

DIDASKALIA 

The Journal for Ancient Performance



photo: P. Winters/Theater of War

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

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About Didaskalia

Didaskalia (διδασκαλία) is the term used since ancient times to describe the work a playwright did to teach his chorus and actors the play. The official records of the dramatic festivals in Athens were the διδασκαλῖαι. *Didaskalia* now furthers the scholarship of the ancient performance.

Didaskalia is an English-language, online publication about the performance of Greek and Roman drama, dance, and music. We publish peer-reviewed scholarship on performance and reviews of the professional activity of artists and scholars who work on ancient drama.

We welcome submissions on any aspect of the field. If you would like your work to be reviewed, please write to editor@didaskalia.net at least three weeks in advance of the performance date. We also seek interviews with practitioners and opinion pieces. For submission guidelines, go to didaskalia.net.

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Note

Didaskalia is an online journal. This print representation of Volume 8 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at didaskalia.net, which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

Play in the Sunshine

Jennifer S. Starkey
University of Colorado

“We are not conscious of daylight as that which displaces darkness. Daylight, even when the sun is clear of clouds, seems to us simply the natural condition of the earth and air. When we think of the downs, we think of the downs in daylight . . . we do not usually envisage the downs without daylight, even though the light is not a part of the down itself. . . . We take daylight for granted.” — Richard Adams (*Watership Down*, 176)



Conference Presentation
 video: Randolph College
[youtube.com/watch?v=Hz0K5dLUYZU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hz0K5dLUYZU)

It is common knowledge that Greek tragedy of the fifth century was performed in outdoor theaters. It is also a commonplace that actors, chorus, and audience were thus exposed to the vagaries of the elements: clouds, wind, storms, etc. What is not common is an appreciation of the dramatic possibilities offered by the fact of natural light.¹ Indeed, natural lighting might seem more a limitation to be worked around than a fount of dramatic potential. A range of technology is available to the modern playwright who wishes to create meaning or atmosphere through lighting: colored lights, spotlights, moving lights, or no light at all. He may use lights to make his stage more realistic or eerily unreal, to highlight certain characters or action, to startle the audience, or to effect visual illusions.²

The Athenian playwright had none of this, and without modern technology, he would not have been aware of the lack as we are today. But he did produce his work in the same theater and at the same time every year—that is to say, the Theater of Dionysus at Athens and the Great Dionysia in March.³ This regularity afforded him ample opportunity to become closely acquainted with patterns of sunlight and shadow in the theater at that time of the year and enabled him to factor them into his dramatic scheme. The time of day, the fall of light and shadow across the stage and orchestra, the visible passage of time, and the very presence of the sun are all elements that he might have taken into account when composing his play.⁴ He would not have felt *compelled* to do so; I do not contend that every play makes equal use of the sun, or that a play which does use it very thoroughly loses all meaning if not performed in March in the Theater of Dionysus. But the light was always there, and thus was one of the many dramatic tools which the playwright could work into his play if and as he saw fit. The sun, its light, and the shadows were not limitations but supplements, utilized to enhance and complicate the meaning inherent in the text. This paper’s thesis, then, is simple: we should not, as Richard Adams suggests we often do, “take daylight for granted.”

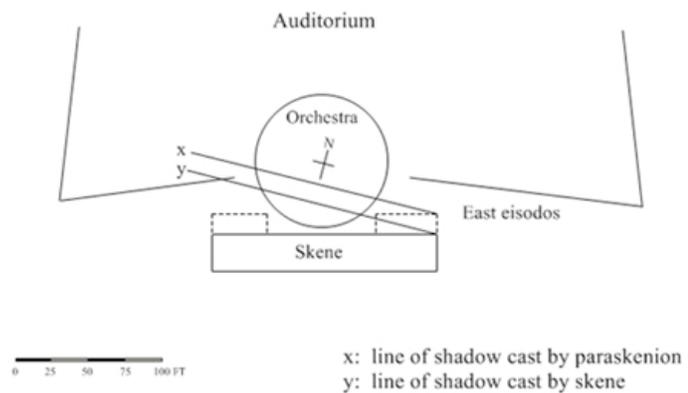
It seems to me that the sunlight in an open-air theater can have three fundamental effects on a performance. First, of course, is realism. It requires no great effort to imagine a morning scene when it is in fact morning. This is a very simple use, however, and contributes little to one’s experience of the play beyond a touch of vividness. And several tragedies set at other times of the day (or even night) surely would not have lost their impact by being performed under the morning sun. Nevertheless, this most basic level of realism makes possible the second fundamental effect of sunlight: it acts as a sort of bridge between the mythical world of the play and the real world of the audience.⁵ Where the sun exists in both, it brings the two worlds closer together. It may encourage the audience to view action otherwise removed to another time and place in the light of their own world, or, on the other hand, it may allow the ambiguities of the drama to seep out into the real world. Finally, the dynamic interaction between

dramatic theme and natural light may suggest especially effective patterns of staging.

I will attempt to demonstrate the value of reading Greek tragedy with an appreciation for the natural light through examination of key scenes in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. But first I will explain briefly my principal assumptions about the geographical orientation of the theater and how its lighting was affected by surrounding buildings, and examine the evidence for the time of day when the plays were performed.

The Theater of Dionysus is built into the south slope of the Acropolis on a generally north-south axis. A person standing in the orchestra looking toward the center of the auditorium would be facing north-northwest (see [fig. 1](#)).⁶ In late March, when the Great Dionysia was held, the sunrise is very nearly due east—in fact, straight down the east entrance, or eisodos.⁷ With the sun at this angle, the east wing of the auditorium could have cast significant shadow only on the spectators, but not on the orchestra or stage.⁸ Though the Odeion of Pericles and the hall to the immediate south of the stage-building (skene) would have increased the shaded area significantly,⁹ they probably were not built until after 458. While it remains possible that in Aeschylus' day there was another large building in the spot later occupied by the Odeion, it is safer, in the absence of any positive evidence, to assume that there was not.¹⁰

Fig. 1: Aeschylus' Theater, 458 B.C.



So Aeschylus' orchestra will have been largely and uniformly illuminated except for the area immediately in front of the skene.¹¹ While this structure may not have been a permanent feature of the theater in this period, it must be acknowledged that *Agamemnon* requires a stage-building for entrances and exits into the palace, and a fairly hefty one if the watchman at the beginning is to be perched on the roof—in other words, a structure sufficiently large and solid to cast a noticeable shadow on the stage.¹²

But how long a shadow, and at what angle? It is generally assumed that the tragedies of the Great Dionysia were performed in the morning, with the satyr play at the end providing a sort of transition to the comedies in the afternoon.¹³ If so, then the skene cast a shadow at an angle of approximately 15°. While we cannot know precisely at what time the first play began, it may not matter much: whether the performance started at dawn or a couple hours later, the sun would still be in the eastern part of the sky and the area in front of the skene would still be in shadow, which is all that I require for my interpretation of *Agamemnon*. The length of the shadow makes no difference.

So the first play of the trilogy began sometime in the morning with the sun casting its light into the orchestra along the east eisodos and with shadow fronting the skene. Our next task is to examine specific references to the sun, light, day, and their counterparts in the text of *Agamemnon* and consider their possible ties to the actual lighting in the theater.

Agamemnon is incredibly complex in its use of light, both natural and poetic; its imagery is deeply imbued with interconnected dichotomies of light and darkness, good and evil, life and death, victory and defeat. But the symbolic value of light turns out to be slippery and ephemeral, and may be blurred when

connected to other themes. On the purely literary level, light and darkness in the *Agamemnon* have been effectively analyzed by Nicholas Russo.¹⁴ Since I do not intend to repeat his project, I will limit my discussion of imagery to those passages which either bear directly on the staging or characterize light and darkness within this play; these characterizations can then be applied to an interpretation of the action on the visual level. More precisely, I will first discuss the beacon, whose resonance is felt well beyond its appearance in the prologue scene: several characters connect it closely with the sun and the dawn (itself described as a mixture of day and night), thus creating a network of varied and sometimes-contradictory meanings for light and darkness in the play. Then I will consider how these dynamics operate in two specific scenes: Agamemnon's arrival and entrance into the palace over the tapestries, and Cassandra's impressive performance.

A physical description of the Aeschylean stage is simple. The play's focal points are the palace where Clytemnestra and Aegisthus reside, and the east eisodos, which serves all other entrances and exits.¹⁵ Given the fall of light and shadow over the acting area, the palace is defined by darkness, in all of its manifestations, while the eisodos and orchestra are defined by light. But it is not enough simply to know (or to speculate) whether a character stood in an illuminated or a shadowed area; first we must understand what meaning(s) Aeschylus attaches to light and darkness in his text. For example, the action begins at dawn, an inherently liminal time partaking of both night and day; furthermore, the east is naturally associated with the true sun visible to the audience, as well as with Troy, the beacon, and Agamemnon's return from Troy, all with their own connotations. The fall of Troy, for instance, is a glorious victory on its face, but also a nighttime scene of bloodshed and Greek sacrilege.¹⁶ Such conflicts of meaning saturate the play and call into question any straightforward interpretations of "light" and "darkness." This ambiguity then extends to the real light and shadow of the theater and hence to the audience's perception of the characters and action within them. And all of this begins in the prologue with the first mention of the beacon.

The watchman stationed on the palace roof sets the scene in darkness, but immediately before dawn.¹⁷ His first words about the beacon seem to indicate instead that he is awaiting the rising sun (8-10):¹⁸

καὶ νῦν φυλάσσω λαμπάδος τό σύμβολον,
αὐγὴν πυρὸς φέρουσιν ἐκ Τροίας φάτιν
ἄλώσιμόν τε βᾶξιν.

And now I'm looking out for the agreed beacon-signal,
the gleam of fire bringing from Troy the word and
news of its capture.

The watchman's initial description of the beacon is vaguer than the translation suggests; as a "token of light" (a rather obscure phrase) and a "ray of fire," it evokes the sun, and only when we reach the end of line 9 (ἐκ Τροίας φάτιν, "word from Troy") do we realize what he is actually watching for. Nevertheless, he has drawn attention to an inherent similarity between the beacon and the sun, and this will become important after the choral entry (parodos), when dawn has fully arrived and the chorus finds reason to doubt whether there was a beacon at all.¹⁹ Even now, it is not clear whether the long-awaited beacon is really a good thing, for the watchman goes on in the next lines to link it to the capture of Troy (symbolic of both glory and carnage) and to Clytemnestra; here she is ambiguously characterized as a possessor of "power" (κράτος) and a "man-counseling heart" (ἀνδρόβουλον κέαρ), and we surely already know her malicious intentions toward Agamemnon.²⁰ So right from the start the beacon's meaning is taken along two parallel lines: on the one hand, conflated with the sun and the new day, on the other hand, problematized by connections to the events at Troy and to the sinister Clytemnestra. The beacon's likeness to the sun is as much visual as conceptual, as demonstrated again by the watchman's language when he

actually sees the beacon (20-4):²¹

νῦν δ' εὐτυχῆς γένοιτ' ἀπαλλαγῆ πόνων
εὐαγγέλου φανέντος ὄρφναίου πυρός.

ὦ χαῖρε λαμπτήρ νυκτὸς ἡμερήσιον
φάος πιφαύσκων . . .

But now may there be a happy release from misery
by the appearance in the darkness of the fire that brings good news.

O welcome, beacon, bringing to us by night a message of light bright as day . . .

Line 21 is remarkably oxymoronic in its phrasing—literally, “a propitious shining dark fire.”²² The primary intended meaning (as conveyed in Sommerstein’s translation) is obviously that of a light shining out of the darkness, yet the idea of a dark fire and the apparent contrast between the first and last pairs of words (“propitious shining” / “dark fire”) should give us pause. Further, the adjective “propitious” (εὐάγγελος), while eminently suitable for a beacon, is also the adjective applied to a welcome dawn later at 264, though this dawn will not turn out to be propitious for everyone. When he spies the beacon, the watchman at first seems to hail it as a “light of night” (λαμπτήρ νυκτὸς), which could be taken to mean a light belonging to night or a light consisting of night—in either case, a troubling collocation.²³ The “day light” (ἡμερήσιον φάος), which Sommerstein renders as “light bright as day,” is another ambiguous expression that heightens the confusion between the (imagined) dramatic beacon and the real sun.²⁴ In addition to uncertainty as to whether the watchman is actually seeing a beacon or only the sun, the audience may feel uneasy about the nature of a beacon (and a sun) which supposedly heralds victory but to which the vocabulary of night is so readily applied.²⁵ Conflation of the beacon with the sun suggests that the beacon may not be real; problematization of the beacon through its connection to other themes, together with conflation of night and day, suggests that day (represented most vividly by the real sun) is not as favorable a thing as might be expected. The sun and its light lie at the heart of the play’s perversion of moral values and are instrumental to Aeschylus’ creation of an atmosphere of unreality, where even the natural world is not what it seems. These dynamics continue after the parodos in Clytemnestra’s opening words, a prayer that “a dawn of good-tidings may be born from its kindly mother, night” (264-5).²⁶ This passage contributes to a larger theme in which parents beget children like themselves²⁷ and qualifies the apparently propitious rising of the sun by connecting it closely to the night. It may be significant that Clytemnestra, who resides in the darkened palace and (as far as I can tell) never moves beyond that shadow, considers this particular dawn to be wholly positive and refers to night as “kindly,” normally a euphemistic and apotropaic title, though she probably means it literally. Since we in the audience know what she intends, we may comprehend the threat behind her superficially pious words.

As she explains the beacon’s significance, the chorus questions the validity of her information and wonders whether she might be relying, unwisely, on a dream or a rumor (with the implication that the beacon is no more reliable than these). Though Clytemnestra takes offense at their questions, we have seen that the conflation of sun- and firelight create good dramatic reasons to doubt that the beacon really did shine, and ten years of waiting make it all the more incredible that victory has been won at last. But Clytemnestra’s initial responses to the chorus’ questions enhance the atmosphere of unreality by blurring normal conceptions of time (278-80):

Χο. ποίου χρόνου δὲ καὶ πεπόρθηται πόλις;
Κλ. τῆς νῦν τεκούσης φῶς τόδ' εὐφρόνης λέγω.

Χο. καὶ τίς τόδ' ἐξίκοιτ' ἄν ἀγγέλων τάχος;

Cho. Within what time has the city actually been sacked?

Cly. Within the night, I say, that has but now given birth to the present day's light.

Cho. And what messenger could come here with such speed?

First, the continuing conflation of day and night. As at 265, Clytemnestra's language here characterizes dawn as a transitional period and links the current light to its mother, night, rather than to the day; as if to emphasize the relationship, she settles φῶς τόδ' ("the present day's light") snugly in the middle of the line, between the words describing night.²⁸ Her statement further attenuates the usual normative boundaries between light and darkness, which can no longer be understood as straightforwardly good and bad. The victory at Troy was achieved *last night; this morning*, so closely connected to mother Night, will answer that victory with the return and brutal murder of Agamemnon.

Second, the contraction of time and space implied by line 280. The chorus is amazed that a message could have traveled over such a great distance so quickly, and Clytemnestra readily explains it to them. What is never explained is how Agamemnon and his men are also able to travel such a distance so quickly. One may object that we should not press Aeschylus too hard for complete temporal accuracy; I would respond that he himself draws attention to the disjunction in passages like the one just cited.²⁹ Perhaps more explicit is Agamemnon's later speech, when he declares that the smoke, embers, and ashes of Troy are still visible (818-20), again emphasizing the temporal immediacy of its razing only the night before. The new dawn brings many things with it: a beacon, victory at Troy, and the return of Agamemnon, all virtually concurrent with each other. The fuzziness of the temporality gives the play an atmosphere of unreality made all the more unsettling by the fact that the day and sun, with which all of these things are associated, *are* real and so link the worlds of the audience and the characters. The solid reality of the morning sunlight contrasts with the seeming unreality of Agamemnon's victory and voyage in the night, and with the speciousness of the light as a harbinger of good fortune.

The uncertainty surrounding the beacon's light is carried further when the chorus leader, still mistrusting the beacon, spots an approaching herald and declares (489-92):³⁰

εἰσόμεσθα λαμπάδων φαεσφόρων
φρυκτωριῶν τε καὶ πυρὸς παραλλαγᾶς,
εἴτ' οὖν ἀληθεῖς εἴτ' ὄνειράτων δίκην
τερπνὸν τόδ' ἔλθὸν φῶς ἐφήλωσεν φρένας.

We shall soon know about the beacon-watches
and fire-relays of the travelling light-signals,
whether they are indeed telling the truth or whether
the coming of this joyful light has beguiled our minds like a dream.

His indirect question in 491-2 suggests that the beacon may be not merely fallacious (the expected alternative to "telling the truth"), but even illusory. The phrase "the coming of this joyful light" almost reads as a correction of the beacon-oriented catalogue in 489-90, for "this light" is a rendering of the Greek words τόδε φῶς, which were used above at 279 to denote "this present day." Is this light then a meaningful signal fire or the current morning light (cheering so far as it goes but otherwise insignificant)? Even the phrase "beguiled our minds" (ἐφήλωσεν φρένας) carries a double meaning: the beacon may beguile by signifying something other than what is expected, but it may also beguile by not being there at all. Thus, the actual sun, through its earlier conflation with the beacon, becomes potentially a spurious beacon, a waking dream.³¹

The destabilization of the dramatic world is communicated out into the real world by the fact that the sun stands at the center of these ambiguities. The sun aids mystification of the real world by its association with the questionable beacon and the problematic relationship between day and night. It also contributes to that dynamic through a dichotomy of light/life, darkness/death. Light is linked to life in the ancient cliché that the sun sees all, here applied to Menelaus (whose ship was lost at sea):³² the sun sees and knows where Menelaus is, and if Menelaus in turn sees the sun, then he lives.³³ The motif of the all-seeing sun³⁴ is in some sense metatheatrical: the same “eye” not only knows the whereabouts of missing characters, but also observes the drama being performed in the theater and the spectators watching it. It thus spans the physical boundaries of the earth, as well as the temporal gap between the heroic age and contemporary Athens. That it exists both here and there (spatially, temporally) lends concreteness to the dramatic action and its unsettling motifs at the same time as it in some degree destabilizes the audience’s own sense of time and space.

Agamemnon is preceded by a lone herald; a perceptive reader has asked me why Aeschylus would allow Agamemnon’s grand entry to be anticipated in this way. I would venture that more is to be gained from first showcasing the herald’s joyful naiveté; he hails the day of return (508) and greets the entire palatial compound, including its statues, whose faces shine in the sun,³⁵ in an attempt to draw a straightforward connection between light and safety (518-23):

ὦ μέλαθρα, βασιλέων φίλαι στέγαι,
σεμνοί τε θᾶκοι, δαίμονές τ’ ἀντήλιοι·
εἷ που πάλαι, φαιδροῖσι τοισίδ’ ὄμμασιν
δέξασθε κόσμωι βασιλέα πολλῶι χρόνωι·
ἦκει γὰρ ὑμῖν φῶς ἐν εὐφρόνηι φέρων
καὶ τοῖσδ’ ἅπασι κοινὸν Ἀγαμέμνων ἄναξ.

Hail, palace, beloved home of my kings,
and august seats, and you deities who face the sun!
Let those eyes of yours be bright, if they ever have been before,
as you welcome your king home in glory at long last;
for he has come, bringing light out of darkness to you
and to all these people—King Agamemnon!

His effusive relief betrays the uneasy atmosphere of the dramatic action. While the army moves from a night of carnage and war into the light of safety, we know that Agamemnon’s return cannot be so simple.³⁶ The relentless intertwining of the themes of light and darkness throughout the play until now points up the shallowness of the herald’s words.

The herald’s description of the king as “bringing light in the night”³⁷ prepares us for Agamemnon’s entrance, where he appears to do this quite literally: he marches in triumphal procession down the east eisodos, a corridor of sunlit white stone, with the morning sun directly at his back.³⁸ Agamemnon moves wholly in the light of the morning sun and with that sun as an implicit escort. Clytemnestra appears at the door of the palace; if there were multiple doors, a clever producer would set her at the western end of the skene in the deepest shadow to allow the procession the greatest scope across the bright orchestra and to heighten the contrast with Clytemnestra’s position.³⁹ The purple tapestries, a symbolic river of blood pouring from palace to orchestra, also gain in meaning when that river flows from a darkened source into the light. Finally, Agamemnon’s overconfidence and blindness to the situation become more obvious:⁴⁰ like the herald, he stands in such a dazzle of light (with all its various connotations), that he is unable to see the threat.

Though the surface meaning of this scene is certainly valid—Agamemnon *does* abandon the light of life

and enter the darkness of death—there is a great deal more to it than that. It is a central theme of the play, especially where light and darkness are concerned, that nothing is ever quite as it seems. The spectator comes to this scene only after the concepts of light and darkness have been complicated, conflated, and problematized in a variety of ways. So when Agamemnon comes “bringing light in the night,” he comes bringing not only the light of military glory and salvation for his troops, but also the light of the beacon, of the sacrilege at Troy, of dawn’s liminality, of the day of his own murder. The light as embodied by Agamemnon, and the life that it represents, is about to be swallowed up in the murky interior of the palace. At the same time, the light itself has become a deceptive and dangerous thing. That Agamemnon actively brings this light suggests his culpability in what follows, just as his willingness in the end to tread on the purple tapestries is a sure sign of his downfall. While Agamemnon is unable to bring the real light into the darkness of the palace, he still bears all the weight of its meaning as he goes to his death.

After his exit, Cassandra’s sudden outburst of prayer and prophecy focuses on the light as simultaneously a source of knowledge and of violence. At 1180-3, in a frankly puzzling rush of imagery, she declares of her seer’s art:

λαμπρὸς δ’ ἔοικεν ἡλίου πρὸς ἀντολάς
πνέων ἐπάξειν, ὥστε κύματος δίκην
κλύζειν πρὸς αὐγὰς τοῦδε πῆματος πολὺ
μεῖζον.

It seems that it will rush toward the sunrise,
a bright/fresh wind, so that like a wave
it will dash against the sun’s rays, a wave of doom far
greater than this one.⁴¹

Wind, waves, and light blend inextricably. λαμπρὸς immediately suggests “bright” and therefore anticipates ἡλίου (“sun”) but properly describes πνέων (“wind”), both of them emphatically positioned. With the force of an ocean wave, prophetic power rushes like an independent source of light in direct challenge to the sunrise; it dashes against the rays of—what? At first reading (or hearing), τοῦδε πῆματος (“this doom”) appears to be the possessor of the rays, and only as the sentence reaches its end do we discover that we are to understand it as part of a comparison. For an instant, Cassandra’s mantic insight⁴² seems to confront the “rays of this doom;” and that momentary equation of the rising sun with disaster is surely as significant as the fact that Cassandra’s destroyer is Apollo, the god so often associated with light and brilliance.⁴³ This perhaps explains why prophecy can be imagined to vie with the sunlight: both are facets of the same god, different sides of the same coin, as it were. An effective staging of this moment, and perhaps the entire scene (addressed as it is to Apollo) would have Cassandra face the sun, down the east eisodos and back toward Troy, where her troubles began. This would form a sort of triangulation with Cassandra at the apex, Troy and the light on the one side, and her prophesied fate in the shadowed palace on the other. The only “escape” from the light (from prophetic knowledge, from Apollo) lies in the darkened palace—ultimately an escape from life.⁴⁴

Before she exits for the last time, Cassandra marks the power of the sun in yet one more way: she calls it to witness her doom and to pay out vengeance to her murderers (1323-6):

ἡλίου⁴⁵ δ’ ἐπεύχομαι
πρὸς ὕστατον φῶς, δεσπότης τιμαόροις
ἔχθροὺς φόνευσιν τὴν ἐμὴν τίνειν ὁμοῦ,⁴⁶
δοῦλης θανούσης, εὐμαροῦς χειρώματος.

Looking on my last sunlight,
 I pray that my enemies may pay to my master's avengers
 the penalty for my murder as well—for the death
 of a slave, an easy victim.

Unfortunately, much of the Greek text is corrupt, but it is at least plain that Cassandra addresses the sun with reference to her own wretched death, and the reference to vengeance is not improbable. In the end, the light of the sun is even granted the violent strength necessary to carry out revenge on the murderers who lurk in the dark, while Cassandra herself leaves the stage as little more than a shadow, or something even less than a shadow (1328).⁴⁷ The menace inherent in the light and Cassandra's image of man as shadowy and ephemeral are things the members of the house of Atreus would do well to keep in mind. But Aegisthus, at least, has not learned that lesson, for his first line upon entering from the palace salutes the kindly light of a vengeful day (1577). His words recall the naïve herald, and his application of the epithet "kindly" (εὐφροον, which may recall the euphemistic term for night) to the day is unconsciously problematic. He is the last character to speak of the light in this play.⁴⁸

Conclusion

My primary aim in this paper has been to show that the ancient playwright was not straitened by the circumstance of natural lighting in the theater in which he produced his plays. Rather, he learned from experience what dynamics of light and shadow to expect and discovered various ways of making them work for him. With its preponderance of imagery related to light and darkness, *Agamemnon* is particularly well suited to this sort of investigation, though it may actually be the product of Aeschylus' dramaturgic innovation as much as his experience of the theater: the recently introduced stage-building changed the performance space by creating a shadowed area within the sunlit orchestra, of which Aeschylus took advantage in ways unanticipated by earlier poets and audiences. Later playwrights were then able to build upon his experiment.

Much of the language in *Agamemnon* is strictly metaphorical and has no real counterpart on the physical stage. But the audience is able to contemplate many of the play's basic ideas more concretely through the light and shadow visible in the acting area. The natural light may help to establish the dramatic time of the play (e.g. morning, noontide, etc.), but at the same time, the very fact that the sun belongs both to our world and to that of the drama allows for a conflation of the two—a phenomenon not possible in a modern theater, where all lighting is artificial. In the ancient theater, some degree of realism is unavoidable. Even where dramatic time does not match real time, the audience may be aware of various role(s) played by the sun in both worlds: as an all-seeing witness, as a beacon, as the light of Apollo, as a symbol of life and hope.

Though the playwright may plan his work around the natural light and shadow, it will not seem this way to the audience; they will see only that the natural world happens to coincide in important ways with the dramatic enactment of a story rooted in Greek myth and culture. This makes the play more believable in terms of details (such as the time of day) and more especially the action itself. When *Agamemnon* brings home "light" with the sun right over his shoulder, we are given a stronger sense of the underlying struggle between good and evil, the unseen forces driving that struggle, and the interplay of guilt and justice. The shadow hanging over the house of Atreus is a real thing; it must be a more disturbing experience for the spectator actually to see that figurative shadow of murder and disaster looming over the stage. With this play in particular, the conflation of the sun with the beacon and the confusion of the normally straightforward dichotomy of light and darkness lend an air of unreality to the dramatic action. That the natural elements appear to cooperate of their own accord with the dire events of the play fits in well with the common interpretation of Aeschylean tragedy as cosmic in scope, linking the individual to

a much larger chain of causality reaching all the way up to the gods. Perversion of the natural order, ever a popular way of reading *Agamemnon*, also emerges in Aeschylus' conflation of the values normally attached to light and darkness.

In addition to making the dramatic experience more immediate and more terrifying, the poet's apparently artless involvement of the sun and its light in his production also draws the spectator into a world just as real—or unreal—as his own. An expression of Martin Revermann's may be applicable here: he finds that the boundary between worlds, "while clearly marked, is often porous, and any crossing destabilizes the fictional character of the world of the play."⁴⁹ But by destabilization of a play's fictionality, do we mean that the play becomes less believable, or more so (and its fictionality less apparent)?

notes

¹ D. Wiles (1997, 133–60) considers the movements of the sun within the spatial dimension, particularly the various associations of the left and right eisodoi, but does not delve deeply into the meaning generated by the sun itself. M. Revermann (2006, 111–3) also toys briefly with direct references to the sun in Aristophanic comedy, though his main point is the limited value of *skenographia* in a "fundamentally environmental" theater, and he does not advance beyond the use of the sun itself in straightforward realism.

² I attended a performance of the *Persians* in 2007 in which the raising of Darius was effected by blinding the audience with white light while the actor simply walked onto the stage.

³ Though plays could be performed and reperformed in the deme theaters, the majority our surviving tragedies were originally intended to be produced in Athens.

⁴ Light would also affect the reciprocity between actors and audience during a performance, as observed by Revermann (2006, 35); consequently, watching a play in a darkened modern theater is relatively a more isolated, personal experience than watching one outdoors.

⁵ What might be termed metatheater, but see E. Hall (2006, 99–141, esp. 105–11) for a word of caution regarding that term. When I employ it here, I have in mind words or acts that jar the "dramatic illusion." There is nothing inherently dramatic about the sun, but as it is an object within the play that simultaneously reaches out beyond the play, drawing attention to it may encourage the spectator to think about the dramatic action on another level.

⁶ According to C. Ashby (1998, 97–108) the precise orientation is 346.4°. This is the orientation of the theater's remains, which cannot take us further back than the Periclean reconstruction of the precinct (including the addition of the Odeion) in the 440s. It is not known whether the earlier theater was built along the same axis; S. Scullion (1994, 26–8) seems to suggest that it may have been on more of a NW/SE axis, parallel to the Odeion, and later adjusted to accommodate the stone skene and hall to the south. Fig. 1 retains the orientation of the later (extant) theater; the lengths of lines x and y do not correspond to the lengths of those shadows, which of course depend on the size of the skene and the height of the sun in the sky.

⁷ Ashby (1998, 108); the vernal equinox, when the sun rises due east, is about March 21. J. T. Allen (1937, 169–72) refutes Flickinger's claim that there was no east eisodos until the Odeion was built.

⁸ Perhaps it did in the summer months, when the sun moved further north. In March, shadow would have fallen only on the northernmost edge of the orchestra and the auditorium itself.

⁹ On the Odeion, see J. T. Allen (1941, 173–8); O. Broneer (1944, 305–12); A. L. H. Robkin (diss., University of Washington, 1976, 10–41); M. Miller (1997, 218–42). It was probably completed by 446, though some have dated it as early as the 470s, as its roof was said to have been made from the wood of ships at the Battle of Salamis.

¹⁰ One might think that without something to obstruct the morning sunlight it would have shone right in the eyes of half the audience. But this was probably less of a problem than it seems, as the spectators' gazes were directed downward from auditorium to acting area. Ashby (1998, 109–15) recognizes the problem but adds that the orientation of the theaters was probably meant to maximize warmth in the winter months.

¹¹ I am in agreement with R. Rehm (1988, 263–307) that both actors and chorus were permitted in the orchestra (see also Ewens and Ley, 1985, 75–84). I therefore use the terms “stage” and “acting area” interchangeably to refer to the entire space in front of the stage–building (skene). The shape of the orchestra (circular versus trapezoidal) makes no difference for my argument, nor does the possible existence of a moderately raised stage.

¹² For the watchman on the roof, see O. Taplin (1977, 276–7). If the *Oresteia* was the first production to use the skene (so Taplin 1977, 452–9), then this would be one of the more extreme ways in which the playwright could alter the lighting of the acting area. For the possibility that there were projecting *paraskenia*, which would also increase the shaded area, see A. W. Pickard–Cambridge (1946, 43–4 with n. 1, as well as the appendix on pp. 169–70); J.–C. Moretti (1999/2000, 377–98, esp. 397–8).

¹³ On the order of tragic and comic performance, see A. W. Pickard–Cambridge (1988, 64–5); E. Csapo and W. J. Slater (1994, 107). There may have been five comedies on the first day and only tragic tetralogies on subsequent days, or tragedies in the morning and comedies in the afternoon of every day. Even in the first case, we have no compelling reason to believe that the tragedies would not still have been performed in the morning; the main evidence for this is *Ar. Birds* 786–9 (produced in 414). Ashby (1998, 120–1; cf. also pp. 109–10), doubts that the plays began at dawn and further concludes that the texts only make reference to the time of day when it is markedly different from the dramatic time. I do not agree with this, for there are many reasons to mention the time of day beyond “setting the scene.”

¹⁴ N. M. Russo (1974). In addition to Russo, see Wiles (1997, 144–5) as well as J. J. Peradotto (1964, 378–93), and L. Moss (1977, 267–78).

¹⁵ Excepting probably the initial choral entry and final exit, if we imagine the west *eisodos* as leading to the city's interior. See Wiles (1997, 133–60, esp. 144–5), on the significance of left and right in the staging of Greek tragedy; a certain level of realism dictates that Agamemnon should enter from the east, given that two things with which he is strongly associated (*Troy* and the sun) both lie physically in the east.

¹⁶ See e.g. 326–9 (the dead and defeated Trojans), 338–42 (a warning against impiety in victory), 427–55 (the Greek dead), 527 (Trojan altars and shrines destroyed), 646–70 (the storm at sea). The best-known Greek sacrileges during the sack of Troy are the rape of Cassandra by the lesser Ajax and the slaughter of Priam at the altar by Neoptolemus; the expedition as a whole is framed by the sacrifice of Iphigenia (vividly described in the *parodos*: 146–55, 218–49) before the fleet's departure for Troy and the sacrifice of Polyxena before the return voyage. The sack itself occurs during the night, which in turn is addressed (with propitiatory $\varphi\iota\lambda\acute{\iota}\alpha$) alongside Zeus as an agent of the city's destruction (355–7). Further, the net which Night uses to capture Troy anticipates the one Clytemnestra uses on Agamemnon (1115, 1382–3).

¹⁷ As confirmed in other statements (e.g., 4–8, 12–17). The dramatic time in the prologue is thus a little earlier than the actual time, though it seems to catch up after the *parodos* so that by that point the sun

may have a more directly realistic effect. On the imagery of the prologue speech, see Russo (1974, 7–18); he subscribes to an ironic reading whereby the beacon portends doom as much as it symbolizes the fulfillment of the watchman’s immediate hopes. Russo links the beacon to the stars, but he does not consider the applicability of the language to the sun as well.

¹⁸ All quotations of the Greek are from M. L. West (ed.), *Aeschylus: Tragoediae* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1990) unless otherwise noted. The translations are those of A. H. Sommerstein (ed.), *Aeschylus II*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008)."

¹⁹ See 83–7, 272–80, 475–92. Line 272 is a demand for proof; subsequent lines question whether the beacon actually has the significance with which Clytemnestra imbues it.

²⁰ The audience would already be acquainted with Clytemnestra’s treachery from Homer (*Od.* 11.404–11, 421–34).

²¹ It is possible (but unprovable) that by some stage effect a fire did flare up down the east eisodos (Russo (1974, 13).

²² J. D. Denniston and D. L. Page (1957, 21n.) on ὀρφναίου: “‘in the darkness’; elsewhere always ‘dark’.” E. Fränkel (1950, 21n.): “ὀρφναῖος occurs in Homer (only in the *Doloneia* and once in the *Odyssey*) exclusively in the formula νύκτα δι’ ὀρφναίην, and elsewhere too is always an epithet of night or something dark.”

²³ So Denniston and Page (1957, 22n.) The genitive νυκτὸς (“night”) could also indicate “a light during the night,” which is how Sommerstein seems to understand it, though the word order is such that this translation is not the most obvious one. D. Page (1972) and H. W. Smyth (1963) both punctuate after νυκτός, producing the sense “welcome, light of night, bringing a light of day.” Fränkel (1950) (followed by West and Sommerstein) punctuates after λαμπτήρ (“light”), suggesting rather “welcome, light, bringing a light of day of night” (or “during the night”); see Fränkel (1950, 22n.) for discussion. I leave the line unpunctuated to bring out the polyvalence.

²⁴ So also Clytemnestra’s words at 288, applied specifically to the beacon. Unfortunately, the text here is corrupt.

²⁵ Cf. also 588, where the fire is again one “of night” (νύχτιος).

²⁶ See Russo (1974, 25–6) on both the simple and the ironic connotations of Clytemnestra’s use of the proverb.

²⁷ E.g 717–36, 763–71, as well as 278–80 (discussed below).

²⁸ Russo (1974, 27) suggests that φῶς in this passage is meant to recall the watchman’s use of the same word to describe the beacon, with both types of light in turn being linked to the fall of Troy. However, night is more immediately linked to Troy, and thus dawn’s connection is only indirect.

²⁹ Therefore, while I agree with the general remarks of Taplin (1977, 290–4) on continuity of time in ancient tragedy, I cannot follow him in saying that “Aeschylus takes positive care to ensure that in performance nothing seems chronologically improbable.” Cf. Scullion (1994, 67–88) who concludes that Aeschylean drama as such had no more scenic “fluidity” than later tragedy; if so, such fluidity as we do find is all the more noticeable.

³⁰ Some manuscripts mark 489–500 as Clytemnestra’s, with the chorus returning at 501; these marginal

notations were deleted by Scaliger (followed by Fränkel, Smyth, West, and Sommerstein), though Denniston and Page (1957) and Page (1972) retain the manuscripts' attribution. See Taplin (1977, 294–7) for discussion. The need to know more about the beacon stands in contrast with Clytemnestra's earlier confidence.

³¹ At 81–2 the chorus compares old age to a waking dream (ὄναρ ἡμερόφαντον). Day is normally a time of concrete awareness, in contrast to insubstantial dreams experienced during the night. A waking dream, then, is something of an oxymoron, and indicates that the dreamlike quality of old age is not limited to physical weakness, but is almost an imaginary state of existence, just as the chorus' account of the fighting at Troy in the lines immediately preceding these was imaginary, and just as drama itself is an act of imagination. Ἠμερόφαντον suggests the unreality of the chorus' perceptions within the dramatic action, as well as the unreality of the play itself.

³² See 632–3, 676–7. Despite the title, E. Hall, *Greek Tragedy: Suffering under the Sun* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010) has little to say about the light in the theater, but see 93–4 on the all-seeing sun.

³³ Russo (1974, 56) makes the interesting point that the account of the storm, which takes place in the night and whose results are revealed the following day, prefigures the end of the play, when Clytemnestra exposes to the light the bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra.

³⁴ Elsewhere in tragedy at e.g. *Soph. Trach.* 94–102, OC 869.

³⁵ The primary meaning of φαίδροισι τοισίδ' ὄμμασιν must indicate benevolence, but the literal sense should not be ignored; see Fränkel (1950, 520n.). I therefore disagree with Denniston and Page (1957, 520n): “the adj. is purely metaphorical: we are under no compulsion to believe that the statues' eyes are, or are deemed to be, conveniently lit up by the morning sunshine.” Cf. Russo (1974, 49); though he occasionally suggests that some of the imagery of light might also have been staged, he never connects it to the real sun.

³⁶ To look at it another way, the herald is not a “brilliant dynast,” like Agamemnon, and therefore neither surrounded by the same social and moral ambiguities nor pursued by the same fate. Cf. M. Griffith (1995, 73): “Thus an audience in the theater experiences simultaneously (or in rapid alternation) at least three quite different perspectives on the action unfolding before it: (i) it empathizes with the ambitions or horrified anxieties of the leading character(s); (ii) it shares and enjoys the gods' or prophet's (and author's) ability to look down on those leaders, from a distance, as misguided and error-prone objects of pity or scorn; (iii) along with the fearful choral group or minor character, it gazes up at these leaders from below in wonder, as stupendously superior pillars of strength, ambition, and determination. And from first to last, safe in his/her theater seat, every member of the audience knows that this “internal audience” of minor characters and chorus, will survive, to resume their lives after the drama of the leaders has played itself out, just as they themselves (the theater audience) will resume their everyday lives upon leaving the theater. To that extent at least, these minor characters and this chorus are felt to be more like the theater audience, and closer to them, than are their leaders, upon whom so much attention (from both internal and theater audiences) is so fiercely focused.” See also pp. 79–81 on Agamemnon.

³⁷ A more literal translation of φῶς ἐν εὐφρόνῃ φέρων, though Sommerstein's “bringing light out of darkness” captures the herald's optimistic attitude. As we read this sentence, it initially appears that the light itself is coming until we realize that φῶς (“light”) is the object of φέρων (“bringing”), not the subject of ἦκει (“comes”). Taplin (1977, 299, 302–4) describes the herald's and Agamemnon's returns in terms of light that becomes overshadowed, though he is thinking figuratively.

³⁸ See Wiles (1997, 77) for brief discussion of silhouetted figures on the stage. Russo (1974, 27–37)

argues that the beacon is personified in some sense and associates it with Agamemnon; it thus becomes symbolic of both his guilt and his ruin (p. 42)—but Russo does not connect any of this to the sun.

³⁹ This staging would also have the advantage of using more of the acting area. A central position for Clytemnestra would risk rendering the entire western half dead space—unless we assume that the chorus occupied this space or that the procession spread out to occupy the whole of the orchestra (which would make for an equally effective contrast). But Taplin (1977, 438–40) doubts that there were multiple doors until New Comedy.

⁴⁰ P. E. Easterling (1993), argues that Agamemnon’s decision is characterized by human blindness rather than impiety or hybris. For a fuller survey of this scene’s impact and implications, see Taplin (1977, 310–6).

⁴¹ I find Sommerstein’s translation of this passage to be inadequate to my purposes and have therefore rendered it into English myself. Sommerstein prefers to read in the first line πρὸς ἀντολῆς (“from the sunrise”) and in the third ἀγὰς (“beaches,” which he nevertheless translates as singular). Such expressions as “so to speak” and “like a bright fresh wind” are not in the Greek and soften the language more than Aeschylus intended. Ἔοικα with a dative means “seem like,” while ἔοικα with an infinitive (as we have here) means “seem likely to . . .” Thus Cassandra’s prophecy is a bright fresh wind which seems likely to rush etc.

⁴² Russo (1974, 23–4) cites this passage (fuller discussion on pp. 69–71) as an example of light as understanding, which he also finds in the choral passage at 250–4 and the principle of πάθει μάθος (177).

⁴³ As illustrated by his common epithet Phoebus. I do not claim that Apollo is the sun, but the sunlight on the stage may recall this aspect of his divinity. Russo (1974, 73) associates Apollo (as healer and far-shooter) with light in both its positive and destructive manifestations, though I cannot see any immediate relation to light in either healing or archery.

⁴⁴ Taplin (1977, 317–21) prefers to have Cassandra continuously orientated on the skene. Though his interpretation of Cassandra’s role as leading the chorus and audience to enlightenment is attractive, I disagree with his formulation that “Cassandra’s is a journey into knowledge and insight,” since she has long possessed these things and seems finally to be divesting herself of them (literally at 1264–70).

⁴⁵ West (1990) and Sommerstein (2008) print the conjectural ἠλίου, producing “looking upon my last light of the sun”; the manuscripts’ ἠλίωι would suggest “I pray to the sun, looking upon my last light . . .”

⁴⁶ West (1990) prints this conjecture for the corruption in 1324–5.

⁴⁷ Depending on whether we read σκιά τις ἄν τρέψειεν (Fränkel, Smyth, and West) or σκιᾶι τις ἄν τρέψειεν (Page). For the exits of Agamemnon and Cassandra likened to shadows, see Wiles (1997, 169).

⁴⁸ Cf. Russo (1974, 77–8). At 1646, the chorus expresses the hope that Orestes is still alive to see the light so that he may take revenge—a sort of complement to the thoughts of both Cassandra and Aegisthus.

⁴⁹ Revermann (2006, 37), though he is thinking in spatial terms, and of comedy (which is in any case more topical and immediate than tragedy).

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