

Distant Ventriloquism: Vocal Mimesis, Agency and Identity in Ancient Greek Performance

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Did the ancient Greek actors alter their voices when called upon to play different characters in the same performance? Was it enough to signify emotion through intelligible words or the rhythmic and melodic requirements of the music? Since the relatively recent advent of performance-oriented approaches to Greek drama, these have become legitimate questions rather than merely reasons to despair. Indisputable factors such as the use of masks and the convention of playing multiple roles in ancient Greek theatre have led most scholars to assume that the actors did not alter their voices for different characterizations. ¹ This, however, is an anachronistic judgment based on the primarily twentieth-century opposition of realistic and non-illusional modes of dramatic representation. Even when an actor is alleged to be using his or her everyday voice, it reads as natural only because of its relation to the system of qualities and values that distinguish realistic from conventional, genuine from affected, and authentic from stereotyped. As with any sign system, verbal and vocal signs of identity create meaning within specific cultural and historical contexts and local framing. Masked actors, puppeteers, storytellers, monologists, and other performers who signify multiple identities with the voice usually rely on systems of difference that reveal cultural codes for the class, ethnicity, gender, and socially typed personality of the speaker. The codes involved in this kind of vocal identity construction are most clearly identifiable in representational practices, but related cultural meanings and values attend to vocal difference in a wide variety of social contexts. Since much of the difference in speech consists of contrasting tonal qualities and other paralinguistic features, it is also a mistake to infer an absence of vocal characterization [End Page 45] from the uniformity of tragic diction, dialect, and vocabulary. Even if, *per impossibile*, we could listen to audio recordings of Greek theatre in the Classical period, we would be hard pressed to decode the paralinguistic features of the singing and speaking without a broad knowledge of the underlying cultural conceptions of voice in its relation to emotion, identity, and agency.

In this article I will present evidence from mostly non-dramatic sources that provides the relevant cultural context for the problem of voice characterization in ancient theatre. This investigation grew out of my research into the history of ventriloquial practices, by which I mean actual voice-changing in the broad context of mimetic behavior, primarily defined by the act of speaking as other, and by the notion of agents that speak through others. The most inclusive modern definition of ventriloquial practice is the vocal production of sounds or voices that appear to come from somewhere other than their actual source. However, from antiquity to the present, the cognates of ventriloquism have been associated with such disparate phenomena as demon possession, necromancy, the imitation of multiple and remote voices, belief in a rare natural ability to throw the voice or to speak inwardly, and the tendency of humans to mislocate the source of a sound in response to visual and auditory cues. The two basic types of vocal modulation associated with ventriloquism as a mimetic technique are vocal transformation and acoustic perspective. The former designates a change of voice that is in contrast either to the

speaker's normal voice or to other assumed or imitated voices. Acoustic perspective is the principle behind not only the voice-throwing illusion or distant ventriloquism, but also the auditory signification of space and movement in the sign systems of radio drama or cinema sound tracks. The voice-throwing illusion foregrounds the normally unconscious structural operation through which the voice is localized as a speaking agent.

Although customarily taken for granted, the coherence of a voice to a specific body in space is not self-evident. Assigning the sound of the voice to a body as source and agent is a structural operation analogous to the formation of the subject as the locus of consciousness. The disembodied voice is attributed to gods and ancestors because its invisibility links it to the pre-symbolic state before the emergence of the subject and object. The human voice structures the hierarchy of sounds in space because human listening is very vococentric. Ventriloquism underscores the fact that the link between voice and identity is a fundamentally spatial concept, although the space in question may be either literal or imaginary, or some combination of the two, as in theatrical representation. The key to the voice-throwing illusion is vocal imitation of the modulation that sounds undergo traveling between points of distance or through obstacles. These vocal signs sometimes function effectively to misdirect the hearer to a signified source of a sound even without visual cues and purposeful misdirection. Vocal changes indicating a change of speaker are common in most storytelling traditions, as well as traditional forms of puppetry and more modern genres of performance such as the imitation of celebrity voices. When someone is possessed or serving as a vessel for spirit communication, the apparent channeling of spirit voices is fundamentally recognized by a difference between the voice of the spirit and that of the medium, or even recognition of the spirit voice as that of a specific person. Thus, voice-throwing, voice changing, and voice-channeling all highlight an operative relationship between the voice and the most basic form of identity: the distinction between self and other. **[End Page 46]**

The cultural context I will offer here is culled from a wide range of genres and fields of ancient Greek discourse. I concentrated primarily on accounts of prophetically inspired vocalizations; accounts of poetic inspiration and the multiple-voice performances of rhapsodes (reciters of Homer); citations on vocal mimicry framed as entertainment; and evidence from Athenian drama of vocal transformation by masked actors. All of these speech situations involved a deflected sense of agency and responsibility and reveal foundational cultural assumptions about the link between voice and identity. ² Most of the evidence I will present here has never been considered by historians of ventriloquism, who, in their search for origins, have focused on citations of the Greek cognates of ventriloquism, *engastrimantis* and *engastrimuthos*, from which the Latinate "ventriloquist" derives. ³ Literally meaning "belly-prophet" and "belly-speaker," these terms occur only in the context of oracular divination. ⁴ The few scattered texts from classical antiquity that mention the vocal imitation of distant sounds, animals noises, and other voices do not use the Greek or Latin equivalents of ventriloquism to describe these mimetic practices. A misplaced faith in etymology led the earliest historians of ventriloquism to focus on the belly-speaking prophets rather than looking for ancient evidence of vocal illusion and mimicry in performance contexts. The earliest citation of a form of the word "ventriloquism" that refers to a vocal illusion or mimicry does not appear until the eighteenth century. ⁵ Despite this, previous histories of ventriloquism uniformly propose that the modern entertainment genre developed from the vocal techniques of counterfeit spirit mediums. Even Stephen Connor's recent and erudite *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* fails to critique this traditional developmental narrative. ⁶ Behind this theory is the assumption that the techniques of mediums were at some point or repeatedly **[End Page 47]** appropriated for use by performers. The co-existence of vocal illusions and spirit communication, from antiquity to the present, makes it more likely that vocal mimics

adopted the word "ventriloquist" to lend a supernatural aura to their illusions.

The similarity between multiple voice performance and speech during possession was not the willful creation of an illusion, but the vocal signification of layered, multiple, collective, or simply other identities and a corresponding deflection of public responsibility for acts of speech. Fortunately, for my purposes, the ancient sources themselves make explicit analogies that connect the various kinds of speaking as other. I have analyzed this archeological test-trench of information employing tools from semiotics, cognitive science, and cultural studies and used these contextual clues to evaluate the informed conjectures of recent scholars on the vocal practices of Greek actors. In conclusion I will make my own case for the likelihood of a type of theatrical voice characterization that signified the source of speech and the identity of the speaker.

The earliest mention of ventriloquism occurs in the text of Aristophanes' *Wasps*, in lines 1015-20, where the concept of spirit possession is already being used as a metaphor of displaced agency and responsibility for speech. I will return later to this traditional starting point for the history of ventriloquism, but the passage in *Wasps* is not the earliest extant revelation of Greek ideas about voice and identity.

Though it has never been associated with the traditional lore of ventriloquism, the earliest representation of both a multiple voice performance and a ventriloquial prank or deception is a story told by Menelaus in the *Odyssey*. It is not, however, one of the deceptions performed by the trickster protagonist Odysseus against his monstrous or human foes but a ruse Helen of Troy used against the Greeks themselves. After Odysseus' wooden horse had been pulled inside the gates of Troy, the Greek soldiers waited inside for night to fall. A deity sympathetic to the Trojans apparently warned Helen of the "hollow ambush," so she visited the horse with the divinely inspired purpose of tricking the Greeks into revealing themselves:

Three times you walked around the hollow ambush, feeling it,
and you called out, naming them by name, to the best of the Danaans,
and made your voice sound like the voice of the wife of each of the Argives. [7](#)

The soldiers, on hearing these convincing imitations of their wives' voices, would have cried out in response if Odysseus had not assured them it was a trick.

While Helen neither throws nor directly channels a voice in this story, the narrative illustrates a complex of values and concepts associated with gender, vocal mimesis, and speaking as other. The reaction of the soldiers to the imitated voices illustrates a deep and even sentimental linking of voice to identity. Menelaus' explanation of the event displays a distrust of mimetic skill as deceitful and supernatural. Questions about Helen's culpability underlie the general Homeric ambivalence toward her, but in the prank story, the god not only instigates her actions but also grants her apparent skill at vocal mimicry. Thus, Helen is not quite responsible for the treachery, but also not clever enough to have accomplished it herself without the help of a god speaking through her. **[End Page 48]**

Helen's prank also illustrates early Greek conceptions of vocal gender difference and the cultural values associated with female voices. As in the episode of the Sirens, Odysseus, the noble male trickster, saves his men from the seductive power of the female voice.

Other mythological narratives reduce this female power to mere parrot-like mimicry, even when the women are gendered deities or demigods. In the Homeric hymn to the Delian Apollo choruses of Delian handmaidens are said to "imitate the chattering and dialects of all men; each would say that he were speaking himself." [8](#) The most well-known example of subtractive feminine mimicry is the story of Echo, who, condemned by Hera for distracting her with small talk, was sentenced to speak only by repeating the words of others. Wasting away from her unrequited love for Narcissus, Echo's identity is eventually reduced to mimicking the ends of other people's sentences; yet even this disembodied voice has an identity and a causal narrative behind it. [9](#)

Despite this archaic association of women's voices with manipulation and mimicry, modern ventriloquists traditionally trace their art back to a male Greek diviner named Eurykles. As the father of ventriloquy, Eurykles was supposed to have used vocal illusion and multiple voice performance to counterfeit spirit possession. ¹⁰ The gender opposition implicit in this traditional lore is that men can use their skill to manipulate others, whereas women who speak in multiple voices are either deceitful sorceresses or possessed by some demonic or divine agency. However, no evidence survives to indicate that the archaic or classical Greeks suspected vocal trickery of any kind from their oracles and diviners. ¹¹ Before the invention of writing, language was exclusively an event of the human voice. Some of the earliest Greek inscriptions preserve a voiced conception of writing that had not yet materialized into its graphic idiom. Archaic craft objects marked with such inscriptions as "I am Nestor's cup" or "Mantiles dedicated me" represent utterance with a source, an occasion, and an addressee. Rather than labeling the objects with trademarks or signing their names, the artisans imagined the objects as speakers that declared their own identities through the voice of the reader. ¹² To their **[End Page 49]** original owners, these inscribed objects may have seemed no less marvelous than if they actually were to speak aloud. Drawing their metaphors from an oral thought world, the Greeks linked the indirectness of writing with vocal spirit possession. ¹³ Just as the gods spoke indirectly through their oracles, mortals could speak across time and space through the medium of writing.

After centuries of oral composition the technology of writing gradually changed the nature of poetry from a process to a product; yet a concept of individual authorship did not arise until long after the voice of the poet was first frozen into text. Although writing separated language from its speaking agent the new technology also made way for a concept of individual agency in poetic composition. This seems paradoxical particularly in the postmodern age, when the various branches of late twentieth-century critical theory have dismantled the authorial subject. In the discourse of post-structuralist textual analysis, the severing of language from its context through writing has prompted questions about the relevance of any conception of a source or agency behind language, at least as far as the production of meaning is concerned. Yet, neither authorship nor autonomous discourse could exist without the notion of personal agency behind language. In the dominantly oral culture of ancient Greece, however, neither of these concepts was solidly entrenched enough to be deconstructed or even identified as binary oppositions.

Walter Ong has suggested that pre-literate and predominately oral cultures did know "a kind of autonomous discourse in fixed ritual formulas as well as in vatic sayings or prophecies." ¹⁴ Yet, Ong's definition of ancient autonomous discourse is anachronistically conceived in opposition to a post-Romantic concept of authorship that did not exist in pre-literate culture. The Greeks habitually attributed proverbial sayings and anonymous texts to the names of specific persons, just as they attributed the canonized epic tradition to a historical Homer and the Delphic prophecies to Apollo. As Walter Burkert suggests, writing did free the oracle's utterance from "the context of question and answer" and "the execution of the ritual," but the fact that written oracles could become important at later times and in other places did not make them context-free. ¹⁵ Likewise, whether the Muse was considered an ontological being or a personification of the formulaic oral tradition, she was still identified as an agent of poetic language, as was the god or demon possessing the soothsayer. As a personification of oral tradition, the Muse also represented a voiced conception of language as did performative inscriptions like "I am Nestor's cup." The inscription was an imitation of speech attributed to a site of identity, even though neither the speaking object nor the artisan ventriloquist could be engaged in a dialogue. Ong is correct to note the deflection of responsibility in possession and even perhaps in the process of how oral composition was perceived. However, a deflection of agency depends

upon a conception of agency and does not make the pre-literate oracle or poem autonomous in the way that post-structuralist criticism characterizes written texts. **[End Page 50]**

Greek drama and philosophy were both created in a period when the profound changes heralded by literacy were only beginning to surface. The technology of writing and the rational probing of the philosophers had begun to influence the culture at large, and this was the context in which Aristophanes and Plato evoked the name of Eurykles in the two earliest extant examples of the trope of ventriloquism.

It is striking that the two earliest citations traditionally associated with ventriloquism are both metaphors. Not so surprising are their sources: Aristophanes, the author of self-reflexive comedies, and Plato, the apparently self-effacing writer of philosophical dialogues. About fifty years apart, they each compare two very different situations to the activity of Eurykles, a name that is not mentioned by any of their extant contemporaries (fifth-fourth century BCE). Aristophanes likens Eurykles' miraculous way of "speaking from the bellies of others" to his early activities as a dramatist, while Plato compares the voice of "the uncanny Eurykles" to a self-conflicting inner voice.

The passage from Aristophanes comes from the *Wasps*, in the first *parabasis* or direct audience address by the chorus:

Now then, folks, pay attention if you want some plain talk,
for the poet desires to reprimand the spectators.

He says that they have injured him, unprovoked, and after the good he's done them:

first not *openly*, but *secretly*, assisting *other poets*,

imitating the divination [*manteia*] and method/thought [*dianoia*] of Eurykles,

into the bellies of others from where he poured forth a lot of comedy,

but afterwards openly too, taking risks on his own account/responsibility

chariotting the mouths of his own, not another's Muses. [16](#)

Plato's Eurykles metaphor is less extended but no less problematic. In the *Sophist* the Stranger or Eleatic ridicules the pedantic restrictions that sophistic teachers place on the language used in philosophical discourse:

They have no need of another to refute them, an *enemy* haunts them, as the saying goes, in their own house, wherever they go, *replying within*, like the weird Eurykles, carrying him about with them. [17](#)

The basic meanings of Aristophanes' and Plato's comparisons are relatively clear, but more nuanced interpretations require an accurate identification of Eurykles. Scholars from the fourth century CE until very recently identified Eurykles as some sort of spirit medium, but with no consensus and much confusion about the actual nature of this mysterious practice of belly-speaking. [18](#) Beginning in the eighteenth century, the traditional origin myth of ventriloquism presents Eurykles as both a fake medium and a vocal trickster. However, recent commentaries on Aristophanes' *Wasps* by both Sommerstein and MacDowell have identified Eurykles not as a human prophet but as the name of the spirit who would speak from the belly of such a medium. Neither **[End Page 51]** commentator supplies the reasoning or supporting citations behind this theory, but grammatical and contextual reasons confirm that this is what both Aristophanes and Plato meant. Reading the Eurykles metaphor from *Sophist* with either a spirit medium or a vocal illusionist in mind, it is easy to miss the fact that *Eurykles* is in the accusative case (*Euruklea*), agreeing with the words for "enemy" (*polemion*) and "reply" or "speaking in an undertone," (*hypophthegomenon*). [19](#) Most citations of the verb *hypophthegomai* seem to indicate the whispery tone quality and vocal register associated with the speech of spirits in many cultures and time periods. [20](#) Thus the name Eurykles is being identified with the enemy voice replying or speaking from within, analogous to the inhabiting spirit rather than the medium who is carrying this opposing voice inside him.

Sommerstein and MacDowell were not the first scholars of Aristophanes or Plato to identify Eurykles as the name of a familiar spirit. Actually, this solution was considered but casually dismissed by Pearson in his commentary on fragment 59 of Sophocles, in a note on the singular occurrence of the word *sternomantis* (chest-prophet), which Dodds suggests was a more dignified form of *engastrimantis*. ²¹ Although Pearson admits that "Eurykles was a generic name given to spirits temporarily occupying the body of a man," he contradicts himself by adding: "There is nothing in these passages which is not satisfied by the simple inference that Eurykles alleged his oracles to be the voice of a demon lodged in his own breast." ²² Contrary to Pearson's evaluation of the evidence in the scholiast's commentary, the exact language in Aristophanes' and Plato's references to Eurykles is not satisfied by this inference, and it does not explain how such an activity could be possible or serve as a vehicle for the metaphor of an inner contradicting voice. The problem lies in explaining how and why Eurykles would speak through the bellies of others, which, if he were a medium would mean the bellies of people consulting him. There is a strange story in one of the scholia on the passage from Plato about Eurykles being blamed for a bad omen. ²³ Campbell suggests that this story is an **[End Page 52]** invention of the scholiast in order to explain the apparent discrepancy of the grammatical and figurative correlation between "like Eurykles" and the "the enemy within." Here Campbell seems on the verge of recognizing that Eurykles must have been the spirit rather than the medium but instead concludes:

The meaning of course is that they have their enemy and their opponent in their own breast, in the shape of a voice, which comes from within them, like the answer of Eurykles, who used to speak in those who came to him. Plato and Plutarch all make it quite clear that what happened was that the voice of Eurykles came from the belly of someone else; consequently those scholars [from Scholiast Pl. *Soph.* 252] who say that the voice came from the belly of Eurykles are mistaken. ²⁴

This is no clearer than the scholiast's or Plato's original language and does not explain how such an activity could be possible or serve as a vehicle for the metaphor of a contradicting inner voice. Making a voice appear to come from the bellies of those consulting him would be a good trick for even the most skilled of modern ventriloquists, since the illusion of throwing the voice is most effective when the ventriloquist is placed between the hearer and the imagined source of the voice. While I have never witnessed a contemporary ventriloquist performance that defies this spatial restriction, I have found anecdotal references to ventriloquists causing voices to come apparently from people's pockets or from under their hats. ²⁵ But even such expert sleight of voice is quite different from making a sound appear to come from within someone else's body, unless that person were a confederate or stooge, which rules out anyone who was genuinely consulting a seer. Making a voice appear to come from someone else's belly might be an excellent party trick at a symposium, but the illusion would be effective for everyone but the target of the joke, who would seem to have spoken to the others present but have no perception of a voice coming from inside himself. If the culprit was identified, deflecting responsibility for such a joke might involve blaming the spirit Eurykles, as when people say "it was the drink talking" or in this case, "the daemon made me do it." This might have been the common proverbial sense underlying the more literary metaphors in Aristophanes and Plato. ²⁶ Out of context, Aristophanes' comparison of himself to Eurykles has been interpreted as an illustration of the relatively straightforward idea that dramatists speak through the masks of characters. ²⁷ The metaphor actually represents a much more complex situation, and contrary to the traditional lore of ventriloquism, it cannot be **[End Page 53]** made to imply that Aristophanes was comparing himself to a voice-throwing counterfeit medium. Scholars do not agree on the precise figurative meaning of the passage because so much of the literal context is obscure, especially the details of Aristophanes' early career and

public emergence as a comic poet. The two major lines of interpretation are offered: one argues that Aristophanes is saying that he made previously unaccredited contributions to plays by other authors, [28](#) while the other claims that the word *krubdein* (secretly) indicates that the authorship of his own early plays was not publicly known, since they were presented under the name and perhaps the direction of Philonides or Kallistratos. [29](#) Here and elsewhere Aristophanes characterizes the act of producing or authoring a comedy as one of taking risks and being held responsible. [30](#) Considering the comic license afforded composers of comedies for the festival, it seems unlikely that a ventriloquial alliance with other poets would be needed to shield Aristophanes from responsibility for risky content in plays. A more likely explanation is that Aristophanes engaged proven showmen in order to avoid the risk of a shaky production when he needed the help. Whatever the exact circumstances prompting the analogy, the site of identity in question was the public name of the person considered most responsible for the production and therefore the recipient of the prize. [31](#)

On the surface, Aristophanes seems to be asking for credit that he previously did not receive, accept, or assume. The passage may also indicate that the division of labor between himself as author and other poets as directors of his previous plays was something new that needed to be explained to the audience. It is more likely that at least a portion of the audience was in on the secret of Aristophanes' authorship of plays produced under the names of other poets, especially since he seems to have presented another play at the same festival (422 BCE) called *Proagon*, which competed against *Wasps*. Whether *Wasps* followed or preceded *Proagon* in the festival program, the comparison with Eurykles functions as a self-reflexive comic boast, a way of playing with the fact of his dual participation and the pretense or secrecy. But whether the metaphor was a private joke or a purposeful revelation, the analogy with spirit possession suggests both an operative deflection of responsibility and a mask of borrowed authority in speaking through another's name.

Unlike the emergent concept of authorship, a dialogic model of the self is well attested in the literature of classical Greece. [32](#) It occurs in direct association with vocal multiplicity (or in this case bivocalism) in a passage from Euripides in which Theseus wishes to know men's true minds through their voices, if only he could distinguish **[End Page 54]** clearly between the just and the unjust voice, "so that the voice thinking unjust things could be refuted by the just voice, and we would not be deceived." [33](#)

In both the *Ion* and the *Republic*, Plato compares poetic inspiration to possession, but the Eurykles passage from *Sophist* compares a literal secondary voice to an inner voice that contradicts what the outer voice says. [34](#) The analogy between spirit possession and the inner voice relies on a cultural image schema of inner multiplicity expressed as voiced positions in dialogue. The voice of the Other becomes the predominant metaphor for the inner voice of one's own thoughts. Studies in cognitive linguistics suggest that it is habitual for speakers of Western (and at least some non-Western) languages to think in the form of a dialogue between the subject and any one of a number of multiple selves. [35](#) Although a layered multiplicity of voice seems to permeate Greek conceptions of what are currently called personal psychology and social identity, the Greeks also generally believed in the separate ontological identity of possessing spirits. [36](#) Clearly both unwanted and invited inhabitation by spiritual entities was a part of the thought-world from which Aristophanes and Plato drew their metaphors.

Vocal Illusion and Mimicry in Classical Antiquity

Although ancient reports do describe the use of mimetic vocal skills similar to modern ventriloquism, the illusions are always framed as entertainment or deceptive mimicry. In Plato's *Republic* (III. 397a) Socrates gives a detailed description of a mimic whom he

considers a "debased speaker" because he "will not shrink from imitating anything and everything":

He will attempt, seriously and in the presence of many, to imitate all things, including those we just now mentioned—claps of thunder, and the noise of wind and hail and axles and pulleys, and notes of trumpets and flutes and panpipes, and sounds of all instruments, and the cries of dogs, sheep, and birds. [37](#)

This list of imitations is almost identical to the sound-effects repertoire of almost any performer billed as a ventriloquist in the nineteenth century, and Plato/Socrates **[End Page 55]** clearly indicates that he is discussing the performance of an entertainer. [38](#) But the ancient anecdote describing a performance with the closest resemblance to modern ventriloquism occurs in both Plutarch's the *Moralia* and Phaedrus' the *Fables* in the first century CE. [39](#) The version in Plutarch seems to assume it is a familiar story, and it is essentially the same as the version in Phaedrus except for the addition of specific details. The story centers on a popular performer named Parmeno who was famous for his imitation of a pig's squeal. [40](#) Parmeno is challenged to a competitive exhibition of pig squealing by a rival performer in Plutarch and a country bumpkin in Phaedrus. Unbeknownst to the audience for this competition, the challenger has concealed a suckling pig under his cloak. The audience still judged Parmeno's imitation of a pig to be more realistic than the actual pig's squeal, even when the challenger released the live animal into the crowd. In the *Fables* of Phaedrus, the story is presented as a proverbial demonstration of how the prejudice of audiences toward their favorite performers affects their perception or reception. Plutarch's rendering of the story emphasizes an intriguing conception of the subjectivity of perception within what would now be called the performance frame:

This plainly demonstrates that the very same sensation will not produce a corresponding effect a second time in people's minds unless they believe that intelligence or conscious striving is involved in the performance. [41](#)

Elsewhere in the same work, Plutarch again uses the example of an animal imitation to demonstrate how the performance frame affects reception of mimicry, making the observation that "a hen that cackles ceaselessly or a cawing crow is unpleasant and painful to hear, but the imitator of noisy hens and crows delights us." [42](#)

While it is logical to assume that vocal mimics in antiquity also produced the distant voice of the ventriloquist, direct evidence of this is limited to a passing remark in a discussion of acoustic phenomenon in chapter 11 of the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problems*:

Why do voices heard at a distance sound more shrill? For example, imitators of those shouting from a great distance speak shrilly like those causing an echo, and the sound of an echo seems shriller? [*oxuteros*] [43](#)

This passage does not necessarily refer to skilled mimics but to anyone who might have cause to imitate someone shouting from a distance, as in the course of telling a **[End Page 56]** story. Although his description of the effect is less than precise, the author of the *Problems* does show an awareness of the principle of acoustic perspective at the heart of distant ventriloquism. [44](#)

Aristotle may have been describing something akin to the distant voice associated with modern ventriloquism, but he specifically describes it as imitation, and in no way associated with spirit voices or belly-prophets. How then did the spirit voices of the belly-speakers sound? A humorous story in Lucian is one of many sources indicating that the sort of *daemones* involved with gastromancy was commonly thought to speak in an exotic or archaic diction. In Lucian's dialogue *Lexiphanes*, a man is being treated for a strange verbal ailment. His friend Lycinus brings him to a "physician" named Sopolis and describes his symptoms as talking "from a thousand years ago, distorting his language, making these preposterous combinations, and taking himself very seriously in the matter, as if it

were a great thing for him to use an alien idiom and debase the established currency of speech." [45](#) Speech filled with nonsense words and archaic expressions appears as a sign of difference in spirit possession in many historical cultures. In this same passage, Lexiphanes also seems to compare common digestive "stomach growling" with the sound of an *engastrimuthos* and constitutes evidence for the production of a rumbling "belly voice," which might have seemed to come actually from the belly. That this reference is humorous reinforces the idea that gastromancers were a less reliable if not lower class of medium, and an allusion to farting suggests that we should not be surprised to find "demons in the belly" in other humorous contexts such as Aristophanes' Old Comedy and Plato's satire of sophists contradicting themselves. The Loeb translation of Lucian's *Lexiphanes* above renders *engastrimuthos* "familiar spirit," and this does seem to be the sense of the word in this passage as well as the passages in the Septuagint which use this word. [46](#) Certainly a spirit who had been "swallowed" would speak from the belly, and it is impossible to imagine that Lexiphanes means that he swallowed a human "ventriloquist." Both as signifier of identity and object for comic parody, the exotic diction of spirits seems analogous to the other-voicedness of characters in classical tragedy, who also spoke in a heightened and often archaic diction. Like rhapsodes and actors, the possessed or mad are also reported to speak rhythmically, musically, and a change in the quality and register of the voice is almost always noted in both ancient and contemporary observations of possession. [47](#) The Hippocratic treatise *Sacred Disease* **[End Page 57]** (400 BCE) indicates that the pitch of the voice was one of the ways the possessing spirit was identified by the *kathartai* (purifiers or exorcists):

If the patient imitate a goat, if he roar or suffer convulsions on the right side, they say that the mother of the gods is to blame. If he utter a piercing and loud cry, they liken him to a horse and blame Poseidon. [48](#)

Although the author of this work condemns the practice of these exorcists as quackery, this opinion was a specialized one that probably had little effect on popular belief and opinion. [49](#)

Plutarch, citing Theophrastus, comments at length on the effect of various emotions on the voice. Plutarch's description of the musicality of the voice in extreme emotion, acting, and possession includes versification and song. [50](#) He describes music as both coming from and causing emotion, and associates the musical voice with sorrow, joy, and religious ecstasy. But vocal expression of emotion does not rule out the signification of identity through vocal difference in performances where several voices must be distinguished from one another, even with the addition of visual signs that signify speaker identity.

While the attribution of some lines in Greek drama will always be disputed, it is fairly clear who is speaking because of verbal clues such as self-proclaimed identifications, ways of addressing each other, difference of intent, and familiarity with the narrative requirements of the characters' speeches. Certainly the audience could also recognize these verbal indicators of vocal source, which seem sufficient when combined with visual signs of speaker identity such as gesture and movement. However, the verbal (linguistic and indexical) signs mentioned above require certain conditions to operate effectively. A moving head, body, or arm would only clearly signify the person speaking when no other actor is moving. This would of course be more problematic in the presence of all three actors and various mute parts. Ultimately, recognizing that vocal (paralinguistic) difference between character voices was not strictly necessary does not rule out the possibility of voice characterization, nor does it prove that the only differences between voices were those between one actor and another. In the following summary of the relevant arguments, keep in mind that the Greeks generally recognized vocal qualities subtler than dialect or accent, along with the evidence I have presented indicating strong links between voice and identity in the fabric of their culture.

The same factors that made it difficult to signify the source of a voice in the ancient theatre also give us what few hints we have as to how the Greek actors may have accomplished it. Comedy and tragedy may have differed in the degree and manner in **[End Page 58]** which the voice was altered, but both genres share in common the competition among actors, the size of the theatre space, and the use of masks. The awarding of a prize to the lead actor suggests that the individual actor's voice, while veiled at least by the generic style of delivery, was still recognizable to the audience. Rather than discounting the use of vocal difference between roles, this may indicate a self-consciousness that would allow the audience to appreciate the transformative vocal skills of individual actors. Clifford Ashby suggests that in Euripides' play *Ion*, "much of the comedy is rooted in the Third Actor's portrayals of six wildly assorted roles." [51](#) To whatever degree the audience recognized an individual actor's voice, this alone is insufficient evidence for doubting that the actors altered their voices from role to role. The various cartoon and radio character voices of Mel Blanc, for instance, are both recognizable as distinct characters and for most fans as the single voice of a virtuosic mimic, partly because he was so famous for the contrasts between his many voices. [52](#) Although the Greek audience didn't have title credits or a program, they most certainly knew who the lead actors were in each poet's production, either by attending the Proagon (a sort of preview) or by word of mouth. The audience and judges came to expect certain kinds of versatility, if not virtuosity, from the actors.

Since the use of masks meant that no mouth movement was visible, some other kind of posture, gesture, or movement must have indicated the current speaker, at least until it became obvious through recognition of vocal difference matched with distinctive emotion and intent. In agreement with Z. Pavolskis, Mark Damen, whose examples focus on Euripidean tragedy, suggests that "distinctive vocal tone" identified characters more often than entrance announcements and self-proclaimed identifications. [53](#) Damen also emphasizes that role-sharing during the classical period was probably exceptional, pointing out that "no play produced before 406 BC requires role-sharing," and that "lightning changes . . . became popular only after the fifth century BC." [54](#) Most important for this discussion is Damen's question, "Did actors play incongruous roles in the same play?" [55](#) After listing the many likely contrasting pairs of roles for the lead actor, he concludes: "Such a variety of characterization was regularly demanded of the actor that it is hard not to believe part of the evaluation of his performance lay in the success with which he depicted disparate character types." [56](#) Posture, gesture, and movement would certainly be considered part of the actor's skill in differentiating roles, but mask and costume do not reflect on the actor's skill in this way. Considering the dominance of the voice in the Greek actor's art, it seems highly unlikely to me that the differences between contrasting characters would be only visual. **[End Page 59]**

Aided by conventional visual signs and narrative cues, the audience for a dramatic performance comes to recognize the vocal differences between individual characters over time, comparing and contrasting sameness and difference. The vocal signification of character identity in ancient Greek theatre may have relied on paralinguistic conventions and characteristic musical devices. Certain types of characters may even have had conventional vocal registers, as with the kind of roles traditionally assigned to sopranos, mezzos, tenors, baritones, and basses in European opera, or the analogous conventions of the vocal styles of various character types in Japanese Noh drama. [57](#) Conventionalized differences between character voices would also show off the actor's vocal flexibility without disturbing the unity of tragic diction. Like realistic speech and voice characterizations, conventionalized modes of theatrical speech can also signify the social, personal, or generically typed identity of the speaker. Z. Pavlovskis suggests that the identifiable personal timbre of an actor's voice may have even been used to signify the

family relationships between characters played by the same actor. [58](#) Damen also posits vocal similarity between collaborative or parallel roles. [59](#)

Most of the evidence from which an absence of vocal characterization is inferred could just as easily be used in support of some conventional scheme of vocal character difference. For example, in a list of an actor's failings Pollux (second century CE) included the unwanted quality of being woman-voiced. Arnott takes this extremely late evidence as an indication that a uniform strength of voice and register was required of actors that would preclude imitating the weaker voices of women. [60](#) This conjecture is again based on a realistic conception of vocal characterization. An actor with the vocal skill to execute the language and music of tragedy and to be heard through a mask at great distances could manage a higher register, or even a conventional or stereotyped weakening of voice without diminishing its ability to be heard when performing female roles.

Even a slight change of quality or shift of register between two character voices could signify the difference between, for example, Deianeira and Heracles in the *Trachiniae*, one of the more likely dual roles for a lead actor in tragedy. Clifford Ashby suggests that this particular double role implies a logical casting principle that would group "mature, presumably contralto female roles with those of mature men . . . while high-voiced youths and thin-voiced old men fit well with young women." [61](#) For example, the doubling of Deinaeira and Hercules might involve either a baritone heroine and thunderous Hercules or a soprano Deinaeira and a dying Hercules speaking in "thin quavering tones," as he is carried onstage by attendants. [62](#) **[End Page 60]**

Another convention cited by Arnott as evidence against vocal characterization is the announcement of offstage voices and character entrances, since that would seem to preclude the need for vocal contrast in identifying newly introduced characters. In fact, the announcement of offstage voices was one of the techniques used by the nineteenth-century dramatic ventriloquists performing the distant voice, as a clarifying sign to aid in the illusion of an offstage voice. [63](#) When Arnott concedes that the actor playing Medea may have performed the voices for the children crying from behind the door of the *skene*, he cites this as evidence against vocal realism. [64](#) This could just as easily be taken as evidence of skill at vocal transformation, on the level of the distant voice performed by modern ventriloquists. Expressing the revised view, Ashby concurs that obvious solution to the frequent (and tear-jerking) use of speaking children in Euripides was simply to "allow nearby actors or chorus members to utter children's lines, while the children pantomime the act of speaking." [65](#)

David Wiles and others have proposed that even in the more realistic Hellenistic theatre, it was primarily the mask that signified character identity and that the voice was used to signify primarily emotion. [66](#) Yet, both tragic and comic roles have characteristic emotional states different from each other. If the voice in classical and/or Hellenistic theatre signified different emotions, it would also signify the difference between the characters that enact these emotions vocally. The general trend toward realism in Greek art following the classical period may also have resulted in more imitative vocal characterization. Aristotle remarks in the *Rhetoric* [67](#) that although the tragic actor Theodorus (apparently a contemporary) seemed to imitate the voice of the character he was portraying, in his opinion, the voices of all other actors did not imitate their characters. This does not necessarily imply that the other actors weren't trying to create the voice of the character that is speaking. In this same passage of the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle credits Euripides with introducing a more natural diction. From the context of the passage it seems more likely that Aristotle was partial to the particularly natural quality in the acting of Theodorus, a quality that he found persuasive in oratory as well as in imitation. Wiles seems to have a different interpretation of the Theodoros passage when he translates Aristotle as saying that the actor "created the illusion that in any role he spoke with his own personal voice."

[68](#) However, here Wiles is talking about the illusion of spontaneity, not of a lack of vocal transformation.

By the first century CE, Quintilian expresses distaste for too much realistic vocal impersonation, as when one character imitates the speech of another:

For even comic actors seem to me to commit a gross offense against the canons of their art when, if they have in the course of some narrative to quote either the words of an old man, **[End Page 61]** (as in the prologue to the *Hydria*) or of a woman (as in the *Georgos*) they utter them in a tremulous or a treble voice, notwithstanding the fact that they are playing the part of a young man. [69](#)

Wiles points out that this imitator imitating a quotation in direct speech would only seem excessive to someone with expectations of role-doubling, as in the tradition of acting Menander. The audience would become aware of artifice rather than illusion, since the actor might appear later in the role of the type of person he was imitating. [70](#) On the other hand, one character parodying another's speech would be an occasion for fun in a less illusionistic theatre like that of Plautus, where doubling was either not essential or was done with self-conscious theatricality.

Sifakis has argued that multiple role performance by a solo actor was at the heart of the Greek acting tradition, and that the second and third actor were assistants to the lead actor or protagonist, who was originally the poet and played all of the major roles, as in epic recitation. [71](#) Sifakis proposes that multiple role performance was the basis of the acting tradition, rather than an addition to existing practices. If as Sifakis suggests, the three actor rule was not so much one of limitation as augmentation in fifth-century Athenian theatre practice, then it does seem logical that the lead actor, taking the place of the performing poet, would portray the major roles, even if it meant switching characters with one of the assistant actors in order to perform a major speech. Sifakis cites as an example of such role sharing the last speech of Creon, which in his scheme would have been spoken by the lead actor who was previously playing Antigone. [72](#) Such a situation would seem to demand more than a change of mask for clarity of role identification. If the actor had used a slightly higher or more shrill tone for Antigone, a booming voice might be used by both actors playing Creon, which would signify the continuity of or difference between characters' voices and still allow for recognition of the lead actor's voice behind the mask. Wiles follows Sifakis in this, adding that "there would have been conventional ways of modifying the voice to signify youth and age, male and female, because there were shared assumptions about the physiological basis of age and gender distinctions, and voice was part of the bodily whole." [73](#) Wiles offers no evidence of this background assumption, but the evidence I have presented here seems to support it.

In Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae*, much of the comedy comes from the situation of having female characters (portrayed by men) assume male disguises onstage. Thus **[End Page 62]** this play contains the only evidence that actors may have used voice alteration to indicate gender. Joseph Dane sums up this emphasis on disguise as a parody of some of the most crucial theatrical conventions in fifth-century theatre:

Not only are disguises produced through costume change and changes in verbal claims (pitch of voice and specific claims of identity), they are also effected by alterations in a character's mask. . . . We know Mnesilokhos is Mnesilokhos only because he remains onstage during his disguising. In other respects he will differ from Woman A and Woman B (both played by male actors) only in what he says of Euripides. [74](#)

Although Dane does mention a change in pitch of voice, he implies in the quote above that this would not have been enough to identify a man disguised as a woman; i.e. a high pitched voice would only signify drag if the actors portraying female characters also raised the pitch of their voices. MacDowell's solution is to have darker masks for men (in and out of drag) and white masks for the female characters. [75](#) Even with the visual signs of darker

mask and onstage dressing, I hope the evidence I have presented earlier demonstrates that the audience could make finer distinctions between pitches than simply two registers (high and low). Falsetto seems most likely to indicate the gender disguise in *Thesm.*, but that does not rule out a higher register for the female characters. In any case, it is hard to draw conclusions about how gender was performed from the topsy-turvy world of Aristophanes, where the arbitrariness of theatrical conventions seems to have been emphasized. [76](#)

One of the major controversies about *Thesm.* concerns the parody of Euripides' lost *Andromeda*, in which Echo must have repeated words sung by the heroine as she lies chained to the rocks awaiting death or rescue. [77](#) Most contested is the question of whether or not Echo was visible onstage or represented as a disembodied voice in either the original or the parody. MacDowell disagrees with Heath and Somerstein, who both think that Euripides did not play Echo in *Thesm.* because he would not physically be able to manage the change if she appeared onstage. [78](#) MacDowell's justification for Echo having been offstage in *Andromeda* and therefore in *Thesm.* is thus dependent on the likely assumption that Euripides plays Echo in Aristophanes' parody. I am attracted to MacDowell's idea that the joke was making fun of the real Euripides' use of an invisible character. [79](#) His argument is that Echo bewilders the Archer "who rushes around trying to find the person who is flinging his own words back at him." [80](#) In Euripides' play there was probably no one onstage but Andromeda. The repeating of her lines, perhaps overlapping a bit, would have been sufficient to indicate that the invisible voice was the nymph Echo. It is also possible that if Echo did appear onstage in *Thesm.* (played by Euripides or any other character), Aristophanes **[End Page 63]** could have been ridiculing the onstage appearance of a character in *Andromeda*, who was commonly thought of as a disembodied voice.

Another possible solution to the problem of vocal continuity in role-sharing is a kind of stage ventriloquism in which the voice of a character may be supplied by an actor other than the one wearing that character's mask and costume. This sort of ventriloquism has been accepted recently by a number of scholars as a limited solution to the problem of a fourth or fifth speaking role when all three speaking actors were onstage at one time. [81](#) Macdowell and Marshall have convincingly identified the scenes where this kind of ventriloquism would have been used in Old Comedy, and several scholars have noted instances of its use in Euripides. [82](#) The instances of stage ventriloquism in Old Comedy usually involve repeated replies, mumbling, the cries of babies and other fairly inarticulate sounds, which make the hypothesis all the more likely. [83](#) Modern ventriloquists also make use of repetition and expected answers to clarify the modified speech that represents the puppet's half of the dialogue. The ventriloquist often casually or emphatically repeats the dummy's speech in a more articulated voice. In this way the ventriloquist serves the same function as the human interlocutor of traditional Western folk puppetry. [84](#) MacDowell even suggests that dolls rather than mute actors could have been used for Megarian's daughters in Aristophanes' *Akharnians*, whose speech amounts only to onomatopoeic squeals, "*koi koi*." Marshall thinks that mute actors are more likely than dolls, "since they must follow orders for movement," although he agrees with MacDowell that the scene was done with quick changes and four speaking actors. [85](#) Marshall, however, proposes that almost all of the instances in Old Comedy where MacDowell thinks five actors are required could have been accomplished with four actors through the use of lightning changes of costume and ventriloquial dubbing of characters.

Lightning changes and ventriloquial dubbing would also offer a possible solution to problematic instances in tragedy that seem to require role splitting. However, this would sometimes require the scarcely plausible situation of one actor performing two voices that speak at length, in order to keep the same voice for each character that had to be split

between actors. For example, ventriloquism would be a possible solution to the famous problem of three different actors having to play Theseus in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, or in the *Antigone*, to the dialogue between Antigone and Creon mentioned above. In the latter scene, the actor speaking behind the mask of Creon would also speak for the actor wearing the mask of Antigone, who would gesture accordingly. Despite the clarifying use of gesture, this technique, more than any other, strikes the modern spectator as requiring vocal transformation of some kind. My **[End Page 64]** previous suggestion of uniform registers, qualities or tempi giving continuity to each character's speech would seem a more plausible solution. However, since scholars have generally accepted ventriloquism and quick changes as limited techniques of the ancient theatre, experimentation with more elaborate uses of ventriloquism may have been attempted. The convention of one performer doing the voices for several pantomime actors or dancers became popular in later antiquity, and a limited use of quick changes and ventriloquism in ancient Greek theatre seems much more plausible in light of what was achieved by the dramatic ventriloquists of the nineteenth century. ⁸⁶ In the uses of stage ventriloquism proposed by MacDowell and Marshall, Aristophanes seems to be self-consciously playing with the convention, as he did with many conventions of tragedy, and particularly the devices of Euripides, who seems to have used this kind of ventriloquism in a fairly straightforward, un-self-conscious manner.

The more the fifth-century Greek plays are examined with performance issues in mind, the more ingenious, flexible, and continuously innovative their theatre practice seems. Performance analysis makes it clear that tragedy in particular has much in common with many non-Western traditions of masked, sung, and danced drama. Character identity may not have been as important to a Greek audience as the ideas in the poetry or the emotional effect of the music, but the requirements of their theatre practice made signifying the source of a voice clearly a necessity. It seems unlikely that an audience so attuned to oral recitation and the musicality of the voice would rely only on indexical references and visual cues in order to distinguish between speakers. Even in Epic recitation, where the narration conventionally announces each speaker, Plato (in the *Ion*) at least indicates that the change of speaker was also signified by a shift in register and vocal quality. ⁸⁷

The special circumstances and framing of oracular speech distinguished it from mimetic performance, but the actor's expression of extreme emotions through rhythm, song, and heightened diction links possession with acting on a sonic level. The particular kind of vocal difference that signifies the identity of a character also signifies a kind of identity, whether it is defined by emotional state, gender, or status as mortal or divine. Cultural codes determine or contribute to the meaning of paralinguistic vocal signs, but vocal difference signifies the change of speaker, whether from one mask to another, or from the medium to the demon in the belly. Possession is not the origin of the dramatic impulse to speak in another voice, but it relies on the same deep-seated Western assumption that someone or other is doing the talking.

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Notes

1. I will summarize the arguments about vocal characterization in the concluding sections of this essay. Peter Arnott expresses the majority view in *Public and Performance in the Greek Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1989) when he writes: "It is obvious that the level of vocal impersonation was far less than we are now used to—if indeed, it existed at all" (86).
2. The practice of professional writers composing speeches for defendants to deliver in the law courts is another example of the ambiguity of Greek conceptualizations of agency behind speech. But this practice originated in the fourth century; I chose to focus on the areas of discourse that coexisted with fifth-century theatre and continued as traditions into late antiquity.
3. The first history of ventriloquism was Abbe de la Chapelle, *Le Ventriloque ou L'Engastrimythe* (London: De L'Etanville, 1772). About the time I had completed my research for my own book, Oxford published Stephen Connor's *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). My review of this book appears in *TDR: A Journal of Performance Studies* 46 (2002): 174-76. Before Connor's study, histories of ventriloquism have been either popularized or were esoteric works concerned with arcane origins, scientific explanations, and narratives of ventriloquial prowess. Most of these were published between the early eighteenth and late nineteenth century and include Paul Garnault, *History of Ventriloquism*, tran. George Havelock Helm (Brooklyn, 1900); and Antonio Blitz, *History of Ventriloquism, with Instructions and Anecdotes Combine* (Philadelphia: Brown's Steam Power Book Card and Job Printing, 1856). The most recent popular history of ventriloquism is Valentine Vox, *I Can See Your Lips Moving: The History and Art of Ventriloquism* (Surrey: Kaye and Ward LTD, 1981).
4. Etymologically, the word "ventriloquism" comes from a Latin rendering of the Greek word *engastrimantis* or *engastrimuthos*, literally "belly-prophet" or "belly speaker" respectively, a word which first appears in texts from the classical period of the fifth century BCE. The Latin derivative, *ventriloquus* (*venter-*, the belly; *loqui*, to speak), does not seem to have become the common translation for this type of medium until the third or fourth century CE. Earlier Latin usage has the word *pythonissa*, although there is no indication of any implied connection between the "belly-prophets" and the Python spirit of the Oracle at Delphi. Like the word "ventriloquist," it became generic, confusing the spirit with the medium in much the way that popular usage refers to the Frankenstein's monster as Frankenstein.
5. *Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 519, s. v. "ventriloquism."
6. In Connor's defense his work does focus on the history of ventriloquism as a cultural tradition; the core of the book is appropriately a "history of the history of ventriloquism" (*Dumbstruck*, 14).
7. Homer, *The Odyssey*, tran. Richmond Lattimore (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 4.271-89.
8. Homer, *To Delian Apollo*, in *Hesiod and The Homeric Hymns and Homerica*, tran. H. G. Evelyn White, Loeb vol. 57 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 3.161-65. See also W. Burkert, *Greek Religion*, tran. J. Raffan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 110.
9. The only dramatic representation of Echo that survives is Aristophanes' parody of Euripides' lost *Andromeda* in the comic poet's *Themosphoriazusae*. The greatest controversy about Echo's presence in either play is the question of whether or not she was visible onstage or represented as a disembodied voice. I will address this controversy below.
10. Vox, *I Can See*, 18-19.

11. The only direct ancient evidence of vocal trickery associated with oracular responses is from Lucian's first century CE account of *Alexander the False Prophet*, tran. A. M. Harmon, Loeb vol. 4 (London: Heinemann, 1925), 15.26. The charge of "falseness" consists of not only unreliable prophecies and outright deception through the use of speaking tubes placed in an idol but also personal financial gain, sexual improprieties, and fear tactics. Lucian doesn't call Alexander a prophet when he visits his temple, but a *goes* or sorcerer, associating the word with Alexander's claim of the power to heal the sick and raise the dead. In any case, Lucian's accounts of the trickery of Alexander of Abonuteichos are depicted as unusual, transparent, and silly rather than the expected practice. On Alexander and false prophecy see D. S. Potter, *Prophets and Emperors: Human and Divine Authority from Augustus to Theodosius* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 110.

12. For more and varied examples of "speaking vases" see Niall Slater, "The Vase as Ventriloquist," in *Signs of Orality: The Oral Tradition and Its Influence on the Greek and Roman World*, ed. E. Anne Mackay (Boston: Brill, 1999). In 1982, Eric Havelock suggested that such inscriptions represent the objects as if they were speaking in his book *The Literature Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 195, 197.

13. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1982), 24.

14. *Ibid.*, 78.

15. Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, tran. J. Raffan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 117.

16. Aristophanes *Wasps* 1015-20, translation and italics mine.

17. Plato *Sophist* 252c, translation and italics mine.

18. The meager sources that are available between the Alexandrine scholiasts to the classical scholars of the mid-twentieth century uniformly describe Eurykles as a human. I will cite most of these sources below.

19. The citations of *hypophtheggomai* noted in Liddel and Scott's Lexicon are: Pl. *Sophist* 252c; Lucian *Niger* 13 (where it means "speaking from underground"); Plutarch *Moralia* 2.88c with *tini*, *ti-* to hint gently, suggest, and Brutus 36 "reply" (where it is the reply of a phantom who identifies himself to Brutus as his own evil genius); Josephus *Bellum Judaicum* 3.2.3; of birds, Aelius *De Natura animalium* (where it distinguishes the soft from loud hooting of an owl); of a dog, Plutarch *Aratus* 8 (where it described a dog growling faintly and indistinctly).

20. Cross-cultural examples of the belief that spirits speak in sibilant whispers include: Edward Burnett Tylor, *Religion in Primitive Culture* (Gloucester: P. Smith, 1878, 1958), 18, 220-21; Linda Hunter, "Transformation in African Verbal Art: Voice, Speech, Language," *Journal of American Folklore* 109 (1996): 178; Lydia Cabrera, *El Monte: Igbo Fina Ewe Orisha Vittininfinda* (Havana: Ediciones C. R., 1954), 101; David Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts and Ancestors* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 75-76; Jean-Claude Muller, "La Pierre Qui Parle Ou Le Savoir Ventriloque: Response rukaba aux masques et aux possedes des ethnies voisines," *Anthropolgie at Societes* 17.3 (1993): 93-101.

21. Sophocles, *The Fragments of Sophocles*, ed. A. C. Pearson (Amsterdam: A. M. Hakkert, 1963). Pearson glosses Eurykles as follows: "Considerable notoriety was acquired at Athens during the time of the Peloponesian war by a ventriloquist named Eurykles, who professed the power of divination by means of a familiar spirit—hence Aristophanes producing his plays through others compares himself to Eurykles" (37).

22. *Ibid.*, 59, 37.

23. *Scholia Platonica*, ed. William Chase Greene, Frederic de Forest, John Burnet, Charles Parker Pomeroy (Haverford: Haverford College, 1938; reprint, Chico: Scholars

Press, 1981), 252. See also Lewis Campbell, *The Sophistes and Politics of Plato* (1867; reprint, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 141-42.

24. Campbell, *The Sophistes*, 141-42. See also Aristophanes *Wasps* 264.

25. James Caulfield, *Portraits, memoirs and Characters of Remarkable persons, from the revolution in 1688 to the end of the reign of George II, Collected from the most authentic accounts extant* (London: T. H. Whitely, 1819, 1820.)

26. Early in my research classical theatre scholar C. W. Marshall cleverly suggested to me that the ventriloquist could place his ear near someone else's belly, with his face turned away from the subject, and produce a voice that might seem to come from that belly. However, this image does not suit the sense and language of the metaphors in Aristophanes and Plato, nor does it resemble any divinatory practice in the traditions I have investigated.

27. See Vox, *I Can See*, 18-19. This popular history of ventriloquism states that "Aristophanes inferred that Eurykles' voice diffusion was so well managed that it appeared to come from another source and that he himself, in the same manner, wrote words to put into the mouths of actors" (18).

28. G. Mastromarco, A. M. Bowie, "Introduzione a Aristofane," *The Classical Review* 45 (1995): 430; and S. Halliwell, R. Scodel, "Theater and Society in the Classical World," *Classical Review* 45 (1995): 177.

29. D. M. MacDowell, *Aristophanes and Athens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 35-45.

30. Aristophanes expresses "taking the risk of failure at dramatic festivals" as dangerous (*kindunon*) (*Wasps* 1021). Macdowell comments that "On his own responsibility" (*kath' heauton*) is the opposite of acting as a subordinate to someone else" (commentary on *Wasps*, 264).

31. MacDowell also points out that "there appears to be no fifth century text in which that word [poet] is used of the writer of a comic script who was not also the director" (*Aristophanes*, 41).

32. See Christopher Gill, *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy and Philosophy: The Self in Dialogue* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

33. Euripides *Hippolytus* 925-31. See Herbert Mursurillo, "The Problem of Lying and Deceit and the Two Voices of Euripides' 'Hippolytus' 925-31," *Transactions of the American Philological Society* 104 (1974): 231-38. Although Mursurillo mistakenly assumes that Eurykles is not only a medium but also one much like a modern ventriloquist, he does point out that the passage from Euripides illustrates the Greeks' dialogic and voiced conception of the self.

34. For a survey of scholarly opinions on Plato's ideas about poetic inspiration, see Penelope Murray, ed., *Plato on Poetry: Ion; Republic 376e-398b; Rep. 595-608b* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 7-12. This work contains extensive bibliographical references on the subject as well.

35. "The Subject is the locus of consciousness, subjective experience, reason, will, and our 'essence' everything that makes us who we uniquely are. The Selves consist of everything else about us, our bodies, our social roles our histories and so on." Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 268.

36. For the most recent and comprehensive argument for the concept of possession in ancient Greece see Ruth Padel, *In and Out of the Mind: Greek Images of the Tragic Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

37. Plato, *Republic III*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, tran. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 398 a.

38. On the repertoire of nineteenth-century ventriloquist performances see C. B. Davis,

"Reading the Ventriloquist's Lips: The Performance Genre behind the Metaphor," *The Drama Review: A Journal of Performance Studies* 42 (1998): 133-56.

[39.](#) Plutarch *Moralia* 674b. Phaedrus *Fables* 5.5.

[40.](#) F. C. Babbitt's Index to Plut. *Moralia* I, Loeb Classical Library, identifies Parmeno as a famous comic actor of the latter part of the fourth century BC (383).

[41.](#) Plutarch, *Moralia*, tran. Frank Cole Babbitt (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949-1976), 612B-697.

[42.](#) *Ibid.*, 674.

[43.](#) Aristotle, *Problems*, The Loeb Classical Library, tran. W. S. Hett (London: W. Heinemann, Ltd., 1953-1957), 11.6. Attributed to Aristotle and probably written by one of his students, *Problems* asks a series of questions and offers reasoned answers on how the four elements of ancient science interact in various observable phenomena such as the effect of heat, moisture, and the contours and materials of objects on the phenomenon of sound.

[44.](#) While not in the context of mimicry, the same chapter also shows an awareness of vocal production relevant to the ventriloquist's technique of muffling or modulating the voice. The author of the *Problems* asks, "Why do the deaf always speak through their nose? Now the dumb make sounds through their noses, for the breath strikes through the nostrils because the mouth is closed. It is closed because they do not use the tongue to modulate the voice" (Aristotle *Problems* 11.2).

[45.](#) Lucian, *Lexiphanes*, Loeb Classical Library vol. 5, tran. A. M. Harmon (London: Heineman, 1926), 20.

[46.](#) The *Septuagint* (LXX) has the word *engastrimantis* at *Leviticus* 19.31, 20.27, and at 1 *Samuel* 28.7 as the Greek translation of the Hebrew compound word *ba'al 'ov* or "controller of the ov," indicating either a spirit or a fetish involved in channeling the spirit voice. See Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964), 217, 220; and S. R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Books of Samuel*, second edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913, 1960, 1966), 214.

[47.](#) Dodds, 91.

[48.](#) Hippocrates, *The Sacred Disease I*, Loeb Classic Library vol. 2 (Harvard University Press, 1994), 6.360.151 L.

[49.](#) This popular belief extended beyond the early Christian period. Writing about the first through third centuries CE, D. S. Potter explains that "inscriptions recording oracular responses tend to begin with the word 'the god said' and this is presumably what most people thought happened: the god entered the prophet and spoke. In this respect the Christian critique of oracles, that they were the work of demons who spoke through prophets, was probably much closer to the perception of the average person that were the arguments of these intellectuals" (Potter, *Prophets and Emperors*, 48-49).

[50.](#) Plutarch *Moralia* 1.5.2, 623 B.

[51.](#) Clifford Ashby, *Classical Greek Theatre: New Views of an Old Subject* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999), 130.

[52.](#) Occasionally the characters in the cartoons help draw attention to Blanc's virtuosity, as when Daffy Duck and Bugs Bunny disguise themselves as each other and affect less than perfect imitations of each other's voices!

[53.](#) Mark Damen, "Actor and Character in Greek Tragedy," *Theatre Journal* 41 (1989): 318. See also Z. Pavloskis, "The Voice of the Actors in Greek Tragedy," *Classical World* 71 (1977): 113-23.

[54.](#) Damen, "Actor and Character," 319.

[55.](#) *Ibid.*, 320.

[56.](#) *Ibid.*, 320-21.

57. Clifford Ashby suggests that in Greek theatre practice, "doubled roles may usually be grouped by pitch; in all likelihood, the three actors were selected for differing vocal ranges, from basso to high tenor or countertenor" (*Classical Greek Theatre*, 137).
58. Pavlovski, "The Voice of the Actors," *Classical World* 71 (1977): 113-23. Examples of characters in the same family who could have been performed by the lead actor include Atossa and Xerxes, Ajax and Teucer, and Pentheus and Agave.
59. Damen, "Actor and Character," 321-22.
60. Arnott, *Public and Performance*, 87
61. Ashby, *Classical Greek Theatre*, 133.
62. Ibid., 134.
63. My evidence for this is simply the dialogue in the prototype of "dramatic ventriloquism." See William T. Moncrieff, *Memoirs and Anecdotes of Monsieur Alexandre, with Adventures of a Ventriloquist, or the Rogueries of Nicholas* (London: John Downes, 1822). See also Davis, "Reading the Ventriloquist's Lips," 138.
64. Arnott, *Public and Performance*, 92.
65. Ashby, *Classical Greek Theatre*, 134.
66. David Wiles, *The Masks of Menander: Sign and Meaning in Greek and Roman Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 219-20.
67. Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1404b 22-24.
68. Wiles, *The Masks*, 167.
69. *Hydria (The Urn)* and *Georgos (Farmer)* are plays by Menander. *Quintilian*, Loeb Classical Library vol. 4, tran. H. E. Butler (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 293. 11.3.91.
70. Wiles, *The Masks*, 218-19.
71. Sifakis makes the most convincing and broadly supported argument in "The One-actor Rule in Greek Tragedy" for the convention of the protagonist or lead actor playing the most important roles (in *Stage Directions: Essays in Ancient Drama in Honour of E. W. Handley*, ed. Alan Griffiths [London: Institute of Classical Studies, 1995], 13-21). He quotes a wide selection of passages that "imply that the protagonist was recognized as the only player of a tragedy, as if he alone acted the play while the other two actors, necessary though they were for the production of the play, assisted and (literally as well as metaphorically) worked for him. This was true from the earliest phases of theatre history when, in Aristotle's words, 'the poets themselves acted the tragedies,' down to Roman times, as is shown by inscriptions, which reflect official language" (16).
72. Ibid., 20.
73. David Wiles, *Greek Theatre Performance: An Introduction* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 160.
74. Joseph Dane, "Aristophanic Parody: *Thesmophoriazusae* and the Three-actor Rule," *Theatre Journal* 36 (1984): 75-84.
75. MacDowell, *Aristophanes*, 258.
76. Dane, "Aristophanic Parody," 84.
77. Euripides *Thesmophoriazusae* 268 ff.
78. See Malcolm Heath, *Political Comed*