

## The role of Chorus

Although the historical origins of Greek drama are unclear it may be said it had relevance to religion, art and to the love of expression and perceptive storytelling in general. The origins of the chorus in particular may have stemmed out of ancient rites and rituals with elements of song and dance, and most importantly – the gathering of people.

In order to understand the function of the chorus one must remember that at the origins of Greek drama there was only one actor; and even at later dates no more than three actors occupied the stage, each of whom may have played several roles. As there was this clear need to distract the audience while the actors went off-stage to change clothes and costumes, and perhaps prepare for their next role, the function of the chorus may have had more to do with practicality, than with artistic or philosophical considerations.

Aside from the practical the chorus would have had numerous functions in providing a comprehensive and continuous artistic unit. Firstly, according to a view accepted by many scholars, the chorus would provide commentary on actions and events that were taking place before the audience. By doing this the chorus would create a deeper and more meaningful connection between the characters and the audience. Secondly, the chorus would allow the playwright to create a kind of literary complexity only achievable by a literary device controlling the atmosphere and expectations of the audience. Thirdly, the chorus would allow the playwright to prepare the audience for certain key moments in the storyline, build up momentum or slow down the tempo; he could underline certain elements and downplay others. Such usage of the choral structure-making functions may be observed throughout many classical plays but may be more obvious in some than in others.

In Aeschylus' "Prometheus Bound", the chorus is composed of Oceanids (nymphs from the ocean, the children of the sea god Oceanus and his wife Tethys). Aeschylus changed the role of the chorus which brought criticisms from Aristotle who his *Poetics* suggested that "he diminished the importance of the Chorus" (Aristotle 5), and by more modern writers such as H. D. F. Kitto who in his *Greek Tragedy: A Literary Study* writes "Aeschylus arranges things differently. He makes the chorus do what Greek choruses are supposed never to do: to take a part in the action." (Kitto 85) Nonetheless such rearrangements might have made the chorus more convincing because it could remain on the stage with Prometheus for the entire play as witness and commentator. Here the chorus could express its sympathy for the lead character:  
"I mourn for thee, Prometheus, minished and brought low,  
Watering my virgin cheeks with these sad drops, that flow  
From sorrow's rainy fount, to fill soft-lidded eyes  
With pure libations for thy fortune's obsequies." (Aeschylus)

In the works of Nietzsche the chorus takes on a completely new and profound philosophical meaning. In his *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche presents a view of a distinct dissonance between what he calls the *Apollonian* and the *Dionysian* paradigms, referencing to the dramatic and choral qualities of Greek drama respectively. In a metaphysical framework the chorus is the essence of the play and embodies a certain Dionysian consciousness which deals with the primal realms of the human condition. Nietzsche goes to the extreme of suggesting that the "tragic myth can only be understood as a symbolic picture of Dionysian wisdom by means of Apollonian art." (Nietzsche 261)

These primal forces would be at the command of the playwright through the choice of character and composition of the chorus. It might well consist of sea nymphs, as in *Prometheus Bound*, or 15 Theban elders as in *Oedipus Rex*, or of any other sort of people who would represent the unison of people. It could be argued that the thing that unified the chorus was their mode of communication – more often than not the chorus would elevate its meaning in song. Moreover, and perhaps partly for practical reasons (for it may have been difficult to see the characters from afar because of the relatively large size of the theatre) the chorus would emphasize certain elements of the story through the use of attributes such as masks and weapons.

The chorus may have distinguished itself by an elaborate use of language or style, varying the voice of reason or that of emotion depending on occasion and the intention of the playwright. More importantly though, the chorus could have represented the prevalent views of the contemporary society holding up certain moral and cultural standards – much like the media does for modern people throughout their daily lives

In case of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex the audience may have already been familiar – and in many cases probably was - with the outcome of the play. This made the task of engaging the viewer ever more difficult. Hence the chorus would create interest by presenting an alternative or additional viewpoint. It may have negotiated sympathies for one or another character, or perhaps depending on the sophistication of the particular character, it may have even guided the characters through problematic situations. This is exemplified by how Oedipus' (who is all but blind to his fate) and Teiresias' conversation is affected by the chorus.

“To us it sounds as if Teiresias  
has spoken in anger, and, Oedipus,  
you have done so, too. That's not what we need.  
Instead we should be looking into this:  
How can we best carry out the god's decree?” (Sophocles 485)

Both in the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles and in Ancient Greek drama in general, the role of the chorus may have been important because of structural and practical reasons. At the same one may praise primarily as an enhancer and amplifier of impression, and sometimes the voice of a moderator, or the moral voice of the people. Certainly it also had a similar role to music in modern drama underlining important events and downplaying the less important ones. Perhaps most generally though, the chorus would give the ancient playwright a multifunctional literary device for the creation of an award-winning play on the Dionysian festival.

However, as we proceed in time, we find that in the works of Nietzsche the chorus takes on a completely new and profound philosophical meaning. In his *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche presents a view of a distinct dissonance between what he calls the Apollonian and the Dionysian paradigms, referencing to the dramatic and choral qualities of Greek drama respectively. In a metaphysical framework the chorus is the essence of the play and embodies a certain Dionysian consciousness which deals with the primal realms of the human condition.

The use of the Chorus in Elizabethan plays derives ultimately from its use in Ancient Greek drama. In Shakespeare's *King Henry V* (1599), for instance, a play which includes military sieges and battle scenes, the Chorus is used to ask the audience to exercise their imaginations to conceive of such vast doings taking place in so small a theatre. Marlowe employs chorus in *Doctor Faustus* for a number of functions. In the modern theatre chorus has become almost of no use. G. B. Shaw has used prefaces and elaborate stage directions which serve the purpose of the Greek chorus. The chorus comments on the action in lyrical speeches. Thus they add lyrical splendour to the drama and help in transforming horror and pain to beauty and music. It also knows the past, observes the present and has shrewd sense of the future. It participates in the action in the sense that, it suffers its consequences.

Aristotle says in his Poetics that chorus “should be an integral part of the whole, and take share in the action.” But in the Problemata he admits that “action is not fitting for the chorus”. The main function of chorus is dancing and singing. Twelve or more persons always standing on the stage can not effectively participate in any action. They interfere with dramatic probability and movement. It has been rightly said that the chorus contributes “in some degree to the progress of the action, by active offices of friendly assistance as, for example, in the Philoctetes, and the Ajax of Sophocles”. (Twining)