

The Poetic Voices of the Tragic Chorus in Baltic Theatre: Translation, Adaptation, and Stage Practice

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Abstract. This article examines the translation, adaptation and staging of the Greek tragic chorus across Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian theatrical traditions. Treating the chorus as an intersection of poetic text, ritual performance and collective voice, the study analyses a spectrum of choral transfer strategies, ranging from maximum textual fidelity to mediated or minimal forms and, in some cases, complete absence. Drawing on selected productions and translations from the 20th and 21st centuries, the article demonstrates how different theatrical traditions negotiate the tension between philological ambition and contemporary performance practices. The comparative analysis reveals how the tragic chorus gives voice to changing ideas of collectivity, authority and civic meaning. Across theatrical practices in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, choral transfer appears as a dynamic process in which ancient drama is continually reinterpreted and reshaped in response to changing aesthetic, political and social conditions.

Keywords: tragic chorus; Greek tragedy; translation and performance; choral transfer; Baltic theatre; reception of antiquity

Introduction

Among all elements of Greek tragedy, the chorus is widely regarded as the most resistant to translation and modern performance. Its language is highly formalised, marked by complex metric structures, strophic responsion and dense mythical allusion, while at the same time it remains inseparable from ritual enactment such as music, dance and collective movement, and from its civic function as the voice of the polis (Winnington-Ingram 1954; Wiles 1997;

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Henrichs 1994–1995; Foley 2003; David 2006). Any attempt to translate or stage the chorus must therefore negotiate not only verbal meaning, but also its performative embodiment and collective articulation.

Choral lyric is organised according to a system of metrically corresponding strophes and antistrophes, often concluding with an epode in a distinct meter (Goldhill 1997: 128; Poe 1993). This formal organisation is closely tied to performance practice, as different types of choral ode correspond to specific patterns of movement and dance in the orchestra (Kitto 1955). The chorus speaks in a collective voice (Andújar 2025: 1), and its lyrical sections are typically more extensive and structurally complex than the spoken dialogue. The linguistic features of choral odes further increase the difficulty of their interpretation and translation. In contrast to dialogue, which generally approximates everyday language, choral passages employ an elevated poetic register, retain archaic vocabulary and are syntactically more complex. At the same time, choral odes can contain indirect references to contemporary events, including allusions to current political circumstances, which might be incomprehensible for the modern reader. Additional complexity arises from dialectal variation, as Doric elements are interwoven with the Attic tragic language (Goldhill 1997: 128).

Modern scholarship has consistently emphasised the double nature of the tragic chorus as both poetic text and social performance. It has been interpreted as a mediating voice between individual and collective, human and divine, as well as a ritualised body that stages communal identity and ideological tension (Weiner 1980; Podlecki 2009; Pizzato 1992; Hart et al. 2003; Foley 2003). At the same time, studies of reception and adaptation demonstrate how contemporary theatre reconfigures the chorus through fragmentation, redistribution or replacement across different media (Foley 1999). From the perspective of translation studies, this problem has long been recognised: Cookson noted that both strict metric imitation and excessive freedom risk distorting the balance between poetic form and performative viability (Cookson 1923: 146–147). Thus, the tragic chorus emerges as a particularly complex site of cultural transfer, where poetic text, ritual performance and collective voice intersect (Pizzato 1992; Andújar 2025).

These challenges become particularly visible in smaller European languages and culturally specific theatrical traditions. The Baltic region offers a revealing comparative case, bringing together three distinct linguistic and theatrical traditions: Estonian, Lithuanian and Latvian, each characterised by relatively recent histories of translating and staging Greek tragedy. In all three contexts, translation practices are often closely linked to theatrical production and historically situated performance contexts, and are shaped by

changing ideological and cultural conditions, from the late Soviet period to the post-independence era (Foley 1999; Lotman et al. 2022). These shifts are reflected in changing approaches to the tragic chorus: from more controlled, text-oriented or ideologically framed uses in earlier periods to increasingly experimental, fragmented or mediated forms in contemporary theatre, where the chorus may be reinterpreted, redistributed or even eliminated.

In this article, translation is understood as a spectrum, ranging from attempts at close formal correspondence to freer forms of transformation, including adaptation. From this perspective, adaptation is treated as a subtype of translation, since it involves the recoding of meaning from one sign system and cultural context to another, often within a different medium. For the purposes of this study, three analytical levels are distinguished: translation, understood as the rendering of a dramatic text into another language; adaptation, as a more substantial transformation of the source material, including modern rewritings such as those by Anouilh or O'Neill; and staging (or theatrical production), as the performative realisation of these texts within specific theatrical, cultural and ideological contexts.

This article examines how the tragic chorus is translated, adapted and staged in Baltic theatre, focusing on the shifting relationship between poetic text, performative embodiment and collective voice. Rather than offering a comprehensive overview, the study adopts a typological approach, analysing selected case studies to identify recurring strategies of choral transfer. The first section explores Estonian approaches, where translation practices have most consistently pursued formal reconstruction; the second examines Lithuanian strategies, structured as a spectrum from text-centred to mediated and absent chorus; the third turns to Latvian theatre, where translation and staging traditions have developed more independently, offering a complementary perspective on the same range of choral transformations.

1. The Chorus Between Translation and Performance: Estonian Approaches to Greek Tragedy

In the Estonian context, approaches to the tragic chorus differ notably between translation and stage practice: while translations tend to pursue a high degree of formal correspondence to Greek choral meters, stage productions frequently reduce, transform or omit the chorus. This tendency is closely related to the strong philological tradition of translating Greek drama in Estonia, particularly from the 20th century onwards, where considerable attention has been devoted to reproducing quantitative meter and formal structure. However, such translations often prove difficult to integrate into contemporary stage practice,

which tends to favour more flexible and performatively viable solutions. As a result, the chorus emerges as a structurally demanding yet theatrically unstable element, situated at the intersection of philological ambition and performative feasibility.

In the Estonian context, these efforts bring questions of choral voice to the foreground, particularly in relation to how formally precise texts can be articulated and heard as collective utterance on stage. The following discussion provides a brief overview of the strategies through which these issues have been addressed in translations and adaptations intended for Estonian audiences. In examining the ways of adapting and translating Greek tragedies, four broad categories of translation practice can be distinguished, although these categories allow for further specification and their boundaries remain to some extent fluid and overlapping.

- 1) Complete omission of the chorus,
 - 2) Minimum transfer (message only),
 - 3) Semi-structured choruses (omission of most of the original features),
 - 4) Maximum transfer (close adherence to metric and stylistic patterns).
- These principles, when staged, can merge with different non-verbal codes, resulting in a multimedia translation in which the text interacts with sound, visual design and movement, becoming part of a polycoded performance.

1.1. Omission of the chorus

These cases illustrate particularly clearly the extent to which translation strategy and staging choices can diverge from the ancient model. An example of such a strategy is Ljudmila Razumovskaya's adaptation of *Medea*, in which the chorus is entirely omitted, a feature that is retained in the Estonian translation of the play². While based on a Russian adaptation, this example is relevant to the Estonian context because, despite belonging to the late Soviet period, it reflects the broader Soviet-era tendency to approach classical antiquity through contemporary adaptations rather than direct translations. Here, the use of a Russian author was not incidental but part of the cultural and theatrical framework of the era.

Whereas theatre translation allows for considerable flexibility in principle, and a translator could theoretically introduce choral material into an adaptation, in practice, the opposite tendency prevails in contemporary reworkings of Greek tragedy: choral sections are more frequently reduced or omitted than

² The tragedy was translated by Vahur Värk for the Estonian Theatre for Young Audiences production (staged in 1990); the text remains in manuscript form (TMM 2875/T7).

newly introduced into stage texts. In such cases, the functions traditionally fulfilled by the chorus, including its poetic density and its role as a collective, reflective voice, are reassigned to the dialogues and monologues of individual characters. Consequently, the choral perspective that in ancient tragedy operates at a certain distance from the dramatic action, often as a reflection of it or commenting on it (Vickers 1973: 12–13), is no longer present. At the same time, this strategy enables a heightened focus on individual conflict and psychological motivation, thereby aligning the adaptation more closely with contemporary dramaturgical preferences.

Thus, the omission of the chorus constitutes not merely a formal reduction but a substantial transformation of dramaturgical structure and audience reception. The removal of the chorus concentrates interpretative and ethical responsibility within the individual characters, while simultaneously eliminating some of the most elevated, lyrical and ritualised elements of the original tragic text, resulting in a less elevated and less ceremonial performance.

Another example of the omission of the chorus can be found in Cabaret Rhizome's production of *Oedipus the King* (2015; for more on this staging, see Lotman 2024: 300). In this version, the traditional choral body is absent, and its functions are partially replaced by additional narrative passages. These segments do not operate as lyrical or musical choral odes: they are not organised according to metric patterns, not intended for musical performance and not assigned to a distinct group of performers representing a collective voice. Instead, they take the form of narrative fragments inserted between dramatic episodes and delivered through voiceover.

The dramaturgical function of these narrations is more limited than that of the ancient chorus. Their primary purpose is to supply contextual information and mythological background rather than to articulate collective reflection or ritual commentary. In terms of register, they approximate documentary narration rather than elevated poetic discourse. This type of adaptation demonstrates that the omission of the chorus does not merely entail the removal of specific textual components but may involve the substitution of the choral principle itself with an alternative dramaturgical device. As a result, the ritual, musical, and collective dimensions traditionally associated with the ancient chorus are absent, while a distinct interpretative layer is introduced through narrative mediation.

1.2. Minimum transfer (message-oriented translations)

In the Estonian cultural context, the minimum transfer approach in theatre translation – understood here as working from already mediated source texts,

such as modern adaptations rather than the ancient Greek original – has predominantly taken the form of prose translations of adaptations (for more on the history of translating ancient dramas in Estonia see Lotman 2024). In such cases, translators typically work not from the original Greek text but from an already transformed dramatic version, which significantly reduces the formal and poetic complexity of the choral material. These adaptations frequently involve shifts in semantic emphasis as well, reflecting the tendency of stage directors and adapters to reshape the material in accordance with current themes perceived as relevant to contemporary audiences. An example of this is the original adaptation of *Medea* by Tiit Palu (staged in 2018, published in print in 2022; on this version, see also Dikmonienė, Bodniece, Lotman 2024), in which the chorus functions primarily as a philosophical commentator. Positioned as a sympathetic presence, the chorus actively intervenes in dramatic action and seeks to influence Medea's decisions. The choral passages are written predominantly in prose, with occasional iambic elements, and are performed by a single actor rather than a collective body. This approach marks a significant departure from the structural, metric and performative conventions of the ancient tragic chorus.

Another similar example is Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*,³ whose Estonian translation closely follows the original structure and has been staged repeatedly in Estonia. In this version, the chorus is redefined as an expository and interpretative voice, largely abandoning its poetic and ritual functions. As a modern adaptation shaped by the historical context of wartime Europe, Anouilh's play foregrounds individual resistance rather than collective voice, which further contributes to the reduction of the chorus.

1.3. Semi-structured choruses

In such versions, the choruses adopt a poetic register and, in some instances, metric organisation, yet they depart from the strict formal patterns of the ancient chorus. Within this category, the degree of formal freedom varies considerably. Stricter examples can preserve the overall division of the original choral odes without reproducing their precise metric schemes. In such cases, the original stanzaic architecture is not maintained, even if the segmentation of individual choral passages corresponds to that of the source text.

³ Translated into Estonian by Oskar Kuningas (first staged in 1967); for more on the translations of Sophocles' *Antigone* in the Baltic cultural sphere, see Lotman, Bodniece, Dikmonienė 2022.

A representative example is Marie Under's translation of Sophocles' *Antigone* (1928),⁴ produced indirectly through German rather than from the Greek original. In this translation, the dialogue is rendered in iambic hexameters, whereas the choral sections are treated with significantly greater formal flexibility. Rather than adhering to strict metrical patterns, Under emphasises rhythmic movement and poetic cadence, at times diverging substantially from the original meters. Nevertheless, the degree of structural correspondence remains sufficient to allow the seamless integration of portions of Under's translation into a new translation of *Antigone* by Anne Lill, staged by Vane-muine Theatre in 2024.

At the more liberal end of the spectrum are translations that largely abandon the metric diversity of the Greek original. Jaan Jõgever's *Prometheus Bound* (1908) exemplifies this approach: the complex range of Greek meters is reduced in the Estonian translation to predominantly trochaic lines of varying length, accounting for approximately 95% of both the dialogue and choral passages (Lotman 2012: 65–66). As a result, the alternating strophic structure characteristic of the ancient chorus is eliminated, along with much of its expressive and lyrical complexity. While the translation succeeds in conveying the basic semantic content of the text, this is achieved at the expense of structural fidelity and poetic effect.

It should be noted that both translations belong to an earlier phase in the Estonian reception and translation of classical antiquity. In more recent practice, a different translation strategy has become predominant, as will be discussed below.

1.4. Maximum transfer

This concept refers to translations that aim to approximate the formal characteristics of the source text as closely as possible. The primary objective of this approach is the systematic reproduction of stanzaic symmetry, prosodic patterns (including the organisation of syllabic quantities), and the elevated stylistic register. Such translations are frequently accompanied by extensive scholarly commentary. Although these versions can present considerable challenges in terms of readability, they remain the closest approximations of the formal structure of the ancient tragic chorus.

⁴ Marie Under's translation of *Antigone* has not yet been published in print, but is available electronically in KIVIKE, the Estonian Literary Museum's repository, at <https://kivike.kirmus.ee/meta/AR-17331-49143-07686>.

An example of this approach is the translation of *Oedipus Rex* by Ain Kaalep and Ülo Torpats⁵, which has served as a model for subsequent translators. In this translation, particular emphasis is placed on the detailed rendering of quantitative verse. Both the metric schemes and the distribution of long and short syllables are carefully reproduced, and thus the prosodic structure characteristic of the Greek original is effectively mirrored. While this approach represents the highest degree of philological ambition within Estonian translation practice, it also renders the chorus particularly resistant to performative activation: its metrical precision often exceeds what contemporary staging can accommodate without substantial modification.

Thus, in the theatrical performance at Vanemuine Theatre (1963), this formal structure underwent modification. Certain stanzas were omitted, additional repetitions were introduced and the musical realisation did not consistently correspond to the quantitative metric patterns of the text. Such alterations illustrate the tension between textual fidelity and performative practicality in staged adaptations.

Recent Estonian translators working from the original Greek largely share a commitment to the reproduction of quantitative meter in choral passages, as exemplified by Anne Lill's translation of Sophocles' *Antigone* (2024). These versions place a strong emphasis on formal correspondence, seeking to bring Estonian readers as close as possible to the musical and structural complexity of the Greek chorus.

At the level of performance, this approach has often resulted in dramatic adjustments, such as the alternation of prose passages with choral sections, a practice that diverges from the structure of the ancient original but facilitates audience comprehension of the choral odes.

Overall, the strategy of maximum transfer represents the most far-reaching translational ambition within this spectrum: the attempt to convey not only the semantic content of the choral passages but also their formal organisation. While this approach aims to preserve the ritual and poetic intensity of the original, it could also render the text demanding and, in some cases, difficult for contemporary audiences to access.

This approach also affects the status of choral voice in performance, as the emphasis on formal precision shapes how the chorus can be articulated and heard as a collective presence on stage. In performance, this difficulty becomes particularly apparent in the realisation of the chorus as a collective presence on stage.

⁵ Translated in the late 1950s by Ain Kaalep and Ülo Torpats, first published in 1964 in the anthology of ancient Greek literature (Kaalep, Torpats 1964).

2. The Chorus Between Text and Stage: Lithuanian Approaches to Greek Tragedy

This section examines Lithuanian approaches to the tragic chorus through a three-part typology: (1) text-centred chorus and attempts at ritual reactivation; (2) mediated chorus (body without text/voice without body); and (3) chorus absent. Rather than representing chronological development, these forms coexist as different strategies of choral transformation, ranging from the preservation of a full tragic chorus to its mediation and eventual disappearance. The analysis outlines the key poetic, ritual and civic functions of the ancient chorus and traces how these are preserved, redistributed or replaced in Lithuanian productions.

Lithuanian stagings are closely linked to translations by classical philologists that tend to maintain the distinction between dialogue and choral lyric. The tradition of translating Greek tragedy developed gradually, beginning with Jurgis Šaulys' prose translation of Sophocles' *Antigone* in 1903 and evolving into a more consistent philological practice in the second half of the 20th century. The most important translators – Antanas Dambrauskas, Jonas Dumčius, Henrikas Zabulis and Audronė Kudulytė-Kairienė – worked directly from Ancient Greek and established a philological translation tradition marked by a commitment to textual fidelity, the preservation of the distinction between dialogue and choral lyric, the consistent use of standard Lithuanian and the inclusion of explanatory commentary. Although the complex metric structures of Greek choral poetry are not reproduced exactly, these translations typically retain stanzaic organisation and a clear rhythmic differentiation between spoken and choral sections. At present, all extant Greek tragedies have been translated into Lithuanian in poetic form, and many of them are available in Dramų stalčius, an online repository of foreign drama in Lithuanian translation initiated by the theatre director Gintaras Varnas.

2.1. Text-centred chorus and attempts at ritual reactivation

The productions discussed below focus on three cases representing different strategies of maximum or near-maximum choral transfer: Juozas Miltinis' *Edipas karalius* (*Oedipus the King*) (Panevėžys Drama Theatre, 1977), Oskaras Koršunovas' *Oidipas karalius* (*Oedipus the King*) (Lithuanian National Drama Theatre, 2002), and the contemporary reception of Aeschylus' *Maldautojos* (*Suppliants*) in Paulius Ignatavičius' *Europiečiai* (*Europeans*) (Vilnius Small Theatre, 2016). Together, these examples demonstrate how Lithuanian theatre

negotiates fidelity to choral text while redefining its performative and civic resonance.

In *Oedipus the King*, the chorus of Theban elders functions as a custodian of religious order and collective memory rather than as a political body. As Henrichs has shown, Jocasta's scepticism precipitates a ritual crisis that implicates the chorus itself, making the question "why should I dance?" a key moment of choral self-reflection (Henrichs 1994–1995: 65–73). Through supplication, fear and hope, the chorus suspends action and frames Oedipus' investigation within a broader horizon of religious justice.

The reflective choral function was central to Juozas Miltinis' *Oedipus the King* (1977), based on Antanas Dambrauskas' translation (1974)⁶. Dambrauskas' translation preserves the differentiation between iambic dialogue and choral lyric, maintaining elevated diction, syntactic density, and rhythmic solemnity suitable for collective utterance. The translator collaborated closely with Miltinis during rehearsals, refining choral passages to strengthen semantic precision and acoustic weight (Dikmonienė 2004: 125).

Miltinis retained the full chorus as a collective body on stage, resisting fragmentation or individualisation. Conceived as a static and hieratic presence – through masks, stylised movement and sculptural visual composition – the chorus functioned as a supra-personal voice mediating between human action and divine order. Although critics noted a tension between ritual distance and emotional intensity, the production remains a key reference point in Lithuanian theatre history as a paradigmatic example of a text-centred, ritual-oriented approach to the tragic chorus (Rapšytė 1977).

Oskaras Koršunovas' *Oedipus the King* (2002) continues this text-centred tradition but reactivates ritual through an opposite aesthetic logic. Using Dambrauskas' second, revised translation of *Oedipus the King*⁷, Koršunovas relocates the tragic myth into a recognisably contemporary polis: an enclosed urban playground that mediates civic crisis through spectators' lived experience

⁶ The production is based on Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* in the Lithuanian translation by Antanas Dambrauskas, published in Sofoklis. *Tragedijos*, Vilnius: Vaga, 1974. It should be noted that, unlike Estonian practice, Lithuanian translations of Greek tragedy are rendered in accentual rather than quantitative meters. Although the terminology of ancient metrics is retained, metric feet are defined by patterns of stress rather than by syllable length. As a result, attempts at maximum choral transfer in Lithuanian theatre rely less on metric reproduction and more on elevated diction, rhythm and performative or ritual strategies on stage.

⁷ The production uses Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* in Antanas Dambrauskas' revised Lithuanian translation, published in *Antikinės tragedijos*, ed. Henrikas Zabulis, Vilnius: Vaga, 1988.

(Vasiliauskas 2002; Vasinauskaitė 2002). Critics interpret the chorus as an infantilised majority whose grotesque masks transform the Theban elders into an image of a community shaped by mass culture (Jauniškis 2002; Marcinkevičiūtė 2003). Rather than functioning as the polis' moral conscience, the chorus becomes its symptom: a collective body that generates pressure through percussion, recitative and choreographic synchrony, producing bodily unease (*ekpleksis*) rather than consolatory catharsis (Sabolius 2002).

A contemporary coda to this trajectory is provided by Paulius Ignatavičius' *Europeans* (2016), based on Aeschylus' *Suppliants*. Unlike the reflective elders of Sophocles, Aeschylus' Danaids form a chorus-as-protagonist whose collective supplication drives the action itself. As Rutherford has shown, their choral speech carries existential stakes and generates ethical tension rather than detached reflection (Rutherford 2007: 5–9). Ignatavičius builds on this Aeschylean model through Audronė Kudulytė-Kairienė's Lithuanian translation, which foregrounds anapestic openings in choral songs, sharply distinguishing choral lyric from iambic episodes and giving the chorus a forward-driving, processional rhythm⁸.

On stage, the Danaids appear as a unified female ensemble – conceived as a live-performing women's band – whose masked presence evokes both ancient theatricality and contemporary forms of exclusion. Reviewers identify the chorus as the production's strongest element, precisely because it operates as an exposed collective body that tests spectators' tolerance and ethical responsibility in the context of the refugee crisis (Balevičiūtė 2016). Their masks evoke both ancient theatricality and the contemporary burqa, turning antiquity into a test of modern tolerance. In the immediate context of the Syrian refugee crisis, this strategy rendered Aeschylus' text very fitting for today, shifting the focus from narrative reconstruction to ethical confrontation. The chorus retains textual authority and collective force yet produces discomfort and moral pressure rather than stabilising catharsis.

2.2. Mediated chorus (body without text, voice without body)

While the above examples seek to preserve or reactivate the chorus as a collective textual presence, other Lithuanian productions move towards mediated forms in which choral functions are redistributed. A paradigmatic Lithuanian example of a mediated chorus reduced to bodily presence without

⁸ The performance is based on Aeschylus' *Suppliants* in the Lithuanian translation by Audronė Kudulytė-Kairienė (2016), published online on the website Dramų stalčius (<https://www.dramustalcius.lt/>).

verbal articulation is Anželika Cholina's ballet *Medėja* (*Medea*) (Lithuanian National Opera and Ballet Theatre, 1996). Although the chorus no longer functions as a speaking or singing collective, it remains a powerful scenic force through coordinated movement, rhythm and visual massing (Šabasevičius 1996: 28). Unlike ancient tragedy, where choral lyric integrates song, dance and poetic speech, Cholina's chorus is entirely non-verbal, yet it preserves a core choral function identified by Henrichs (1994–1995: 56–59): the chorus as a ritual body generating meaning through collective motion. Acting as a social body rather than a lyrical commentator, it frames the action affectively; in the second act, silent rhythmic stamping physically separates Medea from Jason and the children, replacing verbal lament with kinaesthetic exclusion (Žiūraitytė 1996: 9). As Foley (1999: 2–3) observes, such adaptations foreground bodily movement, music and ritual as primary carriers of choral meaning, reactivating performative dimensions of Greek tragedy marginalised by Western realist conventions.

A contrasting form of mediation – voice without body – appears in Birutė Mar's mono-performance *Antigonė* (*Antigone*) (Lithuanian National Drama Theatre, 1999), based on Sophocles' tragedy in Antanas Dambrasukas' translation (1988)⁹. It is a philologically precise version that preserves the differentiation between iambic dialogue and anapaestic choral passages, as well as the strophic–antistrophic structure of the odes. While the textual integrity of the chorus is thus maintained, its corporeal presence is removed from the stage.

In Sophocles' tragedy, the chorus of Theban elders functions as a civic and moral mediator between individual action and communal order: it articulates shared values of the polis, reflects on law, fate and human limitation, and gradually revises its stance as the consequences of Creon's decisions unfold (Podlecki 2009: 28–29).

In Mar's *Antigone*, the collective voice is transferred to large-scale video projections of anonymous human faces accompanied by recorded speech, confronting the solitary actress who embodies all dramatic roles. Critics observed that this disembodied chorus functions as a moral and civic presence, intensifying Antigone's isolation and restoring the chorus' role as a collective judge, albeit without ritual song and dance (Vasinauskaitė 1999; Dikmonienė 2004: 128).

⁹ The performance is based on Sophocles' *Antigone* in the Lithuanian translation by Antanas Dambrasukas, published in *Antikinės tragedijos*, ed. Henrikas Zabulis, Vilnius: Vaga, 1988.

2.3. Chorus absent

This tendency towards mediation can be taken further, resulting in the partial or complete disappearance of the chorus. In Lithuanian theatre, the complete absence of the chorus most frequently appears in productions based on modern adaptations of Greek tragedy, particularly those by Jean Anouilh (*Medea*, *Antigone*). In these works, the ancient choral institution is either removed entirely or reduced to a single speaking figure delivering prose commentary or poetic insertions drawn from other authors. As a result, dramatic meaning is concentrated almost exclusively within individual psychological conflicts, while the collective and ritual dimensions of tragedy are substantially diminished.

This marks a significant departure from the ancient model. As Weiner notes, Euripidean choruses are often undervalued because their lyrical and reflective autonomy is mistaken for dramatic weakness rather than recognised as a different strategy (Weiner 1980: 206). In *Medea*, the chorus of Corinthian women functions as a sympathetic witness and lyrical commentator, suspending action and articulating ethical reflection beyond the protagonists' immediate conflict (Foley 2003: 22, 24). In contrast, Anouilh's *Medea* eliminates the chorus altogether, intensifying psychological introspection while abandoning this mediating communal function (Weiner 1980: 211).

A clear example of unmediated choral absence is Dalia Tamulevičiūtė's staging of Jean Anouilh's *Medėja* (*Medea*) at the Vilnius State Youth Theatre in 1974¹⁰, which accepted the elimination of the chorus without attempting formal or symbolic substitution. The performance unfolded in a single uninterrupted movement, with Anouilh's prose delivered in a heightened rhythmic mode that almost approached poetic speech (Girdzijauskaitė 2011: 304–305).

Rather than restoring ritual distance or collective mediation, the staging intensified psychological continuity and emotional tension, producing a closed dramatic world centred on individual consciousness and markedly different from ancient tragic structure. In this sense, the production exemplifies how the removal of the chorus does not merely simplify tragic form but fundamentally reorients meaning away from communal reflection toward sustained interior conflict.

A more compensatory strategy appears in Diana Dobрева's *Medėja svetimšalė* (*Medea Outlander*) (Old Theatre of Vilnius, 2022), where the absent chorus is partially replaced by lyrical insertions from modern poetry

¹⁰ Jean Anouilh's *Medea* was translated into Lithuanian in 1974 by Donata Linčiuvienė. The translation was later published in *XX a. prancūzų dramos*, ed. Birutė Želvytė, Vilnius: Vaga, 1988.

(Alexander Sekulov, Constantine Cavafy, Rainer Maria Rilke and Marina Tsvetaeva). These fragments momentarily suspend dramatic action and invite reflection, imbuing the performance with pathos, yet they cannot fully restore the chorus' mediating function (Dikmonienė 2022: 35). In the absence of a genuine collective voice, broader themes of exile, exclusion and political violence remain largely confined to individual psychology rather than articulated as communal or ethical concerns.

3. The Chorus from Text to Stage: Latvian Approaches to Greek Tragedy

Although the translation of Greek tragedies into Latvian began in the early twentieth century, Latvian theatre showed little interest in staging these works. While some translations were produced at the initiative of theatrical institutions, it cannot be argued that the tradition of translating ancient tragedies into Latvian was shaped by theatre commissions. Consequently, the traditions of translating and staging Greek tragedies in Latvia developed largely independently of one another.

Ancient tragedies and comedies were translated into Latvian primarily by classical philologists, who established an academically oriented tradition of translation. This tradition was initiated in the early twentieth century by Kārlis Straubergs, continued in the mid-twentieth century by Augusts Ģezens, and further developed by Ābrams Feldhūns, whose final translations were published in the early 21st century. Feldhūns translated the largest number of ancient Greek and Latin tragedies and comedies into Latvian, consciously cultivating and refining his translation practice over several decades. In addition to these three major figures, other classical philologists translated individual plays during the period of Soviet occupation; however, their contributions were sporadic and nonetheless aligned with the established tradition.

The translation strategies employed by all three principal translators remained largely consistent and can be described as philological. Their primary aim was to reproduce the source text as faithfully as possible and, where feasible, to preserve the original verse meters, although this was not achieved consistently in all cases. Although the Latvian language contains regional dialects, none of the translators employed them to reflect the dialectal variation of Ancient Greek. Instead, all translations were rendered in standard Latvian, i.e., the Latvian literary language. Publications of translations of ancient tragedies and comedies usually include extensive commentary explaining characters, mythological references, contemporary realities, historical facts

and the meanings of specific phrases and idioms. Although these editions were compiled by specialists in classical philology, their approach to interpreting the text is based on the 20th-century view of dramatic text. The translations of texts are accompanied by stage directions explaining the movement of the characters on stage and indicating their emotions. In the choral parts, it has not been possible to preserve the original complex stanzaic structure, so the texts are divided by the stage directions indicating parts spoken by the chorus leader (coryphaeus) and the chorus. The theoretical introductions to the publications, describing and explaining the structure of the tragedies, also attempt to bring the ancient texts and their staging closer to the understanding of modern dramaturgy and staging. Rather than treating these texts primarily as religious or sacred, Latvian translations tend to approach them as dramaturgical material that must be adapted to the expectations of contemporary audiences through the resources of the target language and culture. Theatre directors approach ancient tragedy through the prism of contemporary theatrical practice and aesthetic principles. Moreover, both ancient originals and their reception texts are accepted within the Latvian cultural space as a unified constellation of ideas and forms.

When staging ancient tragedy in a contemporary theatrical context, directors cannot entirely dispense with the chorus. First, the chorus functions as a symbolic marker of ancient Greek theatre, and second, it conveys a substantial portion of the dramatic and ideological content of the play. In reception works, however, the image and function of the chorus are subject to the author's interpretation. The chorus may assume a significant role within the plot and character system, or it may be reduced to a largely decorative element, serving primarily as a reference to ancient theatrical tradition.

An examination of ancient Greek tragedy and its reception in Latvian theatre reveals three principal strategies for the treatment of the chorus, which broadly correspond to tendencies observed elsewhere in the Baltic region: 1) complete transposition, that is, an attempt to reproduce the ancient chorus in its entirety; 2) partial transfer, involving replacement, partial reproduction, or transformation of the chorus; and 3) the complete absence of the chorus.

3.1. Attempts to reproduce the ancient chorus in its entirety

The earliest attempts by Latvian theatre directors to stage ancient Greek tragedy were marked by an aspiration to represent the ancient chorus in its full complexity. Notable examples include Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, staged at the National Theatre in 1920, and *Antigone*, performed by drama students at the Palladium Theatre in 1927. Contemporary press reviews and photographs

indicate that scenography, costumes, actors' movement and vocal delivery were all conceived to evoke the ancient Greek world. However, this approach failed to resonate with contemporary audiences. Several critical responses from the period emphasise the perceived shortcomings of the chorus, frequently describing it as awkward, ineffective, or alien to modern theatrical sensibilities.

The next noteworthy attempt to bring the ancient chorus to the stage appeared during the period of Soviet occupation in 1968. It was the production of *Electra* by Sophocles at the National Theatre¹¹ under the direction of the young director Mihails Kublinskis. Although the production met with considerable success, contemporary critics identified the chorus as its weakest element. As one reviewer noted, "the chorus's actual functional role is diminished, and its public presence is likewise reduced.... The choral passages are delivered with little imaginative variation, flattening the nuanced stylistic character of the choral speech in Sophocles' work. Instead, the production foregrounds lively, at times visually striking, pantomimic movements." (Reihs 1968: 12) The critic concludes that the role of the chorus in the ancient play was not fully realised in this staging.

3.2. Partial transfer, involving replacement, partial reproduction or transformation of the chorus

As most modern critics acknowledge the objective limitations of achieving an authentic representation of the chorus of ancient tragedy in contemporary performance, theatre directors seek alternative modes of expression, most commonly through the use of a partial chorus. In many cases, this takes the form of a single performer. In such instances, the chorus no longer functions as a collective, sonorous embodiment of the community but instead becomes an internal dialogic partner, reflecting the protagonist's psychological experience, or an alienated narrative presence.

Employing the chorus in the form of a single actor, director Mihails Kublinskis returned to the myth of *Electra* a decade after his earlier production. In 1977, he staged Hungarian playwright László Gyrurkó's *Electra, My Love* (*Szerelmem, Elektra*, 1968) at the National Theatre.

A comparable strategy is evident in the most recent staging of the *Electra* myth at the Valmiera Theatre: Eugene O'Neill's tragedy *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), staged in 2023 and directed and translated by Inese Mičule. In O'Neill's original text, the choral function is distributed among various members of the town; in the Valmiera production, this collective presence is

¹¹ Called the Academic Drama Theatre at that time.

replaced by music and a single, distanced choral figure. Performed by actor Mārtiņš Meiers, this figure serves to illuminate the concealed psychological layers of the protagonist. As one critic observes, Emīls Zilberts' music can likewise be understood as assuming a choral function, as it "breathes emotionally alongside the action while remaining entirely impassive and incapable of influencing events." Ultimately, it is Meiers' choral presence that enables Lavinia's symbolic liberation from her black, visually striking 'flower of evil' corset. (Adamaite 2023)

One of the productions least appreciated by both critics and audiences is Kārlis Auškāps' attempt to encompass the entire Theban cycle, i.e., Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*, within a single staging. In addition to criticisms of shifts in the temporal setting and other modernising interventions, reviewers also draw attention to the unsuccessful interpretation of the chorus. As one critic observes, "for Sophocles, the chorus is the expression of collective experience, that is, the voice of the people. Auškāps has entrusted the role of the people to a mute, masked group of actors whose function is purely decorative." (Čakare 1995)

The production is structured in three acts, each presenting a different ancient tragedy in a distinct historical period. The choral function is performed by three actresses alongside a silent mass representing the people. In the first act, set in antiquity, the chorus appears as a ritualised collective body; in the second, set in the Middle Ages, this ritual dimension is retained but transformed; in the third, the chorus is reconfigured as contemporary press office employees, replacing ritual authority with symbols of modern information power.

Director Mikhail Gruzlov employed a different strategy in his 2013 staging of Sophocles' *Antigone*. In this production, the chorus appears in a modern sense as a purely musical ensemble. It functions exclusively by singing; however, the choral songs, composed specifically for the production, are performed by four prerecorded male voices. Although this approach enhances the emotional intensity of the performance, the chorus ultimately serves a predominantly decorative and atmospheric function rather than a dramaturgical one. For a more powerful theatrical effect, the reviewer Verhoustinska notes a preference for the chorus to be present live on stage. (Verhoustinska 2013)

Two recent productions of ancient Greek tragedy in Latvian theatres in 2025 – Euripides' *Medea* at the Valmiera Theatre and Euripides' *Hecuba* at the Daugavpils Theatre – continue the search for viable ways to integrate the ancient chorus into contemporary stage practice. *Hecuba* is particularly noteworthy as the first staging of an ancient Greek tragedy in the Standard Latgalian (a historical variant of the Latvian language spoken primarily in

southeastern Latvia). The drama has not yet been translated into standard Latvian. However, this achievement is somewhat undermined by the fact that, as the creators of the production themselves acknowledge, the dramatic text was adapted from several foreign-language translations rather than from the Ancient Greek original. (Smagare 2025)

Critical responses to both productions suggest that the chorus remains one of the most difficult elements to integrate convincingly into contemporary performance, often appearing weakened, displaced or only partially functional. As Valda Čakare notes, the production inverts Euripides' dramaturgy: Medea becomes an ordinary earthly figure, while the chorus turns into a mysterious poetic image (Čakare 2025). Visually marked by identical costumes and illuminated masks, the chorus evokes archaic otherness, yet this stylisation also distances it from the social and ethical function of Euripides' Corinthian women.

In the Daugavpils production of *Hecuba*, the chorus of Trojan women is reimagined as a supernatural, almost Fury-like presence. Rather than restoring the chorus as a civic or reflective voice, the production turns it into an atmosphere of ritualised mysticism, conveyed through insistent polyphonic singing (Čevērs 2025).

3.3. Absence of the chorus

Within the broader context of contemporary reinterpretations of ancient texts, however, director Vlad Nastavshev's minimalist staging of Euripides' *Medea* at the Mikhail Chekhov Riga Russian Theatre in 2016 is particularly noteworthy. The scenography is reduced to a pedestal and two chairs. According to the creators' concept, all dramatic action takes place exclusively on the pedestal positioned at the centre of the stage, from which Medea never descends.

The actors convey the entire meaning of the play through direct performance rather than narrative mediation. Medea's actions, including the murder of her children, are enacted openly in front of the audience. All elements that cannot be physically performed are eliminated from the dramatic text, resulting in a radical condensation of the play's structure. The cast is thus reduced to Medea, Jason, Creon, the Messenger, and the two children, transforming the tragedy into an intensely focused confrontation devoid of choral commentary or ritual mediation.

Conclusions

This article has examined the translation, adaptation, and staging of the tragic chorus in Baltic theatre cultures, focusing on Estonian, Lithuanian and Latvian contexts. Approaching the chorus as an interface between poetic text, ritual performance and collective voice, the study has shown that the chorus remains one of the most revealing sites of cultural transfer in the modern reception of Greek tragedy. Across the Baltic traditions, it repeatedly exposes the tension between philological ambition and theatrical practice, although this tension takes different forms in each case.

In Estonia, the dominant tendency has been toward formal reconstruction: translators have most consistently sought to reproduce the metrical and musical complexity of the Greek original, especially through quantitative verse. At the same time, this very ambition often makes the chorus difficult to activate on stage, so that theatrical practice tends to reduce, transform or omit it. In Lithuania, in contrast, the material is most clearly organised as a spectrum of choral transformation, ranging from text-centred and ritual-oriented forms to mediated and absent chorus. Here, the relationship between translation and staging is especially close, and the chorus becomes a flexible site of reconfiguration rather than merely a problem of formal reproduction. In Latvia, the traditions of translation and staging have developed more independently: although classical philologists established a strong translation tradition, theatrical practice has often struggled to preserve the chorus as an effective collective voice, tending instead toward partial transfer, decorative reduction or substitution.

The comparison also suggests that changes in political and cultural context have affected the use of the tragic chorus, though not in a simple linear way. Earlier and more ideologically constrained periods more often favoured controlled, text-based or symbolically framed uses of the chorus, whereas more recent theatre has shown a stronger tendency toward fragmentation, mediation and experimentation. Yet these developments should not be understood as a straightforward decline of the chorus. Rather, they reveal the coexistence of different aesthetic and cultural strategies, shaped by the interaction of translation tradition, theatrical convention and historical circumstance.

Taken together, the Baltic material demonstrates that the tragic chorus cannot be reduced to a mere technical problem of translation or staging. Even when it is fragmented, redistributed or removed, it remains a crucial register through which theatre negotiates collectivity, authority, memory and civic meaning. In this sense, the chorus survives in Baltic theatre not only as a remnant of ancient drama, but also as an active means of thinking through how communities are imagined, represented and challenged on the modern stage.

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