The Eyeline of Orestes: Exploring the Dramaturgy of Civic Space in the Greek Theatre

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Writing about Greek theatre is notoriously hazardous. Solid physical evidence is scarce, and we only have a handful of plays to represent the entire period. Nevertheless, the Greeks continue to be of critical importance to twenty-first-century theatre academics and practitioners. Greek theatre is featured prominently in nearly every "Introduction to Theatre" and theatre history course, and adaptations and revival productions appear consistently in our production seasons. Therefore, despite the challenges of working in this corner of the field, we must continue to reengage this small but disproportionally important body of evidence to see if our ever-evolving array of critical tools can bring new insights to our understanding of the period.

Naturally, this requires us to operate more theoretically than we would if we were working in a more recent period. Our analyses, which rest upon these more abstractly derived theories, will subsequently be shakier and more subject to later revision. Yet such theoretical contributions may nevertheless provide useful insights into how these enduring classics may have operated in their own time, and how modern adaptations and revivals might best bring them to life in ours.

In this brief article I examine a number of important moments from *The Oresteia* with a particular eye toward what I describe as the play's "dramaturgy of space." My analysis of this spatial dramaturgy is informed by prior scholarship that has helped us to understand the sociological position of the Greek theatre structure as a civic space within Greek society, rather than simply a site of entertainment.

Undergirding my discussion of *The Oresteia*'s dramaturgy of space is an ongoing analysis of the physical layout of the classical Theatre of Dionysus at Athens, the trilogy's original performance venue. Noteworthy studies

of the use of space in the Greek theatre have preceded this one, and my work is built in part upon the accomplishments of these prior scholars. Oliver Taplin's 1977 book *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* was groundbreaking in its exhaustive analysis of the spatial implications built into the play-texts themselves; *Tragedy in Athens: Performance Space and Theatrical Meaning*, by David Wiles, takes a sophisticated and highly nuanced approach to analyzing the civic and religious dynamics of Greek tragedies.[1] My analysis of *The Oresteia* operates somewhere between these two studies, maintaining much of the pragmatic flavor of Taplin's study while being heavily informed by more recent generations of scholars, like Wiles, whose attention to the cultural context from which the plays arose has proved so valuable.

Further informing my own analysis are recent insights into human perception emerging from neuroscience research, which are increasingly being utilized by scholars in the humanities in much the same way that research from psychology informed the psychoanalytical approaches to criticism in the mid- to late twentieth century. Often loosely categorized under the umbrellas of cognitive studies or cognitive science, this research emerges from a remarkably diverse array of scientific disciplines. The value in bringing the emerging perspectives of cognitive studies to bear on an analysis of ancient theatrical productions comes from our understanding of the universality of many of the mechanisms of human perception across cultures and eras. Social customs and religious attitudes have changed dramatically in the nearly 2,500 years since the first production of *The Oresteia*, but the anatomy of the human eye, and the neurological structure that connects it to the mind, has not. We may have to continually hedge our statements regarding the precise layout of the classical Theatre of Dionysus at Athens, but we can discuss with great confidence the perceptual mechanisms that allowed the spectators to imaginatively transform the scenery into the palace of the House of Atreus.

Although the kind of cultural contextualization that has become such a familiar part of our scholarship over the past few decades implicitly increases our focus on the spectatorial versus the textual aspects of theatre, an analysis rooted in cognitive studies will tend to focus on spectatorship in a far more literal way. Thus my analysis of spatial dramaturgy will necessarily include more than just the kind of textually based spatial cues that Taplin focuses on. If we are to consider the hypothetical cognitive perception of classical Greek spectators, then the overall layout of the physical space in which the productions occurred becomes of critical importance. The relative location of the spectators to the performance space, to the other spectators, and to the rest of the polis all have the ability to alter the perceptual process. Considered together, the material arrangement of

all these elements within physical space creates a kind of "architecture of perception" that has the power to shape each spectator's perception of the theatrical events.[2] The nature of human subjectivity will ensure that perception will always remain a highly idiosyncratic event, yet it is nevertheless possible to analyze the ways in which highly skilled playwrights such as Aeschylus crafted their plays dramaturgically to suit the perceptual dynamics of the specific performance spaces for which they were destined.

The Dramaturgy of Space

Dramaturgy is an area of inquiry that often overlooks the use of space. There are good reasons for this, as the division of labor in the modern theatre typically cedes the control of spatial matters to the directing and design staffs. In fact, many directing and design students are encouraged to pay little or no attention to a playwright's stage directions.

However, it would be a grave error to completely ignore the dramaturgy of space, particularly when looking at plays that were written with specific performance conditions in mind. When writing for a known space, playwrights frequently make dramaturgical choices that take advantage of the particular spatial characteristics of the known space in which their work will be performed. A straightforward example would be the prologue to Shakespeare's *Henry V*, in which the character labeled simply as "Chorus" asks:

> Can this cockpit hold
> the vasty fields of France: Or may we cram
> Within this wooden O the very casques
> That did affright the air at Agincourt?
> *(Henry V:* Act 1, Prologue)

The references to "cockpits" and "wooden O's" in this famously metatheatrical speech help to stake out the boundaries of the spatial dramaturgy of the play. In describing his theatre as a "cockpit," Shakespeare's Chorus reminds the spectators of the Globe's decidedly humble and marginalized location at the vice-ridden outskirts of the city;[3] in describing his performance space as a "wooden O," Shakespeare creates a sense of theatrical community that encompasses the performers and the spectators alike, and encourages everyone involved to shift their eyeline from the stage to the larger structure of the Globe theatre, with its numerous "circles" of galleries and rooflines.

These references, along with the subsequent metatheatrical references by the Shakespearean Chorus throughout the play, alter the spectators'

perception of the performance space in important ways. When it comes to visual perception, much of our cognitive architecture is focused on the identification of the borders between objects. As such, our ability to visually identify and cognitively process these borders is rooted in the layout of the rods and cones of our retinas and extends to the layout of the neurons to which they are connected. Often these borders are more physically defined (e.g., where an actor's hand ends and where her prop begins) while other borders are more metaphorical (e.g., upstage vs. downstage), but our cognitive handling of each instance remains nearly identical.[4]

Shakespeare's reference to the "wooden O" goes beyond simply suggesting that the spectators observe the physical structure of the playhouse. Cognitively, this speech alters the parameters of what is called the "container schema" for the performance. A container schema is a mental construct that allows each of us to conceptualize something as existing "within" something else. The two critical components of this schema are the boundary of the "interior" and the articulation of a discrete object that is positioned within that interior space. This appears straightforward when we think about "a butterfly in a jar," but establishing a strict boundary for the interior becomes more difficult when we think about "a butterfly in the garden."[5]

Thus in verbally articulating the surrounding architecture of the theatre building itself, rather than, say, the stage edge, as the boundary of the "interior space," Shakespeare invokes a container schema that encompasses not only the stage action, but the activity of the spectators as well. Although the action of the play's narrative scenes allows the boundary of the performance space to recede back to the edges of the stage, the repeated stretching of the performative envelope by the Shakespearean Chorus between the formal acts allows the audience to become increasingly comfortable with their ability to shift the cognitive boundary of the performance space outward to include their own role within the production in a more conscious way. Thus when King Henry gets to a major "public" speech such as the famous St. Crispin's Day speech, which is ostensibly performed for the onstage audience of his soldiers, the audience would be more likely to recognize the metatheatrical implications of the moment and to include themselves more consciously as part of Henry's "band of brothers," particularly if the actor playing Henry were to lift his own eyeline above the heads of his onstage soldiers to include the spectators as well.

Of course, we have no evidence that indicates where the actor playing King Henry might cast his gaze in the original production, and we can do nothing more than make a reasoned argument as to what effect

such a choice might have had on the play's spectators. But by examining how Shakespeare uses dramaturgical techniques to define his audience's conception of space we can better understand the potential options that practitioners have to work with in mounting future productions. *Henry V* stands as a prime example of how space can be shaped again and again within a single performance in ways that alter the perceptual/cognitive processes of the spectators.

A dramatist's use of spatial dramaturgy need not always be so meta-theatrically oriented. More narratively driven techniques are important as well. Cassandra's "vision" of the Furies who sit upon the roof of the House of Atreus in *The Oresteia* provides a useful example:

> These roofs—look up—there is a dancing troupe
> that never leaves ...
>   —The Furies!
> They cling to the house for life. They sing,
> sing of the frenzy that began it all,
> strain rising on strain, showering curses
> on the man who tramples on his brother's bed.
> (*Agamemnon*: 1189–1198)[6]

Translations naturally differ in their depiction of this scene, but all contain some variation of the direct exhortation from Cassandra to shift the chorus' (and the spectators') line of sight to the roofline of the palace.[7] The combination of the presence of the physical skene—posing as the palace for this production—Cassandra's exhortation to "look up—there," and what I have to assume was the reinforcing influence of the actor's own line of sight (possibly even a pointing finger) cognitively conjures the Furies into the physical space of the Theatre of Dionysus in what Andrew Sofer would describe as an instance of "dark matter." In Sofer's conception, dark matter becomes a kind of symbolic term used to describe unseen objects of theatrical relevance; Macbeth's dagger is the prototypical exemplar. Though utterly imaginary, instances of dark matter create a kind of "charged negative space" on the stage; they are objects that are both "not there" and "not not there."[8] In theatrically conjuring the dark-matter-Furies of Cassandra's vision, Aeschylus not only postulates the physical location of the Furies, but also encourages the audience's gaze to linger at the ridgeline of the skene as he animates their presence with dancing and singing.

This moment is an interesting example of spatial dramaturgy because it not only displays the playwright's ability to precisely control the gaze of the spectator, but it is also an example of how spectators can be "forced"

to cognitively "misread" the physical objects that they can see within the stage space. As with most of the physical objects within a performance space, the skene in this scene has both a "real" identity (big chunk of physical scenery) as well as a "fictive" one (the palace of Agamemnon). Playwrights use a variety of techniques for imbuing physical scenery and props with their fictive identities, but in this instance the spectators' perception of the skene-as-palace is driven by the elementary spatial relations that support the cognitive conception of the Furies as being *on* something; the perception of the "House of Atreus" rather than the skene is cognitively implied within the perception of the invisible Furies.[9] Here the palace appears in the spectator's perception as a "situational anaphor," which is an entity whose presence is implied by a situation. Our ability to automatically insert situational anaphors into our perceptual processes is what allows dozens of tables, chairs, menus, and utensils to appear in our mind's eye when we read that a scene is taking place in a restaurant.[10] In many ways, this is simply a reinforcement of the skene-as-palace perception that is established in the opening moments of the play, but Cassandra's speech reinforces the metaphorical connection of the building to the generations of cyclical vengeance that the physical building played host to. Aeschylus uses Cassandra's lines to subtly reassert the fictive identity of the physical skene as the palace not only of Agamemnon, but of Atreus, Thyestes, Pelops, and Tantalus as well. This moment of spatial dramaturgy is markedly different from what we see in *Henry V*, but both examples demonstrate the power that playwrights can wield over our perception of the physical reality that surrounds us.

Civic Spaces

Aeschylus had little control over the performative space in which his plays appeared. The disputes over which scenic elements he may have had at his disposal are numerous, but they were certainly minimal.[11] Further compounding the playwright's lack of scenic control was the fact that the Theatre of Dionysus itself was enormous, probably designed more to the purposes of the fifty-performer dithyrambs than to the familial disputes of the House of Atreus. More than anything, the Theatre of Dionysus was a place of communal gathering, a "Civic Space" where the polis assembled for many reasons, only one of which was to watch a play.[12] Thus the material arrangement of the classical Theatre of Dionysus would likely have established an "architecture of perception" for the spectators that differs greatly from most theatres that are purpose-built with small theatrical performances as their primary raison d'être. Yet a careful examination of the spatial dramaturgy of *The Oresteia* reveals a series of plays that did not

struggle against the architecture of perception that the Theatre of Dionysus presented; rather, these plays seem to have exploited the particular spatial characteristics of this famous space to great theatrical advantage.

Although the large, semi-circular stone auditorium exemplified by the Theatre at Epidaurus has become our default conception for what a Greek theatre would have looked like, a cursory survey of the roughly 200 Greek theatres that have been located to date demonstrates that the differences in their layout are as striking as their similarities. Greek orchestras could be either circular or rectilinear (more often the latter); altars could be located centrally or to the side of the main playing area; and the theatron could open not just to the eastern sunrise but to almost any point on the compass. That said, in all but a very few instances, the theatron—the seating area for the polis—was designed with a relatively steep rake in an arc-like arrangement that wrapped around three sides of the orchestra.[13]

There are obvious pragmatic benefits to this design: the steeply raked rows gave spectators an unobstructed view of the orchestra, and also allowed more seats to be located closer to the stage, thus improving acoustics. These pragmatic concerns aside, however, the theatron also organized the spectators spatially in a way that allowed them to easily see the faces of most of the other spectators. The ability to easily perceive the reactions of the rest of the members of the polis, as with a modern sports stadium, doubtless contributed a great deal of communitarian energy to the kind of events that these theatres were built to support.

Greek theatres were more than just sites of public entertainment; they were sites of civic gathering.[14] In such a space, the ultimate payoff for a play might easily arise from the socialized reaction of 15,000 spectators witnessing their fellow citizens respond to key moments of the play. A careful analysis of works like *The Oresteia* can reveal the ways that playwrights used the audience's ability to effortlessly observe one another's faces as a dramaturgical feature to be exploited, rather than as a problem to be overcome. An intriguing example can be observed in the scenic shift from Delphi to Athens in *The Eumenides*.

Internal shifts were relatively rare in the tragedies, but the completeness of the shift from Delphi to Athens is implied by the full exit from the stage of all the performers. How precisely the Temple of Athena was depicted is impossible to determine, but most scholars concede that the famous statue of Athena was somehow represented scenically; there is a clear reference by the Furies to Orestes clinging to the base of it.[15] The fact that the scene being set in the orchestra was a direct representation of the Temple of Athena, which stood only meters behind the spectators atop the Acropolis, must have sent waves of murmurs and amused looks of recognition through the audience. As with Shakespeare's reference to

the "wooden O," the connection between the two statues would have altered the boundary of the container schema for the performance, stretching it to include not only the spectators, but the Acropolis as well. The impact of this moment would have been driven primarily by the spectators' experience of their communal response.

As in *Henry V*, the cognitive relocation of the audience of citizens to the interior of the space of performance is reinforced several other times throughout the remainder of *The Eumenides*. Just before the start of Orestes' formal trial, Athena leads out a chorus of ten jurors whom she refers to as "Men of Attica."[16] The configuration of this chorus was a clear reference to the ten demes that formed the political divisions within the Attic polis, and whose citizens were seated in tribal order in the semicircular theatron.[17] Far from being "too big," in this moment the Theatre of Dionysus suddenly becomes a rich concentration of the citizenry of hundreds of square kilometers condensed into a relative nutshell.

The fact that the trial ultimately ends in a hung jury might again have inspired observable reactions among the spectators in the theatron; all large communities find themselves faced with intractable internal divisions that easily sustain flocks of metaphorical Furies. In the play, the deadlock is ultimately broken by Athena herself, and the metaphorical connection between the goddess Athena and the Attic capitol that was her namesake seems clear: the leadership of Athens allowed the many divided tribes of the Attic region to rise above their petty divisions.

The architecture of perception imposed by the Theatre of Dionysus gave Aeschylus the opportunity to articulate these sorts of civically minded ideas using spatially driven methodologies. By referencing the actual presence of the demes in the auditorium in the form of the ten fictional onstage jurors, he encouraged his Attic citizen-spectators to shift their gaze from the stage to the auditorium and back again; in presenting his audience with a scenic replica of the nearby statue of Athena, Aeschylus again encouraged a perception of a space so large that the spectators would have been dislodged from their position as omniscient voyeurs, and reminded of their role as citizen-participants in a public festival. These ideas may or may not have been reinforced further via specific staging techniques; the connection between the jurors and the demes would have been made stronger, for example, if they were to stand at the outer edges of the central orchestra, directly in front of the demes in the auditorium. Aside from whatever references to staging remain in the lines of the plays themselves, the evidence for such specific staging is essentially nonexistent. Nevertheless, a careful analysis of the spatial dramaturgy of both the play and the space for which it was written can provide modern

practitioners and critics with some creative insights as to how modern productions might be staged in order to at least partially replicate the experience of the original spectators.

The Eyeline of Orestes

Some parts of *The Oresteia* are less clear regarding the details of their spatial dramaturgy than others. But if we assume that Aeschylus actively used the civic space of the Theatre of Dionysus as a tool for constructing his polis-oriented plays, we can begin to make informed arguments as to how certain moments might have been staged.

One particularly important moment comes just before the end of *The Libation Bearers* when Orestes first lays eyes on the approaching Furies:

> No, no! Women—look—like Gorgons,
> shrouded in black, their heads wreathed,
> swarming serpents!
>   —Cannot stay, I must move on ...
>
>   No dreams, these torments,
> Not to me, they're clear, real—the hounds
> of mother's hate ...
>
>   God Apollo!
> Here they come, thick and fast,
> their eyes dripping hate ...
>
>   You can't see them
> I can, they drive me on! I must move on—
> *(The Libation Bearers*: 1047–1061)[18]

There are clear parallels here to Cassandra's visions in *Agamemnon*; Orestes' words conjure the Furies into spatial existence as approaching bodies of dark matter. But unlike Cassandra, Orestes fails to verbalize precisely from where the Furies are approaching. Some critics have described this moment as the onset of madness for poor Orestes, thus postulating that the Furies are not anywhere; after all, the Chorus cannot seem to see what so clearly terrifies Orestes.[19] But there is a problem with this idea because moments later the Furies appear, fully embodied as the primary choral figures in *The Eumenides*; either Orestes was not crazy, or now we all are.

So much of the meaning of this moment depends upon an element of the spatial dramaturgy that has been lost: where, precisely, did the actor playing Orestes *look* when he said these lines? One way or another, the

eyeline of Orestes proves definitive here. Did he simply look offstage toward the same parados through which the Chorus/Furies would enter at the beginning to the next play? Did he look around wildly in every direction, swatting the air as if he were truly mad? Did he look off beyond the western edge of the theatre toward the hill and the Areopagus (the legendary dwelling place of the furies), which lay just beyond the Acropolis? Perhaps, even more evocatively, he looked over the heads of the chorus of Libation Bearers at the members of the polis itself. This last choice would establish yet another spatial connection between the quarrelsome Athenian tribal units and the Furies. As discussed above, connections of this kind would become increasingly prominent in *The Eumenides*, in which the Furies appear as the Chorus, the onstage representatives of the collective citizenry.

   In the absence of evidence, conjecture remains our only option, but Aeschylus' consistent dramaturgical engagement with the civic space of his theatre gives some weight to the idea that the eyeline of Orestes might have located the Furies as both "not present" and "not not present" within the ranks of the spectators in the theatron itself. To end the second play of the trilogy with such a direct reference to the audience is a bold choice, and one that foreshadows the dramatic shift toward the metatheatrical that would become so much more prominent in *The Eumenides*. By directing his gaze at the spectators, the actor playing Orestes would have created a moment of narrative disturbance in which confused looks of "why is he looking at us" might have circulated among the spectators, powerfully stretching the boundary of the container schema for that performative moment to include the audience as the source of Orestes' fear. On its own, such a disruption of the usual narrative flow would be awkward and disruptive, but in the context of the full trilogy, it could serve as a powerful example of the playwright's control of the dramaturgical characteristics of the civic space in which he worked.

   According to the Aristotelian standards that we continue to embrace, *The Oresteia* is a rather eccentric example of a tragedy. For one, the trilogy as a whole is not particularly tragic. Agamemnon, Cassandra, Clytemnestra, and Aegisthus all meet "premature" ends, but none of these characters ever really rise to the level of what we usually think of as a tragic hero. In fact, the entire question of whom the audience is meant to align their sympathies with is enormously complicated. The oft-repeated idea that "the one who acts must suffer" sums up the play's tendency to endear us to *all* those who have been wronged by the actions of others: we empathize with Clytemnestra's grief over the loss of her daughter Iphigenia, with Cassandra over the loss of her nation, and with Orestes and

Electra over the loss of their father. One can even feel a twinge of sympathy for the more prototypically unsympathetic Aegisthus; it must, indeed, be painful to grow up in exile knowing that your father ate your brothers. Yet our sympathies are always sharply curtailed by the actions that those characters subsequently take. The greatest strength of *The Oresteia* is, of course, its ability to humanize the senseless cycles of retribution that form the core of the play's narrative. Although from a strictly Aristotelian perspective the dramaturgy of *The Oresteia* appears flawed, from the perspective of the play's spatial dramaturgy, constructed to take advantage of the civic space of the Theatre of Dionysus, the trilogy operates quite effectively in its attempt to draw the inherently heterogeneous elements of the Attic polis toward a place of greater civic cohesion.

Notes

1. Oliver Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus: The Dramatic Use of Entrances and Exits in Greek Tragedy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977); David Wiles, *Tragedy in Athens: Performance Space & Theatrical Meaning* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

2. The specific phrase "architecture of perception" that I am employing here comes from an insight in Herbert Blau's book *The Audience*. As Blau states, "The distance of looking and the distance of listening . . . are determined largely by the material arrangement of theatre space, the architecture of perception." Herbert Blau, *The Audience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 86. Although Blau's discussion operates in more general terms than mine, I think that his emphasis on the connection between the material arrangement of the theatrical space and the spectator's perception of the performance is useful, and I therefore employ the phrase "architecture of perception" often here in order to reference the connection between the structure of the physical space and the perception of the events that occur within it.

3. There is some doubt about whether the location of the original production was the Globe Theatre or the Curtain Theatre. For more on this see James Shapiro, *1599, A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* (London: Faber, 2005), 99. For more details about the physical proximity of these theatres to physical sites of gambling and prostitution, see Andrew Gurr and John Orrell, *Rebuilding Shakespeare's Globe* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 53–59.

4. Jennifer M. Groh, *Making Space: How the Brain Knows Where Things Are* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), 69–83.

5. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 30–32.

6. Aeschylus, "Agamemnon," in *The Oresteia*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 150.

7. The original script, of course, had no stage directions; thus the only spatial cues that we have to work with are embedded in the lines themselves. Clifford Ashby, *Classical Greek Theatre: New Views of an Old Subject* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999), 6; Taplin, *Stagecraft of Aeschylus*, 30–31.

8. Andrew Sofer, *Dark Matter: Invisibility in Drama, Theatre, and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 3–9.

9. Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 31.

10. William H. Levine and Celia M. Klin, "Tracking of Spatial Information in Narratives," *Memory & Cognition* 29, no. 2 (2001): 327.

11. Ashby, *Classical Greek Theatre*, 62–77.

12. Ibid., 78; Oddone Longo, "The Theatre of the Polis," in *Nothing to Do with Dionysos,* ed. John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 15–16.

13. Ashby, *Classical Greek Theatre*, 15–17, 24–37, 98–117.

14. Longo, "Theatre of the Polis," 13–16; John Camp and Elizabeth Fisher, *The World of the Ancient Greeks* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 82, 134, 185.

15. Taplin, *Stagecraft of Aeschylus*, 375–77.

16. Aeschylus, *The Eumenides*, in *The Oresteia*, 262. Translations vary in their description of this group; Fagles actually uses the phrase "men of Greece"; Herbert Weir Smyth, E. H. Plumptre, and Gilbert Murray variously employ "Attica"; and Carl H. Mueller and E. D. A. Morshead reference "Athens" instead. But the reference in the original Greek is to "Attikos," which encompassed the entire city-state that extended throughout the Attic peninsula, rather than just the fortified urban center of Athens itself (Αθήνα), but it does not, by any means, extend to include the entirety of "Greece" (Ελλάς). Aeschylus is clearly referencing the region represented by the citizens of the polis assembled in the theatron.

17. Longo, "Theatre of the Polis," 16.

18. Aeschylus, *The Libation Bearers*, in *The Oresteia*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 224–26.

19. Taplin, *Stagecraft of Aeschylus*, 359–60.