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AUDIENCE ON STAGE: PERFORMING THE EUMENIDES OR WHEN THE SPECTATOR TURNS INTO A CHARACTER

Sofia Frade
Centro de Estudos Clássicos - Universidade de Lisboa
<sfrade@campus.ul.pt>

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ABSTRACT

Staging a chorus in modern theatre is always a challenge. Questions on the role and source of authority of this element need to be seriously considered. Above all, the performance of a play, so linked to its own days and so politically charged like the *Eumenides*, brings another set of challenges. This paper will focus on the transformation of the audience into a character in the staging of Aeschylus' *Eumenides* by the Teatro de Braga in 2012, included in a performance of the complete trilogy. If the two first plays use the chorus to establish a connection between what is happening on stage and the audience, the third play goes a step forward and integrates the audience into the play. The aim of this essay is to understand how this works within the play, and how it shapes the reading of the performance.

KEYWORDS: *Eumenides*, Chorus, Performance, 21st-century, Portugal

RESUMEN

Escenificar un coro en el teatro moderno es siempre un reto. Las preguntas sobre el papel y la fuente de autoridad de este elemento deben ser seriamente consideradas. Además de eso, la representación de una obra tan vinculada a sus propios días y tan políticamente cargada como las *Euménides* trae otra serie de desafíos. Este artículo se centrará en la transformación de la propia audiencia en un personaje en la escenificación de *Euménides* de Esquilo por el Teatro de Braga, Portugal, en 2012, incluida en una representación conjunta de toda la trilogía. Si las dos primeras obras utilizan el coro para establecer la conexión entre lo que ocurre en el escenario y la audiencia, la tercera pieza va un paso adelante y se integra a la audiencia en la propia obra. Mi objetivo es entender cómo funciona esto en la escenificación de la pieza y cómo eso permite leer de nuevo toda da la representación.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Euménides*, Coro, Representación, siglo XXI, Portugal.

Of all the elements of ancient theatre, the chorus is probably the easiest to lose in translation. How to stage an ancient chorus in a modern performance? To even attempt to give an answer to that question, it is fundamental to understand what the role of an ancient chorus was. Ancient choruses have been seen as "the voice of the community", deriving their authority from this role. Of course, this view is problematic, as most of the ancient tragic choruses we have, are composed of people with little to no authority in the ancient world: women, old men, slaves, foreigners.

As Goldhill points out, most of the contemporary adaptations of ancient choruses derive from two different views, none without its own problems (Goldhill 2007:51-52). The first is based on the 19th-century German idealism and links the chorus with the voice of the author. The second sees the chorus as an idealised spectator:

> A chorus, the theory goes, directs the audience's attention, informs us how to react, and acts as an audience on stage. In a more sophisticated version, the chorus acts more precisely as a dramatized representation of the citizens as a collective. They are us, onstage, so to speak. (Goldhill 2007:52)

I would like to keep in mind this idea: of the chorus as an audience on stage. Even if this reading is problematic, as we have seen, in ancient tragedies, it can be very relevant for the reading of contemporary performances. In this paper, I would like to look into one specific performance of the *Eumenides* and the solution found by the director to find a voice and an identity to this chorus. The play I want to focus on was performed in 2012 by Teatro de Braga with Rui Madeira as a director. However, to understand this performance, it is fundamental to be aware of the particularities of the chorus in the original play.

In the first two plays of the trilogy, the chorus represents the elders of Argos in the first play, and the women that follow Electra to Agamemnon's tomb in the second. None of them is invested with any particular power; the elders often complain of being powerless, and though they, extraordinarily for an ancient play, threaten Aegisthus with physical violence, their resources to change the situation are hugely limited. The girls who follow Electra are just that; powerless girls, mourning and waiting for a male relative to come and enact the vengeance Electra holds dear at heart.

In the third play the chorus has a fundamental role for the action. The chorus is made up by the deities that follow and torment Orestes; the ones that are to oppose him in court during the second half of the play. This is probably one of the most powerful choruses in extant Greek tragedy, the Erinyes, to

be converted in Eumenides, are indeed powerful with their actions having a clear impact on Orestes' life, and their threats seem to have a serious potential impact in the life of Athens.

But, of course, this play is, in itself, a very peculiar play. The line between the mythic past and the contemporariness of the original audience is never more blurred than in Eumenides. The hero of the glorious heroic —and Homeric— past, is brought to an Athens that, differently from the Athens we find in, for example, *Oedipus Coloneus* or the *Heraclidae*, is not ruled by a king (however democratised Theseus and his sons appear in the Attic tragedy), but seems to be ruled directly by Athena and her citizens. The court that is staged in this play is the Areopagus known to the audience.

This question of the Areopagus does, however, bring a series of problems of its own. As Podlecki states: "No Athenian in that first audience of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* could fail to see that the poet was calling attention to one of the bitterest political issues of the day, the Ephialtes' Reforms of 462/1." (1966:81) In addition, this problem is enhanced by the ending of the play.

There is a tie in the final decision. There was no need for a tie, there is no such tradition in this myth, this is a clear choice of the playwright. The performance of the original play in 458 B.C. followed a critical moment in the history of Athenian democracy. Simon and his conservative policies and tacit allegiance to Sparta were overthrown in favour of a more progressive radical view of democracy embodied by Ephialtes and Pericles and their new alliance with Sparta's enemy, Argos. One of the reforms made by these new politicians had to do with the Areopagus, an aristocratic source of power within a democratic city. Most powers were stripped from this tribunal, then. Clearly, this play has a word to say about it. What that message is, however, is less and the question has been long debated. Is Aeschylus sided with the conservatives? If so, why is he making such a big deal of the role of Argos as an Athenian ally? If he is supporting the new policies, why is he making the court's decision so difficult and problematic? With Sommerstein, I think what we see here is that the Athenian body of citizens is divided, and they are unable to reach the decision that they need Athena's help. What the play really wants to highlight is the danger; it is of vital importance to avoid "anything that might lead to civil conflict." (Sommerstein 1998:32)

Bearing in mind the highly political tone of the original performance of this play, I would like to have a look at the interpretation given in the performance of Aeschylus' *Eumenides* by the Theatre of Braga in 2012, which is included in a staging of the complete trilogy. The play was presented with a few posters and a leaflet with the title "The *Oresteia*, Europe's tragedy: searching for a po-

litical theatre" and signed by the director Rui Madeira. The text handed to the public started with the affirmation that with the *Oresteia* the company wanted to focus on contemporaneity, on us. And the following quote taken from this leaflet clearly shows both, the purpose, and the guidelines of this performance:

> With *Oresteia*, we want to establish ourselves in the contemporaneity. In OURSELVES! In our – by bastards' heritage – Europe. In this mythical, beautiful and hot Europe, which bathed itself in Peloponnesus and was breastfed in the crib by Hellas, so that we don't let Memory betray us. (…) With *Oresteia*, we want to establish ourselves in Europe starting from the South. (…) And so, in this tragic trilogy, between gods without lineage and human dehumanized, we will rehearsal a new paradigm of JUSTICE. (…) The war, this war, is to be won by Choirs of Athenian citizens.

From this text, I would like to underline both, the intention to bring this play to a relevant place in contemporary politics, as well as the idea of an existence of a choir of Athenian citizens. To make it clear, there is no such thing in the original plays. Only the third play is set in Athens, and the chorus is made up by these old, scary deities. This idea is an innovation, an originality of this performance.

Along with the leaflet, the posters of the play were themselves quite political (see fig.1 and 2). In fact, they represented a manifestation with clashes between the population and the military. These posters reinforce the idea that these plays were about a war, which is not strange in this play, this is indeed a play about the return of the war. Along with these elements, the audience was greeted with cloth banners everywhere, with references to Troika, the budget cuts into Portuguese culture and some with the enigmatic phrase "we are 99%".

The translation of the *Oresteia* chosen for this performance, which is the only modern translation of the trilogy into European Portuguese, is a prose translation (Pulquério 1992), very close to the Greek text, with a strong philological and academic character. The option of the director was to follow the text line by line.

The director decided to keep the original choruses, following each line of the translation. This play was performed in different cities around the country and the main actors were always the same, but the choruses, comprised of 30 people, changed from city to city. It is important to understand that most of the tradition for performance of ancient plays in Portugal is closely linked with academic theatre. This makes the options on staging the plays, in general, and the choruses, in particular, more on the conservative side and with a much closer relationship with the text than movement, especially when compared

to other performative traditions in Europe. Even in important companies, like Teatro da Cornucópia, which is responsible for most non-academic performances of ancient plays since 1974, we normally see the same trend. For example, in 2006, in the performance of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, the chorus was performed by a single sailor, underlining the importance of the text over the sense of motion or communality present in an ancient chorus. The same choice was made in 2014, for the performance of Ion, where a character, external to the play, read the text of the choral odes.

In this play, the choice is to perpetuate the communality of the chorus, even if the movement is not particularly privileged. These choruses have, however, two interesting features, in one hand they were made up by locals, most of them with no previous experience in acting, creating, therefore, a direct link with the audience; on the other hand, the use of masks and banners as *peploi* establish a direct link with the ancient past (fig.3).

The chorus had an important role in the original Greek play, in situating the action within the myth. And this role is kept. The political references were not very strong in the first two plays. There were breaks between the plays and after the final break, the public was conducted back to the main room; only this time, the audience was seated on chairs standing on stage. The chairs were in five or six rows, and with some televisions displays in front of the audience playing huge eyes moving, looking at the audience, intended to make it feel watched. So in this last play there is an inversion, the audience is now on stage, they are not spectators in fact there is someone looking at them, with big strange eyes. The stage is closed, so the audience does not see the theatre seats, which they might assume to be empty.

Fischtee-Lichte states that "Ultimately all participants generate the performance together. (…) In other words, performance opens up the possibility for all participants to experience themselves as subjects able to co-determine the actions and behaviour of others, and whose own actions and behaviours are determined by others." In this case, this importance of the audience in the performance and the dynamic between actors and public is taken to a new high. Not only members of the community make up the chorus, the actors are put on stage. This reality also addresses the problem of where to stage a Greek tragedy.

On a reflection on the staging of *Agamemnon*, de La Combe asks:

> Where to perform? Most directors think it possible to transfer tragedy to a traditional theatre-building (Italian theatre). This kind of space secures the freedom of the spectator, who sits in a familiar place and can judge what is represented in front of him or her. But how can the show begin, how can someone leave everyday life and enter a totally new and foreign universe, if

> the place where one finds oneself is already conventional? And how could this place not be conventional (with rows of seats separated from the stage) if theatre is expected?

By moving the audience on to stage, this performance manages to make the conventional foreign, unfamiliar and taking away, at least, part of the sense of security the audience would have normally.

Orestes comes onto the stage with the awful Erinyes following him and the play begins. When the place of action changes from Delphi to Athens, things start to, finally, get quite political. In fact, even if we look at the original play, it is here that things start to get political. The original myth of Orestes has nothing to do with Athens or Athena; originally Orestes' guilt problem was solved in Delphi. As far as I know, there haven't been many stagings of this play where the Eumenides keep their original political strength. The change in sceneries had a very strong political impact on the first staging of this play.

The problems created by the trilogy will be solved not in Argos where they belonged in the first place, nor in Delphi where Orestes goes in search for purification, but in the Areopagus. Along with the political implications mentioned earlier, it is important to note that, at this very same time, Athens was trying to export their juridical system, and we know for a fact that the Athenian courts were open to charge external matters even if they had nothing whatsoever to do with Athens.

When the play goes back to Athens, the curtains of the stage are opened and the audience can finally see the seating area were they find the banners that greeted them at the beginning, as well as some of the actors watching the play. Athena comes into the scene and for a cape she has nothing else than the flag of Europe with its 12 stars. The great decision maker, the ruler of this new court is Europe herself.

It has been established that the members of the Areopagus were to have been played by silent actors. In a modern performance of this play it is easy, as happens here, for the chorus to be regarded as full characters in the second part of the play, given the fundamental role they play. In this particular staging, the fact that the audience is sitting on stage looking at Athena and Orestes and the Erynes, gives the impression that the audience could very well represent the jurors, creating some sort of a second, silent, chorus: the chorus of Athenian citizens mentioned in the leaflet is clearly on stage by now.

In one of the readings for the final of the play, the message is quite clear and that means that all problems can be solved in Athens, even problems that outside Athens seem endless like this endless cycle of blood and revenge. Justice in Athens could overcome any problems. As it is normally said that we

have the old gods and the new gods on stage and the new gods win, creating a modern and prosperous city. Looking back at the banners saying "we are 99%", it is possible to understand what they mean, the jurors are 99%, the audience is 99%, we all are 99%, Athena is only 1%, Europe is only 1% (even if the maths are not clear as there is no indication in the text that there were 99 jurors, they are thought to be between 12 and 15). Even if Athena leads the court, the citizens have the right to make the decision. And we are back to the theme of the play —the tragedy of Europe. The play means to send a clear message that Europe is in trouble if she doesn't listen to her citizens, and that the audience as citizens are in the centre of the stage we are the decision-makers we have to make ourselves heard. And by the introductory text we see there is a clear opposition between North and South Europe; we in the south including Portugal, Greece, and maybe Italy or Spain should just say something about European politics.

The play ends with the actors sitting within the main theatre getting up and applauding the audience, in a moment where everything in the theatre is reversed, where the actors are the audience and the audience becomes the actors. Following this, both actors and audience sing a song that is one of the national anthems of the Portuguese revolution of 1974: "Grândola, Vila Morena" (fig.4) The politics of the play are perfectly clear I think, and the inversion of roles between the actors and the audience, sort of nudge the audience into action. Finished with the play, the audience is to reenact the revolution.

There is, of course, a problem with this reading. As we have seen, there was a tie in the original judgment. Not only that, but does Athena vote in the first round? If yes, her vote counts twice. In fact, her vote goes against the majority of the jury. Is she one of the jurors, one whose vote is more important than the others? The text is unclear and despite all the discussions, I think the text is purposely unclear and ambiguous.

But, if we entertain the idea that Athena voted, in fact, on the first round. Then she votes twice, and she actually votes against the majority of the citizens, because if Athena voted in the first round it means the citizens would have decided that Orestes was guilty by one vote. Of course, this is not the only reading of the play but it is one that cannot be disregarded. Although if it is so, then the banner saying we are 99% means nothing, because no matter how many we are, the decision-making is solely in Athena, that is in Europe, and all illusion of power given to the citizens, their voice, is just a farce.

Whether the director was aware of this reading and decided to ignore it, or not is unclear; maybe the original play had more to say about the present than Aeschylus could have ever imagined…

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IMAGES

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4