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The Puppet and the Puppet-Master in Ancient Greece: Fragments of an Art Form

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Drawing on literary, epigraphical, and archaeological material, this article addresses the interrelation of the performance context, physical form, and aesthetic of ancient Greek puppetry. Puppeteers performed in a variety of contexts, which included processions and public theaters. During religious festivals, they were hired to supplement competitions in drama and music. I classify ancient Greek puppetry into two main types: the phallic puppets used in religious processions in the Eastern Mediterranean, and small-scale puppetry, which was performed in theaters and possibly also in private contexts. I contend that puppetry was not universally considered an insignificant art but was, rather, an important part of the performance culture of the ancient Mediterranean world. The inclusion of puppetry in religious festivals suggests a positive relationship with this art; reactions to puppetry, from laughter to *thauma* (wonder), align with the aims of the festivals which hosted such performances.



Puppeteers, known as *thaumatopoiōi* ('marvel-makers') or *neurospastai* ('string-pullers'), performed in a variety of contexts in the ancient Greek world, which included processions and public theaters. During religious festivals, they were hired to supplement competitions in drama and music. While the actors, poets, and musicians who competed for prizes at the festivals were of a higher status, hired performers could attain prestige from these public displays in the grand theaters of Greece and, in some cases, were even honored with permanent monuments.¹ Hired performers at the Greek festivals in the Hellenistic and Roman periods included not only puppeteers, but also mimes, pantomime dancers, trick magicians, and acrobats. Of all these performance traditions of antiquity, however, puppetry has attracted perhaps the least scholarly attention.²

While many unknowns remain about what these puppet shows were like, and what stories they told, from the fragmentary evidence that has survived it is possible to make a number of observations about the aesthetics, performance contexts, physical form, and practice of puppetry. I classify ancient Greek puppetry into two main types: the phallic puppets used in religious processions in the Eastern Mediterranean (found not only in ancient Greece but also in Egypt), and small-scale puppetry, which was performed in theaters and possibly also in private contexts. By drawing together references made to puppets in mechanical, philosophical, historical, and epigraphical texts, this article reconstructs many aspects of the materials, construction, and methods of operation employed for stringed puppets and puppet theaters. Though caution should be used when determining how puppetry functions in relation to the rhetorical aims of each text, similarities across texts, even in metaphors, do suggest a common culture of this art form in the ancient Mediterranean world. Wherever possible, I seek to contextualize puppetry in the ancient Greek world within a wider context of puppetry in the ancient Mediterranean, from the Bronze Age to the Roman era. Such connections were

¹ Hestiaea and Oreus had a bronze statue of a pebble-conjurer, Theodorus, in their theater, and the Athenians erected a statue of Eurykleides (a *thaumatopoiōs*) at the Theater of Dionysus, Athenaeus, *The Learned Banqueters* (hereafter Ath.) 1.19b–e, text and translation in Olson (2007: 104–109). Abbreviations of ancient literary authors in this article follow *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Hornblower, Spawforth, and Eidinow (2012). Epigraphical abbreviations follow the *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* (hereafter SEG), Chaniotis et al. (2009).

² Scholars of ancient philosophy, working on puppet metaphors and similes, have also considered how ancient puppets may have functioned; see Nussbaum (1976: 146–52) and Bowe (2017). Ancient Greek puppeteering has also been studied in the context of the long history of puppetry by Joseph (1920: 15–21), Jurkowski and Francis (1996), and Puchner et al. (2009). Puppeteers have also been studied in the context of the ancient Greek theater, alongside other types of hired performers, as in Slater (1993) and Denard's (2007) work on the meanings of *akroamata*. Valuable work has been done on the prosopography of theatrical performers in ancient Greece, including some *thaumatopoiōi*, by Stephanēs (1988).

recognized by ancient authors, like Herodotus and Lucian, which suggests a complex and deep association between puppetry and religion across multiple cultural contexts.

The history of puppetry in the ancient Greek world is closely linked to religious festivals and the large-scale public events of the theater. This is true of both large-scale processional puppets and miniature stringed puppets. We know the names of only two professional puppeteers, or *neurospastai*, as well as one king who took up puppetry (see **Table 1**). Potheinas performed in Athens in the 4th century BCE, and a puppeteer whose name ended in *-sion* appears at the end of a list of victors from a festival on Delos (169 BCE).³

Name	Performance context	Term	Date
Antiochus IX Cyzicenus ⁴	Private context	<i>Neurospastein</i>	115–95 BCE
Potheinas ⁵	Public theater (Athens)	<i>Neurospastes</i>	Fourth c. BCE
-sion ⁶	Public theater (Delos)	<i>Neurospastes</i>	169 BC

Table 1: Puppeteers in Ancient Greece.

Like other theatrical arts, puppetry was closely associated with Dionysus. This connection to Dionysus was not only in relation to theater, but also fertility rituals, to which Herodotus noted Egyptian parallels.⁷ By drawing out the role of puppetry in religious contexts, as well as the ways in which puppeteers utilized such festivals to obtain their own fame and notoriety, I complicate the notion that the ancient Greeks had a largely negative view of puppetry.⁸ I contend that puppetry was an important part of the performance culture of the ancient Mediterranean world, that the inclusion of puppetry in religious festivals suggests a positive relationship with this art, and that reactions to puppetry, from laughter to *thauma* (wonder), align with the aims of the festivals that hosted such performances.

While it is true that many elite Greek and Roman authors associated puppetry with mindless entertainment, scholars writing on the role of puppetry in Greek philosophy have argued that these images help to conceptualize the place of human beings in the

³ *Inscriptiones Graecae* (hereafter *IG*) XI 2.133, line 83 (Durrbach, 1912).

⁴ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* (hereafter *Diod. Sic.*) 34/35.34.1, text and translation in Walton (1967: 132–35). Stephanēs (1988) no. 213.

⁵ Ath. 1.19e, translation in Olson 2007, 108–109. Stephanēs (1988) no. 2077.

⁶ *IG* XI 2.133 (Durrbach, 1912). Stephanēs (1988) no. 2487.

⁷ Herodotus (hereafter *Hdt.*) 2.48–9, text and translation in Godley (1920: 334–37).

⁸ For instance, commenting on Herodotus’s description of the processional puppets in Egypt, Alan B. Lloyd writes, ‘*Νευρόσπαστα* “marionettes” are well known in Greece, though practitioners of the puppeteer’s art were much despised’ (1994: 222).

universe, and that ‘mindlessness’ might not always hold a negative association. It could instead constitute an important dimension of education and understanding (section 1).⁹ In the next two sections I consider the two main types of puppetry practiced in the ancient Greek world: processional puppets (section 2) and the miniature puppet theater (section 3a–d). While there is no distinction in Greek terminology between these categories, processional puppets and miniature puppet theaters can be distinguished on the basis of performance context, and the relationship of the operators or puppeteers to puppet and audience.

1. The Puppet as *Thauma*

The aesthetic of ancient puppetry was one of *thauma* (‘marvel’). *Thauma* is the wonder experienced at things which the viewer cannot comprehend: things which seem impossible or defy expectation. Puppets have the potential to cause *thauma* because they are inanimate objects, and yet appear to move as living beings. *Thauma* generated due to imitation (*mimesis*) characterizes not only puppet shows, but also automata, mime, and pantomime (see Dickie, 2001; Milanezi, 2004 and Skotheim, 2021). *Thauma* had a central function in ancient Greek religion as it was also associated with wonder directed towards the divine.¹⁰

For Aristotle, intellectual inquiry begins with *thauma*.¹¹ Aristotle claims that humans began to philosophize by experiencing *thauma* at that which they did not understand. He writes in *Metaphysics* that they were ‘wondering (θαυμάσαντες, *thaumasantes*) first at obvious perplexities’, and then advancing to more complex questions about the natural world.¹² The difference between philosophical *thauma* and the *thauma* caused by puppet performances is that the former provokes philosophers to ask questions and seek answers in pursuit of knowledge about how the universe works. By contrast, the spectator at a puppet show is meant to experience *thauma* without that necessarily provoking the motivation to understand the mechanism of the puppet. A distinction can therefore be drawn between the purpose of the *thauma* caused by puppets in the context of a religious festival, which contributed to an atmosphere of amazement appropriate for the worship of the gods, and the *thauma* Aristotle identifies as an

⁹ The connection between puppets, play and education is particularly emphasized in Plato’s *Laws* (hereafter *Pl. Leg.*). See Bernadete (2001: 43–48), Kurke (2013) and Shofield (2016).

¹⁰ The wondrous aspect of ancient religion can be seen, for example, in the use of miraculous technologies in cultic contexts. Gerolemou (2018: xii–xiii) uses the example of the wonder directed at the statue of Artemis in Euripides’s *Iphigeneia among the Taurians*, which has a mechanism that makes it appear to close its eyes automatically. See also Lightfoot (2021).

¹¹ *Pl. Leg.* 658c; see Meyer (2015: 55) for a translation.

¹² Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (hereafter *Arist. Metaph.*) 982b, text and translation in Tredennick (1933: 12–13).

impetus to philosophize. The presence of puppets in philosophical texts, then, creates a certain tension between the wonder they evoke (because they defy understanding) and their use as an explanatory tool to clarify complex phenomena such as the workings of the soul.

Greek authors repeatedly associate puppets with frivolity and mindlessness. Comparing his troupe of entertainers (dancers and musicians) to puppet-shows (νευρόσπαστα, *neurospasta*), the Syracusan in Xenophon's *Symposium* calls those who watch them witless.¹³ Marcus Aurelius groups puppeteering with empty enthusiasm for processions, stage dramas, 'flocks and herds', mock battles, bones thrown to dogs, crumbs in a fish pond, the labors of ants, and fearful mice: all distractions that the philosopher must rise above.¹⁴

The concept of the mindlessness of puppetry takes on a central role in Plato's *Laws*. The Athenian Stranger imagines a hypothetical contest open to all types of performers, in which rhapsodes, dramatists, and even puppeteers would all compete against one another rather than only competing within their own categories, as was the custom in real festival competitions (rhapsodes with rhapsodes, tragedians with tragedians, etc.). He suggests that if little children judged contestants, they would give the prize to puppeteers, older children would give the prize to comedians, educated women and adolescents would give the prize to tragedies, and old men would prefer rhapsodes—and Clinias agrees.¹⁵ We need not deduce from this passage that puppet shows were only frequented by small children, in the same way that we are not to imagine that comedies were primarily attended by older children, and tragedies by women and their teenage sons. Rather, in Plato's scheme, small children stand in for the mindless: those who are delighted by *thaumata*.

The Stranger's speech in *Laws* is centrally concerned with childhood education. The wonder that children direct at puppets in this passage has been seen as significant. Earlier, he suggests that people must practice their life's work through childhood play: those who will be builders must build toy structures and those who will be farmers must play in the soil using miniature tools.¹⁶ This description leads to a conceptualization of humans as puppets, 'whether constituted as the gods' playthings or for a serious purpose, we have no idea' because, just like puppets, people are pulled by different

¹³ Xenophon, *Symposium* 4.55, text and translation in Marchant (1923: 592–93).

¹⁴ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* (hereafter M. Aur.) 7.3 uses the Latin term for puppet, *sigillaria*, modified by the Greek *neurospastoumena*, text and translation in Haines (1916: 164–67).

¹⁵ Pl. *Leg.* 658c; translation in Meyer (2015: 55).

¹⁶ Pl. *Leg.* 643b–c; translation in Meyer (2015: 38–39).

strings.¹⁷ The leading string of calculation, made of gold, represents law, while the iron strings represent other competing forces, such that any person is being pulled between good and bad. Therefore, when the reader encounters children watching a puppet show, it is not only a show but also a philosophical lesson. Seth Bernadete suggests that the wonder the children feel towards puppets mirrors what they will learn as adults through philosophy: ‘the truth about man: he is a divine puppet’ (Bernadete, 2001: 68). Throughout *Laws*, the puppet image allows Plato to explore the concept of serious play, and a sliding sense of scale. Children’s miniature playthings become the tools of adulthood, and so humans realize they are the miniature playthings of the gods.

An anxiety that puppetry detracts from serious pursuits emerges in Diodorus Siculus’s account from the 1st century BCE of the Seleucid King Antiochus IX Cyzicenus, who ruled Syria from 115 to 95 BCE. The king practiced puppeteering:

Shortly after Antiochus Cyzicenus gained the throne he lapsed into drunken habits, crass self-indulgence, and pursuits utterly inappropriate to a king. He delighted, for example, in mimes and exhibitionists, and generally in all showmen (*thau-matopoioi*), and devoted himself eagerly to learning their crafts. He practiced also how to manipulate puppets (*neurospastein*), and personally to keep in motion silver-plated and gilded animals five cubits high, and many other such contrivances. On the other hand, he possessed no store of ‘city-takers’ or other instruments of siegecraft that might have brought him high renown and performed some service worth recording.¹⁸

For Diodorus, the theatrical hobbies of Antiochus are equivalent to his neglect of imperial duties, a criticism leveled against many rulers in Greek and Latin literature.¹⁹ Antiochus’s puppets are probably those of the miniature theater. This creates a gradually increasing sense of scale in the objects Diodorus references, from small puppets to metal-plated animals ‘five cubits high’, or approximately seven and a half feet, to large-scale siege engines, which the king ignores. The implication is that puppets are not just smaller in physical scale than siege-engines, but smaller in significance.

In imperial Greek literature, puppetry was used as a marker of the decline of post-classical Greek culture. Athenaeus displays this elite disdain for popular performance in his dialogue *The Learned Banqueters*, written in the late 2nd or early 3rd century CE.

¹⁷ Pl. *Leg.* 644d; translated by Meyer (2015: 40).

¹⁸ Diod. Sic. 34/35.1, with minor adaptations from the translation by Walton (1967: 132–35). See also Cappelletto (2011: 325).

¹⁹ Most notably the emperor Nero, e.g. Suetonius, *Life of Nero* 21–5, text and translation in Rolfe (1914: 116–29).

The guests at Athenaeus's imagined dinner party are all elite Greeks, who display their education by demonstrating their extensive knowledge of Greek literature of all genres and periods. Athenaeus criticizes what he calls 'later' Greeks who erected statues of performers such as the pebble-conjurer Theodorus, contrasting their interest in *techné* to more high-minded intellectual pursuits.²⁰ Then he lists performers who Greeks in various cities have honored too highly, claiming that Aristotle's philosophy has been turned into parody, and a puppeteer has performed on the same stage as once did Euripides:

The itinerant showman Matreas of Alexandria inspired admiration among the Greeks and the Romans. He used to say that he was raising a beast that devoured itself, and a debate continues until today about what Matreas' beast was. He also wrote parodies of Aristotle's *Problems* and read them in public: 'Why does the sun sink but not dive?'; 'Why do sponges soak up wine but not get drunk?'; and 'How can accounts be reconciled, if they don't argue with one another?' The Athenians granted the puppeteer Potheinas use of the stage on which Euripides staged his inspired dramas; and they erected a statue of Eurycleides in the theater along with that of Aeschylus. The magician (*thaumatopoiós*) Xenophon was also much admired. He left behind a student, Cratisthenes of Phlius, who could make fire flare up spontaneously and created many other illusions that allowed him to baffle people's minds.²¹

Athenaeus implies that such amazement at tricks, shows and jokes is misdirected. Readers are encouraged to be astonished instead by his immense knowledge of Greek culture as he recites the names of individual performers from hundreds of years past, which has been gained from extensive study of Greek literary and historical texts. Athenaeus repeatedly contrasts the classical past (here represented by Aristotle's *Problems* and the performances of Euripides and Aeschylus) with later popular performances like the traveling parodist Matreas, the puppeteer Potheinas, Eurycleides, the illusionists Xenophon and Cratisthenes of Phlius. A focus on puppeteering, which takes place in the Theater of Dionysus, the site of the first performances of Aeschylus' and Euripides' plays, and the first dramatic festivals in the Greek world, heightens the contrast between the classical and post-classical past. How he knew about such performers is difficult to say; he may have found a reference to Potheinas in a text,

²⁰ 'For in later times the Greeks attached much more value to crafts involving manual skill than to intellectual pursuits that require an education' (Ath. 1.19a, translated by Olson, 2007: 104–105). 'Later times' refers to the period after the 5th century BCE, as the earliest performers listed are from the 4th century BCE.

²¹ Ath. 1.19d–20b, translation in Olson (2007: 106–111).

which he does not cite, or have seen a monument, such as a statue or inscription in his honor, like that of Eurykleides.

This critical commentary from Athenaeus suggests that the puppeteer Potheinas stood upon the most venerated stage in Greece. But what, exactly, would that audience have witnessed? Potheinas may have used a miniature theater, creating a stage upon a stage, and probably operated multiple puppets drawn by strings. His show would have been difficult to see beyond the lowest rows of the theater and therefore spectators may have crowded into the orchestra to get a better look, as Alciphron writes of the fictional audience of a performer of pebble tricks in the 4th century CE.²² Athenaeus does not tell us what stories Potheinas told with his puppets, whether they were rooted in the travails of everyday life, as found in New Comedy and mime, whether they were drawn from fable or folktale, like the tales of Aesop, or whether they were drawn from myth, as represented in tragedy, as well as music and dance. However, his audience likely reacted with *thauma*, and would have marveled at the transformation of the inanimate to the animate, as objects appeared to move and act of their own accord.

2. Processional Puppets

Puppets were used in religious processions across the Eastern Mediterranean world, in Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor, and Greece, from as early as the 2nd millennium BCE to the Roman era. These processional puppets had ritual significance, in connection with ithyphallic deities and ranged in size from small to larger-than-life, and relied on visible operators.

In the *Histories*, Herodotus (ca. 484–20 BCE) claims that Greek Dionysiac ritual could find its origin in Egyptian puppetry. He describes a festival of Dionysus in Egypt, where women carried in the procession ‘cubit-tall figures, pulled by strings’, with moving phalluses as large as their bodies, accompanied by a flute-player and women singing hymns to Dionysus.²³ A cubit is the length from fingertip to elbow, approximately 18 inches, and the mention of women carrying the puppets suggests that they were visible to spectators and participants in the procession. This is the earliest use of the term νευρόσπαστος (*neurospastos*) or ‘pulled by strings’ which, along with the related term νευροσπάστης (*neurospastes*) or ‘string-puller’, refers to puppeteering in ancient Greek. Herodotus claims that the mythical seer Melampus introduced this Egyptian ritual to

²² Alciphron, *Letters* 2.17, text and translation in Benner and Fobes (1949: 110–13). Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Gregory the Wonderworker* 956b, translation in Slusser (1998: 85).

²³ Hdt. 2.48; translation in Godley (1920: 334–37). Lloyd compares the phallic puppets in this passage to the string-pulled phallus puppets employed in religious rituals in Yorubaland and the Congo from the 18th century to present day (Lloyd, 1994: 222).

Greece and that the Greeks substituted carrying the phallus for the Egyptian puppet-phallus.²⁴ The mythological connection between Egyptian phallic puppetry and Greek Dionysiac ritual may or may not have a historical basis.²⁵

Writing in the late 2nd century CE, the Syrian author Lucian tells another story about the connection between puppetry and the cult of Dionysus. In his description of the temple of the Syrian goddess, Lucian provides evidence that Dionysus had visited Syria. He says that the Greeks erected phalluses for Dionysus, on which were mounted ‘little wooden men with large penises. They call these *neurospasta*’.²⁶ He says he saw such a figure in the sanctuary. Lucian may have derived this image from Herodotus’s description of the Egyptian procession of phallic puppets, or at least connected the figure in the sanctuary to Herodotus’s cubit-tall figures. Later in the same text, Lucian interprets a phallus-climbing ritual, in which a man climbs to the top of a column and spends seven nights and seven days on top, in imitation of such figurines.²⁷ He neglects to mention whether these little wooden men were used in processions in Syria.

In Egypt and Syria, then, there is mention of relatively small-scale phallic puppets in connection with the cult of Dionysus. Though none of these phallic puppets have been archaeologically recovered, Eric Csapo has argued that there is iconographical evidence for such a ritual from Egypt and the Greek world (Csapo, 1997). He suggests that a representation of the ithyphallic god Min Kamut-ef from the temple of Ramses III at Medinet Habu shows the manipulation of the statue by a rope during a procession, possibly in connection with the raising of the phallus (Csapo, 1997: 273 and plate 7C). He also analyzes an Attic black-figure cup of ca. 560 BCE, now in the Etruscan museum in Florence, which depicts a large satyr figure atop a phallic pole, suggesting that it is a puppet akin to those described by Herodotus and Lucian (Csapo, 1997: 269–70 and plates 3–4).²⁸ A man rides the satyr-puppet, whose legs dangle over the pole, while the pole appears to be operated by a group of eight figures from below using ropes. Notably, the puppet in this case is larger than life-size. Such ritual puppetry may have lasted

²⁴ Hdt. 2.49; translation in Godley (1920: 336–37).

²⁵ Cross-pollination between Greek and Egyptian theater and ritual is clear; especially in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Osiris, like Dionysus, was associated with the agricultural cycle. Plutarch, writing in the 1st century CE, also mentions an affinity between the festival of the birth of Osiris, the Pamyliia, and Dionysiac ritual, each of which involved phallic processions: Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris* (hereafter Plut. *De Is. et Os.*) 12, text and translation in Babbitt (1936: 30–35). At the Pamyliia, Plutarch says that a statue of Osiris with a phallus three times the size of the figure was carried, symbolizing the multiplying capability of fertility: Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 36, translation in Babbitt (1936: 86–91). The Khoiak festival, held in the fourth and last month of the inundation of the Nile, included a ritual performance at Edfu, in the Ptolemaic period, which has been compared to drama (Hedges, 2017).

²⁶ Lucian, *On the Syrian Goddess* (hereafter *Syr. D.*) 16, translated by Lightfoot (2003: 256–57).

²⁷ Lucian *Syr. D.* 28, text and translation in Lightfoot (2003: 266–67).

²⁸ Florence, Museo Archeologico Etrusco no. 3897.

into the Roman era, as the Dionysiac phallus-riding ritual is epigraphically attested to into the 3rd century CE (Csapo, 1997: 278).²⁹

The distortion of scale is a significant feature of these processional phallic puppets. Herodotus emphasizes the scale of the puppets in relation to their oversized phalluses. On the Florence cup, there is a clear difference in scale between, on the one hand, the larger-than-life satyr and phallus pole and, on the other, the human participants, including both the operators and the rider. The fact that the operators of such puppets were visible to spectators, then, need not have detracted from their visual impact: it would have only served to further emphasize the difference in scale between puppet, phallus, and human, which was part of the purpose of these objects.

3. The Miniature Puppet Theater

3a. Performance context

Diminutive puppets are also attested to in the Eastern Mediterranean, from Old Kingdom Egypt to the Roman era. Like processional puppets, they were operated by strings. They can, however, be differentiated in several respects, including their reliance on an invisible operator (the hidden puppeteer) and the use of a framing device, such as a screen or miniature theater. In the Greek world, the operation of these miniature puppets was considered an art, which in certain cases was rewarded with public recognition, as with the performance of Potheinas in the Athenian theater. Such miniature puppetry could be performed in the context of festivals, where the stimulation of *thauma* (wonder) had not only entertainment value but also a religious purpose in terms of instigating awe directed at the divine.

Already in Plato's *Laws*, the hypothetical competition between puppeteers, rhapsodes and dramatists suggests that puppetry would not have been out of place at a theater festival.³⁰ This is more concretely verified by an inscription from the island of Delos, dating from 169 BCE, which includes several *thaumatopoi* ('marvel-makers') who were hired to perform at a local festival, including a dancer, puppeteers, and a *rhomaiestes* (a rare word which appears in a late antique glossary, where it is defined as a type of trapeze-artist).³¹ The puppeteers are called *neurospastai*, and their inclusion here, among competitors and performers of the theater, strongly suggests that *neurospastai* were theater performers as opposed to operators of processional puppets. The inscription from Delos says:

²⁹ Csapo cites an inscription from Euboia (SEG 29-807 and 35-907).

³⁰ Pl. *Leg.* 658c; translation in Meyer (2015: 55).

³¹ On possible meanings of this term, see Ferri (2008).

And these men competed on behalf of the god. The aulete Perigenes.
 Kallistratos won with a chorus...Nicander...;
 Actors of old tragedy: Menedemos, Eukrates,...
 Philon, Autokrates...Kitharists:
 Kritoxenos, Hierokles; with a chorus: Straton, Hermonax;
 Kitharodes: Dionysios, Drakon, Demetrios;
 Actors of old comedy: Tharsynon, Herostratos...
 Aulode: Athenikon; Marvel-makers (*thaumatopoi*oi): Zoilos twice,
 Artemo twice, Artemidoros twice, Apollonios twice;
 Dancer: Sosos, twice; Puppeteers (*neurospastai*)...-sion;
 Romaistes: Agathodoros...³²

An unusual feature of this inscription is that the hired performers are listed by name, as victors of competitions normally were. Victory lists typically state competitions in the order in which they occurred, so grouping these entertainers at the end suggests that the hired entertainment was reserved for the conclusion of the festival. The timing of the hired entertainment at the Delian festival, which included puppeteering, is in keeping with a record of a festival in 124 CE, the Demostheneia at Oinoanda, in Northern Lycia, South-West Turkey. At the Demostheneia, after 18 days of musical and dramatic competitions, hired performers took the stage for three days. The festival concluded with a single day of athletic competitions.³³ While these inscriptions do not give insight into how audiences reacted to such hired entertainment, placing these events at or near the conclusion of the festival may have provided spectators with something to look forward to, which would allow the festival to end on a spectacular note.

3b. Materials and construction methods

Several authors mention that puppets were carved from wood. For instance, in *On the Motion of Animals*, Aristotle refers to wood and iron as the materials of the ‘automatic puppets’.³⁴ Elsewhere, Horace compares the unwise man to a slave: ‘a wooden puppet, moveable by means of others’ sinews’ (*nervis alienis mobile ligneum*).³⁵ In his treatise *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Human Body*, Galen (130–200 CE) calls puppets ‘wooden

³² IG XI 2.133, lines 71–81 (Durrbach, 1912).

³³ SEG 38–1462, translated by Mitchell (1990). See also Wörrle (1988).

³⁴ Aristotle, *On the Motion of Animals* (hereafter Arist. *De motu an.*) 701b7–9, text and translation in Nussbaum (1978: 42–45).

³⁵ Horace, *Satires* 2.7.82, text and translation in Fairclough (1926: 130–31). There is also a reference to wooden puppets in Apuleius, *De Mundo* 27, text and translation in Boys-Stone (2021).

images' (τὰ ξύλινα τῶν εἰδώλων, *ta xulina ton eidolon*).³⁶ While none of these sources mention clothing, one can speculate that these wooden puppets were either painted or dressed with textiles and even jewelry, as attested to by certain elaborate dolls.³⁷

Wooden artifacts survive from antiquity only in very limited environmental conditions, such as the deserts of Egypt and the bogs of Northern Europe, and not,



Figure 1: Jointed Greek terracotta doll of the 5th century BCE. Height 13.5 cm. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program.

typically, in Greece. The closest surviving analog to such puppets from Greece are terracotta dolls (Figure 1). These can be variously jointed, including at the shoulders, elbows, hips, and knees.³⁸ Rather than using ball-and-socket joints, which would allow for a full range of motion, the dolls' joints are like hinges, allowing the limb to move only on one plane (up and down, rather than side-to-side).³⁹ The more joints a doll or puppet has, the more closely it can mimic the motions and gestures of living beings. It is possible that ancient wood-carved puppets were constructed to produce more lifelike movements than the terracotta dolls. Indeed, the descriptions of the lifelike movements of puppets' hands, necks, shoulders, and even eyes, described by pseudo-Aristotle, Philo, and Apuleius, suggest that performance puppets were much more elaborately constructed.⁴⁰

Some of these jointed terracotta dolls have holes at the top of the head and in each of the hands, indicating that they were anchored by a rod at the head and manipulated by strings or rods at the hands, though the surviving

³⁶ Galen, *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body* (hereafter *De usu partium*) I, 193 translated by May (1968: 201-2). See also Nussbaum (1976: 148).

³⁷ An ivory doll with jointed limbs was found in the sarcophagus of Crepereia Tryphaena (2nd century CE), along with jewelry for the doll, including a diadem. Clothing does not survive in the doll's kit but was likely made of highly perishable materials (Dolansky, 2012: 261-62).

³⁸ Elderkin (1930) discusses examples of Egyptian, Greek, and Roman jointed dolls, made of a wide variety of materials, including terracotta, bone, and wood. Words for 'doll' in Greek (κόρη, *kore*, κόρος, *koros*, νανίον, *nanion*) are also used for puppets. Almost all the Greek jointed terracotta dolls represent female figures, although one set of 11 such jointed dolls representing male figures has been found in Ephesus. See Lang-Auinger (2015).

³⁹ Similarly, the arms of a small wooden female figurine from Egypt of ca. 945-664 BCE, Metropolitan Museum of Art no. 58.36a-c (Anonymous, 1958), move up and down, but in this case by means of a string mechanism pulled through the interior of the body (Reeves, 2015).

⁴⁰ Pseudo-Aristotle, *On the Cosmos* (hereafter *Ps.-Arist. [Mund.]*) 398b, text and translation in Forster and Furley (1955: 390-91). Philo, *On the Creation* 117, translated by Runia (2001: 77-78). Apuleius, *De Mundo* 27, discussed below in section 3d.

examples were most likely used as playthings or for ritual purposes, not for performance. One might compare these jointed terracotta dolls with the Sicilian marionettes of the *opera di pupi*, which are also anchored at the head with a metal rod and operated by rods and strings attached to the hands and feet.⁴¹

There may have been several distinct types of miniature puppets in the ancient Greek world, all operated by strings, but requiring different manners of engagement from the puppeteer, depending on construction method. One type is marionettes, operated with strings from above, and likely anchored by a rod at the head, on the model of the terracotta dolls. Another would be string-pulled puppets operated from below. Small string-operated figurines have also been found in Egypt, in tomb contexts, such as the group of dancing pygmies, operated by strings pulled from below, found in the tomb of Hepy from the 12th dynasty at Memphis, ca. 1950–1885 BCE.⁴² However, a third type seems to have had a more complex internal mechanism akin to the automatic theater. Such semi-automated mechanisms allowed the puppet to deliver complex motion in response to a simple impetus by the puppeteer. In *On the Motion of Animals*, Aristotle refers to ‘automatic puppets’ (τὰ αὐτόματα, *ta automata*) which are set moving when a small motion occurs: the cables are released and the pegs strike against one another’.⁴³ While he does not call these *neurospasta*, Aristotle compares the wooden pegs and iron of the *automata* to the bones of animals, and their sinews (τὰ νεῦρα, *ta neura*) to the cables.⁴⁴ The reference to *neura* surely calls to mind the *neurospasta*.

Geoff S. Bowe draws a distinction between Aristotle’s moving *thaumata* and Plato’s static puppets in the allegory of the cave, suggesting that these different images express Aristotle’s concern with the causes of motion, in contrast to Plato’s concern with the mimetic relationship of the observable to the real (Bowe, 2020: 12). According to Bowe, for Aristotle, such a ‘kinetic, as opposed to a static, theory of imitation’ was expressed not only through the internal workings of the puppet, but also the movements of the heavenly spheres, and the circularity of reproductive cycles (Bowe, 2017: 69).

⁴¹ It is not possible to establish direct continuity between ancient Greek and modern Sicilian puppet traditions, although puppets were likely known in Sicily in antiquity, as the island was well connected to the theatrical traditions of the wider Greek world from the late 6th century BCE through to the Roman period. Boshier (2012) explores connections between Greek, Sicilian, and Italian theater.

⁴² Metropolitan Museum of Art no. 34.1.130; see Anonymous (1934).

⁴³ Arist. *De motu an.* 701b1–3, translated by Nussbaum (1978: 42). The corruption of the text at this point is discussed by Primavesi (2020: 121), who suggests emending the text such that the ‘striking’ motion refers to the striking of sabers against one another. Aristotle, *Generation of Animals* 734b and 741b also concern such automatic puppets, text and translation in Peck (1942: 148–55, 204–9).

⁴⁴ Arist. *De motu an.* 701b7–9, translation in Nussbaum (1978: 42).

Several scholars have attempted to reconstruct the mechanism of Aristotle's automatic puppet. Pavel Gregoric and Martin Kuhar suggest that the pegs were arranged around a central cylinder, and around this a weighted rope, such that the release of the rope would twist the cylinder and, in turn, 'release the ropes attached to the other parts of the automaton, thus setting them into motion' (Gregoric and Kuhar, 2014: 108). According to Martha Nussbaum, a 'complex mechanism of cables, pegs, or both ensured that, given an initial action of the puppeteer (the untying of a cable, or the freeing of a peg), the puppet performed various complex motions without further direction' (Nussbaum, 1976: 148). These semi-automated puppets seem to be closer to the automatic theater described by Heron of Alexandria, although Sylvia Berryman rightly cautions that true automata should be distinguished from puppets (Berryman, 2003: 354).

Galen compares the tendons of human hands and legs to the strings of puppets.⁴⁵ Speaking of the operation of the hand, he writes, 'This is the device, I think, that is used in moving puppets with cords; for, passing over their articulations, the cords are fastened to the beginning of the parts beyond, so that the puppets readily obey the force of the upward pull when the cords are tightened'.⁴⁶ Similarly, explaining the muscles attached to the tibia, he says, 'For just as those who move puppets with cords attach them beyond the joints to the heads of the members to be moved, so Nature long ago used the same device at all the joints'.⁴⁷ Galen's description of the attachment of the cords 'beyond the joints' suggests that puppets' strings extended across their limbs, such that tightening or loosening them would cause the limbs to move (Nussbaum 1976: 148). The upward pull of the strings would seem to suggest a marionette operated by a puppeteer from above, in contrast to Aristotle's automatic puppets.

However, Nussbaum cites Michael of Ephesus (1070–1129 CE), whose commentary on Galen's text explains the mechanism. According to Michael, the puppeteer releases the cables, which strike against one another and cause the puppets to move. As the cause is not visible, the puppets appear to be self-moving.⁴⁸ In other words, a spectator would experience the puppets, in this case, as if they were viewing an automaton, although a human operator was in fact the cause of the puppets' motion. Similarly, commenting on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* in the late 2nd or early 3rd century CE, Alexander of Aphrodisias glosses *thaumata* 'puppets' as 'those amusements which are displayed by

⁴⁵ Galen, *De usu partium* I, 34 (hand), I, 193 (leg), translation in May (1968: 90–1, 201–2).

⁴⁶ Galen, *De usu partium* I, 34, translated by May (1968: 90–1).

⁴⁷ Galen, *De usu partium* I, 193, translated by May (1968: 201–2).

⁴⁸ Nussbaum (1976: 148), citing Michael of Ephesus 117.20.

the *thaumatopoiioi*, which seem to be moved by themselves, and automatically'.⁴⁹ This close association between puppets and automata, due to the invisible operation of the puppets in the miniature theater, may also help to explain why Antiochus IX engaged with both.⁵⁰ In the pseudo-Aristotelian *Mechanics*, the author says that mechanics construct a marvelous instrument, while obscuring the cause, similarly associating the marvel of the seen mechanism with the obscurity of the unseen cause.⁵¹ Both come together to create a sense of the marvelous, which is a reaction not just to spectacle, but that which is not fully understood.

3c. The miniature puppet stage

Miniature theaters are evidenced both archaeologically and textually. The connection between Osiris and Dionysus perhaps helps to explain the appearance of a miniature theater in the tomb of Khelmis, a singer of Osiris Antinous, at Antinoe (Antinoopolis), likely dating between the 3rd and 5th centuries CE. Inside the theater, there were figures on pivots operated by strings.⁵² The miniature theater of Antinoe must have been inspired, to some extent, by the Greek theatrical traditions well rooted in Egypt by the Roman imperial period, and it resembles in certain respects the automatic miniature theater described by Heron of Alexandria in the 1st century CE.⁵³ Heron's theater had doors which opened and closed to reveal five successive scenes. These scenes represented the building, launching, and sailing of ships for Troy, and Ajax shipwrecked, and may have been an adaptation of the play *Nauplius* by Lycophron, a tragic poet of the 3rd century BCE.⁵⁴ The miniature theater of Khelmis similarly had doors that opened and closed to reveal a scene with figurines of Isis and Osiris, which were movable with strings. These were still intact when the tomb was opened by M. Gayet in the early 19th century. The structure of both miniature theaters is similar, while the content of the display within reflects different cultural contexts: one being the Greek theatrical tradition of Alexandria, the other a Greco-Roman-Egyptian cultic context in Antinoe.

Given comparable evidence from Antinoe, and Heron's automatic theater with doors, it seems possible that Greek puppeteers could have sometimes used miniature theaters with doors which could open and close to reveal a scene. Such a theater could

⁴⁹ Nussbaum (1976: 147), citing Alexander of Ephesus 18.17–18, a comment on Arist. *Metaph.* 983a, translation in Tredennick (1933: 14–15).

⁵⁰ Diod. Sic. 34/35.1, discussed above.

⁵¹ Pseudo Aristotle, *Mechanical Problems* 848a, text and translation in Hett (1936: 336–37).

⁵² Paris correspondent (1905); Réville and Alphandéry (1905).

⁵³ Hero of Alexandria, *On Automata* 22, text and translation in Grillo (2019: 70–75).

⁵⁴ Kotlińska-Toma (2015: 86).

be mounted upon a table, covered with a screen, behind which the puppeteer could crouch or sit. It is not difficult to imagine that such a contraption would be portable enough for itinerant puppeteers to carry, along with their puppets.

The idea that puppeteers were not seen by spectators in the case of the miniature theater is bolstered by their appearance in philosophical texts to indicate an unseen force which sets things into motion. For instance, Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish Middle Platonist philosopher of the first half of the 1st century CE, uses the image of the puppeteer to indicate the invisible force of God, suggesting the reader learn ‘who it is that, all invisible, invisibly sets the puppets in motion and pulls their strings’, whether that be the mind of the individual or the mind of the universe.⁵⁵ In another commentary, *Questions on Genesis*, Philo compares humans to puppets moved by the invisible puppeteer (God). The invisible powers of God are the cause of the ‘movements of visible things’, as the Creator sends out his powers, ‘but we are wonderfully moved like puppets toward that which pertains to us, (namely) seed and procreation’.⁵⁶ Here, the puppet is used not only as a representative image of control but also something wondrous, connected to God’s designs by actions which appear mundane.

In Plato’s parable of the cave, icons are carried along the cave, above a low wall, which Plato compares to the partition used by puppeteers. This image suggests that the puppeteer would be hidden by such a wall and manipulate their puppets from below:

Picture further the light from a fire burning higher up and at a distance behind them, and between the fire and the prisoners and above them a road along which a low wall has been built, as [like or similar to] the exhibitors of puppet-shows (ὡσπερ τοῖς θαυματοποιοῖς, *hosper tois thaumatopoiiois*) have partitions before the men themselves, above which they show the puppets (τὰ θαύματα, *ta thaumata*).⁵⁷

In this parable, the educated are capable of understanding that icons are casting shadows on the cave wall, while the uneducated respond to the shadows as if they are real. This points again to a distinction between a philosophical reaction to *thaumata* (one of educated discernment) and a mindless reaction, associated with spectacle rather than understanding.

⁵⁵ Philo, *On Flight and Finding* 46, text and translation in Colson (1934: 34–35).

⁵⁶ Philo, *Questions on Genesis* (hereafter QG) 3.48, text and translation in Marcus (1953: 242–47).

⁵⁷ Plato, *Republic* 514b, text and translation in Shorey (1942: 120–21). See also Moore (2014) on the puppet image in Plato’s parable of the cave.

Asli Gocer has interpreted this passage to refer to shadow-puppets, arguing for direct continuity between ancient Greek and Turkish Karagöz puppets which arose in the Ottoman period (Gocer, 1999). In a Karagöz show, figures made from animal hide are manipulated from behind a cloth screen which is backlit. This connection cannot, however, be substantiated. There are clear differences between Plato's puppets and Karagöz shows, such as the position of the light and the surfaces onto which the shadows are cast. In Plato's cave, the light comes from above and behind the people in the cave (figured as spectators), casting shadows onto the wall and not onto a screen, as in the case of Karagöz puppets. Additionally, Karagöz puppets are made of thin, two-dimensional material, whereas Plato is describing three-dimensional objects of stone, wood, and other materials casting shadows. In sum, while we cannot rule out the possibility that shadow-puppetry was practiced in antiquity, Plato's parable of the cave does not provide definitive evidence of such a practice, only of the use of screens to hide the puppeteer from view.

3d. Puppets in motion

This section considers evidence for the operation of ancient Greek puppets, based on descriptions of their movements in philosophical texts. In a pseudo-Aristotelian treatise, *De mundo* ('On the Cosmos'), the author employs puppeteers as one of 12 interconnected analogies to explain the concept of God as an invisible mover. Puppeteers, like engineers, cause complex movements by means of a simple, initial movement. In this image, the puppet illustrates the smooth functioning of the cosmos and the appearance of ease with which the puppeteer operates the puppet. The image in *De Mundo* centers on the operation and movement of the puppet:

In the same way too [i.e. as the operators of machines] the men who run puppet-shows (οἱ νευροσπάσται, *hoi neurospastai*), by pulling a single string (μίαν μήρινθον, *mian merinthon*), make the creature's neck move, and his hand and shoulder and eye, and sometimes every part of his body, according to a rhythmical pattern.⁵⁸

The focus on the single string (μήρινθος, *merinthos*) controlling all the movements of the puppet suggests wonder generated by the apparent simplicity of such a complex mechanism. Of the motions described, only that of the shoulder would have been possible with the jointed dolls that survive, which suggests that performance puppets

⁵⁸ Ps.-Arist. [*Mund.*] 398b, text and translation in Forster and Furley (1955: 390–91). See also Gregoric and Karamanolis (2020: 187–8).

did have more joints than these dolls and were able to move in a more realistic fashion. It is the puppet's realism which the author emphasizes, as he refers to minute motions of the hand, the eye, and 'every part of his body'.⁵⁹

Philo describes the start-and-stop movement of puppets when he compares the seven parts of the soul, which he defines as the five senses and the faculties of speech and generation, to a puppet show:⁶⁰

Just like in puppet shows (έν τοῖς θαύμασιν, *en tois thaumasin*), all these [parts of the soul] are manipulated by the ruling element through the nerves (ὑπό τοῦ ἡγεμονικοῦ νευροσπαστούμενα, *hypo tou hegemonikou neurospastoumena*). Sometimes they are at rest, at other times they move, each producing its own appropriate disposition and movement.⁶¹

As in Aristotle, the motions of the puppet are controlled by a single puppeteer, identified with the rational part of the soul in Philo's simile. The word ἡγεμονικός (*hegemonikos*, 'authoritative', i.e. rational part of the soul) also refers to the puppeteer as leader, derived from Stoic philosophy.⁶² In his commentary on Abraham, Philo uses a similar image, comparing the invisible mind to a puppeteer (*thaumatopoiος*), 'sometimes relaxing and giving them a free reign, sometimes forcibly pulling and jerking them back, and thus causing its puppets at one time to move in harmony, at another to rest'.⁶³ Four centuries earlier, Aristotle had emphasized the motions of the parts of a single puppet, while Philo captures the marvelous nature of the cast of puppets springing into motion at different times. *De Mundo's* mention of puppets moving in a 'rhythmical pattern'

⁵⁹ Another example of the imitative nature of puppets appears in Athenaeus, who says that bustards 'move around like marionettes (*neurospasteitai*)' as they observe men dancing in front of them, imitating their movements, Ath. 9.391a, translated by Olson (2008: 312–13).

⁶⁰ For another example of puppets used as a symbol of control, see Philodemus, *On the Good King According to Homer*, *P.Herc. Stub*, col. 40 (*P.Herc.* 1507, col. 22), line 32; Asmis (1991: 33). Puppetry was a favorite metaphor for the control of the body for Marcus Aurelius: M. Aur. 3.16; 6.16; 6.28; 7.29; 10.38; 12.19, text and translation in Haines (1916: 62–65, 138–51, 144–45, 176–77, 190–91, 330–31). See also Berryman (2010). Writing in Late Antiquity, Eusebius (ca. 260–265 to 339–340 CE) used puppets as a much more negative image of the lack of control, objecting to the idea that nature could be compared to 'a lifeless object ... carried back and forth like a puppet on strings': Eusebius, *Reply to Hierocles* 45.1, translated by Jones (2006: 246–47). At 45.2, Eusebius claims that Pythagoras was not a lover of philosophy but a puppet of the Fates, a similarly negative use of the puppet metaphor.

⁶¹ Philo, *On the Creation* 117, translated by Runia (2001: 77–78). In a discussion of the withdrawal of the senses during sleep, Philo suggests a successive involvement of the intellect with the senses, the senses with the nerves, and the nerves with the motion of the parts of the body: Philo QG 1.24, translation in Marcus (1953: 14). The focus on the nerves as proximate causes of motion works both in relation to the human or animal body and also for the motion of the puppet, whose strings are nerves.

⁶² Runia (2001: 288).

⁶³ Philo, *On Abraham* 16, text and translation in Colson (1935: 40–43).

and Philo's image of puppets moving in harmony raise the question of whether puppet shows were accompanied by music, and whether they sometimes moved in harmony because they were representing choral dance.⁶⁴

In the 2nd century CE, the Numidian philosopher Apuleius adapted the pseudo-Aristotelian image from *On the Cosmos*, describing similarly life-like puppet movements. He writes:

Even the people who set in motion gestures in wooden puppets, when they pull the string for the limb they want to get activated, then the neck will turn, the head will nod, the eyes will roll, and the hands present themselves for service—and the creature as a whole will appear to be alive.⁶⁵

Apuleius' description does not suggest that the entire puppet was operated by a single string, but that it was more like a marionette, with strings associated with each limb. It is also remarkable that Apuleius seems to be familiar with such elaborate puppets, with eye-motions as well as moving limbs.

Because of the life-like nature of their movements, puppets were used as images by philosophers to discuss the ability of spectators to discern between reality and illusion. In *Every Good Man is Free*, Philo discusses the perception of truth in a passage which evokes Plato's theory of forms. Those who are unable to discern truth, due to a lack of education or an over-exposure to sophistry, he says, believe that things shown clearly to them 'are wild phantom-like inventions no better than the illusions of the puppet show'.⁶⁶ Plutarch similarly uses puppets as an example of the deceit of the viewer, like the phantoms that delude madmen, who believe in the existence of 'things that no artful joiner, puppet-maker (πλάστης θαυμάτων, *plastēs thaumatōn*), or painter ever ventured to combine for our entertainment into a likeness to deceive the eye'.⁶⁷ These passages also suggest that life-like illusion was associated with puppet shows.

4. Conclusion

Rather than identify a singular form of puppetry in the ancient Mediterranean, I have argued that puppets were constructed and operated in multiple ways. This diversity is

⁶⁴ Kurke (2013: 130–9) discusses the relationship of puppet imagery to the chorus in Plato's *Laws*, and by extension to the movements of the cosmos.

⁶⁵ Apuleius *De Mundo* 27, translated by Shofield (2016: 137).

⁶⁶ Philo, *Every Good Man is Free* 1.6, text and translation in Colson (1941: 12–13).

⁶⁷ Plutarch, *Reply to Colotes in Defense of Other Philosophers* 1123c, text and translation in Einarson and De Lacy (1967: 286–87). To my knowledge, this is the only mention of a puppet-maker in Greek literature.

hardly surprising, given the vast chronological, geographical, and cultural span of the ancient Eastern Mediterranean world. Furthermore, the puppets used in processions can be distinguished from the puppets of the miniature theater despite the common terminology used for both (*neurospasta* or *thaumata*).

The association between puppetry and mindlessness present in philosophical texts is not to be taken as an indication of the lack of importance of puppetry in the ancient Mediterranean. If anything, the reoccurrence of puppets in philosophical texts would suggest the opposite: puppetry was a common part of the performance culture of the Greeks and their neighbors. Herodotus's and Lucian's claims about phallic puppets in connection to Dionysiac ritual suggest an important role for the religious ideation of puppetry in multiple cultural contexts, while the appearance of puppeteers at the festival on Delos further suggests a connection between puppetry and theater festivals. It is likely that the oversized phalluses of processional puppets and their operation stimulated laughter on the part of spectators, which was a meaningful part of these celebratory festivals. In particular, the *thauma* so closely associated with spectators' reactions to puppetry of all forms suited the context of the festival which participants were meant to enjoy.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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