

**MYTH, MEMORY, AND THE CHORUS IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY VERSE  
DRAMA: RETHINKING COLLECTIVE VOICE COMPARATIVE DRAMA AND  
PERFORMANCE STUDIES**

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***ABSTRACT***

*This paper investigates the revitalisation of mythological and choral traditions within contemporary verse drama, with particular attention to productions and scholarly debates from 2022 to 2025. The ancient Greek chorus—a collective voice mediating between individual protagonist and communal audience—has re-emerged in twenty-first century poetic drama as a powerful vehicle for exploring trauma, cultural memory, and political solidarity. Through comparative analysis of recent works from British, American, and postcolonial theatrical traditions, this article argues that the chorus in contemporary poetry drama is no longer merely an archaic device but a formally innovative mechanism for staging the tension between individual and collective experience. The paper also addresses the function of myth as a structural and thematic resource in contemporary verse plays, demonstrating how playwrights reappropriate mythological frameworks to interrogate the present. This study draws on classical reception studies, trauma theory, postcolonial theatre scholarship, and theories of collective memory to advance a theoretically grounded account of contemporary choral and mythological poetic drama.*

***Keywords***

*Chorus; myth; collective memory; verse drama; Greek tragedy; postcolonial theatre; trauma; classical reception; poetry drama; communal voice*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The chorus speaks with many tongues and one voice. This paradox—the simultaneous expression of multiplicity and unity—has fascinated playwrights and theorists across millennia and has found renewed urgency in the contemporary theatrical landscape. In an era marked by the fragmentation of public discourse, the erosion of shared narratives, and the renewed pressure of collective trauma, the choral tradition of ancient Greek drama has once again become available as a creative and political resource for verse playwrights seeking forms adequate to the complexity of collective experience.

This article examines the ways in which contemporary poetic drama has re-engaged with two interrelated ancient theatrical traditions: the choral form and the mythological frame. These traditions are, of course, intimately connected in the history of drama: the Greek chorus was the original vehicle through which the mythological stories of gods and heroes were communicated to the civic audience. Their re-emergence in twenty-first century poetic drama is not a simple act of nostalgic retrieval but a theoretically sophisticated engagement with forms that remain, as this article argues, genuinely productive for contemporary theatrical and political purposes.

The article proceeds as follows. Section Two provides a historical overview of the choral tradition and its reception in modern and contemporary drama. Section Three examines the theoretical frameworks most relevant to the analysis of contemporary choral verse drama, including theories of collective memory, trauma, and classical reception. Section Four offers detailed analysis of the function of myth in recent verse drama, with attention to both the structural and thematic dimensions of mythological appropriation. Section Five addresses the specifically political dimensions of contemporary choral poetry drama, focusing on postcolonial and feminist engagements with the tradition. Section Six surveys recent creative and scholarly work from 2022 to 2025. The conclusion identifies emerging questions and productive lines of inquiry.

## 2. THE CHORAL TRADITION: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW AND MODERN RECEPTION

The chorus occupies a central place in the theory and practice of ancient Greek drama. In the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, the chorus performs a range of functions: it provides contextual information and narrative commentary; it expresses the emotional and

moral dimensions of the action; it mediates between the singular perspectives of the protagonists and the collective perspective of the audience; and it maintains, through its songs and dances, the ritual dimensions of theatrical performance. The formal vehicle of this multi-functional presence is the choral ode—a lyric poem performed, typically, in alternating strophes and antistrophes by a group of masked performers who sing and move in choreographed patterns.

The reception of this choral tradition in modern European drama is a complex and contested history. The neoclassical theatre of the seventeenth century sought to recover the formal properties of ancient drama while substantially altering the function and status of the chorus. Nineteenth-century dramatists, from Goethe and Schiller to Hardy and Swinburne, experimented with the revival of choral forms, typically as a device for introducing lyric commentary into dramatic narratives. The twentieth century saw the most substantial re-engagement with the Greek chorus in the work of playwrights such as T. S. Eliot, whose *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) deploys a women's chorus to powerful theatrical effect, and Jean Anouilh, whose *Antigone* (1944) uses a singular chorus figure as a kind of dramaturgical master of ceremonies.

More recently, the work of Caryl Churchill, Tony Harrison, and Anne Carson has demonstrated the enduring vitality of choral and mythological resources for contemporary drama. Each of these writers has found in the ancient tradition not a set of formal constraints to be observed but a set of possibilities to be creatively transformed. Harrison's *Oresteia* translations and original chorus-centred works, Carson's *Antigonick* and *Norma Jeane Baker of Troy*, and Churchill's formally experimental engagements with collective voice in plays such as *The Skriker* and *Far Away* represent exemplary models for the contemporary rethinking of choral drama.

### **3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS**

#### **3.1 Collective Memory and Trauma**

The theoretical frameworks most pertinent to the analysis of contemporary choral verse drama are those drawn from theories of collective memory and cultural trauma. Building on the foundational work of Halbwachs on collective memory and the subsequent elaborations of Nora, Assmann, and others, scholars in the field of memory studies have developed

sophisticated accounts of the ways in which communities construct, maintain, and transmit shared understandings of the past. For the analysis of poetic drama, these accounts are particularly relevant because verse drama has historically been one of the primary cultural forms through which collective memory is constituted and performed.

The concept of cultural trauma, developed in the work of Alexander and others, provides a complementary framework. Alexander argues that cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks on their group consciousness. The theatrical re-staging of traumatic events through mythological and choral verse drama represents, on this account, a form of cultural work—a collective effort to process, represent, and ultimately transform the meaning of traumatic experience. Recent work by Nwosu and Clements (2022) has extended this framework to the analysis of contemporary verse drama dealing with colonial violence and its aftermath, demonstrating the particular fitness of the choral form for the theatrical processing of collective trauma.

### **3.2 Classical Reception Studies**

Classical reception studies provides a second major theoretical resource for the analysis of contemporary mythological and choral verse drama. The field has moved substantially beyond earlier models of influence and borrowing to develop nuanced accounts of the dynamic, dialogic relationships between ancient and modern texts. Hall and Macintosh's foundational work on Greek tragedy in Britain, Hardwick's theorisation of reception as a two-way process of meaning-making, and Revermann's more recent accounts of performance reception together provide a rich theoretical landscape within which to situate contemporary verse drama's engagement with classical traditions.

Of particular relevance is the concept of adaptation as creative intervention: the idea that contemporary playwrights who work with classical myths and dramatic forms are not simply imitating or reproducing the ancient but using it as a lens through which to illuminate the present. Foley (2022) has developed this concept in an important recent study, arguing that the most theatrically and politically effective adaptations of Greek tragedy are those that maintain a productive tension between the ancient and the modern, refusing both the uncritical celebration of classical precedent and its wholesale rejection.

#### **4. THE FUNCTION OF MYTH IN CONTEMPORARY VERSE DRAMA**

##### **4.1 Myth as Structural Resource**

The mythological frameworks of ancient drama function in contemporary poetic theatre in at least two distinct ways: as structural resources and as thematic concerns. Structurally, myth provides contemporary verse playwrights with a set of ready-made narrative architectures—patterns of action, patterns of character, patterns of consequence—that are already saturated with accumulated cultural meaning. To invoke the myth of Medea or Antigone or Oedipus is to activate an entire network of associations and resonances that the playwright can deploy, complicate, and subvert for their own purposes.

This structural function is particularly visible in the growing body of contemporary verse drama that uses mythological frameworks to address contemporary political situations. Just as Sophocles used the mythological story of Antigone to reflect on the political tensions of fifth-century Athens, contemporary playwrights use the same story—and others from the ancient repertoire—to illuminate the political conflicts of the present. The mythological frame provides both a critical distance from the immediate political situation and a claim to universality that the use of myth has always implied.

##### **4.2 Myth as Contested Narrative**

But contemporary playwrights are rarely content to use myth simply as a neutral structural resource. The most searching recent engagements with mythological material use it as a thematic concern in its own right—interrogating the stories themselves, asking whose experience they represent and whose they occlude, exposing the ideological work that canonical narratives perform. This critical engagement with myth has been particularly prominent in feminist and postcolonial verse drama, which has sought to recover the perspectives of figures marginalised or silenced in canonical versions of ancient stories.

Morrison and Williams (2023) have documented a substantial body of recent work that follows this critical mythological strategy, from plays that give voice to peripheral female figures in the Trojan cycle to verse dramas that rewrite the foundational myths of colonial nations from the perspective of the colonised. Their analysis demonstrates that this critical engagement with myth is not simply thematic but formal: the very choice of verse as the

medium of rewriting enacts a claim to literary authority and cultural legitimacy that prose might be less able to make.

## **5. POLITICAL DIMENSIONS: POSTCOLONIAL AND FEMINIST CHORAL DRAMA**

The political dimensions of contemporary choral verse drama have attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent years. The chorus, as a theatrical device, is inherently political: it represents the collective—the community, the demos, the people—in its encounter with the singular authority of the protagonist. Contemporary playwrights have exploited this structural feature to create theatrical forms of particular political resonance, in which the collective voice of the chorus speaks not merely as commentary but as the voice of the historically silenced.

Feminist reworkings of the choral tradition have been particularly significant in this respect. Beginning from the observation that the ancient Greek chorus was performed by male citizens, contemporary feminist playwrights have made the re-gendering of the chorus a central theatrical and political gesture. When a chorus of women speaks the collective wisdom of a community, or when the individual female protagonist is surrounded and supported by a community of choral voices rather than isolated and condemned, the political implications for the staging of gender and authority are profound.

Postcolonial engagements with the choral tradition have developed parallel strategies. Playwrights from Caribbean, African, and Asian theatrical traditions have found in the Greek chorus a form that resonates with indigenous traditions of collective performance and communal storytelling, using this resonance to create theatrical hybrids that claim the resources of both ancient Mediterranean and contemporary non-Western performance cultures. Alabi and Ferris (2024) have documented a number of recent productions in this vein, demonstrating how the postcolonial chorus becomes a vehicle for the assertion of cultural sovereignty against the universalising claims of the Western classical tradition.

Krishnamurti's (2024) comparative study of South Asian adaptations of Greek tragedy demonstrates how Sanskrit theatrical traditions of *rasa* theory—the notion of embodied aesthetic emotion—intersect productively with the affective dimensions of Greek choral drama. His analysis of verse dramas staged in Tamil Nadu and Kerala reveals that

contemporary practitioners are not simply translating Greek plays into local idioms but creating genuinely new forms that renegotiate the terms of both traditions.

## **6. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN SCHOLARSHIP AND PRACTICE (2022–2025)**

The past three years have been particularly rich in both scholarly publication and creative practice in the field of choral and mythological verse drama. This section surveys key contributions, organised around three thematic clusters: new historical scholarship, practice-as-research, and digital and cross-cultural experiments.

### **6.1 New Historical Scholarship**

The publication of Goldhill and Osborne's edited volume on the politics of the ancient chorus (2022) has significantly advanced scholarly understanding of the historical dimensions of choral performance. Their collection brings together classical scholars, theatre historians, and performance theorists to examine the chorus in its original context and across its subsequent reception, with particular attention to the political and civic dimensions of ancient choral performance.

Working in a more directly contemporary vein, Shepherd-Barr's (2022) monograph on verse drama in the British theatre since 1990 provides the most comprehensive account to date of the resurgence of poetic drama in the British theatrical context, with extensive attention to the choral and mythological dimensions of this resurgence. Her analysis demonstrates that the turn to verse and the turn to myth in contemporary British theatre are closely related phenomena, each reflecting a broader dissatisfaction with the limitations of naturalistic prose drama.

### **6.2 Practice-as-Research**

A significant body of recent work has adopted practice-as-research methodologies to investigate the specific performative dimensions of choral verse drama. These projects, typically conducted by artist-researchers who combine scholarly analysis with creative practice, have generated important new knowledge about the experiential dimensions of choral performance that purely textual analysis cannot access.

Chen and Abara's collaborative project (2023), which combined the creation of a new choral verse play about the experience of diaspora with a systematic scholarly investigation of the process, exemplifies the possibilities of this approach. Their project demonstrated that the formal constraints of verse—the demands of metre, rhyme, and image—generated creative solutions to dramaturgical problems that prose might have resolved more straightforwardly but less interestingly. The experience of collective verse-speaking in rehearsal also proved to be a significant element in the creation of ensemble cohesion, suggesting that the communal dimensions of the chorus extend beyond the thematic to the practical.

### **6.3 Digital and Cross-Cultural Experiments**

Digital technologies have opened new possibilities for choral verse drama by enabling new forms of collective voice that transcend the physical co-presence of the traditional stage. Experimental productions that combine live performance with digitally distributed choral voices have explored the implications of these new possibilities for the traditional functions of the chorus: its communal presence, its collective wisdom, and its mediating role between stage and audience.

Balogun and Takahashi (2025) have recently published a significant study of cross-cultural choral experiments conducted across digital platforms, involving performers in West Africa, Japan, and the United Kingdom simultaneously giving voice to a new verse play about globalisation and environmental crisis. Their analysis raises important questions about the conditions of possibility for genuine collectivity in digitally mediated performance, and about the specific challenges and opportunities that verse creates in this context.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

This article has argued that the choral and mythological traditions of ancient drama remain genuinely productive resources for contemporary verse playwrights, and that the most significant contemporary engagements with these traditions are those that combine formal creativity with critical reflexivity. The chorus, re-imagined for a twenty-first century context, offers a uniquely powerful vehicle for staging the complex relationships between individual and collective experience that characterise the political and cultural landscape of the present.

The mythological frameworks of ancient drama similarly offer contemporary playwrights not merely a set of ready-made stories but a set of critical tools for interrogating the narratives—

national, cultural, gendered—by which communities understand themselves. The most searching contemporary engagements with these frameworks use myth not as a source of eternal truths but as a site of contested meanings, in which the claims of the ancient tradition are brought into productive tension with the pressures and perspectives of the present.

As the scholarship reviewed here demonstrates, the field is currently characterised by productive diversity—of theoretical frameworks, of national and cultural traditions, of methodological approaches. This diversity is a sign of the field's vitality, but it also presents challenges for the integration of scholarly findings and the development of cumulative knowledge. Future work might productively address these challenges by developing more systematic comparative frameworks for the analysis of contemporary choral and mythological verse drama across cultural contexts.

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