

People as Props in Greek Tragedy

Silence on the Greek stage has attracted considerable scholarly attention; however, interest has been limited almost exclusively to the silences of otherwise speaking characters (e.g. chapters 5-8 in Montiglio (2000), chapters 1-5 in Jäkel and Timonen (2001), Götter (2005), Rood (2010)). Discussions of truly silent figures are few and brief (e.g. Stanley-Porter (1973), Bain (1981), Marshall (2013)). *Kōfa prosōpa* have been largely overlooked, relegated to the bottom of the spectrum of characters. Yet they are a constant presence in Greek tragedy, and often play a crucial role in both the plot and central themes. Their neglect can be partially attributed to an anachronistic aversion to objectification, and the resultant insistence on the distinction between people and objects. By considering silent figures as the least important of characters, we fail to see them for what they are: the most important of props.

This paper demonstrates that silent figures in Greek tragedy perform the same wide range of functions as props (as established by e.g. Ketterer (1986), Sofer (2003), and Revermann (2013)). Like conventional props, mutes can be defined in close relation to two adjacent and potentially overlapping categories of stage objects – set and costume – as against the categories of characters, who are endowed with traits such as agency and personality. The most significant objects, both animate and inanimate, are those that are given layers of symbolic meaning, which are determined externally and shift as speaking characters compete for their real and semantic ownership.

The conventions of Greek tragedy, notably the use of masks and the resultant distinction between actors and characters, add a further dimension to the use of silent figures. The substitution of a speaking actor for a silent one allows some figures to cross the boundaries between prop and character, and vice versa. Although it will not be possible to examine these

cases in detail, this paper will outline the implications of such figures for the old question of the consistency of characterization and the perception of character in Greek tragedy.

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