

## Knowledge Bearers and Narrative Swayers: Enslaved Women in Euripides and Aristophanes

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### **Abstract**

Euripidean tragedy and Aristophanic comedy often feature enslaved women as confidantes and messengers, though scholarship has largely overlooked the narratological importance of this group. Through an analysis of enslaved women who receive guests, serve as decoys, act as advisors, and deliver fateful news, this article explores how enslaved women in Euripides and Aristophanes hold access to or withhold critical information. I argue that these women exert a degree of control over surrounding characters and circumstances through their possession of essential knowledge, thus influencing the progression of dramatic plots.

### **Keywords**

Enslaved Women, Euripides, Aristophanes, Power, Narrative

In lines 790–880 of the Euripidean tragedy *Hippolytus*, Theseus discovers and laments the death of his wife Phaedra, who took her life after the revelation of her forbidden love for her stepson Hippolytus. Despairing of a future of disgrace and dishonor, Phaedra hangs herself, and her lifeless body is soon discovered by a nurse and the Chorus in the palace. As Theseus returns home, alerted by the clamor and wailing, he rebukes his slaves who first encountered the body of his wife, demanding an explanation for the tragic events which have unfolded. Theseus exclaims: “Could someone say what was done, or does the royal home keep the multitude of my slaves in vain?” (εἴποι τις ἂν τὸ πραχθέν, ἢ μάτην ὄχλον / στέγει τύραννον δῶμα προσπόλων ἐμῶν; Eur. *Hipp.* 842–843).<sup>1</sup> This exasperated demand reveals that Theseus expects his

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<sup>1</sup> All Greek translations are my own. The term *prospolos* appears most often in Greek tragedy, generally denoting female or male attendants and servants (LSJ, s.v. “πρόσπολος”). According to the TLG, classical attestations of the word appear overwhelmingly in Euripides and Sophocles and are often (but by no means

servants to be knowledgeable of the most intimate events concerning his *oikos* and family and that they would dutifully inform him as their master. That Theseus relies on his slaves to apprise him of important occurrences at this pivotal moment in the plot corresponds to a larger trope within Greek drama: the role of enslaved women in bearing news and sharing it with other servile or free characters.<sup>2</sup>

While scholars have studied the appearance of slaves in Greek drama and the legal and social standing of slaves in classical Athens, less attention has been specifically devoted to enslaved women and their places within dramatic narrative.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, existing scholarship has addressed the function of Euripidean messenger speeches and other narratological elements (e.g., narrators, time, and speech) appearing in Euripides and Aristophanes, though these inquiries have not focused on enslaved female speakers.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the intersectional approaches to studying slavery utilized by the contributors to Murnaghan and Joshel (1998), especially Rabinowitz (1998), and the contributors to Kamen and Marshall (2021) suggest the importance of concurrently analyzing gender and class to better understand the institution of slavery and the complex identities it produces in classical Athenian literature and society. Furthermore, Anne Feltovich demonstrates the importance of female networks, which included slaves, to Greek comedy (2020) and how certain female enslaved characters influence the plots of both Greek and Roman comedy (2021). Finally, Kelly Wrenhaven (2012, pp. 90–127) points to the relevance of enslaved nurse characters to the plots of specific Euripidean tragedies. Therefore, while diverse in scope and

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exclusively) used to refer to groups of enslaved characters as a collective (cf. Eur. *Ion* 510; Eur. *Or.* 1359), like in the example here.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article, the term “enslaved” is slightly preferred over the term “slave.” For this choice in terminology, see Foreman et al. (2022).

<sup>3</sup> Ehrenberg (1951), Dover (1972), Akrigg and Tordoff (2013), and Ruffell (2014) discuss slaves in Aristophanic comedy. Synodiou (1977) explores slavery in Euripides, while Rabinowitz (1998), duBois (2003, pp. 143–152), and Wrenhaven (2012) focus on slave women in Euripides. For more generalized publications on ancient Greek slavery, see Finley (1987), Kamen (2013, pp. 19–49), Rihll (2011), Hunt (2011), Lewis (2018), and Forsdyke (2021).

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of Euripidean messenger speeches, see de Jong (1991). For a detailed discussion of narrative elements in Aristophanes, see Bowie (2004) and for those of Euripides, see Lowe (2004).

purpose, these studies offer a foundation from which one can explore the relationships between enslaved women and plot elements of Old Comedy and tragedy.

Through an analysis of enslaved women in Euripides and Aristophanes, this article seeks to uncover the ways in which enslaved women mediate the transmission of knowledge and ultimately influence the actions of free characters, and subsequently, the plot. By their vital positioning, actions, and words, enslaved women can be seen as central players within the dramatic plays rather than peripheral characters of minimal relevance.<sup>5</sup>

While they appear in both Euripides and Aristophanes, enslaved women are portrayed differently across the two authors. Kelly Wrenhaven (2012) notes that “out of the three major tragedians, Euripides appears to have been particularly interested in the nature of slavery and his plays are replete with representations of slaves” (p. 109).<sup>6</sup> Although this observation positions Euripides within the tragic milieu, Wrenhaven’s characterization may also be applied to the general ways in which Euripides depicts enslaved women: they are abundant in number, often engage in dialogue, and are present in scenes of vital importance to the tragedy. In Euripidean tragedy, enslaved women are frequently presented as nurses (*trophoi*) or servants (*therapainai*) who develop close relationships with their mistresses (Wrenhaven, 2012, p. 92). Euripides also famously centers multiple tragedies (the Trojan War plays) around enslaved female Trojan royalty, offering a lens through which to view one particular element of slavery, namely the enslaving of war captives.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, enslaved women in Aristophanes appear less

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<sup>5</sup> This argument is situated in contrast to the instrumental or property-oriented views of slavery espoused by a wide range of ancient authors including Aristotle (e.g., κτήμα τι ἔμψυχον, *Pol.* 1.1253b) and Demosthenes (e.g., 27.46, 36.14). For more on slaves as property in Greek law, see MacDowell (1978, p. 80), Kapparis (2018, p. 97), Lewis (2018, pp. 25–30, 40–48), and Forsdyke (2021, pp. 31–36), and for a discussion of the property definition of slavery, see Vlassopoulos (2021, pp. 47–57) and Lewis (2017).

<sup>6</sup> See Synodiou (1977, pp. 83–87) for a discussion of Euripides’s own possible attitudes towards slavery.

<sup>7</sup> *The Trojan Women*, *Andromache*, *Helen*, and *Hecuba* present their titular female characters as enslaved captives, or *aichmalōtides*. See Synodiou (1997, pp. 16–31) for a survey of captive women appearing in Euripides. Hunt (2011) discusses how these enslaved women are depicted differently from those implicated in “the institution in

frequently and rarely speak across the comedic corpus. Unlike the nurses and servants who work in the tragic home, enslaved women in Aristophanes appear more often as entertainers (specifically as *aulētrides*, or *aulos* players, and *orchēstrides*, or dancers) or sex workers.<sup>8</sup> In comparison to Euripides, the representation of enslaved women in Aristophanes is more limited, though it remains useful for developing a richer understanding of enslaved women and their roles across Greek drama.

Although the servile status of enslaved women often impedes them from directly affecting important events through independent action, they exert a degree of influence over these events through their ability to regulate the flow of information. Speaking broadly about Greek comic protagonists, Bowie (2004) asserts that “the control of narration grants power to its possessor” (p. 291). While enslaved women are rarely the clear protagonists in Greek drama, and they were relatively powerless by legal and political standards,<sup>9</sup> enslaved women exert power when they hold access to information that others lack.<sup>10</sup> It is by this participation in and influence over the dramatic narrative, then, that enslaved women challenge the notion of a total “social death” (Meillassoux, 1975, pp. 21–22).<sup>11</sup> Through a survey of specific functions

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contemporary Athens,” primarily due to their special backgrounds (p. 34). Despite differences in how the enslaved royal women of Euripides and servants of an Athenian *oikos*, for example, are portrayed in our sources, there is still value in considering them in the same study to develop a clearer image of enslaved women as a complex group in drama. For more on the historical reality of enslaved captives in Greece, see Braund (2011) and Forsdyke (2021, pp. 70–73).

<sup>8</sup> See Ruffell (2014, p. 161) for the use of female entertainers as sex objects in Aristophanes. See also Goldman (2015) and Starr (1978) for discussions of the *aulētris* and Olsen (2017) for the appearance of the *orchēstris* in comedy.

<sup>9</sup> For the legal and political standing of slaves, see Kamen (2013, pp. 19–25).

<sup>10</sup> Hunter (1994) argues that the knowledge slaves hold is a way of exerting “social control” over their masters (p. 71, 89). While Hunter relies more on evidence from Greek oratory, this notion holds true in discussions of drama. This described phenomenon of knowing what others do not is called “discrepant awareness” and is discussed in detail by Zeitlin (1996, p. 357).

<sup>11</sup> “Social death” is a term coined by Meillassoux in the context of slavery in precolonial Africa and then popularized by Patterson (1982) with respect (in part) to the ancient Mediterranean. Scholars of Greek law and legal status (most recently, Todd (1993, p. 186) and Kamen (2013, p. 20)) have used it to describe some aspects

including answering doors, disrupting the reception of visual information, providing advice, and delivering news, this article will argue that enslaved women affect the movement of knowledge in the Aristophanic and Euripidean plays. As a consequence, enslaved women succeed in influencing other non-enslaved characters and shaping the plot.

### ***Answering Doors***

Dramatic scenes in which visitors arrive at the doors of strangers are moments inherently tied to the transmission of knowledge. In Aristophanes's *Frogs*, such a scene occurs when Dionysus and Xanthias reach the home of Hades and Persephone. After knocking and nearly instigating a fight with Aeacus (Ar. *Ran.* 464–478), the comedic duo meets a female servant (θεράπεινα, Ar. *Ran.* 503) who compels them to come inside. Despite Xanthias's initial reluctance (Ar. *Ran.* 508; Ar. *Ran.* 512), the enslaved woman describes in detail all the food preparations and entertainment ordered by Persephone, beckoning to Xanthias (whom she mistakes for Heracles) to enter (Ar. *Ran.* 503–519). Her language is direct and commanding, and she utilizes the imperative mood repeatedly (εἴσιθι, Ar. *Ran.* 503, 507, 512) to convince her guest to join the banquet. It is not until she mentions the presence of an *aulos* player (αὐλητρίς, Ar. *Ran.* 513) and dancing girls (κώρχηστρίδες, Ar. *Ran.* 514) that Xanthias changes his mind and he and the god rush inside to partake of the feast.<sup>12</sup> While likely intended as a comedic indication of

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of the lives of slaves in classical Greece. See Lewis (2017) for an in-depth engagement with Patterson's definition of slavery in the context of classical Athens and beyond.

<sup>12</sup>Xanthias's change in demeanor is captured by his speech in this exchange: Ἐα. πῶς λέγεις; ὄρχηστρίδες; / Θε. ἠβυλλιώσαι κάρτι παρατετιμμένα... / Ἐα. ἴθι νυν, φράσον πρώτιστα ταῖς ὄρχηστρίσιν / ταῖς ἔνδον οὔσαις αὐτὸς ὅτι εἰσέρχομαι (Ar. *Ran.* 515–520). This event may also call to mind Ar. *Vesp.* 737–740, in which Bdelycleon attempts to lure his father Philocleon into staying at home from the lawcourts with the promise of a prostitute (*pornē*). In both scenarios, an enslaved woman is used as a bargaining chip by others in attempts to persuade male characters into moving to (or staying in) specific spaces. In the *Frogs*, the bargainer is an enslaved woman herself, whereas in the *Wasps*, it is Bdelycleon, an Athenian citizen. For more on the enslaved status of prostitutes in classical Athens, see Pomeroy (1975, p. 89), Glazebrook (2011, p. 54), and Kapparis (2017). With some caution, it is reasonable to assume that the *pornē* mentioned in the *Wasps* may have been enslaved.

Xanthias's fickle personality, this scene also portrays the revelation of information through the conduit of an enslaved woman. By spreading word of the festivities to guests at the door, the *therapaina* convinces Xanthias and Dionysus to enter the house of Hades, bringing them closer to the fulfillment of their journey in the Underworld.

Euripides's *Helen* presents another scenario in which an enslaved woman opens a door to reveal valuable knowledge. In lines 437–482, an old, enslaved woman of Proteus (denoted as a *graus*) opens the door of the palace to Menelaus, whom others, including his wife Helen, have presumed dead. Like the servant in the *Frogs*, the enslaved woman also utilizes forceful language, insisting Menelaus leave and resisting his attempts to enter.<sup>13</sup> In the short dialogue that ensues, the woman discloses information critical to the development of the plot. When Menelaus asks about the name of the land and to whose palace he has arrived (Eur. *Hel.* 459), the enslaved woman replies, “this is the house of Proteus, and the land is Egypt” (Eur. *Hel.* 460). After revealing that her master is hostile towards Hellenes (Eur. *Hel.* 468), the *graus* explains that this demeanor is a result of Helen, who lives inside with Theoklymenos, the son of Proteus (Eur. *Hel.* 472). Upon receipt of such information, Menelaus, perplexed and distressed, decides to return to his ship, at which point he intercepts Helen returning home from receiving a prophecy (Eur. *Hel.* 483–545). Thus, the knowledge divulged by the enslaved woman in this passage plays a role in the achievement of *anagnōrisis*, the moment in which central characters recognize their own identities or those of others.<sup>14</sup> In this case, the enslaved woman who prevents Menelaus's entry to the palace ultimately causes a chance meeting and reunification between Menelaus and Helen. In this way, the knowledge shared by the *graus* triggers the beginning of a major plot line: after the couple is reunited, Helen and Menelaus conspire to escape Egypt in secret, which they ultimately accomplish by the end of the tragedy.

Through their role in answering doors, the two enslaved women in Aristophanes's and Euripides's plays are endowed with a degree of

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<sup>13</sup> The strong language of the *graus* is especially exhibited in lines 437–440.

<sup>14</sup> For an evaluation of *anagnōrisis* in Euripides, see Zeitlin (1996, p. 287).

influence over the plot. They disclose information pertaining to the affairs of the household which is otherwise unknown by their visitors, whether the preparations of a feast or the presence of Helen.<sup>15</sup> The revelation of this knowledge then motivates further action by the recipient, rendering scenes at the door as relevant devices for the development of the dramatic plot. Moreover, the differential in knowledge between the enslaved woman and the visitor establishes a uniquely inverted power structure: although enslaved, the servant holds power over the non-servile character,<sup>16</sup> permitting or barring entry of the latter into the intimate space of the home.

### ***Disrupting the Reception of Visual Information***

Enslaved women also play a role in the control of information in Aristophanes through their functions as decoys (Ruffell, 2014, p. 161). In such scenarios, the information in question can be understood not only as knowledge transmitted verbally through speech, but also as visual, auditory, or any other knowledge revealed through the senses.<sup>17</sup> This is demonstrated most clearly in the *Thesmophoriazusae*, in which an enslaved woman is employed as a decoy to distract another character, actively blocking his perception of a central dramatic event. While the enslaved character in this scenario does not actively possess or spread verbal information, she does inhibit the perception of visual information by others. In the comedy, Athenian women have assembled to attend the Thesmophoria rites and to address their poor portrayal by the poet Euripides in his tragedies (Ar. *Thesm.* 373–380). Euripides dispatches his relative, In-Law, to improve his reputation among the women, though In-Law’s clever female disguise is soon unveiled. While In-Law is held in

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<sup>15</sup> This awareness of household affairs is neither confined to drama nor to these two specific subjects. Hunter (1994) surmises that slaves were aware of almost anything pertaining to their masters (p. 74).

<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that Xanthias is enslaved, but he acts in this scene as Heracles and is consequently mistaken for and treated as a non-servile character.

<sup>17</sup> See the Oxford English Dictionary’s (2022) definition for information as “knowledge communicated concerning some particular fact, subject, or event.” If we understand communication simply as transmission, one can assert that information may be communicated non-verbally and received through one’s perceptive abilities.

custody by a Scythian archer (Ar. *Thesm.* 930–931), Euripides contrives means to free his relation, ultimately sending an enslaved girl as a decoy to distract the guard (Ar. *Thesm.* 1171–1209). The enslaved girl, a dancer (*orchēstris*) named “Fawn” (ὤλαφιον, Ar. *Thesm.* 1172), dances before the guard, briefly drawing him away from the stage while Euripides helps In-law escape.<sup>18</sup> When the archer returns, he realizes the deceit of the dancing girl and laments the loss of his prisoner (Ar. *Thesm.* 1212).

In this passage, an enslaved woman is employed as a sexual object to influence a male character. The enslaved woman is expected to and succeeds in distracting the Scythian archer, preventing him from perceiving critical visual and auditory information (of In-Law’s escape) that, if received, would alter the course of events. In this way, the enslaved dancer functions both as an obstacle to comprehending specific information and as a sort of embodied information herself. As a diversion, she presents the archer with a new message, a tantalizing stimulus to which he is drawn and subsequently distracted from other nearby events.<sup>19</sup> While the enslaved woman discussed ultimately shapes the flow of the dramatic plot, it is necessary to note that she is used as a tool to achieve this end. Moreover, the primary force behind the diversion the slave produces is not her words or counsel, but her sexuality; despite the influence she wields, she is not an agent of her own but rather “framed and defined by male commentary” (Olsen, 2017, p. 26). “Fawn” is sent to the Scythian by Euripides, not of her own volition. Most importantly, the woman is mute, and her control over characters and the plot is entirely tied to her actions, rather than her words.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The name “Fawn” (ὤλαφιον) was commonly used for female prostitutes, according to Sommerstein (1994, p. 234). The implication of this brief hiatus from stage was that the Scythian engaged in sexual intercourse with the dancer; see more on this in Sommerstein (1994, p. 236). Olsen (2017) draws attention to “Fawn” as the “most substantial surviving representation of a female sympotic dancer in Greek comedy” (p. 26), rendering this scene useful not only for this study but more generally for inquiries on dancing figures in Greek literature.

<sup>19</sup> See Meineck (2018, 121 *passim*) for a discussion of the perception of information and cognition in Greek drama.

<sup>20</sup> See Zweig (1992) for an in-depth discussion of mute female characters in Aristophanes. Another scene in which an enslaved woman is dispatched as a distraction for a male character emerges in Ar. *Vesp.* 1326–1381. In this scene (foreshadowed earlier in Ar. *Vesp.* 737–740), an *aulētris* detains Philocleon at home by



### ***Directing Action through Advice***

In contrast to the largely silenced enslaved women of Aristophanic comedy, enslaved women in Euripidean tragedy play a speaking role in directing the actions of free characters as confidantes and as advisors within the tragic *oikos* (Wrenhaven, 2012, p. 108). While the nurse of the *Medea* fails to convince her mistress to abandon her plans of killing Jason's new wife and her own children,<sup>21</sup> nurses elsewhere are more persuasive or influential.<sup>22</sup> In the *Andromache*, the titular character is taken as a concubine for Neoptolemus, rousing the jealousy of Hermione, the wife of Neoptolemus. Hermione and her father Menelaus conspire to kill Andromache and her son (Eur. *Andr.* 74–76), but the later failure of this attempt sends Hermione to take dire measures. Perceiving her imminent demise, Hermione attempts to take her own life, fearing the wrath of her husband. The nurse, however, intercepts Hermione in a state of hysterical fear and guilt and seeks to console her. Keen on protecting Hermione, the nurse commands Hermione to cover her chest (Eur. *Andr.* 832), takes her knife away (Eur. *Andr.* 841), and reasons with her that all is not lost (Eur. *Andr.* 866–878). In this dialogue, the nurse actively cares for and advises her suffering mistress.<sup>23</sup> The intervention of the nurse is responsible for the preservation of Hermione's life, and the latter eventually absconds with Orestes, fleeing her husband Neoptolemus and his land (Eur. *Andr.* 987–1008).

A nurse also plays a pivotal role in manipulating her mistress and disseminating information in the *Hippolytus*.<sup>24</sup> After discovering that

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her sexuality (and is detained herself by Philocleon), successfully distracting him from his previous desire to go to the Athenian law courts. While less related to the flow of information, this scene is an example in which enslaved women catalyze events central to the dramatic plot, sharing some thematic elements in common with the scene discussed above. See also Olson and Biles (2015, p. 474) for more on this scene and its significance to the plot.

<sup>21</sup> For this nurse character, see Eur. (*Med.*, 1–203). While she perceives that Medea may be up to some vengeful act (δέδοικα δ' αὐτὴν μὴ τι βουλευέσθαι νέον, 37), she fails to hinder Medea from exacting her revenge.

<sup>22</sup> This seems to reflect the statement of Golden (1988) that “nurses occupied a position of ‘extraordinary trust’” (p. 457).

<sup>23</sup> See Wrenhaven (2012, p. 108) for enslaved women acting as confidantes, including this passage.

<sup>24</sup> See Wrenhaven (2012, pp. 115–117) for an analysis of the nurse in this play.

Phaedra is plagued with a mysterious illness, the nurse questions her mistress about the cause of her distress. Following a long exchange in which the nurse guesses as to the source of malady, the nurse begs Phaedra to tell her the issue, and Phaedra confesses her forbidden love for her stepson, Hippolytus (Eur. *Hipp.* 198–361). In this dialogue, the nurse is persuasive and persistent, drawing the truth from Phaedra, who exhibits great reluctance. When the truth is revealed, the nurse initially flees, distraught by the news (Eur. *Hipp.* 364); however, she soon returns with a change of heart (Eur. *Hipp.* 433–481). The nurse advises Phaedra to not allow her love to ruin her, but to “bear it, although being in love” (Eur. *Hipp.* 476) and to accept the will of Aphrodite. The nurse promises Phaedra a love medicine to free her from her lovesickness (Eur. *Hipp.* 509–517), but her obedience to her mistress soon takes a turn.<sup>25</sup> The nurse ultimately reports Phaedra’s love to Hippolytus and the others in the home, and Phaedra, in turn, takes her own life in despair. While Phaedra executes the fatal action, she is not the sole architect of this dramatic consequence. When Artemis appears as *deus ex machina* at the end of the tragedy, she clearly ascribes fault to the nurse, saying of Phaedra that “she unwittingly was destroyed by the devices of the nurse” (τροφοῦ διώλετ’ οὐχ ἔκοῦσα μηχαναῖς, Eur. *Hipp.* 1305).

In these passages, nurses intervene at critical moments for the women of the *oikos*, resulting in two opposite effects: Hermione’s life is saved, and that of Phaedra is tragically lost. Both central plot events, however, are clearly affected by an enslaved woman’s access to sensitive information and the manner in which she responds to that information. In her capacity to advise and control her mistress (physically or through the spreading of knowledge) the enslaved woman momentarily breaks from the constraints of the typical master-slave relationship.<sup>26</sup> Phaedra’s

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<sup>25</sup> See Wrenhaven (2012, p. 118) for a discussion of this trope. Wrenhaven makes two general observations that ring true concerning the specific relationship between the nurse and Phaedra: first, that while nurses are often portrayed as the “good slave”, tragic representations of these characters indicate how their positive qualities are also “subject to subversion” (p. 91), and second, that a slave’s proximity to their master may position them as more likely to enact a betrayal of that master (p. 118).

<sup>26</sup> See Wrenhaven (2012, p. 109) on how enslaved nurses occupy a unique role in the “master-slave relationship” and offer the opportunity to critique heroic characters in tragedy.

initial reluctance to listen to her nurse (ὤ δεινὰ λέξασ', Eur. *Hipp.* 498–499) also might reflect the response to a transgression of the expected master-slave relationship. Ultimately, slave women in Aristophanes and Euripides exhibit the ability to manipulate men or women of non-slave status, whether through their own devices, albeit rarely, or more often by the compulsion of others.

### ***Delivering and Disseminating News***

A final and perhaps clearest way in which enslaved women control the events of the drama is through their delivery and dissemination of important news. As sharing news necessitates speech, it is far more common in Euripides than Aristophanes, given the more common presence of enslaved women with speaking roles in the tragic plays. While enslaved women infrequently function as formal messengers, they often are portrayed reporting news of events that they have either witnessed firsthand or learned through others (Lowe, 2004, p. 273). The tragic consequences of spreading news are clear from the previously discussed passage of *Hippolytus* in which the nurse reveals Phaedra's secret, leading to her suicide. The disclosure of news important to the plot also occurs at two crucial moments in the *Hecuba*. At the start of the play, Hecuba's son, Polydorus, appears as a ghost and informs the audience that his body will be found by a servant woman (δούλης, Eur. *Hec.* 48) of Hecuba on the shore. Moreover, Polydorus explains that he was killed by Polymestor, Priam's Thracian guest-friend, out of greed for money (Eur. *Hec.* 1–58). Later in the play, a servant fulfills this prophecy when she proclaims the discovery of Polydorus's body, guided by a dream (Eur. *Hec.* 657–701). This event hurtles an already-ailing Hecuba to dire straits. Accompanied by the chorus of enslaved Trojan women, Hecuba visits Polymestor, intending to avenge her son's death. Disguising the purpose of their visit, the enslaved women lure Polymestor and his children into a tent, swiftly murder the children, and blind Polymestor (Eur. *Hec.* 1035–1055). Furthermore, it should be noted that when Hecuba and her contingent arrive at the tent of

Polymestor, the latter is alerted by a slave of Hecuba (δμῳίς, Eur. *Hec.* 966).<sup>27</sup>

This dramatic passage demonstrates first that the enslaved serving woman at the shore plays an integral role in the plot; upon her discovery and announcement of the corpse of Polydorus, she triggers a tragic sequence of events leading to the downfall of Polymestor and justification for Hecuba. The enslaved woman, thus, is positioned as a disseminator of critical information, as is the slave of Hecuba who notifies Polymestor. Second, despite the general rule that enslaved women are restricted in the *oikos* and society, the *Hecuba* imagines an alternative: Hecuba, a slave herself, directly exacts justice upon Polymestor with her group of captive women.<sup>28</sup> This event seems to suggest that these women hold an extreme degree of agency compared to enslaved women in other plays. It is clear, then, that enslaved women in the *Hecuba* are endowed with some extent of influence over the tragic narrative. By controlling the spread of information, as well as, in this case, committing an act of murder, they in turn shape the unfolding of the plot.

Finally, in the *Ion*, enslaved women are responsible for delivering news to Creusa about her husband Xuthus and his parentage of Ion, events which produce significant consequences for the narrative. Intent on addressing their personal concerns about past and future childbearing, Xuthus and Creusa seek out the Delphic oracle for answers.<sup>29</sup> Xuthus learns from the oracle that he is to have offspring and he embraces Ion, a temple attendant, as his child after receiving the prophecy that the first individual he meets outside the temple is his son (Eur. *Ion* 536). Upon this event, Xuthus warns the Chorus of enslaved women standing by to not inform his wife Creusa of the events which have transpired. He threatens the serving women, warning, “But for you,

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<sup>27</sup> See Synodiou (1977, pp. 21–25) for a discussion of these passages.

<sup>28</sup> Synodiou (1977, p. 24) notes the “reversing of roles” exhibited by Hecuba when she acts independently of Agamemnon, seeking only his agreement to not thwart her plot for revenge against Polymestor.

<sup>29</sup> Creusa wishes to learn about the fate of her child which she bore and exposed in secret after being raped by Apollo (330–368) and Xuthus wishes to learn if he is to have children (417–424).

slave women, I say to keep these things silent, or there will be death for the ones having spoken to my wife” (ὕμῖν δὲ σιγᾶν, δμωίδες, λέγω τάδε, / ἢ θάνατον εἰπούσισι πρὸς δάμαρτ’ ἐμῆν, Eur. *Ion* 666–667). Xuthus’s threat reveals an understanding that enslaved women held both access to and the ability to spread intimate knowledge, particularly to their mistresses.

Despite the warning of their master, the Chorus of enslaved women reveals the details of the oracle relayed to Xuthus when they are enjoined by Creusa. Creusa refers to her serving women as “the trustworthy service of my looms and shuttle” (ἰστῶν τῶν ἐμῶν καὶ κερκίδος / δούλευμα πιστόν, Eur. *Ion* 747–748), reflecting an expectation similar to that of Theseus in the *Hippolytus* that enslaved women are apprised of and will communicate relevant news of the *oikos* and its inhabitants.<sup>30</sup> Pressured by their mistress, the Chorus explains that Xuthus has already found his prophesied son, born of a union other than that of the husband and wife.<sup>31</sup> Creusa is plagued with grief from these news, and with the prodding of her trusted old tutor, plots to kill Ion with poison (Eur. *Ion* 971–1038). While this attempt fails, it leads to Ion’s pursuit of Creusa and the ultimate dramatic revelation that Creusa is Ion’s mother (Eur. *Ion* 1210–1449).<sup>32</sup> Thus the news Xuthus receives at Delphi is the catalyst for Creusa’s attempt to murder Ion and (less directly) for the moment in which they realize their identities as mother and son. By both witnessing the discovery of newfound knowledge by Xuthus and then sharing it with Creusa, the chorus of slaves is powerfully positioned at the nexus of the play’s central story line. Their choice to speak, albeit at Creusa’s demand, influences the subsequent events of the play and is thus necessary to the fulfillment of the dramatic plot.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See p. 2 for the passage of the *Hippolytus*. Zeitlin (1996) recognizes that the exceptional loyalty of Creusa’s servants significantly affects the development of the plot, saying, “Household servants are bound by loyalty to the family of their masters, especially in tragic drama, but Creusa’s maidservants will go so far as to share in the fortunes of the house, even if it means they might die for it” (p. 333).

<sup>31</sup> The dialogue between Creusa and her servants takes place in lines 747–807.

<sup>32</sup> As Zeitlin (1996) notes, a central theme of the *Ion* is *anagnōrisis*, as Ion discovers his true identity and Creusa learns that she is his mother (p. 287).

<sup>33</sup> Lowe (2004), discussing the *Ion* and other plays, notes that tragic choruses are “bystanders or victims, excluded from the processes of power” by means of their

### **Conclusion**

Through their roles as nurses, servants, sex workers, dancers, and musicians, enslaved women in Euripidean tragedy and Aristophanic comedy mediate the flow of information by answering doors, diverting attention, offering advice, or disclosing news of vital importance to other characters. In Aristophanes, these slaves are often silent, except for the *therapaina* in *Frogs*, who utilizes persuasive language to achieve the purpose of her mistress.<sup>34</sup> Enslaved women in Euripides also influence the actions of free characters by utilizing their positions to offer advice to their mistresses and by sharing news concerning deaths or parentage. Enslaved women are expected to know certain things, even when their masters do not, and their ability to disclose this information, whether through the compulsion of others or by their own volition, ultimately affects the course of the dramatic narrative.

A reading of Greek drama with a focus on enslaved women offers insight into a diverse body of individuals indirectly or marginally represented in both ancient texts and modern scholarly sources. While scholars recognize the legal and social restrictions placed upon slaves and the barriers limiting our access to their voices, a more complex image emerges from analyzing their roles and appearance within dramatic narratives.<sup>35</sup> This alternative, which places enslaved women at the center of facilitating, instigating, and blocking plot events, may also point to a societal reality beyond scenes imagined for the stage. It is

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identities (p. 276). In the case of the *Ion*, however, I disagree with this total exclusion. While the Chorus itself is not the central focus of the play, its revelation is necessary to the advancement of the major tragic consequences which ensue.

<sup>34</sup> Another exception of an enslaved woman who speaks is the drunken servant in Ar. *Eccl.* 1112–1142, who experiences a dramatic reversal in fortune after Praxagora’s radical reforms.

<sup>35</sup> In addition to the ancient legal recognition of slaves as property (see Footnote 5) and a general (though not unconditional, cf. Vlassopoulos 2021) acceptance of the condition of “social death” of slaves in recent years (see Footnote 10), it is clear that enslaved women were not afforded the marriage and economic rights of citizen women fleshed out by Sealey (1990, pp. 25–40). Hunt (2011) remarks on how slaves in Greek literature lack the opportunity to “represent themselves” (p. 22). Forsdyke (2021, pp. 9–12) discusses the difficulties in discerning whether the speech of enslaved characters merely mirrors “slave-owners’ perceptions or projections” or portrays “some aspects of the actual lived experience of slaves”.

estimated that people of enslaved status comprised somewhere between 15 to 40 percent of the population of classical Athens (Hunt, 2011, pp. 49–50),<sup>36</sup> and it is clear that enslaved women were present in spheres including the *oikos*, *agora*, and select religious festivals.<sup>37</sup> Their existence within both public and private spaces and interactions with individuals outside their legal and social standing exhibited in the dramatic texts considered in this article indicates that enslaved women were a significant part of the social fabric of these spaces. Moreover, this observation, supported by Hunter (1994) (albeit pertaining to events of the Athenian courtroom), suggests also the centrality of enslaved women to the imagination of the poet, who depicts them in scenes of tragic or comedic import.<sup>38</sup> Returning, then, to Bowie’s notion of the power inherent in narration,<sup>39</sup> viewing enslaved women through their relationship to knowledge and dramatic plots furnishes a way through which these women can be understood not as an inconsequential and marginal presence, but as complex individuals and conduits of power within Greek drama and, to an extent, Athenian society.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> For another discussion of the size of the slave population in Athens, see Forsdyke (2021, 89–91).

<sup>37</sup> This claim is explored further in a forthcoming work. Beyond drama, countless oratorical speeches (e.g., *Lysias* 1 and *Demosthenes* 47) attest to the presence of enslaved women within the home and their interactions with the free members of the *oikos*. For the notion of enslaved women working in the *agora*, see the issue presented about the speaker’s mother in *Demosthenes* 57 and Kamen (2013) for a discussion of “privileged chattel slaves” (pp. 29–39). Finally, Burkert (1985, p. 259); Todd (1993, p. 188); Kamen (2013, p. 36); and Hall (2014, p. 315) indicate that slaves, including women, held varying degrees of access to religious spaces despite exclusion from specific religious rites or festivals.

<sup>38</sup> While somewhat beyond the scope of this article, thinking about the authorial intent behind depictions of enslaved women should be guided by an important observation expressed by Wrenhaven (2012), that “representations of slaves in the Greek sources are selective and emphasize, above all, the attitudes and concerns of the master-class” (p. 123). As Wrenhaven notes, scholars’ limited access to sources in which slaves speak for themselves is one way in which studies of ancient and modern systems of slavery differ.

<sup>39</sup> See p. 5 for the quoted language from Bowie (2004).

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