

BOOK REVIEW

Objects as Actors: Props and the Poetics of Performance in Greek Tragedy. By MELISSA MUELLER. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016. Pp. x + 278. Hardcover, \$55.00. ISBN 978-0-226-31295-8.

Mueller begins this intriguing and engaging book by underscoring the importance of props, as “actors,” in fifth-century tragic dramaturgy. Previous scholarship, she notes, tends to downplay the role of non-human elements in Greek tragedy. Mueller stresses that props in ancient drama aid audiences in interpreting the plays and the larger repertoire. Mueller presents six detailed case-studies of various tragedies, each exploring a different category of theatrical objects, such as weapons, recognition tokens, and textiles. The book’s first half involves tragedies as part of a larger poetic and theatrical tradition, while the second treats tragedy’s engagement with contemporary Athenian society. Mueller concludes each chapter with further avenues for study.

In Chapter 1, Mueller examines Ajax’s sword as prop in Sophocles’ *Ajax*, with Philoctetes’ bow and Heracles’ weapons as comparanda. Here, Mueller grapples with the difficult staging of Ajax’s suicide, and the visibility of the sword on stage. Mueller emphasizes that Ajax’s sword is presented as Hector’s Iliadic gift, and the sword thus links the tragic and Iliadic Ajax as it kills him. A recent book, *Staging Ajax’s Suicide* (Most, Glenn & Leyla Ozbek, eds., Pisa 2015), would have been another excellent resource, both here and for Chapter 5 on Ajax’s shield. Chapters by Patrick Finglass (“Second Thoughts on the Sword”) and Maria Chiara Martinelli (“Aiace e la spada”) nicely complement Mueller’s astute analysis. Further discussion of Philoctetes’ bow and Heracles’ weapons would also have been helpful alongside Mueller’s detailed thoughts on Ajax’s sword.

Chapter 2 delves into the complicated semiotics of the textiles of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, especially those in *Agamemnon*. Mueller not only explores the significance of the tapestry upon which Agamemnon marches to his death, but also suggests an olfactory component—an especially keen-scented audience may have smelled the prop’s *porphyra*-dye. So too, perhaps, could the character of Cassandra smell latent danger mingled with the dye and Agamemnon’s putrefaction. Mueller also

emphasizes the “intertheatricality” of props, since props were often reused between productions. Mueller tracks the bloodstained textile from *Agamemnon* through *Choephoroi*, from slain father to avenging son.

Mueller turns in Chapter 3 to recognition tokens (in Euripides’ *Ion*; Orestes’ scar in Euripides’ *Electra*). Athenians recognize themselves, Mueller asserts, as Ion’s authentication becomes a public and civic spectacle. Orestes, in Euripides’ *Electra*, is recognized instead by a distinctive scar, a nod to the pervasive focus on rationalism in the fifth century. Mueller also connects Orestes’ recognition in the *Electra* with the Athenian institution of *dokimasia*, as if Orestes were becoming a man and a full citizen.

In Chapter 4, Mueller explores the significance of Electra’s urn in Sophocles’ *Electra*, among other tragic receptacles. The story of the fourth-century BCE actor Polus, who reportedly portrayed Electra with an urn containing his own son’s ashes, powerfully begins this chapter. Props can thus help actors to embody their roles. Mueller’s views on the urn, which appeared previously in Aeschylus’ *Choephoroi*, are both refreshing and innovative. She reads the urn’s Sophoclean *Nachleben* as a more developed “material actor” merely waiting for its time to shine. It is attractive to see an unbroken line between each production’s urns in such similar tragedies. Mueller thus envisions a “genealogy” created between tragedies by reusing props.

In Chapter 5, Mueller analyzes the role of Ajax’s shield in Sophocles’ *Ajax*. Mueller questions the emphasis on battlefield weapons, rather than on the warriors themselves, and argues that epic warriors are one with their weapons. Mueller reads Ajax’s shield as a blend of the Bronze Age and contemporary Athens, just like the play itself. Unlike the sword, mired in Ajax’s bloody epic past, the shield heralds a brighter Athenian future for Ajax and his descendants. Mueller focuses chiefly on Ajax’s gift of the shield to his son Eurysakes, an act which, considering the Homeric precedent of Hector and Astyanax, connects epic/tragic father and fully tragic son.

In her final chapter, Mueller examines tragic “letters,” including *deltoi* (“writing-tablets”) in Euripides’ *Iphigenia* plays, *Hippolytus*, and Deianeira’s *deltos* in Sophocles’ *Trachiniae*. Mueller notes that these tragic *deltoi* metapoetically emphasize the written text enabling the performance. She compares Phaedra’s *deltos* in *Hippolytus* to a *defixio* (curse-tablet), like a judicial curse, a preemptive quasi-*apologia*. Mueller then considers Iphigenia’s “letter” in *Iphigenia in Tauris*, which describes her post-Aulis life, as a microcosm of the play itself. Later, the

interception and unsealing of Agamemnon's *deltos* in *Iphigenia at Aulis* by Menelaus can be read, as Mueller notes, as an act of "rape." The tablet, she argues, symbolizes Iphigenia's virginity. Mueller sees further metapoetics employed in the brothers' struggle over the tablet: the two brothers are struggling to control the plot.

Overall, this short, tightly-argued read is brimming with innovative ideas. Mueller engages with a wide array of props and tragedies, exploring props' semiotic and dramaturgical possibilities. As for the volume itself, it is handsomely printed, with relatively few errors. Mueller's book will greatly aid anyone working on Greek tragedy and performance theory, yet will also delight and challenge a more general audience.

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