DIDASKALIA

The Journal for Ancient Performance

photo: P. Winters/Theater of War

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 διδασκαλίαι. *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 8 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at didaskalia.net, which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

Compassion in Chorus and Audience

Paul Woodruff
The University of Texas at Austin

This version of the paper is revised and slightly expanded by the author from a transcript of the presentation.

Conference Presentation
video: Randolph College
youtube.com/watch?v=D6ZYSdT4D-U

Speaking from the orchestra, I'm in the sun, and so are you as you listen and watch from theater seats. I am familiar with performing under lights, but most of us are not used to being an audience for a classical play under a bright sun. At least I'm not. An audience in these circumstances can see itself and respond. In a football game, we know how this plays. The audience may spontaneously generate certain behaviors—cheers, songs, body motions. All stand, all sway, all roar. When our student cast here performs the *Hecuba* they do not expect behavior as raucous as that, but they should expect some effects from the audience's ability to see itself. In the football game, these effects may be controlled to some effect by cheerleaders, whose job is partly to put on a show of their own, and partly to model certain desired behaviors for the audience. The chorus in a tragic play may have a comparable function, or they may instead serve to reflect predicted audience behavior to the audience, so that the audience see themselves. In this paper I will look into these two possible roles for the chorus—modeling and reflecting—in the context of compassion.

As a writer or director, you have to assume that the audience does have some basic skills at being a good audience for the kind of play you are going to present. You can assume, for example, that they know not to talk during a production, but you can't assume that they will remember to turn off their cell phones, so you have to remind them. And, through various devices, you may also want to teach your audience new skills and encourage them to behave in a way that suits the play you are presenting.

When we are watching a scene in the theater, other people are watching it too, and in the ancient Greeks' theater, we watch the chorus watch every episode (well, almost every episode—not the death of Ajax, for a unique example). And what do we learn from the chorus? How do they affect our experience? Sometimes the chorus may be only part of the background scenery; at other times it may be contributing to the spectacle that we are watching. Often, however, they have a role based on their status as fellow watchers with the audience, and when they do, they may affect us as an audience through modeling or reflecting.

Compassion. A typical audience to a typical tragic play has many opportunities for pity and compassion. Both pity and compassion, on the ancient Greek model, arise when we become aware of suffering in someone similar enough to ourselves that we believe it possible for such suffering to afflict us in the future. The gods, who will never feel human suffering, are not likely to feel pity or compassion. These are not precisely the same, although they have much in common. Compassion has more to do with understanding, as the Greek root of *sungnōmē* shows.

Aristotle held that one of the functions of tragedy was to arouse pity in an audience (*Poetics* 1452a2-3, 1452a36-b1, 1452b29-30), and compassion is often an explicit theme in tragedy, especially in Sophocles' work. Sophocles represents compassion as appropriate to human beings in many contexts, though perhaps not to the gods, who appear from the human perspective to be ruthless (*Women of Trachis* 1266;

cf. the exchange at *Ajax* 121-133). In the *Ajax* we have to admire Odysseus for the compassion that saves the honor of Ajax after his death; in the *Philoctetes* we are led to root for the young hero, Neoptolemus, to show compassion for the wounded archer. In the latter play, it seems that the chorus shows the way to Neoptolemus (*Philoctetes* 169-190); perhaps they are also showing the way to the audience, though it is equally possible that they are reflecting to us—and to the young hero—the audience reaction to the wounded man's misery, thereby playing the modeling role and the reflecting role at the same time.

There is another possibility: that the chorus reflects behavior that the playwright wishes to discourage. Examples of this technique are well known from Shakespeare, who uses plays within plays (and other metatheatrical devices) to show the audience themselves behaving atrociously in a play. We see famous examples in *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Love's Labour's Lost*, in which actors behave like audience members sitting to the side of the stage in original performance style, mocking the players unmercifully. If a Greek tragic chorus mirrors our expected response, it may be showing us to ourselves in a cautionary way, as if saying, "This is how you look. Do you really want to react in this way to the scene we are watching together?"

I have no theory about this; the text does not reveal how the chorus is supposed to interact with the audience. Audience interaction is an area in which the director can decide how she wishes to use the chorus. The same scene can be played in a variety of ways. To illustrate the choices, we showed the matricide scene in Sophocles' *Elektra*, performed by some wonderful students from this college. We used two very similar but significantly different versions. Here is the scene as I translated it:

Clytemnestra
I'm finished! Aegisthus, where are you now?

Electra
Listen! What a horrible scream!

Clytemnestra
My child, O my child!
I gave you birth! Have pity on me!

Electra
But you had none—
There was no pity in you for the father who planted the seed.

Chorus
O City! O Family!
What misery! Your days are coming to an end.

Clytemnestra
(With a shriek)
I'm hit!

Electra
Hit her again! Make it twice, if you're strong enough.

Clytemnestra
Another blow!

Electra
How I wish Aegisthus had the same!

Chorus
Curses fulfilled! Drop by drop, the thirsty dead,
Alive beneath the ground, suck back the blood
Of those who killed them long ago.

(Orestes and Pylades enter through the great doors. Their swords are bloody.)

And here they are. His hand drips red Antistrophe
From a sacrifice to Ares.
I do not know what to say.[1]

In the first version, we performed the last line as it is usually printed, following an emendation: "Οὐκ ἔχω ψέγειν, "I am not able to blame them." In that version the chorus was fairly calm. They stood in a line facing the action, between audience and action. The action, in both versions, was in the middle of the orchestra, not on the raised *skene.*

In the second version, we performed the manuscript reading: Οὐκ ἔχω λέγειν, "I do not know what to say."   And this time the chorus reacted with a formal display of horror and compassion, expressed physically in bodily movements. The chorus did not stand between audience and action, but presented their faces to the audience.

The manuscripts attribute those last lines to Elektra, but virtually all modern editors attribute them to the chorus leader. That is a judgment call. If there is an ounce of compassion expressed in the play for Klytemnestra at this point, it is coming in this passage from the chorus in such lines as these: "What misery!" and "I do not know what to say."

If I am right about the text, is the chorus modeling for us a compassion that we ought to feel for Klytemnestra? If so, we have perhaps been prepared for that by what Chrysothemis has said about Klytemnestra and by Klytemnestra's own very brief moment of sorrow for the loss of Orestes earlier in the play, when she hears the Messenger. Alternatively, we might see the chorus as mirroring a horror and compassion that we might be inclined to feel but over which we ought to exert some measure of control. Is compassion here a weakness that we should fight against, or a virtuous feeling we should cultivate? The text here gives no answer, but Sophocles' support for compassion in the other plays I mentioned earlier suggests the latter.

We did the scene first with a very passive chorus, leaving the audience to its own reaction. In this version, the chorus were simply watchers like us.   Then we did the mother-killing scene with a chorus reacting in a very stylized way to the horror of it all.   After that, it was time to ask the performers and then the audience how the two scenes affected them. Here are the reactions:

Raquel Cruz (actor): "I think that it depends on how you interpret it, if they are just commenting or if they are more invested . . . . I think it would depend on how passionate you want the person to be."

Conrad Bailey (actor): "I think performing the scene the second time around it was a lot more unnerving to do it because of the way the lines are now moved around; we have many more lines in unison; it is much more easy, chanting together. The first time doing the scene was kind of scary but the second time I sort of freaked out, having that new response. It is probably closer to what Sophocles was going for—it is just much more of a reaction."

Paul Woodruff: “I am glad to hear you say that, thank you. The convention has been to regard these lines as belonging to the chorus leader, but if you look at the passage, it's rather like a *kommos* metrically. It does seem that the entire chorus is reacting physically and verbally to the lines. That is why I had you say more key lines in unison.”

[Some of the discussion was lost at this point, as the wind drowned the voices.]

Paul Woodruff [responding to an actor]: “Yes, I wonder if Sophocles’ chorus was allowed to model different reactions or if they had to speak with one voice.”

Audience Member: “I have a question, does it matter if we feel sorry as long as we feel *something*?—because if the whole purpose is to feel, is it the most important thing that we feel something in the audience, something other than neutral?”

Paul Woodruff: “You may feel that the show is ruined if the audience breaks out in laughter, so sometimes it is important to control the audience in some way. [The audience member is asking whether any emotional response is better than none, and I am answering that sometimes the wrong emotional response—say, laughter at matricide—is worse than no response at all.]

Eric Struble (audience member): “Is it more important to view the chorus as more of a prop or as actual people and characters in the play? If they are props, they are kind of buffers between the actors and audience—as a kind of response to what horrible thing is happening on stage—as a buffer. But if they are characters their actions are translated directly to the audience.”

Paul Woodruff: “The way we did it the first time they were a wall between the audience and the actions, and because we didn't have a raised *skene*, which is essentially a buffer, [they filled that role]. [In the second version they were people.] Should the chorus be buffers or people? That is something to think about a lot.”

Annie Freeman (actor): “They [the chorus] are more useful as people, they have an influence on the audience, yes, but they are very useful as people. But for the actors it is good to be able to bounce off of them; if they are reacting, then I can react to their reactions on stage.”

Paul Woodruff: “Well, thank you very much, and thanks to the wonderful actors.”

Conclusion. I view this as an experiment. I think the second version affected both actors and audience more profoundly, supporting the hypothesis that Sophocles used the chorus here rather like cheerleaders—analogously, and to coin an ugly phrase, sad-leaders. Their reaction is the opposite of Electra’s outburst, and, although they support Electra, their reaction may put some distance between the vengeful daughter and us. The play is mysterious, however; aside from the lines performed in our experiment, the play seems to render no verdict on its central action, the killing of a mother by her son and his friend, with the daughter cheering them on.

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note

[1] From Peter Meineck and Paul Woodruff, *Sophocles: Four Tragedies.* Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007.