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TONY HARRISON'S *THE COMMON CHORUS*  
AND DRAMATIC TRILOGIES



ABSTRACT: In the mid-1980s British poet Tony Harrison planned a trilogy of three plays: an adaptation of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, a close version of Euripides' *Trojan Women*, and an original play called *Maxims*. Together these plays would form *The Common Chorus*. While the trilogy was never performed in its entirety, it is an important work for understanding the development of Harrison's engagement with ancient Greek theatre, and a useful tool for thinking about the nature of dramatic trilogies in fifth-century Athens. This article provides an overview of Harrison's vision for *The Common Chorus*, while also arguing that while any play from a trilogy, narratively connected or not, can stand independently, that is not the same thing as being complete, and that we cannot adequately grasp how a poet was using narrative, theme, and the various elements of stagecraft when only a single play survives.

IN THE EARLY 1980s, coming off the success of *The Oresteia*, Tony Harrison pitched the National Theatre the idea of doing a trilogy of three plays: an adaptation of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, a close version of Euripides' *Trojan Women*, and an original play called *Maxims*. Together these plays would form *The Common Chorus*. Harrison imagined the trilogy, in some ways, to be a response to *The Oresteia*, including balancing that production's all-male cast with an almost exclusively female one. But it was also deeply rooted in Harrison's explorations, which spanned the 1980s, of what he has called "the wholeness of the Greek imagination".<sup>1</sup> He was particularly fascinated by the ability of Greek tragedy to look at the worst things imaginable and keep singing — "giving the unspeakable poetical expression" — while also sharing a performance space and audience with

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\* I am very grateful to Tony Harrison for allowing me to quote unpublished archival materials and to Faber for arranging formal permissions.

1. Harrison (2004) 7.

satyr plays and Old Comedy.<sup>2</sup> *The Common Chorus* yokes together Old Comedy and tragedy in a thematically linked set of plays, transitioning from comedy, to tragedy, to history play, framing these plays in the context of modern warfare across the 20th century. In the end *The Common Chorus* trilogy never reached the stage. Parts I and II (*Lysistrata* and *Trojan Women*) would be published, and the third play would be staged in a significantly revised form in 1992 under the title *Square Rounds*.<sup>3</sup> Despite the trilogy never being performed in its entirety, it is an important work for understanding the development of Harrison's engagement with ancient Greek theatre, and a useful tool for thinking about the nature of dramatic trilogies in fifth-century Athens.

#### TONY HARRISON AND THE GREEKS

Tony Harrison is closely associated with modern receptions of the ancient world, especially ancient Greek theatre. His work includes: *Aikin Mata*, a version of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* produced for students at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Nigeria (staged in 1964, published in 1966); *The Oresteia*, produced at the National Theatre, London (1981); *Medea: a sex-war opera*, a libretto written for the New York Metropolitan Opera, but not staged due to the composer's failure to complete the score (published in 1985); *The Common Chorus*, written for the National Theatre London but not staged (Part I first published in 1988, and Part II first published in 2002); *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, an original play built around the fragments of Sophocles' satyr play *Ichneutae* (Delphi 1988; London 1990); *The Kaisers of Carnuntum*, a play about the Roman Emperor Commodus (1995); *The Labourers of Herakles*, a play built around the fragments of Phrynichus' *Alcestis*, written for performance at Delphi (1995); *Hecuba*, a translation of Euripides' tragedy written for the Royal Shakespeare Company (2005); *Fram*, an original play in which the idea of the power of Greek tragedy, both the mask and the messenger speech are central (2008); and his final work, *Iphigenia in Crimea*, a version of Euripides' *Iphigenia Among*

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2. Harrison (2008) 10.

3. *The Common Chorus* (Part I) was first published in *The Agni Review* 27 (1988) and by Faber and Faber in 1992. *The Common Chorus* (Part II) was first published in 2002 in *Plays 4* by Faber and Faber.

*the Taurians*, broadcast on BBC Radio 3 in 2017.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the theatre works, Harrison also created a number of film/poems which engage with the classical world.

*The Common Chorus* marks the point in Harrison's career when he was just beginning to contemplate whether his engagement with the Greeks would go beyond *The Oresteia*. That work had been a commission by Peter Hall in the early 1970s soon after Hall had been appointed as the Artistic Director of the National Theatre. Despite Harrison's background in Classics—he holds a undergraduate degree in Classics from the University of Leeds, and had started a PhD on 18th-century receptions of Virgil's *Aeneid*—it was Hall's experience performing in *Agamemnon* in the Cambridge Greek Play in 1953 that was the driving force behind *The Oresteia*. Yet, as is clear from the numerous Greek projects that Harrison worked on across the 1980s, *The Oresteia* was creatively stimulating for him. He would write to Peter Hall in 1984 from Greece, where he had given a talk at the European Cultural Centre of Delphi for the first time, "I don't think my creative juices have ever flowed, nay flown so freely before. Something mysterious happened to me at Delphi...I think my work in the theatre has finally made me realise my true nature."<sup>5</sup> That was the prelude to his pitch for *The Common Chorus* trilogy, which he hoped would "bring to fruition all my work as a poet of the theatre."<sup>6</sup> In the same letter, he argued that "the real value of exploring the past, and there is no greater past than the Greeks, is to unlock the energies, dramatic forms for the present", lamenting that, "My frustration was that it never happened at the NT for me."<sup>7</sup> This bears some unpacking, as one might have thought that he had in fact accomplished this, given that among the most successful productions that the National Theatre had produced in its first decade and a half were three works by Harrison: *The Misanthrope*, a version of Moliere's 17th-century play, *The Mysteries*, a version of the northern English Medieval Mystery Plays, and his translation of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. Harrison seems to be drawing a distinction between making plays from earlier periods accessible and exciting to modern audiences, and creating new poetic drama for the modern era. By the late 1980s he clearly felt that he had come closer to this goal with *The Trackers*

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4. The play was conceived of and written for a performance in Sebastopol, Crimea, which did not happen due to the Russian invasion in 2014.

5. Tony Harrison Archive, *The Common Chorus* notebooks, 32.

6. Tony Harrison Archive, *The Common Chorus* notebooks, 32.

7. Tony Harrison Archive, *The Common Chorus* notebooks, 32.

of *Oxyrhynchus*, which he would describe as, “my play, which has an ancient heart.”<sup>8</sup> *The Common Chorus* was the theatrical work that bridged his work on *The Oresteia* and the writing of *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*.

In a letter written to Helen Mirren in January 1986, Harrison provided a summary of the planned trilogy:

At the simplest level the trilogy is one longish evening of 3 plays comprising:

1. The LYSISTRATA of Aristophanes.
2. The TROJAN WOMEN of Euripides.  
(I am translating both these from the Greek. They were written within a few years of each other. Both ‘peace’ plays).
3. MAXIMS, which is a new verse play by me about the American brothers Maxim; Hiram, the inventor of the machine gun, and Hudson, inventor of explosives, and also the author of *The Science of Poetry*. Hiram also invented towards the end of his life an inhaler for his own asthma, which he called the ‘Pipe of Peace’. He died, nevertheless, in the year the play is set, 1915, which also saw the first use of the more potentially deadly invention GAS, by both German and British troops.

The title of the whole evening is THE COMMON CHORUS because all three plays are presented by a group of modern women, all with different class and regional backgrounds, at the Peace Camp at Greenham Common.

The first page of Harrison’s *The Common Chorus* notebooks indicates that Harrison had originally conceived of performing the plays in repertory on three separate evenings. In any event, the three plays were united by their cast, setting, a common concern about the increasingly destructive nature of war from Troy to the 20th century, and questions about the function of poetry in the face of such destruction. The setting of the trilogy was to be the US Cruise Missile Base at Greenham Common, around which a protest camp had been established in 1981 by women who objected to the siting of nuclear missiles anywhere on British soil.<sup>9</sup> At its peak the camp welcomed

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8. Lennon (1990).

9. The Greenham Common protest began in August 1981 when a group of thirty-six women, part of “Women for Life on Earth”, began walking from Cardiff, Wales, to Green-

30-50,000 women who undertook various acts of protest, including 30,000 women joining hands to encircle the base, and forty-four women entering the base and dancing on the Cruise missile silos. Harrison imagined Hecuba and Lysistrata holding hands and dancing among them.<sup>10</sup> Harrison set *The Common Chorus* amidst these women in the early 1980s during the height of protest activity, though the camp lasted in one form or another for nearly twenty years.<sup>11</sup> The central conflict that would frame the trilogy was that between the women protesting outside Greenham Common and the male soldiers who were on the other side of the fence, both literally and ideologically, manning the base and its weapons.

Where Harrison's previous version of *Lysistrata* —the Nigerian *Aikin Mata*— had been charming, the *Lysistrata* of *The Common Chorus* is ugly. It was undoubtedly its ugliness that caused the National Theatre management, in Harrison's words, to "linger over the text [until] the tension of a topical present and a tragic past had leached away into oblivion."<sup>12</sup> The National Theatre management had reason to be concerned, both under the leadership of Peter Hall and later under that of Richard Eyre. The management may have been made wary by the court case brought against director

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ham Common in Berkshire, England, to protest the locating of nuclear Cruise missiles at the American Forces base there. The walk took ten days, and when they arrived the women demanded a televised debate between themselves and government officials on nuclear arms. The government ignored the women and their demands, and so the women set up camp at Greenham Common and their numbers began to grow. In December 1981 the women took their first serious action, preventing sewage pipes from being laid. The following March two hundred and fifty women blockaded the base, resulting in the first arrests associated with the women's camp. Actions and arrests would steadily escalate from this point onward. The number of the women at the camp also continued to grow, invited by chain letters to join the protest, and spurred by the news coverage. On the early stages of the protest, see Liddington (1989) 1-2. For a time line of events and actions associated with the Greenham Common Women, see Harford and Hopkins (1984) "Dateline" in unnumbered introductory pages.

10. Harrison (2002) 194. In *The Common Chorus* notebooks (231), Harrison has pasted in an article, "Decorating the Wire", from *The Guardian* on December 10, 1982, which reported that, 'On Sunday the women plan to encircle the whole nine mile perimeter of the Greenham Common base with a chain of women holding hands...8,000 estimated needed. Each woman is being asked to bring what means most to her as a symbol of life — flowers, photographs of their families, bits of baby clothing and to hang them on the wire and concrete fence'. Harrison would draw on the idea of the women as a collective chorus for his trilogy, as well as the women's practice of adorning the fences with various items.
11. The last nuclear missiles were removed from the base in 1991, but the protest camp lingered on until 2000, when permission was given for a memorial to be built on the site.
12. Harrison (2002) 197.

Michael Bogdanov by Mary Whitehouse over the National Theatre's 1980 production of *The Romans in Britain*. That play contained a scene in which a Roman soldier raped a druid, and on account of this scene Bogdanov was privately prosecuted by Whitehouse for "procuring an act of gross indecency", on the basis that he had cast the actors involved in the scene.<sup>13</sup> The prosecution was eventually dropped, but it had gone far further than anyone at the National had initially anticipated. And Richard Eyre had personal experience of the furore that Harrison's penchant for rhyming obscenities could cause, having directed the 1987 film of Harrison's poem 'V'. The broadcast of the film on Channel 4 led to widespread, often hostile, media coverage, and even discussion about obscenity on television in the House of Commons.<sup>14</sup> Nor was the National Theatre's management the only one with concerns about the play. *The Partisan Review*, published out of Boston University, solicited Part I of *The Common Chorus*, the adaptation of *Lysistrata*, prior to the anticipated performance with a view to publication. Eventually Harrison received a letter from the journal's editors saying that while they thought his version was wonderful they had come to the conclusion that it was "too pacifist, and too obscene" to publish.<sup>15</sup>

The same vulgar language that had caused so much consternation in regard to 'V' is deployed in *The Common Chorus* by the guards at the base shouting at the women outside. The choice of language was part of a larger agenda on Harrison's part about language, culture and class. As he has said, "If we want to debate some of the obscenities in our culture...we must represent them."<sup>16</sup> In *The Common Chorus* the language is both offensive and abusive, and purposefully so. As the play opens, standing behind the perimeter wire, into which the protestors have woven the letters CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament), the guards at the base chant::

GUARD 1  
Cock!

GUARD 2  
Nob!

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13. Hall (2000) 313-16 discusses the production and the subsequent legal proceedings.

14. For examples of the press coverage and other responses to the broadcast of 'V', see the second edition of the poem published by Bloodaxe Books — Harrison (1989). See also Eyre's essay "Such Men are Dangerous" in Astley (1991) 362-66.

15. Harrison (1991) 449.

16. *Daily Telegraph*, Tuesday 13 October 1987.

GUARD 3

Dick!<sup>17</sup>

GUARD 1

Christ, but I could do with a screw.  
Too long on this job, my balls are turning blue.

GUARD 3

I tell you, mate, doing this patrol  
doesn't give a bloke much chance of hole.

GUARD 1

And if you spend too long on this fucking wire  
you'll find someone's been at home poking the wife's fire.

GUARD 3

Back there the cunt's all Yankie and it's booked  
so far as fucking fucking goes you're somewhat fucking fucked.<sup>18</sup>

Later in the play, the guards add a bit of music to their crude repertoire, singing:

Are you out there, Phyllis, come give us a fuck?  
Are you out there, Cynthia, come and give us a suck?

Camp-followers are yer, after military cocks  
sucking off a sentry in his sentry box?

How would you like a nice shot of warm come  
right down your tonsils, up your cunt, your bum?  
The semen of he-men's superior to that  
your stubby little hubby squirts into your twat.

Oh I can feel their little fannies start to ooze  
when I unzip my flyfront and flash 'em my cruise!

Are you out there, Phyllis, come give us a fuck?  
Are you out there, Cynthia, come and give us a suck?<sup>19</sup>

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17. In *Trojan Women*, Harrison imagined Cassandra adding material to the letters CND on the fence to weave her own name.

18. Harrison (2002) 200.

19. Harrison (2002) 207.



Like so many of Harrison's plays, just where one thinks that he is embellishing the historical narrative that he has found for dramatic effect, it is there that the play is perhaps most firmly rooted in reality. The Greenham Women were constantly exposed to this sort of sexually abusive language by the guards on the other side of the wire fence, especially at night when they were trying to sleep. In his introduction to *The Common Chorus* Harrison quotes Caroline Blackwood's book on Greenham, *On the Perimeter*:

'I am so tired,' said Pat. 'We had such an awful night with the soldiers. They shouted at us all night. They just couldn't stop. It was sexual, of course. It's always sexual'. (...) the peace women brought out everything that was sadistic and infantile in these men. The sex war that was raging on the perimeter was a very ugly and cruel one.<sup>20</sup>

And, lest anyone think that he was exaggerating the vulgarity of the guards, Harrison also reprints songs included in a publication for sale from the United States Air Force 77th Tactical Fighter Squadron at Upper Heyford. The following song is representative of the general tone and content:

I fucked a dead whore by the roadside  
I knew right away she was dead  
The skin was all gone from her tummy  
The hair was all gone from her head.

As I lay down there beside her,  
I knew right away I had sinned.  
So I pressed my lips to her pussy  
And sucked out the wad I'd shot in.

Sucked out, sucked out.  
I sucked out the wad I'd shot in, shot in,  
Sucked out, sucked out,  
I sucked out the wad I'd shot in.

The language of *The Common Chorus* is in places exceedingly crude and vulgar, but like *Trojan Women*, it reflects the historical reality of women in militarized zones. It is worth noting that no one was objecting to staging *Trojan Women* with its myriad forms of extreme violence against women;

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20. Harrison (2002) 195-96.

draped in the guise of tragic diction such violence was and is seen to be unproblematic. The ugly words of *Lysistrata*, on the other hand, despite a lack of actual violence, were deemed by some to be too uncomfortable to either stage or print.

Having not been staged under Hall, *The Common Chorus* was still being considered for production at the National Theatre in some form when Richard Eyre became Artistic Director of the National Theatre in 1987. In a letter to Eyre from January 1988, Harrison argues for the importance of a production that included both his *Lysistrata* and *Trojan Women*:

I've re-read and thought about and really feel that both plays should be done. They are interdepndt [sic] in the way I have transposed them. The contemporaneity of the First allows the tragedy to unfold with greater simplicity as I have been able to set things up in the comedy. Also I like the theatrical idea of a comedy and a tragedy written very close together as a reaction to the same events. They gain by juxtaposition. Also the sexual content, the division of the sexes by the simple device of the wire seems an enormous plus. The Greenham parallel doesn't stop there — it gives a 'speaking' style that will have nothing of the Cheltenham Ladies Verse Speaking Competition performed in white nighties.<sup>21</sup>

In the same letter he mentions having given Eyre an early draft of *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* to look at, which notably explores similar juxtapositions of comedy, tragedy, and history, alongside a concern about the cultural desire to foreground Greek tragedy, while relegating the bawdier traditions of satyr plays and Old Comedy to the confines of academia.<sup>22</sup> Again and again in the 1980s, Harrison would argue that if we are to understand the wholeness of the ancient Greek dramatic imagination, we must consider all the genres which were performed in a shared space, in a shared light, refusing divisions of 'high' and 'low' art.<sup>23</sup>

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21. Tony Harrison Archive, Correspondence, Tony Harrison to Richard Eyre. For reasons that are unclear *Maxims* is not mentioned in the letter. It may have been that the play had been dropped and Eyre was suggesting staging just *Trojan Women*, but it is also possible that Eyre was imagining a production that included *Trojan Women* and *Maxims*, but not Harrison's more problematic *Lysistrata*.

22. Given that the National Theatre lost advertisers over the programs of *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* due to the prominence of phalluses both within the production and on the posters advertising it, the concerns of both Hall and Eyre were well founded.

23. For an extended version of this argument, see Harrison's introduction to *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*. Harrison (2004) 3-20.

Harrison's version of *Trojan Women* was not intended as a stand-alone tragedy, but rather as the middle piece in an extended meditation on modern warfare. In *The Common Chorus* the women of Greenham around whom the first play in the trilogy, *Lysistrata*, is centred, perform the second play, Harrison's translation of Euripides' *Trojan Women*, for the soldiers in the military base. Harrison's version of *Lysistrata* departs from the original in its ending, providing no reconciliation. In place of the utopian ending of Aristophanes' play, which to a large degree obviates the consequences of war, Harrison transitions to the women playing out the entirety of the extant Greek tragedy most concerned with the devastating consequences of war. And in this transition from *Lysistrata* to *Trojan Women* the first play in the trilogy is recast and takes on a deeper resonance. It is more than a pacifist play and more than an obscene play. It becomes fundamentally about remembrance. As *Lysistrata* argues,

...there's no difference between there and here...  
 In the Third World War we'll destroy  
 not only modern cities but the memory of Troy,  
 stories that shaped the spirit of our race  
 are held in the balance in this missile base.  
 Remember, if you can, that with man goes the mind  
 that might have made sense of the Hist'ry of Mankind.  
 It's a simple thing to grasp: when we're all dead  
 there'll be no further pages to be read,  
 not even leaflets, and no peace plays like these  
 no post-holocaust Aristophanes.<sup>24</sup>

*Trojan Women*, likewise, is about remembrance, both circa 415 BC and exactly 2400 years later. Even for its original Athenian audience the events depicted in the play were the stuff of legend set in the distant past, though many scholars have seen in Euripides' play about Bronze Age Greece a reflection of the violence inflicted by the Athenians on the Melians in 416 BCE.

Within the intended context of the trilogy, *Trojan Women* resonates on a number of levels. At its heart it is a play about the suffering of women in war; women who have watched their loved ones, husbands, sons, and grandsons be slaughtered, only to survive themselves that they might be raped and enslaved, enslaved and raped. But it is also a play that queries the

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24. Harrison (2002) 242.

function of drama, both in fifth-century Athens and in our own times. In the *Maxims* notebooks, Harrison has lines recalling a performance of *Trojan Women* in Germany during World War I:

Yes the young Berliners wept when it was played  
but it didn't stop the idiots from going on parade.

The odd eye here went watery and dim —  
but what is he to Hecuba or Hecuba to him?<sup>25</sup>

Harrison's answer is that Hecuba is the embodiment of remembrance and endurance and that this sort of historical and cultural remembrance is an integral component of our humanity.<sup>26</sup> Humans define themselves, their culture, their history through remembrance, and Harrison in this trilogy is arguing that the developments in warfare that have taken place over the course of the twentieth century have allowed war to threaten the very existence of memory.<sup>27</sup> There is no possibility of redemption for Hecuba and her fellow Trojan women through remembrance in song if there is no one left to sing.

Where Part I of *The Common Chorus* provides a rational political argument from the women as to why war should be ended, Part II serves as a narrative example of the horrific experience of women in war zones. With the exception of Cassandra's bridal songs, the play is largely a line-for-line translation of Euripides' *Trojan Women*. In Harrison's conception of the tragedy, and perhaps Euripides' as well, the larger meaning of the play comes from the plays staged alongside it. Cassandra, with her ability to foresee the future, echoes the language of the male soldiers in Part I of *The Common Chorus* to the tune of "Here Comes the Bride":

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25. Tony Harrison Archive, *Square Rounds* notebooks, 868. On the history of this 1916 *Trojan Women* production in Berlin, see Sharp (2018).

26. On the importance of memory to Tony Harrison's poetry, see Marshall (2008) and Marshall (2022).

27. Part III of *The Common Chorus*, *Maxims* (which became in a heavily revised version the play *Square Rounds*) takes as its theme the development of military weapons. Equating science with magic, the play meditates upon the power of man's imagination, in all its ingenuity and all its cruelty, through a discussion of the history of the invention of military weapons.

Light up all sides!  
 The God of Brides!  
 At the king's side  
 the Argos bride!

O I'm in luck –  
 a royal fuck!

Here comes the bride  
 of genocide.

...

Dance after me  
 Please 1-2-3.

Sing! Sing! Sing! Sing!  
 for the bride of the king.

Bouquet and veil  
 veil and bouquet.  
 Blood marks the trail  
 to my wedding day.

Cock, Nob and Dick  
 hard as a stick  
 into Cassandra and over with quick.

Cock, Nob and Dick...<sup>28</sup>

Harrison alters the wedding hymn of Cassandra so that a modern audience can hear the perversion of ritual that is present in Euripides' play, and fully comprehend the horrific insanity of equating rape by a genocidal enemy with marriage. What is happening to the women of Troy of course goes far beyond rape and enslavement. They are experiencing what women in war zones have experienced throughout history — the use of sexual violence to effect a complete physical and psychological destruction. Hecuba suggests that the only redemption for such suffering is that unlike others who have suffered less and been forgotten, the depth of the suffering of the Trojan

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28. Harrison (2002) 295-299. Harrison's *The Common Chorus* notebooks make clear that the tune of "Here Comes the Bride" was imagined as echoing through the play at various points, adding additional levels of tragedy and pathos to Cassandra's version here.

women ensures that they will be remembered in song.<sup>29</sup> Harrison takes this idea of the possibility of the redemptive power of suffering being preserved through poetry, and weaves it into both his *Lysistrata* and *Maxims*, with characters in each of the plays expressing concern that modern warfare will eradicate poetry and its preservation of the things that shape our humanity. *Lysistrata* says:

The world till now up to the last minute  
and every creature who was ever in it  
go when we go, everything men did or thought  
never to be remembered, absolutely nought.  
No memorials with names of dead on  
because memory won't survive your Armageddon.<sup>30</sup>

In the third play, the ghost of Leander Maxim, who died in the American Civil war, observes:

the loss of all things rhythmical, heart, blood, breath  
is the first and most obvious fact of death.  
Here in the world of death there is no beat,  
no iambic, no dactylic, no spondaic feet.  
Death's a rhythmless continuum...

...

I'll tell you something: on the day I died  
I heard another soldier was reciting  
poetry to himself all through the fighting.  
[In the midst of warfare] mem'ry can retain  
such counter rhythms in the brain.  
You can't ask the enemy to hold his fire  
until you have found the page you require.  
Think, he said, if a fire destroyed all books  
And all the libraries were turned to ember  
How valuable the words a man remembers...<sup>31</sup>

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29. Harrison (2002) 339.

30. Harrison (2002) 243.

31. Tony Harrison Archive, *Square Rounds* notebooks, 552.

Sandwiched between those two plays Harrison presents a deeply faithful version of Euripides' tragedy, the poetry through which the suffering of Hecuba and her fellow Trojan women has survived through millennia. This performance is not, however, the only performance of *Trojan Women* in the trilogy. In the later half of *Maxims*, Harrison envisaged scenes evoking the performances of *Trojan Women* that took place in both Germany and England during World War I, each in different ways evoking catastrophe and apocalypse.

It is this existential threat posed by modern warfare with which the third play *Maxims* was concerned. Despite the eventual dismantling of the trilogy for publication, *Maxims* should be seen as the argumentative focal point to which the rest of trilogy was building. As Hiram Maxim says, "What has poetry or drama done / more useful than my Maxim gun?"<sup>32</sup> Harrison crafts his response across the three plays, intimately linked in performance, with language, music, visual images and themes echoing across the entire trilogy. The American voices that came from inside the base in *Lysistrata*, become the voices of Poseidon and Athena in *The Trojan Women*, and then the American Maxim brothers in the final play, using voice to create associations with power structures and military force across the trilogy. Music also echoes across the plays, from various iterations of "Here Comes the Bride", to the music that accompanied the death of Astyanax which recurs as a tower is climbed in *Maxims*.<sup>33</sup> In *Maxims* Harrison imagines a *pieta* between Mrs Maxim (mother to the 3 Maxim brothers) and her dead son Leander, "so that we get the image of the reconciliation" created by the audience tracking the different roles that the actors had played across the three plays (Hecuba and Mrs Maxim, Lysistrata, Helen, and Leander).<sup>34</sup> When Astyanax is buried in *The Trojan Women*, the women "take the trimmings from the wire" that had been put up in *Lysistrata*, "so that what they put up there on the wire, all the emblems of the things they did not wish to lose in a nuclear war, are all stripped from it, as hope is diminished."<sup>35</sup> The dance of the chorus at the end of *Lysistrata*, which one might have expected would be evocative of the historical Greenham women dancing on the silos, instead creates an image of the women with their hands on each other's shoulders, which will be visually echoed in the chorus of gassed and

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32. Tony Harrison Archive, *Square Rounds* notebooks, 763.

33. Tony Harrison Archive, *Square Rounds* notebooks, 844.

34. Tony Harrison Archive, *Square Rounds* notebooks, 927.

35. Tony Harrison Archive, *The Common Chorus* notebooks, 209.

blindfolded World War I soldiers at the end of *Maxims*, who enter only to die en-masse.<sup>36</sup> Across the trilogy Harrison has woven threads that create sounds and images that reflect and play off each other, increasing their impact each time they are used. In the final play the various threads are pulled together, giving them an argumentative and emotional force beyond what was possible in individual plays. In doing so, Harrison explores the relationship between poetry and war, adding his own peace play to those of Aristophanes and Euripides.

#### THE COMMON CHORUS AND GREEK TRILOGIES

While *The Common Chorus* never made it to stage, its conception as a set of three plays intended for performance together makes it a useful work for thinking about ancient Greek tragic trilogies. Scholars from Gilbert Murray onward have sought to find a connection between the three tragedies of Euripides' tetralogy of 415 BCE, partly as a means of explaining the apparent peculiarities of *Trojan Women*.<sup>37</sup> What Harrison's trilogy can offer is a model of how our ability to understand an individual play or larger parts of a trilogy become necessarily fragmented when one or more plays is removed from the picture; or, to look at it from the opposite perspective, how three seeming disparate plays can make a meaningfully connected whole. Any of the three plays that make up *The Common Chorus* could be produced as a stand-alone play, and at various times each of three plays has been imagined separately from its companion pieces. And yet, while each play can be read or performed without their trilogy mates, without them they are not the same play and cannot create the same meaning in the same way for its audience. This is also true of our ancient tragedies.

Much of the scholarly discussion of ancient trilogies has focused on works such as Aeschylus' *Oresteia* where the three tragedies were narratively connected, typically presuming an interdependence between the three plays that was lacking in trilogies without this narrative connection. A clear example of this can be seen in Yoon's article "Rethinking the Tragic Trilogy", in which she asks of *Prometheus Bound*, "was the play part of a

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36. For an example of the imagery that Harrison had in mind for this scene, see John Singer Sargent's 1919 painting *Gassed*.

37. Murray (1946) 128-48.



connected trilogy, or did it stand independently?”<sup>38</sup> She goes on to note, “A single surviving play from a connected trilogy is a fragment of a complete work, even if the play itself is intact; however, if the play was part of a non-connected trilogy, the work we possess is complete.” Scodel, in her book on *Trojan Women*, provides a useful summary both of the scholarly understanding of trilogies and what is known about the plays that were staged as a unit in competition alongside *Trojan Women*, *Alexandros* and *Palamedes*.<sup>39</sup> For Scodel, and many other scholars, “trilogy” is a term that refers only to a set of narratively connected plays and not to any of the entries in the tragic competitions at the City Dionysia which consisted of three non-narratively linked tragedies.<sup>40</sup> In this view what links the three plays of the *Oresteia* is the narrative tracing the fate of the descendants of the House of Atreus after Agamemnon’s return from Troy.<sup>41</sup> And if we view this type of narrative thread as the essential element connecting the three plays, then few entries in the tragic competitions at the Dionysia would have met this definition of trilogy. Indeed trilogy or tetralogy ceases to be a useful term for discussing the tragic competitions. For some scholars, such as Koniaris, this understanding of what constitutes a trilogy means that unconnected tragedies, which he believes *Trojan Women* to be, can only be ‘correctly’ interpreted by being studied on their own, independent of the plays with which it was entered in competition.<sup>42</sup>

But, of course, there is another element that links the three plays of the *Oresteia* together, and that is the theme of *dikē* — justice. As Peter Wilson notes, “There can be little doubt that *dikē* is one, if not the, central term and concern of the the *Oresteia*. The mountainous critical bibliography on the

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38. Yoon (2016) 258. Yoon suggests that it might be better to allow the possibility of more and less connected trilogies, allowing for the possibility of mythic narrative that are not closely tied to each other and/or not sequential, unlike the extant example of Aeschylus *Oresteia*.

39. For the text of the fragments of the other plays in the trilogy, see C. Collard, M.J. Cropp, and J. Gibert, *Euripides: Selected Fragmentary Plays*, volume II, Oxford 2004, with M. J. Cropp, “Alexandros”, 35-87, and appendices “Palamedes” and “Sisyphus” by C. Collard at 92-104. For a detailed engagement with *Alexandros*, including text and commentary, see Karamanou (2017).

40. Scodel (1980) 15-19.

41. There is, however, the problem of Aristophanes’ *Frogs* 1124-76 which clearly suggests that the *Oresteia* began with *Libation Bearers* and not *Agamemnon*. On the possibility of reperformances of *Libation Bears* and *Eumenides* as Lenaeon dilogy, see Marshall (2017) 46-52.

42. Koniaris (1973) 90.

trilogy is firmly centred upon it.”<sup>43</sup> While Harrison’s *The Common Chorus* works to create a loose narrative framework for the three plays, it is not the narrative links that give the work its greatest impact, but rather its thematic links. The narrative framework is ultimately only a cog in the creation of the thematic. The women of the Greenham antinuclear protest camp provide the cast and context, but each play builds upon the other to create a set of three plays which each, in their own way, add to the horrors of war, stretching from the Trojan War to the 20th century. And theme is not the only thread that links the plays of the *Oresteia* beyond their narrative continuity. As Taplin and others have documented, the stagecraft of the plays also functions to create echoes between them, be it the mirror scenes of a murderer standing over their victims at the end of *Agamemnon* and *Libation Bearers*, or the constant presence of the voice of Apollo across the three plays, perhaps reinforced by role assignments.<sup>44</sup> There is no reason to think that ancient tragedies written for performance together in competition would not also avail themselves of the use of theme and the opportunities provided by stagecraft to link their plays together, even when the narrative connection was not present.

Harrison’s *The Common Chorus* was modelled on his understanding of Greek trilogies, developed in large part from the half decade that he had spent working on his version of *The Oresteia*.<sup>45</sup> While his plays could be disentangled from one another, and to some extent have been disentangled, Harrison would be the first to argue that separated from one another they are no longer the same work as they were in their original trilogic form. As noted earlier, in a letter to Richard Eyre, Harrison argued that his plays were interdependent and gained dramatic force by their juxtaposition, responding to the same issue from different perspectives. By combining three very different stories, and in the case of *The Common Chorus*, three genres, Harrison is able to create a work in which the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Each play can stand on its own, but it cannot create the same meaning on its own, as its author intended, in the original construction of

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43. Wilson (2006) 187.

44. On mirror scenes in the *Oresteia*, see Taplin (1977) 123-27; on the casting/doubling of the roles of actors associated with Apollo, see Marshall (2003) 262-268; on the importance of Apollonian voice to the interpretation of the *Oresteia*, see Knox 1979 and Michelini 1984.

45. There is, of course, a danger in rooting our understanding of the nature of Greek trilogies in the singular extant example of the *Oresteia* when we have no means of knowing the degree to which its various aspects may have been typical or atypical.

the plays as part of a trilogy. Each makes an anti-war statement, but collectively they create a broader and stronger argument against war, refuting the arguments of the modern military complex that lead to arms races, contextualizing it in a history of warfare from ancient Troy to the nuclear weapons of the late twentieth century. Far from making people safer, the escalation of military technology has created an existential threat to the human race, with such capacity for destruction that even the memory of the suffering of Hecuba and her fellow Trojan women, which has endured for millenia, risks being obliterated. A trilogy or tetralogy offers the dramatist the ability to create narrative, visual, acoustic and thematic echoes which have the potential to gain in dramatic power each time they are repeated. That is not to say that all members of an audience were expected to pick up on and find a deeper meaning in the echoes between plays in a trilogy and/or with plays performed in previous years. Rather, for the experienced theatre-goers, which the Athenian judges must have been, sets of multiple plays in competition allowed for a broader range of theatrical effects, both within a given play and across the set of plays.<sup>46</sup> Given that both of the major dramatic competitions in Athens in the fifth century BCE required tragedians to enter more than one play (a set of two tragedies at the Lenaea and three tragedies plus a satyr play at the City Dionysia), whereas the poets of Old Comedy entered only a single play, the possibility of interconnectedness between tragedies seems to have been an inherent part of the genre.<sup>47</sup>

Given that the dramatic potential of trilogies and/or tetralogies is not in doubt, I think it would advance the scholarly conversation if we were to reframe the conversation around trilogies and tetralogies. The question is not whether a trilogy required plays to be narratively linked, be it closely or loosely—as noted earlier, if we accept this limited usage of the term, the terms “trilogy” and “tetralogy” cease to have any real value for discussing the tragic entries at the City Dionysia in the fifth-century BCE—but rather why, given the clear possibilities for amplifying dramatic impact, narratively linked trilogies were relatively rare, and why they seem to have become increasingly rare as the fifth century progressed.<sup>48</sup>

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46. On the ability of the original audiences to engage with dramatic performances on a range of levels, see Revermann (2006).

47. Despite entries in any given competition consisting of only a single play, Old Comedy’s sophisticated engagement with both tragedy and other Old Comedies suggests that it was normative across all the dramatic genres to engage with and make meaning by echoing various aspects of previously performed plays, be they one’s own or those of other poets.

48. On Aeschylus and his supposed preference for connected trilogies, see Yoon (2016) 263.

While the inevitable shift in aesthetic and dramatic trends undoubtedly played a role, another possible factor was the changing nature of the festival itself across the century. When Aeschylus first began his career the City Dionysia will have been a much smaller more local affair.<sup>49</sup> As the Athenian Empire grew, so too did the City Dionysia, which included, alongside the dramatic competitions, the performative presentation of the tribute of allies, along with contributions from Athenian colonies.<sup>50</sup> By the time Euripides' tetralogy of 415 BCE was staged, Athens likely had a resident population in the vicinity of 300,000 and welcomed tens of thousands of visitors to the City Dionysia.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, recent scholarship suggests that the Theatre of Dionysus might only seat 3700 to 5000.<sup>52</sup> A likely consequence of this mismatch between people and available seating was that there was more churn in the audience — that is to say fewer people were watching every performance every day of the festival, but more people were attending overall. This fluidity in audience composition would likely impact the way that tragic playwrights approached their entries in any given year.

An instability in the audience across the duration of the performance of a tragic tetralogy would mean that tragedians were writing with two audiences in mind even for their debut. There would be the general audience who may or may not have seen every play by a given tragedian that was staged in competition in a given year, and who may or may not have been familiar with plays performed at previous festivals. But then there were the ten judges whose duties required them to watch all four plays presented by each of the three tragedians who had been allotted a chorus in a given year, and whose judgement was based on the totality of the entry. Many in the audience may have shared this expertise, but this group possesses a different level of engagement than the former one does.

If we see a dramatic power being bestowed to narratively connected trilogies (or tetralogies if the satyr play also linked to the tragedies) —and

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49. Akrigg (2019) 141-44 estimates that there were approximately 30,000 Athenian citizens in 480 BCE and at least 60,000 by 430 BCE. As the population grew and the size of the Athenian Empire, we should assume that the number of visitors attending the City Dionysia similarly increased in number.

50. See Csapo (2013) 4-5, 8-9.

51. Csapo (2013) 3. Csapo leans on Moreno (2007) for his population estimates.

52. Estimates for audience numbers at the Theatre of Dionysus in fifth-century Athens range from 3700 to 30,000 (see Dawson 1997: 7-8, and Csapo 2007: 97-100). Recent scholarship suggests an audience of 3700 to 5000, but those numbers are far from being widely accepted. Unfortunately, as outlined by Goette (2007), the archaeological evidence for the size of the fifth-century theatre is limited for a variety of reasons.

few would deny the cumulative power of *Agamemnon*, *Libation Bearers*, and *Eumenides*— and we recognize the the primary goal of each tragedian was to win at the City Dionysia, then it is odd that connected trilogies seem to have been a rarity, with most tragedians consistently entering in competition tetralogies that were not narratively connected. This would seem to be putting them at a competitive disadvantage should one of the other poets against whom they were competing enter a set of narratively connected plays. What *The Common Chorus* points to is that unconnected plays can also work collectively to create a unified dramatic impact, and they can use many of the same tools that we see at work in connected trilogy like Aeschylus' *Oresteia*.

The advantage of this approach is that audience members who were not watching every play were able to enjoy the ones that they did see without a sense that they had missed part of the story. At the same time, playwrights could still pull out all their dramatic tricks to create a larger more impactful whole that might sway the votes of the judges. We should expect that all trilogies, narratively connected or not, were constantly working to create connections in both expected and unexpected ways. While *The Common Chorus* is not attempting to recreate an ancient dramatic trilogy, it is deeply rooted in the many years Harrison spent thinking about how to stage *The Oresteia*, and how ancient Greek tragedy functioned, not only within individual plays, but as collective works within a trilogy.

We should take heed of the fact that Harrison is readily able to deploy the dramatic techniques that he found in a connected trilogy to three seeming unconnected plays. The reality of ancient theatre is that what survives to us can only provide fleeting glimpses of the larger experience of these plays in performance: we have only dim echoes of the music and the visual aspects of performance, but we readily accept the centrality of both to the experience of the ancient audience. Alongside those missing aspects, we should also place the way the plays of a dilogy, trilogy or tetralogy made meaning through their relationships with each other. What we see in the *Oresteia* and in *The Common Chorus*, and by extension the *Trojan Women* trilogy of 415, is that while any play from a trilogy, narratively connected or not, can stand independently, that is not the same thing as being complete. We cannot adequately grasp how a poet was using narrative, theme, and the various elements of stagecraft when only a single play survives.

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## ΠΕΡΙΕΧΟΜΕΝΑ / CONTENTS

---

### **ΙΟΑΝΝΙΣ Μ. ΚΟΝΣΤΑΝΤΑΚΟΣ**

Ancient Comedy and Iambic Poetry:  
Generic Relations and Character Depiction

### **ΜΙΧΑΛΗΣ ΚΑΡΔΑΜΙΤΣΗΣ**

Αίσχυλος, άναγνώστης του Όμηρου:  
Άπό τήν όλολυγή τής Εύρύκλειας  
στο έυχος τής Κλυταιμήστρας

### **EDITH HALL**

Tragic Temporalities in Euripides' *Trojan Women*

### **DAVID KONSTAN**

Emotion and Abjection: Voices of Despair

### **ΑΓΙΣ ΜΑΡΙΝΗΣ**

Η σκηνή της Κασσάνδρας στις *Τρωάδες*:  
Τελετουργική επίτευση και πολιτικό υπόβαθρο

### **C. W. MARSHALL**

Euripides' *Trojan Women* and the Stagecraft  
of Memory

### **ΚΩΝΣΤΑΝΤΙΝΟΣ Ι. ΧΑΣΚΗΣ**

Οι θηβαϊκοί μύθοι στην τραγωδία  
του 4ου αι. π.Χ.

### **ANTONIS K. PETRIDES**

*ήμεϊς δ' ἴωμεν*: Menander and Sophocles in  
Intertextual Dialogue (*Dyskolos* and *Philoctetes*)

### **DIMITRIOS KANELLAKIS**

*Lysistrata* Against the Greek Military Junta

### **HALLIE REBECCA MARSHALL**

Tony Harrison's *The Common Chorus*  
and Dramatic Trilogies

### **ANTONIS K. PETRIDES**

*Euripides, The Trojan Women: A Comic* by  
Rosanna Bruno and Anne Carson. A Survey

### **EFIMIA D. KARAKANTZA**

*Antigone* Goes to School: Georgina Kakoudaki's  
Production of the Sophoclean Play (2014)  
for Teenage Audiences

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