

The Journal for Ancient Performance



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

# DIDASKALIA

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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](mailto: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](http://didaskalia.net).

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**Note**

*Didaskalia* is an online journal. This print representation of Volume 13 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at [didaskalia.net](http://didaskalia.net), which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

## The Authenticity of Mary-Kay Gamel

**Ruby Blondell**

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Like so many others, I have benefited deeply for many years and in countless ways not only from Mary-Kay Gamel's academic and theatrical work, but from her collaboration and friendship. In composing my response to these papers, then, I decided to focus on the quality that, in my eyes, unifies her life as a human being and friend with her work as a theater artist, teacher, and scholar: authenticity.

Whether in a person or in a theatrical production, this quality is notoriously difficult to define; but I believe that very difficulty lies at the heart of its significance for Mary-Kay. She has argued that theatrical authenticity comes in at least six flavors: (i) nominal/historical (reproducing original performance conditions); (ii) expressive (bringing out a work's latent meanings); (iii) processual (expressing the commitment of all the artists involved); (iv) structural (evoking the communal character of ancient theater); (v) inductive (producing an audience impact analogous to that of ancient productions); (vi) critical (taking a holistic scholarly approach).<sup>1</sup> These varieties of authenticity are far from mutually exclusive. It is, rather, the very complexity and multivalence of the term that give it such generative richness for practitioners of ancient drama.



*The set for Antigone at the Upstream Theater Company, 2014  
(photo: Peter Wochniak)*

Traditionally, scholarship on ancient performance has equated authenticity with fidelity to the text and to ancient theater practice (nominal/historical authenticity). It is in these terms that Amy R. Cohen locates herself and Mary-Kay “at opposite ends of the ancient theatrical spectrum.” At her end of that spectrum, Cohen recreates original practices as closely as possible; at the other end, Mary-Kay is famous for provocative adaptations which insist, in Cohen's words, that we “understand the tragedies in terms of our modern world.” Mary-Kay would argue, however, that her productions are no less authentic than Cohen's, since she strives for other forms of authenticity, which complement but also complicate the goal of fidelity to text and *realien*.

Among these modes of authenticity, I would argue that the “inductive” occupies a special place. A director might, for example, choose not to engage in processual or structural authenticity, but the challenge of inductive authenticity is inescapable, since “productions...that do not engage their audiences intellectually and emotionally...fail as theatrical experiences” (Gamel 2013: 189). One of the few things we know for sure about ancient audience response is that it was viscerally emotional. It follows that a modern production will be more authentic in a vital respect if it succeeds in engaging its own audience in a comparable fashion. But this can only be done by relating the drama to contemporary concerns. If, as Christopher Bungard puts it, “a text makes meaning through its engagement with the cultural values of its recipients,” then those values, as well as the script, require translation.

Once we realize this we can, like Cohen, let go of the classicist's plaintive knee-jerk reaction “but that's not what it says.” After all, no act of translation can convey *every* aspect of “what it says.” Indeed, simply by rendering the text in a modern language we have sacrificed one aspect of authenticity—the original words—in favor of a more important one, namely the not-insignificant fact that ancient audiences could understand what the performers were saying. Mary-Kay takes this insight further. On her view, respect for an ancient script may be displayed not only by translating the original words accurately, but

sometimes by actively tampering with them (as ancient actors did themselves<sup>2</sup>). Departing from the received text may actually serve as translation of a different kind. Mary-Kay's production of Euripides' *Helen*, which Toph Marshall mentions in his introduction, provides an excellent example of this paradox. As Marshall tells us, the ending of her version diverged radically from the original script. As a result, in his words, "The...weirdness of the mythic variant [kept] even the most savvy Euripidean guessing at where the play [would] turn next." Given Euripides' own propensity for surprising his audience with unusual mythic variants, there is an important sense in which nothing could be more Euripidean than such "infidelity" to his script.

Mary-Kay's approach helps to liberate theater practitioners from a misleading and partial notion of what must be done to ensure "authenticity." In an article quoted by Bungard, for example, Niall Slater objects to inserting new lines into the script of Terence's *Hecyra*, saying "the problem with this strategy is that Terence disappears and is replaced by what the adapter thinks of Terence" (Slater 1999: 18). But in Mary-Kay's view such concerns evaporate, or must at a minimum be rephrased. In any kind of production, Terence or Euripides or Sophocles *always* disappears, to be replaced by a hybrid resulting from complex interactions between the playwright and his or her interpreters.

There is, then, no such thing as a fully authentic performance. Even time-travel could not provide us with one, since a modern viewer in the Theater of Dionysus would be a cultural alien, incapable of ancient Greek modes of comprehension and emotional response. By the same token, however, *any* modern production, from the most historically informed to the most avant-garde, may stake its own kind of claim to authenticity. In this view, authenticity is not, after all, a point on a spectrum. It is more like a fluid boundary between two territories, or a zigzagging line connecting the dots among multiple points of contact and tension between ourselves and the past—whether these concern script, staging, mode of production, or audience impact. As with any kind of translation, this line is drawn as a result of complex negotiations between what we know of the past and the contemporary perspectives from which we know it. But performance stands apart from textual translation in distinctive ways. Most importantly, it takes the meaning of a script out of the realm of pure imagination and into the physical world, making the choices that inform it starkly visible. In so doing, it forces both performers and audience to take up specific positions in the no-man's-land between us and them, then and now.

As Homer says about the shifting line of battle, this boundary is in a constant state of ebb and flow. But there is no need to construe the field of performance choices as a battlefield, since there is not—nor can there be—any single determinately correct version of where that line should "should" fall. Each production, from the most antiquarian to the most adventurous, is equally engaged in drawing it in a distinctive way. There is, however, some danger of effectively abandoning the field altogether. This can happen, at one extreme, with the kind of pedantic reconstruction that Mary-Kay objects to, which runs the risk of disconnecting the audience from contemporary meanings altogether.

At the other extreme lies the risk of over-familiarization, fueled by the insistence that Greeks and Romans were "just like us." Modern interpreters are, of course, well aware that ancient institutions and cultural practices (such as slavery and the treatment of women) were different from our own. But it can be tempting to bridge this gulf by perceiving the characters' motivations and psychological make-up as "timeless," in other words, as indistinguishable from our own. Medea, for example, may be modernized by presenting her as a heart-broken love-sick woman, or as criminally insane. This approach has the merit of forging a connection with the alien Other, but it does so at a price: we lose the full terrifying force of seeing a "woman" driven by shame, honor, and revenge to commit deeds that fit into no contemporary framework for comprehensible human motivation. By erasing the Otherness of the ancients, such strategies risk abdicating the challenge of what Bungard calls "a double-visioned approach" that "can encourage students to probe ancient attitudes while thinking more critically about their own."

Mary-Kay is of course well aware of this danger, arguing that even inductive authenticity calls for “a mixture of the familiar and the strange” (Gamel 2010: 160). In an interview quoted by Cohen, she declares, “I do not want to change things into concepts that modern audiences can completely understand. There needs to be some unfamiliarity.” One of the things that makes her work remarkable is her success in walking this line. Modernizing or experimental productions can, of course, be as unsuccessful in dramatic terms as pedantic literalism. But Mary-Kay’s particular genius consists in part in making choices—often risky ones—that keep audiences gripped, even while challenging them to negotiate both similarity and difference. This balance makes her extraordinarily successful in generating what she calls the “dynamic” and “fruitful tension” between antiquarianism and theatrical effectiveness.

How is this fruitful tension to be achieved? In my own experience, members of the general public tend to occupy the same two extremes that bookend the choices of theater practitioners, namely pedantry and over-familiarization (often both at once). It is widely believed that the ancients are “just like us,” and that *this* is why their dramas still have meaning for us, since they embody a “timeless” human nature to which we can still “relate.” This belief is instinctive, inescapable, and in fact essential, to some degree, if an audience is to engage emotionally with a text or production. But the very necessity of such a response also makes it dangerous, since the complacent acceptance of such commonplaces risks erasing difference altogether, and with it the “fruitful tension” of which Mary-Kay speaks.

I personally prefer the other widespread tendency that pervades reactions from many of the public, namely an almost obsessive desire for a production to “get it right.” It is easy to find such reactions in online comments and reviews. A favorite example of mine is the frequent complaint about the 2003 TV miniseries *Helen of Troy*—where Achilles is played (by Joe Montana) as a shaven-headed thug—that Achilles was not “really” bald. This may seem amusingly naive, but as a production choice, the baldness of Achilles is, in fact, a great starting point for a discussion of culture and meaning: Why *would* a twenty-first century TV producer represent one of the “long-haired Achaeans” with a shaved head? What would the alternatives be, and how would they affect the meaning of the production? Whatever answers one offers to such questions, the essential point is that in producing a drama—as opposed to simply reading a text—*some* choice must be made about Achilles’ head and its hair, or lack thereof, and that choice will have a whole range of implications. The visibility of performance forces us to confront such questions in a uniquely powerful way.

This is one reason why the kind of pedagogical techniques that Bungard employs are so important. By having his students produce and perform in ancient dramas, he obliges them to make these kinds of choices for themselves, thus prompting reflection on the ways in which—individually and socially—we both are and are not like the ancients. This primes them to become sophisticated viewers and readers outside the classroom, where theater productions and other forms of reception (such as film and television) will continue to challenge them, each in its own way, to interrogate such boundaries.

Upstream Theater’s *Antigone*, as analyzed by Timothy Moore, provides a perfect example of such a challenge. Thanks to its location in time and place, the production was inescapably framed by the political unrest in Ferguson. According to Moore, modern productions can “engage with contemporary politics in meaningful and constructive ways while introducing minimal changes to their received texts and very few striking anachronisms.” This approach is absolutely “authentic” by the standards of Greek tragedy, which almost never refers directly to contemporary Athenian politics yet engages profoundly with such concerns through verbal, visual, and narrative implication. But the Upstream staging also challenged its audience to construct their own version of the shifting line between ancient and modern meanings. The literal line of Greek key pattern enclosing the stage (visible in [this image](#)) seems to provoke the viewer to interrogate its effectiveness as a barrier, not only between audience and players but between the Greeks and us.

The background of oversized vase paintings presents a slightly different kind of challenge. Viewers will respond to it variously, depending on their personal knowledge of Greek antiquity. (Do they realize, for example, that these images are taken from specific vases?) Yet even those who know little of such matters will recognize the images in question as signifiers of European “high” culture. As such these panels invite us to affirm the lasting value of ancient works of art, including drama; by the same token, however, they also elevate the artistic and cultural significance of the events unfolding on stage. In so far as these events allude to the recent political turmoil in Ferguson, then, the production is using an elite cultural form to legitimize the tragic concerns of disadvantaged American blacks—people who, as a group, typically stand well outside the gates of “high” culture. Using ancient drama to think about contemporary concerns is thus a way of democratizing elite cultural products—a way that would have seemed perfectly natural in classical Athens.

Academic theater practitioners can use pedagogy to democratize ancient drama in a related way. As Cohen emphasizes, college productions offer many people their first or even their only exposure to such works of “high” art. As teachers, we have the opportunity to drive home the fact that despite their cultural cachet, ancient dramas were not composed as elite texts for a privileged few, but as performance scripts aimed at a mass audience. If this kind of pedagogy is to succeed, however, the plays must be presented, as they were in antiquity, in ways that make emotional and cultural sense to their audience. This democratizing of an elite cultural practice that was deeply democratic in its origins offers us yet another avenue to theatrical authenticity (in more than one of its varieties).

At this point, one may be wondering whether the concept of authenticity has outlived its usefulness. If every approach has equal potential for authenticity on its own terms, then how are we to locate or evaluate that elusive quality? I think the key lies in a phrase Cohen uses to describe the success of any production: it must have a “lively authenticity.” By “lively” I take her to mean “infused with life”: infused with our life in a way that makes sense of ancient life as we understand it. To be authentic is to be true to oneself in negotiating the boundaries between past and present and joining the dots to produce our own version of that uncertain line, in full and humble awareness that other approaches may have an authenticity of their own.

I say “humble” because in approaching ancient work of all kinds we must never forget that we are always doing so as ourselves. At the end of the day, we have no choice other than, as Cohen puts it, to “understand the tragedies in terms of our modern world.” Different styles of production tell us about different aspects of that world and different aspects of ourselves. But *every* engagement with an ancient script is just that—an engagement, not a presentation of objectively determinable facts. Each classicist involved in the performance of ancient theater must take on the challenge of drawing that uncertain line between ancient and modern, in order to achieve a production that is authentic to oneself personally, both as a scholar of antiquity and as a product of the here and now. We must all aspire, that is, to the authenticity of Mary-Kay Gamel.

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## notes

<sup>1</sup> This taxonomy is from Gamel 2013. Mary-Kay says more about (iv) in Gamel 2016 and (v) in Gamel 2010. On the difficulty of defining “authenticity” more generally see, most influentially, Trilling 1972.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Cicero *Pro Sestio* 121, Plutarch *Moralia* 841F. The degree to which such interpolations may have affected our texts is debated (for a skeptical view see Hamilton 1974), but the fact that they occurred in live performance is not in doubt.

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