THREE OFF-STAGE CHARACTERS IN EURIPIDES¹)

BY

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Introduction. Dramatic and off-stage characters

The average cast of a Euripidean tragedy consists of eight different dramatic characters (τὰ τοῦ δράματος πρόσωπα), without counting the chorus. This number of different characters or roles can be related to the three actors' rule, current in Euripides' time. Apart from these dramatic characters, however, there are also characters which, though belonging to the story of the play, do not appear on the stage. These off-stage characters²) as they might be called, remain unseen and 'exist' for us, the audience, only by virtue of the fact that other characters speak about them. They miss, in Pfister's terminology³), the multimediality of the normal, dramatic

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³) Pfister 164-5 speaks of "backstage characters": "figures who are referred verbally in the speeches of others, but who never actually appear on stage". 

²) See Pfister 6-11 on "drama as a multimedial form of presentation".
characters who are heard and seen. An example of an off-stage character is Hyllus in *Heracl.*: in the prologue we hear that he is away, looking for a new refuge, in case the Athenians send the children of Heracles away (45-7). In 664 a servant states that Hyllus will not come, because he is inspecting his troops, and, finally, a Messenger reports how Hyllus (unsuccessfully) challenged Eurystheus to a duel (802-18). Though he is the eldest of the children of Heracles, Hyllus is a secondary figure in the play: he is put in the shadow by his sister Macaria, who sacrifices herself in order to secure victory for Athens 4) and by his uncle Iolaus, who takes the lead in capturing Eurystheus, a feature ascribed by other writers 5) to Hyllus alone 6).

But off-stage characters can also play important roles, like Apollo in *Ion,* who is intimately linked to the events as Creusa’s lover, Ion’s father and master, and not least importantly, god of Delphi, where the play is situated: “Apollo has been directing the return action [sc. of *Ion*], but he has been one of the players too, albeit an invisible one, in the actions of vengeance or release. Indeed, he seems always to be at the very heart of the play, ..., and there is a sense in which we watch a tripartite consultation of the oracle, as Xuthus, Creusa and Ion receive his words and react in their different ways. Apollo, however, does not merely speak in this play, he acts. Once in the past he had appeared on earth ... and made the child about whom now everything turns, and on this stage he moves to defend his creation. He acts by means of a dove and a priestess ... And finally he sends Athena, who represents him in his prophetic capacity, but who also announces once and for all the fact that he has taken an active part in the adventures of the principals.”

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6) Another example is Neoptolemus in *Hec.:* “Achilleus’ Sohn ist der Vollstrecker des Opfers..., wird aber aus dem Streit um Polyxena, der ihm vor allen anderen angeht, vom Dichter herausgehalten: es liegt hier eine jener Ausschaltungen der natürlichen Hauptrollen vor, die für das späte Drama ebenso charakteristisch sind wie der Aufstieg der Nebenrollen.” (Friedrich 33).