

Clytemnestra's letter in Iakovos Kambanellis' *Letter to Orestes**

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Kambanellis' Letter to Orestes constitutes Clytemnestra's apologia for the murder of Agamemnon and is addressed to her estranged son Orestes. Until now, research has concentrated mainly on the content, verbal message and metatheatrical dimension of Clytemnestra's letter, laying emphasis upon Kambanellis' intertextual links with the ancient Greek tragedies revolving around the Atreid myth. This article focuses attention on the dramatic form of the letter, examining it as a physical object with social connotations and as an active agent in the development of the events. It is argued that in emphasizing these aspects of the letter Kambanellis was probably influenced by the function of letters in two of the Greek tragedies which he clearly draws upon in The Supper trilogy: Euripides' Iphigenia at Aulis and Iphigenia among the Taurians. However, Kambanellis' intention was not to reproduce his tragic models but rather to exploit the medium of the letter in order to reconsider a staple of his own work: the disconcerting issue of human, and more particularly of familial, communication.

Keywords: Iakovos Kambanellis; *The Supper* trilogy; *Letter to Orestes*; Greek tragedy

The one-act play *Letter to Orestes* (Γράμμα στον Ορέστη) was first staged in 1992–3 at the Νέα Σκηνή of the National Theatre of Greece in a production directed by Kambanellis. It is the first play of the trilogy *The Supper* (Ο Δείπνος), which consists of *Letter to Orestes* (Γράμμα στον Ορέστη), *The Supper* (Ο Δείπνος) and *Thebes*

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Byway (Πάροδος Θηβών).¹ This trilogy forms part of a series of eight small-scale plays, seven of which were published in the sixth volume of Kambanellis' collected works with the rubric 'Σπουδές και απόπειρες', a programmatic blurb foreshadowing the experimental character of the works included in the volume.² Whereas most of these are *études* regarding the aftermath of well-known plays, in *The Supper* trilogy Kambanellis is making his first systematic attempt to get to grips with Greek tragedy.³

Letter to Orestes constitutes Clytemnestra's apologia and is written in the form of a letter which she addresses to her estranged son Orestes. Clytemnestra's letter is on one level an apologia for her actions in the past and an attempt to rewrite herself in her children's consciousness, but it is also more than that. The letter desperately appeals to Orestes to return home in time to prevent her daughter Electra staining her hands with the guilt of matricide. Clytemnestra dwells upon her forced marriage and gives a harrowing account of her troubled life with her philandering, patriarchal, and drunken husband Agamemnon. His obsession with having a male successor to consolidate his throne and royal power, together with Clytemnestra's inability to give birth to a boy, made their relationship extremely tense, and he was totally neglectful towards his daughters. Agamemnon's indifference had severe repercussions, especially for Electra, who ended up hating both herself for being a woman and her mother for making her a woman. Electra's sister Iphigenia was sacrificed by her own father for the sake of the Trojan campaign, while even Orestes, the longed-for male offspring and the fruit of Clytemnestra's brutal rape by

1 *Πάροδος Θηβών* has been referred to as *Thebes Sidestreet* by Melina Sardi, who first translated the play. Here I follow the more recent rendering *Thebes Byway* by V. Liapis, 'Iakovos Kambanellis' *The Supper: Heterotopia, intertextuality and metatheater in a modern tragic trilogy*, *Gramma* 22 (2014) 123–41. The English translation cannot preserve Kambanellis' toying with the different meanings of the word *parodos* in Ancient and Modern Greek. In Ancient Greek the term indicates a) the first choral passage recited or sung in an ancient Greek tragedy as the chorus enters the orchestra and b) the passage in an ancient Greek theatre between the auditorium and the *skene*. In Modern Greek *parodos* has the meanings 'sidestreet' or 'byway'. Through the title *Πάροδος Θηβών* Kambanellis ingeniously alludes to both his debt to Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Antigone*, and to his play's focus on the minor characters featuring in these tragedies. On the twofold meaning of the play's title see V. Tassis, 'Πάροδος Θηβών του Ι. Καμπανέλλη και τα διακεϊμένα της', in Y. Gotsis, E. Kali, P. Sakellaropoulou, V. Tassis and D. Tsatsoulis (eds), *Από το αττικό δράμα στο σύγχρονο θέατρο: Μελέτες για την πρόσληψη και τη διακεϊμεινικότητα* (Athens 2008) 177–210, at 206–7.

2 The rubric 'ΣΠΟΥΔΕΣ ΚΑΙ ΑΠΟΠΕΙΡΕΣ' is printed vertically in red on the front cover (but not the title of page) of I. Kambanellis, *Θέατρο ΣΤ': Γράμμα στον Ορέστη, Ο Δείπνος, Πάροδος Θηβών, Στη Χώρα Ίψεν, Ο Διάλογος, Ποιος ήταν ο κύριος...; Ο Κανείς και οι Κύκλωπες* (Athens 1994). Kambanellis first labelled these plays 'Σπουδές και απόπειρες' in his prefatory note to the programme of the 1992–3 production of *The Supper* trilogy. This note was republished in *Θέατρο ΣΤ'*, pp. 19–20.

3 Kambanellis deals with ancient themes in other plays as well (for example, *Ο μπαμπάς ο πόλεμος, Οδυσσέα γύρισε σπίτι*). However, as N. Papandreou correctly points out ('Ο μύθος των Ατρεϊδών στο νεότερο θέατρο', in Kambanellis, *Θέατρο ΣΤ'*, 11–18, at 17), this is the first time that he takes them seriously.

Agamemnon, suffered severely from his father's militaristic upbringing. Clytemnestra's only true love was Aegisthus, a benign and honourable man, a 'democratic despot', who came to Argos and became king at the people's behest. Clytemnestra claims that her decision to murder Agamemnon was taken not in revenge, but preemptively in defence, as he was threatening to kill both her and Aegisthus.⁴

In his prefatory note to the production of *The Supper* trilogy Kambanellis emphasized his opposition to the fact that Clytemnestra's treatment in Greek tragedy is one-sided, and confessed to the fondness that he had always felt for her.⁵ Indeed, Clytemnestra's portrait in *Letter to Orestes* is a far cry from the heroine's profile in tragedy, especially in Aeschylus and Sophocles.⁶ Kambanellis gives Clytemnestra the stage and allows her to raise her voice and openly defend herself.⁷ Although her fate is the one prescribed by Greek tragedy (Orestes will enter his mother's room, urged on by Electra, and cut her life short with one fatal stroke), Clytemnestra is presented throughout the play as a maternal figure who endured her husband's brutality and lived her life at his beck and call for the sake of her family. The opening phrase of the play 'Orestes, my beloved son' ('Ορέστη, αγαπημένε μου γιε'), which is very likely to be the salutation of her letter, helps to set the tone of her apologia from the outset; prefacing Orestes' name with the participle 'αγαπημένε' denotes an expression of affection, at least on the writer's behalf.

This innovation associates Kambanellis with playwrights such as Marguerite Yourcenar, who adopted a modern feminist reading of the myth: the vile tragic heroine was rejected and recast in a new, positive light. In *Clytemnestra or the Crime*, a first-person monologue structured as a speech and addressed to the 'gentlemen of the jury', Yourcenar's Clytemnestra is depicted as a woman bound by love who is forced to commit her crime because of her husband's neglect and indifference. Kambanellis knew and admired Yourcenar's monologue – as he states, he came across it when he started working

4 Even though Kambanellis departs from the tragic myth in many respects in his *Letter to Orestes*, he clearly draws on a number of tragedies dealing with the House of Atreus, such as Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and *Choephoroi*, Sophocles' *Electra*, and mainly Euripides' *Electra*, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, and *Orestes*; see P. Sakellaropoulou, 'Γράμμα στον Ορέστη και Ο Δείπνος του Ι. Καμπανέλλη: Στοιχεία πρόσληψης και διακείμενα', in Gotsis et al. (eds), *Από το αττικό δράμα στο σύγχρονο θέατρο*, 121–76; W. Puchner, *Τοπία ψυχής και μύθοι πολιτείας. Το θεατρικό σύμπαν του Ιάκωβου Καμπανέλλη* (Athens 2010) 655–73; Liapis, 'Iakovos Kambanellis' *The Supper*'. On Kambanellis' engagement with Greek antiquity in general see V. Ladogianni, *Ο τόπος του δράματος: Μελέτες για την ελληνική δραματουργία του 19ου και 20ου αιώνα* (Athens 2011) 402–12.

5 Kambanellis, *Θέατρο ΣΤ*, 19–20.

6 Kambanellis' Clytemnestra is closer to her Euripidean counterpart, who entertains some motherly emotions towards her children.

7 On monological and single-character plays on ancient themes in modern Greek theatre see K. Diamantakou-Agathou, 'Τραγικοί ήρωες μόνοι επί σκηνής στην αρχαία και σύγχρονη ελληνική δραματουργία: Η αυτονόμηση της μονολογικότητας', *Παράβασις* 10 (2010) 55–84, at 63–84, esp. 68–9.

on *Letter to Orestes* – even though he distances *his* Clytemnestra from hers.⁸ In Greece, Yannis Ritsos was the first to provide a revisionist image of Clytemnestra in the dramatic monologues of his masterly *Fourth Dimension*.⁹ Although Ritsos' Clytemnestra is the only member of the House of Agamemnon who is not allocated her own soliloquy – she is merely a silent addressee in 'Agamemnon' – her portrayal is skilfully pieced together by her children, especially Orestes and Iphigenia. In their respective dramatic monologues, they nostalgically remember her as an attractive, tender, and high-minded woman.¹⁰

Tragic letters and *Letter to Orestes*

My intention in this article is not so much to trace Kambanellis' ancient and modern influences in portraying *his* Clytemnestra, as to re-examine *Letter to Orestes* by focusing particular attention on the medium of the letter used by Kambanellis for his heroine's apologia. Yourcenar's Clytemnestra also writes a letter, and it is certainly possible that this is where Kambanellis found his inspiration. However, in Yourcenar's work the letter serves entirely different purposes – it is a woman's desperate attempt to regain her husband's interest – and, except for a passing reference, it remains firmly in the background.¹¹ Significantly, letters also figure in, and are well integrated into, two of the Greek tragedies on which Kambanellis clearly draws in *Letter to Orestes* and *The Supper*: Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* and *Iphigenia among the Taurians*.¹² Whereas the intertextual links between *Letter to Orestes* and tragic myth have been extensively and

8 Yourcenar's monologue was published (in Greek translation) in the journal *Lexis* in 1981, 363-5; see also T. Grammatas, 'Μύθος και διακειμενικότητα στη δραματουργία του Ιάκωβου Καμπανέλλη', in Kambanellis, *Θέατρο ΣΤ'*, 203–25, at 211. On Yourcenar's treatment of Clytemnestra see S. Braund, "We're here too, the ones without names": A study of female voices as imagined by Margaret Atwood, Carol Ann Duffy, and Marguerite Yourcenar', *Classical Receptions Journal* 4 (2012) 190–208, at 191–3. Cf. N. Papandreou, 'Οι Ατρείδες της Γιουρσενάρ', in D. I. Iakov and E. Papazoglou (eds), *Θυμέλη. Μελέτες χαρισμένες στον καθηγητή Ν. Χ. Χουρμουζιάδη* (Herakleion 2004) 251–79, which discusses Yourcenar's treatment of the Atreid myth in her play *Electra or the Fall of the Masks*.

9 Y. Ritsos, *Ποήματα, τόμος ΣΤ' (1956–1972): Τέταρτη Διάσταση*, 17th edn (Athens 1991).

10 Although Kambanellis' debt to Ritsos' 'Orestes' and 'The return of Iphigenia' has been acknowledged by others (Grammatas, 'Μύθος και διακειμενικότητα', 211; Papandreou, 'Ο μύθος των Ατρείδων', 15; Sakellaropoulou 'Γράμμα στον Ορέστη και Ο Δείπνος του Ι. Καμπανέλλη', 152; Puchner, *Τοπία ψυχής και μύθοι πολιτείας*, 661, n. 1863), this connection appears all the more likely if we take into account that these two monologues, directed by Minos Volanakis under the title *The Loneliness of the Atreidae*, were staged at the Kava theatre in Athens in 1990. On Clytemnestra's treatment by Ritsos and Kambanellis see also S. Shamanidi, 'Μεταμορφώσεις της Κλυταμνήστρας (Γ. Σεφέρης – Γ. Ρίτσος – Ι. Καμπανέλλης)', in K. Dimadis (ed.), *Συνέχειες, ασυνέχειες, ρήξεις στον ελληνικό κόσμο (1204–2014): Οικονομία, κοινωνία, ιστορία, λογοτεχνία*, IV (Athens 2015) 245–58.

11 Yourcenar's Clytemnestra writes an anonymous letter to Agamemnon in which she reveals her infidelity with Aegisthus. Agamemnon reads the letter, but remains apathetic, displaying utter indifference towards his wife's adultery.

12 In fact, *The Supper* could be seen as the sequel of Euripides' *Iphigenia among the Taurians*; see Sakellaropoulou, 'Γράμμα στον Ορέστη και Ο Δείπνος του Ι. Καμπανέλλη', 138.

thoroughly studied, this connection has hitherto received only cursory attention.¹³ Nonetheless, *Letter to Orestes* contains evidence which testifies to Kambanellis' engagement and 'play' with the two tragic letters, despite his divergence from them in many respects.

In both of Euripides' tragedies, letters contain information that are capable of utterly and drastically transforming the plot, given that they do in fact reach their supposed addressee and that the delivery is timely. *Iphigenia at Aulis* opens with an anxious Agamemnon agonizing over writing, erasing and rewriting a letter in the middle of the night:¹⁴

OLD SLAVE: (*addressing Agamemnon*) But you are writing a letter by the gleam of lamplight, the letter you have in your hand. The words you have written you erase again, you seal the tablet and then break the seal, you throw the pine frame upon the ground, and weep copious tears. In your perplexity you are all but raving mad. (33-41)¹⁵

When Agamemnon hands the letter to his trusted old slave to deliver to Clytemnestra, we are informed that its purpose is to take back what he has written in a previous letter which he had composed, so he claims, under duress from his brother Menelaus:

AGAMEMNON: At this point my brother, making every sort of argument, persuaded me to bring myself to do a terrible thing. In a folded tablet I wrote a message and sent it to my wife, telling her that she should send our daughter to marry Achilles. I made much of the man's high position and said that he was not willing to sail with the Achaeans unless a daughter of mine came as bride to his house in Phthia. That was the way I persuaded my wife by concocting a lie about the girl's marriage.... The ignoble decisions I made at that time I have recast nobly in this letter, the letter which in the dark of night you saw me opening and closing, old man. (97-110)

Although Agamemnon's revised, second letter is dispatched, it is eventually intercepted by Menelaus and so fails both to reach its destination and to fulfil its purpose: to prevent Iphigenia's death. Accordingly, Agamemnon's first, duplicitous letter turns out to have a devastating impact upon everyone involved in his marriage

13 Sakellaropoulou (op.cit., 150–1) acknowledges that Clytemnestra's letter harks back to the opening of Euripides *Iphigenia at Aulis* but does not pursue the issue further.

14 There has been much controversy over the authenticity of the prologue of the tragedy; on this issue see, inter alia, C. W. Willink, 'The prologue of *Iphigenia at Aulis*', *Classical Quarterly* 21 (1971) 343–64; D. Kovacs, 'Toward a reconstruction of *Iphigenia Aulidensis*', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 123 (2003) 77–103, at 80–3; P. Michelakis, *Iphigenia at Aulis* (London 2006) 107–10; K. Pietruczuk, 'The prologue of *Iphigenia Aulidensis* reconsidered', *Mnemosyne* 65 (2012) 565–83.

15 Translated passages from Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* are taken from D. Kovacs, *Euripides VI: Bacchae, Iphigenia at Aulis, Rhesus* [Loeb Classical Library, 495] (Cambridge, MA and London 2002).

scheme,¹⁶ especially Iphigenia, who comes to Aulis as a ‘bride’ only to be sacrificed for the sake of obtaining favourable winds. Simultaneously, the prospect of the cancellation of the entire Trojan campaign, as prescribed by myth, disappears since if Agamemnon’s letter had not been dispatched, Iphigenia would not have come to Aulis and, consequently, the Greek fleet would not have been able to set sail.¹⁷

In *Iphigenia among the Taurians* the letter reappears, although in an entirely different context (578–797). Orestes is still being pursued by a number of Furies who were not appeased by the jury’s verdict at Athens, when, along with his close friend Pylades, he arrives at the land of the Taurians. They have been sent by Apollo to steal the image of Artemis. The presence of the two men in Tauris does not pass unnoticed and, as a result, they are captured and handed over to the officiating priestess of the local cult – none other than Iphigenia – to be sacrificed to the goddess. When Iphigenia discovers that the two strangers are her compatriots, she agrees to spare Pylades’ life on condition that he will act as her messenger and deliver a letter to her brother (578–616). When Pylades asks to be exempted from perjury if the letter is lost during the return journey, Iphigenia recites her message aloud, thus securing its transmission no matter what occurs (755–65). The vocalization of the contents of the letter leads to the siblings recognizing each other, and, consequently, to Orestes’ rescue. If Iphigenia had not read out her message, Orestes would have been sacrificed and it would have remained forever uncertain whether the letter would be delivered.¹⁸

Two issues stand out in these examples. The first is the intricate and ‘directive’ function of letters. In addition to being purveyors of lifesaving messages, they are also significant as stage props that promote the plot. To use the taxonomy proposed by François Jost, Euripides follows the ‘kinetic/active’ method, whereby the letter does not merely report or describe events to a recipient who is passive and uninvolved in the action (static method), but also provokes the reaction of the intended addressee and actively contributes to the action.¹⁹ In other words, the action in the two Euripides tragedies is carried forward by means of the respective letters. Secondly, in both cases, the audience is encouraged to perceive the letters as physical objects. As Rosenmeyer emphasizes:

16 On Agamemnon’s letter in *Iphigenia at Aulis* see, inter alia, P. A. Rosenmeyer, *Ancient Epistolary Fictions: The Letter in Greek Literature* (Cambridge 2001); eadem, ‘The appearance of letters on stages and vases’, in O. Hodkinson, P. A. Rosenmeyer and E. Bracke (eds), *Epistolary Narratives in Ancient Greek Literature* (Leiden 2013) 39–70; T. E. Jenkins, *Intercepted Letters: Epistolary and Narrative in Greek and Roman Literature* (Lanham and New York 2006) 87–95; Michelakis, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, 101; I. Torrance, *Metapoetry in Euripides* (Oxford 2013) 158–65.

17 See Michelakis, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, 55.

18 On the function of the letter in *Iphigenia among the Taurians* see, inter alia, Jenkins, *Intercepted Letters*, 95–101; P. Kyriakou, *A Commentary on Euripides’ Iphigenia in Tauris* (Berlin 2006) 256–64; Torrance, *Metapoetry in Euripides*, 152–7.

19 F. Jost, ‘Le Roman épistolaire et la technique narrative au XVIII^e siècle’, *Comparative Literature Studies* 3 (1966) 397–427. Representative examples of ‘kinetic’ epistolary novels are *Les Lettres portugaises* and Laclos’ *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. See also the perceptive study by J. G. Altman, *Epistolary: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus 1982).

'When a letter is used on stage its formal and functional characteristics, far from being merely ornamental, significantly influence the way meaning is consciously and unconsciously constructed by the epistolary writers and readers'.²⁰ In addition to other intertextual links he establishes with the two letters from the tragedies, in *Letter to Orestes* Kambanellis seems to capitalize on both of these features: the physicality of Clytemnestra's letter is placed under the spotlight even before its contents are disclosed, while the letter as such actively contributes to the development of the events, not only in *Letter to Orestes* but also in its sequel, *The Supper*, the second play of *The Supper* trilogy.

Clytemnestra's letter as a physical object with 'social' connotations

This is how the opening scene of *Letter to Orestes* is set: the actress playing Clytemnestra first picks up some of the sheets of paper (some blank, some used and crumpled up) strewn around the stage and places them 'as if at random' on the floor and on a box used as a table, which is the only piece of stage décor. She then lights a candle. After this sketchy stage set-up with its apparent metatheatrical dimension,²¹ the actress takes one of the crumpled sheets of paper and starts reading out slowly what is written on it 'as if to confirm that what she has written is correctly phrased'. The very first phrase, 'Orestes, my beloved son', indicates that the sheets of paper we can see on stage – or at least some of them – form part of the letter referred to in the title of the play. Although it is impossible to tell at this point whether what we have in front of us is the final version of the letter, it is evident from the very beginning that the writing of the letter is an act that has already been begun in the past, outside dramatic time.

In his study on Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, Todorov distinguishes between what a letter says (its content) and what a letter signifies (its connotations), emphasizing that all epistolary messages have a double meaning. As he indicates, a letter is a 'social phenomenon' and, as such, it provokes certain expectations that extend beyond its verbal and textual message:

On the one hand, they [*sic.* epistolary messages] mean what the sentences that constitute them mean, and each letter says something different from the other. On the other hand, they possess a connotation, identical in the mind of all, which is that of the 'letter' as a social phenomenon, and this connotation is in addition, or even in opposition to the literal message of each letter.²²

Bearing in mind the 'social' dimension of letters, what we are faced with at the opening of Kambanellis' play somewhat belies our expectations. Whereas we might

20 Rosenmeyer, *Ancient Epistolary Fictions*, 65.

21 See Liapis, 'Iakovos Kambanellis' *The Supper*', 6–7.

22 T. Todorov, 'The discovery of language: *Les Liaisons dangereuses* and *Adolphe*', *Yale French Studies* 45 (1970) 113–26, at 115. In *Les Liaisons dangereuses* Todorov (115–16) distinguishes three main connotations evoked by letters: a) intimacy between the sender and the recipient, b) the possibility of change in a situation, c) authenticity.

expect a few sheets of paper arranged in order, what we see is quite the opposite. The chaos that dominates Clytemnestra's room serves to highlight from the very beginning that her letter is problematic, and directs us to focus attention on the letter as a physical object. As the play unfolds it becomes clear that this is neither a typical letter from a mother to her child, nor a letter whose one and only purpose is to *inform* or to *advise*,²³ but rather a mother's anxious attempt to *communicate* with her son. Kambanellis' decision to open his play with Clytemnestra reading from a discarded sheet of paper indicates her anxiety to find the words she needs to accurately express her feelings and thoughts in order to bridge the huge gap that separates her from her estranged children. Orestes is not present, and so Clytemnestra is unable to use non-verbal communication (visual cues, gestures, intonation, pitch and so forth) or to monitor his reactions to what she says. This heightens her inner turmoil and renders the act of writing an even more frustrating and painful experience.²⁴

The problematic nature of Clytemnestra's letter is also indicated by the intertextual links between the opening of the play and the prologue of Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, and in particular Agamemnon's equally problematic letter. Just like Agamemnon, Clytemnestra writes her letter at night by candle-light. The chaos of the papers strewn around her inevitably brings to mind Agamemnon's indecisiveness and emotional confusion expressed through the constant writing, erasing and rewriting of his second letter. Nevertheless, in writing his letter, Euripides' Agamemnon is driven by anxiety stemming from a conflict between his fatherly emotions and his political ambitions and duty as the commander of the Greek army; in contrast, Clytemnestra's distress proves to be much deeper, inasmuch as her overarching concern is not merely to deliver a message or give instructions (as is the case with both Agamemnon's and Iphigenia's tragic letters), but to truly *communicate* with her son. This substantial divergence between Kambanellis' and Euripides' letters is also expressed by the fact that the writing of Agamemnon's letter is depicted as an impulsive and erratic act – note his servant's comment that Agamemnon acts like a 'madman'²⁵ – while Clytemnestra's composition is clearly the outcome of forethought and not simply an *ad hoc* reaction to her circumstances. In addition to representing Clytemnestra's distress and emotional impasse, the scattered and crumpled sheets of paper also encompass a temporal dimension, inasmuch as they imply the lapse of a substantial period of time and, very likely, many sleepless nights. Significantly, this is in stark contrast to Clytemnestra's repetitive and urgent exhortations to herself to hurry up and finish the letter because 'the

23 On maternal letters and the genre of mother's advice see R. A. Anselment, 'Katherine Patson and Brilliana Harley: Maternal letters and the genre of mother's advice', *Studies in Philology* 101 (2004) 431–53.

24 'Πού είσαι Ορέστη; Γιατί να σου τα γράφω αντί να σου τα λέω!' (27). All quotations from *Letter to Orestes* and *The Supper* are from Kambanellis, *Θέατρο ΣΤ*.

25 OLD MAN: 'In your perplexity you are all but raving mad' (40–1).

clock is ticking'.²⁶ As Todorov might have said, there is an incongruity here between what the letter connotes and what it actually says.²⁷

Clytemnestra's letter as an active agent in the plot

In addition to the meaning generated by its physicality and its 'social' connotations Clytemnestra's letter is far from being merely a bearer of her thoughts; it also serves as an agent in the development of events. Kambanellis' deployment of the 'kinetic' method, to recall Jost's formulation, becomes more evident in the second play of the trilogy, entitled *The Supper* – chronologically placed after the matricide – which centres on the reactions the letter provokes in its intended recipients. According to Electra, the initial plan was to kill their mother and then return to the room where their father was murdered and proudly announce to him that they had avenged his death (63). However, the letter found in Clytemnestra's room thwarts their plans and completely transforms their feelings towards their mother. Electra, on the one hand, starts to admire Clytemnestra's character and actions; Orestes, on the other, is racked by guilt for his part in the murder. In fact, the eponymous dinner arranged by Electra for the dead members of her family in *The Supper* would never have taken place without the letter. Crudely stated, the letter is very much the driving force behind everything that takes place in *The Supper*.

The 'kinetic' method is also evident in *Letter to Orestes*, to the degree that the writing, reading and rehearsing of the letter by Clytemnestra provokes action. Kambanellis highlights its importance by means of the stage-directions interspersed throughout the play, all of which concern Clytemnestra's handling of the letter. For instance, at some points she is presented filling in gaps in a document she has already written.²⁸ On other occasions she merely reads what she has jotted down beforehand.²⁹ On yet other occasions she speaks without the aid of any written text. However, even in these cases, Kambanellis is careful to stress her physical contact with the letter, thus making a veiled connection between what Clytemnestra says and what the letter contains (or might contain).³⁰

26 'Ορέστη, αγαπημένη μου γιε ξέρω πως οι μέρες μου είναι μετρημένες και τρέμω που δε βλέπω να 'ρχεσαι.' (25); 'Πρέπει όμως να τα γράψω, και να βιαστώ μάλιστα' (27).

27 As Todorov indicates ('The discovery of language', 115), the connotations of a letter are not always in accord with its contents and might be 'in addition or even in opposition to the literal message of each letter'.

28 'Σταματά να διαβάζει, πιάνει ένα μολύβι και γράφει' (25); 'Ξαναπιάνει μολύβι και γράφει προφέροντας με έξαψη την κάθε λέξη' (27); 'Ξανάρχεται στο τραπέζι και γράφει' (35).

29 'Πηγαίνει βιαστικά στο τραπέζι και ξαναδιαβάζει' (29); 'Πάει στο τραπέζι, ψαχουλεύει στα χαρτιά για να βρει κάποιο φύλλο. Το βρίσκει και διαβάζει' (33).

30 'σταματά να γράφει και συνεχίζει λέγοντας αυτά που έχει να πει παρασυρόμενη όλο και πιο πολύ απ' αυτά που νιώθει' (25); 'Τινάζεται όρθια φράζοντας με το χέρι το στόμα φοβισμένη κι η ίδια απ' αυτό που ξεστόμισε, κάνει δύο τρία άσκοπα βήματα, γονατίζει ανάμεσα στα σκόρπια χαρτιά, πιάνει ένα αφηρημένη και λέει...' (33); 'Χουφτιάζει και με τα δυο χέρια μάτσο τα χαρτιά απ' το τραπέζι, σηκώνεται . . . βηματίζει μπροστά, κάπου κάπου της πέφτουν χαρτιά απ' τα χέρια' (34); 'Βηματίζει αφηρημένη προς το προσκήνιο, τα χαρτιά που κρατούσε της γλιστρούν λίγα λίγα απ' τα χέρια, σκορπάνε στο πάτωμα' (35).

In a dense essay, Pefanis interprets these stage directions as Kambanellis' attempt to experiment with what he calls the 'dialogic nature' of the monologue. He emphasizes that every time Clytemnestra appears to write, read, or recite, the distance between her, as the writer, and Orestes, as the addressee, changes, becoming greater when Clytemnestra writes, and smaller when she recites.³¹ Although Pefanis' suggestion should be endorsed, these stage directions serve yet another equally important purpose. It is normally assumed that, whenever Clytemnestra speaks without the aid of a written text, she is reciting from memory what she has already written down. This may be so, but the distinctions drawn by Kambanellis with regard to Clytemnestra's psychological state in each particular case urge us to interpret each 'recitation' on its own merits. Consequently, it is plausible to argue that an 'absent-minded' ('αφηρημένη', 35) Clytemnestra is reciting from memory. However, when she abandons the text, overwhelmed by her emotions ('παρασυρόμενη όλο και πιο πολύ απ' αυτά που νιώθει', 25), her words should most likely be perceived as uncensored streams of consciousness and as spontaneous speech triggered by the exigencies of the moment: see, for instance, her comment when she thinks that someone is outside the door to her room.³² Of course, the boundaries between these two kinds of speech are fluid and cannot be mapped out with precision; accordingly, whenever Clytemnestra is seen to be neither reading nor writing, it would be safer to interpret her words as constituting a *bricolage* of recited and spontaneous speech.

Subsequently, the text of the play *Letter to Orestes* should not be perceived as being the actual words of the letter in the title, but merely a version of it; *Letter to Orestes* can be thought of as a keyhole through which we are allowed only glimpses of the letter written by Clytemnestra. Orestes and Electra do not find in their mother's room a letter whose pages are arranged in an orderly fashion, but, instead, sheets of paper, some blank, some used, scattered in disarray, along with balls of crumpled paper. These had at one time been discarded by Clytemnestra, but were very likely to have been part of the letter subsequently pieced together by Orestes and Electra. It can hardly be a coincidence that the phrase 'Orestes, my beloved son', obsessively repeated by Orestes himself in *The Supper*, is likely to originate from the crumpled sheet of paper that Clytemnestra reads from at the opening of the play.

The conclusion of all this is that Clytemnestra's confession, which we 'overhear' during the performance, stands as a version of the legacy that she leaves to her children in the form of a letter: it constitutes a 'rehearsal' of what the letter might have been, in the same way that each performance of the play provocatively introduces itself as a

31 G. Pefanis, *Ιάκωβος Καμπανέλλης: Ανιχνεύσεις και προσεγγίσεις στο θεατρικό του έργο* (Athens 2000) 160–1. On Kambanellis' treatment of monologues in his one-act plays see also Ch. Bakonikola, 'Τα μονοπρόσωπα μονόπρακτα του Ιάκωβου Καμπανέλλη', *Δρώμενα* 95 (1995) 23–6, who refers to his tendency to 'dialogize' them (διαλογοποίηση του μονολόγου).

32 'Τι' αυτό και μόνο με τρομάζει κάθε ψίθυρος που ακούω στο διάδρομο, όχι για να φυλαχτώ' (26).

rehearsal.³³ The view that Kambanellis wanted us to perceive *Letter to Orestes* in this way might also find support in *The Supper*: here Orestes, who is still in shock after reading his mother's apologia, mechanically repeats parts of the letter, with a slight difference from what we hear in *Letter to Orestes*. For instance, Clytemnestra's question 'Πού γυρίζεις, Ορέστη, γιατί αργείς...;' (26) in *Letter to Orestes* becomes 'πού έχεις χαθεί, Ορέστη, γιατί αργείς...;' in *The Supper* (57). This difference of wording is significant, for it makes a clear distinction between Clytemnestra's letter and the two in Euripides, in which the senders recite the exact content word for word.³⁴ Even in the case of Agamemnon's second letter, which passes through various drafts before it is finalized, we only have the definitive version: every new message written on the wax tablet presupposes that the previous one has been permanently erased.

A letter without a destination

As mentioned above, Clytemnestra's letter to Orestes constitutes both an apologia for perpetrating Agamemnon's murder and a desperate appeal to Orestes to return home. In order to fulfil its prescribed purposes, however, the letter must reach its destination and its intended recipient. In *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Agamemnon hands over the letter to his trusted slave to deliver to his wife, but in Kambanellis' play the letter is never dispatched. Clytemnestra, however, depicts it as a finished product and contemplates Orestes reading it.³⁵ She even provides information about the time and mode of its transmission: Orestes' nurse will come in the early hours of the morning in order to pick up the letter secretly through the window. If for any reason this plan should fail, Clytemnestra will hide the letter under the floor for the nurse to collect.³⁶ The secretive and careful way in which the letter's transmission is contrived emphasizes its private and confidential nature. At the same time, it produces a *frisson* in external readers or in the audience eavesdropping on such a highly personal matter,³⁷ despite this impression ultimately being proved wrong because what we overhear are not the actual words of the letter but merely what it might have said.

33 From the opening stage directions, it is made clear that Kambanellis wants his audience to receive this play as a piece of metatheatre. This is not a monologue delivered by Clytemnestra, but by an actress pretending to be Clytemnestra. As he indicates, *Letter to Orestes* should be staged and performed as a dramatic artifice ('Τι αυτό προτείνω η σκηνή να είναι σε συνθήκες πρόβας' 25).

34 For the content of Iphigenia's letter see *IT* 779, 770–1, 773–6, 778. For Agamemnon's letter see *IA* 115–16, 119, 120–3.

35 See for example, 'Όμως σε παρακαλώ, αγοράκι μου, πριν τα διαβάσεις, σκέψου – όχι για να είσαι επιεικής αλλά για να κρίνεις πιο σωστά – σκέψου πως αυτά τα μαρτυρά κάποιος που είναι πια πέρα από αυταπάτες, εγωπάθειες και ματαιότητες' (27).

36 'Το γράμμα που θέλω να διαβάσεις θα το τελειώσω απόψε. Θα 'ρθει κατά τις τρεις η παραμίνα σου να της το δώσω κρυφά απ' το παράθυρο, ή θα το κρύψω κάτω από ένα σανίδι, στο πάτωμα, να το βρει εκεί...' (26).

37 The term is used by O. Hodgkinson and P. A. Rosenmeyer, 'Introduction', in Hodgkinson, Rosenmeyer and Bracke (eds), *Epistolary Narratives in Ancient Greek Literature*, 1–36, at 3 with reference to the emotions experienced by external readers 'eavesdropping' on a private conversation.

Notwithstanding all these details, there are still questions about the delivery of the letter. How might Orestes' nurse bring this task to completion? Are we to suppose that she will merely hide the letter and hand it over to Orestes upon his arrival? But this would defeat the object of the letter, which is to hasten Orestes' return. As the nurse could not deliver the letter herself because of her old age,³⁸ another plausible hypothesis would be for her to entrust it to a messenger to deliver to Orestes. This scenario is also ruled out when Clytemnestra reveals that she has already sent people to search for Orestes no less than seven times, but without success.³⁹ Even if we assume that Orestes will be tracked down on this occasion, other questions still arise: will he read the letter? And if he reads it, will he take his mother's apologia to heart or reject it as a ruse? When she refers to her alienation from her eldest daughter Electra, Clytemnestra emphasizes that her invitations to meet were repeatedly rejected and even the letter she had sent to her had been returned unopened.⁴⁰ Electra's dismissive stance no doubt casts a dark shadow upon Clytemnestra's letter to Orestes. Clytemnestra fears that her attempt is futile and that her letter will probably remain unopened and unanswered. Nevertheless, she also knows that this is the only channel of communication still available to her. The letter is the only way to bridge the spatial and psychological gap that separates her from Orestes. She *needs* to believe that Orestes will read it.

The letter in shared space

As the play moves towards its conclusion, the door of Clytemnestra's room opens and Orestes secretly enters, with the intention of killing his mother. Clytemnestra, sitting at the table and eager to finish her letter, shouts her final appeal to Orestes and desperately pleads with him. He is now seen in his role as Agamemnon's avenger, returning to free himself from the capriciousness and foolishness of his father and grandfather. Uttered at the very moment when Orestes is about to plunge his blade into her neck in retaliation for Agamemnon's murder, Clytemnestra's plea takes on a deeply tragic dimension. This heightened moment where Clytemnestra, as the writer, issues her final appeal to her son without knowing that he is present, harks back to Euripides' *Iphigenia among the Taurians*. In that play Iphigenia reads out the contents of her letter to Orestes, its intended recipient, although she does not yet know that it is him. Nevertheless, the outcome in each case is profoundly different. In Euripides, the fact that Orestes receives Iphigenia's message renders her written words obsolete (in fact, Orestes does not even bother

38 On the incompetence of Agamemnon's servant as a 'courier' of the letter due to his old age see K. Synodinou, 'Agamemnon's change of mind in Euripides' *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, *Logeion* 3 (2013) 51–65, at 53–4.

39 'Ἐστειλα ὡς τῶρα ἐφτά ἀνθρώπους νὰ σε βροῦνε. Πού ἔχεις πάει;' (27)

40 'Τρεῖς φορές τὴν παρακάλεσα νὰ ῥθει νὰ μιλήσουμε. Δὲν ἦρθε. Τῆς ἔγραψα. Ἐστειλε πίσω τὸ γράμμα χωρὶς νὰ το ἀνοίξει.' (26)

to open his sister's letter)⁴¹ and leads to the siblings recognizing each other, after the direct exchange they have on stage.⁴² By contrast, in Kambanellis, Orestes completely fails to respond to his mother's final appeal, even though she addresses him twice by name.⁴³ The explanation for his cold-blooded reaction is identified in the re-enactment of the matricidal scene acted out in *The Supper*. As Orestes himself confesses, upon entering the room Clytemnestra's figure suddenly disappeared before his eyes:

ΟΡΕΣ.: (παίρνει ένα μαχαίρι απ' το τραπέζι και πηγαίνει μερικά βήματα πίσω απ' την ΗΛΕΚΤΡΑ) ...η πόρτα ήταν μισάνοιχτη... κοίταξα και την είδα που το διάβαζε... κρατούσα ως και την ανάσα μου για να μη μ' ακούσει... γιατί αν γύριζε το πρόσωπό και την έβλεπα να με βλέπει, δε θα μπορούσα πια τίποτα...! κοίταξα το λαιμό της και πλησίαζα... μόνο το λαιμό της για να βλέπω μόνο το σημείο, όχι εκείνη... κι άμα πλησίασα όσο για να μπορώ να την αγγίξω.... (μυμείται το χτύπημα...) (62)

The description is striking: Orestes voluntarily blocks off all his senses (hearing, smell, sight) and intentionally enters into a condition that disrupts his contact with the surrounding world, conscious that any kind of communication with his mother might suspend the act of matricide indefinitely. This naturally leads to a paradox. Epistolary communication *per se* is engendered and justified by the separation of the writer from the recipient. The letter is always a reminder or indication of the gap, whether spatial, temporal or emotional, that separates writer and recipient. Although by the end of the play mother and son share the same space (a condition that renders the letter unnecessary) Clytemnestra's letter never loses its mediatory role, since Orestes stubbornly refuses any sort of communication with her. As Iphigenia succinctly states in *The Supper* when Folos (Electra's husband) laments that the letter was read too late by Orestes and Electra, a more timely reading would have made no difference because Orestes would not have been willing to believe what his mother had written, and Electra would not have let him do so. Whereas in *Letter to Orestes* Clytemnestra's undelivered letter raises a 'what-if' possibility – what would have happened if Orestes had read the letter in advance? – in *The Supper* this possibility disappears.

41 ORESTES: '[...] I will not trouble to open the letter but will choose first a pleasure not of words but of deeds. Sister I love best, stunned though I am, with scarce believing arms, I yet come to the pleasure of your embrace.' (793–7)

42 On the recognition scene in Euripides' *Iphigenia among the Taurians* see, inter alia, Torrance, *Metapoetry in Euripides*; E. Hall, *Adventures with Iphigenia in Tauris: A Cultural History of Euripides' Black Sea Tragedy* (Oxford and New York 2013). L. Stirewalt, *Studies in Ancient Greek Epistolography* (Atlanta 1993) 77: 'once the oral message has been delivered, the delivery of the letter is reduced to a pantomime, an empty gesture rejected by Orestes as he tosses the text aside to embrace his sister'.

43 ΚΛΥΤ.: 'Τελειώνω, Ορέστη, έγραψα ό,τι είχα να σου πω. Όμως... προς Θεού, μην παρασυρθείς κι εσύ απ' τα καμώματα του παππού σου και του πατέρα σου! ελευθερώσου, Ορέστη' (35).

Conclusion

In summary, Kambanellis' use of the dramatic form of the letter in his *Letter to Orestes* is highly likely to have been inspired by the letters featuring in *Iphigenia at Aulis* and *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, two of the tragedies upon which Kambanellis clearly draws in *The Supper* trilogy. Although on several occasions Kambanellis evokes the tragic letters only to distance himself from them, he clearly imitates the pivotal role they play in the development of events and expands upon their physicality. Nevertheless, his main objective is not to use the form of the letter to reproduce his tragic models but rather to place a staple of his own work under scrutiny: the disconcerting issue of human, and more particularly of familial, communication.⁴⁴ On the one hand, through Clytemnestra's extensive dramatic monologue, he depicts an utterly different portrait of his heroine and sheds new light upon her motives in murdering Agamemnon. Clytemnestra's apologia brings to the foreground a dysfunctional family whose alienated members cannot and do not communicate with each other, as a result of Agamemnon's capriciousness, authoritativeness, and bloated ego. Clytemnestra is aware of the severe consequences of this on her children, but feels obliged to tolerate her husband's egotism and authority because of the constraints of social pressures and the prevailing patriarchal protocol. Eventually, the letter allows her both to break her silence and somehow bridge the distance that separates her from her children. By quoting and paraphrasing their words, or by imagining their voices,⁴⁵ Clytemnestra strives to overcome her estrangement and to enter into a dialogue with them – albeit an imaginary one – so that her inherently 'monologic' speech effectively becomes 'dialogic'.⁴⁶ At the same time, however, the letter proves to be insufficient to fully express and transmute her emotions and thoughts, and this finds expression in the chaos that dominates her room. In fact, the very existence of the letter is problematized when Orestes and Electra enter the room, for at this point other more immediate means of communication (for example oral) are available. The letter reassumes its mediatory role after Clytemnestra's death, when the prospect of oral communication between mother and children ceases to exist. However, the insurmountable distance that separates the world of the living from the world of the dead serves to turn Clytemnestra's letter into an agent of vengeance for the matricides, who are unable to provide even a written response to their mother's appeals.⁴⁷ In *The Supper* this rift becomes ironic, as both the living and the dead

44 See Puchner, *Τοπία ψυχής και μύθοι πολιτείας*, 665, who suggests that the play could also be a study of the limitations of written discourse and its inefficiency as a vehicle of communication: 'Πόσο πραγματική είναι η συγγραφή της επιστολής αυτής; Μήπως ο συγγραφέας από την αρχή προετοιμάζει κι ένα μήνυμα τελείως άσχετο με το θέμα: ότι ο γραπτός λόγος ποτέ δεν μπορεί να εκφράσει αυτό που μπορεί ο προφορικός'. This issue is also thematized in the other two plays of *The Supper* trilogy.

45 See for example, Kambanellis, *Θέατρο ΣΤ'*, 32.

46 As Puchner observes, *Τοπία ψυχής και μύθοι πολιτείας*, 663), Kambanellis uses the monologue but adds to it a number of 'windows' that open it up.

47 As Iphigenia confesses, Orestes keeps the letter constantly with him even when he sleeps: 'ΙΦΙΓ. ...το 'χει συνέχεια πάνω του, το κρύβει στο μαξιλάρι του...! πιο πολύ κι απ' το φονικό τον τυραννά αυτό το γράμμα...!' (45).

members of Agamemnon's family are depicted sharing the same table. Despite the spatial proximity, however, this is a one-way communication: the dead can see the living and listen to their conversations, but not *vice versa*. Ironically, however, this proves to be the most significant conversation that Clytemnestra and Agamemnon ever had with their children, who openly disclose their emotions, fears, and anxieties for the first time.⁴⁸ Using this pseudo-dialogue between the dead and the living, Kambanellis ingeniously allows us a glimpse into how different things might be, if only the members of the family truly communicated with each other.

The realization by Orestes and Electra that Clytemnestra's murder has permanently eliminated every kind of communication with her finds its most tragic expression in Orestes. Re-enacting the moment of the matricide, he narrates the scene using the second person singular, as if addressing his mother in a final – albeit futile – attempt to communicate with her:

ΟΡΕΣ.: ... με τη φόρα που είχα έγειρα στο τραπέζι και είδα στα φύλλα τ' όνομά μου «Ορέστη, αγαπημένε μου γιε...» γύρισα να σε δώ... με κοίταξες... ένιωσα σα να με αγκαλιάζεις και γονάτισα... το χέρι σου, που κρατούσες τα τελευταία φύλλα, σηκώθηκε λίγο και ξανάπεσε... (κάνει όσα αφηγείται κρατώντας το χέρι της Ηλέκτρας) ... άνοιξα το χέρι σου δάχτυλο, δάχτυλο και τα πήρα... και ύστερα άδειο και μόνο του ήταν τόσο σκεφτικό, τόσο λυπημένο.... (62–3).

The letter as a physical object is eventually the only thing that gives Orestes a sense of physical contact with his mother, not only because it contains her emotions and thoughts, but also because it was written by her and was the last object she touched before her death: it becomes a projection of her. Orestes' obsession with Clytemnestra's hands throughout *The Supper* can hardly be coincidental;⁴⁹ the hands, the principal means through which one has physical contact with others, have left their indelible traces on the letter. Every time Orestes holds the letter, he is simultaneously touching and embracing his mother.

48 'ΑΙΠΣ.: ...μα γιατί πονάτε επί ματαίω αφού η σκέψη δεν έχει φωνή...; ΚΛΥΤ.: ... αυτό είναι άδικο...! σήμερα που θα 'μαστε πάλι όλοι μαζί, θα μπορούσαμε να πούμε ένα σωρό πράγματα που δεν είπαμε ποτε...!' (41–2); 'ΑΓΑΜ.: ...εσύ τα ήξερες όλα αυτά...;! ΚΛΥΤ.: ...πώς να τα ξέρω όλα...; ΑΓΑΜ.: ...γιατί δε μου τα είπε κανείς...; δεν ξέρω τίποτα για τα παιδιά μου...!' (48–9).

49 Kambanellis, *Θέατρο ΣΤ'*, 62–4. On Clytemnestra's hands see also Ritsos, *Ποιήματα ΣΤ'* ('The Return of Iphigenia'), 128.