

Translating and Directing the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus

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Abstract

The consensus is among theater people that to translate and direct Aeschylean drama for a modern audience is a major task and even more so is the task of translating and directing the *Oresteia*. The Classics Department of the University of Canterbury undertook this task when I translated and directed the *Oresteia* for the Christchurch stage in New Zealand. The article discusses the directorial choices made in terms of compressing this epic drama into a smaller theater space, especially in handling in an effective way the parodos and first stasimon of the *Agamemnon*.

(Key words: *Oresteia*, *Agamemnon*, *Clytemnestra*)

Introduction

This paper is based on the experience I gained in translating, directing and performing in the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus in a production mounted to coincide with an international seminar on Greek Drama hosted by the Department of Classics at the University of Canterbury in February 1992.¹ The inception of the whole project is a salutary reminder of the dangers and seductive advantages of study leave. For it was while I was in Perth at University of Western Australia in 1990 that I came up with the foolish notion, born out of leisure and sired by hybris, that I would translate and direct the *Oresteia* for the upcoming drama seminar. I was also already half-way through a translation of the *Choephoroi* to use with my existing translations of the two 'Electra' plays in courses in drama and mythology at Canterbury. As a result of this exercise I was intrigued by the difficulties and rewards both of translating the poetry of Aeschylus and by the challenges the text would provide for a modern director, cast and audience. Part of the my interest sprang as well from a desire to test the

¹ The actual production did take place on the nights of Feb. 5, 6, 7 & 11, 12 1992 in the University Theatre of The Arts' Centre of Christchurch and was a joint production of The Drama Programme of the University of Canterbury, The Department of Classics and The Free Theatre (Inc.). The hours of performance were 6.30 -

validity of the objections to the performability of Aeschylus which first were raised by the character Euripides in the *Frogs* of Aristophanes, especially to the 'outmoded' dramaturgical skills of Aeschylus regarding, for example, the portentous silent figures (vv. 907-920), such as Cassandra in the *Agamemnon*, and also of the objections raised implicitly by the actual playwright Euripides himself in the text of his *Electra* (vv. 508-584) regarding the 'unconvincing' recognition scene of the *Choephoroi*, which he appears to parody so unmercifully in his own play on the Electra story.

It had also become a commonplace of classical criticism, a tradition perhaps stemming from the comic comments of Aristophanes, that Aeschylus was majestic indeed, but outmoded and stagy (whatever that quite means – overtly theatrical, perhaps, and so intrinsically interesting to those who have outgrown the confines of inhibiting naturalism?) compared with the more psychologically 'convincing' naturalistic style of Sophocles and the self-aware iconoclasm of Euripides.

Supposed Difficulties

The difficulties of presenting the work of the ancient dramatists to the modern audience are often exaggerated. In some ways the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides² are no more remote from the modern English speaking experience than are the tragedies of Racine or Ibsen or, more especially, and perhaps more controversially, the plays of Shakespeare.

After all the translation of the ancient plays should be in recognizably modern English, which is too often not the case, as it happens, with productions of Ibsen and Chekhov,³ in particular, and which, of course, can never happen in the case of Shakespeare – although Shakespeare can often be made more comprehensible than it often is, on stage and on film, witness Kenneth Branach's *Henry V*, and the Christchurch Free Theatre's production of *King Lear* in March 1983. Also the cultural and intellectual background of Athens of the

8.00 (*Agamemnon*), followed by a meal-break, and 8.45-11.30 (*Choephoroi* and *Eumenides*) with a ten minute interval for change of scene between the two plays.

² The comedies of Aristophanes are a different matter, both in terms of translation and production, because of their obviously more closely topical content. I hope to be able to speak with greater authority on the matter of Aristophanes after a projected production of the *Thesmophoriazousae* in Perth in August/September of this year.

³ Michael Fraynes' translation of *The Cherry Orchard* (Methuen, 1978) is exceptional in this regard. Unfortunately the Penguin translations of Ibsen's plays e.g. Peter Watts' *Ghosts and Other Plays* (Harmondsworth, 1964) seem stilted in the extreme by comparison.

fifth century B.C. is, I would argue, no more essentially remote from the Australasian milieu and audience, as currently educated, than the England of Elizabeth and James or seventeenth century France or, indeed, the England of Noel Coward or even *Look back in Anger*. Indeed, it could be argued that over time the influence of the Classical world on the development of our European based culture and literature has been at least as pervasive as that of the bible of King James and the doctrines and mythology of the Christian church, but that, even as the influence of these institutions has been consistently eroded, just so the knowledge of the Classical influence has waned – until the recent and mushrooming growth in the popularity of Classical Studies – itself eroded by new, and not necessarily undesirable trends in education, but also by self conscious barbarism.

Accordingly, the real challenge in a modern world, unused to live theatre, is to make any theatrical text of historical significance interesting and challenging in an intellectual and dramatic way to a modern audience and to educate that modern audience through the process of its participation, even as the audience itself, by its participation, helps in the creation of the performance and, indeed, of the text. For the text will achieve a different and new and valid identity in its interaction with each new audience, so long as the director remains as honestly true as is possible to his or her interpretation of the text, as it exists on the page, and so long as that interpretation is achieved by a careful but not slavish study of existing scholarship, and, if possible, of previous productions.

There are, of course, not many recent productions of the *Oresteia* to study, although I was given a good deal of information about the National Theatre's production in London in the 1980s. Only once has the whole trilogy been attempted in New Zealand and that was in the time when Professor Guy Manton was head of the Department of Classics in Dunedin.

As far as recreation of the ancient conditions of performance is concerned it must be recognized that that is impossible, although it may be desirable to utilize some of the conventions of the ancient theatre such as masks, music and dance, adapted to the modern context and to the specific space of performance, which in my case was an intimate theatre of approximately one hundred seats, as opposed to the size and shape and majesty of the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens in the fifth century B.C. A playwright friend did suggest (in his cups) that I hire the Addington Raceway in Christchurch, the home of the trots and harness racing in the city, but the size of my total budget (c. \$3,000 N.Z.) sadly was against it – even though that venue would have been more than useful for the ceremonial entrance of Agamemnon's

chariot!

However, even in a small theatre it is possible, if it is thought desirable, by set design to give some intimation to the audience of the basic conditions of performance of the ancient productions in terms of entrances and exits at the very least and the structure of the *skene* building. Accordingly, I designed a very simple set for this production which with a minimum of distracting adjustment⁴ was suitable for each of the trilogy's three plays.

On entering the theatre from the central door at the rear of the auditorium the audience was confronted by a raked auditorium (the University Theatre was originally a lecture theatre on the town site of the University of Canterbury) with three blocks of seats. Two aisles led down to the stage area; I do not say 'acting area' because the aisles themselves as well as the rear of the theatre and the whole auditorium were pressed into service as acting areas from time to time, notably in the entrances of the Herald, Agamemnon and Cassandra and in the scene between Agamemnon and Clytemnestra in the *Agamemnon*, and again in the frenzied dancing and hunting of the Furies in the *Eumenides*. The stage was backed by a very solid timber construction some two metres high; this created a wall across the entire cyclorama and provided also a suitably elevated walkway some 1.5 metres across for the appearance and perambulations of the Guard, at the beginning of the trilogy, and for the appearance of the gods, Athene and Apollo, in the trial scene of the *Eumenides*.

This raised walkway was the equivalent of the *theologeion* on the roof of the *skene* building in the theatre of Dionysus in Athens. Of course, in the theatre of Dionysus the sky is literally the limit; however in my theatre I discovered too late that the gap between the elevated walkway and the ceiling – with lighting bar and spots – was barely sufficient in terms of headroom for my suitably lofty, but rather acrophobic Athene! Accordingly Athene was without a helmet in the trial scene of the *Eumenides*. Her feelings of insecurity inspired by having her unhelmeted head some four metres above the stage and fifteen centimetres from the roof necessitated also the removal of the backlighting bar and subsequent alterations to the original lighting scheme.

The *skene* wall disappeared into the black wing curtains on either side of the stage, providing, however, practicable – if somewhat cramped – entrances SL and SR to match the

⁴ For example the tomb of Agamemnon, which plays such an important role in the *Choephoroi* was simply a table covered with a black cloth, carefully draped, and brought on stage in the interval between the first two plays of

side entrances of the Athenian *skene*. A central entrance in this wall was constructed in the shape of the Lion Gate at Mycenae and provided access to the palace in the *Agamemnon* and the *Choephoroi* and by the use of lighting both to the interior of the Delphic cave and to the exterior scene at Athens for the trial of Orestes in the *Eumenides*. A raised plinth was placed in front of this entrance to strengthen the impression of an important threshold and also to help a diminutive but dynamic Clytemnestra dominate access to the palace into which she only admits her husband ultimately on her own fatal terms. Also, backlit, this entrance to the palace provided a splendid frame for the bloodily triumphant Clytemnestra, gory sword in hand, after the murder of Agamemnon.⁵

The colour scheme was simple: the palace wall itself was black as was the stage floor apart from a purple pathway from the central plinth (also purple) to DSC. This path was anticipatory of Clytemnestra's net of purple embroideries, while the significance of the colour extends obviously – too obviously perhaps – to the concepts of royalty and blood. The 'Lion Gate' was also picked out in purple which was also the colour of the floor inside the palace in so far as it could be seen by members of the audience in the more elevated seats and, incidentally, of Clytemnestra's costume. The cyclorama above the walkway was stark white relieved only by an enormous splatter of 'blood' some two metres by one metre painted, with great skill and élan, by Christchurch artist Don Peebles. This symbol was present throughout as a reminder of the bloody history, present and future of the royal house of Atreus. The poster, designed by Max Hailstone, was itself the inspiration for this aspect of the set.

I said earlier that the difficulties of presenting ancient plays to the modern audience are often exaggerated, but for all that, it should be noted that certain ancient plays are, at first blush, apparently more appealing and seductive to the susceptibilities of a modern audience than are others: the *Lysistrata* (at first blush) comes to mind – and I know that an excellent production of that extremely difficult play was mounted in Wellington quite recently – and more relevantly, perhaps, the *Trojan Women* of Euripides, which I translated and directed some few years ago, or the *Philoctetes* of Sophocles or the *Medea* of Euripides. In these latter plays the ethical issues concerned with the treatment of women and the political realities of war seem startlingly, if deceptively, modern and the metaphysical element can be consciously

the trilogy, while the altar of Apollo to which Orestes clings in the opening of the *Eumenides* was a simple painted box brought on and set in the ten minute interval between the *Choephoroi* and the *Eumenides*.

⁵ This scenic device was inspired by the cover of Oliver Taplin's book, *Greek Tragedy in Action* (London, 1978).

played down, if not ignored entirely.⁶

On the other hand, the *Oresteia*, by dint of its very scale, the complexity of its language and poetic imagery, the related density of its religious texture and the apparent unfamiliarity, or 'otherness', of the ethical dilemmas and choices made on the stage, necessarily presents a greater challenge to audience and performer and translator alike. However, help is to hand in meeting that challenge, in the initial interpretative stages at least, through the medium of generations of classical scholarship. All I need to do here is mention a few of the names: Kitto, Lesky, Winnington-Ingram, Dodds, Taplin, Fraenkel, Thomson, and more – and more recently my own colleague Matt Neuburg – to whom I owe considerable gratitude for his advice regarding judicious cutting – and to others who have endlessly deconstructed and reconstructed the *Oresteia*, sometimes, it seems, beyond all recognition. A judicious study of this body of work and the consensus it provides does give the director/translator at least an entry into the world of the *Oresteia*.

The journey which the director makes is the result of a vast complex of influences which are under various degrees of personal control; these include, obviously, the translation itself in my case; ideally the translator and director should be one and the same or, at least, able to work closely together, given that every translation is by necessity an interpretation. The designs of set and costumes and lighting will always play a formative role, of course, as will the vagaries and predilections of the strong minded and creative people who make up the design team. Some influences are not so automatically under control, however, in an essentially amateur production – the quality of the cast, for example, and whether they are experienced and amenable to direction, whether they think they are experienced and are, therefore, *not* amenable to direction or inexperienced and amenable to direction but basically incompetent and so on and so on and so on...

Interpretation and Translation

Essentially the *Oresteia* is about crime and punishment, guilt and responsibility, about the conflict between perceived free will and actual determinism and, in an aetiological sense, about the transfer of responsibility for the punishment of homicide from the individual family

⁶ It is, in fact a weakness of Kakoyannis' otherwise excellent film of the *Trojan Women* that the divine prologue between Athene and Poseidon is omitted.

of the victim to the state at large and the establishment at Athens of the court of the Areopagus. It is about the nature of the relationship between two realms both of which had an equal and complementary and interrelated reality so far as the Athenians of Aeschylus' day were concerned, that is to say, the realms of the metaphysical, that is, of the gods of Olympus under the rule of Zeus, and the physical, political, and ethical realm or world of men and of women. In a sense this distinction between the metaphysical and the physical (or human and terrestrial) is anachronistic, since the concept of existence divorced from spatial extension was not recognised until the time of Plato in the fourth century B.C. and the traditional Athenian view of the first half of the fifth century was that the gods were both anthropomorphic and as physically actual as mankind – how else could they control human affairs? However, the distinction is convenient and also demonstrates that in this essential area Greek tragedy has much in common with the tragedy of the later European tradition, where the coexistence of the two realms and the question of the relationship between them constitute two of the prerequisites of the tragic genre.

Accordingly, some at least of the modern audience will find the appearance of gods and ghosts in Greek tragedy no more surprising than the ghost of Hamlet's father and will accept the intercourse between humankind and gods as part of the dramatic furniture and conventions of the genre. Others, perhaps less well informed, can be led to accept the coexistence of men and gods in the same way that in science fiction or fantasy they will accept the interrelationship between humankind and aliens, so long as they can be boldly led where they have never been led before by the *confidence* of the performance. That confidence is essential, since it is absolutely necessary that the audience believe in the reality of the theatrical conflicts for the characters involved, if they are to empathise with the characters and so undergo the tragic experience in this pre-Brechtian theatre in any other than a merely intellectual way, if, to use the familiar terms, they are to suffer the appropriate pity and fear.

It is also essential that the members of the audience are made confident that they are capable of comprehending the text as it unfolds from moment to moment. It is insufficient and misleading, potentially, to trust simply as director in the emotional impact of the *music* of the language backed by an actually emotive musical score. Apart from difficulties caused by the variety of the manuscript tradition and scholarly emendation the dialogue passages are usually clear enough in their essential meaning, even when ambiguity and dramatic irony are consciously employed by the author. The choral lyrics are, however, a different matter; nevertheless, it is my belief that one has to assume that Aeschylus did make sense to himself

and to his original audience, that he was in control of his own creativity and that it is possible to make the Greek text as we have it have a fresh and relevant meaning for a modern audience, even when the text plays fast and loose with time, space and logical causality, when its 'logic' is that of poetry and image, symbol and metaphor rather than the logic of prosaic dialectic.

Friends whom I trust as critics – Peter Falkenberg, for example, my colleague in the Drama Programme at Canterbury – suggest that, at times, I make the meaning of the Greek more clear than the text perhaps warrants as it stands and that so, in a sense, I patronize the members of the audience by not allowing them to be exposed to the full difficulty and ambiguity of the text, to its full mystery. My answer, such as it is, is that I am not in the business of mystification and that my translation of the text is also my *interpretation* of the text and nobody else's, apart from the fact that it belongs also to the tradition of criticism to which I willy-nilly belong. That interpretation depends to a large extent on the understanding that the *Oresteia*, like much contemporary philosophical thought in Greece in the fifth century B.C.,⁷ is constructed around sets of polar opposites rich in potential for dramatic conflict; these opposites are religious and social and are demonstrated by the author as being of crucial importance in the operations of both the political and the domestic arena, the latter being equally important in an emotionally accessible *family* tragedy.⁸ These creative opposites include old and young, male and female, human and divine, dark and light, beautiful and ugly and, well, the list could go on almost indefinitely as well as a discussion of the inter connections.

I had intended to examine three sections of the text of the *Oresteia* to demonstrate some of the problems involved in concretizing the text on the stage. These sections were:

- a) the parodos and first stasimon of the chorus of the *Agamemnon* – vv. 40-257 in the production text,
- b) the recognition scene of the *Choephoroi*, vv. 165-255 and the invocation of Agamemnon's ghost – vv. 305-337,

⁷ Take, for example, the list of elemental opposites that was of prime importance to the thought of the Pythagoreans: limit/unlimited, odd/even, one/plurality, right/left, male/female, at rest/moving and so on and so on.

⁸ This domestic aspect was one of the elements which was so obviously exploited in Eugene O' Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, perhaps to the detriment of the balance of that trilogy as a whole.

c) the accommodation between the old and new after the trial and acquittal of Orestes, *Eumenides*, vv. 778 – ad fin.

However, it became clear as I was putting this all together that the constraints of time would not allow me to deal properly with all those three sections. Accordingly, I have decided to concentrate only on the parodos and first stasimon of the *Agamemnon*, given that that is a difficult, challenging and important section both from the point of view of interpretation and production.

The Parodos and First Stasimon of the *Agamemnon*

The first decision I had to make was to do with the number and nature of the members of the Chorus. It is necessary that they at least appear old enough to have the memories and experience which they share with the audience and the other characters. They are, or should be all male, according to the text, but in my production I introduced a woman, Margaret Burrell, because (a) I was short of men and because (b) (and more importantly) Margaret was keen to be involved and she had/has a beautiful voice and commanding presence. Because of the limitations of space in the University Theatre I had settled originally on a total of five for the chorus, because odd number are easier to arrange aesthetically on the stage. However, because of the defection of one actor I had to readjust my choral divisions to suit four voices. The four were John Goodliffe, a skilled and experienced actor and another of my colleagues in the Drama Programme, as Coryphaeus (Chorus Leader), John De La Bere, a retired member of the Department of Mathematics, Jim Tully, Head of Journalism, and Margaret Burrell of the Department of French. In one respect at least they all met one of my major criteria for actors: they are all extremely intelligent and literate in the reading and interpretation of text. Their different manners, ages, styles and individual characteristics enabled me to divide the choral passages appropriately and consistently between them so that the speaking in unison could be reserved for passages of special significance.

Putting it very simply the Chorus Leader, played by John Goodliffe, was a figure of judicious and conservative authority: Mr. De La Bere, as the oldest member of the cast – he is a man in his seventies – was given lines especially of halting reminiscence; an unexpected bonus was the fact that the very real difficulties which this John had in memorizing some extremely complex verse forms gave an extremely touching and convincing aura to his

performance, once the decision was made to make a virtue of necessity and exploit his occasional hesitations and lapses. Jim Tully was a little younger – in his forties – and was given lines suggestive sometimes of a greater impetuosity. Without, I hope, being sexist in any way I gave Margaret Burrell passages which might appear appropriate to a woman in the context of the drama – in the light of what I assumed to be the preconceptions of the ancient audience from my knowledge of Greek drama and culture in general – and when a more than usual sensitivity or sympathy or emotional response was required in the face of the suffering depicted on the stage or described by the Chorus and other characters as part of the traumatic history of the House of Atreus.

Her character was especially affected, for example, later in the play by the descriptions of the suffering of the innocent children of Thyestes (vv. 1214-1235, when vv. 1232-1235, in the Greek text would normally have been spoken by the Coryphaeus), or of the fate of Iphigeneia or of the anonymous victims of the Trojan War. She was moved in a different way by the infidelity of Helen, where her sadness mingled with outrage (in passages in the third stasimon, vv. 681-809),⁹ and, after the presentation on stage of the corpses of Cassandra and Agamemnon, for example, it was Margaret who was given the specific and repeated lines of lament, kneeling in very real tears over the body of her dead king.¹⁰ In this

⁹ E.g. vv. 681-685:

Who was it coined this fatal name
in all respects most accurate?
It must have been a man possessed
of a tongue
itself possessed of future sight
of what is bound to come.

And vv. 700-708:

A shackle of wedded woe,
well named and working its will,
in the fullness of time
their rage imposed on Ilium, for guest
friendship and Zeus, domestic deity,
scorned, punishment exacted for
that boisterous song,
hymenaeal, which fate
then demanded
the new king sing.

¹⁰ vv. 1489-1496 & 1513-1520:

My king, my king!
How shall I weep for you?
What can I say to match the love I feel?

passage her outrage was compounded as she reflected again on 'unwomanly' and 'unwifely' behaviour, this time of Clytemnestra, because as a member of a Greek chorus she is herself of a traditional frame of mind.

The metre of the Greek is the marching anapaest, as is normal for the entrance of the chorus. It is also appropriate in this instance for the military nature of the subject. The English version duplicates the anapaestic effect in so far as is possible in a stressed verse form and this sound was underpinned both by a soundtrack exploiting that rhythm¹¹ and by the rhythmic beating of staves held by the members of the Chorus. The simulated pre-dawn light was barely sufficient to allow the chorus members to make their entrances in two pairs severally from SR and SL towards CS and to allow them to be seen by the audience. These entrances were timed by the divisions I made in the parodos. As the chorus progressed into the stasimon itself the intensity of the lighting was gradually increased with a special light provided for the 'appearance' of Agamemnon at Aulis (actually from the SL entrance) as imagined by the chorus. No bright light was used until the emergence of the purple clad Clytemnestra from the palace at the end of the stasimon.

Coryphaeus

This is now the tenth year since the kings,
Menelaus and Lord Agamemnon,
Priam's great opposition,
firmly harnessed, ensceptred,
enthroned by Zeus, Atreus' sons,
did launch from this land
the thousand-strong
Argive fleet, martial aid,¹²
war cries clanging loud from their heart,
a sound as of eagles

Prone in the web of this spider's net
you breathed out your life in impious death,
and I grieve for you trapped in that fatal embrace,
overcome by the wiles of a wife,
by her hand on the double edged sword.

¹¹ The music throughout was original and composed and performed by Ms Liz Golding; choreography of the Choruses through the trilogy was by Ms Maureen Perry, working in conjunction with the director.

¹² In production the phrase 'martial aid' was changed on the advice of John Goodliffe to 'military aid', because of the unintentional and particularly anachronistic associations of my original English version.

trackless in grief for their young
ones lost, carried high in the thermal
whirl by the stroke of their
wings, nest empty below,
wasted the lingering labour
their young ones cost.

In this opening section the essential and central image and metaphor of the whole of this choral section is introduced – and it is an image which recurs throughout the trilogy. Agamemnon and Menelaus *are* the twin eagles of Zeus sent to avenge the rape of Helen by Paris as avenging Furies (v. 59), but their war cries as they embark on their journey are *like* the cries of eagles whose young have been stolen, are like, or rather *are* the cries of the despoiled Menelaus, whose cries are heard by some god and so the 'slow vengeance of Furies' is sent out, i.e. Agamemnon and Menelaus. The cries are, however, anticipatory also of the cries of the pregnant hare at Aulis whose death caused by eagles, associated already by the poet with Agamemnon and Menelaus, precipitates the becalming of the fleet by an enraged Artemis and hence the compensatory sacrifice of Iphigeneia. The sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter, Iphigeneia, demanded by the goddess Artemis, acts also as an anticipatory sacrifice for the innocent deaths at Troy and, more immediately, provokes the cries of Clytemnestra, despoiled of her child, on hearing the news of the sacrifice of Iphigeneia and makes her, Clytemnestra, ultimately resolve to murder Agamemnon on his homecoming from Troy. This she does with the aid of her lover Aegisthus, himself the sole survivor of the banquet of Thyestes' children, who were served up as food for their father by Atreus their uncle - again children lost and lamented. Finally, as the curse works its way through the generations, Orestes and his sister Electra, the eagle's children,¹³ cry out in grief and outrage at their father's murder and in turn execute their mother. This act itself arouses the avenging and unearthly Furies of Clytemnestra who, in the *Eumenides*, pursue Orestes to Delphi and to the final resolution at Athens, their shape and behaviour in part being that of strident carrion birds.

In short, the parodos and the first stasimon provide the audience with a complex map of the history and current state of the House of Atreus and its curse, and a map anticipatory of the future of the house, as it is to be depicted in the ensuing six hours; it is obviously essential, therefore, that the audience are given the opportunity by all means possible to grasp the meaning of that map and its significant symbols so that they have some guide to what is

to come based on some knowledge of what has already come to pass. The contours and detail of the map are progressively filled in by the various choruses throughout the play as the *Agamemnon* itself progresses and by the equally, but more consciously prophetic outpourings of Cassandra and by the pleas made in defence of the murder/execution of her husband by Clytemnestra and the self-justificatory rant of Aegisthus.

It is the oldest member of the chorus who brings the issue of *religion* to the fore:

Some god in his height,
Pan, Zeus or Apollo, hearing the screams
of their neighbours the birds, the shrill
cries of grief,
send out a slow vengeance of Furies.

It is the female member of the chorus who in this production pays explicit attention to the adultery of Helen, the proximate cause of the Trojan War, and to the bitterness of the fighting caused not so much by one woman, but by the proprietorial attitudes of men to that one woman in particular and by extension to all women in general.

So it was lord Zeus, the god of hosts,
guest-friends, sends out the Atreidae
against Alexander, a woman the cause
and much manned, setting up for the Greeks
and the Trojans alike many battles to weary
the limbs, knees thrust down in the dust,
lances broken and snapped
in the war's early rites.

The simple and traditional statement of an overriding fatalism is shared by the whole chorus, when they have established themselves CS in a pool of dim light, which suggests momentarily by its circular shape the *orchestra* of the Greek theatre.

All: It is now where
it is and will end where the end has been set.

The implacability of fate and of the will of the gods is suitably represented further by the leader of the chorus. He also explains that age prevented him from going on the expedition against Troy: hence he and his colleagues are uneasily aware of the goings on in Mycenae and the unladylike behaviour of Clytemnestra.

¹³ They are described specifically as such at *Choephoroi* vv. 247-263.

No man can ease the tension of the wrath of god
by burning sacrifices, by offerings that need no fire,
or by the shedding of tears.
But we, ancient of flesh, honour lost,
had no share in that rescue attempt,
stayed behind
supporting our strength,
childlike, on these staves.

The impetuosity of the relatively younger member of the chorus shows itself in the closing lines of the parodos. He is someone who has moved from middle-age, with its bitter memory of youth lost, to an awareness of impending old age and death in the time taken for Agamemnon to take Troy and recapture his brother's wife. His words are often replete with the pessimism of a man who has not yet come to terms with the onset of age.

The sap of youth that shoots in the chest
is lost from the land and War
assumes here an old man's guise,
while age itself, leaf withered, stumbles
its three-footed way, weak as a child,
wanders dreamlike in the day.

His words depicting the evils of old age caused his fellow chorus members to move and shuffle and react uncomfortably; always it was necessary for the ensemble to be aware of what was being said (not only to retrieve lapses of memory!) and to be aware of what was meant and being done at any time. Only by such mutual awareness, alertness and strict discipline could the lengthy choral passages have a chance of holding the audience's attention and so informing and moving the audience in an appropriate manner.

The chorus now moves into the stasimon itself, picking up and amplifying ideas introduced in the parodos. The Chorus are filled with the vicarious pride of old men and nostalgia at the military grandeur of the expedition against Troy. They are troubled, however, by the memory of the sacrifice of Iphigeneia and the tragic dilemma which was thrust upon Agamemnon. So far as they are aware the outcome of the war is as yet uncertain, but the stasimon also anticipates the arrival on stage of Clytemnestra and her news of the beacon light of victory.

Again the text as you have it is divided for the four voices. The refrain, 'Sorrow, speak sorrow, but may what is well still prevail,' was sung in unison on each occasion. The

narrative thread of the stasimon is clear enough, despite the complexity of the images. However, what is of paramount importance is to demonstrate to an audience, which is more than likely hostile to the military ethic, the very real nature of Agamemnon's dilemma when confronted with the necessity to sacrifice his daughter. Sympathy must be induced for him. For here is the question which on the human level, dominates and colours the ethical disputation of this play and motivates the actions of Clytemnestra, and therefore, the subsequent action and argument of the trilogy as a whole: can *anything* justify a father's sacrifice of his own daughter?

The build up to the posing of this question is skillfully done:

[str. a]

Power I have yet to sing the success of their rule over men
in their prime on the road; inspired I am still by the gods
to persuade, and my age is well matched to the telling of tales.
The might of the Argives, twin-throned, and the martial,
like-minded array of the young men of Greece,
was cast, vengeful spear in its hand,
upon the land of Troy, and the senders, berserk,
kings of birds, appeared to the kings of the ships, golden eagle,
sea-eagle, in turn, close in on the side of the spear,
clear to see on their nests,
gorging, their feast gravid womb-fruit of hare,
clawed at the last in the course of its flight.

The association is made once more between the eagles as agents of Zeus and the two kings. By some mysterious association the actual kings are tainted with blood guilt in the eyes of Artemis because of the predatory behaviour of the actual birds of prey.¹⁴

All: Sorrow, speak sorrow, but may what is well still prevail.

[ant. a]

The valued Calchas, eyes prophetic of the host, observed
the likeness to the warlike Atreids, at odds in style the two,
said they, the generals, would 'rend the hare',
foretold.

Impatient with the slow unfolding of the story the younger chorus member thrusts himself forward CS and almost blurts out the message of Calchas and the consequences of the death of the hare. He stresses once more the death of innocent creatures. The connection is

¹⁴ In the Sophoclean and Euripidean versions of the story the *hybris* of Agamemnon and his fault in the killing of an animal sacred to Artemis is made more explicit and so perhaps less terrifying.

made between the death of the hare and the fall of Troy and the resulting slaughter in words which also anticipate Clytemnestra's fears about the war crimes that might be committed in the heat of victory after ten years of bitter campaigning as described so evocatively by the Herald. The Chorus anticipates and interprets what is to come and comments and puts into perspective what has taken place in the past.

In time this force will stalk the town of Priam,
Doom plunder, violate
the public herds that browse
beneath its battlements;
but let no malice of the gods invest Troy's mighty curb,
this force, with darkling cloud. For virgin Artemis
for pity's sake is angry at the winged hounds
the father sent to feast upon the trembling beast and hates
the eagles' feast of pregnant dam and young.

All: Sorrow, speak sorrow. But may what is well still prevail.

The maternal concern for the young and innocent is picked up by the female member of the chorus whose lines here also anticipate the famous image of the wild beast raised in the house in vv. 718-738. Accordingly these lines (718-738)¹⁵ were also given to Margaret, at least until harshly interrupted once again by the impetuous and cynical character played by Jim Tully. By such devices the members of the chorus were given both a continuing and consistent individual and corporate identity which could be recognised by the audience. The occasional 'embarrassment' caused by the unfamiliarity of the choral body corporate can hence be avoided. It was not a source of embarrassment to Aeschylus, of course, who was happy and confident with the conventions within which he worked. In fact, the handling of the Aeschylean chorus is in a sense less difficult than is the handling of the choruses of Euripides, who himself seems to have been embarrassed or at least uncomfortably aware of the presence of the chorus in his dramas of intrigue and suspense such as the *Medea*.

[mesod.]

¹⁵ **MB:**

A man once reared in his home
a lion cub, unweaned and still
fond of the teat;
in its formative years,
gentle, soft, loving the children, charming
the old folk it lay in the crook
of their arms like a child newly born,
eyes bright as it fawned on their hand –
JT: compelled by the ache of its belly for food...

Fair is the goddess, so kind in her heart
MB: to the birth-damp young of the lion, harsh beast
and a source of delight to the breast-cherished cubs
of all the wild things of the field,
so she begs to accomplish the signs,
the visible signs that I see bringing good, bringing ill in their train.

At this stage, however, Margaret was interrupted by the anguished cry of the oldest member of the chorus whose reminiscences have become so vivid that, retold, they take on the tone of a narrative of past events taking place in the dramatic present before his own mind's eye and so the images of his own mind's eye and those of the rest of the chorus, activated by his geriatric confusion of memory and present reality, are ultimately manifested on the stage itself before the actual eyes of the audience.

I cry, Apollo, the Healer,
do not let her bring on the Greeks a cessation of ship-shifting breeze,
to delay them too long, in her wish for an answering death, unsung,
and not to be taken to eat,
a match for that parent of strife, and she no respecter of men.

The agitation of the chorus is expressed in an increase in pace and the rapid interchange of voices:

Dreadful there waits one to safeguard the house,
a madness it is, avenging a child and mindful of guile.

Even so Calchas trumpeted Fate to the men, great and good,

the fate of the house from the flight of the birds on the way;
yes, in concert with them

All: sorrow, speak sorrow, but may what is well still prevail.

The Coryphaeus finally brings the chorus back to a quieter tone and frame of mind with a timely reference to Zeus and the religious questions which exercise the collective mind of the chorus – in a sense the intellectual protagonist of the drama - and so of the audience. There persists, however, in the midst of the questioning a belief in the almighty power of Zeus, 'whoever he is'.

[str.a]
Zeus - whoever he is, and, if this title
is pleasing to him, this is the name I bestow.
Of all things that I weigh
Nothing I think of compares

except Zeus, if I must successfully hurl from my mind
its vain burden of dread.

The younger man is more concerned with the impact of the antipathy of the gods on the human individual, is concerned with the destruction of all human aspirations and the general helplessness of humankind of whatever status in the face of the rank antipathy or even huge disinterestedness of the gods. He wants to know where justice lies when great men are forgotten along with their deeds.

[ant.b]

Not even he who formerly was great,
teeming triumphant with strength,
not even of him will the story survive;
nor yet of the one who succeeded,
now gone, though he won in his time.
Yet the man who in earnestness trumpets victorious Zeus
will not be astray at all in his mind.

However, in the face of doubt it is best to take refuge in received and traditional wisdom. The tragedy of the chorus is that this simple and naively held belief in the essential justice of the cosmos under the rule of Zeus is rudely shattered or at least severely shaken by the murder of Agamemnon by his wife and her paramour, because, as mere mortals and creatures of a day, they are incapable of realising that *sub specie aeternitatis*. Justice and the will of Zeus, the arbiter and agent of Justice, will eventually be done. Until they are faced with that crisis by the death of Agamemnon, however, they put their faith in the eloquent commonplaces of received religion.

Zeus who has set men the route
to good sense, set firm this sovereign rule

All: that wisdom is the child of pain.

The woman's view is more complex, recognizing the enigmatic and unfathomable nature of the rule of Zeus she expands the commonplace into something more subtle:

Displacing sleep before the heart there drips
the constant memory of grief, and wisdom comes,
like it or not, upon men.
The kindness of the gods that sit at heaven's helm
is savage indeed.

This brings us to the depiction of the tragic choice of Agamemnon and all its attendant

circumstances and details. Initially I had thought of introducing some kind of shadow play or dimly perceived representation of the actual sacrifice itself onto the stage. In the small space I had available for such an effect I decided that this would not be desirable and would in all likelihood disrupt the continuity too much and distract from rather than add to the understanding of the audience. I was also concerned not to alienate the audience's sympathies too much from the character of Agamemnon in advance of his arrival on stage in person. The audience had to feel that, however revolting the sacrifice might be, the personal anguish of the father was totally real, as his public duty overbore all ties of love and family affection. Simply to describe the sacrifice of Iphigeneia was, therefore, sufficient to arouse the compassion of the audience for the child – and, indeed, her mother – but I felt it necessary to show the anguish of Agamemnon and his mental torture. Accordingly, I entered as Agamemnon SL to make two impassioned speeches which were derived from the text of the Chorus itself at vv. 206-217 & 232-237.

The lines of the Chorus immediately prior to my entrance set the scene magnificently and described the physical and human background to the king's dilemma in vivid detail:

[ant.g]

The elder leader
of the Argive fleet
did not blame the prophet then,
but breathed in harmony with gusting fate,
and the Argive host, aggrieved
and hungry in the doldrum
calm, hugged the shore of Aulis' beach,
the currents flowing to and fro.

The winds persisted from the North,
imposing hunger, mischief, idleness,
upon that tiresome anchorage;
crews sauntered, careless of the ships and gear,
the winds stretched time, ground
down the withered bloom of Greece;
the prophet then cried out
another remedy, more biting than
the bitter wind, a burden 200
for the leading men, Artemis the cause
the Atreids did beat on the ground
with their staves, could not
restrain a tear.

The picture of the fleet in disarray, all morale gone, on the point of desertion and worse was superbly conjured up by Kakoyannis in his film of Euripides' *Iphigeneia at Aulis*

with slow sweeping pans across the beach and past the grounded ships with crews dicing, drinking, brawling in 'hunger, mischief, idleness, upon that tiresome anchorage'. It was through seeing that film that I first realised the enormity of the burden on the shoulders of Agamemnon. This was the feel and atmosphere I attempted to create through the words of the Chorus, prior to the evocation of Agamemnon, and through the sound effects on tape of wind and surf and flying, biting sand.

The Chorus beat the ground with their own staves, matching word to deed in a crescendo of sound the sudden cessation of which provided a superb silence partially filled with cold blue light into which to step and speak.

[ant. d]

Lord Agamemnon spoke, the elder prince:

Agamemnon:

Grievous the doom should I disobey,
but grievous, indeed,
if I butcher the child, the delight of my house,
and stain these father's hands with floods
of virgin blood beside the altar place.
What thing is free of disaster here?
How can I desert the fleet,
abandon my allies?
To rage in anger for
a sacrifice to ease the winds,
a sacrifice of a virgin's blood,
is right. I would it were well.

The Coryphaeus accurately describes the behaviour of Agamemnon when once the fatal decision was made:

[str. e]

But when he put on the harness of necessity,
his heart's breath came evil within him,
impure and unholy, changed
so as to dare all in his hardihood.

But it is the woman, once more acute and intelligent, who anticipates the response of Clytemnestra to the murder of a child, and recognizes what had happened to Agamemnon, reads the symptoms with the detachment that a woman has from the pressures of office and its responsibilities; the strain of making the decision had pushed him over the brink of madness, the edge of darkness of the mind:

For madness encourages men in their schemes,
wretched first cause of all ills.
Emboldened he slaughtered
his child for a war
waged for one woman,
a gift for the fleet.

I gave the next lines which introduced the second outburst of Agamemnon and gave the actual description of the preparations for the sacrifice to the oldest member of the cast. This decision added a depth of halting poignancy to the moment and provided an ideal vocal frame that contrasted with the stronger and more strident voice of the king.

[ant. e]

Her prayers, her screams of 'father',
her young and innocent life her judges
discounted, lusting for war.
Her father, he prayed and instructed his crew,
'Though she clings at my robe,
lift her high, like a young she goat,
over the stone, face down,
heart rending, cover her mouth, her fair
lips, shutting off any curse
she screams at my house.'

[str. f]

Gagged in violence, muted the cry
of her heart, saffron robes flowing down,
she constantly pierced
with the shaft of her piteous gaze each man
that would kill her, speaking portrait of silent appeal, this girl
who so often had sung midst these guests at her father's fair
table, to honour with song and affection
the third welcome drink
her dear father set out,
clear voiced this virgin unploughed.

All the Chorus then covered their heads behind their robes as things better left unsaid – and the more shocking for that – were left unsaid by the Coryphaeus.

It was at this moment that the Queen, Clytemnestra, entered from the palace, immediately after the description of the event that was to precipitate the murder of her husband. This gives the final section of the first stasimon added significance:

[ant. f]

I neither saw, nor can speak of what happened next,
but Calchas's arts are not unfulfilled.

All:

The scales of Justice swoop down
on those who will suffer and learn: you will
hear what will be when it comes;
leave it all well alone in advance.
Foreknowledge is equal to pain.

All will come clear with the sun's early light.
May the business that follows upon these events turn out well,
to match the desires of this woman close by,
sole bulwark of Apia's land.

And so the action of the *Agamemnon* proceeds.

I am very much aware that more visual aids would have been valuable. However, I hope that I have been able to give you some insights that may be interesting into the ways in which I tackled one small portion of this text. Obviously my approach is very subjective and personal; on the other hand, all the decisions made in terms of the presentation of the text itself and of the physical support provided for the text - if that is the correct way to put it! - were made with a strict view to consistency and dramatic intelligibility.