

The Loss of *telos*: The *Oresteia* of Athol Fugard

This paper will discuss how one modern adaptation of the *Oresteia* exhibits the difficulty in performing and understanding ancient drama. Athol Fugard's *Orestes* is a fragmentary version of the *Oresteia*, an unusually complete work in being the only trilogy extant from Greek drama (though missing its satyr play). This particular adaptation evokes the feeling of distance inherent to studying literature of which most is lost, particularly performed literature, since the performance can never be attended or truly known. In the face of the *Oresteia*, Fugard created the experience of unrepeatability, answering the apparent, grand *telos* that closes Aeschylus' trilogy with the finality of its loss as a theatrical experience.

In 1971 in South Africa, Athol Fugard and a few actors staged a version of the *Oresteia* that handled a recent, violent protest against the apartheid. Though Fugard first called it "the Oresteian Trilogy," it ultimately became a loose version of Orestes' response to Clytemnestra and was titled *Orestes*. The performance itself was staged with very few words and was never written out fully. It is recorded now through a series of Fugard's sketches and a description in a letter he wrote and later published. Thus Fugard's *Orestes* assumes the mostly lost, fragmentary nature of many ancient works—though not, ostensibly, of the *Oresteia* itself. In fact, it pointedly resists many ostensible qualities of the Greek trilogy it aims to recreate: it is nearly wordless, unstructured, and relies on the spontaneous interactions of a group of performers. Yet its resistance to history (to being historicized) evokes the silence around ancient performance—the pieces that are lost (movement, presence) despite the scripts that remain.

In a fifteen minute talk, it will be impossible to discuss this works in depth and that is not my goal. Rather, the aim of this talk will be to raise questions on how reception of an ancient

work can be a process of pulling apart, interrogating, and exposing the fragmentary nature of what appears complete.