

M. Telò and M. Mueller. *The Materialities of Greek Tragedy: Objects and Affect in Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides*. London: Bloomsbury, 2018. Pp. 320 + 9 bw illus. HB \$115 USD. ISBN: 9781350028791

In reviewing Melissa Mueller's *Objects as Actors*,¹ I voiced some dissatisfaction with that monograph's refusal to directly name new materialism as its theoretical framework for thinking about objects in Greek tragedy. This volume, from Mueller and co-editor Mario Telò, more than ably makes up for that theoretical gap, with twelve very strong chapters explicitly engaging with new materialisms and affect theory in their various explorations of Greek tragedies.

Mueller's and Telò's introduction is a wonderfully wide-ranging consideration of theoretical applications to Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, starting from Bennett's "vibrant materialism,"² through Harman's and Morton's "Object-Oriented Ontology"³ and finally following the affective turn, with nods to not only Deleuze and Guattari⁴ but also Sedgwick⁵ and Ahmed.⁶ Telò and Mueller then roughly divide the volume along these lines, with the first four essays addressing more traditional understanding of prop and scene in their materialities; then three chapters on understanding how interactions between stage materialities and audience members' lived realities create affect; finally, four chapters more strictly on affect through a variety of lenses, with a final chapter pushing back against "new" materialism altogether. All of these chapters are strong, and create a volume that truly explores with breadth and depth the possibilities of understanding materialism in tragedy.

Victoria Wohl's chapter is particularly brilliant, considering Euripides' *Troades* through Bennett's "vibrant matter" and thinking about humans as materials, surrounded by materials, such as in the confusion between the child Astyanax and his father's shield. From here, Wohl also examines the interplay of permanence and object-ness in the stone structures of the city, both Euripides' imagined Troy and the idealized Athens in Thucydides' presentation of Pericles' Funeral Oration, asking what role language has in

¹ Mueller, M. (2016) *Objects as Actors: Props and the Poetics of Performance in Greek Tragedy*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press; Kozak, L. (2016) *Review, Objects as Actors*. *Phoenix* 70.3-4: 403–405.

² Bennett, J. (2010) *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

³ See especially Harman, G. (2011) "Autonomous Objects," *New Formations* 71: 125-30 and (2012) "The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object-Oriented Literary Criticism," *NLH* 43: 183–203, and Morton, T. (2012) "An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry," *NLH* 43: 205–24.

⁴ Deleuze, G. and F. Guattari (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

⁵ Sedgwick, E.K. (1985) *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia University Press.

⁶ Ahmed, S. (2004) *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, and (2006) *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

assessing what things last, and what we make of monumental materialities that are built primarily through metaphor.

Karen Bassi's chapter on *Alcestis* also starts with Bennett, turning again towards human "thing-ness," specifically our reification when we die. Considering the problem of the staged corpse, Bassi points out its "limits of mimetic enactment," with the essential paradox between the corpse's known assertion of death and the unknowable state of being dead. Bassi's most interesting point revolves around the connection between "debt" and "death," pointing not only to the exchange of bodies throughout Greek epic and tragedy, but also understanding death itself as a debt we all owe.

Joshua Billings' chapter, much like Wohl's, looks at how language creates material meaning. Billings explores Orestes' urn as material metaphor, a sign for Orestes' corpse that is only given that signifying power through language, and whose materiality necessarily changes as what we are told about its contents changes.

Erika Weiberg's work on weapons as friends and enemies expands on scholarship that understands tragedies in the context of citizen-soldiers' post-traumatic stress disorder, seeing weapons (as the characters themselves do) then invested with distributive agency that, as Freud would have it, allow the heroes either to "act out" (in Ajax's case) or "work through" (in Herakles' case) their wartime trauma.

A.C. Duncan's work on "The Familiar Mask" also thinks about stage objects in their historical contexts, in its inspired consideration of masks as *non*-theatrical objects. The question of how audience members might relate to the staged mask through the negotiation of their experience with masks outside the theatrical context adds a necessary contribution to recent work on theatrical, practical, and cognitive aspects of the mask by Wiles,⁷ Vervain,⁸ and Meineck⁹ respectively.

This consideration of how objects within the playing space reflect audience understanding of those outside the playing space continues with Ava Shirazi's work on mirrors. In examining *Hecuba* and *Medea*, Shirazi sees women's mirror scenes, ensconced in cultural contexts of bronze and light, as heightening the moment of reversal. I only wished there might be a bit more here on horror and the uncanny in the consideration of the "lifeless" (ἄψυχον) double.

Seth Estrin's work on *Ion* and grave *stēlai* makes an even greater leap between the stage and lived experience, seeing Creusa's associative memory-response to the temple as analogous to a passer-by's provoked memories at the sight of a grave stele: in both, the material acts as an Aristotelian "this" that stand in and reminds the viewer of "that."

⁷ Wiles, D. (2007) *Mask and Performance in Greek Tragedy: From Ancient Festival to Modern Experimentation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁸ Vervain, C. (2012) "Performing Ancient Drama in Mask: The Case of Greek Tragedy," *New Theatre Quarterly* 28.2: 163-81.

⁹ Meineck, P. (2011) "The neuroscience of the tragic mask," *Arion* 19.1: 113-58.

Telò's chapter on *Philoktetes* takes on affect from another angle, looking at both the dangers of *philia* and of the collapsing of subject-object lines, and suggests instead a Levinas-style alterity for compassion that allows us to relate to tragic figures without cannibalising (or being cannibalised) by them.¹⁰ I hope that Telò has seen NBC's *Hannibal*: there might be no more perfect exploration of the dynamics proposed here.

Anna Uhlig's chapter on the *Ichneutae* perhaps most directly engages with stage business, drawing on Latour's work on how we construct bodies,¹¹ as a collection of organic and inorganic tools, to consider not only the costumes but also the possible choreography and gesturing of the play's satyrs.

Naomi Weiss's work on Aeschylus also addresses stage possibilities, with a focus on the beacon light at the top of *Agamemnon*, and constant confusion and interplay between sight and sound in the language or both the *Oresteia* as well as *Seven Against Thebes*.¹² Weiss explores the tension between Aeschylus's penchant for surprising moments of *opsis*, from the appearance of Darius's ghost in the *Persians* to the Furies in the *Erinyes*, with the sound-based *ekphrases* of the *Seven's* shields, as his work collapses the border between stages physicalities and theatrical "dark matter."

Nancy Worman moves to another sense, that of touch, in exploring the haptic implications of how tragic characters, especially family members, handle one another. With an introduction that focuses on the erotic perversion of familial touch in the Oedipus plays, Worman then looks at Aeschylus's violence between Orestes and Clytemnestra before moving on to how Electra fits into their relations of touch in increasingly violent ways in Sophocles and Euripides. Worman asks us to reach beyond the binary implications of reconciliation or aggression in the hand's touch, to consider the broad intersections of sex and violence that might lurk beneath the tragic familial grasp.

Finally, Edith Hall's chapter asks of all that has come before whether we are really ready for a "new" (post-human) materialism, insisting with verve that we still have a long way to go in Marxist approaches to Classical literature that truly take into account the labour of human hands manifest in the productions and props of tragedy.

On the whole, this volume uses new materialism as a helpful focusing framework for thinking about Greek tragedy, but, with Hall's punchy "old" materialism and my own experience more firmly rooted in practical performance, I wonder where these theories bring us beyond the already-often observed poetic dynamics of deixis, metonymy and ekphrasis in considerations of performance practice. Still, it is exciting to see new(er)

¹⁰ Levinas, E. (1998) *Entre nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*. Trans. M. B. Smith and B. Harshav. New York: Columbia University Press.

¹¹ Latour, B. (2004) "How to Talk About the Body? the Normative Dimension of Science Studies," *Body & Society* 10.2-3: 205-29.

theoretical modes being very capably brought to bear on familiar texts—this is a volume that handily brings Greek tragic scholarship “in touch” with the new materialisms that have recently dominated other critical fields.

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