WEAPONS OF FRIENDSHIP:
PROPS IN SOPHOCLES’ PHILOCTETES AND AJAX

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By definition, a prop is an object that goes on a journey
(Andrew Sofer1)

Stage props are powerful generators of meaning that are inseparable from other elements of the theater. Distinct from passive scene-setting objects, they interact with the material presence of the actor, the authorial words of the script, and the reception of the spectators to create drama. This essay will focus on the dynamic network linking objects, bodies, text and audience in two Sophoclean dramas that accord great importance to stage properties, specifically the bow of Philoctetes and the sword of Ajax. It is significant not only that both these props are weapons, but also that these weapons are, rather paradoxically (especially in the case of Ajax), gifts that evoke the protocols of ritual friendship.2 As indispensable stage props they are, moreover, extensions of the embodied characters, Philoctetes and Ajax, and additionally of two other men, both deceased: Heracles and Hector, who seemingly haunt the dramas, and who thus give special meaning to the objects that Philoctetes and Ajax handle.

Even the most rudimentary production of the tragedies must acknowledge the materiality of the bow and the sword. The plot of Philoctetes is organized around the acquisition of the bow of Heracles which is in the possession of Philoctetes and which the Achaeans require to conquer Troy. The sword of Hector is the instrument of Ajax’s suicide, the climax of the drama, although there is controversy about how that event was staged in the original production. My thesis is that these objects, the bow and the sword, each so central to the meaning of their respective tragedies, gain their significant status within the drama because they import a narrative history that connects

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1 Sofer (2003) 3.
each protagonist with another male who has died before the play opens, but who still continues to “haunt” the dramatic text. Both tragedies exemplify Carlson’s concept of the “haunted stage:” not only are *Philoctetes* and *Ajax* haunted in that they rely on their audience’s memory of previous “ghost” texts, but dead men actually continue to influence living men, so that the past intrudes persistently and uncannily into the present.³ The points of entry for these phantoms, in both cases, are stage properties, the bow and the sword. The objects are gifts that have brought with them the spectral presence of their former owners who never entirely relinquish them. The bow and the sword summon up, as it were, a “ghost-text”, that relies on the audience’s recognition of an earlier narrative.

These are not the only objects in tragedy that possess such semiotic density and narrative power. Most tragedies could be produced with minimal stage properties; when they are obviously necessary, however, they can have a potent effect on the dramatic action.⁴ While objects in the real world derive meaning from their utilitarian function, stage properties have more complex meanings. Any object that is part of a dramatic production exists, to quote Elam, in “quotation marks”.⁵ It is a link between the world of the audience’s experience, and the representation of reality that they apprehend. The Sophoclean weapons that I am considering go beyond this function to serve as links between the dramatic past and present. To quote Sofer they take a “journey”. In other words, their semiotic functions develop or change over the course of the drama.

Tragedy features several instances of objects that import a history that impinges on the dramatic present. Among the most common are recognition tokens. In plays such as Aeschylus’ *Libation Bearers*, Sophocles’ *Electra* and Euripides’ *Electra, Iphigenia in Tauris*, and *Ion*, small tokens prove the identity of characters and legitimatize their relationship to other characters by evoking past events. A piece of textile proves the identity of Euripides’ Ion, and weaves present and past together. Often these tragic stage properties become symbols of a particular history that will offer a resolution to a problem. After the revelation of the tokens, a bond is re-established between family members. These are not static objects that simply help to set the

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³ Carlson (2001) 11: all theatre “is as a cultural activity deeply involved with memory and haunted by repetition.”
⁴ As Taplin (1978) 77 notes in his survey, properties are used sparingly in tragedy, an economy that emphasizes them when they are employed.