Anchoring the Solo Parts of Tragedy in Song Culture

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Project: The Invention of Tragedy and its Relation to Earlier Monody

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My particular application of the concept of ‘Anchoring Innovation’ involves the anchoring of an innovative literary genre in more established literary genres. The innovative genre is tragedy, which emerged in that hotbed of innovation that was 5th-century Athens – but where it came from is as much a mystery and an object of contention today as it was in the 4th century BCE, when this first became an object of scholarly attention. The more established literary genres I consider, which permeated the poetic and musical culture of Greece before the existence of tragedy, are the various sorts of archaic and early classical solo song.

Solo song – in most cases when I explain this project to someone who has not heard about it before they will do a double-take at the mention of solo song: what they’d expected me to say is choral song. Accepted wisdom has it that tragedy emerged out of choral song, and we have a tidy teleological narrative about how one voice separated out from the chorus to become the first actor, then a second was added and then a third, and then the chorus gradually lost its primacy as the actors assumed more and more importance over the course of the history of tragedy until we have something of a crisis in the late fifth century, when solo actors start singing their own songs and completely overshadowing the chorus—and eventually the chorus became so marginal that it was considered merely entertainment between the acts, the embolima, as it was called, the ‘thing stuck in-between’.

Classical scholarship has inherited—together with the nineteenth-century obsession with the origins of tragedy—also an overriding concern with all things
choral in relation to tragedy. Of course there is good reason for this, and I wouldn’t for a moment wish to play down the relation of tragedy to choral song, but I wonder if the flip side of the story does not deserve more attention, that is to say the emergence and rise of the solo voice in counterpoint to the chorus. In fact, if we think of it in terms of innovation, it is the solo component that is the innovative element in the conventional narrative of the evolution of tragedy. We might then ask how it is that the additional solo parts were successfully anchored in the face of the traditional element of choral song.

For the purposes of this project, then, I look at the history of tragedy in this light, shifting the focus to the solo parts of tragedy, and zooming in on two spikes of innovation: firstly, early tragedy when choral song and solo song first came to coexist in the tragic genre. And secondly, that time of heightened innovation in the late fifth century, when tragedy starts to become experimental in all sorts of ways including (as I’ve already mentioned) having the solo actors sing full-blown songs, not just in tandem with the chorus, but even on their own.

The manner in which I have started to look at this nexus of questions has been to borrow an interpretive approach commonly applied to the choral parts of tragedy, whereby one looks at how the tragic choral songs plug into non-tragic lyric genres, more traditional musical practices – in song culture more generally. By ‘song culture’ I mean the state of affairs by which the performance of lyric poetry — whether elegiac, iambic or melic, whether recited or sung — was at this time part of the very fabric of Greek society.

So let me explain how this commonly applied approach works in relation to choral song before I talk about the differences and challenges in applying it to the solo parts of tragedy and how it needs to be adapted. This approach involves looking at how the tragedians deliberately exploit their audience’s familiarity with, and investment in, the long established lyric genres. The (entirely uncontroversial) assumption is that tragic choral song is essentially just one variant of choral song in general, the kind of song which had a rich life outside of the theatre, the kind we find described already in Homer and which we know very well to have been an important part of the social life of Athens still in the fifth century. The citizens who performed in a tragedy fulfilled a ritual function by taking part in the tragic chorus in much the same way as they did by taking part in a chorus performing songs of explicit religious devotion or, say, weddings songs. So the tragic chorus had a real-

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1 The notion of ‘song culture’ and its significance to tragedy were influentially formulated by Herington (1985).
world dimension as a ritual and institutional entity—it was not just a fictional character within a tragic plot.

It follows that when a tragic chorus sings a lyric ode it is doing two things at once: it is at once a formalized representation of something taking place in the fictional world of the tragedy, the experience of a particular group of people—bacchants, Trojan captives, or what have you—and it is also a chorus of citizens ‘living out’ its ritual nature, yes, vicariously through the events of the plot, but also, in its own right in the context of the Dionysiac festival. The chorus, even when it is wearing masks and standing in the orchestra of the theatre of Dionysus, is still in an essential sense a chorus, a recognizable ritual and musical entity on a continuum with its other manifestations outside of drama in more established genres: this is how it would have been understood by the audience, and they would have had a direct way of mapping it onto traditional song culture.

This ritual function of the chorus is indeed one of the things which lends classical tragedy its distinctive charge; and a whole new dimension is added when tragic choral song interacts with older established lyric genres—or, as we would say, when it anchors itself in these genres. For example, when a chorus sings something that is in some way like, say, a threnos (a ritualized lament), it has a power that goes beyond just ‘pretending’ or ‘acting’ the way a modern theatre group would do.

This kind of phenomenon which I’ve just been describing has been studied fruitfully, and teasing out the entanglement of the ritual and mimetic functions of the chorus is now a well-established interpretive strategy—indeed it is a text-book example of Anchoring-Innovation research ante litteram. However this way of making sense of choral song is not simply transferable to the solo parts of tragedy. The obstacle here is that there is no corresponding way of mapping the solo parts of tragedy onto traditional song culture. For one thing, we do not know what species of song the solo parts of tragedy are. We know that they, too, must find their place in the workings of song culture, in the wider practice of mousike: there is no such thing as a solo singer floating freely in musical space in archaic and classical Greece. But unlike in the case of the chorus, scholarship is not able to point to a straightforward way of correlating solo performance on the tragic stage and solo performance elsewhere. Where scholarship has thought around the question, it has done so once again with that genetic bias, wanting to isolate the direct ancestry of the solo parts of tragedy to determine out of what they evolved and how.

See I. Sluiter’s introductory article (forthcoming).
In this view, it has been noted is that there are continuities between the *spoken* parts of tragedy and other iambic poetry. Tragedy adopts the metres of archaic *iambos*[^3] and, unlike comedy, it observes the metrical conventions of more serious *iambos* (e.g. Porson’s bridge and the placement of caesura). But, insofar as I know, practically all that has been said about this has been in the vein of trying to decipher the genetic origins of tragedy, though even here, solo song gets somewhat dwarfed by the discussions of choral matters. The prevailing view is the one first advanced by Gerald Else and John Herington, and reprised, for instance, by Leslie Kurke in a companion piece, in which she draws attention to Solon as an antecedent for the iambic portions of tragedy: Solon’s poetry is a performative fusion of elegiac persona (that is to say authoritative advisor and lawgiver for the city) and the more bitingly critical iambic persona, and this kind of public poetry is the place for debate and contention in the 6th century, a function taken over by drama in the 5th century.[^4]

This is of course very relevant, but when we set aside the quest for origins and adopt instead a more synchronic view – when we look at the question with the notion of anchoring in mind – I think it is clear that this is not an entirely adequate answer. Would an audience really have made sense of solo acting on stage as being something of the same kind as Solon’s iambos? Well, maybe to some extent, but I suspect that’s not the whole story. I have a hunch that it may be the role-playing potential of *iambos* which is its salient feature here. Both in its serious and in its scurrilous mode, *iambos* has more and more come to be recognized as a genre which allowed the speaker to take on a persona distinct from their real-life persona, a genre which has a greater potential for fictionality. ‘Solon’ was the mouthpiece for statements no ordinary citizen could utter (think of the various accounts of him pretending to be mad or being thought to be mad). The same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for scurrilous *iambos* and comedy (think of the sorts of things Archilochus and Hipponax get up to—and, more to the point, get away with).

Be that as it may for the specific question of iambic meters in tragedy, perhaps it is useful to think of the solo parts of tragedy—that is to say also the lyric parts—as not so much the means by which a ritual entity ‘lives out’ its nature within song culture in the same way as the chorus, or not even the kind of poetic speech that

[^3]: Dialogue: iambic trimeter and trochaic tetrameter catalectic, both of which long antedate the rise of tragedy (Nestor’s cup has an iambic trimeter), and are used in rituals, subliterary songs, epitaphs and epigrams, proverbs, etc; see Herington (1985), who also remarks on the injection of the Attic dialect into the Ionian metrical forms of iambic tetrameter at first and then trimeter and refers to Arist. Poetics 1449a and Aesch. Pers. and Ag.

seeks to accomplish something in the real world as in the case of Solon, but more as being a kind of generically blank canvas for role-play, a speech act not in propria persona, a generically unmarked bracketing off from real-life speech.

To be sure any singer’s performance is ‘bracketed’, in a sense. Even a symposiast is taking on a persona and wearing an invisible mask when he holds in his hand the myrtle branch and recites, say, an Anacreontic. And rhapsodes and citharodes, too, were clearly judged for their mimetic abilities. But this seems to me to fall within a different order of things. A tragic singer on stage is more significantly imprisoned in what Peter Wilson has called the ‘hyper-mimetic medium’ that is the tragic genre. In the absence of the musical/ritual function that the chorus has, the solo actor seems to me at once less directly connected to the real-life dimension of song culture and more tightly corseted within the mimetic constraints of the tragic fiction.

So when there is generic interaction between tragedy and other kinds of song we might expect it to be according to a different mechanism from that we find in the choral parts, to account for the absence of ritual charge. We do find appropriations of other genres in the solo parts of tragedy, by which I don’t mean just allusion to other genres—the kind that allows the singer to foreground themes and attitudes by association—but also in the sense that sometimes solo tragedy poses as some other kind of song which the audience would have been familiar with from broader musical culture.

In its most obvious form this ‘posing as’ other forms of song involves the mimetic representation of singers and musicians, as in Sophocles’ Thamyras, or Euripides’ Antiope. The story of how Sophocles himself played the part of Thamyras (and was immortalized, cithara in hand, in the Stoa Poikile) flags up what is special about this sort of mimesis. In the case of late Euripides especially and the New Musical milieu it assumes a new dimension. As Eric Csapo has argued, star singers and auletes more and more wanted the opportunity to show off their excellence, and poets complied by giving them scenes mimetic of accomplished performances in which to do so—this is the case not just in tragedy but in other genres also.

In a more subtle form, this posing as or enacting of other instantiations of mousike involves a less overt appropriation of other kinds of song. A fragment of

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6 Vita TrGF 4 T29 and see Wilson (2009) 61-2 on the overlapping of the contours of myth and biographical tradition in the story of how Sophocles lost his voice and gave up acting.
7 Csapo (2011) 72-3, discussing in particular Melanippides’ Marsyas.
Aeschylus’ Xanthriai (frr. 168-168b Radt) preserves a hexameter hymn which appears to have been sung by the character of Hera as she enters the play disguised as a wandering priestess collecting alms. Another more frequently cited case is the run of elegiacs at the beginning of Euripides’ Andromache, quoted here in full with Andromache’s iambic speech introducing it.

[Av.] χώρει νυν· ἡμεῖς δ’ οἶσπερ ἐγκείμεσθ’ ἀεί θρήνοισι καὶ γόοισι καὶ δακρύμασιν πρὸς αἰθέρ’ ἐκτενοῦμεν· ἐμπέφυκε γὰρ γυναῖξι τέρψις τῶν παρεστώτων κακῶν ἀνὰ στόμ’ αἰεὶ καὶ διὰ γλώσσης ἔχειν. (95)

πάρεστι δ’ οὖχ ἐν ἀλλὰ πολλὰ μοι στένειν, πῶλιν πατρώιν τὸν θανόντα θ’ Ἐκτορά στεφθὸν τε τὸν ἐμὸν δαίμον’ ὢν συνεζύγην δούλευν ἦμαρ ἐστεπεύσοι’ ἀναξίως, χρῆ δ’ οὕποτ’ εἰπέπει οὐδέν’ ὀλβιον βροτῶν, πρὶν ἂν θανόντος τὴν τελευταίαν ἔθης ὅπως περάσας ἠμέραν ἤζει κάτω.

Ἰλίῳ αἰσπειναὶ Πάρις οὐ γάμον ἀλλὰ τιν’ ἀταν ἀγάγετ’ εὐναῖαν ἐς θαλάμους Ἐλέναν. ἀς ἐνεκ’, ὥ Τροία, δορί καὶ πυρὶ δηύλωτον (105)
eἰλὲ σ’ ὡ χυλώναυς Ἑλλάδος ὦκυς Ἀρῆς καὶ τὸν ἐμὸν μελέας πόσιν Ἐκτορά, τὸν περὶ τείχη εἰλίκυς διφρεύον παῖς ἀλίας Θέτιδος· αὐτὰ δ’ ἐκ θαλάμων ἀγόμαν ἐπὶ θένα θαλάσσας, δουλοσύναν στυγερὰν ἀμφίβαλουσα κάραι. (110)
pολλὰ δὲ δάκρυα μοι κατέβα χροός, ἄνικ’ ἐλείπον ἠστυ τε καὶ θαλάμους καὶ πόσιν ἐν κονίας. ὡμοί ἐγὼ μελέα, τί μ’ ἔχρην ἐτί φέγγος ὡράσθαι Ἐρμίόνας δούλαν, ἂς ὡπο τειρομένα πρὸς τὸδ’ ἀγαλμα θεᾶς ἰκέτεις περὶ χείρε βαλουσα (115)
tάκομαι ὡς πετρίνα πιδακόεσσα λιβάς.

See Prodi (forthcoming) for a ‘generic archaeology’ of this passage.
Go then! For my part I shall fill heaven at great length with the laments and groans and tears to which my whole life is devoted. It is natural for women to get pleasure from their present misfortunes, by constantly having them on their lips. I have many things, not one, to lament, my native land, the death of Hector, and the hard lot to which I have been yoked when I was cast undeservedly into slavery. One should never call any mortal happy until he dies and you can see how he has completed his last day and gone below.

(sung) For lofty Troy it was not as bride but as mad ruin that Paris brought Helen into his bedchamber! For her sake the keen warcraft of Greece, its ships a thousand strong, captured you, O Troy, sacked you with fire and sword, and killed Hector, husband to my unlucky self! The son of the sea goddess Thetis dragged him behind his chariot as he rode about the walls of Troy. I myself was led off from my chamber to the seashore, wrapping hateful slavery as a covering about my head. Many were the tears that rolled down my cheeks when I left city and home and husband lying in the ashes! Oh, unhappy me, why would I still look on the light as Hermione’s slave? Oppressed by her I have come as suppliant to this statue of the goddess and thrown my arms about it, melting in tears like some gushing spring high up on a cliff.

(text and translation by D. Kovacs)

Ewen Bowie has argued that this section could have been perceived as an allusion to the Iliou Persis of Sacadas of Argos (a narrative poem along the lines of Archilochus’ ‘Telephus fragment’) and simultaneously to a tradition of smaller scale lamentatory elegy, such as we find, also in Archilochus, in the Pericles fragment (13 W) or in the poem on the drowning of his brother-in-law (fr. 7-11 W). Euripides’ ‘elegiac Kreuzung’, as Bowie calls it, raises interesting questions in particular about the mimetic effects of the use of other genres in the solo parts of drama. This elegiac song seems to start off (at lines 103 and following) by evoking one kind of elegy -- larger

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in scale and on epic/martial themes. Then it zooms into one detail of the epic narrative: Andromache herself lamenting her capture in the past tense in ll. 111-2. And then this lament swells envelop the present utterance, which is of the kind anticipated at lines 94-5 above, where we’d heard of the ‘pleasure that women take in their present misfortunes by constantly having them on their lips’. This, incidentally, reminds us of Archilochus’ self-reflexive closing of the Pericles elegy, where he tells himself to put aside ‘womanly mourning’ (gunaikeion penthos) as though to mean ‘it’s time to finish up this elegy’. So here Euripides seems to be playing a deliberate and clever game of enacting and modulating between different kinds of elegiac performance.

Against the background of these considerations one passage of Euripides, the opening monody of the Ion, stands out as particularly intriguing. It goes without saying that the whole question of generic interaction between tragedy and other lyric genres is a complicated one in the case of late Euripides, with his penchant for actors’ monodies, the development of so-called New Music, and the changes in the socio-economics of tragic performance to which I’ve already alluded. But even so, the first monody of the Ion seems to stand out as unusual in a way which is connected to the sorts of considerations I have tried to outline. What Euripides’ monodies usually tend to do is exploit the possibilities opened up by New Music to produce ‘heightened’ passages of song, and they usually ratchet up the emotional intensity; they are typically laments.10 That is the sort of thing we see, for instance, also later in the Ion, in Creusa’s ‘anti-paean’ of sorts—though of that song is akin to a paean only in the sense that it alludes to its themes, not that it sets itself up as a paean. The first monody of the Ion, on the other hand, moving though it is in a different way, is a measured, serene, fairly low-key song, and a celebration of contentment in servitude. It is worth quoting the first part of this song at length.

10 Cf. especially theses of Beverley (1997) and De Poli (2008). Beverley on p. 82: ‘The use of monody as a vehicle for contentment in one’s work and praise of a god is completely without precedent.... The preoccupations of most monodists are ones of grief and despair; Ion’s preoccupations are very different. We do Euripides an injustice if we try to fit Ion’s monody into the normal patterns of monody.’
Παρνασσάδες δ’ ἀβατοὶ κορυφαὶ καταλαμπόμεναι τήν ἡμερίαν ἀψίδα βροτοῖς δέχονται. σμύρνης δ’ ἀνύδρου κατνῦς εἰς ὀρφόους Φοίβου πέτεται. (90)

θάσσει δὲ γυνὴ τρίποδα ζάθεων Δελφίς, ἀείδουσ’ Ἑλλησί βοὰς, ἂς ἀν Ἀπόλλων κελαδήση.

ἀλλ’, ὦ Φοίβου Δελφοῖ θέρατες, τὰς Κασταλίας ἀργυροειδεῖς βαίνετε δίνας, καθαραίς δὲ δρόσοις ἀφυδρανάμενοι στείχετε ναοῦς· στόμα τ’ εὐφημοι φρουρεῖτ’ ἀγαθὸν, φήμας ἀγαθὰς τοῖς εἴθέλουσιν μαντεύεσθαι γλώσσης ἱδίας ἀποφαίνειν. ημείς δὲ, πόνους οὐς έκ παιδὸς μοχθοῦμεν ἀεί, πτόρθοις δάφνις στέφεσιν θ’ ἱερὰς ἐσόδους Φοίβου καθαρὰς θήσομεν ἔφημος τε πέδον ἡμῖν νοτερόν· πτηνὸν τ’ ἀγέλας, αἱ βλάπτουσιν σέμοι’ ἀναθήματα, τὸξοισὶν ἐμοῖς φυγάδας θήσομεν· ὡς γὰρ ἀμήτωρ ἀπάτωρ τε γεγὼς τοὺς θρέψαντας Φοίβου ναοὺς θεραπεύω. (100)

ἀγ’, ὦ νεήθαλες ὦ καλλίστας προπόλευμα δάφνας, ἃς τἀν Φοίβου θυμέλαν σάφεις ὑπὸ ναοῖς, κάπων ἐξ ἀθανάτων, ἵνα δρόσοι τέγγουσ’ ἱεραὶ, γαῖας ἀέναιν παγάν ἐκπροϊέσαι, μυρσίνας ἱερὰν φόβαν· (110)
Now Helios bends the course of his bright chariot here toward the earth, and the
stars, banished by his flame, flee into the holy night. The trackless peaks of Parnassus gleam with light and receive for mortals the sun’s chariot wheels. The smoke of dry incense rises up to Phoebus’ rafters. Upon her holy tripod sits the Delphian priestess, who cries aloud to the Greeks whatever Apollo utters. So, you Delphian servants of Apollo, go to the silvery streams of Castalia, and when you have bathed in the pure water, return to the temple. Keep pious silence and guard the goodness of your lips, so that to those who wish to consult the god you may utter words of good omen.

As for me, I shall perform the tasks I have ever performed since childhood: with boughs of laurel and their holy bindings I shall purify the entrance to Phoebus’ house and cleanse the floor with sprinklings of water. The flocks of birds, which harm the sacred offerings, I shall put to flight with my bow. As one who is without mother or father I serve the temple of Phoebus that has given me nurture.

Come, O broom fresh-grown, servant made of lovely laurel, sweeper of Phoebus’ altar near his temple, you that are sprung from groves immortal, where the holy springs, gushing forth from earth a stream ever-flowing, water the holy myrtle growing in profusion: with you I sweep the god’s temple floor all the day long as the sun wings swiftly through the sky, performing my daily service. O Paian, O Paian, blessed, blessed may you be, son of Leto!

Fair is the toil, O Phoebus, I do for you before your house, honoring your prophetic seat. Glorious is the task I have, keeping my hands in service to the gods, not mortals but immortal beings.
Labor of such fair name  
I do not grow weary to perform.  
Phoebus is the father that begot me:  
for I extol the one who feeds me,  
and I cull my benefactor by the name of father,  
Phoebus, lord of the temple.  
O Paian, O Paian,  
blessed, blessed  
may you be, son of Leto!

But I shall cease my labor  
of sweeping with these laurel branches,  
and from a vessel of gold I shall cast  
the water the earth produces,  
which gushes out  
from the eddies of Castalia.  
I scatter its moisture around,  
I who have risen pure from my bed.  
Thus always for Phoebus  
may I not stop toiling—  
or stop but with heaven’s blessing!

etc..

(text and translation by D. Kovacs)

This monody strikes me, at least, as a generically over-determined hybrid of paean and—a type of song which is not often mentioned when we talk about lyric genre, but one which is very relevant in the context of traditional song culture—work song.

Indeed the song is arguably a work song before it is a paean. We do not hear the paeanic refrain until after Ion has listed his tasks and set to work sweeping and singing. Before that, we have the lengthy address to the broom, which conforms to a template of work-song in which an instrument of work is addressed and to some extent personified. I am borrowing here from Andromache Karanika’s book-length
discussion of work songs: hers is the comparison with the Lesbian milling song PMG 869 (where we might note already the wittily developed personification): ¹¹

ăngι χέλυ διὰ τοίο λέγε,† φωνάεσσα θέ γίνετ... Sappho ~ ἄγ', ὦ νεπθαλὲς, ὦ καλλίστας προπόλευμα δάφνας... Ion]: such an echo, if felt, would arguably place even greater emphasis on the homeliness of Ion’s monody: this is, in the world of the tragedy, a real work song with a practical function—and this impression would no doubt have been emphasized by the use of props (especially the broom) and by the actor’s movement, as he must have been marking the rhythm of his song by his sweeping. For if this is a solo song in terms of vocals, in terms of staging it must have been a pas de deux with the broom, and indeed the work-song habit of personifying the instrument of work is taken here to a whole new level.

That the broom is a projection of Ion himself has been argued perceptively by Richard Hunter: ¹² like Ion, the broom is a ‘young shoot’ from ‘immortal gardens’; the hapax προπόλευμα (v. 113) is made up ad hoc from a verb which is standardly used of temple attendants; both Ion and the broom sweep the ground before the god’s temple, and their shared duty is marked by the repetition of σαίρεις (115) ~ σαίρω (121), a repetition which underlines the personification, together with the address and the anthropomorphizing ‘hair’ φόβαν (line 121) of the broom.

This monody enacts a work song, then, and exploits to the full its generic traits. But the song is also a paean. For all paean’s notorious elusiveness as a genre, in this particular passage Euripides leaves us in no doubt about the generic label we

¹¹ Karanika (2014) 146: ‘While Euripides blends a work-song tradition with some form of a prayer to a god, the song exhibits the same feature of addressing an object that is important to carrying out a certain type of task. The exhortatory ἄγ’ seems to spring from a type of invocation, not uncommon within the realm of oral poetry, that is intertwined with daily work.’

¹² Hunter (2011) 24-5.
should assign: the buildup of light imagery, the Delphic cultic context, the repeated naming of Apollo (as many as 12 times) and, above all, the full refrain or *epiphthegma*—all this clearly marks this song as a paean.

Not that this has gone unremarked: interesting points have been made especially about the dramatic payoff resulting from deployment of paeanic language to assist in the presentation of different conceptions of the divine—I’m thinking now especially of Laura Swift and Ian Rutherford.13 What Laura Swift also notes is that this is not merely an allusion to paean, but within the world of the play the song sets itself up as an actual act of worship (just as it had also set itself up as a work song). I wonder if we can be more daring and suggest that this song does not just enact a paean, but it really goes to town on being a paean, in a manner which strategically replicates – with a more deliberate artificiality – the kind of effect that is inbuilt in the chorus’ use of other lyric genres as I have sketched it above. Here this effect is achieved by what I have referred to as a generic over-determination, by anchoring the song in the audience’s experience of song culture, and by the exploitation of the magico-ritual aspects of paeanic language. The result of this is that the cultic charge of the song bleeds out of the fictional world to affect the real world in which the tragic festival is taking place.

The magico-ritual dimension of paeanic language lies in the importance of naming the divinity through song: as Andrew Ford puts it in his important article on this ‘genre of genres’: ‘..any song made out of paian will attach importance to naming, for saying paian entails the “Du-Stil” in which getting the deity’s name and epithets right (*euphemia*) was crucial for success’.14 It is this aspect of paean which is crucial also in our song.

It is striking that this monody displays a particular inflection of dramatic irony whereby, though ignorant of his true identity and his relationship to Apollo, Ion ‘names correctly’ and thereby preserves the *euphemia* on which he so insists throughout the scene. The first stanza of the paean song is, as we have seen, a second-person address to a projection of himself that is more accurate in absolute terms than it is in the fiction of the play, for Ion speaks without knowledge but (in getting his ancestry right) he names an important reality in the construction of Athenian identity. In lines 136-40 Ion correctly names Apollo as his father, and in the song which accompanies his work he qualifies what he’s doing as εὐφάμους δὲ

πόνους (line 134): his work is *euphamous* because he is singing *euphemia* as he practices it.

In the play as a whole the issue of naming is invested with all the significance of the issue of identity. This is nicely expressed by Ion’s reply to Creusa when they first meet and she asks him who he is: his reply is τοῦ θεοῦ καλοῦμαι δοῦλος, εἰμί τ’, ὦ γυναι. ‘I am called the god’s slave’ [or ‘my name is slave of the god’] and that is who I am’ (l. 309). Ion had started off pointedly without a name as well as without an identity—he is the foundling temple servant, with no mother, no father, no city/homeland. Hermes tells us he is the first to call him by his name in the prologue just before the protagonist enters. Heavy weather is made of the process of naming: Ion is eventually named by his mortal father: Ἴωνα δ’ ὀνομάζω σε, ‘I name you Ion’ (line 661) is Xuthus’ performative statement which goes on to explain the pun on the participle ἰων (playing with the oracle that the first person he would run into would be his son) with a ponderous periphrasis (l. 663). And Ion’s name will, of course, live on in that of the Ionian race. So the process of acquiring an identity goes hand in hand with that of naming, and it is not only the hero’s identity that is at stake, but that of all concerned, actors and audience alike, for in this Athenian-themed play it is the founder of their lineage of the whole Ionian people that we are talking about.

I propose, then, that part of Euripides’ strategy of generic interaction here is to artificially replicate the generic interaction peculiar to choral tragic poetry where the ritual charge of the chorus’ song is boosted by channeling another lyric genre. Euripides here really seems to be going out of his way to set up this song as one which the audience could relate to actual songs from real-life song culture. By enacting a real work song and a real paean, the song poses itself as a real song, like other real songs from real-life song culture. And it claims a ritual significance which reverberates outside of the fictional world of the play.

It is not difficult to imagine how this line of thought might be pressed further to attempt to map in greater detail within the architecture of the play this use of paean in the service of the construction of Athenian identity at an important historical moment. Or alternatively how it might lead to a reading which traces how this simple, Apolline, un-dithyrambic song which returns to cultic roots inscribes itself in the terms of the polemic against New Music. But that is for another time; here, just a few words to conclude. I started off by wondering how it is that the solo

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15 On the nexus of issues surrounding ‘identity’ in this play see Zeitlin (1989).
parts of tragedy would have been anchored in the context of the broader song culture; I was trying to make sense of what I perceive as an inherent difference between the choral parts of tragedy and the solo parts. I have barely scratched the surface of the larger question, but I hope to have begun to show that even just an alertness of the issue can make us attuned to interesting poetic effects in the tragedies and so open up new and useful interpretive strategies.


Else, G. F. (1967). *The Origin and Early Form of Greek tragedy*. Cambridge MA.


