

1 | *Helen* and the evidence for performance

This book is a study of a Greek tragedy, Euripides' *Helen*, and how the play shapes its own interpretation in performance. This happens in a variety of different ways, and what emerges is relevant to the study of ancient theatre generally. Any of a number of plays could have been used to reach similar conclusions about appropriate methodologies for understanding tragedy as it was originally performed. *Helen* was chosen both because it challenges a number of basic assumptions that are often held about tragedy (particularly in terms of the tone and themes of the genre) and because it offers a number of apparently unique theatrical moments among the corpus of extant plays. The play has been examined in detail,¹ but I believe that a different approach reveals significant features of the play that have not been appreciated. It is a cliché to insist plays were originally performed and were originally interpreted in performance before a live audience: that is true, but what it means for how a play creates its meaning is neither well nor widely understood. My hope in this book is to demonstrate how a close reading of Euripides' *Helen*, considering how an audience processes a stage performance intellectually, reveals significant features of how a play communicates. Such an approach aims to uncover insights both about the play itself and about the genre and attendant performance context that produced it. It also provides a toolkit that can offer new insights into other plays as well.

The study of Athenian stagecraft has advanced considerably over the past fifty years, so that it is now possible to assume some familiarity with the workings of the Greek stage among most students of ancient drama.²

¹ The past decade has produced two important commentaries on the play (Burian 2007 and Allan 2008), as well as the extended discussion in Wright 2005. Of particular importance among earlier studies are the commentaries of Dale 1967 and Kannicht 1969, and the studies of Zuntz 1960, Burnett 1971: 76–100, Podlecki 1970, Segal 1971, Wolff 1973, Arnott 1990, Pucci 1997, and Foley 2001. Diggle 1994 provides the best account of the text of the play, though not all of his decisions are followed here; see also the text and translation of Kovacs 2002b.

² The 1968 revision of Sir Arthur Pickard-Cambridge's *Dramatic Festivals of Athens* (to which a short supplement was added in 1988; = Pickard-Cambridge 1988) represents a landmark in the reconception of ancient performance, though of course there were many important earlier works that laid the foundations for this significant advance. Following this, Taplin 1977b, an

This does not mean that there is agreement, of course, about how stagecraft creates meaning, and how that meaning relates to the text of the work as we have it; indeed, there are intelligent, articulate differences of opinion on almost every major issue that will be encountered. This leads to a crucial hermeneutic problem for students of ancient performance: stagecraft affects how a play communicates with its audience, but specific stagecraft decisions cannot (in most cases) be recovered, and therefore how they affect the interpretation of a work must remain uncertain as well. Through my examination of Euripides' *Helen*, I hope to begin to articulate a means through this difficulty, and in doing so to identify more evidence for ancient stagecraft.

To begin, however, I shall identify three axioms that shape much of what I say generally about the nature of ancient performance:

1. The unit of interpretation for the original audience was the set of plays being evaluated by the judges.
2. The entire stage picture is interpretable, and contributes to the understanding of the work.
3. Stagecraft criticism opens up some interpretative possibilities, and it shuts some down.

Each of these axioms has implications that affect the study of *Helen*, and so will be considered in turn.

The first axiom is that the unit of interpretation for the original audience was not the individual play, but the set of plays being evaluated by the judges. All plays in fifth-century Athens were performed as part of a festival competition; if there were exceptions we do not know of them. Two festivals in particular were the City (or Greater) Dionysia and the Lenaia. Tragedies were presented in competition in sets (three tragedies and a satyr play at the Dionysia, two tragedies at the Lenaia), and these sets were evaluated as units. As a result, links between plays, even when those plays are unrelated in terms of mythical content, create associations that would have been available to every member of the original audience, but which are almost exclusively no longer available today. The existence of this category of information (regardless of how rich it proves to be) suggests that some spectators appreciated it. While it is conceivable that it was not leveraged to create additional levels of meaning, such a position seems *prima facie* improbable. It follows, I believe, that such connections

exhaustive consideration of the works of Aeschylus focusing on entrances and exits, elevated the study of ancient stagecraft into a respectable field of study.

between plays were intended by the playwright to be appreciated by at least some members of the audience in their aesthetic assessment of the dramatic event. In the same way that a playwright could allude to previous dramatic works, explicitly or implicitly, a play could also create intertextual echoes with the plays being performed alongside it. (I would argue that this happens regardless of authorial intention, but that claim is not a necessary component for what follows.)

Watching a tragedy in Athens, at least at the City Dionysia, typically involved seeing four plays (a tetralogy),³ and included a necessary self-reflexive process at the conclusion, where the genre of satyr play fundamentally challenged the modes of narrative presentation that occupied the previous four or five hours.⁴ Three competitors would compete in turn on three successive days. The experience of tragedy at the Lenaia was different: here, there were only two tragic competitors, and each presented two tragedies (a dilogy, with both dramatic entries presented on the same day of the festival).⁵ Rural dramatic festivals also attracted the big names, and these involved different performance contexts again, and these remain largely mysterious to us today.⁶ With the genre of tragedy, scholars habitually assume that the extant plays were all performed at the City Dionysia; this is not necessarily a safe assumption. This first axiom leads to several corollaries.

Context is important: apparent differences between plays, in their tone or style, may be due as much to the festival context as to any other more easily identifiable factor. Secondly, in most cases the companion plays of a

³ Discussion of tetralogies was advanced significantly by Seaford 1984, 21–33; for the demands on actors in a tetralogy, see Marshall 2003.

⁴ In some exceptional cases, it is possible that dramatic entries were incomplete. Was there a satyr play when Euripides won the competition posthumously with *Bacchae*, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, and *Alcmaeon in Corinth* in 405? We do not know, but it would not be surprising if we should at some point discover that there was not. The plays won the prize in any case.

⁵ Pickard-Cambridge 1988: 41. Inscriptional records show that there were two competitors in 418 and half a century later in 364 there were three (*IG II² 2319*): we do not know the reason for the difference, but it seems likely that two tragic competitors were standard at the Lenaia in the fifth century (see Csapo and Slater 1995: 136, IIIAib 74). There is no reason to think that it was not part of the festival from the time it was inaugurated, and, in any case, it is certain that a tragic competition existed by the time of *Helen*.

⁶ Major playwrights did compete at regional festivals, including Sophocles at the Lenaia and at Eleusis. See Pickard-Cambridge 1988: 42, 47–48 and Csapo 2004b: 61–62. At deme festivals, tragedies may have been presented singly. Ael. *VH* 2.13 tells us that even late in his career Euripides competed in the Rural Dionysia at the Piraeus more than once, and that the philosopher Socrates attended as a fan: καὶ Πειραιοῖ δὲ ἀγωνιζομένου τοῦ Εὐριπίδου καὶ ἐκεῖ κατήκει ('and when Euripides was competing at the Piraeus, he [Socrates] would even go down there').

given tragedy are not known, and will probably remain unknowable. I have argued that both *Orestes* and *Cyclops* were performed at the Dionysia in 408, and I believe that this allows some additional light to be shed on each work.⁷ A similar argument might be possible with *Bacchae* and *Iphigenia in Aulis*, but this has not been pressed because of the uncertainties surrounding the composition of the posthumous plays.⁸ Thirdly, the initial reception of Athenian theatre was in a competitive environment, which privileges the initial performance above other instantiations of the text, in reperformance or in private reading. It may be that a text received multiple performances (we know, for example, that Aristophanes' *Frogs*, initially performed in 405, was remounted, and there are many traditions of texts receiving subsequent performances either in Athens or elsewhere⁹), but in the absence of such attested separate occasions in which more than one specific performance might be isolated, it is appropriate to concentrate scholarly attention on the play's initial public performance. There does exist a single privileged performance: it need not be the focus of enquiry,¹⁰ but it may be.

This observation informs my second interpretative axiom, which is that in the theatre, the entire stage picture is interpretable, and contributes to the understanding of the work. Even if a particular feature remains unmarked for the audience, the choice to use default iconography (or whatever else) constitutes a positive fact that can contribute to the interpretation of the work. Choices were made, and the effort of seeking to understand these choices can lead us to new understandings. As discussed in Chapters 6–8, even if we do not know precisely which choices were made, an examination of the possibilities can at times identify unquestioned assumptions we make as readers, and this provides positive evidence that can inform our readings of ancient plays.

⁷ Marshall 2001b and 2005. ⁸ Michelakis 2006: 85–87 considers this questions briefly.

⁹ A partial list of such opportunities for subsequent performance would include reperformances (such as are attested under different circumstances for Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and Aristophanes' *Frogs*), invited performances in Sicily or Macedon, performances that inspired fourth-century South Italian theatrical vase-painting, and performances by the progenitors of the Hellenistic touring companies, especially the Artists of Dionysus (these are not completely independent categories). See Newiger 1961: 427–30, Xanthakis Karamanos 1980, Easterling 1993 and 1994, Taplin 1993 and 2007, and Allan 2001, and Revermann 2006a: 66–87. Biles 2007 rejects the possibility that Aeschylus was reperfomed at the City Dionysia.

¹⁰ Marshall 2001a considers the stage property used in a remount of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* in the 420s, for instance. Similarly, performance anecdotes in dramatic scholia typically reflect some awareness of stage performance, but this is seldom connected to the original performance (see Falkner 2002, Dickey 2007: 31–38, and Nünlist 2009).

From this it follows, problematically, that creative ideas that are part of the stage picture might not have originated with our author. Theatre is by its very nature a collaborative enterprise, depending on the skills of many discrete individuals who each contribute to the whole. We know very little about ancient theatrical personnel, though there were individuals, some of whom were professionals, who were involved with theatrical productions both before the day of performance (these included chorus trainers, costumers, and mask-makers, for example) as well as on the day of performance (including the crane-operator and the aulos-player; all in this second category of course will also have been needed to some extent before the performance). The stage realization of a playwright's work necessarily involved the contributions of many individuals, even though the competition (at first) isolated a single individual when it selected a victor. This individual was the director (*didaskalos*), who in fifth-century tragedy was also typically the playwright. In the mid fifth century, another competition was also added for the best actor, who need not have performed in the winning set of plays. It is nevertheless self-evident that artistic success was due to the efforts of a much greater number of individuals.¹¹

Another corollary of the broad interpretability of the stage picture is that choices, for almost every aspect of the production, are made for each production.¹² Given that we may isolate a single performance as privileged (typically the performance which is being evaluated by the judges in competition), the full extent of the difficulties posed by this issue are somewhat mitigated. Nevertheless, the acknowledgement that choices were made means that there is a 'right' answer – by which I mean one that is a historically correct – for what happened on stage on that particular day, even if the precise choice that was made is not now recoverable.

Whatever happened on stage, the audience will have shaped its understanding of a play not simply from the words of the script, but on the relative position of actors at any given point during the play, the quality of their delivery, their somatype and vocal resonance, the costumes they wear, the presentation of their masks, their singing ability, the quality of the aulos-player (and any other musicians that might be providing accompaniment on percussion), the appearance of props, the appearance of any set that might be present, lighting effects (which include in the outdoor

¹¹ Pickard-Cambridge 1988: 93–95, Csapo and Slater 1995: 221–24.

¹² In a theatrical context where a play is performed multiple times during a run, as in the Rome of Plautus and Terence, this concern may be extended to different choices from one performance to the next within the same production.

theatres of Athens any effects caused by weather, and so also things like the ambient temperature and whether it had rained the night before), among a host of other factors. If it appears in the performance space (by presence or absence), it becomes interpretable by an audience, who will also take into account other factors: how crowded the theatre is, how good the previous performances might have been, how hungry or noisy everyone is. We are not able to quantify most of these variables, but we would be wrong to dismiss them out of hand. No single spectator is going to interpret the combination of these factors identically: each will provide a unique response, in just the same way that each will respond individually to literary allusions within the plays, depending on whether the work being referenced is known from performance, from reading (for a few), from hearsay and anecdote, or if it remains unrecognized and therefore uninterpreted. No one in the audience can be an Ideal Spectator: all are making selections of what is important, and doing so on the fly as the play unfolds before them. It is simply not possible to describe or recreate the richness of live theatre performance, and this is no less true today than it was in fifth-century Athens.

As a result, an audience's response to a play is heterogeneous, with no two spectators quite ever seeing or perceiving the same thing. Whatever comes together at the moment of performance, then, is the diffuse product of the creative energies of many individuals, and will be interpreted differently by every single person in the theatre, a process that itself requires creative engagement. The only thing that they share is a time and a place: this theatre, this performance. Mastronarde suggests that there is a 'usefulness of an approach that is eclectic, flexible, and wary of totalizing interpretations'.¹³ Recognizing heterogeneity in audience response is central to that.

This leads to my third axiom: stagecraft criticism opens up interpretative possibilities, and it shuts some down. The ways in which the additional variables derived from performance open up possible avenues for interpretation does not need extended justification. As just described, visual elements (costume, mask, movement, posture, proxemics, props, scenery, extras), acoustic elements (music, delivery, intonation, singing, timing, silence), and the joy and immediacy of the ephemerality that are part of being part of an audience at a performance (the jostling of the crowd, the pre-show ceremonies, the weather in the outdoor theatre, how

¹³ Mastronarde 2010: 25.

attractive you find the person sitting next to you) all combine to add to the experience of the words of the script themselves. But performance also removes possible interpretations, or at least makes them less plausible or coherent. Here are two examples, in brief, that I have considered elsewhere.

In Euripides' *Electra* (produced c. 419), there is reference to a scar on the mask of Orestes (*El.* 573–75). The interpretation of the scene will differ for most viewers, depending on whether it is a large, significant scar on the mask (clearly visible to the audience, and perhaps evoking comparisons with the heroic associations of Odysseus' scar at *Od.* 19.385–96) or if it is something visible only to Electra (and consequently anti-heroic, as the words of the script exist in tension with what the audience perceives).¹⁴ Whichever was the case, a decision was made by someone about the mask which in turn will shape the interpretation of the exchange and in turn the interpretation of Orestes' character. This choice cannot control how an audience will react, but it can point towards a particular interpretation as being favoured, and more likely to be dominant among the spectators. Today, we cannot say precisely what the mask looked like (though I suspect that the scar was invisible to the audience and that a standard young male mask was used for Orestes), but the fact that a choice was made – either to use the default mask or to make a special scarred mask – constitutes a positive piece of evidence about the play that can inform our readings of Orestes' character.

In Sophocles' *Philoctetes* (produced 409), it has sometimes been argued that the appearance of Heracles at the end of the play is not a genuine theophany, but only another ruse of Odysseus as he impersonates Heracles.¹⁵ Though I think this extremely unlikely, for the ancient audience the matter would have been unambiguously clear: either Heracles appears suspended from the *mēchanē* (and so is the god) or the audience sees Odysseus (the same actor in the same mask) hiding himself from Philoctetes somewhere in the performance area, or otherwise making clear gestures that this is a deception. In both cases, there exists no indeterminacy: the choices of performance point the viewer towards one or the other interpretation. Though some in the audience may still recognize that the same actor plays both roles, there is no sense of confusion as to what is happening within the dramatic world. Of course,

¹⁴ Marshall 1999: 340 n. 61, Torrance 2011: 179–80, 188–89, and see Tarkow 1981.

¹⁵ This approach began with Erradonea 1956, and see Roisman 2001. I argue against it in Marshall 2012: 192–93.

different choices would be possible in different performances, which is why the privileging of a single performance can be hermeneutically advantageous.

There is a corollary to this third axiom as well. For while some interpretations are going to be favoured by the audience, and some are going to be intended by the creative individuals at work producing the play, there is no way to guarantee a unified, homogeneous interpretation from the audience, even assuming such a response were desirable. Instead, each spectator draws on his or her own experiences and perceptions to make sense of the theatrical presentation.¹⁶ In Athens, it seems likely that many male spectators had some performance experience (singing in dithyrambs, for instance, which alone involved 1,000 distinct individuals at the Dionysia annually¹⁷), and so some musical and metrical sophistication can be expected from most but not all in the audience. Of course, not everyone goes to the theatre for the same reasons, or with the same degree of attention, and all of this leads to differing degrees of intellectual and emotional response to the dramas. Revermann helpfully considers the competence of theatrical audiences, considering how paratragedy and other dramatic techniques achieve their effect: 'Competence, then, is a skill-set which is both innate and, to a significant extent, acquired on the basis of an individual's cognitive and emotional pre-disposition as well as socialization.'¹⁸ Heterogeneity is a virtue of the theatrical event, and is not one of its liabilities.

This problematizes artistic associations of an individual as a creative mind. In recognizing that many creative individuals work together in theatre, each contributing to the stage-picture and the overall success of the performance, we begin to remove the proprietary associations of the poet with the play. Indeed, there are indications that it was the play's director, the *didaskalos*, and not the poet himself, to whom credit for a dramatic victory was awarded (compare the Oscars – the annual awards of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences – where the Best

¹⁶ The issue of women in the audience of Athenian tragedy is a vexed one: see Podlecki 1990, Henderson 1991, Goldhill 1994, Sourvinou-Inwood 2003. I believe that, in most circumstances, a small portion of the original audience will have been female, but that the audience was notionally all male. None of the interpretations offered here depend on one case or the other.

¹⁷ Each of the ten tribes in Athens produced two dithyrambs, one for men and one for boys, in which the chorus numbered fifty. See Revermann 2006b: 106–108 for the extent of choral participation in Athens by citizen males: 'this experience fundamentally shapes how theatre is viewed, perceived and, eventually, evaluated as a spectator' (112).

¹⁸ Revermann 2006b: 105.

Director award is more prestigious than the award for Best Adapted Screenplay). A statue base, excavated in 1954, was part of a choregic monument celebrating a tragic victory by Socrates of Anagyrous, in which 'Euripides was the *didaskalos*'.¹⁹ At least a quarter of Aristophanes' output of forty plays was directed by someone other than the poet, including six of the extant eleven plays (and, since we are dependent on surviving hypotheses and other records for positive statements about the use of another director, there is no reason to believe the ratio was not much higher).²⁰ The problem is exacerbated slightly by the fact that the terminology is not always transparent, since in tragedy these discrete functions were typically assumed by the same individual. The poet (*poiētēs*) was responsible for writing the script. The director (*didaskalos*) sought a chorus from the archon, and oversaw all elements of the stage action. This included serving as teacher of the chorus (for which we have the term *chorodidaskalos*).²¹ For tragedy, the distinction between poet and director does not impact our understanding of plays to the same degree. There is no certain instance of a living tragic playwright using someone else to direct his plays. Nevertheless, in all of these productions, we need further to add the *chorēgos* (the producer, who is paying for the chorus as part of the Athenian tax system) and possibly the *koryphaios* (the chorus leader, literally the 'head speaker', who is the principle chorister during performance), who at times may also have been the *chorodidaskalos*, to our list of essential theatrical personnel.

Further, by c. 449, each performance is competing for two prizes: one for the best production (and so to the *chorēgos* and the *didaskalos*, so that both may legitimately be said to have won the prize) and one for the best actor. The actor's competition was awarded in the name of the protagonist (the lead actor), though it recognized the work of the group of three actors who assumed speaking roles in a given tetralogy, meaning success could be threatened by a weak performance by any one performer. While I have argued that the vagaries of the judging system are such that no single result can be seen to be representative, in any way, of a given play's actual favour

¹⁹ IG I³ 969 (= SEG 23 [1968] 102). See Csapo and Slater 1995: 360–61, IVD 307, and Wilson 2000: 130–36.

²⁰ The second hypothesis to *Birds* (lines 38–39 Wilson), says ἐπὶ Χαρίου τὸ δρᾶμα καθῆκεν εἰς ἄστυ διὰ Καλλιστράτου· εἰς δὲ Λήναια τὸν Ἀμφιάρσασιν ἐδίδαξε διὰ Φιλωνίδου ('When Charias was archon, [415/14], he [Aristophanes] put on the play in the city [i.e. at the Dionysia] through Callistratus; and at the Lenaia, he directed the *Amphiaraus* through Philonides'). The two verbs (καθῆκεν, ἐδίδαξε) are being used as synonyms here, which obscures the fact that Callistratus and Philonides were both *didaskalos* for the plays written by Aristophanes.

²¹ Pickard-Cambridge 1988: 76, 90–91, and see *Ar. Eccl.* 809.

with the audience or with the judges,²² the prize is still something that one strives to win, because it is associated with a considerable amount of cultural capital, which accrues to some degree to all those associated with the performance.

Given all this, we can see why there are anxieties about integrating the dynamics of performance into our analysis of drama. These anxieties begin with Aristotle, who in *Poetics* 1450a10 lists *opsis* and *melopoiia* ('spectacle' and 'song', or perhaps more broadly visual elements and music) as the least important contributors to the interpretation of tragedy. They are, explicitly, the 'sauce' or 'condiments' (*hēdusmata*), as Aristotle describes (1450b15–20):

τῶν δὲ λοιπῶν ἢ μελοποιία μέγιστον τῶν ἡδυσμάτων, ἢ δὲ ὄψις ψυχαγωγικὸν μὲν, ἀτεχνότατον δὲ καὶ ἥκιστα οἰκεῖον τῆς ποιητικῆς: ἢ γὰρ τῆς τραγωδίας δύναμις καὶ ἄνευ ἀγῶνος καὶ ὑποκριτῶν ἔστιν, ἔτι δὲ κυριωτέρα περὶ τὴν ἀπεργασίαν τῶν ὄψεων ἢ τοῦ σκευοποιοῦ τέχνη τῆς τῶν ποιητῶν ἔστιν.

Of the remaining parts, song is the most important of the sources of pleasure [τῶν ἡδυσμάτων, which Halliwell renders 'the garnishings']. Spectacle is attractive, but is very inartistic and is least germane to the art of poetry. For the effect of tragedy is not dependent on performance and actors; also, the art of the property-manager [τοῦ σκευοποιοῦ, the mask-maker] has more relevance to the production of visual effects than does that of the poets.²³

Similar anxieties inform any discussion of creative activity today. In Aristotle's case, I believe that his emphasis on the role of the poet is designed specifically to remove the difficulty described here: as long as the poet is responsible for a single play that can be considered as an independent unit, it is possible to isolate the cause of the emotional and intellectual effects of tragedy. Music and spectacle get in the way of that direct author-to-reader connection, and so are relegated in order for direct communication to be possible: as Munteanu cynically writes, Aristotle 'only wishes . . . that actual performances would not spoil a good tragedy, or, perhaps, transform a bad one into a success'.²⁴ By problematizing the cleanness of this model, new possibilities for the interpretation of a play emerge.

²² Marshall and van Willigenburg 2004, esp. 101: 'we are never safe to draw conclusions about the nature of the dramatic competition based on the placing of a given play.' Stevens 1956 argues against the assumption that Euripides was unpopular with audiences.

²³ Trans. Heath 1996: 13. ²⁴ Munteanu 2012: 89, and see 80–90.