CHAPTER 3

Emotion in Aeschylus’ Active Choruses

1 Defining Active Choruses

I begin my study of choral discourse by focusing on active choruses and primarily fear. I employ the term ‘active’ in two different ways. First, I use it in the intuitive sense as referring to choruses that participate actively in the dramatic plot. As actors, these female choruses perform a role different from the more common kind of choral participation that consists primarily in responding to the events in the plays. The Aeschylean choruses that I discuss move the action of the plays forward and thus inevitably trigger emotional and other responses. Second, these choruses are active insofar as they specifically (attempt to) instigate fear and perform an extensive discourse about the content and function of this emotion. The choruses of Erinyes and suppliant women in Aeschylus’ Eumenides and Supplices respectively are unique in the extant corpus for performing this role intentionally. Aeschylus’ Seven Against Thebes, on the other hand, brings on stage a chorus of Theban maidens that spread fear in the city unintentionally but also choose to elaborate extensively on such fear. In the Supplices and the Seven, I also examine the choruses’ attempt to evoke pity and the close relationship between fear and pity.

Before I proceed to the plays, some clarifications on ‘active’ choruses are necessary. Despite the apparent overlap of using the concept of the chorus as actor with the well-known Aristotelian statement about the ideal treatment of

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1 The Erinyes are also divine, which adds to their uniqueness. The choice of these particular choruses does not imply that all other choruses are passive or take no intentional action. In the Oresteia itself, for instance, the choruses of the first two plays are active to different degrees and in different ways. The elders in the Agamemnon not only perform lyrics that dominate the play; they also attempt to resist the new regime established by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus in the final scene. The female chorus of the Choephoroi contributes significantly (in terms of emotional and motivational support) to the preparation of Orestes and Electra for the murder of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Already these examples indicate that what can be seen as choral action varies from play to play. As I explain in Chapter 1, I view the possibilities of choral action on a spectrum. The choruses examined in this chapter would occupy one end of the spectrum while the choruses of Chapter 4 would each fall in different positions along this spectrum. This study, therefore, aims to examine representative examples of different types of active choruses that offer valuable insights to the tragic emotions. On Aeschylean choruses and choral action, see also Foley (2003) 15–17.
the chorus, my approach inevitably departs from and contrasts with Aristotle’s understanding. In the Poetics, Sophocles famously sets the example for this ideal treatment: καὶ τὸν χορὸν δὲ ἔνα δεῖ ὑπολαμβάνειν τῶν ὑποκριτῶν, καὶ μόριον εἶναι τοῦ ἄλοι καὶ συναγωνίζεσθαι μὴ ὥσπερ Εὐριπίδη ἀλλ’ ὥσπερ Σοφοκλεῖ (and one should treat the chorus as one of the actors; and it should be part of the whole and share in the contest not in the way it does with Euripides but in the way it does with Sophocles). The precise meaning of the statement has been extensively debated. While the chorus’ relevance to the issues and action of any given play appears to be part of what Aristotle requires, Stephen Halliwell has systematically demonstrated that mere relevance cannot be sufficient in the Aristotelian theory of tragedy. Since Aristotle emphatically prioritizes the structure and unity of the plot, the demand for καὶ μόριον εἶναι τοῦ ἄλοι “can be seen to prescribe no mere thematic pertinence, but indispensable involvement in the action of the plot”. And since nowhere in Sophocles would the removal of the chorus seriously damage the unity of the plot, the chorus, Halliwell concludes, has essentially no place in Aristotle’s theory. In other words, the opaqueness of the philosopher’s demand and the inability of the Aristotelian theory to explicate choral function stems from “the incompatibility between an identification of the Aristotelian plot-structure as ‘the whole’ of a drama and the distinctive character of choral lyrics as these are employed in much of the work of all three tragedians. Melopoia is not reducible to the elements and standards of a play’s action”.

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2 Poetics 1456a25–28. Scholars have debated the meaning of συναγωνίζεσθαι. Citing earlier interpretations, Else (1957) 552–553 argues that we should keep its usual meaning: “Ἀγωνίζεσθαι in the Poetics, like ἀγών, always refers concreately to the poets’ competition at the Dionysia or Lenaea [. . .] Συναγωνίζεσθαι here has precisely the same reference”. Using Aristophanes’ Thesm. 1060, where the verb has its literal meaning “helped him in the contest”, Lucas (1968) 193 suggests that “here the sense must be ‘make a positive contribution to the play’. I retain the literal meaning of the infinitive in my translation. Even so, “being part of the whole” remains the most significant part for my reading according to which the chorus, like the actors, has to be organically integrated in the plot of the play. See also Else (1957) 553.


5 See ibid., 250: “Aristotle’s theory of poetry and tragedy virtually dictate the devaluation and neglect of choral lyric. If that is right, then it is reasonable to conclude that the end of ch. 18 is an inchoate attempt at rationalization, an attempt to bring melopoia into line with the thrust of the theory as a whole, but one whose formulation effectively confirms that the treatise’s chief principles implicitly slight the lyric dimension of the tragedian’s art”.

6 Ibid., 248. For a reading of the chorus in Sophocles that confirms Aristotle’s statement about the Sophoclean chorus, see Goldhill (2012) passim, and especially his discussion of the komos in the Antigone, Electra, and Philoctetes. Goldhill concludes his analysis by suggesting: