

BOOK REVIEW

The Materialities of Greek Tragedy. Edited by MARIO TELÒ and MELISSA MUELLER. London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2018. Pp.ix + 302. Hardback, \$115.00. ISBN: 978-13-50-02879-1.

Twelve essays in Telò and Mueller's collection explore how recent materialist theoretical approaches offer new ways of thinking about Greek tragedy. Each chapter treats non-living things—what we often call “objects”—as vital subjects; humans, on the other hand, are reduced to material bodies stimulated by other material. The volume points to several materialist inspirations, among which are Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (Durham, NC 2010), as well as various scholars engaged in Affect Theory. By orienting our attention to things as things, the contributing scholars reveal a self-conscious materiality pervasive in the genre, one that has lost out, perhaps, in competition with other lenses: for instance, with emphasis on form over matter, a long-standing predominance of text, and with various anthropocentric theoretical approaches.

Chapters 1 through 7 focus on the agency of different categories of objects and productively draw upon comparative examples outside the theater to explain how the Greeks thought about human-thing interaction. Karen Bassi (Chapter 2) sees the tragic corpse as an object that bridges the divide between human and non-human and marks death's place on the horizon of our knowledge. Erika Weiberg (Chapter 4) uses trauma to explain the interaction between the warriors Ajax (in *Ajax*) and Heracles (in *Heracles*) and their weapons; sword and bow, respectively, initiate a process of acting-out and working-through trauma that opens a holistic and socially engaged view of the loss of *philoï*. Ava Shirazi (Chapter 6) draws attention to the verbally instantiated mirror in *Hecuba* that occupies the viewpoint of its holder within a process of beautification and sense of repose. The mirror's perspective, Shirazi shows, is deceptive, however, as with a shift of face it reflects brutal violence. Seth Estrin (Chapter 7) explores the process by which objects effect tragic recognition scenes; since things endure outside the human life-cycle, their materiality initiates comparison with the deceased person. To explicate the feelings in *Ion*'s recognition scene, Estrin brings to bear the *comparandum*

of grave *stelai*, in whose encounter Greeks frequently recognized their own lost loved ones and, significantly, particular loss experienced by others.

Chapters 8 through 11 focus more heavily on affect, pre-conscious feelings communicated to the body through vehicles such as images, touch, smell. Mario Telò (Chapter 8) presents a frequently psychoanalytic exposition of the dynamics of shared affect in friendship in *Philoctetes*. Telò demonstrates that in Philoctetes' attempts to build relationship through shared emotions he makes (potential) *philoï* into objects. The cannibalizing possibility of shared emotion, Telò suggests, may extend to the audience's experience; they must work consciously to resist reforming tragedy to fit their own identity. Anna Uhlig (Chapter 9) uses satyr-bodies in Sophocles' fragmentary *Ichneutae* to illustrate how the body in tragedy is continually acted upon and transformed by affects. Nancy Worman (Chapter 11) focuses on how hand-to-hand interactions in tragedy are sites laden with affect, where both parties touch and are touched, and where the audience senses subtexts of incest and violence layering in complex and energetic ways.

While the contributors purposefully exclude human manipulation of matter, words are important in their relation to matter and several authors invest words with agency, even materiality. Victory Wohl (Chapter 1) uses Euripides' *Troades* to illustrate and problematize the imbrication of human and non-human matter; while the poetry materializes humans and vitalizes matter, Wohl locates passages in which things prove recalcitrant to human language. She finds a shared vitality for matter and language in their breakdown. Joshua Billings (Chapter 3) explores the intersection of Orestes' words and the material urn in Sophocles' *Electra*: *logoi* render the urn deceptive in its apparent "solidity" and "trustworthiness" to be the object it seems to be; but Billings describes words' "quasi-mystical power" to go astray from their human speaker's intent and argues that they create their own destructive reality. Naomi Weiss (Chapter 10) shows how words and sound take on the materiality of things not present in the theater and, in reverse, how sight translates into sound; Weiss argues that Aeschylus' rich materialism extends to his poetry.

The volume's critical stance is far from credal and rather seeks to open up new material-sensitive approaches. Several contributors advocate for re-incorporating human subjectivity into materialist reading of tragedy. Bassi proposes "morbid materialism" to overcome matter's recalcitrance to human understanding; the corpse's thing-ness relates human and material; tragedy implicates the audience in the act of discerning between death and life, and the conundra bound up in death and replacing a life with life. Edith Hall (Chapter 12) closes the volume by invoking Old Materialism of Marxism

with its emphasis on human labor, and asking that human agency be added to attention to things.

For scholars of Greek tragedy, Telò and Mueller demonstrate that attention to the vital feeling coursing between things and humans has broad application to tragedy. While some Classicists may be deterred, at times, by assumed knowledge of theory and, at times, dramatic plots, complementing all the essays are well-chosen examples that lend tangibility to the arguments. It is certain that this volume will provoke rich new readings highlighting tragedy's material actors.

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