

# Envisaging the Past Behind *Aeschylus' Agamemnon*

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**Abstract** This paper looks at the ways that Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* conjures up the past – the 'back-story' – and asks how, or how far, this can be conveyed for modern audiences. The two most prominent episodes, evoked in very different ways, are the feast of child-flesh served up to Thyestes by Atreus, and Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigeneia at Aulis. Generally speaking productions from the last 50 years have made little of the Thyestean feast, and much of the figure of Iphigeneia. This is illustrated from the productions directed by Ariane Mnouchkine in Paris in 1991 and by Katie Mitchell in London in 1999. While it is not obvious why so little Thyestes' feast is evoked beyond its repellent 'Senecan' horror, the emphasis on Iphigeneia is clearly related to an increasing (and in my view justified) concentration on the figure of Clytemnestra.

**Keywords** Agamemnon. Iphigeneia. Thyestes. Modern productions of Greek tragedy.

**Summary** 1 The Past in Aeschylus. – 2 The Past in the Productions of Mnouchkine and Mitchell.

## 1 The Past in Aeschylus

All the Greek tragedies that draw on the treasury of traditional heroic myth – which means almost all of them – are bound to involve a certain amount of 'back story'.<sup>1</sup> There are genealogies, local sagas, dynastic

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<sup>1</sup> This contribution is a revised version of the lecture that I gave at the University of Pisa on 26th May 2022, and I am most grateful to Enrico Medda and the organisers for the invitation. It retains the informality and broad-brush nature of the occasion. I have therefore regarded only minimal bibliography as appropriate; for doxography of the interpretation and textual criticism of the passages discussed I cannot do better than refer the reader to the well-documented and judicious Medda (2017).



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struggles and so forth that need to be somehow conveyed as the past of the narrative that is being dramatized. This may be done more or less lightly, with more or less complexity. At one extreme some Euripidean prologues simply run through a pocket background, at the other the present time of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* is largely taken up with gradually uncovering the past. As will be seen, Aeschylus' *Oresteia* incorporates the past in particularly varied and vivid ways, making certain past episodes verge on being visible and present to the audience.

Modern productions face this issue of back-stories at one further remove. How and how far are they to convey to the audiences narratives that may be totally unfamiliar to most if not all of them? Since the public can't be assumed to know the mythical back-story already, it is always a major challenge, whether or not recognised as such, for any production to decide how much or how little to include. In general, audiences cannot and should not be expected to do any 'homework' in advance. They should not even be required to look at the printed programmes, which in any case are often overfilled, I find, with semi-irrelevant mythological and historical background. So the dilemma is this: do you somehow work the past events into the present production? Or do you play down such allusions as far as possible – or even cut them out completely? I shall be looking at two particularly interesting test-cases in *Agamemnon* in the first half of this study, and in the second half at how the challenge was met in two memorable – and very different – modern productions.

Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* emerges, once seen in this light, as richly studded with a variety of evocations and episodes from the past both of the Trojan War and of the royal house at Argos. These range from the events of recent hours back to an ever-receding attempt to trace any πρόταρχον ἄτην (*Ag.* l. 1192). It is Clytemnestra who, with frighteningly controlled and realistic detail, paints the scene in the newly conquered city (ll. 320 ff.); the Herald supplies detail both of the life of the soldiers camped round Troy (ll. 551 ff.) and of the storm on the return journey (ll. 636 ff.). These are discrete episodes conveyed by set-piece speeches. The story of the elopement of Helen is more protracted and seen from more angles. The second and third of the three great songs that loom so large in the part of the play before the return of the king recollect her trail of longing and ruin with great emotional colouring. They paint the picture of how she was missed at Argos, especially through the desolation of the deserted Menelaus, at ll. 403-28. But they also stir a disquieting sense of the swerve within Troy from the calm and erotic charm of her first arrival to the disillusion and bereavement that follows (700-16). All of these are, however, fleetingly and impressionistically pictured rather than made palpable; they are half-seen associative montage rather than fully-moulded events. So these lyric 'flashbacks' make an interesting comparison and contrast with the two stories of the past that

are most persistently and keenly traced and pursued: these are (of course) the sacrifice of Iphigeneia and the feast served by Atreus to his brother Thyestes. It is these that I shall now trace in some detail.

Each of them is revisited twice in two very different expressive modes during the course of the *Agamemnon*. The account of Iphigeneia's sacrifice in the *parodos* takes up no less than six stanzas, more than sixty lines; it must surely be the greatest and most varied lyric narrative in all of Greek tragedy. The other great evocation is when, after the killing of the king, Clytemnestra is able to emerge in full honesty and to speak out. This is strikingly different: private instead of public, allusive rather than sustained, experienced rather than witnessed. The Thyestean feast, further in the past, is also conveyed in two completely different ways. It is first tracked down and then seen in a kind of prophetic vision by Cassandra. She emphasises her sight, her literal visions, and the audience is urged to see the past in something more like a ghost-play than a narrative. And then towards the end there is the saga as told by Aegisthus: while still horrific this is a more descriptive narrative, coloured with self-justification for his own behaviour.

I shall look at the Atreus-Thyestes back-story first. It has not been sufficiently noticed in the relevant scholarship that the closing anapaests of *Choephoroi* build in an almost programmatic awareness of the trilogic structure as a whole. The lines (ll. 1065-76) lay out the three storms that have shaken the royal house.

ὄδε τοι μελάθροισ τοῖς βασιλείοις  
τρίτος αὖ χειμῶν  
πνεύσας γονίας ἐτελέσθη.  
παιδοβόροι μὲν πρῶτον ὑπῆρξαν  
μόχθοι τάλανές τε Θυέστου:  
δεύτερον ἀνδρὸς βασιλεία πάθη:  
λουτροδάικτος δ' ὤλετ' Ἀχαιῶν  
πολέμαρχος ἀνὴρ:  
νῦν δ' αὖ τρίτος ἦλθέ ποθεν σωτήρ,  
ἢ μόρον εἴπω;  
ποῖ δῆτα κρανεῖ, ποῖ καταλήξει  
μετακοιμισθὲν μένος ἄτης;

The second 'act' (δεύτερον) was the killing in the bath that is the central event of the first play; third (νῦν δ' αὖ τρίτος) is the arrival of Orestes, the subject of the second play – whether he has been a σωτήρ, or a μόρον, an open question that captures the ambivalence of the events and the shape of the play as a whole. The third play, yet to come, is anticipated by the question posed in the last two lines. So the anapaests set out a four-part sequence, in which the first (πρῶτον) was the παιδοβόροι μόχθοι of Thyestes. It is like a first play lurking behind the directly enacted trilogy, a kind of ghost of a play.

'Ghost-play' is an apt way of putting the way it is conjured up by Cassandra. As soon as she becomes articulate she centres attention on the house, which she senses as the site of terrible slaughters. The very first testimony she gives of the truth of what she can scent is the children of Thyestes (ll. 1095-7):

μαρτυρίοισι γὰρ τοῖσδ' ἐπιπέιθομαι:  
κλαιόμενα τάδε βρέφη σφαγᾶς,  
ὄπτάς τε σάρκας πρὸς πατρὸς βεβρωμένας.

The two deictics (τοῖσδ'...τάδε) emphasise how vividly she sees this scene – the slaughter, the cooking, the eating – in all its horror. This is even more explicit when she conjures up the second of the two visions that she locates by, or on, or (as I prefer) in the house (ll. 1217-22):<sup>2</sup>

ὄρᾳτε τοῦσδε τοὺς δόμοις ἐφημένους  
νέους, ὄνειρων προσφερεῖς μορφώμασιν;  
παῖδες θανόντες ὡσπερὶ πρὸς τῶν φίλων,  
χεῖρας κρεῶν πλήθοντες οἰκείας βορᾶς,  
σὺν ἐντέροις τε σπλάγχν', ἐποίκτιστον γέμος,  
πρέπουσ' ἔχοντες, ὧν πατήρ ἐγέύσατο.<sup>3</sup>

Cassandra emphasises again the visuality, urging the elders of the chorus to see this scene as well (l. 1217 ὄρᾳτε...); the innards in the children's hands are "clear" (l. 1222 πρέπουσ'). This is not merely a filling-in of the background narrative; the audience in the theatre is urged to see the revolting scene in detail with the eye of imagination.

Cassandra goes on to connect the child-feast with the avenger who is lurking in the house awaiting Agamemnon's return. Aegisthus is not named at this stage, but once he comes on in person towards the end of the play, the story of the feast is recounted by him once more at ll. 1590-1602, though with quite different tonal colouring. There is also a shift from Cassandra's emphasis on the pitifulness of the children to Aegisthus' bringing out his father's horrific experience in discovering too late what he has eaten. His account is vivid, especially the vomit and the kicking over of the table, but it is all told in the past without any sense of its being somehow still visible. Twice he does talk about sight (l. 1597 ὡς ὄρᾳς, l. 1603 ἰδεῖν πάρα) but what he is talking about is the corpse of Agamemnon, the fulfilment of his vengeance.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. l. 1217 τοῦσδε τοὺς δόμοις ἐφημένους and l. 1191 δώμασιν προσήμεναι.

<sup>3</sup> She says that the children are "like dream-shapes" (l. 1218) and yet "clear" (l. 1222); the close affinity between dreams and ghosts comes out clearly in the third play when the dead Clytemnestra appears, visible to the audience, and tries to arouse the sleeping Erinyes, assuring them that it really is her who speaks to them as a "dream" ὄναρ (*Eum.* l. 116).

Turning to the way that the 'ghost play' of the sacrifice of Iphigeneia is conveyed brings out the quite extraordinary range and variety of narrative techniques and modes that Aeschylus deploys in the course of this unusually long tragedy. The scenes at Aulis recounted with assurance by the chorus in the *parodos* (l. 104 κύριός εἰμι θροεῖν...) are justly well-known and well-studied. After the build-up of the unrelenting winds, the agony of Agamemnon's dilemma and the terrible mental effect of his choice, the verge of action is reached: ἔτλα δ' οὖν θυτήρ γενέσθαι θυγατρός (ll. 224-5). The compressed detail of the next two stanzas (ll. 228-37, 238-47) with their unusual syntactical continuity between strophic pairs is both exquisite and excruciating. First there are the girl's pleas to her father, the brutal animal way she is hoisted up above the altar, her falling robes, the gag thrust over her στόματός καλλιπρώρου (ll. 235-6) to stifle any curse. Then, emerging through the problems of interpretation in the second stanza, two things stand out most indelibly: the piercing look of her eyes, πρέπουσά θ' ὡς ἐν γραφαῖς (ll. 241-2), and the beauty and innocence of her singing φίλωσ (l. 247) back in her father's palace. After this there is no need of any description of the fatal blow. Nor, I suspect, was there any mimetic physical enactment by the chorus to accompany the verbal vividness. While nothing can be known for sure about the extent of mimesis in the choreography, I doubt that the old men acted out the sacrifice at all literally: the words and choreographic suggestion rather than reconstruction would be quite effective enough.

After the concentrated continuity of this account of the sacrifice at Aulis, the evocations by Clytemnestra are very different. Her allusions are scattered, full of passion and menacing undertones. She had, of course, suppressed any reference to Iphigeneia during her scene of meeting with Agamemnon on his return, so the first time that she brings up this motivation is only after he is lying there dead before her. It can now come out in the open at last. When the chorus condemn her deed, she comes straight back at them (ll. 1415-20): why did they not condemn "this man" (1414) in the past?

ὄς οὐ προτιμῶν, ὡσπερὶ βοτοῦ μόνον,  
 μῆλων φλεόντων εὐπόκοις νομεύμασιν,  
 ἔθυσεν αὐτοῦ παῖδα, φιλτάτην ἔμοι  
 ὠδῖν', ἐπφδὸν Ἑρηκίων ἀημάτων.  
 οὐ τοῦτον ἐκ γῆς τῆσδε χρῆν σ' ἀνδρηλατεῖν,  
 μισμάτων ἄποινα;

She does not even have to name her daughter: the allusion to the winds and to the selection of an animal sacrifice are enough.

Throughout this great scene of confrontation the chorus can match her, but they can't out-match her. When they lament that the king has

met with an unworthy death through deceit, she counters with the deceit that lured Iphigeneia to Aulis (ll. 1523-7):

οὐδὲ γὰρ οὗτος δολίαν ἄτην  
οἴκοισιν ἔθηκ'; ἀλλ' ἐμὸν ἐκ τοῦδ'  
ἔρνος ἀερθὲν τὴν πολὺκλαυτὸν τ'  
Ἴφιγένειαν ἀνάξια δράσας  
ἄξια πάσχων...<sup>4</sup>

Not long after this comes her most bitter and most devastating evocation of Iphigeneia, not as the victim at Aulis, but as a spirit in the underworld. The chorus questions how the great man will have a proper funeral with public honours: Clytemnestra retorts that it is not their business, and that the family will see to that (ll. 1555-9):

ἀλλ' Ἴφιγένειά νιν ἀσπασίως  
θυγάτηρ, ὡς χρή,  
πατέρ' ἀντιάσασα πρὸς ὠκύπορον  
πόρθμευμ' ἀχέων  
περὶ χεῖρα βαλοῦσα φιλήσει.

Father and daughter had been parted bedside the Euripos straits between Aulis and Chalcis (ll. 190-1), and will now be reunited at the ferry-crossing of Acheron. Clytemnestra holds back the bitterest touch until the end: she will greet him ὡς χρή... (l. 1556) not with fear or grief or hatred, but with embrace and kisses. In this context this is not the token of forgiveness or reconciliation, but of welcoming him as the victim of well-deserved revenge.

In the last response of this great confrontation the chorus cannot deny the strength of what Clytemnestra says, though they hold fast to the rule that the doer must pay for deeds (ll. 1560-1).

ὄνειδος ἦκει τόδ' ἀντ' ὀνειδούς,  
δύσμαχα δ' ἐστὶ κρῖναι.

Judgement is indeed difficult. And the verb κρῖναι carries weight, since this difficulty of adjudicating foreshadows the third play, where the trial of Orestes at Athens will prove hard to judge. The citizen jurors are bound by solemn oath to vote justly, and yet their votes turn out equal. So too for the audience. Throughout the confrontation between Clytemnestra and the chorus the dead body of Agamemnon

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<sup>4</sup> On the problems of text in this passage, cf. Medda 2017, 386-91. I am inclined to agree with him – so too Raeburn and Thomas (2011) – that ἀερθὲν (l. 1525) carries an echo of the way she was lifted up for sacrifice, ἀέρδην (l. 235).

lies there visible (however it was staged). The ugly humiliation of the great king and general has to be weighed against his killing of his own daughter, so vividly recalled by the chorus, and then used as a kind of weapon by his wife. δύσμαχα δ' ἔστ' ἰ κρῖναι (l. 1561).

## 2 The Past in the Productions of Mnouchkine and Mitchell

I turn now to the reception of these two 'ghost-plays' in modern productions. I have not attempted any sort of complete survey of how they have been treated in all the various stagings – that would be a huge task (more suitable for a young doctoral student!). I have, however, been in the audience for several of the most significant productions of the last 45 years, including those directed by Peter Stein, Karolos Koun, Peter Hall, Silviu Purcarete and Michael Thalheimer. I am going to concentrate on just two of the most powerful and memorable that I have had the good fortune to have witnessed: *Les Atrides* directed by Ariane Mnouchkine in Paris in 1991 and the *Oresteia* by Katie Mitchell at the National Theatre in London in 1999.<sup>5</sup>

The first thing to observe may not be surprising, but it is none the less notable. I cannot recall a single one of these productions making any particular attempt to evoke the feast of Thyestes in any vivid or present form. It has been part of the horror of Cassandra's visions, but has not been dwelt upon or revealed with any specific re-imagining. There are all sorts of ways that the Thyestean feast might be insinuated into the audience's awareness without going to the lengths of some kind of dumb-show of the mutilated children, yet I cannot recall any evocation that has left an imprint. And the narration of the story by Aegisthus has usually been played in a fairly low key in keeping with the usual interpretation of his role as blustering and not really serious (by contrast with Clytemnestra). So, despite its prominence in those closing lines of *Choephoroi*, the feast has been seldom if ever played as any kind of first ghost-play lying before or behind the trilogy. I shall return to the question 'why?' after looking at the sacrifice of Iphigeneia.

The contrast is extreme. Most productions make much of the daughter's fate, whether in the *parodos* or the post-killing confron-

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<sup>5</sup> Discussions of these two productions and others are to be found spread through Macintosh et al. 2005. An appendix (359-435) contains a chronological catalogue of all productions on the APGRD (Oxford) database at that time up to mid-2004. Baudou (2021) includes major discussions of Mnouchkine (265-92) and Mitchell (390-441). It also includes discussion of the post-2004 *Oresteias* by Michael Thalheimer (2006) and Olivier Py (2008). I particularly regret that I never saw the famous production of Luca Ronconi (1972), nor the more recent INDA production, directed by Daniele Salvo in 2014, where Elisabetta Pozzi, whom I greatly admire, played Clytemnestra.



**Plate 1** Iphigeneia dances innocently for her father Agamemnon in the first part of *Les Atrides*.  
With gratitude to Théâtre du Soleil for kind permission





**Plate 2** Clytemnestra dances in triumph after killing her husband Agamemnon in the second part of *Les Atrides*. With gratitude to Théâtre du Soleil for kind permission

tation or both. The two productions I am focussing on – both directed by women – brought it to the fore strongly, though in very different ways. Ariane Mnouchkine went to the bold lengths of putting on first a completely separate tragedy, making the final full version of *les Atrides* into a tetralogy.<sup>6</sup> This was a largely complete version of Euripides' *Iphigeneia at Aulis*. This had, of course, been first put on after Euripides' death more than 50 years after the *Oresteia*, but Mnouchkine skilfully drew attention away from any disparities in dramatic technique, language or tone between the two dramatists by the well-integrated use of aesthetic continuities, particularly costumes, acting style and choreography.<sup>7</sup> One memorable illustration of this is brought out by plate 1 and 2 [pls 1-2]. When Iphigeneia was first reunited with her father at Aulis, before the truth gets revealed, she danced in a vain effort to please him; she also eventually danced on her way when she went willingly to her death. This motif of the solo dance expressing deeply ambivalent situations and emotions was carried over into *Agamemnon* 'with a vengeance' when, after the triumphant murder of her husband, the bloodstained Clytemnestra danced in celebration.

Katie Mitchell was, by contrast, very constrained by what she could do textually because she had been commissioned by the National Theatre to stage the translation left by the celebrated poet Ted Hughes (1999),<sup>8</sup> who had died the year before. Hughes was a masculine poet with a strong feeling for 'nature red in tooth and claw', and he clearly relished the carnal horrors of the feast of Thyestes. He expanded the butchery with macabre flourishes. See, for example, Hughes 1999, 59:

Look –  
They hold out their own hearts and livers.  
Rib-cutlets, haunch and saddle –  
Just as their father ate them,

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<sup>6</sup> Something analogous was done in the powerful contemporary adaptation of the *Oresteia* by Robert Icke at the Almeida Theatre in London in 2015. It was divided into four acts, and Act 1 was devoted entirely to the story leading up to the death of Iphigeneia and its impact on the relationship of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, before turning to the first play of the Aeschylean trilogy in Act 2. Act 1 took up some two-fifths of the entire show, and ended with the child actor of Iphigeneia being induced to drink a fatal drug and dying slowly on stage in her father's arms. Powerful, horrifying, and very much not Aeschylus!

<sup>7</sup> There is much of interest, drawing on his personal involvement in the enterprise, in Judet de La Combe 2005.

<sup>8</sup> The published version is divided into the three-part trilogy, while the production in the theatre was divided into two: *The Home Guard* and *The Daughters of Darkness*. This division and the titles came out of meetings that I had with Katie Mitchell during her preparation for the production.

Tore the meat from the bone and washed it down with gulps of  
wine  
As he reached for more.<sup>9</sup>

So far as I recall, however, Mitchell did not make much of this in the performance.

It was quite different with her theatrical treatment of Iphigeneia, which was entirely her own invention and unprompted by the translation.<sup>10</sup> One of the company (Asta Sighvats) was as small as a girl; and throughout the play she was present silently moving around in and out of the scene, invisible to the actors and chorus, except for her mother. Also, through the use of hand-held video cameras, she would sometimes be seen on a screen at the back. Most of the time her mouth was bound by the gag which, as reported by the chorus, was put on her at Aulis to stifle any curse. So Iphigeneia was an unsettling presence throughout, and not only in the scenes that alluded directly to her. She was literally a kind of ghost.

And there was another way that the audience was persistently reminded of the Iphigeneia ghost-play behind the present action. Katie Mitchell developed the idea that Clytemnestra had obsessively preserved the little dresses left behind by her dead daughter. These were repeatedly woven into the stage-design. The most powerful instance was when the 'purple cloth' was spread out before Agamemnon's feet, and, as it was unrolled, it turned out to have been made by sewing together dozens of little dresses stained with colour of dried blood. Another use was when some were draped round the bath of death in which Agamemnon had been killed. So they were there visible throughout the confrontation between Clytemnestra and the chorus, a physical ratification of her claims about the sacrifice. There was, however, an unexpected and strangely powerful twist in the course of that scene. When Clytemnestra was speaking of how Iphigeneia would welcome her father to the underworld with embraces (ll. 1555-9, quoted above), the ghost-girl went up to the naked Agamemnon lying in his bath, and the dead man put his arm round her – the dead embracing the dead. It was a strange moment of conflicting emotions: did death ultimately overcome the horrors that had torn them apart?

These two productions exemplify what is generally the case: the Thyestean feast has been played down and only evoked in words,

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<sup>9</sup> Similar gruesome elaboration in the Aegisthus account of the feast: cf. Hughes 1999, 80-1.

<sup>10</sup> There are very few photographs as records from this production, and unfortunately fees for Open Access reproduction are prohibitively high. The significance of the visual motif of Iphigeneia's little dresses may be seen from the cover of the production programme which is reproduced in Macintosh et al. 2005, 220 figure 11.2.

while the Iphigeneia sacrifice is brought in one way or another to the theatrical foreground. Why should this be the case? The leading answers are fairly obvious – and I have nothing revolutionary to add – but I hope a quick survey will be worthwhile, none the less.

First, I take it that the chief inhibition against the child-feast is that it is felt to be too grotesque, too macabre – more Seneca than Aeschylus. But I am surprised that the era following the theatre of cruelty has not found ways of making something more of it. Secondly, Aegisthus is usually played as a figure that the audience does not care much about, and so his account of his motive for revenge comes across as shallow. Although it might be quite possible to make his role more dynamic, he does not convey any direct personal recollection of those terrible events. The third explanation that I have to offer concerns the motivations of Atreus and Thyestes in so far as they are evoked: Cassandra, and Aegisthus explicitly, locate the child-feast in connection with the kind of curse or ancestral doom that weighs upon the house of the Atreids. In so far as that seems to make those figures from the past mere puppets without choice or agency, that gives them less appeal for modern theatre. I do not, however, believe that they have to be treated in that way. As is widely recognised, all the human motivations in the *Oresteia* are more matter of what is often loosely known as ‘double determination’; the humans choose what is also determined. This is epitomised when Clytemnestra speaks of herself as a kind of double of the παλαιὸς δριμύς ἀλάστωρ (l. 1501); and in response the chorus have to concede that this malign power may be her συλλήπτωρ (l. 1507). I do not personally see why any of these three considerations should rule out a vivid evocation of the Thyestean feast, and even of some sort of ghost-play, but the fact remains that modern productions have generally shied away from such a gruesome prospect.

The situation is quite different with the sacrifice of Iphigeneia, as is illustrated particularly vividly by the two productions I have focussed upon. This is, of course, quite understandable. While the old men of the chorus were not personally present at Aulis, the power of their song induces a sense of personal witnessing. In their lyric account both Agamemnon and Iphigeneia ‘come alive’ so to speak; it is not only the events, but their experience of them that are pictured in the mind’s eye of the audience. It is comparable but different with Clytemnestra. There is no direct suggestion that she was present at Aulis – in contrast with Euripides’ tragedy – yet the visceral immediacy of her emotions is no less vivid. She is lamenting the loss of her φιλιτάτην ἐμοὶ ὠδῖνα (ll. 1417-18), and relishing the symbolic equity of her revenge. This emphasis on the maternal bond cannot, and should not, be downgraded as merely the product of an anachronistic ‘feminism’ or ‘gender-consciousness’. As I hope my account will have brought out, she has a far closer personal connection with the two leading ‘ghost-plays’ than any other character. And the maternal bond will, after all, continue to be a leading is-

sue for the rest of the trilogy, and will win half the votes in the trial at Athens. Modern interpretations and productions are, of course, very likely to make Clytemnestra's defiance of male superiority and double-standards into a central element, since these are issues that are very much alive, but they are already built into Aeschylus' play, not merely superimposed from outside.<sup>11</sup>

The physical and visual evocation of the sacrifice of Iphigeneia bring home the blood-dynamics of the tragedy: the father's killing of his own child arouses a visceral horror, and the mother's revenge for her innocent child retains immense power. It is interesting that in modern productions this remains the case whatever kind of acting is employed, however naturalistic or stylised. Most contemporary actors have been trained in some version of Stanislavskian method, and so they are in the habit of regarding a psychological back-story of their motivation as central to the interpretation of their roles.<sup>12</sup> Yet few of the best modern productions that I have seen have used Stanislavskian approaches to acting: some, especially those of Hall and Mnouchkine, have, on the contrary, deliberately set about to develop quite other non-naturalistic modes of acting. Katie Mitchell's employment of Stanislavskian techniques are a notable exception, but even then her actual productions combine that approach with other less naturalistic elements, for example her use of formalised choreography.

In many of the best modern productions of ancient Greek tragedy it is those challenges that are conventionally regarded as 'remote' or as 'problems' – the chorus, the gods, lengthy *agon*-scenes, laments and so forth – that bring about some of the most striking and inventive features of their eventual theatrical realisations. The bridging of difference stimulates creative initiative. The call to find ways of conveying back-stories that are not familiar to modern audiences, unlike those of the original productions, is a further example: the challenge provokes invention. The sacrifice of Iphigeneia in *Agamemnon* – with its powerful themes of parenthood, public demands, male violence and gender-inequity – is a good example. The Thyestean feast also taps into resonant concerns: sibling rivalry, the abuse of hospitality, cruelty to children, the insatiable violence of vengeance. Perhaps before long there will be a production that makes something theatrically powerful, and yet not merely macabre or gratuitously disgusting, out of the recollection of this story. The ghost-children call out to be given recognition.

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<sup>11</sup> The before-its-time study of Winnington-Ingram (1948) deserves recognition.

<sup>12</sup> Lada-Richards has published a series of studies developing a typology in terms of 'Stanislavskian' versus 'Brechtian' acting. Cf, for example, Lada-Richards 1997.

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