A Messenger’s Defense: The Pyrrhics of Euripides’ *Andromache*

The messenger speech in Euripides’ *Andromache* represents the only time in extant tragedy that a murdered body — that of Neoptolemus — appears onstage without the presence of the murderer. As a set piece, it offers the Messenger[[1]](#footnote-2) unusual latitude in shaping his story: only here and in Sophocles’ *Electra* does the messenger tell a geographically remote story. Both stories take place in Delphi, both stories introduce the “body” (ashes in an urn in Sophocles), but, most importantly, the Paidagogos in Sophocles’ *Electra* tells a completely fabricated story. This fabrication poses an uncomfortable question for messenger speech: What happens when a character, who is in large part defined by his allegiance to facts and events, tells a lie?

## What the messenger saw and what the messenger said

And if Sophocles can write an untruthful messenger speech, what should we make of the rest of the messenger speech corpus? In this section, I want to examine the similarities between these two speeches. In view of Sophocles’ false messenger, the narrative decisions made by the *Andromache*’s Messenger suggest that he fails to tell the whole truth.

1. extradiegetic: a character writing his memoirs
2. diegetic/intradiegetic: the events of those memoirs
3. metadiegetic: another character narrating within those memoirs

Far from an outsider, the Messenger’s bias connects him to the other characters of the play, and his limited perspective underscores the *Andromache*’s central difficulty of knowing just *what* is going on.

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δεινὰς δ’ ἂν εἶδες πυρρίχας φρουρουμένου  
βέλεμνα παιδός. ὡς δέ νιν περισταδὸν  
κύκλωι κατεῖχον οὐ διδόντες ἀμπνοάς,  
βωμοῦ κενώσας δεξίμηλον ἐσχάραν,  
τὸ Τρωϊκὸν πήδημα πηδήσας ποδοῖν  
χωρεῖ πρὸς αὐτούς· οἱ δ’ ὅπως πελειάδες  
ἱέρακ’ ἰδοῦσαι πρὸς φυγὴν ἐνώτισαν.  
πολλοὶ δ’ ἔπιπτον μιγάδες ἔκ τε τραυμάτων  
αὐτοί θ’ ὑφ’ αὑτῶν στενοπόρους κατ’ ἐξόδους. (Eur., *Andr*. 1135–43)

And you would have seen the boy’s terrible pyrrhics as he warded off their missiles. And when they stood around him in a circle, held him at bay, and gave no room to breath, he left the offering-receiving hearth of the altar, leaping his Trojan leap with his feet as he advanced towards them. And they turned tail in flight like doves who have seen a hawk. Many of the attackers fell pell-mell from self-inflicted wounds, owing to the narrowness of the exits.

# References

de Jong, Irene J.F. 1991. *Narrative in Drama: The Art of the Euripidean Messenger Speech*. Leiden: Brill.

1. I follow de Jong 1991 in using “Messenger” when referring to a specific character and “messenger” when referring to the stock figure. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)