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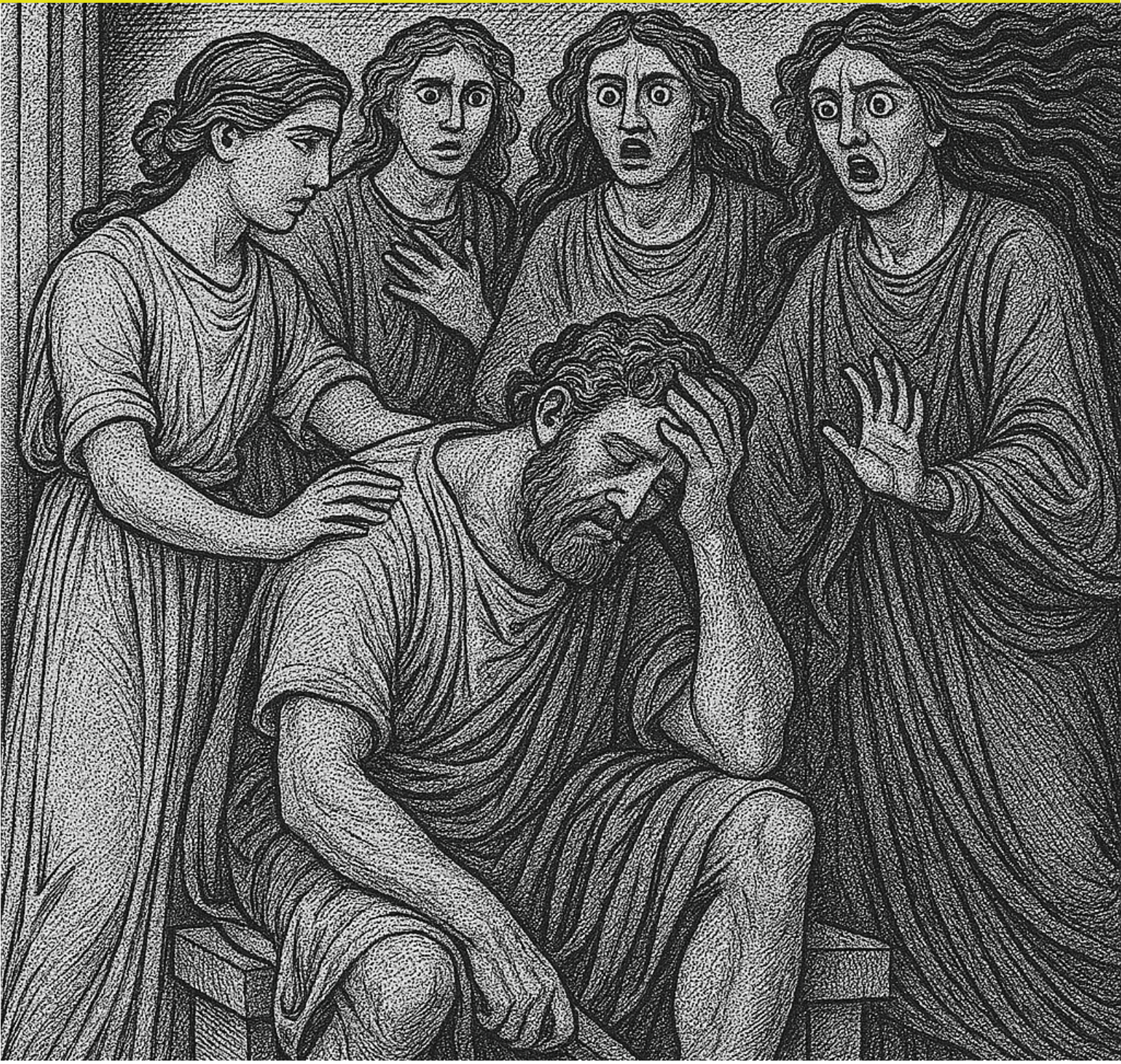

Situating Parrhesia: Toward a Chorus of Critical Dissent

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Abstract

This essay rethinks parrhesia—truth-telling under conditions of risk—not as a sovereign speech/act but as a collective, embodied performance. Taking Euripides's Orestes *as its central case, it argues that the chorus offers a model of parrhesia that is rhythmic, relational, and structurally marginal: not a proclamation of truth, but the staging of its conditions. Against juridical authority and epistemic collapse, the chorus does not resolve crisis but gives it form. In a contemporary landscape shaped by educational defunding, the suppression of dissent, and the weaponization of "free speech," the essay calls for a parrhesiastic mode of scholarship grounded in proximity, complicity, and structural risk. Attuned to the fragile, choreographed conditions under which truth might still be spoken—and heard—it advances not only a theory but a performance. As the inaugural essay in* Parrhèsia*, it offers a provocation: a model for scholarship that is situated, vulnerable, and committed to fostering collective conditions of truth-telling.*

Keywords

Critique; Foucault; Orestes; *Parrhesia; Political subjectivity; Regimes of truth; Truth-telling*

Résumé

*Cet article repense la parrhèsia—le dire-vrai ouvrant un espace de risque—non pas comme un acte ou une parole souveraine, mais comme une performance collective et incarnée. Prenant l'*Oreste *d'Euripide comme étude de cas, il soutient que le chœur, dans le cadre de cette pièce de théâtre, propose un modèle de parrhèsia rythmique, relationnel et structurellement marginal : non pas une proclamation de la vérité, mais la mise en scène de ses conditions. Face à l'autorité juridique et à l'effondrement épistémique, le chœur ne résout pas la crise, mais lui donne forme. Dans le contexte contemporain, marqué par la dévalorisation de l'enseignement, la répression de la dissidence et l'instrumentalisation de la « liberté d'expression », cet article appelle à une forme parrhèsiastique de recherches fondées sur la proximité, la complicité et le risque structurel. À l'écoute des conditions fragiles et chorégraphiées sous lesquelles la vérité peut encore être verbalisée— et entendue—, cet article propose non seulement une théorie, mais aussi une performance. En tant qu'article inaugural de* Parrhèsia*, il se veut une provocation : un modèle de recherche située, vulnérable, et engagée dans la création de conditions collectives du dire-vrai.*

Mots-clés

Critique; Dire-vrai; Foucault, Orestes*; Parrhèsia; Régimes de vérité; Subjectivité politique*

You dance a dance that is no dance, screaming down the sky in search of justice. . . .

Euripides, *Orestes*.

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1. Introduction

The truth shall not set you free.

Truth has no intrinsic force, no salvific power. It does not care for our freedom—mine or yours, or anyone's. We may, for instance, rehearse statistics documenting the number of Palestinian children in Gaza who have been killed, orphaned, or systematically starved in the ongoing war. But this truth alone—these facts alone—will not save a single life or deliver a single bowl of rice. In a world inundated with the pious performancs of data, evidence, and forensic precision, we confront a stark reality: truth, without human context and affect, too often fails to move or to matter.

This dilemma is both ethically and politically charged. Blaise Pascal once wrote: *la vérité sans la charité est une idole*—truth, without care, is an idol. Here, care is not mere sentimentality but *caritas*: the ethical and affective disposition to hear and to hold the other. Pascal reminds us that truth isn't inherently benevolent; it must be animated in and by relation. Michel Foucault, meanwhile, shifts our attention to structural issues that underpin human relations:

> Each society has its régime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault 1980, 131)

These "regimes"—especially within institutions like law and psychiatry—are not neutral systems of knowledge and care. They are technologies of governance, discursive apparatuses that wield power under the guise of reason, oftentimes weaponizing "truth." These dynamics are especially pronounced in domains such as law and psychiatry, where the conditions of who may speak, who may be heard, and who may be believed are tightly regulated. What happens, for example, when diagnosis precedes testimony, or when legal standing limits the narrative form a speaker may take? These institutions are not merely scenes of truth-telling—they precondition its possibility. In such contexts, truth becomes less an emancipatory force than an instrument of discipline, punishment, and exclusion.

Both Robert Cover and Jacques Derrida have explored this relationship between truth and violence in the legal domain. In "Violence and the Word," Cover contends that "legal interpretation takes place in a field of pain and death" (1992, 203). Judicial pronouncements are not benign articulations of truth; they are acts of force, underwritten by the coercive machinery of the state—incarceration, surveillance, removal, even execution. Derrida, in "Force of Law" (1992), similarly deconstructs the fantasy of legal neutrality, arguing that law's legitimacy rests on an originary act of violence. His reading of *force de loi*—both "the force of law" and "force as law"—exposes the unstable foundation of juridical truth. Though they work in distinct idioms, Cover and Derrida both reveal how institutionalized truth functions less as revelation than as command, less as enlightenment than enforcement and domination.

This essay takes that paradox as its point of departure. If truth-telling is neither intrinsically liberatory nor morally innocent, then we must ask: what conditions are necessary for truth to *matter?* Whether medico-legal violence is symbolic, proximate, or material, it resides less in *what* is said in the name of truth than in what is *done* in and by the saying. The distinction here—between content and form, fact and force, naming and doing—marks the performative dimension of truth and truth-telling: the moment where language doesn't simply describe, but acts. In J. L. Austin's (1962) terms, this is when saying makes it so, when our words say what they do and *do* what they say. Hence, the performative violence of the word: "I sentence you. . . ."

I return to this below, but for now I advance the elementary claim that our freedom—mine and yours—must attend to another kind of truth: one that cares, one that risks, one that agonizes over the conditions in and by which a voice may speak and—crucially—may be heard. This brings us, tentatively, toward a definition of parrhesia.

2. Toward a Definition of Parrhesia

Parrhesia resists easy definition—not simply because it's an ancient Greek concept (or better: a speech act) that resists contemporary translations, but because attempts at definition often miss the point entirely. If we seek to pin down parrhesia as a matter of content—a fixed "truth" that can be named and known—then we lose sight of its force. Such an epistemological approach asks what parrhesia *is*, rather than how it operates or what it *does*. It's not enough to equate parrhesia with "free speech." We know too well how this phrase is weaponized—not to liberate, but to silence dissent, curtail expression, and enforce what passes for common sense. To grasp parrhesia, we must turn from abstractions to the context in which speech occurs: its audience, its stakes, its risks.

Parrhesia is often translated as "frankness of speech," as if its power lay in sheer transparency or plainness. But this too is a fiction. Words—like facts—do not speak for themselves. Language is never neutral or purely instrumental: it's always inflected by history, ideology, tone, embodiment, and force. The parrhesiastic speech/act is never free-floating. It's embedded in a wider story—often tacitly accepted, sometimes violently enforced. There is no parrhesia without a scene: a speaker exposed, a relation of power at play, a moment in which something true must be said, and saying it entails risks.

Foucault famously writes: "In *parrhesia*, the speaker uses his [or her] freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy" (2001, 19–20). In his final lectures at the Collège de France, he emphasizes that parrhesia isn't rooted in truth as a transcendental value, but in the ethical hazard of speech—speech that matters *because* it risks. Parrhesia, he writes, "makes the form of existence a way of making truth itself visible in one's acts, one's body, the way one dresses, and in the way one conducts oneself and lives" (2011, 172). Truth becomes force only in relation: to an audience, a power structure, a scene of potential dispossession or death. Parrhesia isn't powerful because of what it says, but because of the cost of saying it—of living it, and

standing by it—when the consequences are real. Foucault's parrhesiast doesn't "possess" truth; they endure it, especially when their utterance interrupts the distribution of accepted discourse or regime of truth.

In institutions like law and psychiatry, truth must be credentialled, certified, sworn, or diagnosed. But these institutions derive their force not from truth itself, but from their power to harm: to surveil, confine, drug, criminalize, remove. Truth alone doesn't act. Rather, it is the legal and clinical fictions—declared, codified, enforced—that make truth "stick," that render it actionable or injurious. These fictions structure the world such that some utterances become admissible, legible, and effective, while others are foreclosed. Parrhesia doesn't reclaim truth in some purist moral sense; it intervenes in the conditions that render truth audible and potent in the first place. It isn't the courage of truth as essence—it's the courage to reconfigure the scene in which truth becomes possible. Against dominant legal and clinical fictions, parrhesia *fictions otherwise*—in an active verbal sense—knowing that there is no *logos* without *mythos*—no "fact" without a narrative movement that mediates and lends it force.

But here we encounter a contemporary difficulty. For the Greeks, parrhesia involved existential risk: one spoke "freely" under threat of exile, disgrace, or death. Today, however, risk has been bureaucratized and financialized. It's measured, calculated, hedged, and translated into the language of insurance and liability. As risk becomes an actuarial "science," we lose our sense of what it means to risk the self. In contemporary political life—particularly under regimes of disinformation, like Donald Trump's—the costs of truth-telling persist, but they're harder to see. And repeated studies have demonstrated that even after being exposed to the truth, misinformation nevertheless continues to shape human perception (see Lewandowsky et al. 2012). Parrhesia drowns in a sea of memes, irony, and ambient cruelty, where "free speech" and hate speech blur and battle in the culture wars. The parrhesiastic act, when it occurs, may no longer be legible. In a climate where everything is performative and nothing sticks, parrhesia is flattened into spectacle or dismissed as incivility, extremism, or narcissism.

And yet this is precisely the impasse that demands our attention. Parrhesia isn't the voice that speaks from outside power, but from *within* it—as one already implicated in, and often complicit with, structural violence and biopolitical death-making. It doesn't proclaim truth from a comfortable distance. It exposes the speaker in the very act of speaking. It's not the armour of truth, but the vulnerability truth produces. Parrhesia isn't the sovereign voice that declares; it's the trembling voice that risks everything to say what must be said, knowing it may be punished, discredited, or never heard at all.

In what follows, I turn to Euripides's *Orestes*, a tragedy in which speech, risk, madness, and juridical power unfold not as abstract principles, but as embodied drama. Here, the conditions for hearing truth are rendered unstable and fraught—and it's the chorus, not the tragic hero, that may offer us a key to what parrhesia demands today, and what it might still make possible.

3. Public Crisis and the Limits of Democratic Speech: Euripides's *Orestes* as Case Study

This section turns to Euripides's *Orestes* not for its narrative content, but for its tragic form—as a dramatized argument about the conditions under which truth-telling becomes fraught, fragile, or newly thinkable. Greek tragedy, unlike most modern drama, included a chorus: a collective of 12–15 singers and dancers who remained onstage throughout, positioned physically between the actors and the audience. The chorus didn't simply comment on the action; it structured its reception. In *Orestes*, I argue, the chorus intervenes rhetorically in a collapsing political world—not by delivering truth, but by shaping the space in which truth might still be heard. The play as a whole stages the breakdown of moral, juridical, and civic authority, yet the chorus functions as a formal counterpoint: not proclaiming parrhesia, but holding open the promise of its legibility. My aim here is to read the play as an allegory of parrhesiastic possibility—where the chorus performs a structural and affective function that reflects on and bolsters the conditions for truth-telling within a broken polis.

Orestes, produced in 408 BCE during the final years of the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE), opens in the wake of a divinely sanctioned crime: Orestes has murdered his mother Clytemnestra at the command of the god Apollo. Now gripped by madness and confined to a sickbed, he lies under the care of his sister Electra while awaiting trial in Argos. The action unfolds in a vacuum of moral and institutional authority. The gods are largely silent. The law is unclear. And the city must decide whether Orestes and Electra—accomplice to the crime—should live or die. The siblings are ultimately condemned in absentia and, facing execution, hatch a desperate political coup: they plot to murder Helen of Troy, take her daughter hostage, and upend the civic order they once served. Apollo intervenes only at the play's conclusion, descending *deus ex machina* to impose an implausible, absurd peace. But by then, the damage is done: familial, divine, and juridical authority have all failed. For Euripides's audiences, the tragic myth of Orestes was already well known, but as Anne Carson argues, Euripides leaves "the external structure of the myth and the traditional form of the play intact," but nevertheless "allows everything inside to go a tiny bit awry," resulting in "a mad tension between content and form" (Carson in Euripides 2008, n.p.). What *Orestes* stages, then, isn't moral resolution, but disintegration. The drama unfolds not as a search for justice but as a reckoning with its impossibility—and in this space, the chorus emerges not as background but as formal interlocutor.

The only explicit mention of parrhesia in the play comes not from the main characters but from a Messenger, who recounts the events at Orestes and Electra's trial. He condemns a speaker's *kamathēsis parrhesia*—"ignorant outspokenness," a corrupted form of free speech that is the opposite (*ka-*) of learning or ethical seriousness (*mathēsis*). As Foucault notes, this is "the only passage in Euripides where the word parrhesia is used in a pejorative sense" (2001, 57). Here, parrhesia isn't a virtue but a danger: speech without wisdom, risk without responsibility. The moment registers a broader democratic anxiety, both then and now: in a polity where everyone has the right to speak, how do we discern whose speech carries truth? "The relation to truth,"

Foucault observes, "can no longer simply be established by pure frankness or sheer courage, for the relation now requires education or, more generally, some sort of personal training" (2001, 73). In a democracy "where everyone is equally entitled to give his [or her] opinion," the question becomes not simply *who* will speak, but *whose* speech will be recognized as true (ibid.). The tragedy thus dramatizes not only legal and familial crisis, but a breakdown in public discernment—a crisis of truth-telling itself.

This crisis permeates the play's entire structure. The gods are absent or duplicitous; the citizenry is indecisive; the law is incoherent. Every utterance—Orestes's, Electra's, the Messenger's—is haunted by instability. What is at stake isn't simply *what* truths are spoken, but whether any shared structure or *logos* remains through which those truths can be received. The problem isn't simply the lack of truth, but the erosion of those conditions that would allow truth to *matter*. And it's here that the chorus becomes indispensable—not as a speaker of truth, but as a formal and affective presence that makes the crisis legible. The chorus doesn't resolve the instability; it listens, absorbs, and reframes it. It provides a kind of civic resonance chamber, registering the dissonance and disarray not to neutralize it, but to hold it in public space.

As Claude Calame writes, the chorus expresses "the truth of the city" and functions as "the organ of civic and collective expression" (2020, 776–777). It doesn't correct the protagonists' errors or restore harmony. Instead, it performs the difficult work of *witnessing*—a work neither neutral nor passive. In this sense, the chorus in *Orestes* models something foundational to parrhesia: not the heroic voice of the lone truth-teller, but the social and rhetorical conditions that make truth-telling possible. If parrhesia is to survive the collapse of institutions—and if truth-telling is to remain possible at democracy's end, where everyone has a platform to broadcast his or her opinions—it will require not only the courage to speak, but a scene—choric, collective, broken yet receptive—within which speech might land and be heard.

4. The Chorus as a Form of Parrhesia

If the trial scene in *Orestes* exposes the democratic crisis of speech—where the right to speak does not guarantee the capacity to be heard—then the chorus enacts a different kind of truth game altogether. Not juridical, not sovereign, and not individual, the chorus rehearses a mode of parrhesia that is structurally marginal and aesthetically disruptive. Where the Messenger's account diagnoses the conditions under which truth becomes unintelligible, the chorus gives form to that unintelligibility: it voices, moves, and sounds the crisis that eludes resolution. What emerges isn't a contrast between the chorus and the citizen-assembly, but a shift in the site and *form* of critical speech—a turn from the discursive to the embodied, from declarative speech to rhythmic disturbance.

Traditionally, parrhesia is imagined as an act of individual courage: a lone speaker risking everything to tell the truth. But as we have seen, this figure is incomplete. Truth-telling is unintelligible without a receptive social field—one in which speech can be metabolized, contested, and made meaningful. Greek tragedy offers a collective figure for that field: the

chorus. Often dismissed as ornamental or redundant, the chorus can instead be read as the condition under which parrhesia might be registered. It doesn't act in the juridical sense; it neither issues verdicts nor dictates outcomes. Instead, it attends. It listens, laments, echoes. It sustains a distributed attentiveness—a resonance chamber—through which speech that is unbearable or incoherent might still matter. Entangled in the contradictions of law, madness, justice, and kinship, the chorus does not resolve tension; it incarnates it. It oscillates between horror and empathy, doubt and dread. It doesn't proclaim truth, but it marks its force—its fracture, its cost, its collapse. The chorus is not itself parrhesiastic, but it performs in and as the space where parrhesia can be felt.

What I am suggesting, then, is that the chorus dramatizes parrhesia not through its semantic content, but through its formal function—its rhythmic, aesthetic, and structural role. The chorus on stage mediates, both literally and figuratively—audience and protagonist, inside and outside, sanity and madness, truth and fiction, safety and danger. The choral voice isn't univocal or sovereign; it's fractured, plural, and affectively unstable. As Claude Calame writes, "the choral voice is all the more multiform in that neither the social identity of the poet . . . nor that of the audience . . . correspond to the composite, generally marginal status of the choral group" (2020, 783). This becomes especially clear in moments of lyric rupture, where the chorus breaks from narrative progression and erupts in apocalyptic lament. "O racing raging goddesses! / You dance a dance that is no dance," they cry, "screaming / down the sky in search of justice, bowling / down the sky in search of blood!" (lines 318ff., Carson translation). This is not plot but *paroxysm*. The utterance tears the fabric of the fiction and registers the crisis overtaking both polis and cosmos.

Later, their lyric turns elegiac and accusatory: "Huge wealth, huge virtue, huge Greek pride / has turned away from happiness / for the house of Atreus . . . / blood for blood / endlessly being paid back. / Atrocity disguised as good" (lines 807ff., Carson translation). These lines do not advance the story; they expose the ancestral violence that saturates the present. The chorus doesn't "speak truth to power" in any sloganized sense. It *sings* within the ruins. Here, the chorus names the collapse of order not as a problem to be solved, but as a wound to be held in collective attention. It doesn't offer coherence; it refuses it. This refusal isn't passive—it's a structural interruption that carries the formal logic of *parabasis*.

Parabasis, a term from Old Comedy, names the moment when the chorus breaks character to address the audience directly—often critically, politically, and against genre expectations. We might think of it as the ancient counterpart to the breaking of the fourth wall in cinema today. It's a stepping aside that is also a stepping forth: a theatrical disobedience in which the chorus interrupts representation to speak from within and against it. Though not formally a *parabasis* in the comic sense, the choral eruptions in *Orestes* carry similar rhetorical force. They are moments when the chorus exceeds its narrative role and becomes a public witness. *Parabasis*, then, offers a classical precedent for understanding parrhesia not merely as content or proposition, but as *form*: rupture, address, and exposure.

This connection isn't incidental. Both *parabasis* and parrhesia mark a structural insubordination—a refusal to stay in place. Parrhesia steps out of order not simply to oppose power, but to disturb its very frame. The chorus enacts this disturbance not by

delivering truth, but by disrupting the logic of coherence and narrative closure. This is parrhesia not as proposition, but as rhythm: a syntax of interruption, a refusal to let violence be smoothed over by form.

5. Choric Performance and Embodied Risk

Recent musical and performative evidence reinforces this reading. A papyrus fragment, first discovered in the nineteenth century and recently reexamined by Armand D'Angour (2024), contains a portion of the *Orestes* chorus with musical notation—possibly in Euripides's own hand. The fragment shows that this choral lament was not only spoken, but sung and danced, marked by mimetic melody and rhythmic *stigmai* most likely indicating gestures, footfalls, or bodily lifts. The word ναβακχεύει—"he leaps in frenzy"—coincides with a sudden melodic leap, while κατολοφύρομαι—"I grieve"—is underscored by a descending melodic cadence. As D'Angour argues, the chorus didn't merely describe disorder; it performed it. Visually situated between audience and protagonist, the chorus reframed the scene through rhythm and movement. Parrhesia here is not propositional but gestural, not epistemological but embodied. Truth is enacted not in what the chorus says, but in how it sounds, moves, and is placed—in a liminal position between speech and silence, audience and action. The chorus reflects: "What should we do—take the news to the town? / Or keep silence—that's safer isn't it?" (lines 1539–40, Carson translation). This performative hesitation is itself parrhesiastic: not as declarative bravery, but as the dramatization of speech's risk, cost, and fragility.

Significantly, the *Orestes* chorus is composed entirely of women—figures without formal standing in the Athenian polis, excluded from legal speech and civic deliberation. Though likely performed by men, the dramatic fiction of a collective female voice enables a counter-politics from below. As Helene Foley argues, "gender is not the only important variable" in the composition of tragic choruses; "distinctions of age, place, or function are also crucial" (2003, 13). Claude Calame adds that choruses are often composed of "women, old men, slaves, or strangers"—groups who occupy marginal positions both socially and ritually (2020, 777). The choral voice is thus defined less by its demographic makeup than by its structural position: excluded from political power, yet central to the performative mediation of truth. Choruses may lack juridical force, but they inform social and ethical meaning through movement, language, and sound.

This marginality enables a distinct form of intervention. The common understanding, as Foley notes, is that choruses "must be 'marginal' because choruses, in contrast to tragic characters, cannot, by the conventions of the tragic stage, initiate, control, or take action" (2003, 14). But this assumption is reductive, she argues. Foley cautions against correlating gender with passivity: "gender does not correlate clearly with inactivity or lack of assertiveness in cases that defy the supposed norm" (2003, 17). Indeed, Euripides's choruses frequently intervene—affectively, narratively, and ritually. In *Orestes*, the chorus not only comments on events but reframes them. They bear witness as Electra—not Orestes—emerges as the play's strategic force, and they remain present as violence escalates. Even as they lament, they do not disengage.

As Foley further observes, Euripides often places his choruses at risk: "his interest in suffering victims leads him to flirt repeatedly with jeopardizing the survival of and stressing the pain and uncertainty of his chorus" (2003, 17). In *Orestes*, the chorus doesn't simply speak about suffering; it shares in it. Their parrhesia isn't that of the truth-teller but of the vulnerable witness. The chorus becomes dangerous—not because it declares forbidden truths, but because it insists on attending to what others disavow. In doing so, it interrupts the patriarchal logics of retributive justice with counter-rhetorics of exposure, grief, and ethical restraint.

This is parrhesia not as declarative authority, but as lyrical dissent: a speech without legal force, yet charged with affective power. As Calame notes, the chorus often serves as "the ideal spectator," transmitting the emotional and ethical charge of the drama to the audience (2020, 789). If we imagine parrhesia only as heroic risk, we miss this other mode—choral, distributed, and marginal. A form of embodied truth-telling that refuses coherence, refuses closure, but insists on being felt.

This choric parrhesia offers a model for critical scholarship today. Scholars writing in the pages of this journal may not be sovereigns, judges, or lawmakers. They may not decide who lives or dies, who is silenced or heard. But they listen. They amplify. They reframe. They write. They labour to make speech matter—to keep dangerous truths from falling into silence. Their work doesn't always resolve, but it disturbs. It interrupts official knowledges with subjugated knowledges, with witnessing, with structural disobedience.

This is what the chorus does. And this, too, is parrhesia.

A journal like this one—*Parrhèsia*—might be understood as one such stage: not a platform for spectacle, nor a repository for sovereign declarations, but a fragile and necessary scene in which the conditions for truth-telling are rehearsed and kept alive. It's easy to romanticize parrhesia as dramatic rupture or heroic dissent. But much of the labour that sustains it is quiet, slow, and unspectacular: fact-checking, documenting, editing, peer reviewing, listening. Sometimes the work of parrhesia takes the form of publishing data that may seem inert on its own—statistics, clinical records, transcripts—but which, when entered into the public record, may irrupt into and reframe dominant narratives. Sometimes these facts will be ignored. But sometimes, one hopes, they'll be taken up by others, metabolized into future actions, or serve as counter-memories against official forgetting.

If we seek to embody parrhesia today, we must be critical about parrhesia's gendered inheritance. In the ancient Greek world, parrhesia was bound to the concept of *andreia*—courage, yes, but specifically "manly" courage, rooted in the word *anēr* (man, as distinguished from woman). "For the Greeks," Foucault reminds us, "courage is a virile quality which women were said not to possess" (2001, 67). But I've invoked Euripides in this essay precisely because he disrupts this norm. Not only is the chorus in *Orestes* composed of women, but Electra is arguably the play's most forceful and directive figure. She orchestrates the action, commands the chorus, insists on her complicity in the matricide, and refuses recourse to divine appeals. When Orestes begs her not to "unman" him (line 1031, *anandrían*) with her lamentations, she responds not with an emotional outburst but with a cool rationality even in grief: "We're about to die. I cannot not groan. / To love life is a pitiful thing but all mortals do" (lines 1033–34, Carson translation). If parrhesia has historically been coded male, *Orestes* invites us to engender a different figure beyond the constraints of "masculine" virtue.

6. Critical Scholarship as a Chorus of Dissent

If Euripides's *Orestes* teaches us anything, it's that truth doesn't arrive triumphant, intact, or secure. It comes disfigured. It comes dancing a dance that is no dance. And it arrives not from the gods or the sovereign, but from below—from a chorus of those without authority, without standing, without speech rights. The chorus in *Orestes* offers more than commentary: it's the ethical pulse of the drama, a structure of witnessing, interruption, and echo. The chorus sings not to resolve, but to disturb. It listens not as a passive audience, but as a medium through which something unbearable might still be made audible—even as it calls attention to its own mediating, and remediating, role. It performs parrhesia not by proclaiming truth, but by insisting—bodily, rhythmically, communally—that something must be said, even if no one is listening. As medium, it becomes the condition of possibility for any message.

This, too, is the work of critical scholarship today.

Not to speak as the hero, protagonists in our own self-promotion. Not to command or resolve. But to reframe, to echo, to interrupt. Humbly. We are not—or not only—the speakers of truth. We are its chorus: bearing witness, giving shape, sounding out the conditions under which truth might still be received. "The organ of civic and collective expression," as Claude Calame describes the chorus, scholarship becomes a form of dissident—and dissonant—resonance. To write in the mode of the chorus is to dissent structurally: not from a place of sovereign authority, but from within the tangle of proximity, implication, and complicity. It's to enact parrhesia not as heroic utterance, but as distributed risk—a rhythm of fragility that dares to persist. Speech/acts in this register don't belong to a lone speaker or sovereign subject. Scholarship, like the chorus, is communal, collaborative, conversational, vulnerable. We speak without knowing where our words will land or what difference they will make. But we speak into an imagined community of reception—into the hope of a justice yet to come (*à venir*, to invoke Derrida).

I have proposed the chorus as a model for critical scholarship because it dramatizes the fraught conditions under which truth may be voiced, heard, and held. It also signals how important it is for us to *fiction otherwise*—in an active verbal sense; indeed, Euripides reminds us that sometimes the truth is most potent, most enduring, precisely *as* fiction. *Orestes* is not "truthful" about the tragic story of Orestes (the myth was already well known), but scholars agree that in its time the play did make a powerful truth claim about the state of Athenian democracy, justice, and truth itself. And, for a moment, the play transports us into another scene so that we might return to our own—our time, our institutions, our complicities—with new attunement. The chorus isn't only an ancient form—it's a contemporary figure.

This essay, too, aims to perform what it describes. It isn't offered from above, but from within the very chorus it summons and attends. I've tried in these pages not to speak as one who possesses truth, as if from the sanctity of some authorial solitude, but as one who rehearses the very risk and relationality that parrhesia demands, moving tentatively, in rhythm with others, attuned to fragility, open to misstep. The risk, here, isn't in declaring the truth, but in addressing the space where something might yet be heard.

Of course, the scene of address is never neutral. To perform parrhesia today is to do so in a landscape shaped by suppression and spectacle, where truth-telling isn't only precarious but often violently disqualified, deceitfully discredited, or systematically dismantled. This essay doesn't claim to stand outside the institutional architectures it critiques. It participates, and it struggles with its complicity. This isn't a claim to authority, but a signal of urgency—a movement from reflection to tentative, choreographed response.

And today, we must choreograph.

Choreography, then, isn't an afterthought but is a precondition for the work of a chorus. In Greek tragedy, the chorus moves—not only rhetorically, but bodily—on stage: shifting formations, pacing the orchestra, responding to tone and tempo. These gestures are not incidental; they are arguments in motion. The chorus choreographs attention and affect, creating a structure within which crisis becomes legible. Parrhesia, as I've argued, depends not only on what is said, but on *how* bodies are arranged to hear it.

In a moment when entire fields of study are being dismantled, when Departments of Education are shuttered, when DEI initiatives are banned, when universities are held hostage to political diktats, when climate science and queer life are under siege—this isn't just a policy shift. It's a grievous assault on the conditions of truth-telling itself. What we're witnessing is a counter-choreography: a state-orchestrated effort to defund and disarticulate the very spaces where difficult truths must be spoken. Meanwhile, of course, Nazi salutes are once again normalized, and empathy, according to Elon Musk, is "a bug in Western civilization" that is being "weaponized by the woke" (Wong 2025). But rather than amass an archive of grief and grievances, we must focus on ways to sustain collective life.

In this landscape, the discourse of "free speech" has been co-opted by the Right to embolden cruelty, disinformation, propaganda, and authoritarian control. But the Left, too, falters. Moral outrage becomes performative. Identity becomes brand. We conflate vulnerability with virtue, and critique with injury. We post tirelessly on social media; victimhood becomes meme. Too often, we mistake visibility for action. But none of this is movement. None of it sustains the relational risk that parrhesia demands.

For parrhesia to matter, it must move beyond the figure of the liberal individual—the lone truth-teller, the defiant subject, the speaker in the so-called free marketplace of ideas. Such sovereignty is a ruse. This is not our scene. The "market," after all, is never neutral: markets are governed by access, capital, and control. Not all speech circulates equally. Some is censored before it can arrive; other speech is echoed endlessly through dominant channels. The liberal ideal of expressive sovereignty—where every voice has equal value and equal risk—is purblind to the structural violence that underwrites epistemic legitimacy.

Parrhesia isn't just about speaking up; it's about disturbing the regime of truth that determines what is and is not sayable in the first place. And this requires more than courage. It requires structures of care, scenes of reception, rhythms of collective rehearsal. A choreography in chorus, parrhesia is a song sung in the contrapuntal resonance of lamentation and sometimes rage—a dissonant call that attends its response, that resists the dominant chords of white ethno-nationalism, racialized and gendered violence, dispossession, and death. Here is the chorus from *Orestes* once again:

Blessedness has flown.
Envy came down from the gods
and a bloody vote from citizens.
O you human beings made of tears,
look how your fate goes astray from your hopes.
Grief upon grief,
the life of mortals is a line no ruler can draw.

(lines 972ff., Carson translation)

If we are to choreograph dissent, let us remember: bodies work with what is at hand. They feel with and learn from other bodies, both friendly and hostile (Foster 2003, 412). Choreography, in this sense, isn't simply motion; it is attunement. It is the trained responsiveness to another's presence, pain, or resistance. Grief upon grief. As Susan Leigh Foster writes, such moments "vivify the forcefulness and vulnerability of everyone involved. They make evident the range of kinaesthetic responsiveness exercised by all bodies in response to one another" (2003, 412). To choreograph is to move with—not over—others. It is a pedagogy of mutual strain, of collective pacing, of altered rhythm when blessedness has flown.

A scholarship that choreographs parrhesia doesn't assert; it assembles. It doesn't declare the truth; it holds the space for it to be heard. It works not only in the clinic, the lecture hall, or courtroom, but in editing rooms, peer reviews, office hours, and late-night drafts—scenes where truth is not yet spoken, but rehearsed. And it remembers that, sometimes, the most powerful forms of dissent are not shouted from the stage, but sustained quietly off-scene.

Parrhesia lives not in certainty, but in resonance. It is for you, when your fate goes astray from your hopes. It moans, it repeats, it fragments, it sings. Its dance is no dance, and yet it dances all the same—as refusal, as celebration, as care, as survival. It is a mode of being, a fragile force sustained through sound, gesture, witness, and breath. And we are called to join the refrain: to hold open the space, to write and speak and live in ways that nurture the very conditions by which truths might move—and move us in turn.

We are not the sovereign speakers of truth.
We are its chorus.
And we are force in motion.

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