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The Therapeutic Function of Dance in Ancient Greek Drama

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Abstract: The cathartic function of ancient Greek drama has been emphasized by Aristotle himself and has been interpreted by several modern researchers. He, in fact, argued that the ancient tragedy comes from the improvisations of the leaders of the dithyrambs, i.e. the hymns composed in honor of the god Dionysus. In this context, dance, which was an important part of both hymns and ancient tragedy, seems to have had a distinct role in the cathartic function of the latter. The purpose of the present study was to highlight the therapeutic function of dance in ancient Greek drama. From the study of the relevant sources (primary and secondary) it emerged that ancient tragedy functioned as a systemic method of psychotherapy, on the basis of which healing was achieved at the individual, family, social and political levels. More specifically, the therapeutic function of dance in ancient tragedy was primarily based on its close connection with the spectators and the universal participation of the latter in the tragic action. Also, it was shown that the balancing function of the dance of ancient tragedy lies in the formation of an inseparable relationship between the Apollonian and the Dionysian element, which compose the opposite aspects of the human existence. Finally, the healing effect of tragic dance seems not to have been limited to the spectators, but extended to those who actively participated in it.

Keywords: Dithyramb, Dance of Ancient Greek Drama, Katharsis, Therapy.

1. Introduction

It is well-known since Antiquity that the function of catharsis is associated with the ancient theatre, a fact especially obvious in the genre of ancient tragedy. In fact, according to modern researchers, the functions of catharsis and therapy pertaining to dance in the ancient tragedy crystallized into the very definition of tragedy by Aristotle, according to which "catharsis" means the completion of a process, which stimulates emotions, balances, harmonizes and engenders liberation and redemption from the afflictions of the soul (Lazou, 2004, p. 48).

The chorus in the *ancient tragedy* is the result of improvisation by the leaders of *dithyrambs*, claims Aristotle in his *Poetics* (1449 A, 9-15). Such leaders were considered as "therapists" under the command of god Dionysus (Lawler, 1984, p. 83). It appears that the chorus was a catalyst in the process of achieving the spectators' catharsis in the context of ancient tragedy. This is obviously due to the identification of the audience with the chorus. Nietzsche even argues that (2008, p. 96) through the medium of chorus in its primitive stage, in the primal tragedy, one Dionysian person mirrors oneself. Based on this perception, Lazou stresses that: […] *only someone in the particular situation of a mystic can be considered as participating in the experience of the chorus, i.e., someone who shares the lifestyle of the Dionysian person* (Lazou, 2020, p. 83).

The aim of the present study was to highlight the therapeutic function of dance and the chorus in the *ancient Greek drama*, by identifying those elements that contributed in creating its impact of balance and catharsis. The above aim was served through literature review of both primary (literary works by ancient Greek writers) and secondary sources. The search for sources in University libraries and online databases relied on the use of search engines and the combination of keywords both in Greek and English: "ancient Greek tragedy", "chorus in the ancient tragedy", "catharsis and ancient tragedy".

In the first part of the study, which is related to the *dithyrambic dances*, there is information on the name, origin and evolution of the dithyramb, the characteristics of dithyrambic dances, the dithyramb as initiation ceremony, the development of dithyrambic dances and their therapeutic function. The second and last part, which is dedicated to the *chorus of the ancient tragedy*, deals with the origins of ancient tragedy, the role of the chorus in ancient tragedy, its relation to the spectators and its therapeutic function.

2. Dithyrambic dances

2.1 Dithyramb: name, origin and evolution

Besides orgiastic dances of women acting under the influence of Dionysian frenzy (sacred or divine mania), there were also dances of male performed to honor Dionysus in his roles as god of fertility and of wine (Lawler, 1984, p. 81). One of the major *Dionysian dances* was the *dithyramb*, concurrently a devotional song in honor of god Dionysus. The name describes the god's double birth: derived from "di" and "thyra", meaning "a double door", it symbolizes the one who came to life through two doors: the womb of his mother and the thigh of his father (Harrison, 1995, p. 117). Consequently, *Dithyramb* was the name of Dionysus the *Diplogenes (of two origins)*, informs the chorus in *Bacchae* by Euripides (*Bacchae*, 526).

The name "dithyramb" also symbolizes the double nature of Dionysus: on the one hand, a god signaling the yearly rebirth of nature, a god for plants, animals and humans; on the other hand, a spirit of drunkenness (Harrison, 1995, p. 127). *Dithyramb* is the first and principal name attributed to Dionysus, followed by other names (*Bacchus*, *Evios*, *Bromius*, etc.) in the *Delphic Paean* celebrating his birthday in spring (Harrison, 1995, pp. 119-120). This epithet became the name of the ritual song repeated every winter by his worshippers in the orgiastic celebrations honoring him as the personification of natural powers, recounting his sufferings, his transformations, his death and resurrection (Harrison, 1995, pp. 122-123).

The *dithyramb* as the skillful evolution of orgiastic dances was intended for circle dance and accompanied by song (Lazou, 1989, p. 64). It is actually a performance with double syrinx accompaniment in the Phrygian mode (Lawler, 1984, p. 83), where dancers impersonated Satyrs (mythological deities of nature and followers of Dionysus), singing and dancing an orgiastic and noisy dance, associated with the consumption of wine and with drunkenness (Tsotakou-Karveli, 1992, p. 188). The name of said dance was *tyrvasia* and it was performed around the altar of Dionysus, where the syrinx player (αυλητής, avlitís) was standing (Lambropoulou, 1986, p. 123; Neubecker, 1986, p. 95) through steps, gestures, songs and cries, the dancers expressed their shared desires and emotions, which made them feel as one, since they experienced the same enthusiasm and danced to the same rhythm (Harrison, 1999, pp. 63-64).

2.2 Characteristics of dithyrambic dances.

The main characteristics of *dithyrambic dances* were: the feature of "exàrchein"; the structured poetic improvisation; the repetition of movements; and the gradual acceleration of their rhythm. Specifically, "exàrchein" meant the presence of a protagonist, who gave signal for the dance or the ritual, by narrating or introducing the topic of the celebration, while texts were spontaneous creations by the protagonist ("exàrchon") or by a poet, who improvised on a specified metrical rhythm (Lazou, 1989, p. 65).

It is believed that, during the initial performance of the *dithyramb*, there was a monotonous repetition of invocations to the god by the participants and that their movement was slow, while later it accelerated, and finally they reached an *ecstatic state* filling the air with devotional cries, such as the sibilation (the hissing sound) of the letter "s" (Lazou, 1989, p. 65). It follows that the *dithyramb* was based on the *dromenon* (the happening, the action) and that its characteristics were improvisation, repetition of movements and the use of voice: such elements appeared to induce the participants to the state of *ecstasis*.

2.3 The dithyramb as initiation ritual

Harrison (1999, pp. 48-49) claims that, in its initial form, the *dithyramb* constituted an *initiation* ceremony, comparable to that of the *Curetes*, and was relevant to primitive magical rituals. Correlating her claims with similar ceremonies that existed in Greek Antiquity and in the practice of primitive tribes, she argues that said initiation rite may have included *purification by fire* (symbolizing the apparition of Zeus in the midst of storm in front of Semele), as well as *baptism in water* (symbolizing *sanctity*, the *manna*), water being an element connected to the birth of a new life (Harrison, 1999, p. 51). She furthermore adds that the birth of Dionysus from his father's thigh is connected also to a *gender initiation ceremony* aiming to release the child from his mother's influence and turn it into a man (Harrison, 1999, p. 53).

2.4 The evolution of dithyrambic dances

Over the centuries, *dithyrambic dances* evolved significantly. They existed well before becoming officially established, and initially they were of a more liberating and orgiastic nature. Their chronology probably starts in an era when Dionysus was not yet part of the official religion of ancient Greeks. Around the early 6th century BC, during the tyranny of Pisistratus, the poet Arion was the first to compose *dithyrambs* and present them to an audience by a group of singing dancers trained by himself (Angelakou, 2015, p. 18); both the circular form of such dance and the movement around the altar are attributed to Arion (Lawler, 1984, p. 84). Around the middle of the 6th century BC, Pisistratus integrated the *dithyramb* into the *Great Dionysia (Μεγάλα Διονύσια)*, the most magnificent celebration in Athens.

The first *dithyramb* composed for the *Great Dionysia* was of public nature and the dancers arrived at the location of performance in procession (Lambropoulou, 1986, p. 121). Subsequently, during the 5th and 4th centuries BC, the *dithyramb* reached its peak and the role of the music was constantly upgraded. The dithyramb now included song, dance and music; after the exile of the tyrants, it was reorganized (Lambropoulou, 1986, p. 123).

In the context of the Great Dionysia, the *dithyramb contests* preceded the *tragedy and comedy contests* and the relevant dances were performed by groups of fifty persons around the altar of the god Dionysus, in the centre of a circular space called *orchestra* (Lazou, 1989, p. 65). Those fifty dancers represented the ten clans of the Athenian people and were trained either by the creator of the hymn or by a paid teacher (Lawler, 1984, p. 85). Over time, however, it seems that the spontaneous and improvised character of the *dithyramb*, which consisted in a frantic dance of worship, so full of movement, faded and gave way to a standard choreography (Lawler, 1984, p. 84).

2.5 Dithyrambic dances and therapy

In its initial substance, the *dithyramb*, which was comparable to other ecstatic and orgiastic dancing ceremonies in honor of various deities, most probably exhibited therapeutic features. According to Lawler (1984, p. 83), in Southern Greece, where the *dithyramb* apparently made greater progress, its performers (*Satyrs*) were considered, in a mystical context, as "therapists" under the command of god Dionysus. Although difficult to prove the therapeutic nature of the dithyramb without comparing it to analogous *rituals*, there is indirect evidence of its therapeutic function in the fact that it provided the origins for *tragedy*, and in its linkage to *catharsis* as defined by Aristotle (*Poetics*, 1449 A, 9-15).

3. The chorus in ancient tragedy

3.1 The origins of ancient tragedy

As mentioned above, the creation of the ancient theatre has its roots in the worship ceremonies conducted to honor god Dionysus, and more specifically in the *dithyramb*. One could, in fact, perceive the close relationship between these two genres, despite the fact that they developed in a totally different way over time, especially during the classical era. The following triptych formed a common parameter: *dramatic expression*, *music/song* and *dance*.

Concerning drama topics, the close relationship between *dithyramb* and *tragedy* is highlighted by Nietzsche in his work "The birth of tragedy" (2008, p. 111), where he argues that, similarly to the *dithyramb* treating as an exclusive subject the sufferings of Dionysus, in the *ancient tragedy* Dionysus never ceased to be the tragic hero, since all the leading figures, all the protagonists in the Greek drama were merely masks of Dionysus, that is, they were aspects of his own, multidimensional personality.

Concerning soundtrack, the above genres included music and word-song. The *ancient tragedy*, in particular, included song accompanied by musical instruments in every part, at the exception of dialogues. Concerning dancing action, the chorus held a protagonist role, closely linked to song. The chorus sung the first song at the beginning (*Parodos*, meaning "way on" as the chorus enters the *orchestra*) and the intermediate songs between acts (*Stasima*, plural of the word *stasimon*, meaning "stationary, in place"); the songs were structured in pairs of stanzas and accompanied with dancing movements. In fact, concerning "turn" (strophé) and "counter-turn" (antistrophé), the chorus may have accomplished a form of palindromic movement, given that both "strophe" and "antistrophe" are in the same meter every time, so the melody may have been repeated for each pair of stanzas (Neubecker, 1986, pp. 61-63).

3.2 The role of the chorus in ancient tragedy

The element of repetition, which was so characteristic for the movements of the chorus, apparently had its origins in the *dithyramb*. The members of the chorus had to dance, sing and recite in absolute synchronization, to produce the feeling that they were one person (Angelakou, 2015, p. 34). The *tragic chorus* (performing the soundtrack called "emmélia") was not improvised, but very carefully planned. It followed strict movement patterns during entrance, exit and deployment, and its presence on stage was permanent (Lazou, 2004, p. 49).

The chorus in ancient tragedy was of noble disposition and was adapted every time to the mood of the play. An important way of expression for the chorus was *gesture*, i.e., a code of symbolic movements allowing the members of the chorus to narrate the story of the play live, without even talking (Lawler, 1984, p. 87). The chorus presented mythical persons and re-enacted the sufferings of the heroes, uttering loud cries, singing with a thunderous voice and executing intense movements (Douka & Kaimakamis, 2004, p. 56).

According to Angelakou (2015, p. 34), the *tragic chorus* was involved in the action of the play, yet without bearing any influence upon it, both in the dialogues and in the lyrical parts: it expresses an opinion on what is happening, offers advice to the heroes, interprets their actions or even interferes during an event. In her opinion, this is mainly due to the nature of the chorus' function, since it consisted of men disguised as elders or women, who made use of their wisdom and experience in order to help the audience interpret the dramatic events, by disclosing to them the deeper meaning of the play, and gave them the feeling that the community's opinion was heard through them.

From the moment of its entrance to the end of the play, the chorus held furthermore a central position in the *ancient drama*, for it was positioned in the *orchestra*, a circular open space in the middle of the theatre. According to Lazou (2004, p. 51), the *circle* constitutes the primary location for the dancing action and the dramatic action: at philosophical level, it can be considered a metaphorical delineation of human perceptions as to the physical space and the secular space, therefore it refers to the connection of humans with the world. She adds that the *circular* shape and the amphitheatre in the "chorodrama" (dance-drama) do not indicate social segmentation into subcategories: to the contrary, they offer a picture of a democratic society where art performances converge to a central point (Lazou, 1989, p. 68).

3.3 Relationship of the chorus to the audience

Given its particular role and spatial positioning, the chorus could relate closely to the spectators and involve them emotionally, provoking intense feelings among them. Nietzsche described (2008, σ. 95-96) this close bond between chorus and audience, arguing that the public in the *Attic tragedy* recognized itself in the chorus located in the orchestra and that, deep down, there was no opposition between the spectators and the chorus. According to him, the *chorus* in the *ancient drama* constituted an "ideal" spectator, to the extent that the chorus was the only observer of the visionary world of the stage.

Nietzsche believed that (2008, p. 96) the relationship between the *chorus* and the audience relies mainly in the architecture of the ancient theatre, specifically in the spatial planning of the audience seats arranged in concentric arcs, which allowed each and every one to ignore the civilized world around and imagine oneself as being also a member of the chorus. This way, the spectators saw their very reflection in the chorus and in the faces of the tragic heroes, who acted on stage, and this was further intensified by the high-level performance of the actors.

3.4 The therapeutic function of the chorus

The close connection between the audience and the chorus laid the foundations for the therapeutic function of the ancient *dance-drama*, which alludes to an equivalent function in the context of modern psychotherapy, where the creation of a close connection between the person treated and the therapist is the cornerstone of the treatment process. In the same way, in the *ancient tragedy*, the relationship between the spectators and the chorus was, most probably, a key requirement to achieve *catharsis*. For *catharsis* was a healing method, and in order to be successful, it required full involvement of the self, i.e., body and soul (Evdokimou-Papageorgiou, 1999, p. 13). Nietzsche even suggests that the spectator of the ancient drama should participate fully in this experience in order to find catharsis, and, to achieve this, the spectator had to have traits in common with the *Dionysian person*.

Another psychotherapeutic function of dance in the ancient drama consists in balancing opposing tensions, which exist in every human. Balance was achieved through the connection of the *Dionysian* with the *Apollonian* element, both included in the structure of the *ancient tragedy*, and expressed through the dancing action. Referring to the contrasts between those two elements, Nietzsche (2008, pp. 51-52) argued that Apollo reigns upon the mature exterior image of a fantastic world expressed through the art of sculpture and related to the artistic world of "dream", whereas Dionysus finds expression through the non-plastic art of music and relates to the artistic world of "drunkenness".

The synthesis of the above two worlds can explain the balancing and hence therapeutic function of the ancient drama, and of its chorus in particular. Based on this Nietzschean perception, Lazou (2015, p. 95) argues that […] *the Apollonian rationality and the Dionysian irrationality, being the two sides of the same primal human condition, function in a complementary manner, materializing the alternation of order and discipline with expressiveness and ecstatic freedom*.

The inextricable relationship between both elements, the *Dionysian* and the *Apollonian*, is also underlined by Pierre Heber-Suffrin (2008, p. 24) in his introduction to the work of Nietzsche "The birth of tragedy": he argues that Nietzsche, in his study of the late phase of *tragedy*, highlights how these opposite forms of expression, *Dionysian dance* and *Apollonian recitation*, combine to constitute, in each occasion, the *tragic* element. In this combination lies, consequently, the balancing effect and hence the therapeutic function of *tragedy*.

More specifically, the role of the chorus in the context of the ancient drama was both unifying and catalytic, because, according to Nietzsche (2008, p. 99), the *choral parts* interwoven with *tragedy* constitute to an extent the matrix which bears the whole dialogue, that is, the whole world of the stage which constitutes the real drama. In addition, he argues, the chorus functions as a servant, for it perceives Dionysus as lord and master. The chorus also represents the highest Dionysian expression of nature, uttering oracles and wise sayings, acting both as a sympathizer and a sage.

Thus adopting this role, the chorus combines the two opposite sides of the human condition: the animal instincts, inherent in every human being, and the need to transcend oneself and unite with the divine element. In the language of psychoanalysis one may argue that through the chorus of the ancient tragedy, the "Ego" of the spectator balances the

claims by the "Id" and the "Superego". Besides, it was *ancient tragedy* that inspired Freud at the end of the 19th century to develop his psychoanalytic theory, where *catharsis* serves self-knowledge (Krasanakis, 2004, p. 54).

The "Id", which includes biological instincts and unconscious impulses that remain active during one's whole lifetime (Paraskevopoulos, 1985, p. 50), finds its full expression in the tragic deeds accomplished by the heroes of *ancient tragedy*. On the other side, the "Superego", which represents principles and moral understandings of society where the person lives in (Salkind, 2004, p. 145), finds its expression in the very presence of the god in the tragic action, with a purpose to render justice and to achieve moral restoration of order.

Restoration of the disturbed balance in *tragedy*, in general, is achieved, according to Lazou (2015, p. 98) first and foremost within the boundaries created by family ties, and subsequently within the boundaries of the "polis" (the city). In this perspective, this is actually a systemic method of treatment – according to modern terminology – where *catharsis*, and consequently *therapy*, occurs in every system: at the level *of the person*, *of the family*, *of the state*. Extending the Aristotelian perspective, therapy at the *personal level* can be achieved through the plot of the myth, whereby the spectator's Ego identifies itself with the chorus and the protagonists and so has the possibility of catharsis at the end, by discharging intense, excess emotion (that is, "eleos" and "phobos" – the former bordering to compassion and pity, the latter to fear and panic).

On the *social level*, Lazou suggests that (2015, p. 92) therapy is the ideal aim when *justice* is rendered in the context of the political system, since this is a process of constant balance and restoration of the social and natural relations of the person. This approach is closely relevant to the one of Plato (*Gorgias*, 464b-c), who argues that *justice*, when referring to healing the soul, is a part of science equivalent to *medicine*.

The *tragic chorus* was therefore closely linked to the therapeutic function of the ancient theatre; such function was already known since the Antiquity, for in ancient Epidaurus operated not only a theatre, but also a clinic. The treatment process in said clinic included drama, music, gymnastics, wrestling, natural diet and celebrations in honor of god Asclepius. Theatrical performances included religious plays and stories experienced by the patients themselves, which they dramatized (Evdokimou-Papageorgiou, 1999, p. 15); sometimes they participated themselves in the chorus of the *tragedy* (Krasanakis, 2004, p. 54). All these facts prove that the tragic chorus had a therapeutic effect not only on spectators, but also on its active participants.

4. Conclusion

The *dithyramb*, in which grow the roots of *ancient tragedy* according to Aristotle, though it cannot be proved that it constituted a therapeutic ritual, can be perceived today as a therapeutic process compared to analogous dance rituals from the distant past. The collective, repetitive, ecstatic and sacred nature of the *dithyramb*, as well as its close connection to movement, voice and poetry, clearly refer to primitive healing rites.

Moreover, the *chorus* in *ancient tragedy* held a protagonist position and appeared to play a catalytic role in the process of catharsis, which involved both the chorus participants and the spectators. The reason for this was that the chorus constituted a module in the plot of the myth, and the plot led the spectators gradually and methodically towards *catharsis*, which was achieved by unloading their excess emotions (eleos and phobos).

Besides, the close link between the chorus and the audience was a fundamental prerogative for catharsis, and thus therapy, of the latter. It could be simulated to the relationship between the person receiving therapy and the therapist in the context of modern dance therapy, while simultaneously reflecting a shared way of life and mentality, pertaining to the *Dionysian person*.

This close link between chorus and audience is enhanced by positioning the chorus at the centre (orchestra) of the ancient theatre, by its permanent presence onstage, by their mutual identification, as well as by the comprehensive participation of spectators, who experience the tragic action.

However, in order to fully grasp the balancing and therefore therapeutic effects of the *tragic chorus*, one must understand its ability to balance opposite impulses through the combination of the *Dionysian* with the *Apollonian* aspect at the level of spectators.

Also, the contradictory nature of Dionysus himself, whose sufferings relate to the topics dealt with in the *ancient drama*, can bring forth the combination of opposite personality aspects, both at the level of spectators and that of participants in the *tragic chorus*, during special treatment processes that took place in the Asclepieia.

One must emphasize that the therapeutic function of the chorus in the ancient drama relies in achieving the cure not only on the personal level, but also on the *family level* and the *state level*, which therefore constitutes an ancient method of systemic therapy (psychotherapy).

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