

DIDASKALIA 

The Journal for Ancient Performance



photo: P. Winters/Theater of War

Didaskalia is an electronic journal dedicated to the study of all aspects of ancient Greek and Roman performance.

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About Didaskalia

Didaskalia (διδασκαλία) is the term used since ancient times to describe the work a playwright did to teach his chorus and actors the play. The official records of the dramatic festivals in Athens were the διδασκαλία. *Didaskalia* now furthers the scholarship of the ancient performance.

Didaskalia is an English-language, online publication about the performance of Greek and Roman drama, dance, and music. We publish peer-reviewed scholarship on performance and reviews of the professional activity of artists and scholars who work on ancient drama.

We welcome submissions on any aspect of the field. If you would like your work to be reviewed, please write to editor@didaskalia.net at least three weeks in advance of the performance date. We also seek interviews with practitioners and opinion pieces. For submission guidelines, go to didaskalia.net.

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Note

Didaskalia is an online journal. This print representation of Volume 8 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at didaskalia.net, which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

Double the Message

Diane J. Rayor

Grand Valley State University

Messenger speeches in Attic tragedies pose difficulties for modern staging. While a truly superb actor can hold an audience's attention through a long monologue, the long report of critical offstage events can seem dull and artificial, especially when the messenger does not have a clear personality. Is the messenger addressing the chorus, other characters, or the audience? What does he do physically while providing this information? One possible solution is to change the dynamic by dividing the messenger role between two actors.



Conference Presentation
video: Randolph College
[youtube.com/watch?v=1qQXb2y9aqU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1qQXb2y9aqU)

In Sophocles' *Antigone*, the Messenger or Guard reporting Polynices' burial does not present the same problems as the messenger who reports Haemon's death later in the play. The Guard projects personality from his first step on stage:

My lord, I can't say I'm breathless
from speeding here on light feet.
My thoughts kept stopping me on the path,
wheeling me around to turn back.
My heart had a dialogue saying:
"Stupid, why go where you will be punished?"
"Crazy, you dare delay again? If Kreon hears it
from another man, how will you not pay?"

(223–230)

We soon hear who he is, why he is on stage, and whom he is addressing. However, the second messenger is a generic attendant to Kreon and could easily fall into the clichéd device of center-stage address to the audience as he reports on Haemon's suicide. Yet, as Simon Goldhill reminds us, "there is always an audience onstage for the messenger, and this relationship between messenger and audience changes the rhetorical strategies of the speech" (102).

The messenger in question addresses the chorus, Haemon's mother, and, after her death, Kreon. He does not simply report events to the audience and leave. In addition to the "center-stage address," I have seen a few possible "solution[s] to the problem of an extended storytelling scene within tragedy" (Goldhill 100). In some productions, the offstage story is acted out onstage while the messenger tells the tale. This technique focuses the audience on the mimed action rather than the immediate scene. In other productions, the messenger and other characters share the messenger speeches: the messenger narrates, but the characters speak their own lines. This strategy also distracts by having offstage characters (some of whom are dead) speak, drawing attention away from the messenger and his onstage audience. What other options are there?

In workshopping my translation for an outdoor production of Sophocles' *Antigone* in 2009, we grappled with how to play the messenger who describes Haemon's death. Our solution was to divide the single messenger role between two actors. In this way, we were able to keep intact the messenger speeches and dialogue in the voices of the two messengers. Kreon and the dead Haemon could remain offstage until Kreon enters carrying Haemon, since we did not need them to act out the story or speak the relevant messengers' lines. This kept the staging uncluttered. The focus remained sharply on the messengers and on the responses to their news by the chorus and Haemon's mother, Eurydice.

As the director, Karen Libman, explains: “Two messengers tag-teamed the delivery of the message,” changing the physical and verbal dynamic of a single messenger. “The messengers spoke not only to the chorus and [queen], but also to each other” (Libman 66). They could look at one another as well as physically frame the queen. Eurydice stayed in center stage with one messenger on each side of her. The messengers, however, moved around, facing the chorus, Eurydice, each other, and the audience as seemed appropriate. This staging also allowed Eurydice’s silent exit to be observed only by the chorus, while the two messengers were engrossed in recounting *to each other* Haemon’s dying embrace of Antigone and in philosophizing on “how ill counsel / is by far the greatest evil for man” (1242-3).

For the long speech to Eurydice followed by a short interchange with the chorus (1192-1256), the two messengers took turns, in eleven chunks ranging from two to thirteen lines. Without changing any words, we discovered two voices in the single character. They reacted to each other, adding information and perspective, and even—once—disagreeing. When the chorus comments on Eurydice’s silent exit, Messenger 1 is confident that she is merely taking her grief “inside / with her servants” (1248-9), as is appropriate, rather than lamenting in public. Messenger 2, however, agrees with the chorus that “too much silence is ominous” (1256) and decides to check on the queen. Of course, the chorus’s unease spurs the messenger (whether played singly or doubly) to enter the house. Yet dividing the part allowed Messenger 2, perhaps more naturally and quickly, to agree with the chorus and exit, taking Messenger 1 with him.

By our particular division of lines, we could emphasize meaning and punctuate various sense transitions. Messenger 1 directly quotes Kreon’s reaction to first hearing his son’s voice (1211-18) and then to seeing Haemon embracing the dead Antigone (1228-30). Messenger 1 also tends toward gnomic statements (1242-3). Messenger 2 narrates more details, and seems more responsive to Eurydice’s grief (“We will know whether she hides something / quietly held back in her raging heart . . .” 1253-4). Later, when the messengers return from the *skênê* to tell Kreon about his wife’s suicide, Messenger 2 breaks it to Kreon as gently as possible: “Your wife, true mother of this corpse, is dead, / unhappy man, just now by freshly inflicted blows” (1282-3). Messenger 1, in contrast, describes how Eurydice “cursed / your evil actions as child murderer” (1304-5).

Many different line divisions were possible, of course. The point is that dividing the lines emphasized the sense in the messenger’s long speeches, and broke the potential monotony of a single speaker. It allowed for more movement and interaction among the chorus, the other actor playing Eurydice or Kreon, and the messengers. The division also physically highlighted Eurydice, even with her sparse nine lines, by framing her between the two messengers. According to Libman, this “breaking of the message into two distinct voices enlivened the scene both vocally and pictorially” (Libman 66), doubling the impact of the message.

In the oral presentation of this paper at the Ancient Drama in Performance Conference, students from Randolph College demonstrated the divided messenger scene (1192-1256) ([video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1qQXb2y9aqU): youtube.com/watch?v=1qQXb2y9aqU). My appreciation goes to Professor Amy Cohen and her students.

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Rayor, D. J., trans. and ed. 2011. *Sophocles’ Antigone: A New Translation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. www.cambridge.org/9780521134781 N.B. The published edition does not divide the messenger lines.