Women front and centre: Revisiting the Greek chorus in Kae Tempest's *Paradise* and Lucy Kirkwood's *Maryland*

Sara Soncini (Università di Pisa)

Abstract: As they grapple with the devastating impact of events such as the refugee crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic on our very sense of a human collectivity, writers are turning with growing frequency to chorus and choric practices in order to reflect on the meaning of 'being-in-common'. This article looks at the way the ancient Greek chorus has been refunctioned and politicised in Kae Tempest's *Paradise* and Lucy Kirkwood's *Maryland*. Both plays were produced in 2021, in the immediate wake of the lockdowns. Tempest's *Paradise* is a full-blown adaptation of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* which was presented at the Olivier, the largest stage at the National Theatre in London, in a high-profile production directed by Ian Rickson. *Maryland* is a contemporary play about violence against women hosting a modern-day chorus of Furies: Kirkwood wrote her short protest piece in two days only and sent it to the Royal Court Theatre for a snap production as a script-in-hand performance. Beyond their evident differences, both projects place a female chorus centre stage and use it to examine the contradictory poles of individuality and communality in our increasingly fragmented civic space. Through their dialogue with the Greeks, Tempest and Kirkwood revive and expand the form of the community chorus in order to explore its possibilities as an instrument of personal and political empowerment, thereby rising to what they clearly see as a social as much as a theatrical challenge.

Résumé : Alors qu'ils sont confrontés à l'impact dévastateur que peuvent avoir des événements tels que la crise des réfugiés et les pandémies de Covid-19 sur notre sens même de la collectivité humaine, les écrivains se tournent de plus en plus souvent vers le chœur et les pratiques choriques afin de réfléchir à la signification de l' « être-en-commun ». Cet article examine la manière dont le chœur grec antique a acquis une nouvelle fonction et s'est trouvé à nouveau politisé dans *Paradise* de Kae Tempest et *Maryland* de Lucy Kirkwood. Les deux

pièces ont été produites en 2021, juste après la fin des confinements imposés au Royaume-Uni. *Paradise* est une adaptation du *Philoctète* de Sophocle, elle se revendique comme telle. La pièce a été créée à l'Olivier, la plus grande scène du National Theatre de Londres, dans une mise en scène très remarquée de Ian Rickson. *Maryland* est une pièce contemporaine sur les violences faites aux femmes, qui met en scène un chœur de furies des temps modernes ; Kirkwood a écrit cette courte pièce de théâtre contestataire en deux jours seulement et l'a envoyée au Royal Court Theatre afin qu'elle soit montée très rapidement, les acteurs jouant le texte à la main. Au-delà de leurs différences évidentes, les deux projets placent un chœur de femmes au centre de la scène et l'utilisent pour examiner les pôles contradictoires de l'individualité et de la communauté dans notre espace civique de plus en plus fragmenté. Grâce à leur dialogue avec les Grecs, Tempest et Kirkwood font revivre la forme du chœur communautaire en la développant afin d'explorer ses potentialités en tant qu'instrument d'autonomisation personnelle et politique, relevant ainsi ce qu'iels considèrent clairement comme un défi social autant que théâtral.

Keywords: Kirkwood, Lucy; *Maryland*; Tempest, Kae; *Paradise*; adaptation; chorus; Greek drama; community theatre; feminist theatre; interventionist theatre

Mots clés : Kirkwood, Lucy ; *Maryland* ; Tempest, Kae ; *Paradise* ; adaptation ; chœur ; théâtre antique ; théâtre communautaire ; théâtre féministe ; théâtre d'intervention

Over the last few decades or so, choruses have emerged as a central formal feature of contemporary theatre practice in Britain and elsewhere. While partly traceable to the exploration of ancient Greek dramaturgical structures, chorus techniques and processes are now common in non-Greek productions and they have come to epitomise the paradigm shift towards devised physical theatre in contemporary

theatre-making (Eastman). On the new writing front, too, the appropriation of choric structures has risen to a chief instrument of (post-) dramatic innovation, providing playwrights with a viable alternative to the representational model grounded in intersubjective dialogue – a move typified, to mention but one prominent case, by Sarah Kane's last two plays, *Crave* (1998) and *4.48 Psychosis* (2000). By contrast, and somewhat paradoxically, the role and space of chorus have considerably shrunk in modern-day revivals of Greek drama. With its growing sense of precariousness, vulnerability and impending catastrophe, our current age of permacrisis may well have turned into a "golden age" (Wallace 2) for creative engagements with the tragic canon; yet with a few notable exceptions, contemporary productions of Greek plays often appear at a loss to accommodate this most distinctive dramaturgical element of the tragic tradition. When they are not omitted altogether, choric interventions are ordinarily treated as little more than interludes (Meineck 356), or in fact inconvenient interruptions, between the 'core' scenes played by the principal actors. With writers and adaptors, likewise, there has been a distinct tendency in the UK to treat this "most unfamiliar feature of Greek tragedy" (Laera 64) as a cumbersome presence to be replaced or outright removed in order to suit changing aesthetic and ideological concerns. In this context, the 'problem' of the chorus has been typically ascribed to a perceived "absence of communality in Western European culture" (Eastman 372)[1] and the attendant discomfort with a formal device that nowadays feels like an obsolete and fundamentally inert historical residue.

The new work considered in this paper attests to a significant departure from this general trend, perhaps showing that the time is ripe for a return of the chorus to its original conceptual as well as civic centrality. This development has arguably been driven by the impact of events such as the refugee crisis and the coronavirus pandemic on our very notion of 'community', and is informed by choric practices evolved within a broad spectrum of participatory and/or interventionist theatre projects, sometimes specifically as a way of addressing those crises. In particular, this paper discusses two plays produced in 2021, in the immediate wake of the Covid-19 lockdowns, and highlights a

set of discursive tools deployed by their authors in order to refunction and politicise the Greek chorus. Kae Tempest's *Paradise* is a full-blown adaptation of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* that was presented at the Olivier, the largest stage at the National Theatre in London, in a high-profile production directed by Ian Rickson. Lucy Kirkwood's *Maryland* is a contemporary play about violence against women hosting a modernised chorus of Furies; the dramatist wrote her short protest piece in two days only and sent it to the Royal Court Theatre for a snap production as a script-in-hand performance. Beyond their evident differences, both projects seek to infuse new life into the tragic chorus by refiguring it as a female community chorus and exploring its possibilities as a means of personal as well as political empowerment. Through their dialogue with the Greeks, Tempest and Kirkwood place the chorus centre stage and use it to reflect on the contradictory poles of individuality and communality in our increasingly fragmented civic space, thereby rising to what they clearly see as a social as much as a theatrical challenge.

No (wo)man is an island

Unlike her earlier 'epic' takes on Greek myth – best exemplified by her award-winning 'spoken story', *Brand New Ancients* (2012), and the poetry collection *Hold Your Own* (2013) – Kae Tempest's first foray into classical culture as a playwright originated from a commission by Ian Rickson to adapt Sophocles' *Philoctetes* for a production at the National Theatre. Implicit in the director's invitation to provide a "cover version" of this seldom-performed tragedy was his confidence in Tempest's rare and distinctive talent as a poet, spoken-word performer and recording artist to creatively confront the challenges involved in bringing Greek tragedy to a modern audience. Though his work has been prevalently defined by his productions of modern and contemporary drama, Rickson had already tried his hand at Sophocles by staging Frank McGuinness's adaptation of *Electra* at the Young Vic in 2014, and was by his own account aware of the chorus as a major pitfall with present-day revivals ("Ian Rickson and Kae Tempest").

One common difficulty, that of "finding an authentic British voice for writing and translating chorus" (Eastman 372), was easily overcome thanks to the powerful orality of Tempest's unique poetic style; but it is especially the writer's *dramaturgical* solution to the 'problem' of the chorus that holds special significance for my discussion. Tempest's bold way of dealing with the issue is to feminise Sophocles' chorus, put it front and centre, and give it primacy over the main play as the structural and conceptual heart of *Paradise*.

Sophocles' tale of war, militarism and trauma has no space for women: the play features a central male trio – Philoctetes, the famed archer, and Odysseus and Neoptolemus, on a mission to Lemnos in order to bring back to battle the marooned soldier so the Greeks can capture Troy – and a male chorus of Neoptolemus' crewmembers. As a way of redressing the balance, Tempest's version of *Philoctetes* has an all-female cast. Whereas the decision to have women play the three male principals only emerged during rehearsals, Tempest ruled from the very start that the chorus of Greek sailors was to be replaced by a group of local women who live in a camp adjacent to Philoctetes' cave. The play does not make it clear whether the women – nine in all – are native to the island or just its long-time residents; what matters is that they exist as a community prior to the arrival of Sophocles' characters. Subverting the common perception of the chorus as a foreign body on the contemporary stage, *Paradise* repositions the choral group as the play's insiders and demotes the tragic heroes to their uninvited guests.[2] While it takes a while for the mythical heroes to arrive, the women are on stage even before the performance formally begins, going about their daily chores, making tea, or simply hanging around in what is clearly marked as *their* space. By the time Odysseus and Neoptolemus enter and the tragic plot starts to unravel, the audience have long been acquainted with the community of women who have made this place their home. The island on which the chorus and the titular character are stuck, apparently since time immemorial, is a far cry from the "paradise" announced by the play's title: "*a bleak beach, rubbish-strewn, still in chaos from a huge wave that broke some years before*" (*Paradise*: 1), according to the opening stage direction. Both setting and dialogue

concur in characterising the female chorus as survivors from various calamities, past and present: the seemingly endless Trojan war and the permanent state of belligerence that has come to mark our current global age; literal as well as metaphorical tsunamis – conflicts, poverty, climate change – resulting in forced displacement. Expanding on the mythical story, where Philoctetes' comrades-in-arms have left him on a desert island to get rid of the stench from his festering wound, *Paradise* refigures Lemnos as a dumping ground for a whole array of exported waste: household rubbish alongside prisoners, war victims and forgotten refugees.

Tempest's dramaturgy heightens the tension between individuality and chorality by adding a gender dimension to Philoctetes' segregation. The women who inhabit the camp have managed to reconstruct a community based on new alliances of care out of the "landfill life" (11) they have been forced into. The chorus's resilient communality finds a symbolic correlative, on stage, in the salvaged and beachcombed props that have gone into making the women's new home: objects that have been washed ashore and that they have recycled, rebooted and repurposed to create a space of shared domesticity. Although he, too, shares the women's fate as dislocated, displaced 'rubbish' stranded on the island, Philoctetes remains stubbornly locked in his toxic isolation, rejecting their offer of food and medicine and even refusing to talk to them. Cross-gender casting throws into sharp relief the hero's tragic imprisonment in a performance of masculinity and his ironic failure to perceive himself as united in a common plight with the female refugees. The other male characters similarly antagonise the chorus on gender grounds, also to ironic effect. Upon their arrival on the beach, Odysseus instructs young Neoptolemus to ignore the women who live there and stare at the newly arrived strangers, lest his acknowledgement of the chorus be taken for a sign of "weakness" (13). Initially, and in keeping with tragic convention, the women reposition themselves as spectators. Having ruled out the option of giving place to the scene initiated by the two intruders – "Why should *I* move? Why can't they move?" (20) – the chorus have no choice but to listen to their "tedious" (20) expository dialogue. Soon enough, however,

the female onlookers begin to encroach upon the heroes' inset drama and, indeed, to actively author it by feeding lines to the actors in the form of an echo that Neoptolemus and Odysseus unwittingly pick up and repeat. In addition to assuming authorial prerogatives, Tempest's chorus shows from the very start a clear metadramatic awareness of its flagrant trespass of the boundaries prescribed by the role, thereby leaving no doubt about its structural as well as ontological primacy over the play's male principals.

Tempest's female ensemble is indeed defined by this refusal to stay tied to its conventional position as a framing device. Throughout the performance, the women prove a remarkably multi-tasking chorus, variously acting as spectators, commentators, narrators and prompters, as well as characters in their own right. Among the various barriers they cross, the latter in particular signals a radical discontinuity with the classical model. As Renaud Gagné and Marianne Govers Hopman observe, the Greek chorus is "never just one chorus" but has a remarkably fluid status, constantly shifting between "an intra-dramatic identity as a fictional group of slaves, soldiers, or captive women, and an extra-dramatic identity as a ritual, civic, and institutionalised collective performing at the festival of Dionysos" (1, 27). For all its oscillations, however, the ancient chorus invariably embodies a collective voice that remains clearly distinct from the emphatically individual voice of the characters; indeed, "no member of the audience would ever confuse the choral ensemble and the cast of characters" (ibid. 6-7). In *Paradise*, by contrast, this distinction no longer obtains. Each member of the female chorus has a name, a unique identity and, most importantly, a story to tell; although we see them acting, and re-acting, as a community, in Tempest's own words "each of those characters has as much of a hero's quest" (Wyver) as Philoctetes, Odysseus and Neoptolemus. The women's narratives of war, suffering and displacement are implanted into the central drama, offering a discursive equivalent for their physical takeover of stage space while, in parallel, stretching the boundaries of choral identity to accommodate both a collective and an individual voice.

With its concomitant feminisation, centralisation and individuation of the chorus, Tempest's version of *Philoctetes* appears aligned with the growing number of participatory theatre projects that have mobilised Greek drama as a vehicle for giving voice to refugees and granting them a form of representational citizenship on stage and in the public sphere. The fictional chorus of female refugees in *Paradise* proclaims on more than one level its kinship with the actual community choruses that have come to hallmark this new breed of civically and politically minded reproductions of classical tragedies.[3] While the condition of uprootedness is often thematised in the Greek canon, the recent spate of refugee-centred productions show a distinct preference for plays that entrust a *female* chorus with eliciting an ethical and empathetic response to the plight of displaced people seeking protection: with their choruses of women who have been driven into homelessness by war or tyranny, Aeschylus' *Supplices* and Euripides' *Hecuba* and *Troades* have been by far the most frequently revived plays to date in this context. In keeping with their community-oriented approach, these theatrical interventions embrace the centrality of chorus and more often than not expand its ranks as a way of signifying representativeness, civic participation and social empowerment. To mention but two paradigmatic examples, *Syria Trojan Women*, a version of the Euripidean tragedy produced in Amman, Jordan in 2013, accommodated as many as fifty women refugees from nearby Za'atari camp;[4] and the same number of female chorus members crowded the Edinburgh Lyceum stage when David Greig's adaptation of *The Suppliant Women* opened there in 2016. Taking inspiration from Greek original practices, in Greig's version the dark-skinned strangers that make up Aeschylus' chorus of Danaids were recruited from the local community in Edinburgh and, later, in each city of the UK tour, resulting in a significant broadening of citizen participation. For participants and spectators alike, the meaning was quite clear: the refugee crisis implicated them all and it was ethically and politically imperative that they confront it as a community.

In general, however, it has been more common to reserve the chorus for refugee participation, and use it to encourage healing and

recognition for those involved: the fictional community chorus in *Paradise* celebrates precisely this twofold potentiality. This also goes some way towards accounting for the overall prevalence of all-female collectives in these projects. In the ancient Greek canon, it is typically female choruses that are tasked with "offer[ing] a broader vision of cultural commonalities" as well as "reconstitut[ing] a kind of fragile and beleaguered community, often a community based on ritual, in the face of physical threats, slavery, or a shattered world that makes little sense" (Foley 2003: 23). In *Syria Trojan Women*, the chorus is envisaged as a means for overcoming the isolation that comes with displacement, and as a much-needed public platform to ensure that refugee voices are no longer silenced or ignored: "I have a scream I want the whole world to hear", as one cast member pithily stated.[5]

While clearly placing value on the choral ensemble as a source of empowerment and enhanced resonance, however, the individuality of the performers is also of vital importance in these grassroots engagements with classical tragedy. In her discussion of "the problem of the chorus", Laera ventures a political explanation for the perceived discomfort of contemporary directors with a collective voice or body that, in her view, is susceptible to "raise the all too familiar spectres of Europe's totalitarian past" (64). Within the community projects that *Paradise* appears to reference, however, the concerns raised by this otherwise strategic force multiplier are arguably of a more pressing and current nature. Today, the representation of refugees as a large, visually imposing and homogeneous group is potentially at risk of replicating, or even validating, their prevalent framing as an indistinct mass in public and media discourse. In other words, the very same choric device that enables participants to make their voice heard could actually end up undermining the ethical and political rationale for the theatre-makers' mobilisation of narrative performativity in these reworkings of ancient Greek drama, namely, that of asserting the right of refugees to be acknowledged and respected as human beings. As a consequence, the choric practices evolved within this context are very careful to balance commonality with individuality; in *Syria Trojan Women*, to return to this highly representative example, the women's

personal stories of war and involuntary exile are incorporated into the Euripidean chorus, with the manifest intention of spotlighting the unique identity of each chorus member.

As discussed above, the same gesture informs the dramaturgy of *Paradise*. The members of its female refugee chorus are elevated to the status of characters for whom storytelling is both a community-building ritual and a way of countering the displacement as well as disposability of their bodies, lives and memories, as clearly evidenced by Tempest's refiguring of the desert island as a dumping site. In the play, the task of weaving the women's individual stories into a common tapestry rests with Auntie, the elderly of the chorus and the guardian of collective memory. Tempest lends her unmistakable poetic voice to this visionary, shamanic matriarch whose rhapsodic chant fills the opening and closing moments of the performance. For this incarnation of the chorus as the expression of collective identity, the National Theatre production relied on the special participation of Zimbabwe-born singer and songwriter Eska. When her riveting vocalisation of Auntie's 'state-of-the-nation' narratives filled the vastness of the Olivier auditorium, the line between the participatory act dramatised in the play and the audience who had gathered to watch it became visibly and purposefully blurred. As the *representation* of a community chorus, however, Tempest's reworking clearly lacks the authenticity which is instead an essential component of the participatory practices it reproduces. Unlike *Paradise*, the theatrical interventions detailed above are marked by an ethico-political investment in the presence of real refugee voices and bodies: "For once, we will not have a mediator; we will stand there in front of an audience and tell it", as a member of the *Syria Trojan Women* collective announced in a blog entry on the project's website ("The Trojan Women Project"). Still, when *Paradise* opened at the National in August 2021, after a long delay due to the Covid-19 pandemic, one could not fail to see some striking continuities between the experience of refuge that is fictionally mediated by the play's female chorus and the reality of the audience attending the performance. Tempest's adaptation of *Philoctetes* was the first

full capacity show at the National after almost two years, marking a return to normal that, as is well known to theatregoers everywhere, felt at once exhilarating and awkward after those long months of social distancing. Philoctetes' tale of segregation, woundedness and difficult healing resonated powerfully with the post-lockdown moment. Beyond all-important distinctions to be made, the image of a group of individuals hit by a tsunami and slowly learning to come to terms with a whole new sense of precarity and vulnerability also inevitably struck a chord with Tempest's audience. In the wake of two lockdowns, it seemed strange, but incredibly important, to be once more able to gather at a live performance in a public space and participate in what felt, in such a heightened, palpable way, a civic ritual. That this was happening in order to watch a play that portrayed the symbolic occupation of the National Theatre's largest stage by a group of female refugees, and used that very central cultural institution to denounce Britain as a "Hell" (116) mired in violence, racism and austerity, further added to the perception of theatre as a vital participatory act whereby we define, and potentially redefine, our human community. By reimagining the Greek chorus in order to draw attention to this possibility, Tempest has offered a template for a task that continues to feel more urgent than ever.

The sound of Fury

A howl, more than a play: this is how Lucy Kirkwood defined the 30-minute protest piece in which she gave vent to the mounting horror, disbelief and rage shared by many as story after story of shocking violence against women came to light during 2021 (Akbar 2021). The brutal killings of Nicole Smallman and Bibaa Henry, Sarah Everard, and Sabina Nessa – all of which are alluded to in *Maryland* – removed any extant doubt about a seemingly unshakable culture of gender-based violence abetted by systemic sexism and, in more than one case, racism.[6] Kirkwood banged out the script in two days in late September 2021, after Nessa's body was found covered with leaves in the park where she had been killed by a stranger nearly 24 hours

earlier. By early October, *Maryland* was already playing at the Royal Court Theatre as a script-in-hand performance; after a sold-out three-week run, the text was licensed free of charge to any theatre company or drama training organisation that wished to stage their own reading, resulting in forty different productions of *Maryland* being presented across the UK throughout the autumn. These methods of staging and dissemination reflected the deep-felt urgency of a collective response to what was beginning to look like a veritable epidemic of violence against women.[7] In some respects *Maryland* is not, properly speaking, a rapid-response play: Kirkwood herself, pointing to the vast collection of lived experiences gathered in it – partly her own, partly known via direct acquaintance or through the news media – has confirmed that the idea had been in her head for years. The play's form, however, was directly catalysed by the rage-filled cultural moment in which the play was produced, and by a concomitant, pressing need to harness that anger for political resistance and social change. As the dramatist has explained,

> The play came from a desire to make a space to protest these atrocities, and a crucible to hold my abject horror and exhaustion that women are a) not safe on our streets and b) cannot rely on the forces of law and order to protect or even give their dead bodies the most basic levels of respect, and allow an audience to bring their own protest, their own horror, their own exhaustion, into that crucible, rather than sitting alone and atomised with it. (Angel-Perez and Rousseau 243)

With *Maryland*, Kirkwood wanted to carry into the theatre the feeling shared by the thousands of women who grieved and protested together at Sarah Everard's vigil and similar events that followed in its wake; significantly, her method of choice was to place a modern-day chorus of Furies at the heart of the play and task it with extending and amplifying this empowering moment of emotional outburst.

The tension between individuality and communality constitutes the thematic and structural mainstay of *Maryland*. The play develops along two axes: a narrative action consisting of realistic scenes set in a police station where two rape victims go through the process of reporting the crime; and an accompanying commentary by a chorus

of Furies. The first storyline spotlights systemic violence and the way it thrives on women's isolation and actively enforces it. For DC Moody, the chief preoccupation is not to bring the perpetrators to justice but to keep the two women apart and prevent them from sharing their experience. The practical reason for this is that the putative representative of law and order is the actual rapist and he is trying to avoid identification; but the policeman's behaviour takes on paradigmatic meaning with regard to the mechanism that the play denounces. Along the same lines, the coincidence whereby both rape victims are called Mary becomes the target of repeated inappropriate jokes by DC Moody, perhaps betraying a nervousness about the potential consequences for the system he stands for if these Marys were to break their isolation and start acting as a group. On leaving the police station late at night, the second Mary is forced into the police car by her aggressor; the next time we see her, after a very short blackout, she has gone to fill the ranks of the Furies – leading us to conclude that the members of the chorus are also dead, that they have suffered the same fate (after all, the avenging goddesses of Greek drama were originally conceived as the ghosts of the murdered), and in all probability they go by the same name of Mary, like every other female character seen or mentioned in the play. For the audience, the message could not be clearer: the time for women to come together is now.

This call to arms is framed, dramaturgically, as the process of the chorus taking possession of the play's discursive as well as physical space. The Furies quickly move from the role of onlookers described in the initial stage direction, to ever more frequent and substantial interloping in the action, down to exclusive ownership of the narrative in the final section, where the performance fully departs from the representational mode to become a collective protest chant. With mounting anger, the Furies reel off facts and figures about gender-based violence in direct audience address, counterpointing individual with unison delivery in a rallying cry that closes with the provocative question "What fresh hell do you need? / Before you are as angry as we are?" (*Maryland*: 18). In the Royal Court production,

the dramatist's mobilisation of chorus as a space for empowerment and activism was sustained through a number of strategic moves aimed at maximising resonance and representativeness. The communal nature of the project was highlighted by having a trio of female directors share responsibility for the play's staging. On the same principle, the chorus of Furies was played on a rotating basis by seven distinct ensembles of women from the community. The rolling cast was a step towards fulfilling Kirkwood's dream of having a mob-sized female chorus on stage: "*at least 3, 100 is better*" (2), is the writer's indication about the number of Furies. For the producers, this was a way of involving as many women as possible and thereby ensure diversity (Akbar). The chorus's ranks, moreover, were further and considerably swelled thanks to the broad dissemination favoured by licensing policies: each of the 40 local productions of *Maryland* UK-wide had a different, and often quite numerous, cast of community players. Through these multiplying female ensembles, *Maryland* paid homage to the original civic function of the ancient Greek chorus, externalising the principle of rotation which is at the heart of democratic participation, and in this case bespoke cycles of violence as well as the possibility of transcending them through forms of collective resistance.

The fact that the members of this expanding community chorus are specifically characterised as Furies, however, has significance beyond the play's more obvious acknowledgement of a long and ongoing history of violence against women. Seizing on the transformative power inherent in the reboot of past models, Kirkwood's chorus of contemporary Furies references its original Greek incarnation in order to bring added firepower to the play's attempt at reshaping an ethos of violence. The weaponisation of voice is central to Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, where the eponymous hero is tormented for his murder of Clytemnestra by the piercing scream of the vengeful Erinyes. In *Maryland*, the goddesses' scream finds an equivalent in the loud noise that, with growing frequency and intensity, replaces the words "raped" or "killed" in the chorus's lines:

FURIES. **and one in forty women have been [UNBEARABLE SOUND]**

and by [UNBEARABLE SOUND] we do not mean

a fumbled flirt

a misguided chat up

an unwanted hug

an overly familiar text message

being watched while we eat our icecream

a builder using us to demonstrate his heterosexuality to his work mates

all that snowflake shit

we mean

The [UNBEARABLE SOUND] *plays for 10 times its normal length.* (*Maryland*: 13-14; bold in original to indicate unison delivery)

On the page, the voice of women screaming in anger and pain and crying out for justice is textualised as an omission. The square brackets and capital letters in the script allude to a twofold process of redaction that is shown to be operative in the police scenes. On the one hand, the narrative involving the two Marys points the finger at a twisted system that protects perpetrators while putting victims in the dock. Since both women have reported a scar on the rapist's forehead, they are asked to identify the suspect in a photo array of nine men wearing identical beany hats: as DC Moody candidly admits, "if there was something distinctive about one of the suspects, we cover it up" (8), allegedly because an innocent man with the same distinguishing mark could be identified by mistake. The one physical feature that might help bring the culprit to justice is treated as sensitive information and conveniently obscured; conversely, victims must agree to bare their body and have photographs taken of their bruises in order to prove their trauma. Meanwhile, their voices are contained, trivialised, ignored, and more or less forcefully muted or censored: at

the same time as he warns the two Marys to refrain from talking to each other in order not to prejudice a trial, the police officer is quick to add "if it gets that far" (3). Indeed, *Maryland* insists, there can be little chance of justice for women in a culture that continues to place responsibility for sexual violence on the victims: on how they behave, or fail to behave, to secure that they 'stay safe'.

In performance, though, the Furies' unbearable sound tells a quite different story, and one that departs sharply from the classical source. The last play in Aeschylus' tragic cycle stages the taming of the vengeful Erinyes into the benign Eumenides, resulting in their effective silencing. Through Athena's intervention, Orestes is put to trial in Athens, but is finally acquitted of his crime of matricide thanks to the goddess's tie-breaking vote. The Furies' outrage at the verdict is placated through the offer of a home and a cult in the city they would otherwise have destroyed in retaliation; the chorus of Furies is solemnly conducted to a cave beneath the Aeropagus, and their place on stage is taken by a civic chorus of Athena's attendants who celebrate the onset of a new social order based on the rule of law. Knowing all too well that the gods have spectacularly failed to deliver upon their promise of justice, the modern-day Furies of *Maryland* are determined instead to remain front and centre and scream on. In performance, the very same blank that in the text indicates the Furies' obliteration creates a space for their collective howl to erupt: the repressed cry of female outrage returns, literally, with a vengeance.[8] The script offers multiple possibilities for realizing the Furies' terrifying scream on stage: "*The* [UNBEARABLE SOUND] *could be a recording that is played by an operator, or operated onstage by one of the* FURIES. *It could be the sound made by a physical action. It could be every* FURY *speaking in unison*." (10) The Royal Court production opted for a layered sound effect, a jolting, chilling crossover between a piercing metal screech, an ear-bleeding static noise, and a distorted human shriek: a choral scream that translated the omitted words "raped" and "killed" into a powerful, visceral sensation for those who listened.[9] With its penetrating, persisting vibration, the unbearable sound established an intense physical connection among the members of the audience as they processed the second implication of the textual

omission: we do not need to hear the words because we all know what they are. With each iteration of the sound, this shared knowledge about the magnitude of gender-based violence became an embodied experience, felt collectively. Through the Furies' wordless scream, *Maryland* creates an affective community that can turn redaction into reaction, counter politically crippling atomization, and promote solidarity, resistance and change.

Though in many respects traceable to a well-established tradition of feminist takes on ancient Greek drama (see Babbage), Kirkwood's and Tempest's very recent reboots are marked by their distinctive focus on the chorus as a tool for invigorating and politicising the temporary community that theatre makes possible. Through the female refugee ensemble that replaces Sophocles' crew of sailors, *Paradise* emphasises narrative performativity as a community-building ritual, in an evident attempt at blurring the divide between the participatory act fictionalised on stage and the spectators who have gathered to watch it. *Maryland* refunctions the ancient chorus as an echo chamber for the female voice, turning what others have seen as an obsolete formal device into a strategic theatrical weapon for liberating the Furies from their confinement in the cave and urging them to carry on the struggle. While significantly diverging in concept, form, and mode of production, these theatrical interventions into the classical canon project a common and deep-felt need to imagine new forms of collective response to the man-made hells in our world.

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1 This comment was made by Martin Crimp during a talk at the University of Oxford while accounting for his replacement of the chorus with three individual characters in *Cruel and Tender* (Young Vic, 2004), an adaptation of Sophocles' *Trachiniae* set during the War on Terror. Considering her extensive engagement with the Greek tragic tradition across her entire oeuvre, Marina Carr's view of the chorus as an intractable problem is even more indicative of a deeply rooted attitude among contemporary writers: "I have never seen a chorus work on stage, so I just get rid of them, or everyone is their own chorus" ("Marina Carr and Caitríona McLaughlin"). The ban has remained in place even after Carr broke with the customary relocation of her Greek-inspired plays to a contemporary Irish setting with *Hecuba* (RSC, 2015), where the story remains rooted in ancient times.

2 Discussing her choice, Tempest has specified that it was important for her "to have the citizens of the island, or the residents of the island, speaking out, rather than just (...) this great old play arriving on this stage and (...) doing its thing. I just thought it was kind of inexcusable to not have the residents of this place where this action is taking place also be acknowledged as being there." ("Ian Rickson and Kae Tempest")

3 See Wilmer 11-49 for a wide-ranging survey of productions and adaptations of this kind across Europe and beyond.

[4] Initially conceived as a therapeutic drama workshop and "an advocacy tool to highlight the plight of Syrian refugees" ("The Trojan Women Project"), the project soon gained considerable international resonance, especially thanks to Yasmin Fedda's award-winning documentary film, *Queens of Syria* (2014). With this new title and a much-reduced cast, the original stage production toured through the UK for a three-week run during the summer of 2016. As the then artistic director of London's Young Vic, where *Queens of Syria* made its first stop, Ian Rickson was instrumental in bringing off the British tour of the Syrian collective; shortly afterwards, the Young Vic went on to host *Now We Are Here*, a piece created by refugee writers in workshops with Rickson and other collaborators.

[5] This quotation appears as the central epigram of the production in the trailer of the film version ("Queens of Syria Trailer").

[6] Sarah Everard was raped and killed in Brixton in March 2021 by a Met police officer who abducted her under the guise of a fake arrest for breaking coronavirus restrictions. Sabina Nessa was sexually assaulted and murdered in September of the same year as she walked to meet a friend at a pub; her killer had a history of violence and had been flagged to police three days before the attack, but no action was taken. Sisters Nicole Smallman and Bibaa Henry were stabbed to death in Wembley in June 2020, during the first lockdown; police officers tasked with guarding the crime scene took selfies with the women's dead bodies and shared them with colleagues via WhatsApp. According to the victims' family, their ethnicity was a factor in the Met's slow search when the two sisters were reported missing. Inquiries into both types of police misconduct were still underway in 2021, when *Maryland* opened in London.

[7] Unlike what is mercifully happening with Covid-19, the death toll of this deeply ingrained virus shows no sign of abating. As I write this paper, in Italy, where I am based, we are reeling from the brutal killing of 22-year-old Giulia Cecchettin at the hands of her former boyfriend; while femicide cases continue to hit the headlines, the call to invest in prophylaxis continues to go largely unheeded.

[8] A similar notion of the age-long compression of the female voice and body eventually leading to a massive bang informs Ellie Kendrick's brilliant take on the Furies in her mutinous feminist cabaret, *Hole* (Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, 2018).

[9] This description is based on my personal recollection of the script-in-hand performance presented by the Royal Court Theatre at WOW (Women of the World) Festival in London in March 2022. It chimes with the details offered in Isabelle Stuart's very helpful account of the original run (Stuart).