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The Continuity of the Chorus in Fourth-Century Attic Comedy

Kenneth S. Rothwell, Jr

ONE OF THE TRAITS that distinguished New Comedy from Old was the apparent decline of the chorus.¹ A convergence of factors can rightly be thought responsible for the change: comedy was probably influenced by precedents in tragedy; comic playwrights became more interested in creating a sense of illusion, unbroken by choral interaction with the actors;² this was abetted by a growing interest in the art of the actor³ and by the internationalization of the market for comedy, which may have made choral drama less exportable (Slater [*supra* n.2]). Innovation in dance and music also had repercussions for the chorus.⁴ In any event, what had been an organic part of the genre in the fifth century seems to have been jettisoned in the fourth.

In this paper, however, I would like to stress that in several respects there were significant continuities at work. Much of

¹ Especially helpful are: K. J. MAIDMENT, "The Later Comic Chorus," *CQ* 29 (1935: hereafter 'Maidment') 1-24; A. W. PICKARD-CAMBRIDGE, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*², rev. J. Gould and D. M. Lewis (Oxford 1968) 46-51, 86-93, 232-46; T. B. L. Webster, *Studies in Later Greek Comedy*² (Manchester 1970); G. SIFAKIS, "Aristotle, *E.N.*, IV, 2, 1123a19-24, and the Comic Chorus in the Fourth Century," *AJP* 92 (1971) 410-32; R. L. HUNTER, "The Comic Chorus in the Fourth Century," *ZPE* 36 (1979) 23-38; H.-G. Nesselrath, *Die attische Mittlere Komödie* (Berlin 1990).

² N. Slater, "The Fabrication of Comic Illusion," presented at the APA Annual Meeting, 29 December 1992.

³ P. Ghiron-Bistagne, *Recherches sur les acteurs dans la Grèce antique* (Paris 1976) esp. 173-202.

⁴ Nesselrath (*supra* n.1: 335) notes that the anapestic tetrameter, one of the most characteristic meters of Old Comedy, virtually disappears from fragments in the fourth century; cf. M. S. Silk, "Aristophanes as a Lyric Poet," *YCS* 26 (1980) 99-151, esp. 146ff. T. B. L. Webster, *The Greek Chorus* (London 1970) 31f, observes that innovation ceases in fourth-century depictions of dances and sees (198) few metrical subtleties in what survives; cf. L. Lawler, *The Dance of the Ancient Greek Theatre* (Iowa City 1964) 14-21, 60f, 97ff.

the evidence for the chorus has been examined by modern critics, yet it still tends to be treated in isolation from its institutional context, the *choregia*. Moreover, its relationship to Athenian politics has often been misunderstood. I should like to show that (a) contrary to claims occasionally made, the fading of the chorus probably had little to do with a loss of vigor in fourth-century Athenian democracy, (b) the *choregia* was quite healthy for most of the century, and (c) literary fragments and archaeological evidence offer hints that the chorus' diminished rôle did not come about abruptly.

I. The Chorus and the Fourth-Century Democracy

A good deal of modern literature on comedy takes it for granted that Athens entered a period of decline after the defeat of 404 and that the evolution of comedy was a response to this. The following is representative:

In the history of Athens choral drama and participatory democracy are coexistent: when one declines, so does the other. After the shattering defeat of the Peloponnesian War, an increasingly apathetic public removed itself from the decision-making process, and with the ascent of Macedon a centralized government imposed itself on the city-states. A parallel manifestation occurs in the theatre. Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae* is a comedy about voter apathy. It shows an Athens where legislative and executive procedures have broken down; where the male population has grown so lethargic that it must be bribed into attendance at the Assembly; and where women find it easy to take over. In its dramatic structure, it also marks the virtual death-knell of the chorus. Although there is still a chorus in this play, its appearances are spasmodic and perfunctory. The action, as in politics, is left to the principals. But, at its best, the Greek dramatic chorus bore the distinctive features of its place and time, an index of a public mentality that recognized arduous and time-consuming service to the state as a necessary component of the well-rounded life.⁵

⁵ P. D. Arnott, *Public and Performance in the Greek Theatre* (New York 1989) 24; cf. A. Lesky, *A History of Greek Literature*, tr. J. Willis and C. de Heer (New York 1966) 643, 658; R. Cantarella, "Atene. La Polis e il teatro," *Dioniso* 39 (1965) 39-55, esp. 54f ("Fine della polis e fine del teatro").

The scenario sketched out here for the demise of the chorus can no longer be sustained. Indeed, it is *not* clear that Athens' defeat in the Peloponnesian War shattered participatory democracy; throughout most of the fourth century the democracy was stable and Athens enjoyed a modicum of prosperity. Nor is it entirely fair to speak of the Athenians as an "increasingly apathetic public." I will discuss these issues in turn.

The fourth-century democracy is a subject of ongoing study. On the one hand, there is unmistakable and well-documented evidence that Athens faced difficulties.⁶ The loss of the imperial revenue that Athens had received from the Delian League in the fifth century had far-reaching consequences. We know, for example, that Athens was forced to modify the trierarchy so that the burden of that liturgy would be more widely shared.⁷ Athens also faced shortfalls in the aftermath of the Social War of the mid-350s; in 349 it even temporarily ran out of money to pay the *dikastai* (Dem. 39.17). Politically, the Athenians lost a large measure of their independence in 338 and finally the democracy itself in 322/321, when an oligarchy was imposed by Antipater.⁸ Many similar episodes in the fourth century point to a city struggling not to succumb.

And yet, on the other hand, we should be cautious about the conclusion we draw from such episodes. The periods following the Peloponnesian War and the Social War were surely difficult, but a balanced account of the fourth century would need to acknowledge the remarkable resilience and economic revitalization of Athens.⁹ Athens was able to compensate for the loss of

⁶ Representative of this view are: C. Mossé, *La fin de la démocratie athénienne* (Paris 1962); E. David, *Aristophanes and Athenian Society of the Early Fourth Century B.C.* (= *Mnemosyne* Suppl. 81 [Leiden 1984]) 5–20; W. G. Runciman, "Doomed to Extinction: The *Polis* as an Evolutionary Dead End," in O. Murray and S. Price, edd., *The Greek City from Homer to Alexander* (Oxford 1990) 347–67; W. K. Pritchett, *The Greek State at War V* (Berkeley 1991) 456–504.

⁷ Recent studies of the symmory include: P. J. Rhodes, "Problems in Athenian *Eisphora* and Liturgies," *AJAH* 7 (1982) 1–19; E. Ruschenbusch, "Symmorieprobleme," *ZPE* 69 (1987) 75–81.

⁸ W. S. Ferguson, *Hellenistic Athens* (London 1911) 1–37; G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (London 1983) 300–06.

⁹ A. W. Gomme, "The End of the City-State," in *Essays in Greek History and Literature* (Oxford 1937) 204–48; B. Strauss, *Athens after the Peloponnesian War. Class, Faction and Policy 403–386* (Ithaca 1987) 42–69; A. French, "Economic Conditions in Fourth-Century Athens," *G&R* 38 (1991) 24–40; S.

imperial income through energetic financial administration; it was in the fourth century, after all, that the two most expensive state payments, the Assembly pay and the *theorika* were introduced.¹⁰ Moreover in 349, the same year that the state temporarily suspended pay to *dikastai*, Demosthenes was pointing out to the Athenians that if they tapped the theoric fund they could have a larger military allowance than any other nation; they therefore faced not outright poverty but a decision about allocating limited resources.¹¹ The defeat at Chaeronea in 338 was a blow to Athenian independence in foreign affairs but led to a peaceful Aegean and an unprecedented volume of trade at Piraeus.¹² Although political decision-making in the fourth century was not identical to that of the fifth (the *nomothetai*, for example, gradually acquired greater powers), democratic political institutions were on the whole remarkably stable until the oligarchy was established by Antipater.¹³

Similarly, the view that an "apathetic public" became disengaged from political decision-making is, I suspect, an overstatement. This raises the old cliché that the fourth century

Isager and M. H. Hansen, *Aspects of Athenian Society in the Fourth Century B.C.* (Odense 1975) 52–55. C. Mossé, "La vie économique d'Athènes au IV^e siècle: crise ou renouveau?" in F. Sartori, ed., *Praelectiones Patavinae* [Rome 1972] 135–44, took a more favorable view of economic activity and proposed that social and political problems of the *polis* in the latter half of the fourth century were fruits of precisely this success; cf. J. Pečírka, "The Crisis of the Athenian Polis in the Fourth Century B.C.," *Eirene* 14 (1976) 5–29. I discuss some of these issues in K. S. Rothwell, Jr., *Politics and Persuasion in Aristophanes' Ecclesiazusae* (= *Mnemosyne* Suppl. 111 [Leiden 1990]) 13–19.

¹⁰ M. H. Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes* (Oxford 1991) 318f.

¹¹ Dem. 1.19. The Athenians may have faced food crises in the fourth century, but certainly not famine: see P. Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-Roman World* (Cambridge 1988) 134–64.

¹² E. Burke, "The Economy of Athens in the Classical Era: Some Adjustments to the Primitivist Model," *TAPA* 122 (1992) 199–226, esp. 204.

¹³ P. J. Rhodes, "The Athenian Democracy after 403 B.C.," *CJ* 75 (1979–80) 305–23; S. Humphreys, "Lycurgus of Butadae: an Athenian Aristocrat," in J. Ober and J. W. Eadie, edd., *The Craft of the Ancient Historian* (Lanham 1985) 199–252, esp. 201f on the *nomothetai* and 217ff on Lycurgus' use of *eisangelia*; for a useful index of differences between the fifth- and fourth-century democracies see M. H. Hansen, *CR* n.s. 38 (1989) 71ff. The fundamental soundness of fourth-century democracy is affirmed in H. E. Stier, *Der Untergang der klassischen Demokratie* (Opladen 1971) 75; J. Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens* (Princeton 1990) 334.

witnessed the emergence of individualism—*homo publicus* replaced by *homo economicus*—a cliché that has been an unquestioned orthodoxy for many historians of fourth-century comedy.¹⁴ This is too large an issue to be dealt with adequately here, but I shall make two brief observations.

First, we need to be skeptical of the assumption that the chorus represents the consensus of the community and that an active chorus can exist only in an era of devotion to the *polis* (the fifth century) but will wane in an era when the individual is presumably of greater importance (the fourth century). The correlation between chorus and community is surely more complicated.¹⁵ Moreover, the diminution of the chorus need not necessarily contribute to drama more suited to individuals. It can be argued that it is precisely by having a chorus on stage that a playwright is more easily able to isolate what is peculiarly individual about a given character: one function of the chorus is to provide a wider context against which the individual character's actions can be considered and thus help us measure his or her isolation from that context.¹⁶

Second, it has been argued that traditional patriotism was less intense in the fourth century and that when an Athenian acted on behalf of the city he saw himself less as a citizen performing his duty than as a private benefactor (*euergetes*) offering his services as a favor, almost as if he were a foreigner. When the wealthy citizen performed a liturgy he took credit for his generosity (and this becomes a familiar *topos* in fourth-century

¹⁴ See e.g. Maidment 8; David (*supra* n.6) 30ff; M. Landfester, "Geschichte der griechischen Komödie," in G. A. Seeck, ed., *Das griechische Drama* (Darmstadt 1979) 354–400, esp. 375f; F. Kolb, "Polis und Theater," in Seeck 504–45, esp. 516f; P. Ghiron-Bistagne, "Die Krise des Theaters in der griechischen Welt im 4. Jahrhundert v. u. Z.," in C. Welskopf, ed., *Hellenistische Poleis* III (Berlin 1974) 1335–71; O. Longo, "The Theater of the *Polis*," in J. Winkler and F. Zeitlin, edd., *Nothing to Do with Dionysos?* (Princeton 1990) 17, at least allows that it is a complex process.

¹⁵ Of course the question of the meaning of the chorus in society is an old one: see e.g. M. S. Silk and J. P. Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy* (Cambridge 1981) 350–53. The wide range of possible relationships between chorus and audience in Aristophanic comedy is surveyed by P. Thiery, "Le rôle du public dans la comédie d'Aristophane," *Dioniso* 57 (1987) 169–85.

¹⁶ Cf. S. Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge 1986) 270f. Menander turns to a different set of conventions for delineating character.

rhetoric).¹⁷ But even if Athenians were not motivated only by selfless civic duty, the fact remains that they continued to perform liturgies. And this has consequences for the fourth-century chorus.

II. The Fourth-Century *Choregia*

There is a long-standing belief that the disappearance of the chorus stems to some extent from a 'crisis' in the *choregia*.¹⁸ But I would like to affirm that the *choregia*, until it was replaced with the *agonothesia* by Demetrius of Phalerum after 317, actually worked rather smoothly. Of course things could go wrong. There were *choregoi* who were reluctant to pay or did so only with difficulty. Ischomachus, the gentleman in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, implies (7.3) that a man who is *kalos te kagathos* should expect to be summoned into court for an *antidosis* for trierarchy or *choregia*. Demosthenes' *Against Meidias* (13–18) shows that, in the case of a dithyrambic chorus, arrangements could break down.¹⁹

Nevertheless we only hear about this because Demosthenes boasted about being able to set things right; he—and Xenophon's Ischomachus—perhaps have an interest in over-

¹⁷ The phenomenon has been documented by E. Lévy, *Athènes devant la défaite 404. Histoire d'une crise idéologique* (=BEFAR 225 [Paris 1976]) 223–57, esp. 242; G. Daverio-Rocchi, "Transformations de rôle dans les institutions d'Athènes au IV^e siècle par rapport aux changements dans la société," *DialAncHist* 4 (1978) 33–50; Humphreys (*supra* n.13: 204, 212) notes the free cooperation in supporting civic initiatives offered by Athenian upper classes during the Lycurgan period; for a harsher judgement on the upper classes see M. Christ, "Liturgy Avoidance and *Antidosis* in Classical Athens," *TAPA* 120 (1990) 147–69. What might be more relevant would be information about the extent of popular participation in Athenian politics in the fourth century, as well as information about their experience as members of the audience. I suspect that Plato's complaint about a *theatrokratia* (*Leg.* 701A) might actually mask a continuing appreciation of an involvement with the theater by fourth-century popular audiences.

¹⁸ Some of this may originate with Platonius, who wrongly thought that Athenians ceased to choose *choregoi* in the fourth century (4.20ff Koster); see Nesselrath (*supra* n.1) 31. "Men able and willing to pay with the former lavishness for mounting tragedies and comedies could no longer be found": G. Norwood, *Greek Comedy* (London 1931) 29; similarly Webster (*supra* n.1) 14; Ghiron-Bistagne (*supra* n.14) 1344.

¹⁹ See D. M. MacDowell, *Demosthenes: Against Meidias* (Oxford 1990) 236–43.

stating the difficulties that they faced. It is true that some *choregoi* were miserly in the fourth century, but we also hear of stingy *choregoi* in the fifth century.²⁰ And it should be emphasized, too, that the *antidosis* was not a phenomenon of the fourth century only. An inscription from Ikarion indicates that it was already available in that deme by the middle of the fifth century,²¹ and it may only be because we have no fifth-century forensic speeches that we do not know of specific instances. The series of monuments that began in 335/334 may attest to the *philotimia* of individual *choregoi*, but they also testify to the expenses *choregoi* were willing to undertake.²² By the time of Demetrius of Phalerum the areas adjacent to the precincts of Dionysus were bristling with tripods set up as choregic monuments.²³ For Aristotle this was cause for concern. He advocated removing the burden of the *choregia* from the well-to-do and wanted to prevent them from performing *choregiai* "even if they are willing" (καὶ βουλομένων; *Pol.* 5.1309a13–20), which indicates that opposition to paying for choruses was not adamant or universal. Aristotle further complained that some *choregoi* spent excessive amounts by having their chorus wear purple cloaks in the *parodos* (Sifakis 410–32). Demosthenes proudly mentioned the golden robe and crown he had made.²⁴ There must have been many Athenians who were either genuinely proud, or at least quick to claim credit, for the liturgies they supported. In any event, it remains a fact that for as long as the *choregia* existed in the fourth century

²⁰ That Dicaeogenes came in dead last as *choregos* for tragic and Pyrrhic choruses is proof of his miserliness: Isae. 5.36 (*ca* 389); Antimachus failed to provide for a proper banquet (*Ach.* 1150–61)—although this would hardly hamper the performance of the chorus, suggests E. Capps, "The Chorus in the Later Greek Drama with Reference to the Stage Question," *AJA* 10 (1895) 287–325, esp. 318.

²¹ *IG* I³ 254 (I² 187) spells out provisions for two *choregoi* and *antidosis*; see J. K. Davies, *Athenian Propertied Families* (Oxford 1971) xxii. In the fifth century Ps.-Xenophon (*Ath. Pol.* 3.4) refers to *diadikasiai* with reference to the festivals.

²² Humphreys (*supra* n.13) 213. Ghiron-Bistagne (*supra* n.3: 84) notes that more dithyrambic monuments have survived than dramatic, but it may not be wise to draw conclusions from the few dozen choregic inscriptions that have survived from the City Dionysia.

²³ P. Amandry, "Trépieds d'Athènes: I. Dionysies," *BCH* 100 (1976) 15–93, esp. 62.

²⁴ *Meid.* 16; see also Pickard-Cambridge 77, *cf.* 89.

we do not know of a single instance in which it was not performed.²⁵

If the chorus suffered from financial limitations, it was in the fifth century, not in the fourth. During the Peloponnesian War the number of poets competing in the dramatic festivals was evidently reduced from five to three. In 406/405 the Athenians resorted to the *synchoregia*, in which the financial burden would be shared between two people.²⁶ What is notable about the incident is that the Athenians went out of their way to save the chorus; they were willing to restructure the *choregia* so as to insure that a chorus could be fully supported (Maidment 5f). Yet this *synchoregia* was only in effect for that one year, as Capps showed in 1943—removing this as a pretext for concern about the viability of the *choregia*.²⁷ We thus never hear of *synchoregiai* at the fourth-century City Dionysia, at least for the years recorded in the Fasti (IG II² 2318, covering the years 398–329).²⁸ For the deme festivals about ten *synchoregiai* are attested in the fourth century, involving as many as three people each. To Pickard-Cambridge “poverty is suggested” by the use of *synchoregoi*, though in three instances the three *choregoi* are a father and two sons, an arrangement that fails to share the burden widely; and where known these individual *choregoi* are by no means paupers.²⁹ A clear instance of the *choregia* being fulfilled by individuals, not *synchoregoi*, is offered by a recently

²⁵ A. W. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Theater of Dionysus at Athens* (Oxford 1946) 167, misleadingly implies that *Ath. Pol.* 56.3 indicates that tribes took over the *choregia*: in fact it seems that the tribes nominated *choregoi* to the archon; cf. P. J. Rhodes, *A Commentary on the Aristotelian Athenaion Politeia* (Oxford 1981) *ad loc.*; MacDowell (*supra* n.19) 236f.

²⁶ Pickard-Cambridge 74–92. And even during the Peloponnesian War we cannot be certain that the number of comedies was reduced: see W. Luppe, “Die Zahl der Konkurrenten an den komischen Agonen zur Zeit des Peloponnesischen Krieges,” *Philologus* 116 (1972) 53–73; for a response, cf. G. Mastromarco, “Guerra peloponnesiaca e agoni comici in Atene,” *Belfagor* 30 (1975) 469–73.

²⁷ E. Capps, “A New Fragment of the List of Victors at the City Dionysia,” *Hesperia* 12 (1943) 1–11.

²⁸ Pickard-Cambridge 87; see also Ghiron-Bistagne (*supra* n.3) 7–27.

²⁹ Pickard-Cambridge 48: IG II² 3095–96, 3098; on the known *choregoi* see D. Whitehead, *The Demes of Attica 508/7–ca. 250 B.C.* (Princeton 1986) 217; Hagnias of IG II² 3098 was trierarch at least twice: Davies (*supra* n.21) 3f.

published dedication from Thorikos, dating from the middle of the fourth century.³⁰

There is no firm evidence that the size of the comic chorus shrank. Aristotle (*Pol.* 3.1276b4) remarked that the same choristers could compose a tragic and comic chorus and he has been taken to mean that both choruses were fixed at the same number, but it may be that Aristotle's point does not depend on numerical equality. A fragment of the *Orestautocleides* of Timocles (fr. 27 K.-A.) names eleven women, who may constitute a chorus, but it cannot be established that they are the entire chorus or even a chorus at all.³¹ Moreover, we should bear in mind that by Greek dramatic convention "a chorus of twelve (Aeschylus) can represent fifty daughters of Danaus, or a chorus of fifteen (Sophocles, Euripides) nine Muses or seven (or more accurately five) mothers of the Seven against Thebes."³² Third-century inscriptions from Delphi mention comic choruses with seven or eight members, but by then we are in a different world entirely.³³

The fourth-century *choregia* (it might be objected) was becoming a hollow relic, carried on by mere inertia. In some ways, of course, the times had changed and the *choregia* no longer meant what it had for the Athenian *polis*; satisfying aristocratic private *philotimia* and *euergesia* seem not to have been important motivations during the radical democracy of the middle fifth century. And I concede that, although the simple mechanistic explanation for the decline of the chorus (that it waned as the *choregia* underwent a financial 'crisis') is demonstrably wrong, it would be equally mechanistic to infer from the continuation of the *choregia* that the significance of the chorus and its rôle in drama did not alter. And yet the remarkable thing about the fourth-century *choregia* is that the

³⁰ D. Whitehead, "Festival Liturgies in Thorikos," *ZPE* 62 (1986) 213–20.

³¹ Maidment (13) thinks it a chorus, but see Hunter (*supra* n.1). Interestingly the scholiast to *Knights* 589 claims that the comic chorus of twenty-four dancers had eleven women and thirteen men. The scholiast is hardly reliable, but if this is true, could the eleven in Timocles' fragment be the women of a twenty-four-member chorus? See C. W. Dearden, *The Stage of Aristophanes* (London 1976) 106.

³² A. D. Trendall and T. B. L. Webster, *Illustrations of Greek Drama* (London 1971) 69.

³³ The epigraphical evidence is tabulated by G. Sifakis, *Studies in the History of Hellenistic Drama* (London 1967) 73f; cf. 113–35 and B. Gentili, *Theatrical Performances in the Ancient World* (Amsterdam 1979) 22–25.

institution was supported as vigorously as it was. It cannot have been an anachronistic fossil from the standpoint of the audience at Athens. The chorus was alive and well, it was an entrenched fact of the Athenian festivals, and it was available. If comic playwrights decided to write plays whose plots depended on individual characters and excluded choruses from the action, this was a conscious choice on their part.

III. Evidence for the Rôle of the Chorus in Comedy

Given that choruses were being virtually forced upon comic playwrights, to what use, if any, did they put them? We could chart an abrupt decline in the presence of the chorus by calculating the number of lines spoken by the chorus in the surviving plays. In (for example) the fifth-century *Acharnians* and *Birds* the chorus represents, respectively, 25% and 23% of each play. Even in *Frogs* 23% was spoken by the chorus. But in the fourth-century *Ecclesiazusae* the rôle of the chorus accounts for only 8% of the play, and in *Plutus* it is about 4%. In Menander all that remains are remarks like that of Daos, at the end of the first act of the *Dyscolus*, on the approach of a group of drunken worshippers of Pan; similar remarks can be found in other plays.³⁴

Yet these bald facts can mislead. Part of the loss of the chorus in *Ecclesiazusae* is due to the disappearance of the parabasis; in the opening three hundred lines of the play members of the female chorus carry on spirited dialogue with Praxagora. Conversely in *Frogs* the interaction between chorus and actors can be reckoned to be less than mere numbers suggest;³⁵ the gap separating *Ecclesiazusae* and *Frogs* can be narrowed. But whatever the level of interaction, there is no doubt that as a rule choruses appeared in the fourth century. As we have seen, Aristotle said that a tragic and comic chorus might be composed of the same persons; whatever else this suggests about dramatic production it confirms that choruses were indeed performed in

³⁴ These only appear at the end of the first act; consult A. W. Gomme and F. H. Sandbach, *Menander: A Commentary* (Oxford 1973) 172; E. W. Handley, *The Dyskolos of Menander* (London 1965) 171f.

³⁵ B. Zimmermann, *Untersuchungen zur Form und dramatischen Technik der Aristophanischen Komödien I* (Königstein 1984) 134, 252f, sees the chorus rather as spectators than as participants.

his day.³⁶ The phrases χοροῦ μέλος or simply χοροῦ generally (in my view) mark the location in fourth-century comedies of choral songs that were performed but were unconnected with the action and felt by later editors to be expendable.³⁷ Possibly the omitted choruses were not even written by the comic playwrights (though in third-century papyri choruses were cut from well known fifth-century tragedies).³⁸ The practice can perhaps be traced to the last decade or two of the fifth century, when Agathon wrote choral interludes, or *embolima*, which were not integrated into the plot of the play.³⁹ This lack of relevance is, of course, a phenomenon that has been detected in later plays of Euripides; and even earlier choruses, such as that of Euripides' *Supplices* (of the 420s), have been accused of passivity.⁴⁰

But there are hints that not all comic choral songs were expendable and that choral participation with the actors continued in the fourth century. Interaction between actors and chorus is non-existent in surviving Menander, but several fragments suggest that it cannot be excluded from other contemporary playwrights.⁴¹ A fragment of the *Trophonius* of Alexis (239 K.-A.) makes sense if understood as spoken to a chorus; someone asks them to strip for dancing; the chorus is addressed in the second person plural.⁴² This stands in sharp contrast to the *Dyscolus* (229–32), in which Daos makes a loud

³⁶ *Pol.* 3.1276b4; cf. Pickard-Cambridge 234.

³⁷ For various views see E. W. Handley, "XOPOY in the *Plutus*," *CQ* n.s. 3 (1953) 55–61; W. Beare, "XOPOY in the *Plutus*: A Reply to Mr. Handley," *CQ* n.s. 5 (1955) 49–52; E. Pöhlmann, "Die Überlieferungswert der XOPOY-Vermerke in Papyri und Handschriften," *WürzJbb* 3 (1977) 69–81; F. Perusino, *Dalla commedia antica alla commedia di mezzo* (Urbino 1986) 68.

³⁸ For the papyri see Pöhlmann (*supra* n.37) 70f.

³⁹ *Arist. Poet.* 1456a32. Agathon's death has been put at 401 by P. Lévêque, *Agathon* (Paris 1955).

⁴⁰ Choruses thought to have especially little connection to plot are *Helen* 1234–83 (412) and *IT* 1301–68; on *Suppl.* see A. M. Dale, "The Chorus in the Action of Greek Tragedy," in her *Collected Papers* (Cambridge 1969) 210–20, esp. 211; G. Xanthakis-Karamanos, *Studies in Fourth-Century Tragedy* (Athens 1980) 9 with n.4.

⁴¹ See Hunter 23–38. It is hard to improve on Hunter's collection of evidence, though Eubulus fr. 2 K.-A. might be given slightly more prominence; cf. Sifakis 423f.

⁴² See R. Kassel and C. Austin, *Poetae Comici Graeci* II (New York 1991) 155, for further bibliography.

point of clearing the stage before the chorus entered so as to avoid any interaction with them.⁴³ Two fragments from Eubulus—one from the *Ankulion* (fr. 2 K.-A.) and one from the *Amaltheia* (fr. 7 K.-A.)—also seem to address a chorus directly, in preparation for dance.⁴⁴ A few fragments in lyric dactyls from Eubulus' *Stephanopolides* (fr. 102f K.-A.), a play evidently named for its chorus, imply a conversation between the leader of the chorus and the actors.⁴⁵ Dialogue between actors and chorus is plausible in *Adesp.* 239 Austin.⁴⁶ Aeschines, in his oration against Timarchus (1.157), mentions in passing that at the rural Dionysia an actor had spoken in anapests directly to the chorus—clearly suggesting interaction. Less direct evidence is offered by Roman comedies that are drawn from fourth-century Greek originals. In the *Rudens* of Plautus, in which a chorus of fishermen sing what we might call a *parados*, the leader briefly converses with one of the actors. The *Rudens* is based on a comedy by Diphilus, and it is more likely that Plautus has preserved the chorus from the original play than created one of his own.⁴⁷ The *Poenulus*, which is probably a reworking of the *Carthaginians* of Alexis, has a group of *advocati* who may reflect a chorus in the Greek original.⁴⁸

Archaeological finds also point to continuity in the rôle of the chorus. Two fourth-century stone reliefs found in the Athenian

⁴³ Sifakis 421f; Maidment 14.

⁴⁴ R. L. Hunter, ed., *Eubulus: The Fragments* (Cambridge 1983) *ad locc.*

⁴⁵ Hunter (*supra* n.44) 191; Webster (*supra* n.1) 62ff; "remarkably parallel to the *Ecclesiazusae*": W. G. Arnott, "From Aristophanes to Menander," *G&R* 19 (1972) 65–80, esp. 67f.

⁴⁶ C. Austin, *Comicorum Graecorum Fragmenta in Papyris Reperta* (Berlin 1973) 241, suggests the ἄνδρες (line 18) may simply be an address to the audience; further examples of this use of ἄνδρες are collected in D. Bain, *Actors and Audience* (Oxford 1977) 190–94—yet, notes Hunter (37), most of these examples are in monologue and *Adesp.* 239 is in dialogue. C. Ferrari, "Il frammento del papiro Berlinese 11771 e la trasformazione del coro da Aristofane a Menandro," *Dioniso* 11 (1948) 177–87, thinks it choral.

⁴⁷ G. Jachmann, *Plautinisches und Attisches* (Berlin 1931) 98f n.3.

⁴⁸ On the *Poenulus* and the *Carthaginians* of Alexis: W. G. Arnott, "The Author of the Greek Original of the *Poenulus*," *RhM* 102 (1959) 252–62; R. C. Flickinger, "ΧΟΡΟΙ In Terence's *Heauton*, the Shifting of Choral Roles in Menander, and Agathon's 'EMBOAIMA'," *CP* 7 (1912) 26 n.2. F. Leo, *Plautinische Forschungen* (Berlin 1895) 217 n.1, points also to the *lorarii* in the *Captivi* and the *Menaechmi*. Roman tragedy retained the chorus, even altering it to establish a closer relation between chorus and actors: see Capps (*supra* n.20) 298ff.

Agora depict contemporary comic choruses in performance.⁴⁹ Sifakis has pointed out (419) that in one of these reliefs an actor appears to be participating with the chorus in dance and that this must represent the subject of the play, not an interlude. It is perhaps also relevant that it is not until the third quarter of the fourth century that the use of choruses as illustrations of drama on dedications is replaced by the use of masks. One of the earliest instances is on a dedication from Aixone, probably from 340/339, which has five masks in relief.⁵⁰

We can also get a sense of the continuity of the choral tradition by looking at the problem from another angle: it may be that the shift to the fourth-century chorus was not as abrupt as might be thought because we have overestimated its importance in the fifth century. Although Aristophanes is obviously our most extensive evidence for fifth-century practice, his eleven surviving plays may have been preserved because of their political content, not because they were typical for the construction and use of chorus in Old Comedy.⁵¹ Even within the Aristophanic corpus we can see a loosening of the old structures and experimentation with the chorus from the time of *Birds* on. *Lysistrata*, for example, has two choruses and the *parabasis* is merged into the plot.⁵² *Frogs*, moreover, by having an animal chorus that may have seemed old-fashioned by the end of the fifth-century and by using the *parabasis* in ways not seen since the plays of the 420s, was perhaps seen as archaizing

⁴⁹ T. B. L. Webster and J. R. Green, *Monuments Illustrating Old and Middle Comedy* (London 1978) 118f AS 3–4; see J. R. Green, "On Seeing and Depicting the Theatre in Classical Athens," *GRBS* 32 (1991) 15–49, esp. 24.

⁵⁰ Webster and Green (*supra* n.49) 118 AS 2, though Pickard-Cambridge (49) thinks 313/312 a more likely date. In general see J. R. Green, "Dedications of Masks," *RA* (1982) 237–48, esp. 246 on the marked increase in masks in the third quarter of the fourth century.

⁵¹ E. Handley, on *P.Oxy.* L 3540 (81f, 85f), a fragment that he identifies (hesitantly) as the prologue to the second *Thesmophoriazusae* (407–406). See also Handley in *Cambridge History of Classical Literature* I (Cambridge 1985) 391/406; D. F. Sutton, "Aristophanes and the Transition to Middle Comedy," *LCM* 15 (1990) 81–95, esp. 94f.

⁵² For a recent study see T. K. Hubbard, *The Mask of Comedy* (Ithaca 1991) 182–95; T. McEvilly, "Development in the Lyrics of Aristophanes," *AJP* 91 (1970) 257–76.

and retrospective.⁵³ Aristotle reported that at Athens Crates (active *ca* 450–430) was the first to relinquish the lampoon (ἰαμβικὴ ἰδέα) and compose “plots of general interest” (καθόλου ποιεῖν λόγους καὶ μύθους; *Poet.* 1449b5–8), thereby following the lead of Epicharmus and anticipating the focus on plot that we associate with New Comedy.⁵⁴ Needless to say, even a comedy with a “plot of general interest” could put a chorus to good use, but it is less likely to *need* a parabasis if it lacks the ἰαμβικὴ ἰδέα. By one estimate⁵⁵ just under half the dated plays in the last two decades of the fifth century involved mythological parody, which presupposes a structured plot. In this connection we should consider the testimony of Platonius, who said that the *Odysseis* of Cratinus (a mythological parody of 439–437),⁵⁶ like the *Aeolosikon* of Aristophanes, had neither choral songs nor a *parabasis*. This cannot be literally true, because (to reemphasize a point I have made above) the grant of a chorus was the institutional precondition for performance at a festival.⁵⁷ And some fragments do seem to be from a chorus, though it may be that the rôle of the chorus did not extend beyond the *parodos*.⁵⁸ (In the fourth century as well, the chorus

⁵³ Hubbard (*supra* n.52) 157f, 200, 201 n.123. But even here we cannot be sure that the animal chorus had entirely seen its day: Archippus' *Fishes* seems to have been written after the end of the Peloponnesian War; see Archippus fr. 27 K.-A.

⁵⁴ Clearly the second *Thesmophoriazusae* (*ca* 407/406) had a parabasis (see K. Deichgräber, *Parabasenverse aus Thesmophoriazusae II des Aristophanes bei Galen* [Berlin 1956], *cf.* fr. 346 K.-A.), but if it began with a prologue spoken by a divinity, then Aristophanes had introduced into comedy a key characteristic of New Comedy before the century was out.

⁵⁵ T. B. L. Webster, “Chronological Notes on Middle Comedy,” *CQ* n.s. 2 (1952) 13–26, esp. 23.

⁵⁶ P. Geissler, *Chronologie der altattischen Komödie*, rev. ed. (Berlin 1979) 20; the play seems to have been performed at the time of the decree of Morychides, which limited personal attacks, but there is no necessary reason why this would affect the chorus. Diminution of the chorus could be due to artistic considerations.

⁵⁷ The point was made by G. Kaibel, “Kratinos' ΟΔΥΣΣΗΣ und Euripides' ΚΥΚΛΟΥΨ,” *Hermes* 30 (1895) 71–89, esp. 75.

⁵⁸ That the rôle is limited to the *parodos* is suggested by Perusino (*supra* n.37) 83; but see M. Bertan, “Gli *Odyssei* di Cratino e la testimonianza di Platonio,” *AeR* 29 (1984) 171–78, esp. 173f. *Cf.* Hubbard (*supra* n.52) 24; Nesselrath (*supra* n.1) 33. P. Händel, *Formen und Darstellungsweisen in der aristophanischen Komödie* (Heidelberg 1963) 130, entertains the possibility that there were other plays with little choral involvement.

made its deepest impression in the *parodos*, and Sifakis has argued that it is the *parodos* that is depicted on two fourth-century stone reliefs from the agora.)⁵⁹ Yet the existence of a peripheral chorus in a comedy that was performed well before Aristophanes even began his career raises a serious question: was the chorus always “the heart and soul of Old Comedy”?⁶⁰ We may have a long tradition of continuity here, obscured by the surviving political plays of Aristophanes.

IV. Conclusion

Let me try to reconstruct some of the steps in the evolution of the chorus. There is a very real possibility that, decades before Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae* and *Plutus*, there was a tradition of comedy in which choruses were limited to the *parodos*. If Platonius was even partly correct about Cratinus' *Odysseis*, action in non-Aristophanic comedy could have been left for some time to the principal actors. Furthermore, the evidence cited above indicates that the chorus remained a presence well into the fourth century and in at least some comedies continued a modest level of interaction with the actors. Admittedly we cannot be confident that these choruses performed lyric songs of high quality. But there may at least have been a good deal of fourth-century comedy that resembled *Ecclesiazusae* and *Plutus* more than the *Dyscolus*. Menander chose not to incorporate the chorus into the action, but we cannot be certain that other fourth-century playwrights made the same choice. In any event I do not think that the defeat of 404 was the decisive turning point it has been made out to be. In fact the very notion of a ‘turning point’ may not be helpful: we are dealing with trends that evolved over decades, with traditions (e.g. political satire, mythological parody, “plots of general interest”) that existed side by side for generations, and with poets who wrote comedies that, should they ever be discovered, might defy categorization and surprise us with their versatility. But let me suggest that if we are to have turning points they came both earlier and later than 404.

⁵⁹ Sifakis 416f; Hubbard (*supra* n.52) 27: *parodos* (not *parabasis*), once the place for choral self-presentation; 247: *parodos*, the one choral form retained.

⁶⁰ As Capps (*supra* n.20: 304) characterized the chorus.

Of course the later turning point is the more familiar: the end of the democracy in 322/321. Menander's first play was in 321 and the *choregia* was eliminated after 317; I do not doubt that at that time there were profound changes in social attitudes and dramatic production. It is in this period that the chorus and actors were probably separated from one another by a high stage.⁶¹ Although Menandrian comedy still had a chorus, evidence for interaction between actors and chorus largely disappears.

The earlier turning point would be the years around 411. Politically this was an era of upheaval: the destruction of the Sicilian expedition, the occupation of Decelea, the oligarchic seizure of power in 411, and the restoration of the democracy. In fact J. K. Davies treated the period 412–380 as a single unit, with 404 as simply one event in a thirty-year period of Spartan supremacy.⁶² In comedy we see experimentation with the chorus on the part of Aristophanes from the time of *Birds* (414). It must have been in this period that Agathon, whose first victory was in 416 and who was so prominent in *Thesmophoriazusae*, began to use *embolima*. Euripides seems to have recourse to these in *Helen* and *Iphigeneia in Tauris*. Accordingly, the chorus of *Frogs* may have been an anachronistic relic by the time it was performed. The rôle of the chorus in comedy was surely being re-thought for some time *before* the defeat of 404.

R. L. Hunter has judiciously warned (23) that "In many matters connected with the chorus we must be content with an honest profession of ignorance." At the same time, I think we can at least sort out what is more probable from what is less probable. The trends that we find in the fourth century have precedents in the fifth, and the marginalization of the chorus

⁶¹ Pickard-Cambridge (*supra* n.25) 156–68; N. W. Slater, "Transformations of Space in New Comedy," in J. Redmond, ed., *Themes in Drama 9. The Theatrical Space* (Cambridge 1987) 1–10, esp. 5; R. F. Townsend, "The Fourth-Century Skene of the Theater of Dionysus at Athens," *Hesperia* 55 (1986) 421–38, esp. 435. I speak only hesitantly of an "end" of the democracy in 322/321. Gomme (*supra* n.9) points to the repeated revivals of Athenian democratic institutions in the decades following.

⁶² J. K. Davies, *Democracy and Classical Greece* (Stanford 1978) 129–64; Nesselrath (*supra* n.1: 334) likewise thinks that Old Comedy began to evolve more quickly after 411. See also E. Segal, "The φύσις of Comedy," *HSCP* 77 (1973) 129–36.

may be one of these. But the stability of the *choregia* and the continuity of the chorus are factors that we neglect at great risk. The gulf separating the fifth from the fourth century was certainly not a vast and precipitous one.⁶³

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⁶³ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the panel on "Transformations of Comedy from Cratinus to Menander" at the 1992 APA Meeting in New Orleans. My thanks to Gregory Dobrov, the organizer, and to Jeffrey Henderson for his comments.