

## MESSENGERS IN TRAGEDY

J. BARRETT: *Staged Narrative. Poetics and the Messenger in Greek Tragedy*. Pp. xxiv + 250. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2002. Cased, US\$49.95/£35. ISBN: 0-520-23180-5.

Barrett addresses himself to the messenger's contradictory sources of authority in Greek tragedy. It is indeed a conundrum that his report is at one and the same time validated by being autopsy and, contrariwise, by being omniscient. So is the messenger an actor in the drama or is he an extradiegetic narrator? Well, it is not startling to find that he can be both within the same narrative. In his introduction B. excellently surveys the area, as he sets himself the project of showing that the plays themselves show interest in the messenger's fluid status and in the working of the conventions which surround him, and that this forms part of the self-reflection of tragic texts. If de Jong's analyses demonstrated intermittent signs of focalization throughout the messenger's narrative, producing the effective conclusion, 'no narrative is ever objective', this conclusion must be offset against the long critical tradition which, contrasting the messenger's narrative with other tragic elements (say, choral lyric or stichomythia) has argued for its transparency, largely by claiming that it draws on the authority of epic narrative. The first two chapters analyse the epic inheritance, while the remaining four go on to examine in detail the fluctuating sources of authority of four message narratives, showing how the delineation of the messenger and his narrative contributes to the critical issues of the text.

Chapter 1 takes the messenger-speech from *Persians* as an initial 'laboratory'. B. notes the same initial criteria employed here as are used for messages in Homer, the Homeric Hymns and lyric poetry: that is, speed, reliability, and comprehensiveness. These markers confer on the Persian runner an authority that simply as an eyewitness he might otherwise lack. The message narrative itself is conveyed in both broad-brush strokes and fine detail; the messenger is sometimes there as an eyewitness, but has sometimes effaced himself into an 'ideal spectator' (like Xerxes on his throne?), so that the story can appear to 'tell itself'. B. concludes that the same double strategy is in operation here as we see with the bard and the Muse at the opening of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and that this feature is visibly negotiated in the text.

Chapter 2 explores more fully the ready-made models for messengers in Homer and Hesiod, showing how they lay claim to higher authority. In a brief foray into ancient literary criticism, he notes the Aristotelean view that the messenger speech is an epic intrusion in drama because it is an extradiegetic voice from the poet himself (*apangelia autou tou poietou*); from this viewpoint the messenger is at home in tragedy only by special arrangement. B. easily refutes this, showing a more complex pattern at work. It then seems somewhat paradoxical of B. in the following chapter to pick up the cudgels against Buxton's incontestable assertion that the various messengers in *Bacchae* do not give impartial accounts of what they see. (One of the major lessons this book teaches both directly and indirectly is the importance of keeping a sense of balance.) But picking up on the metatheatre of the play, B. wants to claim that whereas Pentheus wishes to be a spectator of the Maenads and disastrously fails, the messenger by contrast succeeds, and is thus the 'true' spectator. In this play, the messenger *is* allowed to be at least partly extradiegetic in the sense that he is, like the audience, virtually disembodied with a comprehensive and safe view of the action; in fact (back to the usual pattern), he is both participant and observer. This is a clever idea but, even if the

metatheatrical analogy between messenger and audience is theoretically valid, the argument seemed forced and I remain unenlightened by it.

Chapter 4 turns to Homer and the False Messenger speech in Sophocles' *Electra*, and here I think Barrett's grip on the fact that this is a self-conscious staging of a tragic convention does produce some genuinely new insights into an area already heavily explored. The Paidagogus' speech, so richly drawing on epic privilege, supports the view that the status of *angelia* is masterful and persuasive, while at the same time, his false story inevitably makes manifest the fictional status of the 'true' story into which the false one has been embedded, as do Odysseus' lying stories in *Odyssey*. Disappointing, though, that so much was made of the similarities between the *doloi mythoi* of the epic Odysseus and the tragic Orestes, when in Sophocles' version the lying rôle has been handed over to the Paidagogus—perhaps the most mysterious and still-unexplored figure in Sophocles.

The final chapter is entitled 'Oedipus Tyrannus: Epistemology and Tragic Practice'. I am grateful to B. for making me think about the extraordinary scene with the 'Corinthian' messenger (who gives the news first of Polybus' death, adds that Oedipus was not, after all, his son, and then points to the shepherd from Cithaeron; he does not deliver a continuous narrative and at times is disregarded as Oedipus and Jocasta discuss between themselves: what a fascinating scene that is!) I wish B. had devoted more space to it. He is more concerned, however, with the *exangelos*, whose narrative he subjects to a masterful analysis, highlighting the unusual mediation of memory and the equally unusual absence of *opsis* on the messenger's part (so that it is Oedipus, not the messenger, who sees the tableau of Jocasta hanging from the rafters, though the messenger has 'caught up' and become a third-person narrator again in time for the most gruesome spectacle of all, Oedipus' blinding). B. argues convincingly that the *angelia* here chimes in with the rest of the play, which is also mediated by memory, and constitutes in its entirety a search for an *angelia*, an autopsy account (of who killed Laius).

Building a little higher on footings laid by others, there are some fresh insights in this subtle and usually well-argued book. Not all will agree with his conclusions, or like the self-imposed constriction of subject-matter (I would have valued a comparison between the false narrative in *Electra* and those in *Trachiniae* and *Philoctetes*, for example), but anyone with an interest in message narrative will be stimulated to think again about the manipulation of its conventions and what that might mean for the text as a whole.

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### ACHARNIANS

S. DOUGLAS OLSON: *Aristophanes: Acharnians*. Pp. cii + 379. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. Cased, £65. ISBN: 0-19-814195-5.

This edition of a crucially important play has been eagerly awaited. *Acharnians* has not received a full-scale English-language commentary for nearly a century and Sommerstein's useful 1980 edition made no pretence to completeness or originality in its examination of the textual transmission. Moreover, Doug Olson has been the fastest-rising star of Aristophanic scholarship over the last decade, with a number of important papers preceding his excellent replacement of Platnauer's *Peace* in the

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