

DIDASKALIA 

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Didaskalia is an electronic journal dedicated to the study of all aspects of ancient Greek and Roman performance.

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About Didaskalia

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 διδασκαλία. *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 peer-reviewed scholarship on performance and reviews of the professional activity of artists and scholars who work on ancient drama.

We welcome submissions on any aspect of the field. If you would like your work to be reviewed, please write to editor@didaskalia.net at least three weeks in advance of the performance date. We also seek interviews with practitioners and opinion pieces. For submission guidelines, go to didaskalia.net.

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Note

Didaskalia is an online journal. This print representation of Volume 10 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at didaskalia.net, which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

Antigonick: A new version of Sophocles's *Antigone*

Written by Anne Carson
 Directed by Martha Johnson
 January 31–February 9, 2014
 Tjornhom-Nelson Theater, Augsburg College
 Minneapolis, Minnesota

Reviewed by **Eric Dugdale**
Gustavus Adolphus College

Anne Carson's *Antigonick* (New York: New Directions, 2012) is like no other version of Sophocles's masterpiece. In her inimitable style, Carson defies boundaries of genre with another pioneering work. My attempt to characterize it in the following paragraphs will underscore, I hope, the enormity of the challenge that Martha Johnson undertook in putting it on stage. Whatever *Antigonick* is, it is not a conventional dramatic script.

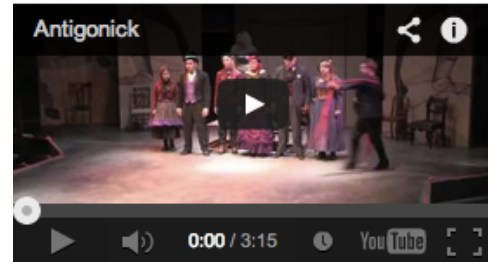
In his interview with Anne Carson, Will Aitken characterized her as both a visual and a verbal artist.¹ Discussing with him her deeply personal book of poetry *Nox* (New York: New Directions, 2010), Carson replied "that even when the thing I'm doing is just writing I try to make it into an object. Try to make it something to look at or experience as well as read, so I worry about the topography and spacing, and just the presentation of it." *Antigonick* is also an *objet d'art*. It is accompanied by thirty-three illustrations by Bianca Stone; printed on transparent vellum, these overlay the text, written in block capitals in the hand of Carson herself. The idiosyncratic layout of words on the page, their interplay with the artwork, the virtual absence of punctuation, and the bold use of space allow the imagination to run riot while keeping the reader off kilter.

This experience is also continued in the language. Carson is a wordsmith. Her language is terse, immediate, arresting:

KREON: WHAT'S UP TEIRESIAS: [TO KREON]
 YOU'RE STANDING ON A RAZOR. I HEAR THE BIRDS THEY
 'RE BEBARBARIZMENIZED THEY'RE MAKING MONSTER
 SOUNDS THE FIRES WON'T LIGHT THE RITES GO WAONG YOU
 KNOW MY TECHNOLOGIES YOU KNOW THE FAILING OF THE
 SIGN IS IN ITSELF A SIGN. FROM YOU A SICKNESS FROM
 YOU A SUPPURATION FROM YOU A SURFEIT COMES OUT
 UPON THE CITY. THIS PILE OF ROT THAT WAS THE SON OF
 OIDIPOUS

THIS BOY IS DEAD STOP KILLING HIM

Page from *Antigonick* by Anne Carson.
 New Directions Books: © 2012, illustrated by Bianca Stone, designed by Robert Currie.
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Video 1: Clips from ANTIGONICK. Brid Henry as Antigone, Michael Wesely as Kreon, Jason Hanson as Nick, Jamil Toney and Joe Rachwal as Guards. Chorus: Quinci Bachman, Ben Fiorendino, Andrew James, Victoria Linstrom, Jack Morton, Alia Thorpe. video: David Ishida
[youtube.com/watch?v=OP8D0b2pDbs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OP8D0b2pDbs)

There is much here that originates with Sophocles. Like Sophocles, Carson enjoys neologisms, bold metaphors, and paradox. The horror and consequences of Creon's act are vividly conveyed by both Sophocles and Carson in Tiresias' description of the omens that fail to signify (*Ant.* 1013). What is different from Sophoclean tragedy is the high degree of referentiality that pervades *Antigonick*. If in Sophocles the birds are screeching with an incoherent frenzy (οἴστρω... βεβαρβαρωμένω, 1002), Carson's "bebarbarizmenized" is now a quotation at one remove. Carson's version engages not only with Sophocles but with theory (e.g., Saussure, Freud) and subsequent versions of *Antigone*, as is signaled in the opening lines of the play:



Image 1: Parodos: The Glare. Photo by Stephen Geffre.

[ENTER ANTIGONE AND ISMENE] ANTIGONE: WE
 BEGIN IN THE DARK AND BIRTH IS THE DEATH OF
 US ISMENE: WHO SAID THAT ANTIGONE: HEGEL
 ISMENE: SOUNDS MORE LIKE BECKETT ANTIGONE: HE
 WAS PARAPHRASING HEGEL ISMENE: I DON'T THINK
 SO

Opening lines of *Antigonick* by Anne Carson.

New Directions Books: © 2012, illustrated by Bianca Stone, designed by Robert Currie.
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This clever self-awareness offers much to delight the erudite reader, but poses a considerable challenge for a theatrical director staging the play. Martha Johnson's production at Augsburg College was perhaps only the second staging of *Antigonick*.²

Johnson's interpretation tapped into the referentiality of *Antigonick*, which she described as follows: "Carson has stated that her translations are filled with her own 'glare,' her fierce way of looking at the original Greek from her contemporary standpoint. I wanted to explore theatrical techniques of somehow staging this vision, this glare, including the self-referential aspects of the play."

This intention was conveyed already in the opening sequence. The whole cast filed in like a Greek tragic chorus. This ordered and harmonious entrance was rapidly thrown off beat as the actors twisted with increased agitation, casting cautious glances over their shoulders, watching and being watched, a motif heightened by the goggles worn by the guards (Image 1). Johnson writes about this opening movement, choreographed by Pam Gleason: "In this...dance, I felt the audience was introduced to Carson's ironic, contemporary vision of Antigone, and that one could sense both her glare, and the glare of the centuries and of all cultures over the millennia, looking at this play. And one could feel the characters, in turn, looking back at the audience, and we could feel that the characters themselves had been affected by the reception and analysis of the play since it was first written and produced."

An hour later, the play closed with the same sequence, now heightened by the tableau of Antigone's body cradled in the lap of her grieving sister Ismene. It was as if time had stood still, as if the play's denouement was contained in its beginning; or, as Antigone says in the opening line of the play, "We begin in the dark and birth is the death of us."

Time is a key interest of *Antigonick*, which introduces a mute character called Nick. His name gives the play its title, and he remains on stage throughout the play; "he measures things," Carson explains in the *dramatis personae*. Nick is reminiscent of Kairos, the Greek personification of the opportune moment as a young man. But Nick is a devastatingly ironic incarnation of him in this play. His name is invoked at key moments: when Kreon enters, moments after the bound Antigone is dragged on by the guard, the chorus exclaims: "Oh perfect here's Kreon," to which Kreon replies "Here's Kreon, Nick of Time." When the chorus persuade Kreon to free Antigone, they urge him to hurry: "Quick quick quick," they cry out. As Kreon rushes to Antigone, the chorus marks the interval with a choral ode that ends with the refrain "Here we are we're all fine we're standing in the Nick of Time." When Kreon recognizes his culpability, the chorus remarks: "You're late to learn what's what, aren't you?" "Late to learn, o yes. I am late, too late," replies Kreon.

Johnson's Nick (played by Jason Hanson) patrolled the stage, unnoticed by the characters, but quietly observing everything. As one audience member said after seeing the production, "Nick was one of the most eloquent characters in the play, in spite of—but maybe because of—the fact that he has no words." He measured the stage, the set, the characters. He measured with a surveyor's measuring wheel, with a tailor's tape, with a carpenter's folding ruler. Most disconcertingly, he occasionally appeared behind characters, measuring their dimensions as if for burial (Kreon was the first person to receive this attention)(Image 2). He also measured time, pointedly looking at his wristwatch or striking a small chime strung over his shoulder at key moments (entrances, deaths) in the play (Image 3). During the second choral ode, Nick began unraveling a scarlet thread ("rope" may more accurately convey its scale), which he wound around the perimeter of the stage. The symbolism of the thread (drawing on the motif of the thread of life spun by the Fates and picking up on a recurring image in Bianca Stone's illustrations) helped to develop the motif of the fragility of human life explored in Carson's version, in which both Antigone ("I died long ago") and Kreon ("A corpse is more alive!") are the living dead. The timing of this stage action, performed during the "Ode to Man" in which the chorus sings



Image 2: Nick, played by Jason Hanson, measures Kreon, played by Michael Wesely. Photo by Stephen Geffre.



Image 3: Nick, played by Jason Hanson, with chime, and Antigone, played by Brid Henry. Photo by Stephen Geffre.

of man's attempts to control his environment (the sea, the land, animals), heightened the punch-line: death man cannot control. Nick finished binding the performance area with his thread during the "Hymn to Eros." Here too the action supported the meaning: like Death, Eros binds us. Or, as the chorus say, "Aphrodite, you play with us! You Play Deeply."

The costuming (designed by Sandra Nei Schulte) suited the disjunctive mood of *Antigonick*. The costumes were inspired

by steampunk, a genre that combines the past, especially the Victorian era, and a post-apocalyptic future (Image 4). Like *Antigonick*, it is intrinsically a *mélange* that defies classification and the constraints of time; as Johnson noted in her post-show talkback, it is both ancient and contemporary, epic and hip. It is thus perfectly suited to Carson's approach, which is to deconstruct *Antigone* rather than to present a dramatically coherent play. Carson's Kreon is almost the parody of a tyrant (Kreon: "Here are Kreon's verbs for today: legislate adjudicate scandalize capitalize...") until he experiences a sudden reversal. Carson's language ranges vertiginously from archaisms (Ismene: "Your heart is hot, thou sister," Antigone: "O one and only head of my sister...") to contemporary slang (when Kreon asks her whether she was the one who buried the body of Polyneikes, Antigone replies "Bingo"). Brid Henry (as Antigone) and Mawrgyn Roper (Ismene) took these sudden shifts in their stride, switching from earnestness to irony as needed (Image 5). Johnson embraced Carson's idiosyncratic humor. For me, however, Carson's penchant for bathos at moments of pathos was distracting. So, for example, Antigone breaks into her *agon* with Kreon with "Can we just get this over with?" "No, let's split hairs a while longer," he replies. Or when Haimon pleads with his father for Antigone's life: "This girl. Here I posit a lacuna. This girl does not deserve to die."

The actors spoke of the challenge of finding the emotional center of their characters. To their credit, they rose to this challenge. Kreon (Michael Wesely) and Antigone both had commanding presences, the former's explosive passion complementing rather than eclipsing the latter's simmering intensity. Ismene's tender and Haimon's (Walter Criswell) earnest entreaties helped highlight the intransigence of Antigone and Kreon respectively.

Martha Johnson did a lot with the play's minor characters, fleshing them out and mining moments for humor, caution and irony. The palpable relief of the sentry (Joe Rachwal) at having been let off the hook by the capture of Antigone was exploited for a moment of light relief and even humor, an



Image 4: Chorus in Steampunk costumes. Photo by Stephen Geffre.



Image 5: Antigone, played by Brid Henry. Photo by Stephen Geffre.



Image 6: The Messenger, played by Jamil Toney, and Eurydike, played by Rebecca Cho. Photo by Stephen Geffre.



Image 7: Teiresias, played by Jorge Rodriguez. Photo by Stephen Geffre.

interlude such as is provided by the gravediggers in *Hamlet*. The messenger (Jamil Toney), by contrast, reported the deaths of Haimon and later Eurydike with a somber poignancy that underscored the frailty of human fortune (Image 6). His message speech is interrupted by the startling entry of Eurydike. Carson takes this minor character and thrusts her into the limelight for a brief but highly charged scene that seems to disrupt the plotline of the play. The messenger announces “They’re dead,” but has only been able to describe one death when Eurydike bursts in, delivers a monologue, then announces “Exit Eurydike, bleeding from all

orifices.” But she does not exit. The messenger resumes his message. Only then does she exit. Like Cassandra in Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon*, Eurydike in this play is a character who takes the play hostage, refusing to exit on its terms. Martha Johnson’s Eurydike (Rebecca Cho) effectively caught the audience off guard with her fierce tragic self-awareness.

Another character who channels Carson’s interests in metatheater is the prophet Teiresias. His entry is announced by the chorus with the words “Here comes Teiresias! Episode Five.” His pronouncements are very self-referential (“You know the failing of the sign is in *itself* a sign... You’ve made a structural mistake with Life and Death, my dear! You’ve put the Living underground, and kept the Dead up here!”)(Image 7). Johnson’s Teiresias (Jorge Rodriguez) entered the theater through the audience, led in by Nick. Treading with a confidence that belied his blindness, he swept past Kreon and eclipsed him with a presence worthy of the Godfather, his prophetic utterances punctuated by the shaking of the sistrum by Nick, producing a sound evocative of a belligerent rattlesnake. The startling and powerful effect of Teiresias’ entry provided motivation for the sudden change of heart of Kreon who, like the audience, was shaken by this encounter.

Tragic choruses are often shortchanged in modern

performances. In this production, the choreography of the six-person chorus (by Pam Gleason) contributed significantly to the success of the performance. Each choral ode was strikingly different in movement and tone. The triumph of the first ode, accompanied by the modern equivalent of a Pyrrhic dance, full of rapid and excited gesture, was followed by the buildup of the second ode, Carson’s eccentric rendition of Sophocles’s famous ode to man (“Many terribly quiet customers exist, but none more terribly quiet than man.”) Here the dancing effectively communicated the vanity of human self-confidence. In the third ode, that confidence had vanished, replaced by a sense of human frailty. “Zeus you win you



Image 8: Chorus with red thread. Photo by Stephen Geffre.



Image 9: Kreon, played by Michael Wesely, on Pedestal. Photo by Stephen Geffre.



Image 10: Antigone, played by Brid Henry, and Ismene, played by Mawrgyn Roper, watch duel from battlements. Photo by Stephen Geffre.



Image 11: Antigone, played by Brid Henry, and Ismene, played by Mawrgyn Roper. Photo by Stephen Geffre.

always win,” cried out the chorus in despair as they sank to their knees. The fourth ode surprised me with its sheer beauty. This is the hymn to Eros (*Ant.* 781–800), and the choreography captured the grace and longing, the joy and despair, of the madness he inflicts. The contrast with the

ensuing ode could not have been more striking. Carson rejects the Sophoclean chorus’ attempt to offer Antigone comfort through mythological exempla, replacing it with a metatheatrical moment (“How is a Greek chorus like a lawyer? They’re both in the business of searching for a precedent, finding an analogy locating a prior example so as to be able to say this terrible thing we’re witnessing now is not unique you know it happened before or something like it.”) This ode was performed in a prosaic, even detached manner, as if the chorus had lost its reason to dance. The sixth choral ode follows on from Kreon’s rapid exit as he now frantically seeks to rescue Antigone. The chorus, holding the scarlet thread, spun in a strophic dance, as if forming the wheel of a clock; Nick stood ominously at the center, controlling the plot as the human characters vainly sought to achieve *eukairia* (timeliness) (Image 8).

In between these choral odes, the chorus assumed a variety of positions on stage that signaled the dynamics of a given scene. When Kreon first entered, they cowered on the ground. Later, when Antigone confronted Kreon, they became passive onlookers, seated at the back of the playing area on high-backed chairs (another motif inspired by Stone’s illustrations). Antigone tried to enlist their support, raising them to their feet, but a glare from Kreon sent them scurrying back into their seated position. At moments of tension they rose to their feet; after Kreon’s *peripeteia* they brought the chairs downstage in a poetic dance and became an onstage audience.

The set design (by Mina Kinukawa) was sparse, in keeping with ancient drama’s visual economy. A prominent rotating central door was flanked by four flats in muted tones, depicting horses’ legs bound by red thread, a design inspired by one of three equine illustrations by Stone. A long trestle table positioned upstage center on this thrust stage gave Kreon an elevated platform from which to issue his virulent verbal assaults (Image 9). Johnson used it as the focal point for a number of pantomimes not present in Carson’s script. In the opening scene of the play, Johnson portrayed the duel between Eteokles and Polyneikes in mime as their sisters Antigone and Ismene watched in horror from this platform, which represented the battlements of Thebes (Image 10). It also served as Antigone’s living tomb, and later the locus of her suicide, a variation on the tragic *ekkyklema*. In the closing scene, Ismene returned to discover her sister hanging in this same spot; she took down the body, cradling it in her lap in a tableau reminiscent of Michelangelo’s *Pietà* (Image 11). Indeed, in her use of visual tableaux and slow and deliberate stage action, Martha Johnson remained very close to the aesthetic of Greek tragedy. Perhaps the most arresting stage property was the empty bier that Kreon’s attendants brought on stage in the closing scene (this replaced the body of Haimon, which in Carson’s script is brought on stage) (Image 12). The bier became the focal point for Kreon’s pathos, a multivalent symbol of the lives he destroyed and the suffering he experienced. Kreon pleads for death, but the chorus responds “That’s the future this is the present.” Exit Kreon and bier, a haunted ending if ever there was one.



Image 12: Kreon, played by Michael Wesely, and bier. Photo by Stephen Geffre.

notes

¹ Carson, Anne. “The Art of Poetry No. 88: Anne Carson.” Interview by Will Aitken. *Paris Review* 171 (2004): 190–226.

² The only earlier performance of which I am aware was put on by the Harvard–Radcliffe Dramatic Club at the Loeb Drama Center in October 2013, directed by Ianthe Demos.