

## Minor characters in Attic tragedy: a central-marginality

This presentation aims at investigating the key role of minor characters in Attic tragedy and argues that they represent a privileged instrument of innovation in the tragedians' hands.

The fifth-century Attic theatre was a mass phenomenon and the audience was the focal point of this collective experience (Ieranò 2010). The tragic subject was based on the epic tradition, which was part of the spectators' cultural heritage. Consequently, the tragedian could not overlook the public's expectations. This raises a question. Was the tragedian free to compose according to his artistic taste? Or, was he inhibited by the reception and taste of the audience? As is widely celebrated, however, 'it is not possible to dismiss the traditional myth' (τοὺς [...] παρειλημμένους μύθους λύειν οὐκ ἔστιν (Ar.Po. 1453b).

The reconfiguration of minor characters, even drastic at times, did not necessarily imply a disruption of the epic core, and especially for this reason the marginal position of servants, pedagogues, nurses, messengers was crucial (Capomacchia 1999; De Martino–Morenilla 2011). Secondary character has a major or minor appearance in nearly every play and consistently in Euripides' work. One of his biggest innovations consists in the way he brings them on stage, and in how he discusses their condition as servants: their speech discloses a certain intellectual complexity and they are also entrusted with actions that determine the course of events. They become, in an way, 'modern characters' that constitute a link between myth and contemporary reality.

They acquire dramatic importance thanks to the bond of *φιλία* that ties them to their masters, acting as an anti-heroic pendant, and influencing the development of events by the power of speech. The *λόγος* is the only mean at their disposal, that's the reason why they so

frequently pronounce warnings and training (Susanetti 2007; Castrucci 2013). But are these humble characters capable of being righteous advisors, for a good παιδεία?

The fundamental contribution of secondary characters consists in their constant closedness and never-ending support toward the protagonists, while from a pedagogic perspective they resort to mere old-school teachings in order to offset the indecipherability of the tragic. With naive ‘didactic buoyancy,’ they usually try to take on their educational responsibilities and ‘give lessons’ by imposing their various γνώμαι, moved by a sense of affection. The case of Phaedra’s nurse, in Euripides’ *Hippolytus Στεφανηφόρος*, is a case in point (Blitgen 1969; Grillone 1972; Roisman 1999), especially if we consider that this tragedy is a recantation, a second version of a previous work. The nurse interferes with the normal course of events and it can be affirmed that she is responsible for starting the tragic mechanism. Prompted by her loyalty towards her master, she confesses Phaedra’s love towards Hippolytus: until that moment, the young man had conducted an esoteric and pure existence, purportedly detached from the political and social setting of everyday life, whereas Phaedra has kept the secret of her love, deciding to abandon herself to sorrow. These two protagonists could have proceeded in different directions through their tragic paths, with distant schemes. It is only thanks to a third element, that functions as a joint link, that the dramatic action meets a turning point in the story. The nurse is a marginal character but, paradoxically, she can be considered to have a central role in the story. It is with her that the tragedy is fueled inexorably through the common tragic outcome of the two protagonists.

This paper shows that the minor characters constitute an important element of innovation, as they give the tragedian the chance to manipulate and redeploy the scene, from technical necessities on the stage to the very keystones of the myths. Minor characters could easily be the

element of modification to the traditional version, without undermining the mythical core of the story. Their marginality becomes a central factor in the play, bridging cultural tradition and contemporary reality.

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