
DIDASKALIA 

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Didaskalia (διδασκαλία) is the term used since ancient times to describe the work a playwright did to teach his chorus and actors the play. The official records of the dramatic festivals in Athens were the διδασκαλῖαι. *Didaskalia* now furthers the scholarship of the ancient performance.

Didaskalia is an English-language, online publication about the performance of Greek and Roman drama, dance, and music. We publish double blind, peer-reviewed scholarship on performance as well as reviews of the professional activity of artists and scholars who work on ancient drama.

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Ellen McLaughlin's *Oresteia*

Directed by Michael Kahn
April 30–June 2, 2019
Shakespeare Theater Company

Washington, D.C.

Reviewed by Jocelyn R. Moore

The University of Virginia

This year Michael Kahn concluded a 33-year streak of producing classic theater for modern audiences at the Shakespeare Theater Company in Washington, D.C. Given Kahn's experience in condensing and fusing multi-play performances, it is perhaps not surprising that he chose to tackle Aeschylus' *Oresteia* – a longtime aspiration – as his *finale*.¹ To adapt three plays for the 2-hour-and-20-minute production time, he invited one of the most productive current adapters of Greek tragedy, Ellen McLaughlin, to produce "Ellen McLaughlin's *The Oresteia*."² This title reflected not an abridgment but a critical rewriting of Aeschylus' trilogy. Not only was the language freely adapted, the action was also re-framed, sometimes through other Greek tragedies. In particular, two central features of Aeschylus' dramaturgy were re-harnessed with thorough appreciation of their power: the house, whose imposing presence shaped the action,³ and the chorus, whose members were arguably the production's central characters.

One 15-minute intermission cut the trilogy in half between the first and second of three acts (my term). The first half followed the action of *Agamemnon*. Scenes where Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, and Iphigenia confronted the possibility of Iphigenia's murder – as in Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* – were added in place of *Agamemnon*'s choral parodos, which retells events at Aulis (*Agamemnon* 40–249). In place of lengthy lyric songs were the chorus' more direct and briefer commentary on the action of the Atreid family. Cut entirely were the messenger's and Aegisthus' scenes (*Ag* 503–680; 1577–1673). The production's second half concentrated about two-thirds of its playing time on the action of *Libation Bearers* and one-third on *Eumenides*, separated by a brief pause. *Libation Bearers* is already much shorter than *Agamemnon*; the STC production excised the entrapment of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra and directly built up to the matricide. Most heavily re-envisioned was *Eumenides*: a much briefer concluding act eliminated both Delphi and Athens (and Apollo and Athena), and the chorus members themselves formed an informal tribunal.

McLaughlin has suggested that she removed the gods from Aeschylus' trilogy,⁴ and in this production the chorus' critical perspective seemed to replace divine governance of action. While Aeschylus' chorus plays one of the largest choral roles in all Greek tragedy, its members shift identities in each play, changing from old Argive men (*Agamemnon*) to slave women (*Libation Bearers*), to Furies and Athenian jurors (*Eumenides*). McLaughlin rolled all these into a single sustained identity that allowed the chorus' characters to transform ethically over the course of the dramas. In the absence of Aeschylus' divine and political authorities at Delphi and Athens, the chorus was able to shift from passive spectatorship of violence to active responsibility.

Visually the chorus members were diverse in age, sex, and skin color. Matching muted uniform-smocks and head wraps gestured towards a lower social status – at several times in the play they were referred to as “the help.” Each had a rag and a bucket for their job of cleaning the house. The chorus did not sing or dance or speak in extended unison, but they did repeat phrases and gestures. From their first words members spoke in turn and among themselves in a generally measured stichomythia that became tense when the chorus members clashed in the final act. Similarly, the chorus moved with informal coordination interspersed by moments of choreography; one of the most impactful was when the chorus members doused Orestes with buckets of blood.

To open the play, a scream came from a plain, bleak, two-story wooden house (the *skene* of the ancient theater) that towered over an uncurtained stage. “Happens every night,” responded the watchman atop its roof. Unlike Aeschylus’ watchman, Kahn and McLaughlin’s watchman saw no torchlight and instead voiced skepticism of the feasibility of the Troy-to-Argos torch relay that Clytemnestra claimed to have arranged. “A manmade star,” he said, “seems crazy to me.” Instead he gazed at the backdrop of a starry sky (perhaps half lit by morning sunrise) and substituted for Clytemnestra’s torch communication from Troy a metatheatrical reflection on the act of drawing stories from distant celestial, stellar bodies of myth. “They’re even older than the gods, the real stars. And each one’s got a story. I tell their stories to myself all night to keep from closing my eyes. The skies are full of blood and jealousy. Long tricky narratives, elbowing each other up there, fizzing away and telling themselves.”

The prologue thus established a critical counternarrative to Clytemnestra’s (and perhaps reflected McLaughlin’s own poetics of revision). After delivering his monologue, the watchman became one of the entering chorus who watched and reacted to everything that happened to the house before finally involving themselves at the production’s end. Some of the chorus’ first lines after their entrance described their position as audience for the news, stories, and nightmares that Agamemnon’s family rehearsed for them, and asked why they continually found themselves helpless to respond. As this production framed it, the chorus had to work themselves up to an active critique and intervention into the story.



*Clytemnestra attends to Iphigenia’s nightmares about her death at Aulis
(photo courtesy of the Shakespeare Theatre Company).*

Glamorous in a jacquard robe, Clytemnestra (Kelly Curran) emerged from the house to tell the chorus that she had screamed in response to her nightmare of Iphigenia's sacrifice. As the chorus listened to the dream, flashbacks from this event replayed on stage, evoking Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*. While Aeschylus' chorus in *Agamemnon* narrate the events at Aulis in terms of unfixed mythical time where human decisions are terrifying but overdetermined (40–263), STC's reenactment of these events positioned Clytemnestra, the chorus, and the audience as interpreters from some of the perspectives that Euripides' play emphasizes. *Iphigenia at Aulis* questions the necessity of killing Iphigenia and depicts the possibility that Agamemnon may *not* have sacrificed his daughter, a past contrafactual that Aeschylus' account more or less rules out. In the STC production, the adolescent Iphigenia recounted to her mother as nightmares what Aeschylus' chorus describes as past, Agamemnon was torn between the demands of leadership and fatherhood (as in his scene with Menelaus in *Iphigenia at Aulis* 302–542), and Clytemnestra violently resisted the claimed necessity of sacrifice (as in *IA* 1145–1208) and the existence of gods who could call for it.

Inserting these scenes surrounding Iphigenia's slaughter into an already condensed trilogy profoundly altered the momentum for McLaughlin and Kahn's production. After killing Iphigenia off stage, Agamemnon came home to Clytemnestra with bloody hands. In these scenes, and not in the second homecoming from Troy, we saw Agamemnon determine his fate. The latter return scene felt less necessary for Agamemnon's development, but was critical for Clytemnestra's.

The use of the house further emphasized this revised momentum. As in *Agamemnon*, from the start of the STC production the house heralded a shocking revelation of the violence it contained. In *Agamemnon* suspense builds to the moment of murders that the audience can hear from inside the house (1333), and of the house expelling a tableau of corpses (1372). But Kahn and McLaughlin repurposed this moment of shock and horror by placing it earlier in the drama. As the sound of Agamemnon's axe-blow resounded through the theater, the house exploded. The aural track became a loud alarm-like wail, the windows and doors burst open violently, and red fabric sprang from its windows, as if blown out by a huge gust of wind. The fabric hung to the ground, mottled as though soaked with blood. Kahn and McLaughlin's re-harnessing of Aeschylus' powerful stagecraft highlighted Agamemnon's initial violence against his family and the traumatic effects on all its members.



The moment after Agamemnon kills Iphigenia and the house "explodes" (photo courtesy of the Shakespeare Theatre Company).

Clytemnestra described the house on stage as a “brain,” “museum,” or “reliquary”: it frequently functioned as a container of collective memories and consciousness that individual characters shared. The STC production did not feature the Furies in the same way that Aeschylus does, as an infesting presence that haunts the uncanny domicile. Instead McLaughlin and Kahn crafted a brief appearance for Furies who emerged from the characters of the chorus members, not from the house.

The house’s eruption at Iphigenia’s murder altered the suspense Aeschylus builds toward Agamemnon’s and Cassandra’s climactic entrances into the house. In the STC production, Clytemnestra’s entrapment of her husband felt entirely determined, because the audience had watched the action surrounding the slaughter at Aulis. In consequence, the homecoming scene seemed firmly focused on Clytemnestra’s experience of the murder and how it transformed her, not on how it destroyed Agamemnon. When she exited the house again to meet Agamemnon on his return from Troy, Clytemnestra glittered in a liquid gold lamé gown. She gained several uneasy laughs from the audience while exerting the same theatrical control of the playing space for her entrapment as in Aeschylus’ drama.⁵

Cassandra’s entrance into the house similarly lacked the terror-filled dramaturgy of *Agamemnon*. Gone were the Trojan priestess’ spooky visions, in which she seems to peer through the house’s walls at the band of singing Furies (Ag 1190–91) and at the brutalized children of Tantalus (1217–22): Kahn and McLaughlin’s Cassandra gazed *away* from the house and into the audience. Her interaction with the chorus emphasized her trauma at Troy and the inevitable cycle of violence when opposition is silent. Apollo’s curse that she would prophesy without inspiring belief framed the chorus’ helplessness. Left outside and “unable to do anything” while Clytemnestra went about the killing within the house, the chorus turned to ask *why* they continued to be a passive audience to others’ “nightmares.” Might these bad dreams be real? Thus the chorus opened themselves to their responsibility for being unprepared in the face of injustice.



Clytemnestra is protagonist of the events following the murder of Iphigenia (photo courtesy of the Shakespeare Theatre Company).

In *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra's initial presentation of the murdered corpses to the chorus concludes in exultation: "I boast in it!" (Ag 1394). This was the concluding note of McLaughlin and Kahn's first half, without the resistance voiced by Aeschylus' chorus. Moreover, as in her *Iphigenia and Other Daughters* (1995), McLaughlin removed Aegisthus' appearance after the murders and excised the motivations his involvement suggests in Aeschylus, both political and sexual. "This is *all* I have done," our Clytemnestra exclaimed, and likened the killing to "a mighty birth." Such a comparison justified the spilling of blood as serving a greater end; she also declared to the chorus of janitors that blood was the most effective detergent for the house.

In contrast to the bloodied queen, the corpses (surely dummies) were thickly wrapped in white cloth, their identities obscure. Kahn and McLaughlin's hyper-sanitized choice here highlighted how Clytemnestra sought to objectify the bodies and to clean and control the house. She kicked each bundle into an unmarked hole in the stage. The ensuing intermission left the audience to consider the dehumanizing effects of Clytemnestra's violence on both her and her victims.

After the intermission, another scream from Clytemnestra opened the second act; this time the nightmare was of breast-feeding a snake. Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers* (527–34) first identifies the dreamed snake with Orestes. In McLaughlin's adaptation, Electra's (Rad Pereira) appearance and her skulking inhabitation of the craggy stage environment embodied the serpentine hallucination. Electra seemed to torment her mother with nightmares by conjuring them at her father's gravesite. Much like Sophocles' Electra, McLaughlin's appeared to bring about Orestes' return by her energetic attentions at the tomb.

When he arrived, Orestes seemed a shell of a young man, his body relentlessly thrown into convulsions by Apollo's possession. Distressed clothing evoked a desert-combat uniform (camo-green military jacket, brown utility pants, combat boots) and suggested that Orestes' divine enthusiasm might thinly veil the trauma of violence – an interpretation supported by the idea that this is a trilogy without the gods.⁶ Another apparently supernatural involvement came after Orestes and Electra summoned their dead father's assistance (as at *Libation Bearers* 479–509): Agamemnon's ghost (*à la* Darius in *Persians*) actually entered to place a dagger beside Orestes. What was most literally Agamemnon's supernatural intervention could also be construed as a manifestation of Orestes' psychological impetus to revenge.



Chorus members douse Orestes with buckets of blood (photo courtesy of the Shakespeare Theatre Company).

The house behind Orestes provided the container from which he relived the trauma of his mother's murder of the father he never met, an addition to Aeschylus' tragedy. In a reframing of the murder scene from the first act of the play, Orestes placed himself as an impatient child quarantined in an upstairs room; while playing a game beside his bed, he gradually realized that the repetitive hacking sound from the first floor was his mother killing his father.

In this production Electra and Orestes did not entrap Clytemnestra in the house, as they do in *Libation Bearers*. After Orestes' flashback, Clytemnestra emerged. While at first genuinely distressed at the suggestion of Orestes' death, she voiced inability to comprehend her children's accusations. Orestes, completely overcome, nearly embraced his mother before piercing her in the chest with his dagger.

After the murder, Orestes dropped his mother's body and looked around frantically, and for a moment the onlooking chorus became the Furies seen only by Orestes at the end of *Libation Bearers*, "my mother's spiteful dogs" (LB 1054). The STC chorus could turn into this retributive entity because, unlike Aeschylus' chorus, they had not goaded Orestes to murder Clytemnestra but had remained spectators. With sudden coordination the chorus closed around Orestes and doused him with the contents of their cleaning buckets, which turned out to be blood. Though Orestes was covered, the chorus members did not seem to stain themselves.

Orestes appeared to recognize the chorus as Furies with his quip, "They work for my mother," an identification which he later explicitly confirmed and which drew laughs at an unexpected moment. The dousing was over in a moment and afterwards the chorus reverted to their normal stance as spectators. The briefness of the interaction allowed the audience to see Orestes' vision of the Furies as a figment of his guilt-distorted perception,⁷ but the scene also suggested the chorus' real capacity to seek vengeance, an issue in the judicial hearing that followed.

After a brief pause, a third act opened with both Orestes and most of the chorus sleeping. Orestes wrestled with nightmares of Furies, as Electra explained. (She remained for the final act, as she does not in *Eumenides*). "He held the knife, it's true, but only because I handed it to him. I made that knife in the furnace, the one I've been tending. Until my furnace blew up." The blood on her brother now covered Electra also, suggesting the limits of her therapy to absolve her guilt in the murder. But in stark contrast to Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, the STC Orestes woke up with amnesia of what he had done, and there was no Delphi, no Pythia or Apollo, and no Athenian council to offer resolution. The waking chorus assessed the situation as an impasse where neither Electra nor Orestes was a viable authority.

In an essay on her *Oresteia*, McLaughlin describes having worried about how to include *Eumenides*' trial scene; she challenged herself to revise this significant element of the trilogy to avoid making any political system the source of its resolution.⁸ Her impulse to avoid a "tedious civics lesson" grew especially strong when she was adapting the final play in the wake of the 2016 election. She found alternative inspiration from the 1998 Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, where victims and perpetrators bore witness to crimes of apartheid and a council considered applications for amnesty.

With Electra and Orestes stuck, the chorus members faced the question of what to do with the pair. The debate here evoked the end of *Agamemnon*, where ten members individually offer different opinions about what to do in the face of Clytemnestra's murder.⁹ In the STC production, one member expressed anger, another proposed exile for Orestes, another mentioned the idea of "justice." Voices grew louder as the members began to clash for the first time.

A calmer tone came with the realization that cowering Orestes still envisaged the chorus as Furies. To one member's question, "Don't you know us?" Orestes answered explicitly: "I thought you were Furies." Electra went further to point out the chorus' passive role in the family's violence, and one chorus member admitted, "We have a part in these crimes." Another member suggested *forgiving* Orestes. The idea of pardon elicited backlash from other chorus members and some conflict. Finally a member said, "We have the power to listen." The chorus proceeded to invite Electra and Orestes to offer themselves for a hearing.

The play ended before the chorus voted or sentenced Orestes. While McLaughlin and Kahn did not present the fate of the Atreid siblings, conclusion and moral redemption came through Orestes' apology and the washing of Orestes and Electra by two chorus members with towels and bowls of water. In this process the chorus came into contact with the blood that had covered every member of the Atreid family, but without becoming blood covered themselves. Apparently moved by the experience, Orestes apologized with an emotional "I'm sorry" to the chorus member wiping him. The washing seemed to offer therapy for pollution and trauma, and to prepare not just the siblings but the chorus for Orestes' hearing. Sitting in the center of the stage with the chorus standing around, Orestes told his story remorsefully.

The chorus' willingness to listen revised Orestes' earlier vision of them as Furies. Moreover, it achieved the ethical transformation of Furies into Eumenides, "Forces of Kindness." "The power to listen" emphasized that the healing benefits for the listeners – as well as those on trial – supersede judgment. The chorus called the audience to reflect on the corrosive effects of violence for all parties and on the need to mitigate those consequences.

The trajectory of the chorus members, who emerged gradually as the production's stand-out product, highlighted a theme of critical engagement with dominant narratives. Signposting this in the prologue was the watchman, a chorus member, who pointedly contrasted his own watchful retelling of the stars' stories both with the gods and with Clytemnestra's news stream in the torch relay: "I tell [the stars'] stories to myself all night to keep from closing my eyes." He pointed towards McLaughlin's claimed excision of the gods by suggesting "They're even older than the gods, the real stars. And each one's got a story." The watchman's practice of interpretation seemed to support the production's implicit claim to revise Aeschylus, democratizing the reading of the heavens' "long tricky narratives," described as "elbowing each other up there, fizzing away and telling themselves. All that glory just for sleepless, lonely me."

This introduction anticipated a process of revision that was probably not always obvious to the audience members who lacked a vivid recall of Aeschylus' trilogy. The most visible transformations of the play were the role of the chorus and absence of the trial scene at Athens.

Less perceptible but equally significant was a shifted focus to female characters and the possibility for dismissing the gods' presence. Characters did experience the gods: Agamemnon and Iphigenia described what the gods decreed, Apollo wracked Orestes with convulsions, and the summoned ghost of Agamemnon visited the stage. But the absence of Delphi and Athens implied a loss of divine control and necessity.

The chorus's new role, especially, reflected this choice. The decision to make its members critics meant avoiding much of their ritual position in Greek tragedy. When the chorus members appropriated one of the most potent supernatural roles in Aeschylus, that of the Furies, the conversion in Aeschylus was itself transposed. Instead of being domesticated by a higher power, the chorus came to exert their own critical listening power over the narrative. In the chorus' role McLaughlin and Kahn seemed to find their own ethical implication in Aeschylus' story, since like their chorus the adaptor and producer took ownership of the Atreids' cycle of violence by creating a critical voice and moral commentary, and shifting the power to tell, and to end, the iconic story.¹⁰

Notes

- 1 For instance, a one-evening performance of all three parts of *Henry VI* (1996) or a composed trilogy of *The Oedipus Plays* (2001).
- 2 Among her widely reperformed Greek adaptations are *Iphigenia and Other Daughters* (1995), *The Trojan Women* (2003), *The Persians* (2003), and *Ajax in Iraq* (2011). *The Persians* was performed in 2005 at the Shakespeare Theater Company under the direction of Ethan McSweeney. McLaughlin has also written a number of original plays, see <https://www.ellenmclaughlin.com>.
- 3 See Jones 1967, 82–111 for discussion of the household, oikos, and the house, as a central figure in *Agamemnon*. Taplin 1977, 276–32 provides a “grammar” of *Agamemnon*’s stagecraft and, 452–59, highlights the position of the physical house that the *skene* building enacts in this play, noting that the “uses of the background building in the *Oresteia* [are] unsurpassed in Greek tragedy and perhaps in all drama” (459).
- 4 McLaughlin is quoted by an actor as commenting that there are no gods in the play, though characters experience them, <https://www.shakespearetheatre.org/watch-listen/inside-oresteia-workshop>.
- 5 Rehm 2002, 78–79 discusses Clytemnestra’s control of the extra-scenic household space.
- 6 The unstated interpretation of Orestes reeling from PTSD (without a clear source except his family’s violence) is similar to his presentation in *Iphigenia and Other Daughters* and in Charles Mee’s *Orestes*, performed by Tim Robbins in 1994, taking place in a mental asylum.
- 7 The chorus in *Libation Bearers* identify Orestes’ perception of furies as a “disturbance of the mind” (1056).
- 8 <https://www.ellenmclaughlin.com/ellen-blog/2019/4/16/ellen-on-the-oresteia>.
- 9 *Agamemnon* 1346–71.
- 10 I am grateful to Rachel Grabowski for her stimulating comments, Mike Lippman for his suggestions, and to Colleen Kennedy for obtaining for me several lines from the play’s script.

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