). The intrusion seems bad enough, for it seems to destroy the rhythm of the scene without adding anything necessary, but this comment is positively bathetic; it reduces the sublime to the ridiculous. As a matter of fact Creon has spoken badly and foolishly, and Haemon has indeed spoken well, but the chorus will not even judge whether sense be in his words; it simply wants to end the quarrel without offending anyone. The previous speech by Creon ended with these pig-headed words:

So I must guard the men who yield to order,
And not let myself be beaten by a woman.
Better, if it must happen, that a man
Should overset me,
I won't be called weaker than womankind.

[ll. 677-80]

To this the chorus replies: 'We think—unless our age is cheating us—/ That what you say is sensible and right' (ll, 681-2). In the previously-quoted couplet the chorus could not even make up its mind whether Haemon was making sense; here it does commit itself to a judgment, but a palpably wrong judgment. In this case the chorus (the Ideal Audience?) would be the only one in the theatre, on either side of the orchestra, who would think that Creon was being right and sensible. But the major cost of such insipid remarks (with which Greek tragedy abounds) is that they seem to constitute an interruption in the action. Even Professor Kitto, that staunch champion of the Sophoclean chorus, cannot explain such anti-dramatic behavior. Even he calls the above-quoted lines "tedious remarks."

If Aristotle did not mean that the tragic chorus should be regarded as a collective character what did he mean? Perhaps the first clue that a reinterpretation of this point is necessary is the very fact that he has said so little about the chorus. It would seem that because the chorus's lines in even the least choric tragedies comprise such a large portion of the total lines (not less than 2/5), that Aristotle would have devoted

* Kitto, p. 168.
at least a proportionate space to it in the *Poetics*. We should not allow this void to pass unnoticed. Because Aristotle seems to dismiss the chorus in a single, short paragraph, one might be led to believe that part of the manuscript is missing, as we assume is the case with his discussion of comedy. Yet the translation of this passage by Professor Else makes it clear that nothing is missing, that everything that Aristotle wished to say about the chorus vis-à-vis the composition of tragedy is contained in that paragraph. Here is that important first sentence in the Else translation: "And one [the tragic poet] should go on the premise that the chorus also is one of his actors: it should be a part of the whole enterprise and an aid to him in winning the competition, not the way it was to Euripides but rather the way it was to Sophocles."*9

The crucial word in the sentence is συναγωνιζόμαι, which Butcher translates as "share in action," but Else argues to do so creates a syntactical difficulty with the datives ὄσπερ εὐχαρίστη... ὄσπερ Σοφοκλεί forcing the phrase to be translated with an interpolated παρά. Moreover, and for me of overwhelming importance, the stem of the word in question is ἀγων which Aristotle always uses to refer to the tragic competitions.10 Thus "share in the action" becomes "aid... in the competition," and suddenly the paragraph loses most of its ambiguity and obscurity.

The key, it seems to me, to understanding this passage and ultimately to understanding Aristotle's thoughts on the chorus, is to construe it as referring not to playwriting but to production. We must not allow ourselves to forget the meaning of Ποιησις. The *Poetics* is concerned solely with the art of poetry, the craft of dramaturgy, the mechanics of writing successful tragedy. The *Poetics* rarely refers to production, and when it does it is only in passing, and then almost in a casual manner. This fact in itself might go far toward explaining why Aristotle has said so little about the chorus: he did not consider it a dramatic element. He considered it an element of production. By interpreting the above passage to mean that Aristotle considered the chorus to be like one of the actors insofar as it should be a part of the whole enterprise and an aid to winning the competition, we suddenly realize that he saw the chorus as a practical element. Coming as late as it does in the *Poetics*, after the principal part of the theory was expounded, this paragraph seems to come almost as an afterthought and not as part of the theory itself.

A paraphrase of the passage might go something like this: 'The poet should compose his choruses with the same care and attention that he devotes to his actors, for if he hopes to win the competition the whole must reflect great care. Sophocles, who took as much care with his choruses as he did with his actors, won many competitions, while Euripides, who did not, won few. Euripides' choral odes frequently had little to do with what was going on in the plot, while Sophocles' were well integrated. Nowadays it is even worse. Agathon began the practice of inserting songs into his tragedies which had

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10 Else, pp. 551-3.
nothing to do with what was going on in the plays, and that is just as bad as taking songs from one tragedy and inserting them in another.' What is important is not that Aristotle is saying that a well-integrated and relevant chorus is essential to a good tragedy; he is saying, however, that it is essential to winning the competition. In other words, the art of writing good choruses is not part of the theory of tragedy; it is part of the theory of production.

Aristotle seems to have premised the chorus and its songs much as we might premise costume design. The poet may approach the chorus in either of two ways: he may, as is the practice "nowadays," simply insert songs which he borrowed from another of his (or someone else's) tragedies, songs which have no organic connection to the plot. Or, in the manner of Sophocles, he may compose each chorus specifically for each tragedy, integrating the songs into the fabric. In the analogy with costumes, the designer may simply "pull" costumes out of stock, some of which might not be appropriate for the production. But it is better to design and build each costume for each production. To dress Malvolio in a costume originally designed for Horatio might fulfill some requirements, such as period, but it would be basically inappropriate. It would not harm the play _Twelfth Night_, but it would not help the production.

In this regard, then, how does the Sophoclean chorus differ from the Euripidean chorus? It does not, as I have shown, differ in the degree of dramatic-ness. Both choruses are basically undramatic. But the Sophoclean choruses are more relevant to the plot, more integrated into the tragedies. For example, the _Tyrannos_ chorus represents the citizens of Thebes whose well-being is dependent upon Oedipus; most of what it says is in response to Oedipus. Indeed, it is the chorus's suffering that is behind Oedipus's investigation of the murder of Laius. The _Ajax_ chorus represents the sailors who serve under Ajax and who are dependent upon him. The _Philoctetes_ chorus represents the sailors, under the nominal command of Neoptolemus, who must help their captain capture Philoctetes in order that they might be victorious in Troy. Euripides' choruses, on the other hand, with several exceptions, seldom have a vested interest in the protagonists' success or failure. They are more often than not merely bystanders. Frequently the failure of the protagonist has no greater effect upon the chorus than to make it unhappy. Sophocles' method is better, Aristotle would say, just as appropriate costumes are better: it adds something, albeit not a dramatic element, to the general pleasure and understanding of the audience.

If my theory is correct—that the chorus in the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides is significant only in the theatre, not in the study—I must turn to theatrical practice in order to conclude my argument. Exactly what function does the chorus serve there? In his well-known essay, "Verfremdungseffekte in der chinesischen Schauspielkunst," Brecht describes the effect of watching Chinese actors: "The efforts in question were directed to playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play. Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on the conscious plane, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience's subconscious." 11 The

Alienation Effect, as it is called, has become so important that the theatre of Brecht and, indeed, an entire avant garde theatre movement could not have come into being without it. Western techniques of alienation, however, are dependent less on acting style, the method on which Chinese alienation is based, than on production methods, such as interrupting the action with “irrelevant” songs, dances, and sermons. That is the way it is done in the modern theatre, and I am suggesting that the classic Greek chorus played exactly this role.

This theory, then, might go far toward explaining the many choral “interruptions” we find in Greek tragedy. Specifically, those I have mentioned in the *Tyrannos* and the *Antigone* should be viewed not as dramatic interruptions, but lyric interruptions. I am suggesting that these interruptions, when they are most commonplace and insipid, were composed by the poets not for sense but for music. In other words, a couplet such as, “We think—unless our age is cheating us—/That what you say is sensible and right” should not be read dramatically as though its sole value were in its verbal sense. Rather, it should perhaps be sung and danced, perhaps expanded to several minutes, and resulting not in a mere interruption, but a full break, an interlude of alienation during which time the audience could stop feeling and begin to think. In cases such as this, how the chorus performs these couplets is more important than that it performs them. The longer choral odes were possibly major interludes of alienation during which the audience could readjust itself, relax, watch the dancing, listen to the music, and perhaps ponder what it had just seen.

In suggesting that the Greek chorus’s role was that of alienating the audience, I am not attempting to expound some chic new theory that Euripides and Sophocles were Brechtians in disguise. On the contrary, the Alienation Effect, which Brecht certainly did not invent but rather merely recognized and named, is an ancient device, one which artists—not only dramatists—have always subconsciously understood and used. It is perhaps the most efficient and direct method of arousing the emotions and passions of the audience while forcing it to think at the same time. Through this technique the director (we should not forget that the tragic poets were also directors) can simultaneously give an action specific and universal significance. Peter Brook, who used the Alienation Effect so brilliantly in his production of *Marat/Sade*, said “alienation is a call to halt: alienation is cutting, interrupting, holding something up to the light, making us look again. Alienation is above all an appeal to the spectator to work for himself, so to become more responsible for accepting what he sees. . . . A normal stage action will appear real to us if it is convincing and so we are apt to take it, temporarily, as objective truth.” And of course when the audience begins to view the stage action as objective truth it begins to delude itself. Alienation puts an end to that.

The greatest pitfall, it seems to me, in directing Greek tragedy is to take the literal meaning of the chorus’s words too seriously, to think of it as another actor, to try to make the chorus seem dramatic. My own theatregoing experiences have taught me that such efforts are totally wasted. To emphasize what is unimportant to the un-

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folding of the plot can only vitiate the power of that which is truly important. So long as the director can teach the chorus to communicate its meaning through song and dance the major part of the battle is won. Far more important than the literal meaning of the chorus's lines is the emotional mood or tone of a given ode. Surely the body is the most immediate and direct mode of communication, and it is on this plane, the physical, that the chorus exists. Here, I believe, we may give some credence to Nietzsche's theory that tragedy is a child of the marriage between the opposing attitudes of Apollo and Dionysus. The one represents the intellect, the other the body; one contemplation, the other the dance; one the dream, the other intoxication; and, to introduce Freud and take it a step further, the one the Superego, the other the Id. The secret, it seems to me, of producing Greek tragedy in an essentially Greek manner is to think of the characters as Apollonian and the chorus as Dionysian, to approach each as a distinct entity with a distinct function, but each being an integral part of the whole production. The characters inhabit a dream world, a world of myth and contemplation and intellect; their irresistible spell draws the audience into their world, and the audience is abused into believing it is a real world. And when the audience is most deeply involved in the mythological world, when their souls are being seared by the suffering of an Oedipus or a Heracles, then the chorus explodes them out of their nightmare and into the real world of sight and sound, into a world where they can think, ponder, contemplate, relax. The chorus does not act as a conciliating influence between character and audience as some believe. To the contrary, it is an alienating influence, working to insist on the differences not the similarities between the two natures of man. The characters, in that they imitate the plot are the very soul of tragedy, and this soul is eternal for it exists whether we read the tragedy or see it on the stage. The chorus, on the other hand, is a purely theatrical element, and it exists only in the theatre. We must see the chorus dance and hear it sing or it does not exist.