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“It is not a small thing to defeat a king”.¹ The Servant/Messenger’s Tale in Euripides’ *Electra*.

Abstract

In Euripides’ *Electra*, the narrative of Aegisthus’ murder (774-858) is generally appreciated for its vividness. Yet, both the dialogue that precedes the speech and the speech itself constitute an exception among the messenger-speeches in Attic tragedies for their length and emphasis upon dramatized speech, respectively. Furthermore, the unexpected opposition between ‘words’ and ‘deeds’ made by Orestes himself after his victory over Aegisthus (893-4) seems to substantially relativize the dramatic convention of the messenger-speech as a whole. This essay aims at exploring (a) the complex way in which the Servant/Messenger establishes a contact with his addressees, and (b) his peculiar interlacing of diegesis and mimesis, narrative and dialogue, which suggests a distinctive metatheatrical function with symbolic implications regarding the offstage/onstage space in relation to Aegisthus’ murder.

In the Servant/Messenger’s tale of Euripides’ *Electra* (774-858) scholars have detected features typical of the ‘epic mode’, such as “the high incidence of direct speech and of detailed ‘word paintings’ of scene and routine events” (Cropp 1988: 153). August Wilhelm Schlegel, who defined it as “a long-winded account . . . interlard[ed] with many a joke”,² noted its many ironic utterances especially in the dialogues between Aegisthus and Orestes. This

¹ *Electra* 760: οὔτοι βασιλέα φαῦλον κρατεῖν. Here I follow Denniston 1939: 145, who preferred κρατεῖν (*kratein*, ‘to defeat, to get power over’) from MS. P than MS. L’s κτανεῖν (*ktanein*, ‘to kill’). I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for her/his precious suggestions and Silvia Bigliuzzi for discussing with me the several stages of the Servant/Messenger’s speech.

² “But at the moment a messenger arrives, who gives a long-winded account of the death of Aegisthus, and interlards it with many a joke” (trans. by Black 1815); “Sogleich kommt aber ein Bote, welcher den Untergang des Aegisth weitläufig mit mancherley Scherzen berichtet”, Schlegel 1825: 165. Schlegel’s opinion on *Electra* is well known: “the very worst of Euripides’ pieces” (trans. by Black); “das allerschlechteste Stück des Euripides”, 1825: 170-1.

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comment was in line with Schlegel's general disparagement of *Electra* and his implicit assumption that tragic messengers were required only to provide information impersonally. As Ulrich von Wilamowitz peremptorily remarked, "the messenger is impersonal" ("der Bote ist unpersönlich"; 1922: 186n1). Since then criticism has often defined the tragic messenger-speech (*rhexis angelike*) as a "rational account of objective fact" as opposed to the "irrational and subjective attitudes which characterise the singer of [a] monody" (Barlow 1971: 61). This assumes that the messenger-speech and monodic singing stand on opposite ends of a continuum, suggesting that objectivity and subjectivity are expressible in degrees. However, the contrast between "attitudes" and "fact" belies a conceptual snare. As de Jong has aptly stressed (1991: 63-103, esp. the section "Scholars on objectivity": 63-5), the fact that "the Euripidean messenger reports (fictional) facts" cannot in any case be disjointed from an awareness that "no narrative is ever objective", even when one says that "he [the messenger] does not lie" (1991: 64-5; cf. Bal 1988: 142; more recently Barrett 2002: 14-22). In *Electra* as well as in the other Euripidean plays where a messenger appears, he does not merely deliver a speech, but also prepares his own performance in order to be pragmatically successful. In this particular play, as will be seen, he is both emotionally involved and eager to establish a contact with his addressee, alternatively foregrounding the phatic and the conative functions with a strong dramatic impact.³ And yet, as Hanna Roisman and Cecelia Luschnig have pointed out, "[o]f all the messengers in Greek tragedy (twenty-six in all) this is the only one who is not believed" (2011: 188).⁴ This curious exception calls for inquiry, suggesting that the messenger's preliminaries to his tale (761-73) are not unconnected with the tale itself and his own communicative strategy.⁵ It should be recalled that, peculiarly, he is not only a witness, but also takes part in both the narrated action and in the events preceding it and leading towards it. This turns him into an 'actor', and as such, once in front of *Electra*, he will foreground his 'testimonial function' (Genette 1980: 256), and consequently his own reliability and understanding of the events. He will also connote his report 'ideologically' (*ibid.*) and in order to establish as close a contact as possible with his addressee he will

³ Similar examples may be found in *Med.* 1121-3, *Andr.* 1069bis-71, *Su.* 634-40, *HF* 910-20, *Pho.* 1335, *Or.* 852-4, *Ba.* 1024-8; see also *Hcl.* 783-7, *IT* 1284-7, *Hel.* 1512-3. Contact with the addressee/s is especially strived after in *Hipp.* 1153-5, *Ion* 1106-8, *Pho.* 1067-71, *Ba.* 660-2, *IA* 1532-3, *Rh.* 264-5.

⁴ Twenty-six is the number both Erdmann 1964 and Rijksbaron 1976 calculated. They amount to twenty-two in the inventory drawn by de Jong 1991: 179-80.

⁵ The same remark would fit the interventions of the herald/*keryx*, a peculiar figure we should distinguish from the messenger/*angelos*; on this distinction see below, p. 73-4, and Avezù 2015: 16-19.

accurately tie his story-telling to the dramatic context of his own speech and narrative gesture.

Before discussing this peculiar narrative performance, though, let us briefly consider the murder plot and the report of Aegisthus' death in the other two plays dealing with the same story: Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* and Sophocles' *Electra*. It should be remarked from the start that in Euripides' *Electra* the messenger-speech is no less ingenious than in Sophocles' ("a virtuoso display of narrative fireworks", as Patrick Finglass put it, 2007a: 300). However, it is more prominently mimetic, a feature which may be related to both his role in the murder plot and the way the revenge was actually executed. I will argue that this peculiar narrative unveils an attempt to deal with the murder scene onstage,⁶ apparently bypassing common practices followed by Sophocles and Aeschylus, but in fact raising more radical metatheatrical questions. Through the messenger's prominent 'narrative ventriloquism' making for vivid story-telling, Euripides brings that scene on stage vicariously. And yet, as will be seen, he only further hides it from view, raising challenging questions on the relation between words (*logoi*), action (*drama*), and deeds (*erga*).

The Murder of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra: Plotting and Reporting in Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* and Sophocles' *Electra*

In *Choephoroi*, the murder plot (555: "this pact with me", *τάσδε συνθήκας ἐμάς*) is first alluded to at ll. 540-50, although it will be dealt with more precisely a few lines later, at ll. 552-76. Its peculiarity consists not only in being "straightforward, brisk, and somehow prosaic" (Garvie 1986: 197), but also in envisioning an action which, contrary to expectations, will occur in a very different way. Unlike what Orestes foresees here (565-70), he will encounter no difficulty in getting into the royal palace with Pylades. Nor will their meeting with Aegisthus be immediately violent, as vividly prefigured at ll. 572-6. As Oliver Taplin remarked, "the plot of Orestes, as well as being misleading in several details, does not include the essential element of Orestes' 'false death'" (1977: 342n2). Roger Dawe has justly foregrounded the inconsistency between this plot and the subsequent events (652-718, 730-82, and 838-69):

⁶ Murder is traditionally not staged (Parker 1996: 13-16, 316-7; Zeppezauer 2011: 6-13, 57-80 on Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*), and violent deaths are par excellence the subject of the messengers' report; both Cassandra's prophetic vision in *Agamemnon*, and this messenger-speech bypass, in their own way, the fear that *miasma* ('pollution') resulting from the murder would affect the community.

in one or two points the plan of vengeance and the actual course of events coincide with each other . . . [b]ut the dissimilarities are much more numerous and weighty. It is impossible to reconcile the two accounts, and it would be misguided even to try. The truth is that the plan has a life of his own, and is developed for its own sake, very much like the description of the chariot race in Sophocles' *Electra*. (1963: 55-6)

However, a couple of observations may be added to Dawe's final remark. In Sophocles' *Electra*, the Pedagogue's tale (680-763) responds to Clytemnestra's question about Orestes' fate ("but do you, stranger, tell me the truth! How did he die?", 678-9).⁷ His answer is emphatic and amplifies his previous succinct message of death ("Orestes is dead! There you have it in a word!", 673; "I said and I say now that Orestes is dead", 676) into a narrative 84-lines long.⁸ As Marshall has pointed out, "the detail provides a certain amount of a corroboration of an evidentiary nature", which persuades not only Clytemnestra but also, and unequivocally, Electra who "can later affirm . . . that she heard it . . . 'from someone who was there when he died' (927)" (Marshall 2006: 204-5). It may be added that the many autoptical details, on which the Pedagogue dwells at ll. 762-3,⁹ are received by Electra as marking the reliability of a tale which rather than having the purpose of being informative was clearly ment from the start to serve a strategy of *captatio benevolentiae*: "Hail, royal lady! I bring to you and to Aegisthus good news from a friend".¹⁰ This will convince Electra to rely upon this tale – and tales in general – even more than on visible proofs such as the offerings on Agamemnon's tomb Chrysothemis mentions as evidence of Orestes' arrival (883-6):

ΗΛ.	καὶ τίνος βροτῶν λόγον	
	τόνδ' εἰσακούσασ' ὧδε πιστεύεις ἄγαν;	
ΧΡ.	ἐγὼ μὲν ἐξ ἐμοῦ τε κούκ ἄλλου σαφή	885
	σημεῖ' ἰδοῦσα τῶδε πιστεύω λόγῳ.	

⁷ ἐμοὶ δὲ σύ, ξένε, / τάληθὲς εἰπέ, τῶ τρόπῳ διόλλυται. Here and below the translation is taken from Lloyd-Jones 1994.

⁸ On these anticipations of the whole messages see de Jong 1991: 32-3 (with previous bibliography).

⁹ "[Ped.] Such was this event, terrible to relate, and for those that saw it, as we did, the worst disaster of all that I have beheld"; ([ΠΑ.] τοιαυτὰ σοι ταῦτ' ἐστίν, ὡς μὲν ἐν λόγῳ / ἀλγεινὰ, τοῖς δ' ἰδοῦσιν, οἴπερ εἶδομεν, / μέγιστα πάντων ὧν ὄπωπ' ἐγὼ κακῶν; emphasis added).

¹⁰ ΠΑ. ὦ χαῖρ', ἄνασσα. σοὶ φέρων ἦκω λόγους / ἠδεῖς φίλου παρ' ἀνδρὸς Αἰγίσθῳ θ' ὁμοῦ (666-7). On the contrary, in Aeschylus' *Choephoroi*, Orestes, bearer of the false news of his own death (658-9), did not qualify the "news" (καινοὶ λόγοι) he was breaking to the masters of the house. Campbell's translation as "strange tidings" (1893: 84) sounds a little strained.

[EL. [F]rom whom . . . have you heard the story to which you give excessive credence? // CHRYS. I believe this story because I have seen signs with my own eyes, and have not heard it from another].¹¹

The Pedagogue's bravura piece has clearly the function of validating the content of his own message by resorting to the typically messenger-speech form. As Marshall has correctly pointed out:

The *dolos* will succeed only if this speech is seen as conventional. To succeed dramatically, Sophocles uses the Pedagogue's speech as a representative type for the 'tragic messenger-speech'. (2006: 208)

Looking at *Choephoroi*, Orestes' pretended plan cannot be defined as a bravura piece: it merely anticipates his later encounter with Aegisthus in a "simple story" (554: ἀπλοῦς . . . μῦθος) devised to produce a sort of emotional autosuggestion.¹² Alerted by the Nurse, Aegisthus will arrive at l. 838, will join Orestes in the palace at l. 854, and will be killed at l. 869 (see Taplin 1977: 346-8). There is neither plan nor report of the murder here, but only, after the event, a fleeting mention of Aegisthus' death on the part of his servant (typologically an *exangelos*),¹³ who will also briefly allude to Clytemnestra's forthcoming death at the emotional climax of his speech (875-84, 886).

In Sophocles' *Electra*, prompted by the Pedagogue, Orestes illustrates the plot he has devised before the beginning of the play (29: τὰ δόξαντα, "my decisions"), adding a few considerations on the opportunity to spread the news of his false death (59-66). Here too the trap (*dolos*) hinges upon the false tale of Orestes' death, but Sophocles replaces Orestes' improvisation in *Choephoroi* with a two-phase scheme, whose preparation has been witnessed by the audience (cf. Marshall 2006: 207). His plan opens with the Pedagogue's lies (ll. 38-50 provide the instructions for its later execution at ll. 660-822),¹⁴ followed by Orestes' arrival in disguise and bearing a funerary urn (this detail is imagined at ll. 51-8 and realized at l. 1098). Nev-

¹¹ "Chrysothemis insists on giving her (true) report at ll. 892-919, starting with 'I'll tell you *everything I saw*' (καὶ δὴ λέγω σοι πᾶν ὅσον κατειδόμεν), but this time without any chance of success" (Easterling 2014: 235; emphasis added).

¹² As already mentioned, the plan will not correspond to the actions: instead, Aegisthus' murder will closely follow the 'false death narrative' which Orestes himself has previously told his mother, perhaps without premeditation, if only in the generic allusion to the "news" he is bearing at l. 659, and certainly with neither his sister nor the Chorus being informed.

¹³ LSJ: ἐξάγγελος (II): "Messenger who told what was doing in the house or behind the scenes (opp. ἄγγελος, who told news from a distance); first used by Aeschylus".

¹⁴ Arrival and establishment of a contact: 660-79; false death tale: 680-763; Clytemnestra's and Electra's reactions to it: 766-822.

ertheless, this plan does not specify the timing of the violent actions that will follow Orestes' arrival at the palace. As is well-known, differently from what we have in Aeschylus and Euripides, Clytemnestra's murder will precede Aegisthus', and the killing of the usurper will not be part of the dramatic action. This final sequence is extremely condensed:¹⁵ Electra, the Chorus, and the audience partake in Clytemnestra's assassination as they hear her screaming off stage;¹⁶ Aegisthus' arrival is suddenly announced by the Chorus (1428); the palace's door is opened (1465), Clytemnestra's corpse is unveiled (1475), Aegisthus enters the palace (1503), followed by Orestes, and eventually meets his death – as it were, final curtain. All in all, this is a rather complex plan, and yet it is deficient in a few fundamental aspects, as well as in reports: both the Chorus and the audience perceive the off-stage events or get an anticipation of those about to happen not from the words of an *angelos* or *exangelos* but thanks to a hectic stage action which is run in real time.

The Plot to Kill Clytemnestra and Aegisthus in Euripides' *Electra*

Orestes, Electra, and the Old Man meticulously contrive the murder of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra in the course of a tightly woven dialogue at ll. 612-67: the murders of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra – in this order – fill twenty-six and twenty-four lines, respectively; the double murder sequence is implicitly suggested by the Old Man in his short preamble (612-13); at the end of the exchange Electra dismisses her brother and the Old Man (see Appendix). Nothing is left to improvisation, except for the final and more critical phases of the killing of the usurper (639) and of their mother (662). Pylades – who had exited the hut at l. 549 – is present but does not in-

¹⁵ See Taplin 1971: 41n37. It should be noted that, according to Taplin, “the same effect is achieved in Eur. *El.* 986ff. . . . in Sophocles the structural technique is much bolder, which may suggest it is later”. I am not sure whether this is entirely convincing.

¹⁶ See *scholium* at l. 1404: “Messengers normally report the things that have taken place inside to those outside, but here he (the poet) did not compose in this way, so as not to waste time in the play, since its main subject is the suffering of Electra. So here the spectator hears Clytemnestra shouting as she is murdered, and the action is more effective than if it were described through the medium of a messenger. The sensationalism of display was absent, but through the shouting he contrived a no less vivid effect.” (trans. Easterling 2014: 232); cf. Xenis 2010: ἔθος ἔχουσι τὰ γεγονότα ἔνδον ἀπαγγέλλειν τοῖς ἔξω οἱ ἄγγελοι, νῦν δὲ διὰ τὸ μὴ διατρίβειν ἐν τῷ δράματι οὐκ ἐποίησεν. τούτῳ γὰρ προκειμένον τὸ κατὰ τὴν Ἡλέκτραν ἐστὶ πάθος. νῦν τοίνυν βρώσης ἐν τῇ ἀναιρέσει τῆς Κλυταιμίστρας ἀκούει ὁ θεατῆς καὶ ἐνεργέστερον τὸ πρᾶγμα γίνεται ἢ δι’ ἀγγέλου σημαινόμενον. καὶ τὸ μὲν φορτικὸν τῆς ὄψεως ἀπέστη, τὸ δὲ ἐναργὲς οὐδὲν ἦσσαν καὶ διὰ τῆς βοῆς ἐπραγματεύσατο.

tervene. There is also at least one of Orestes' servants, the same who will come back as a Messenger at l. 761 and will reveal his identity at l. 766.

The audience witness the devising of the plot just as they listen to the enunciation of Orestes' plan in the prologue of Sophocles' *Electra*. Yet, in Euripides the Chorus, who have been silent since l. 596, are also present and will sing again in front of the empty stage from l. 699 to l. 746. After a sort of invocation in three voices to Zeus "Paternal", the Argive Hera, Agamemnon, and "all the dead" (671-83),¹⁷ and after Electra's last advice to her brother, who is entrusted with the first phase of the revenge plan (668, 685-92),¹⁸ Orestes, the Old Man, Pylades, and one or more of Orestes' servants leave the stage (692). The Old Man will lead Orestes and his companions to Aegisthus' horse-pastures, not far from Electra's hut and "right beside the road" (636: ὁδὸν παρ' αὐτήν), where, upon his arrival, the Old Man had seen the king "preparing a feast for the Nymphs"¹⁹ (621-36). Perhaps before being recognized by Aegisthus and his guard, the Old Man will then leave for Mycenae in order to meet Clytemnestra and start off the second phase of the plot (announced at ll. 650-67). Therefore, Orestes, Pylades, and the servant(s) alone will face Aegisthus.

The Messenger-Speech in Euripides' *Electra*

There is no strength of messengers
compared with one's own interrogation of them.

οὐδὲν ἀγγέλων σθένος
ὡς αὐτὸν αὐτῶν ἄνδρα πεύθεσθαι πάρα.

Aeschylus, *Choephoroi* 849-50²⁰

The first three scenes of the third Episode (746bis-1146) are devoted to conveying the outcome of Orestes' mission: (I) distant shouts announce the end of the fight between Orestes and Aegisthus (746bis-60); (II) the Messenger arrives, announces Aegisthus' defeat, and engages in a dialogue with Electra (761-73); (III) he narrates Orestes' exploit (774-858). I will briefly analyze these three scenes in order to show how the focalization of the messenger-speech is anticipated, at least to some degree, in the preceding dialogues.

(I) A cry (*boe*) is heard and is received as the possible sign that the fight

¹⁷ I follow Diggle 1981, and therefore read l. 683 before 682 and l. 693 after 684.

¹⁸ Lines 685-9 sound like an unnecessary anticipation of what will immediately follow and raise many doubts, although negligible as regards our analysis.

¹⁹ Unless otherwise stated, translations of Euripides' *Electra* are from Cropp 1988.

²⁰ On the text and its interpretation see Garvie 1986: 279.

(*agon*) between Orestes and Aegisthus is over or about to be over. There follows a brief dialogue in single alternating lines (*stichomythia*) between the Coryphaeus and Electra on how one should interpret it. The outcome (at least its gist), unknown to the Chorus as well as to the protagonist, is instead well-known to the audience through the epic, lyric, and dramatic traditions. This produces an “unevenness of information” because the audience not only “know no more than what [they] see, or what the characters say they think and want” (Segre 1980: 46 and 43), but also know the ‘core’ of the myth (that Aegisthus is not expected to kill Orestes). As we shall see further on, this implies two distinct yet implicit focalizations on the part of the playwright. The sign, which the Coryphaeus describes to her companions and then interprets as the lament of a dying man (752), does not bring the message – high as a beacon and indisputable – that Electra has asked the Chorus for.²¹ It is just noise and yelling, coming from the extra-scenic space and is not necessarily meant to be heard by the audience.²² Nor is it a *symbolon*, like the one that in *Agamemnon* signals the taking of Troy (8: λαμπάδος . . . σύμβολον, “the *symbolon* brought by the torch”) and carries a message (φάτις) that, having been prearranged by those who had devised the signalling sequence, is unequivocal. Therefore, if one takes πυρσεύετε at l. 694 (“cry the beacon-news”) to be an allusion to the fire-signals of *Agamemnon*,²³ one can only observe that Euripides overturns their communicative principles and problematizes their gnoseological efficacy no less radically than how he had addressed the process of recognition at ll. 508-46. After exiting the hut (751) with the sword with which she is resolved to kill herself, should Orestes fail (cf. 695-8), Electra may only infer that the *agon* is over in one way or another. She expects that her brother will immediately let her know if he is successful, but no messenger has arrived yet, although

²¹ Lines 694-5: ὑμεῖς δέ μοι, γυναῖκες, εὖ πυρσεύετε / κραυγὴν ἀγῶνος τοῦδε (“you women, take care to cry out the beacon-news of this encounter”).

²² Likewise, one must not assume that the audience see “the dust whirling in the air”, or hear “the blows of hooves”, “the sound” of the Argive army, and “the clash of shields”, that terrify the Chorus in Aeschylus’ *Seven against Thebes* respectively at ll. 81, 84-5, and 100. Whatever be the source and the occasion of it (cf. Hutchinson 1985: 56), Aristocles’ (2nd century BC) statement on the self-sufficiency of *orchesis*, ‘dancing’, as the sum of *lexis*, *melos*, and dance is significant: Aristocles said that “Telestes, the director of Aeschylus’ choruses was so great a master of his art, that in managing the choruses of the *Seven against Thebes*, he made all the transactions plain by dancing” (Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 1.22a: Τελέστης, ὁ Αἰσχύλου ὀρχηστής, οὕτως ἦν τεχνίτης, ὥστε ἐν τῷ ὀρχεῖσθαι τοὺς Ἑπτὰ ἐπὶ Θήβας φανερά ποιῆσαι τὰ πράγματα δι’ ὀρχήσεως., trans. by Yonge 1854: 36, slightly modified). On the scenic effects of off stage sounds in Aeschylus’ *Seven* see Edmunds 2002.

²³ Cropp sees “[a]n ironic contrast . . . with Clytemnestra ‘beacon-speech’ (Ag. ll. 281-316) on the relaying of the news of the fall of Troy” (1988: 148).

the place of the *agon* is not far (623). This persuades her that he has either been defeated or killed and makes her despair: "we are beaten – or where are our messengers?" (νικώμεσθα· ποῦ γὰρ ἄγγελοι;). The certainty of a negative outcome instils a fear (*deima*, 767) in her which neither the Coryphaeus' sensible reflection may mitigate (760), nor the Messenger's apostrophe dissolve (761-4).

(II) Electra's wait is promptly rewarded by the arrival of a messenger. His entrance immediately after a choral ode, reporting the outcome of an action set up in the previous episode, is a typically Euripidean device.²⁴ The time elapsing between Orestes' departure and the Servant/Messenger's arrival, corresponding to ll. 693-760, is in keeping with Euripides' spatio-temporal 'realism' and the symmetry between onstage and offstage time we find in *Electra*.²⁵ Here, however, unlike *Med.* 1116-20, the Messenger's entry is not announced by the Chorus, who do not even seem aware of his coming (as instead they will be of Clytemnestra at ll. 988-97). In turn, the Messenger does not introduce himself, trusting that he will be recognized as the Servant of Orestes. Something similar may be already found in Aeschylus' *Seven*, where Eteocles' wait (36-8) is rewarded by the Scout's arrival at l. 39, with no indication that the latter has been seen by Eteocles prior to his entrance (Taplin 1974: 137). The Messenger addresses the Chorus directly (761-4), thus respecting the 'etiquette' according to which a new arrival should address the choral body first and the female character on stage afterwards (Mastronarde 1979: 21). And yet, he establishes a more direct contact with his addressees than any (true or false) messenger would ever do,²⁶ conveying the information straightaway to both spectators and internal addressees with a strongly sympathetic attitude that culminates in a friendly and excited address: "to all our friends I bring news that Orestes triumphs" (762: νικῶντ' Ὀρέστην πᾶσιν ἀγγέλλω φίλοις).²⁷ This provides a sort of internal prolepsis, thorough and complete, characterized by the expressive vividness typical of the messenger-speech.²⁸ Euripides makes "only [one] exception [at *Or.* 1381-92] to the rule by which the main news is announced in the introductory dialogue" between mes-

²⁴ See e.g. *Med.* 1002-80 (Fifth Episode), 1081-115 (choral anapaestic interlude and recitative anapaests by the Pedagogue), and 1116-20 (Medea sees the long-awaited Messenger arriving), and Mastronarde's commentary (2002: 350-1).

²⁵ Cf. Lloyd's introductory remarks (2007: 293). If "the messenger . . . arrives remarkably quickly after Aegisthus' death-cries are heard at 747" (294), the fact is rendered plausible by what has been anticipated at l. 623.

²⁶ See for instance Sophocles' *El.* 660-1 and *OT* 924-59, but also Orestes in Aeschylus' *Cho.* 653-6, 658-67. It should be noticed that the Messenger in *Medea* 1121ff. urges Medea to flee before telling her about the death of Creon and his daughter.

²⁷ This may sound like a parody of Soph. *El.* 676.

²⁸ See the pres. part. νικῶντ[α].

senger and addressee(s); therefore, also the following messenger-speech “is not concerned with the questions *what* or *who*, but *how*” (de Jong 1991: 32-3). Yet the response to the question ‘whose wail of murder is this?’ should be especially dear to Electra and the Chorus, whereas for the audience it may only mean that the killing of Aegisthus, which the latter may have no doubt about, has already occurred at l. 747. Some scholars have pointed out the dramatic singularity of this arrival, and with Winnington-Ingram (1969: 131-2) we may ask whether the scene was meant to parody the arrival – sometimes even too well-timed – of witnesses to off-stage events. Euripides, however, does not seem to have only a ludic yet generically metatheatrical intent: despite, or rather, thanks to the Messenger’s immediate disclosure of the ‘what’ in a peculiar, four-line-long apostrophe, Euripides manages to intensify Electra’s, the Chorus’, and the audience’s expectations by delaying the account of the ‘how’, so that the Messenger’s initial apostrophe remains effectless. In fact, although he states that he is carrying the message “to all friends (scil.: of Orestes)” (762: πᾶσιν . . . φίλοις), thus implicitly including himself among them, the Messenger is not immediately recognized and is forced to declare his own identity.

Electra’s is an unkind welcome and she will have to apologize for it; besides, the Chorus, who have neither announced the arrival scene, nor taken part in it, will remain silent until l. 859: they do not intervene exactly when – being more confident or perhaps less scared than Electra – they might welcome the new arrival. That the Messenger’s announcement goes unheeded may be taken as an implicit polemic against the Sophoclean Electra’s readiness to believe the Pedagogue’s false account. Roisman and Luschnig have pointed out this peculiarity (2011: 188). In fact, criticism has shown little interest in the formal structure of the entire scene, while attention has been paid to that sort of hyperrealism that characterizes the descriptive and narrative devices in the *rhexis angelike*. Electra’s reaction – quite telling of her psychology, although it does not add anything to what we already know about it (Winnington-Ingram 1969: 131) – delays the information flow and intensifies the expectation as to the way Aegisthus has been killed. Both these preliminaries and the Servant/Messenger’s subsequent report thematize the identity issue that pervades the entire play, rather than the process of recognition only. Roisman and Luschnig have rightly observed that “[t]he epistemological question, how we know things, is a theme in *Electra*” (122), and that “*disrecognition* is something of a theme in the play” (188).²⁹

The exchange at ll. 765-8 focalizes the double status of the message, whose verbal content, albeit overloaded with information (“daughters . . . glorious of victory . . . Orestes triumphs, Agamemnon’s murderer . . . is

²⁹ See Electra’s admission of her own *dysgnosis* (δυσγνωσία) at ll. 767-8: . . . ἔκ τοι δείματος δυσγνωσίαν / εἶχον προσώπου (“fear made me fail to recognize your face”).

laid down . . . offer prayers of thanks to the gods"),³⁰ turns out not to be self-sufficient. Electra does not recognize the Messenger and this makes his speech unreliable (πιστά ["trustworthy"], 765, is predicative of τάδε ["these things", i.e. what you are saying] and focalizes the narrative act). And yet his words are neither incomprehensible nor ambiguous – like the Chorus' exclamations at ll. 747-9 –, nor do they offer disputable proofs – like the Old Man's report of Orestes' arrival (509-23). Despite consistency between what she expects to hear and what he actually says, fear-induced *dysgnosis* prevents her from believing him.

(III) At l. 772 Electra wants to know from the Messenger not only 'how' Orestes killed Aegisthus, but also in what sequence (*rhythmos*) the actions were carried out – a request more accurate than Clytemnestra's in Sophocles' *Electra*.³¹

The messenger-speech proper (774-858) suggests a potential for narrative impersonation. Now the speaker is an extradiegetic narrator involved in the reported events; now he lends his voice to Aegisthus and Orestes, who, in the direct speeches embedded in the tale, speak for themselves – the latter with an unusual irony typical of the narrative's general tone.³² Similar to other Euripidean speeches,³³ this speech has not received much attention with regard to its implications concerning the question of identity, which is prominent in the play and crucial in the murder scene, where Orestes is disguised as a Thessalian 'pilgrim'. With regard to his status and function, we may observe the following:

(a) his dependence on Orestes assimilates him to a herald (*keryx*), like Talthybius for Agamemnon (Aesch.'s *Agamemnon*, Eur.'s *Hecuba* and *Trojan Women*), Lichas for Heracles (Soph.'s *Trachiniae*), and Copreus for Eurystheus (Eur.'s *Children of Heracles*). In *Electra* he has no name, but this is not an exception: also Talthybius (in *Agamemnon*) and Copreus have no speech headings, although they appear in the list of characters. We must assume that he was present when Orestes plotted Aegisthus' murder (612-93), since there is no textual indication that the only occasion he is on stage is when

³⁰ 761-4: ὦ καλλίνικοι παρθένοι Μυκηνίδες, / νικῶντ' Ὀρέστην πᾶσιν ἀγγέλλω φίλοις, / Ἀγαμέμνονος δὲ φονέα κείμενον πέδῳ / Αἴγισθον· ἀλλὰ θεοῖσιν εὐχεσθαι χρεῶν. The Messenger's apostrophe will be echoed by Electra upon her brother's arrival (880-1: ὦ καλλίνικε . . . Ὀρέστα).

³¹ 772-3: "What was the way, what was the pattern of murder, by which he killed Thyestes' son? I want to know" (ποιῶν τρόπῳ δὲ καὶ τίνι ρυθμῷ φόνου / κτείνει Θυέστου παῖδα; βούλομαι μαθεῖν), cf. Soph.'s *Electra* 678-9: ἐμοὶ δὲ σὺ, ξένε, / τάληθές εἰπέ, τῷ τρόπῳ διόλλυται" (see above, 66n8).

³² The same actor (the *deuteragonistes*) could have played both the Messenger and Orestes, cf. Cropp 1988: xxxixn45.

³³ E.g. the already quoted speech in *Med.* 1136-229, on which see above, p. 71n24.

he exits Electra's hut to join the expedition. Although not endowed with a character's identity, such as the Sophoclean Pedagogue's, he acquires one gradually in the course of his own account, where he uses the first person plural (774, 775, 787, 789, and 790) and singular (808), and also voices personal reflections (774-6; de Jong 1991: 45-6):

ΑΓ. ἐπεὶ μελάθρων τῶνδ' ἀπήραμεν πόδα,
 ἐσβάντες ἦμεν δίκροτον εἰς ἀμαξιτὸν 775
 ἔνθ' ἦν ὁ κλεινὸς τῶν Μυκηναίων ἄναξ.³⁴

[ME. When we started on our way from the dwelling here, we entered a two-tracked wagon-path and come where the illustrious king of the Mycenaeans was.]

(b) The Messenger begins his account with ἐπεὶ ['after that'], as often in Euripides (Rijksbaron 1976: 294-6; de Jong 1991: 34). Yet this time he does not refer to a piece of information already given, but implies (1) the consultation in which also Electra has taken part and which has led to the vengeance plot, and (2) the entire sequence of events until the departure of Orestes, the Old Man, Pylades and the Servant(s) at l. 693.

The collective pronoun attests his participation in the action, *philos* among Orestes' *philoî*, thus validating his account after Electra's disappointing reception (761-4). This use not only fulfils the "testimonial function, or function of *attestation*" necessary for him to be believed (Genette 1980: 256), but it also reflects a proactive involvement different from other collective pronouns indicating witnesses, as in the Messenger's report of Hippolytus's accident (Euripides' *Hipp.* 1173ff.). What clearly emerges is that this Messenger was no mere spectator but an accomplice of Orestes and Pylades.

Finally acknowledged as her brother's Servant (768), he has gradually become more familiar with Electra, and intersperses his speech with sarcasm (776) and tendentious reports, such as the one of Aegisthus' prayer (808-10). Both the rhetorical and stylistic connotations of his speech, and his actual participation in the events make him different from a simple "bystander" (Barrett 2002: 75); his "uses of the first-person clearly place

³⁴ I follow the MSS and read κλεινὸς ('illustrious'), against the correction καινὸς ('new'), first proposed by Peter Elmsley (see Finglass 2007b) and also adopted by Diggle 1981 (Denniston 1939: 146 maintained κλεινὸς, "simply" as "a title of royalty"). The use of sarcasm has been judged incongruous in a narrative context that is believed to be objective; nonetheless its presence is undeniable, even though it is not as evident as at ll. 326-7 and in *Tro.* 358 or in Soph.'s *El.* 300 and *Ant.* 761; furthermore, Aegisthus could hardly be defined "the new king of the Mycenaeans" seven years after Agamemnon's murder.

[him] within the frame of his story" (ibid.). But he gradually changes tactics and shifts from a strategic use of the first person plural (until l. 791) to an increasingly overt address to Electra through a prominent handling of the first person and second person singular (808: λέγων Ὀρέστην καὶ σέ. δεσπότης δ' ἐμὸς . . . : "meaning Orestes and *you*; but *my* master . . ."), and a final emphasis upon the latter from l. 803 onward.³⁵ This move from the collective pronoun to an interplay between first and second person brings about a focus upon the dramatic interaction between the two, as well as on the Messenger's own locution (91n65). It also foregrounds his direct contact with Electra as an attempt to persuade her to share his own viewpoint on the events which he reports dramatically through an apt manipulation of mixed digesis (Plato *Rep.* 392c; Halliwell 2013; on deixis and point of view in drama see McIntyre 2006: 96-7). If he later "fade[s] into the background" (de Jong 1991: 5), it will be because of a sudden, and very telling, change in his participation in the events. On this I will return soon.

For now a few remarks on his story-telling: he accurately presents the events in the order in which they happened and without prolepses, "according to his focalization as experiencing character" (de Jong 1991: 45-6, 61). He also concedes much to mimesis by resorting to direct speech in his account of the exchange between Aegisthus and Orestes: this occupies 35 out of the 85 lines of the entire *rhesis*, a "deliciously protracted game of cat and mouse" (Bers 1997: 82) structured as a long dialogue, nowhere to be found in either Aeschylus or Sophocles. Each time the Messenger does different voices – himself, one of the two speakers (as in l. 789, where he impersonates Aegisthus) or both of them (as in the *antilabe* of l. 831) – we may expect some performative change (an expressive pose, a gesture, etc.). Although we know nothing about ancient acting styles, the text shows a potential for variation at this point. Here is how narration and dialogue are organized: after the initial description of the route leading from Electra's hut to Aegisthus' horse pastures (774-8), the messenger-speech alternates lines spoken by Aegisthus (to his servants, to the guests, to Orestes alone, or in form of a prayer) and by Orestes (addressed to Aegisthus alone, and to Aegisthus' servants only at ll. 847-51):

³⁵ As regards the use of grammatical persons by our Messenger:

- the first person plural is always employed with action verbs (774, 775, 789, 790, and implicitly at 791: τοῖς ξένοις ~ ἡμῖν, "for the strangers" ~ "for us");
- first person singular: 808b δεσπότης δ' ἐμὸς ("but my master");
- second person singular, always with reference to Electra: 803, 808a, 814, 854, 855, 857.

Messenger (* = introduces direct speech)	Aegisthus (O = to Orestes; G = to all the guests; P = prayer; S = to his servants)	Orestes (A = to Aegisthus; S = to A.'s servants)
774-8		
779a*	779b-80 (G)	
781a*		781b-2 (A)
783*	784-7 (G) –	
788-9a		
	–789b (G)	
790*	791-2 (S)	
793a*		793b-6 (A)
797-804a		
804b*	805-7 (P)	
808-14a		
814b*	815-8 (O)	
819-30a		
830b*		831a (A)
	831b-3 (O)	
834a*		834b-7 (A)
838-47a		
847b*		847c-51a (S)
851b-8		

The sections of pure narration, quoted above in bold, provide summaries accelerating the Messenger's report.³⁶ However, he also intersperses personal evaluations (808a and 845b) and an inference (808b-9), on which I will return later. Proxemical implications are contained in Aegisthus' greeting (he "shouts": 779: ἀντειῖ), which befits the initial distance between the two groups. They are also embedded in his invitation to Orestes and his fellows to enter the house, which suggests a collective address (ἠγγόρευε, 788, "proclaimed") and a closer contact with them (he takes them by the arm). At l. 789b Aegisthus completes the line left suspended at l. 787, when the Messenger had told what he was doing; this shows the narrator's peculiar handling of the narrative, which he may freely interrupt and take up again at a later stage. The remaining part of the dialogue and Orestes' concluding

³⁶ Lloyd (2007: 301) stresses how the inclusion of a summary at ll. 798-802 endows the Messenger's speech with a narrative acceleration.

lines are instead introduced in a rather formulaic way (ὁ δ' / ἄλλ' εἶπ[ε], "and / but he said", for Orestes; ἐννέπει τάδε, τοιάδ' ἐννέπων ἔπη, ε λέγει . . . τάδε, "declared", "uttering these words", "says . . . these words", for Aegisthus). The only exception is l. 831, where Orestes' and Aegisthus' speeches follow one another in *antilabe*, without the formulaic narrative mediation of the narrator.

In his speech the Servant/Messenger keeps strengthening the mutual understanding he has reached with Electra, while constantly reassuring the audience about the rightness of the murder, and at the same time completely ignoring the Chorus. His effort to establish complicity with Electra occasions his sarcastic remark at l. 776 (see above, p. 74n34), as well as his allusion to Aegisthus as "your mother's consort" (803: μητρὸς εὐνέτης σέθεν); at l. 808a he rekindles Electra's hostility to her stepfather by revealing the identity of the *echthroi* ('enemies') whom he has just cursed in his prayer with a totally pleonastic explanation ("meaning Orestes and you", λέγων Ὀρέστην καὶ σέ) endowed with an almost exclusively phatic function. Contrariwise, his report of Aegisthus' curse against his enemies (805-7) and, then, of Aegisthus' words unveiling his fear of Agamemnon's son – whom he calls "the man most in enmity with me, a foe to my house" (832-3: ἔστι δ' ἔχθιστος βροτῶν / Ἀγαμέμνονος παῖς πολέμιός τ' ἐμοῖς δόμοις) – confirms to the audience that Aegisthus deserves the death Orestes is about to give him.³⁷ At the end of his speech, he has words of appreciation for Orestes and Pylades who, "spurred by courage" (845b: ἀνδρείας δ' ὕπο), face Aegisthus' servants, two against many (844-5: δμῶες . . . / πολλοὶ . . . πρὸς δύ[ο]): if at first Electra had not believed that her "bold", "self-confident", or simply "courageous" brother (εὐθαρσής, like Agamemnon in Aesch.'s *Agamemnon* 930) had entered the land "furtively, for fear of Aegisthus" (525-6: κρυπτὸν ἐς γῆν τήνδ[ε] . . . Αἰγίσθου φόβῳ . . . μολεῖν), and then had recommended, on his taking leave from her, that he "play the man" (693: πρὸς τὰδ' ἄνδρα γίγνεσθαι σε χρή), now she is definitely reassured about Orestes' valour. More importantly, though, in the eyes of the audience this emphasis on Orestes' test of courage compensates for the vivid narration of the murder of Aegisthus, assailed from behind during a sacrificial rite.

That the way the murder is carried out is perceived as censurable – and the Messenger shows to be aware of this – is proved by his peculiar reticence on this point: although he provides copious visual details, such as those regarding the route, Aegisthus' orchard, or the sacrificial rite, which

³⁷ As Allen-Hornblower (2016: 226) remarks, "his words invite Orestes to consider the death he is about to inflict as both necessary and justified", and "thus provid[e] Orestes (and the audience) with grounds for indignation".

he describes minutely,³⁸ or the examination of the bull’s entrails by Aegisthus (826-9), the Servant/Messenger seems to withdraw from the scene of murder the moment Orestes deals the deadly blow. Until then he had benefited from a privileged position, almost as if he had been leaning over the eviscerated animal, next to Aegisthus:

(ΑΓ.) ιερὰ δ’ ἐς χεῖρας λαβῶν
 Αἴγισθος ἦθρει. καὶ λοβὸς μὲν οὐ προσῆν
 σπλάγχνοις, πύλαι δὲ καὶ δοχαὶ χολῆς πέλας
 κακὰς ἔφαινον τῷ σκοποῦντι προσβολὰς.
 χῶ μὲν σκυθράζει . . . 830

[(ME.) Aegisthus took the sacred parts in his hands, and looked. In the liver there was no lobe, and the portal vein and gall-bladder showed onsets of harm to the observer close at hand. Aegisthus scowled . . .]

What is most interesting here is that the Messenger adopts Aegisthus’ point of view (829: τῷ σκοποῦντι, “to the observer”) and describes the content of the entrails’ examination which he himself could not see, at least from the perspective he reports having had at the moment of the murder. And yet, he lingers on it ‘as if’ he had, providing his narrative with a focalization upon the king. This suggests that following a similar strategy of variable focalization he might have described the murder too, although he could not see it, but only hear it being performed through the victim’s wail. His narrative is sufficiently flexible to include alternative perspectives. Thus, his failing to resort to such a device at this point cannot be neutral. His silence seems to suggest that the king’s murder, after all, can neither be shown, nor seen, nor told.

In fact his tale is unquestionably conducted from a position in the background, as if he had slipped backward and only perceived the gesture from behind Orestes’ shoulders, “raised . . . on the tips of his toes” (840: ὄνουχας ἔπ’ ἄκρους σταῖς). The deed is accompanied by neither a word nor a cry on the part of the murderer, and is only followed by Aegisthus’ wailing and convulsions (843: πᾶν . . . σῶμα, where “all” suggests the disarticulation of his “body”, now a “corpse”). As Cropp remarked, the pathos of the scene where Aegisthus is “all convulsed, heaving, writhing in hard and bloody death” (842-3: ἄνω κάτω / ἤσπαιρεν ἠλέλιζε δυσθνήσκων φόνῳ) is conveyed by the expressive power of pure diegesis, deprived of overt ‘ideological’ clues, through the asyndeton of two imperfect tenses (ἤσπαιρεν ἠλέλιζε), “which invite effective parallelisms of sound” with l.

³⁸ The report of the rite is possibly the most exhaustive one that may be found in all Greek literature.

855 χαίροντες ἀλαλάζοντες (1988: 157) but no explicit subjective involvement. Indirect comments, it has been suggested (Easterling 1988: 104; Cropp 1988: 157), are encrypted precisely in that sound parallelism, implying a relation between "espairen *elelize*" (843: Aegisthus dying) and "chairontes *alalazontes*" (l. 855: Aegisthus' servants acclaiming Orestes), as if Aegisthus' death were symbolically and indirectly applauded by the servants (my emphasis). And yet pure diegesis at this point is symbolically endowed with the function of lessening the pathos and detaching the speaker from the scene.

The passages I have discussed are encapsulated within a longer narrative which displays the Servant/Messenger's dramaturgic and expressive ability, and, at the same time, unveils the authorial design behind it, as well as the way this tale relates to it. Two more passages are especially revealing. The first one is at ll. 808-10:

(ΑΓ.)	δεσπότης δ' ἐμὸς	
	τᾶναντί' ἠΰχετ', οὐ γεγωνίσκων λόγους,	
	λαβεῖν πατρῶα δῶματ[α].	810

[(M.E.) But my master prayed the opposite, not voicing the words: to gain his ancestral home.]

Albeit sometimes defined as "indirect speech", these lines rather narrate Orestes' silent vow, which the Messenger at most could only infer from the context, thus speaking like an omniscient narrator while being a testimony to the scene. Differently from other messengers' "inferences about what other people are thinking", "usually obvious and therefore unobtrusive" (Scodel 2009: 422), this remark is part of his strategy to reassure Electra about Orestes' intent to carry out the action of moral redress through seizure of power (which, incidentally, will not take place). Now, it little matters that Orestes not only was loath to go to the city and to the royal palace, but will also be eventually destined to leave the region for good. The Messenger arbitrarily describes him as the Orestes one may find in *Choephoroi* and Sophocles' *Electra*, determined to regain his ancestors' power and patrimony. In so doing, he contradicts Euripides' general dramatic design and, with respect to the course of the action, instils into Electra's mind (and the audience's) expectations that will go unfulfilled. Through his virtuoso diegetic performance, the Servant/Messenger' personality gradually comes to the fore, affecting his narration and implicitly orienting his message 'ideologically'. He thus becomes a proper character among other characters. This suggests a comparison with the False Merchant in Sophocles' *Philoctetes* (541-627), who had been instructed by Odysseus to guide Neoptolemos' decisions. Likewise, the Servant/Messenger by reassuring

Electra about her brother's intentions seems to orient her decisions and, by extension, also those of her brother regarding crucial choices such as the seizure of Agamemnon's power. To this end he needs to become familiar with her. By adopting the collective pronoun 'we', with no purely testimonial function, but with the intent of gaining favour with Electra, the messenger is eventually acknowledged by her and gradually grows more intimate. He stresses their personal interaction and from being a 'narrative exercise' embedded within drama, his speech at times translates into a sort of drama piece: a play-within-the-play performed for an onstage audience by one character doing different voices. His dramatization of the offstage event of the king's murder makes it 'visible' and 'audible' on stage only to the point of the act itself, which is excluded from view and verbal visualization. It also provides the story with a possible plot of restoration of order – yet doomed to remain unaccomplished.

The other passage I mentioned stands precisely at the centre of this speech and deals with one of the play's fundamental topics: one's identity and its recognizability (and knowability). It constitutes a crucial point in the dialogue between Aegisthus and Orestes, and occurs when the former definitely puts his life into Orestes' hands asking the self-professed Thessalian (781) to prove his skill as such in butchering the bull (814-18):

(ΑΓ.) Αἴγισθος . . .

λέγει δὲ σὺ κασιγνήτῳ τάδε·
 Ἐν τῶν καλῶν κομποῦσι τοῖσι Θεσσαλοῖς 815
 εἶναι τόδ', ὅστις ταῦρον ἀρταμεῖ καλῶς
 ἵππους τ' ὀχμάζει· λαβὲ σίδηρον, ὃ ξένε,
 δεῖξόν τε φήμην ἔτυμον ἀμφὶ Θεσσαλῶν.

[(M.E.) Aegisthus . . . spoke again to your brother: "The men of Thessaly, so they boast, excel in butchering a bull, and also in breaking horses. Take a knife, stranger, and prove the saying about the Thessalian true".]

Aegisthus' cue is connoted as stylistically high by the use of the keywords φήμην ἔτυμον, "true saying", placed at the caesura, where he significantly asks Orestes to confirm his declaration to be a Thessalian by proving the "saying" (φήμη) "about the Thessalian" to be "true", that is, ἔτυμος. This adjective, just like ἐτήτυμος and its corresponding adverbs ἐτύμως and ἐτητύμως, was apparently used in a lyric or recitative rather than in a spoken context,³⁹ which makes it stand out at this point. Aegisthus' mental process is hard to define. With Martin Cropp we may ask why "Aegisthus mean[s] to test Orestes' claim to be a Thessalian" (1988: 156); still, as Rois-

³⁹ One should note that ἐτήτυμος and ἐτητύμως do not appear at all in Sophocles.

man and Luschnig have pointed out, "[i]f he suspects his guest of deception . . . it is odd to supply him with a weapon" (2011: 914).⁴⁰ Only later, after he has inspected the sacrificed bull's entrails, will Aegisthus become aware of an impending threat perceived as a hazily defined "alien guile" (831-2 ὀρρωδῶ τινα / δόλον θυραῖον). Jealous and secretive of his identity, which he conceals even to his trustworthy sister (although he actually knows he can count on her at least since l. 155), and unwilling to talk even to the Old Man, who is about to recognize him (558-61), Orestes is here once again put to the test. Yet this time he has to demonstrate to be the man he has declared to be but is not. In the same way, Aegisthus tries to obtain from him confirmation that the Thesalians are good butchers and the demonstration of Orestes' self-proclaimed identity. Various and alternative instances of recognition may be found in *Electra*: from Electra's well-known refutation of the Old Man's proofs of Orestes' arrival, to her failed acknowledgment of the Servant/Messenger and Aegisthus' paradoxical 'experiment'. The demonstration of the truthfulness of a saying (*pheme*) as proof of his fictional identity becomes central in the messenger-speech not only in that it enables them to carry out the revenge plan, but also, and the more so, as the symptom of a pervasive relativization of the identities involved in the drama, be they the ones borrowed from the *mythos* or the ones which are instrumental in the dramatic mechanics.

Soon after the Messenger's performance, our expectations about Electra's and the Chorus' reaction are satisfied by their sudden rejoicing (859-79). And yet, this is no response to his long narrative, but to the bare news of Orestes' success – something which is disclosed early on in his story-telling, about 100 lines before (761). The Messenger out, there enters Orestes with Aegisthus' body (880), and this gruesome evidence of the murder is the silent overwhelming proof of the message's truth, but also of the ephemerality of its words (893: λόγοι) compared to the factuality of the deed done (ibid.: ἔργα, "deeds"):

(OP.) ἦκω γὰρ οὐ λόγοισιν ἀλλ' ἔργοις κτανῶν
 Αἰγισθον· ὡς δὲ τῷ σάφ' εἰδέναι τάδε
 προσθῶμεν, αὐτὸν τὸν θανόντα σοι φέρω 895

[(OR.) I have returned; not in word but in deed have I killed Aegisthus. And so we may assign this to the certainty of knowledge, I bring you the man himself who has died.]

⁴⁰ In this regard Gilbert Murray remarked that "[t]he unsuspectingness of Aegisthus is partly natural; it was not thus, alone and unarmed, that he expected Orestes to stand before him. Partly it seems like a heaven-sent blindness" (1907: 93).

Also those who do not follow the text of the MSS with reference to ὤς . . . προσθῶμεν⁴¹ will grasp the metatheatrical contrast between the vivid speech Orestes has not heard and the tangible proof he now offers: Aegisthus' corpse. The self-sufficiency of *logoi* thus seems to be once again questioned, this time by he who has performed the actions (*ergon*) told by the Messenger, and therefore the one who needs the least to mistrust the tale's truthfulness.

In this light we may finally reconsider this messenger-speech. It dramatizes on stage the events that have taken place off-stage during the course of the action, coordinating diegesis and mimesis within a realistic performance. The Messenger not only blends narration and dialogue, as typically in epics (cf. Plato's *Republic* 392c), but is also endowed with a dramaturgic and acting talent that he clearly shows in the *antilabe* at l. 831. This is undoubtedly a high point of virtuosity among messenger-speeches, relying upon a capacity to potentially modulate different voices and discursive registers (no matter how this may have been done), which likely already characterized the preliminary courtesies between Aegisthus and Orestes as well as Orestes' elaborate acceptance of Aegisthus' invitation (787-97). In this context, the narration of the preparations for the sacrifice, which provides for the location and the posture of the 'actors', becomes a complex stage direction. An accomplice in the action since the revenge plot was imagined, the Messenger always shares in it, and when he recounts it he is at the same time an omniscient narrator (808-10), capable of seeing all, as in the case of the examination of the bull's entrails which we have considered above, and a testimony incapable of seeing, as in the case of the murder scene. Through this Messenger's speech Euripides makes visible what Aeschylus and Sophocles instead choose to pass under silence: Aegisthus' end. Euripides' *Electra*, even more than *Choephoroi* and Sophocles' *Electra*, is above all the tragedy of matricide first and foremost because Orestes is not preoccupied with winning back his father's patrimony and throne: these are the manifest aims of his action in Aeschylus and in Sophocles, while in Euripides it is the Messenger who attributes them to him (808-10). However, Euripides chooses to show what Sophocles chooses to conceal, and Aeschylus only alludes to through Aegisthus' cry. Thus it could be argued that, through this Messenger, Euripides wishes to transcend the taboo on staging violence. The abuse of Aegisthus' corpse, prefigured at 896-8, while it is lying in the foreground, seems to confirm this hypothesis. And yet, the Messenger's withdrawing from the scene, apparently self-effacing at the action's acme, proposes again, this time on stage through its narrative, the

⁴¹ I follow the received text, like Denniston 1939 and Basta Donzelli 1995, while Diggle 1981 expunges it from ὤς to προσθῶμεν.

ban on sight and, therefore, the traditional censure on showing the performance of murder (cf. Zeppezauer 2011: 6-13). What stands out is Orestes' back blocking a clear view. The following exhibition of the corpse, whose suggested vilification on the part of Orestes entails a feeling of shame in Electra, thus foregrounding the cumbersome presence of this body among the characters on stage, goes well beyond that ban, much more than what happens in *Agamemnon* and *Choephoroi*.⁴² However, at the same time it also offers a critique of conventional dramaturgy and perhaps of theatre in general: Orestes' substitution of *logoi* with *erga* seems to question the essence of theatre itself as well as the power of words to represent relations (*praxeis*) rather than the products of doing (*erga*). Since the *ergon* is opposed to the *logoi* that take the place of the action, and since such opposition is thematized by the only *angelos* of himself who is above suspicion, Orestes, one is led to believe that rather than transcending traditional reticence, the tale in fact underlines the unshowability of the action in its unfolding (*drama*). Bypassing the taboo by way of a solo performance of a play-within-the-play mingling diegesis and dialogic mimesis rather reinforces that taboo by excising the only crucial narrative bit concerning the representation of murder. It is the final duplicate on stage of that original ban, which confirms both the unshowability of the murder and its untellability. The display of the corpse/*ergon* not through stage machinery, but directly and bluntly, reifies the action and produces the evidence of the fact beyond all doing and telling – in short, beyond theatre.

⁴² As is well known, in Sophocles' *Electra* Clytemnestra's corpse is not brought out of the palace and the drama ends just before Aegisthus' murder.

Appendix - The murder plot

the killing of Aegisthus	<i>stichomythia</i> Orestes/Old Man	612-3	– the Old Man implicitly suggests the sequence of actions that will eventually take place: the killing of Aegisthus followed by the murder of Clytemnestra (613).
		614-7	– O.M.: the action cannot take place in the city;
		618-27	– the plan triggered by “[s]omething [that] has just struck [the O.M.]” (619);
		628-33	– the O.M. informs Or. about Aeg.’s present whereabouts and business;
		634-9	– the O.M. gives instructions on how to approach Aeg.;
the killing of Clytem- nestra	<i>stichomythia</i> Or./El./O.M.	640-5	– afterwards, Or. will have to improvise (639). – Or. asks where his mother is; – the O.M. explains that Clyt. is not coming with Aeg.
		646-9	– El. suggests that she “[her]self arrange [their] mother’s murder” (647) with the help of the O.M. (649);
		650-4	– El. devises her false puerperium plan (652-3);
		655-63	– details of the trap she is laying for their mother.
final instruct.	<i>stichomythia</i> El./O.M.	664-7	– El. recapitulates the O.M.’s task: escorting Or. to Aeg. and then going to Clyt.
		668-70	– Or.’s and the O.M.’s first parting from El.

Abbreviations

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