CHAPTER 1

Choral Emotions and Collective Passions: Questions and Approaches, Old and New

1 Introduction

Intense emotion pervades Greek tragedy. So does the presence of the chorus. Increasing interest in emotion in antiquity has turned to both Greek tragedy and Aristotle for the insights they provide into emotion in the classical period and beyond. Despite the proliferation of such work in the last twenty years, however, collective emotion tends to be overlooked. This book aims precisely to direct attention to collective emotion in 5th c. Athenian life, with special focus on the choral voice of Greek tragedy.

More specifically, by examining how a particular set of choruses performs and theorizes fear and pity, my aim is to elucidate the content, mechanics, and effect of collective fear and pity within the plays, on the one hand; and to contribute to a better understanding of the role itself of the tragic chorus, on the other. This understanding of choral emotion, however, is not to be seen in a vacuum. This book argues that, partly through its choruses, Greek tragedy participates in exploring and shaping collective psychology in the 5th c. During this period the workings and power of collective emotion are explicitly addressed in various public fora for the import they have in political life. To substantiate this claim, I turn to an analysis of collective emotion in Thucydides’ History. The historian’s depiction of the desires, fears, hopes, and sympathies of the dèmos raises invaluable questions about the nature and role of collective emotion in Athenian public life. Choral emotion is, in turn, shown to engage with similar questions from a markedly, if highly mediated, collective perspective. It thus becomes apparent, this book suggests, that both Thucydides’ History and the choral discourse of tragedy reflect and address in diverse ways what emerges as a vital preoccupation in 5th c. Athenian culture: how to engage (with) collective emotion in order to direct its motivational power into action that is conducive to social cohesion and collective prosperity in the polis.

Before I turn to the History and the plays themselves, the following sections lay the groundwork and rationale for my analysis. Section 2 presents the assumptions that lie behind the questions pursued in this book. These assumptions regard my understanding of the emotions more broadly—their nature and function as complex processes—and in classical Athenian culture in
particular, which I view as ‘a culture of passions’; the integration of aesthetics and sociopolitics and the circulation of emotional discourses in 5th c. Athens; and the function of tragedy and its choruses in this context. In Section 3, I turn to Aristotle to discuss the ways in which his work—regarding especially the (tragic) emotions as well as action—forms an influential background and a valuable point of departure for my analysis of choral emotion. I then move to the tragic chorus in Section 4. I situate my approach vis-à-vis previous interpretations and delineate the aspects of chorality that are particularly pertinent to my reading, introduce the choruses that I will focus on, and conclude by raising certain methodological points regarding my approach. Section 5 elaborates on the insights provided by an analysis of Thucydides’ text for contextualizing the choral discourse of pity and fear. Last, Section 6 introduces a recent theoretical approach to ‘civil passions’ that offers useful conceptual tools for my analysis of both Thucydidean history and tragedy in the chapters that follow.

2 Preliminaries: Assumptions and Questions

Like scholarship in a number of fields in the humanities and social sciences, classical scholarship has shown a growing interest in the study of the emotions. Treatments of ancient emotions often begin from contemporary approaches and their relationship to Aristotle partly because the juxtaposition brings to the fore major ways in which the dichotomy between emotion and reason is or ought to be undermined. To put it in relatively uncontroversial terms, emotions tend to be seen as based on thinking and evaluative processes that go hand in hand with different degrees of changes in the brain and the rest of the body. Emotions, in other words, are complex processes of response to real or imagined stimuli, which include and reflect affect and cognition, physiological and mental change. Under debate remains the precise nature and dynamic between these elements: the genetic and cultural factors that define each one of them, their position in the chronology, as it were, of the emotional experience, their malleability, and the ways in which they interact and (re)define each other and human conduct.2


2 As Prinz (2004) has put it, the problems addressed in the study of emotion can be categorized under two headings: the problem of parts, namely what actually is the emotion