

# Peripheral vision



In Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, the Chorus of Agamemnon and Cassandra share several common traits. The chorus, a large group made up of miscellaneous elders, would, as individuals, all function as secondary characters.

Cumulatively these individuals create one main character that offers supplementary information and commentary to the normal dialogue of Agamemnon. Cassandra, too, plays a secondary role making her entrance towards the end of the play, crying her last prophecy, and finally meeting her end by Clytemnestra according to it. Additionally, Cassandra provides the audience with extra information that could not be obtained from the common dialogue. These entities function differently to expand the audience's overall peripheral vision of the play. Cassandra and the chorus oppose each other in time reference, in acceptance of their individual fates, and in dialogical content. Together, these oppositions give the audience a brilliant panoramic portrayal of the play. The logical progression of thoughts in both the strophes of the chorus and the prophetic song of Cassandra oppose each other and tease the audience with dramatic irony, serving to illuminate the helplessness of mortals and emphasize their dependence and subjection to the gods. The choral songs of Agamemnon all begin with an air of certainty, and gradually progress toward an air of uncertainty. (Meineck, xxxvii) In the choral song preceding the coming of the herald, for instance, the chorus commences with the recognition that Zeus has "stretched [his] bow against Paris, [his] arrow never fell short, nor flew, wasted, beyond the stars," (365). This is a confident and positive assertion, that Paris and the Trojans received what they deserved from Zeus for whisking Helen away. Only forty lines later, the tone of the choral song takes a turn toward the bitter and unsure notion that the Trojans were not the only ones to suffer,

that Helen “[took] with her a dowry of destruction” (407) among the Greeks as well. This ambiguous conception of Zeus’s idea of justice breeds a sense of uncertainty. Members of the chorus ask themselves why Zeus has punished them so bitterly alongside the Trojans, and feel that “ there is something hidden in the darkness,” (460). This movement from confidence and celebration to uncertainty and despair contradicts the movement of Cassandra’s prophetic song. Upon arrival at the cursed House of Atreus, she is filled with a sense of confusion and uncertainty, crying, “ Where have you brought me? What House is this?” (1087). Gradually, her combined gift and curse of prophecy puts the future together in her mind, until she reaches the conclusion that “ the double-edged cleaver waits for [her]” (1149). Though the initial shock of this destiny drives her into a white rage, she finally reaches a state of confidence, accepting her fate solemnly and with grace. Cassandra decides that she “[does] not pity [her]self, [she] [pities] mankind” (1330). Thus, Cassandra and the chorus ride opposite movements between certainty and uncertainty. This dialogue between the chorus and Cassandra deepens the contrast between the two, as the chorus acts as a foil to demonstrate Cassandra’s most unfortunate curse: the chorus finds her prophecy “ hard to understand” (1254-55). The stage is set for the ultimate dramatic irony; the audience understands what Cassandra is prophesizing, but the chorus cannot. This dramatic irony accentuates the helplessness of humankind, represented by the chorus, and Apollo’s curse on Cassandra displays the influence and sheer power of the gods over mankind. In this way, secondary characters Cassandra and the chorus function differently in the text, but when viewed simultaneously, offer a more all-embracing perspective of the play. The Chorus’s references to the past as well as

Cassandra's prophecies of the future sandwich the present and give the audience a full timeline, allowing it to put into perspective the common dialogue of the play's main characters. In the dawn of the play, the chorus immediately steps in and begins to give a detailed summary of the trials and tribulations of the Trojan War. In some 200 lines, the chorus manages to give the present in which the play takes place some context in relation to the Trojan War, and manages to set up the tone of anxiety that will preside for the remainder of the play. Cassandra's prophecies, too, evoke a feeling of restless unease in the audience. These prophecies extend beyond the curtains of Agamemnon, however, to the following two tragic plays of Oresteia, when "[Orestes] will kill his mother and avenge his murdered father" (1281). In Agamemnon it is easy to sympathize with Clytemnestra's maternal love-driven revenge, but Cassandra's prophecy serves as a dark reminder in the back of the audience's mind that her crime was in all truth nothing more than "bloody slaughter" (1307). In this way the chorus helps to shape the audience's interpretation of Clytemnestra's crime in preparation for the following two plays in which Clytemnestra is viewed as a criminal who Orestes was justified in exacting his revenge on. Together, Cassandra and the chorus provide the audience with a peripheral vision of both the past and future, thus encompassing the present of the play and giving the audience the ability to contextualize the motives of the characters. Secondary characters Cassandra and the chorus both relate supplemental information that would not otherwise be related in the common dialogue, but they go about sharing this information in two different styles: the chorus speaks more in the tongue of a narrator whereas Cassandra dramatizes her prophecies, rallying the emotions of the audience. Each of these styles is

effective in relaying the pivotal information. The chorus provides an excellent opening to the play, relating the facts of the Trojan War in what could be likened to a history lesson. This sets the parameters for the play, giving the audience a time reference and introducing important characters. Without this information, the average play attendee would have no perspective of the play's parameters. Cassandra's hysterical prophesizing does just the opposite by creating a dramatic suspense; the audience knows that murder will take place, but one could only speculate about the gritty details of the murder. The chorus thus creates a solid foundation of fact for the audience to make reference to, allowing the uncertainty of Cassandra's prophecy to rattle the hearts of a captive audience. Cassandra and the chorus demonstrate the importance of secondary characters in ancient Greek drama. No characters are truly secondary, as we think of them in modern drama, for each individual has a very specific purpose and shapes the audience's interpretation of the plot. Even "extras" (the chorus) have a crucial role in the play. This may indicate that the ancient Grecian culture, which the plays mirrored, valued the individual and acknowledged that each person contributed something to society. This is at the root of the democratic system of justice, which is introduced in *The Furies*: the power of the individual is not a power to be reckoned with.