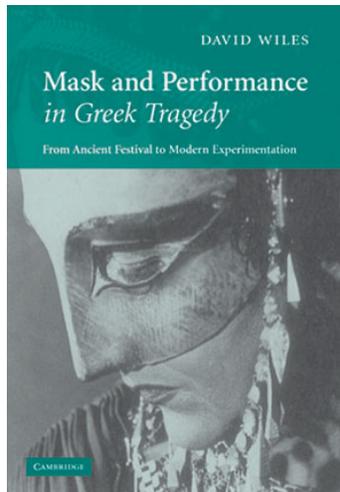


## David Wiles's *Mask and Performance in Greek Tragedy: From Ancient Festival to Modern Experimentation*, 2007.

Reviewed by Zachary Dunbar



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ISBN 9780521865227 (hardback). Price £50 (US\$95.00).

David Wiles is an intuitive and masterful weaver of modern theatre scholarship, practice-based theories and intellectual history. The subject of the tragic mask lends itself well to this particular blend. In the book's introduction, Wiles identifies a nexus of current debates shared by Classics and Theatre Studies: the text- versus performance-based analysis of Greek tragedy, the inherently Dionysian properties of the mask, the dichotomy of theatre and ritual, and the notions of the autonomous self which contributes to our modern misapprehension of the ancient mask as an artefact of concealment rather than as an agency for revelation. The author's overall view is that the mask in Greek tragedy, imbued with a network of relationships, transforms - from fixity to fluidity - the relationship in the theatre between gaze and observer, the actor and the instrument of the mask, the human and the divine, poetry and image, the physical space of *opsis* and the conceptual place of *theoria*. In such a view, binary conditions collapse and, according to Wiles, a higher level of theorisation is called into play. Understanding the meaning and reception of the mask in classical antiquity sends us in search of a post-metaphysical language. As Wiles himself admits, as a historian he "is engaged in the same mythopoetic activity as Euripides". Not that Wiles is inferring a return to Cambridge ritualism; mystification is "bad academic practice" as he rightly points out. Yet the "experience and representation of mystery cannot be dis severed from the phenomenon of religion" (p.11) and it is from a comparative anthropological perspective of religion that he bases his intellectual stance.

A satisfying layout of chapters thankfully shuns linear historiography and begins with the archaeological evidence. Chapter Two visits ancient vase paintings and challenges our modern way of 'seeing', an activity that glosses over the complexity of gazes and spatial relationships toward which the image of the mask trained the observer's vision. Chapter Three relates the profound attention Hellenic artists gave to sculptures. Wiles hypothesises that similar special attention was given the tragic mask so that its angles combined in an idealised neutral form and allowed for multiple meanings to be projected onto it within the extreme viewing distance of the theatre of Dionysus.

In the following four chapters, Wiles voices the modernist views shaped as they were by a utopian account of classical antiquity. Chapter Four is a survey of European intellectual history that culminates in a discussion of the modernist pursuit of organic unity between the body, poetry and theatre space. The mask was vital to a holistic training of the actor, a development which Wiles

then connects to the Neo-Nietzschean outlook of Jean-Louis Barrault and his 1955 *Oresteia*. Barrault's purchase of stylistic eclecticism and quasi-mysticism attracted scorn from the Marxist Semiotician Roland Barthes for whom the mask, according to Wiles, was pre-eminently a sign with fixed meanings. The mask is a political artefact; the Garbo-faced Brecht appears over Barthes's shoulders unmoved by Barrault's Dionysian obsessions. In Chapter Six, the mask constitutes a predominantly cerebral affair in the Peter Hall-Tony Harrison 1981 National Theatre *Oresteia*. Wiles exposes how Hall's text-privileging methods, a world informed by a profound understanding of Shakespearean verse (and acting), are alien to the modern physical theatre and its Copeau-esque concern for the body. In this particular production a methodological schizophrenia arose when the theatrical considerations of Shakespeare's theatre (and the 'metaphorical density' of its verse) were superimposed on the poetry of Sophocles which expresses no division between the body, language and space (p.144). In the next chapter, 'The Mask as Musical Instrument', the focus is on the acoustical event experienced by the mask-wearer, and here Wiles is concerned with the 'musical' language that is appropriated to describe this event in workshops and performances.

The book's final chapters is where the influence of anthropology on Wiles's thinking becomes prominent. The general argument is that the explication of the ancient mask requires transforming conventional reference points from our culture, which is rooted in a monotheistic value-system, to one that peers from behind a polytheistic framework, such as the Dionysian world. In Chapter Eight we travel outside our culture to the world of Yoruba Theatre, Japanese Noh masks in the age of Zeami (1363-1442), and of Balinese Topeng masks. In Chapter Nine, 'The Mask of Dionysus', Wiles argues against modern scholarship's attempts to distinguish the theatrical and illusionist essence of the mask from the epiphanic experience inherent in wearing and in observing the mask in action; Athenian reception in the polytheistic world was far more subtle in its grasp of alterative meanings. The challenge to modern scholarship continues in Chapter Ten. The intellectual quest, led by our encounter with Aristotle, privileges the ancient reception of tragedy and the mask with historical readings based on civic ideology. Moreover, given the moral compass of our theatre and its illusionist techniques we strain to imagine the ancient kind of reception preconditioned, as Wiles argues, by a conceptual rite of passage, or *theoria* – a view indebted in part to Turner's liminality and reinforced by the Classicist Jas Elsner, who, like Wiles, is broadly influenced by cultural anthropology. Experience of *theoria* precedes Aristotelian *opsis*. In both the final Chapter and the Epilogue, the idea of an objectivised or autonomous selfhood existing behind the mask is viewed as unhelpful in any scholarly analysis, and its methodological import is spelled out: "there can be no probing behind the mask, in a hopeless quest for ontological security, because the historian has no position of spectatorial detachment" (p.285).

Comparisons with his '*Masks of Menander*' (1990) are probably inevitable. Seventeen years later it is the re-shaped mask of a semiotician-binarist who is staring down the socio-political contextualists. My criticisms are few. Modern scholarship on the history and the philosophy of science have reshaped the whole Religion/Metaphysical contra Science/Materialism dichotomy, perceiving a much greater continuum in their respective linguistic fields than implied in Wiles's binary revivalism. I also would have welcomed a systematic analysis of music which, within the socio-cultural context of *mousike*, might have further enriched our understanding of the multivalent mask. In terms of performance, when the author discusses pain barriers as a transformative process, the *aulos* reed pressing down in the mouth of the *aulete* might have drawn a comparison with the mask pressing up against the actor's face. Some may also quibble with a somewhat homogenised perception of the ancient spectator and *communitas*. On the other hand the book is already packed with diverse topics and these are shaped by a scholarly *opsis* that makes the reader (theorist and/or practitioner) see some well-traversed materials afresh and renewed.

## Reference

WILES, D., 2004. *Masks of Meander. Sign and Meaning in Greek and Roman Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.