

SPEAKERS, SILENCE AND THE THREE-ACTOR RULE IN GREEK DRAMA

ἔστι δ' οὐ σιγή λόγου
κρίσσειν γένοιτ' ἄν. ἔστι δ' οὐ σιγῆς λόγος.
Euripides' *Orestes* 638-639

In the study of Greek drama the shift of attention from speech to silence seems to follow a theoretical approach borrowed from the semiotics of modern theatre.¹ It is challenging to treat silence as a distinct subject particularly because ancient Greek drama has been associated with the dominance of speech and word in the plays. To quite a large extent, silence in ancient drama is interwoven in the alternations of speakers and the shifts of dialogue. The very close contact and relationship between speech and silence makes it more difficult to explore the meaning of silence in the network where speakers and silent persons are in constant interaction.² While speaking actors are interacting with silent persons, both parties seem to contribute to the texture of the dialogue with their verbal and non-verbal conduct. Non-verbal behavior and any action which aligns with a visual rather than an aural context should be considered in relation to silence. Moreover, silent action refers to a number of typical activities in the plays such as the movement of a non-speaking person, the silent entrances and exits of the characters, the composition of a silent tableau, the marching of a silent procession, a silent prayer or a silent supplication, silent gestures, the silent presence of an actor.

1. E. W. B. Hess-Lüttich, «Dramaturgie des Schweigens. Zur Semiologie des Sprachversagnes im Drama», *Folia Linguistica* 12,1-2 (1978) 31-64, esp. p. 32, notes that «Hatte [das Schweigen] im klassischen Drama vor allem die rhetorische Funktion eines *bereden* Schweigens mit dem Ziel der Emphase, der Retardation, der Erzeugung von Spannung oder Provokation von Rezipientenreaktionen, so wird es im modernen Drama zum bewussten Manifest expressiver Funktionen, die metakommunikativ auf das Problematischerwerden von Kommunikation verweisen».

2. Cf. also Saville Troike, «The Place of Silence in an Integrated Theory of Communication», in D. Tannen – M. Saville-Troike (eds), *Perspectives on Silence*, Ablex Publishing Corporation 1985, pp. 3-18, esp. p. 10, who points out that «while [the] meaning [of silence] ... can usually be achieved only in contrast with the meaning of sound, the time-spaces occupied by silence constitute an active presence (not absence) in communication».

Dealing with the question who is involved in the speeches of drama and who remains silent, we cannot avoid associating this matter with the arrangement of dialogue between the three actors. Not only speeches but also silences are greatly affected by the convention of the three-actor rule in Greek drama. The limitations of this convention seem to allow the dramatists develop a variety of non-speaking parts and, by consequence, elaborate effective dramatic silences in their plays.

1. *The three actor rule*

According to some ancient testimonies Sophocles introduced the third actor in tragedy.³ This innovation enlarged the possibilities of drama and produced a new dramatic effect: three speaking actors were brought on stage and more complicated dialogues could be elaborated between them.⁴ The triangular effect in the dialogue brought about scenes balanced between three speakers with richly varied dramatic impact,⁵ while (so far as we know) there was no restriction in the number of the mute performers. To some extent, the so-called three-actor rule might have been an aesthetic principle, which was based on artistic and practical considerations in the shaping of speeches in drama.⁶ This principle, however, must have been somehow related to the allotment of equal number of actors by the city to each production, which ensured that the competition, both for plays and for actors, would be on

3. For the attribution of the third actor to Sophocles see Aristot. *Poet.* 1449a15ff., *Vita Soph.* 4, Diog. Laert. 3.56, the *Suda* (T TrGrFr IV), or according to *Vita Aesch.* 15 and Themistius *Orat.* 26.316d to Aeschylus. Discussions on this point can be found in G. F. Else, «The Case of the Third Actor», *TAPhA* 76 (1945) 1-10 and «ΥΠΟΚΡΙΤΗΣ», *WS* 77 (1959) 75-107 and A. W. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*, 2nd ed. revised with supplement and corrections by J. Gould – D. M. Lewis, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988. Cf. also J. B. O'Connor, *Chapters in the History of Actors and Acting in Ancient Greece together with a Prosopographia Histrionum Graecorum*, (diss. 1908) Princeton, Chicago and P. Ghiron-Bistagne, *Recherches sur les Acteurs dans la Grèce Antique*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1976, for a terminology on actors in antiquity.

4. Cf. B. M. W. Knox, «Aeschylus and the Third Actor», *AJPh* 93 (1972) 104-124, esp. pp. 106-107 repr. in *Word and Action. Essays on the Ancient Theater*, The John Hopkins University Press 1979, pp. 39-55.

5. Walton argues that when three speaking actors are seen together at a distance of a hundred yards, «the speaker becomes less clear». And he goes on to suggest that «playwrights tend to meet this difficulty by balancing speeches in stichomythia, [...] or long rhetorical speeches». (J. M. Walton, *Greek Theatre Practice*, London, Greenwood Press, 1980, p. 143).

6. For a discussion of «the possible aesthetic basis of the three-actor rule» see G. M. Sifakis, «The One-actor Rule in Greek Tragedy», in A. Griffiths (ed), *Stage Directions, Essays in Ancient Drama in Honour of E. W. Handley*, BICS, 1995, pp. 13-24.

equal terms.⁷ Artistic requirements and official practice might thus have combined to stabilize the use of three speaking actors.

The plays themselves are the best source to prove that they were composed for three speaking actors. It is not always clear, however, exactly how parts were distributed in the first productions. Pickard-Cambridge presents a comprehensive survey of possible distributions of parts in drama. At the same time, he takes into account the difficulties presented by the three-actor rule, namely the limitation of the number of actors, the sharing of roles in succession to the same actor, and the «lightning changes» of costume in a few plays after a very brief interval, which enabled an actor to return with a different role, and he proposes possible solutions to tackle these problems.⁸

It has also been suggested that the division of roles between three actors might have exploited the dramatic implications of this restriction, namely the vocal capacities of the actors and the contrasts or the similarities between characters. At this point, Pavlovskis attempts a distribution of parts on the basis of overlapping roles played by one and the same actor. She argues that the audience could not necessarily tell the actor in the disguise of mask and costume but they could recognize the individual voice behind the mask. The use of the same voice for two or more different characters could contribute to the highlighting of the ironic dimension of the plays.⁹

Following another approach, Damen proposes a reconstruction of role divisions by grouping the roles in three categories: parallel roles, contrasting roles, and less clear-cut divisions of roles, which might suggest subtle tones of irony to the ancient spectator.¹⁰ Furthermore, Kaimio surmises that the public might have expected that the assignment of roles followed some

7. Pickard-Cambridge, op.cit. (n. 3), p. 136, argues that the city would have not provided three actors for one competitor and four for another in a contest to which great importance was attached by the city itself. For the allotment of actors by the State see F. Jouan, «Réflexions sur le Rôle du Protagoniste Tragique», *Théâtres et Spectacles dans l'Antiquité*, Actes du Colloque de Strasbourg, 5-7 Novembre 1981, Leiden 1983, pp. 63-80; N. W. Slater, «The Idea of the Actor», in *Nothing to Do with Dionysos?*, Princeton 1989, pp. 385-395; M. Kaimio, «The Protagonist in Greek Tragedy», *Arctos* 27 (1993) 19-33.

8. Pickard-Cambridge, op.cit. (n. 3), pp. 136-156. Cf. K. Rees, *The So-called Rule of Three-Actors in the Classical Greek Drama*, Chicago 1908, pp. 16-17, 23, who argues that the rule must refer to the aesthetic principle that not more than three speaking characters shall be present on the scene, but a «manager» could use an unlimited number of actors.

9. Z. Pavlovskis, «The Voice of the Actor in Greek tragedy», *CW* 71 (1977) 113-123. Contra Sifakis, op.cit. (n. 6), pp. 13-24, esp. 21 who argues that «the personal timbre of voice would be veiled to a large extent [...] by prolonged training and deliberate voice management».

10. M. Damen, «Actor and Character in Greek Tragedy», *Theatre Journal* 41 (1989) 316-340 n. 2.

conventions in the ancient theatrical experience, i.e. servants were played by other actors rather than the protagonist and, according to Demosthenes, tyrants were played by the tritagonist.¹¹ She also stresses the fact that there must be a connection between the establishment of contests in the 450s and the allotment of protagonists to the poets. She thinks that before the contests it was not important by whom the roles were acted. And she continues that double roles or impressive roles in which the protagonist dominates the stage reflect the influence of the contest.¹²

The exploitation of the actors' voice and the grouping of characters according to their function in the plot can provide some very interesting suggestions, which in some cases may lead to different views as to the possible distribution of parts in tragedy. These suggestions are based on the assumption that the audience were in a position to recognize the ironic undertones which could be conveyed by different characters speaking with the same voice. Also, they could, presumably, follow the purpose of the dramatist to highlight the possible connections and disconnections between two roles. However, these solutions are highly speculative and do not allow us to speak with certainty of how the roles of the actors were distributed in the ancient Greek theatre or how the audience perceived the distribution.

2. *Speakers, mutes and silence*

Especially in Sophocles' plays it seems to be important to see how the dynamic of dialogue is established between the three speakers and what is the involvement of silence in the distribution of the speaking parts, because the dialogues in tragedy are mostly confined to pairs from among the three actors, while the third one follows silently.¹³ When there are more than three actors,

11. Demosthenes, *De Falsa Legatione*, xix, 246f. quoted by O. J. Todd, «Τριταγωνιστής: A Reconsideration», *CQ* 32 (1938) 30-38, esp. p. 34, n. 10. Cf. Sifakis, op.cit. (n. 6), pp. 19-20, and n. 32.

12. Kaimio, op.cit. (n. 7) 19-33, esp. pp. 27-33.

13. The restriction in the number of actors who are engaged in dialogue does not seem to be so strict in comedy as in tragedy. Pickard-Cambridge, op.cit. (n. 3), p. 149, points out that comedy had the freedom «to introduce additional performers for small parts» because it «originated in a more or less disorderly level». Menander's plays could largely be played by three actors, but some parts should be split between two or three actors in order to preserve the three-actor rule. See F. H. Sandbach, «Menander and the Three-Actor Rule», in *Le Monde Grec: Hommage à Claire Préaux*, Brussels 1975, pp. 197-204 and N. C. Hourmouziades, «Menander's Actors», *GRBS* 14 (1973) 179-188. In the comedies of Plautus and Terence the doubling of roles seems to reduce the big number of characters to a maximum of five or six actors. While Roman comedy presents a great number of characters, there is the tendency to restrict the dialogues in no more than between three speakers. See G. E. Duckworth, *The Nature of Roman Comedy. A Study in Popular Entertainment*, London, Bristol Classical Press, 1994, pp. 94-98.

the additional roles are played by mute performers. The definition of «mute performers» is used to indicate the persons who are not given speaking parts, by contrast with the actors who are assigned a speaking activity. This distinction is primarily technical and draws attention to the availability of people who constitute the human resources of an ancient stage production. The absence of speech in these performers must be considered as another aspect of the communication of dramatic meanings in the conversational environment of the plays. Mute performers can assume a wide range of silent activities, which distinguish mute characters with dramatic importance from mute attendants with an ostensibly auxiliary role in the dramatic action. Taplin speaks about two principal classes of mutes, the named independent characters and the mute attendants.¹⁴ He prefers to reserve the Greek terms *χωφὸν πρόσωπον* for the first group, and *παρεισαγόμενα πρόσωπα* for the second group.

According to the dramatic importance of the mutes, there are mute characters with dramatic importance (i.e. Taplin's *χωφὰ πρόσωπα*), «extras» in group scenes in which the entrance of mute performers implies their participation in an assembly¹⁵ and mute attendants (i.e. Taplin's *παρεισαγόμενα πρόσωπα*), who have the least interaction with the characters. Mutes who are used in crowd scenes probably constitute a representative small number of extras rather than a realistically large one, because the congregation of a great crowd of non-speakers on stage risks distracting attention from the main action and might bring confusion as to who speaks and who attends in silence.

Sometimes it is hard to define at first appearance that a new person on stage is played by a mute. His silence may attract the speakers' attention, and references or addresses to the mutes often raise questions about their importance in the play.¹⁶ The use of mutes is so diversified that we see them combining with the speakers in many possibilities of performance. Speakers and mutes are frequently interacting in a close way, particularly when a mute becomes prominent in the dramatic action.¹⁷ We should not imagine them

14. O. Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus. The Dramatic Use of Exits and Entrances in Greek Tragedy*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977, p. 80.

15. The term «supernumeraries» is used as a variant for performers who exceed the number of the three speaking actors.

16. Walton, op.cit. (n. 5), p. 144, argues that «non-speaking actors did not exist until they were addressed».

17. Cf. G. Chancellor, «Implicit Stage Directions in Ancient Greek Drama. Critical Assumptions and the Reading Public», *Arethusa* 12 (1979) 133-152, esp. p. 147: «It is [...] possible, by following the direction of address within the discourse, to reconstruct the intended spatial interrelations of the characters on stage. This technique could provide only limited

having an extended stage-action that would confuse the spectacle of the speaking actors but neither can they be supposed to stay inactive. To some extent, it is necessary to rely on the words of the speakers in order to track down entrances and exits, gestures and attitudes of non-speakers.

Dramatic dialogue is therefore potentially affected by the presence of the mutes and the impact they exert on the speaking actors. Thus, in *Trachiniae*, the mute Iole seems to regulate the dialogue between Deianeira and Lichas with her enigmatic silence. In *Ajax*, the mute child Eurysaces becomes the centre of attention in the encounter of Ajax and Tecmessa. Besides, it seems possible that a mute character can utter a few words in tragedy, like Pylades in Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* 900-2 (unless there is a «lightning change» of the actor who plays the role of the Servant between lines 887-899). Or a mute can be assigned singing parts like Ismene in *Oedipus at Colonus* 1670ff., who sings alongside Antigone the final lament. Ismene might not be the third actor, but a mute who sings a few lines, while the third actor plays the role of Theseus. On this reading, the first actor plays the role of the Messenger, who does not leave the stage after he finishes his report.¹⁸ This practice is exceptional in the existing evidence: it does not necessarily imply that the playwright uses a fourth actor, but it might suggest that he may took advantage of mutes who were being trained as actors and may have been allowed to speak a few words.¹⁹

In a number of plays, roles need to be split between an actor and a mute if the three-actor rule is to be preserved. Therefore, a character who appears as a speaker in a part of a play, may keep a long silence in another part. This change of attitude suggests that the speaking actor has been substituted by a mute. But it does not follow that these silences are without dramatic

information on the relation of the characters to the setting or to non-speaking figures».

18. Kaimio, op.cit. (n. 7), 29, seems to share the same solution for Oedipus and the Messenger's role but she also argues that Oedipus and the Messenger were acted by the protagonist because the other two actors entered immediately after his report as Antigone and Ismene.

19. Kaimio, op.cit. (n. 7), 25, suggests that the assignment of the roles followed the acting experience of the performers, who might have started to play third roles as novice actors and «perhaps after having assisted first as mute performers». Cf. also B. Gredley, «Greek Tragedy and the "Discovery" of the Actor», in J. Redmond (ed), *Drama and the Actor, Themes in Drama*, Cambridge (1984) 6, pp. 1-14, esp. p. 9, who suggests that mute performers might have been used in a transitional period between one actor and two. Gredley argues that «mutes in Greek tragedy are not as is often assumed, the flotsam of occasional technical difficulties but an integral part of the gradual development of the self-contained scene, independent of the Chorus». See also E. W. Handley, *The Dyskolos of Menander*, London & Cambridge, Mass., 1965, p. 26: «small parts in Comedy might be spoken by extras». For apprenticeship in acting see G. M. Sifakis, «Boy Actors in New Comedy», *Arktouros* (1979) 199-208 and Slater, op.cit. (n. 7), pp. 391-392.

meaning. Thus, Schlesinger believes that the silence of Tecmessa in the second part of *Ajax* is to be explained by the fact that it is Teucer who defends Ajax's body, while Tecmessa becomes part of the visual effect. Likewise, Ismene in *Oedipus Coloneus* 1096-1555 does not remain silent because there was no fourth actor, but because Antigone has the leading role in the action.²⁰ Evidently, Tecmessa's role is matched with that of Ajax, while her mute attendance is needed to intensify the image of her mourning in the second half of the play. Similarly, Ismene in *Oedipus Coloneus* 1096-1555 is played by a mute when the three actors are on stage, but she is also a mute in lines 1500-1555 where there are only two actors. At this point, it seems that Sophocles was concerned to bring together on stage the silence of Antigone, which is the silence of a speaking actor, with the silence of Ismene, which is the silence of a mute, in a number of scenes with three actors. At the same time, he did not feel constrained to keep a mute on stage when the scene is occupied with two actors.

What is important here is to draw attention to the dynamic of the dialogue which is shaped between three speakers in the presence of a mute, as well as between two speakers and a silent witness. The common pattern in the dialogues of tragedy is that two speakers converse between themselves, while another actor remains silent. The pattern of *duologue* and a silent witness does not however stay invariable, because speakers often alternate in the position of silent bystanders. The technique of dialogue that turns the speaker into a silent person and defines his silence in the conversation is a pointer to the extent of communication between speakers and silent persons. A silent person can keep a closer or a more distant contact with the dialogue. He can be an interested listener to the speeches or a more passive bystander in the exchanges of two interlocutors.²¹ In scenes where two speakers are on stage and converse, silence can be defined by the attentive listening to each other's speeches. When two speakers address and respond to each other they are engaged in close dialogue-contact. The dialogue-contact becomes uneven when a speaker excludes another speaker from the speeches by prohibiting an utterance from him.

For example, in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, the Merchant does not enter into dialogue-contact with Philoctetes, and in *Electra*, Clytaemnestra excludes

20. Also Iole's silence in *Trachiniae* «is due to the effect she produces on Deianeira». A. C. Schlesinger, «Silence in Tragedy and the Three-Actor Rule», *CPh* 25 (1930) 230-235, esp. p. 231.

21. H. W. Prescott, «Silent Rôles in Roman Comedy. II Silent Actors», *CPh* 32 (1937) 193-209, n. 3, esp. p. 196: «A character who is silent and aloof from the action is much more difficult to handle than a silent character who is an attentive listener».

Electra from the dialogue with the Paedagogus. The Messengers' narrative speeches and the actors' soliloquies are also uttered in the presence of silent witnesses. In Sophocles' *Trachiniae* Deianeira's long speech in lines 436-469 is delivered in the presence of the Old Messenger and Lichas. The long narrative speech of the Paedagogus in *Electra* 680-763 is witnessed by Clytaemnestra and Electra. Ajax's three monologues in *Ajax* 430-480, 545-582, 646-692 are delivered in front of various persons who follow them silently.

3. Conclusion

As far as the three-actor rule in tragedy is concerned, the performance of silence seems to be associated, to some extent, with the distribution of parts in the plays and the limitation in the number of the actors.²² At this point, I wish to draw a contrast between two possible assumptions in relation to the division of roles: on the one hand, it can be argued that the dramatist was obliged to confine the roles of his plays to the combination of the three available actors, with the result that he was sometimes forced to give characters unusually long silences. On the opposite view, the dramatist need not have been hampered by the restriction in the number of the actors, and silences should always be expected to carry dramatic meaning. In this respect, Sophocles' plays, who is also the inventor of the third actor in the antiquity, seems to offer the best examples of scenes balanced between three speakers with richly varied dramatic impact.

The definition of a «speaker» or a «speaking person» refers to any actor with a speaking part. Speakers can be silent for a longer or shorter period of time. «Silent persons» can be the performers of a play who remain silent all the time, i.e. mute performers. Yet a silent person can also be an actor with a speaking part who, however, ceases talking for some time. In this case, we are dealing with the silence for a while of an otherwise speaking actor. Therefore, speaking actors can become silent persons. However, the definition of a «silent person» when it refers to a speaker who remains silent for some time, has to be clearly distinguished from the silence of a non-speaker. This distinction can be maintained by means of defining the dramatic importance and the duration of a speaking actor's silence. Therefore, while we are

22. Cf. Prescott, op.cit. (n. 21), p. 209 n. 42: «Students of Greek tragedy are rightly interested in the relation of the silent actor to the distribution of roles and to the development of stage of theater...».

looking for silence in ancient drama we have to combine two modes of approach: attention both to the speeches of the actors and to the presence and significance of the silent persons.

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