MINOR CHARACTERS IN SOPHOCLES’

Bernhard Zimmermann

1. Introduction

The division of a play’s characters, that is, of the figures who partake in the dramatic action, into leading roles and minor roles, into tragic heroes (or heroines) and others, i.e. those who are less important for the development of the plot, is not such an easy task as one might first imagine. For example, the modern debate on the question of the principal character in Sophocles’ Antigone is immense. In those cases where a tragedy is named after one of the dramatis personae, the title can, although will not always, help us arrive at a decision. On the other hand, the poets often veil this by naming the play after its chorus, even when the chorus has no significant role to play, such as in Sophocles’ Trachiniae. Occasionally the title can even be consciously misleading and can set the audience on the wrong track with regard to the play’s contents or characters. One could cite Aristophanes’ Frogs or Euripides’ Phoenician Women as conspicuous examples of this.

Some general introductory, theoretical reflections on dramatis personae therefore seem unavoidable. To begin with, two approaches should be discarded: first, that which is predicated upon a purely quantitative analysis, creating a hierarchy of a play’s characters based upon the number of lines they speak, and second, that based on a simple differentiation between speaking and silent characters. The importance of a character for any given play can only, and wholly in accordance with Aristotle’s Poetics, be considered in terms of that character’s integration into his or her respective myth; in other words, in terms of the character’s participation and function within the dramatic plot. Most important is the character’s relationship to the tragic conflict that develops out of the plot as well as to the tragic theme of the play. When we conceive of the plot structure of a tragedy as being

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1 Translated from the German by Jasper Donelan.
3 The term ‘tragic theme’ refers to the underlying situation that provides the impetus for the tragedy’s plot and the development of that plot. Generally we can identify two tragic
made up of concentric rings encircling the tragic theme at the centre—what we might label the tragic constellation\(^3\)—then a type of hierarchy comes to light in which we can differentiate between leading and minor roles according to a character’s distance from the centre and thus from the tragic theme.

On the other hand, the tragic conflict which leads to catastrophe (or almost does so, in the case of plays ending with a *deus ex machina* scene) is the result of a collision between different ‘structures’ or ‘fields of authority’. Griffith (2005b) identifies four ‘fields of authority’ in the tragedies of the fifth century. These already contain innate tensions and can lead to further tensions when they collide. They are (1) the public, sociopolitical field, (2) the domestic field, (3) the religious field, and (4) the cultural field, by which last we should understand the authority of tradition, as well as of various forms of knowledge. It should be emphasized that these groups are not rigid entities, but rather that some characters belong to more than one grouping and thereby move between the fields, creating points of contact between them. This is true above all for the chorus (and chorus leader), who, depending on their characterization in the play, can belong to any of the fields of authority.

When we adopt this, in the best sense of the word, Aristotelian approach, i.e. one that considers myth in terms of plot, then characters that have a mythological/literary ‘biography’ such as Polyneices or Creon in *Oedipus at Colonus* can still have the status of minor characters, given that they do not have any proximity to the play’s tragic theme. Indeed, looked at from this point of view, even Athena in the prologue of *Ajax* can be considered a minor character.

### 2. Minor Characters

The preceding considerations make clear that an attempt at such a general classification would require a comprehensive structural analysis of Sophoclean tragedy based solely on the dramatic constellation. However, such an