

Revising “Authenticity” in Staging Ancient Mediterranean Drama

If Aeschylus had lived today/ he'd have to write a different play

Tony Harrison, *Prometheus* (1998)

Thinking about artifacts from an earlier time raises questions which quickly expand beyond the obvious ones about forgery and plagiarism. During the last decades of the twentieth century, debates about authenticity in performance have been most actively pursued in discussions about the performance of music, with some arguing that performers should try to recreate the exact conditions of a first performance, while others point out that too narrow a concept of authenticity ignores the crucial role of interpretation. In thinking about authenticity we need to understand the historical and contingent nature of this concept. Authenticity only becomes a value, and a problem, when alternatives become available. The concept of “live” performance comes into being only with the advent of recording technologies); hence there is no trace of concern in the ancient evidence for authenticity in performance, no doubt because there was no concept of a fixed “original.” Yet many insist that modern performances of ancient drama should strive to be as much like that original performance as possible. Aesthetic theorists suggest that careful attention to earlier performances is important, but so is the larger artistic potential of a work. Dutton distinguishes between “nominal” or “historic” authenticity and “expressive authenticity,” an emergent value possessed by works of art. Miller argues that Shakespeare continues to be performed not in attempts to recreate the original intention of each play but “because we are still looking for the possibility of unforeseen meanings.”

The increasing number of studies of the performance reception of ancient Mediterranean drama have so far paid little attention to authenticity. In this paper I offer a preliminary typology, drawing on theoretical discussions and offering examples of productions which in my view exemplify various types of authenticity. In particular, in the case of performance reception, the performance’s relation to and effect (actual or potential) on the audience are crucial components of analysis. I call this “inductive authenticity” and suggest that engaging an audience via “inductive authenticity” means trying to engage them in ways similar to those we think the Athenian or Roman performances might have done. We know that ancient drama offered its audiences a mixture of elements, and that ancient audiences scrutinized dramatic performances for their ethical, social and political implications, and responded vigorously—intellectually and emotionally—to what they saw. Hence, I argue, productions and adaptations which may seem radically innovative, unfaithful, subversive, even parodic or satiric, but which powerfully engage their audiences, in fact more closely resemble ancient performances in their effect.