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## The old messenger

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## 3 ► The Old Messenger

### 3.1 ► The Messenger as a Convention

The messenger is one of the traditional conventional characters that has been present in drama for millennia since the earliest Classical plays. The use of the messenger has various purposes. The messenger's report broadens the reality of the stage through speech when it refers to "unseen characters, events or spaces, making them part of the fictional universe through reference" (Aston and Savona, 53). It shifts the perspective when it brings new, previously unknown facts or events to the stage.

It presents a greater context of the action that is unwinding on the stage. It also, traditionally, serves to push the plot of the play forward when it provides new motivations from outside the present frame of the plot created by the dramatic dialogue and stage action.

The entrance of the messenger is a signal in itself of a temporary shift on two levels, that of the unfolding action, and the mode of delivery. The action freezes for a moment in expectation of a new motivational impulse because the convention associated with the messenger dictates that the messenger's appearance announces forthcoming news that will influence further developments. In addition, the mode of delivery changes as the dramatic dialogue shifts towards a narrative composing the messenger's report.

The messenger has gone through the whole process of the development of drama from its very beginnings, when the Dyonisian dythiramb was transformed into drama in Classical Antiquity, and it has remained a functional convention till its radical transformation into the new messenger. Yet, even traditional appearances of the messenger on stage have witnessed their breaking points that have redefined the use of this convention. Generally, there are two trends in the messenger's traditional appearance in the history of drama. One is on character level when the nameless messenger, a mere function-carrier, becomes himself or herself a character with his or her own personal role within the framework of the play. The other trend is on the level of expression when the messenger's typical narrative mode assumes significance comparable to that of the dramatic dialogue and other components of the stage action.

To introduce the messenger in its traditional forms, there are three examples of plays that illustrate these various uses of the figure and the development in the use of the

convention. Three short analyses of *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles, *Antony and Cleopatra* by William Shakespeare and *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams present what is later referred to as the conventional, “old” messenger.

The primary focus of these short analyses is how the messenger pushes the action forward. This particular function is the most important as concerns the conventional messenger. However, as the three case studies show, the conventional messenger has other roles, too, and their application varies. First, he or she comes as an informer of facts and events that take place outside the frame of the stage action. In this way, the messenger can report about the distant past (*Oedipus the King*) as well as distant spaces (*Antony and Cleopatra*) or an otherwise inaccessible realm of memory (*The Glass Menagerie*).

It is also possible for the messenger to become a more self-contained character who, although lacking a name, interacts with other characters in dramatic situations, as the example of Cleopatra’s interchange with the messenger shows. Shakespeare’s play thus presents a case in point of the tendency to shift from a nameless character-function to a character with a role. Furthermore, the narrator of *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom, is a messenger whose presence is so intense, that he becomes the formant and propeller of the whole stage action. In this case, he transgresses from being a deliverer of small-scale narratives (the messenger’s reports) to a teller of large-scale ones. Not only is Tom the main character with a name, his narratives also dominate the mode of delivery together with the dialogue.

These examples of the traditional messenger in its varieties will be further capitalized to illustrate the shift in the use of this convention in the contemporary mainstream drama. While the contemporary “new” messenger still holds some of the roles and qualities of the traditional one, it also assumes new features which are radically different from these examples. However, in order to be able to argue for the “new” messenger, it must be first made clear what the “old” messenger is and what its crucial application in the history of drama has been.

### *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles

The play – first staged in Athens in c. 429 BC, perhaps 420 BC (Johnston) – was identified by Aristotle as the best example of tragedy and it immensely influenced Aristotle’s view of the genre in his *Poetics*. The play also employs reportage and uses the messenger to a significant degree. It distinguishes between two temporal levels, that of the story and that of the plot. Towards the ending of the plot of the play (the search for the cause of the curse that has inflicted plague upon Thebes), revelations of the past events of the story (Oedipus’s personal history) are delivered by a messenger.

The moment when Oedipus learns about his past marks the turning point in the play and it is also this moment that makes the play immortal: “Oedipus’ heroic achievement is the discovery of the truth, and that discovery is the most thoroughgoing and dreadful catastrophe the stage has ever presented” (Knox 86). It is the turning point, “the moment Aristotle named the peripeteia, the reversal of fortune moment” (Bloom, “Introduction” 54). The truth about the past is what the play is about, and the epistemological

dimension of learning the truth is also what Aristotle valued about it, among other things: “The reversal of the tragic hero is singled out for praise by Aristotle because it comes about through recognition, in this case Oedipus’ recognition of his own identity” (Knox 81). Oedipus, however, must be *informed* about his own past. The truth is too unbelievable to be discovered even by the wisest among all men, Oedipus himself.

There are two messengers in the play. “The first arrives at the palace to announce the death from old age of Polybus, father of Oedipus and king of Corinth, and the related news that Oedipus will be called as the new king. [...] The second messenger brings the news of Jocasta’s suicide” (Bloom, “Introduction” 24). The first messenger’s report is a message about the death of Oedipus’s believed father Polybus, the King of Corinth (note, it is delivered in a dialogical form):

Jocasta: What are you saying?  
           Is old man Polybus no longer king?  
 Messenger: No. He’s dead and in his grave.  
 Jocasta: What?  
           Has Oedipus’ father died?  
 Messenger: Yes. (941-6)

Here the spiral of the search for Oedipus’s identity and ancestry begins. Oedipus celebrates breaking an old woman’s prophecy that he would kill his father, because he had nothing to do with Polybus’s death. But it transpires soon enough in the following messenger’s speech that Oedipus was not Polybus’s own son: “you and Polybus were not related” (1016). The messenger continues, thus starting off Oedipus’s search: “If you must know, / he received you many years ago as a gift. / I gave you to him” (1021-2). Thus, the messenger pushes the action forward, when he presents knowledge which comes from outside the storyline, and reports to Oedipus of events from a different place (Corinth) and time (soon after Oedipus’s birth).

From this point on, the play develops towards the ultimate tragedy, which lies in Jocasta’s death and Oedipus’s self-blinding. “What does any discerning reader remember most vividly about *Oedipus the King*? Almost certainly, the answer must be the scene of the king’s self-blinding, as narrated by the second messenger” (Bloom, “Introduction” 8). Jocasta leaves the stage to commit suicide after she learns that her husband is her son at the same time. It is the servant of Laius’s testimony that confirms that the old woman’s prophecy was fulfilled. “The Servant of Laius is summoned by Oedipus to tell his version of the murder at the crossroads. He holds the key to Oedipus’s guilt or innocence” (24). But neither the death nor the self-blinding are presented on the stage as action, they both take the form of a narrative. Bloom even suggests that “the scene [is] too terrible for acting out” (9), but it is more likely that it is in agreement with the Classical convention of reporting about, rather than showing “deeds of supreme horror in tragedy [which] do not, as a rule take place on stage, but are made present by deixis or substituted by acoustic signs (calling offstage)” (Honzl, “Hierarchy” 124). According to Honzl, such “phantasma-oriented deixis” (Honzl’s term denoting a verbal reference to

an image, i.e. a fact that is only present in the audience's mind and not performed on the stage) is a fundamental part of the Classical drama which did not allow for doubling of verbal signs and actors' stage performance. It seems that the reason for not showing death on the stage is a prohibitive convention of religious, rather than aesthetic origin. A messenger's report is thus a way of getting around this prohibition as its narrative substitutes stage action with a narrative that has a comparable effect on the audience.

The effect of the second messenger's report is also multiplied by the metaphor of having seen events in one's own eyes, the messenger's status as an eyewitness. Seeing is knowing in *Oedipus the King*. Knowledge brings Jocasta to death and Oedipus to self-blinding, which makes it impossible for both of them to know or learn anything any more: "the text's vocabulary of vision and knowledge suggests that Oedipus's intellectual journey constitutes a quest for 'eyewitness' status" (Barrett 213).

The whole scene, as mentioned above, is presented to the audience in the form of a messenger's report. First, the "*exangelos* [messenger] who enters at 1223 performs, on the whole, along familiar conventional lines: he informs the chorus (and the audience) that Jocasta has died by hanging and that Oedipus has put out his eyes" (194). This is the story on the whole, but a more fearful capacity lies in a more detailed narrative by the messenger, which follows soon after. "In response to the next question, 'How did it happen?' (1236), the *exangelos* again qualifies his report as discontinuous with the events offstage. 'She died by her own hand,' he responds (1237)" (195). The messenger and his report are securing the dramatic effect of the play for the second time.

Initially, the first messenger's report began the search for Oedipus's identity, which resulted in offstage events being brought to a climax for both the characters and audiences, in events which were narrated by the second messenger: "With these words he raised his hand and struck, / not once, but many times, right in the sockets. / With every blow blood spurted from his eyes / down on his beard, and not in single drops, / but showers of dark blood spattered like hail" (1276-80). Barrett explains that "Sophocles' *Oedipus [the King]* offers a parallel example of how a play may profit from manipulating conventional form" (Barrett 190). In other words, it is possible to substitute the dramatic dialogue and stage action with a narrative to produce a dramatic effect.

In the case of *Oedipus the King*, it is the narrative form and the technique of reportage that cause the Aristotelian *anagnorisis*, or recognition: the "way of transmitting expository information in the final phases of the text [...] facts [...] that are new, at least in part, to both the figures and the audience" (Pfister 88). It is because the reports are a specific type of exposition – information which is the beginning of the story (*sjuzet*) but is delivered towards the end of the plot (*fabula*): "Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* is an example of a text in which the expository information is concentrated towards the end of the text" (87-8). The climax (the death of Jocasta and self-blinding of Oedipus) is delivered indirectly as reportage, which makes the situation horrific enough to have become the epitome of tragedy. The catastrophe, then, continues in a conventional dramatic form of a dialogue.

## *Antony and Cleopatra* by William Shakespeare

Although the messenger is primarily associated with bringing reports, it is possible for other characters to do that, too. Often, these are variants of messengers, such as the Attendant who tries to tell the news to Antony at the beginning of *Antony and Cleopatra*. But he does not get the chance to do so. An ironic reversal of competences happens. Cleopatra starts mocking news that usually comes from Rome “Nay, hear them, Antony: / Fulvia perchance is angry; or, who knows / If the scarce-bearded Caesar have not sent / His powerful mandate to you, ‘Do this, or this; / Take in that kingdom, and enfranchise that; / Perform’t, or else we damn thee’” (AC 1.1). Although she is not delivering “true” news from Rome, it is clear that her mockery is a summary of the usual messages they receive. Doing so, she explains the communication channel between her place (Alexandria) and Rome.

It becomes clear in the first scene that the communication between the two cities (and subsequently the two lovers) will be mediated by a messenger. The arrival of news from Rome in the opening of the play is significant. The play itself is based, among other principles, on the difficulties caused by the need of long-distance communication and exchange of news which both affect the noble love and spin the wheels of historical events.

It is not only the Attendant of scene 1.1 who brings news to Alexandria. *Antony and Cleopatra* is a play with a large number of characters and character types (major and minor; with names, and nameless, alike) that often fulfil a messenger’s role. That is, many events are narrated, which subsequently have an effect on the audience’s decoding of the development of the play:

Consistently, in this play, what spectators actually see plays beside what they are made to see through verse that encompasses a vaulting language of display. And it is not just the minor figures – those unnamed messengers (more than in any other play) – who arrive bringing news, telling stories which alternately embellish or deflate the reputations of figures who speak of each other in hyperbole [...]. (Hodgon 245)

There are several reasons for this abundant use of reportage in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Firstly, *Antony and Cleopatra* is a historical play which draws upon actual historical events, which it approaches with an original attitude accentuating the emotional over the historical: “Although not disinterested, Shakespeare is assuredly less interested in the politics that envelop Antony and Cleopatra than in their love” (Logan 162). It is a convenient method of implementing events from the actual historical world into the reality of the stage .

Hodgon suggests that there are more messenger figures in *Antony and Cleopatra* than in any other of Shakespeare’s plays. This fact in itself does not necessarily mean much and it would be futile to expect to draw any definite conclusions from this. However, it makes it possible for us to observe how *Antony and Cleopatra* complements the example of *Oedipus the King* in terms of showing possibilities of applying reportage and employing the messenger.

While there were two messengers in *Oedipus the King*, and they brought news from the dramatic past influencing the dramatic present (a dramatized myth) and from the dramatic present thus accentuating the climax of Jocasta's death and Oedipus' self-blinding (the moral of the story), *Antony and Cleopatra* stands on the opposite end of the temporal spectrum. In this play, messengers deliver actual historical as well as fictional news from the dramatic past and present, alike. They have a much wider scope of what they cover in their reports than the two messengers in *Oedipus the King*.

The following excerpts from *Antony and Cleopatra* are reports of actual historical events. Messenger informs Antony of Fulvia's involvement in a war against Caesar, which she and her accomplices lost against him, and subsequently fled from Rome to Greece:

Messenger: Fulvia thy wife first came into the field.

Antony: Against my brother Lucius?

Messenger:

Ay:

But soon that war had end, and the time's state  
Made friends of them, joining their force 'gainst Caesar;  
Whose better issue in the war, from Italy,  
Upon the first encounter, drave them. (AC 1.2)

This piece of news is based on historical evidence found in Plutarch's account of the life of Antony: "Antony [...] was surprised by reports [...] that Lucius his brother and Fulvia his wife had first quarrelled with one another, and then had waged war with Octavius Caesar, but had lost their cause and were in flight from Italy" (Plutarch 30.1).

In addition, the report of Fulvia's death from a serious illness, delivered by Second Messenger a few lines later, is a reformulation of Plutarch's history (30.3):

Second Messenger: Fulvia thy wife is dead.

Antony: Where died she?

Second Messenger: In Sicyon:

Her length of sickness, with what else more serious  
Importeth thee to know, this bears. (AC 1.2)

In the two quoted dialogues from AC 1.2, there are reports of actual historical facts that come from both the dramatic past (the military campaign) and dramatic present (Fulvia's death). In general terms, such reports create the actual historical frame of the story. In this case, the messenger can be interpreted as an active political agent in the contemporary society watching the performance.

But as mentioned above, *Antony and Cleopatra* is primarily a tragic romance. The mere fact that the plot is situated in various places concurrently – in Alexandria, Rome, and Messina – calls for communication between them. In the second act, one of the most famous scenes with the messenger in the history of drama takes place. The fact that several conventions are violated, together with an expression of the passions, anxieties and desperations of love, have a strong dramatic impact.

The violation of conventions may be divided into two parts: dramatic and social. For the dramatic conventions, the messenger is immediately drawn into the action as if a regular, minor character with a name. Simultaneously, Cleopatra does not allow the messenger to switch to narration, she constantly interrupts him and drags his attention to the here and now of the stage instead of the there and then of his narrative. Messenger becomes *the* messenger for Cleopatra, as for her it is the same individualized character who again returns with yet another piece of news. Furthermore, the messenger is threatened from the beginning:

Messenger: Madam, madam, —  
 Cleopatra: Antonius dead! — If thou say so, villain,  
 Thou kill'st thy mistress. (*AC* 2.5)

Cleopatra is preventing the messenger from delivering his news, threatening him and creating her own ideas about the report from Rome. At first she is afraid that Antony is dead, but she learns the news is far worse. Antony is married to Octavia. The messenger becomes the target of her hatred and he defends himself only by appealing to a tradition (which is prone to be violated in order to cause a dramatic effect based on the dichotomy between expectations and action) of a peaceful approach to him: “Gracious madam, I that do bring the news made not the match” (*AC* 2.5). Her continuing abuse has rather comical results when the messenger refuses to deliver the rest of his message once his life is at put risk, and exits only to be promised he will not be killed and to return again:

Cleopatra: Rogue, thou hast lived too long.  
 (*Draws a knife*)  
 Messenger: [...] What mean you, madam? I have made no fault. (*AC* 2.5)

In this scene, many of the controversies about the play are condensed. The near-comical loss of self-control by Cleopatra illustrates the problematic nature of the play as a tragedy: “In many ways, the play is clearly a tragedy, dramatizing as it does the fatal errors in judgment leading to the catastrophic falls of two colossal figures. However, in other respects the play fails to conform to traditional tragic rubrics” (Deats 12). Cleopatra not only threatens the messenger and thus breaks the social norm of not hurting the messenger bringing bad news, she also approaches him as a regular character, thus breaking the dramatic norm of the messenger as a small-scale narrator of events. Indeed, Cleopatra applies social pressure when she uses all her powers as the empress of Egypt (“I’ll set thee in a shower of gold” (*AC* 2.5)) and a sexual tension when the attractive woman with her ambiguous, sexually charged: “Make thee a fortune from me” (*AC* 2.5), tries to change the nature of the message.

Although the conventions are violated as we have seen, it does not mean that they are not present or inactive. Most of the dramatic effect of this scene is based on the principle that what is happening on the stage contradicts the expectations based on the



conventions associated with the messenger and a reportage scene. Such use of the messenger scene (the disturbance of his reportage, threatening, seduction, and treating him as if he were an individual character) thus underlies the effectiveness of the technique of reportage in classical drama. Both *Oedipus the King* and *Antony and Cleopatra* serve as illustrative examples of the traditional use of the messenger as they dwell on and contribute to the traditional use of this convention in the history of drama and theatre.

### *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams

Besides the main types and features of the traditional messenger in drama which have been illustrated in the examples from *Oedipus the King* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, it is worth mentioning that the messenger's dominant mode is closely connected to another character type, the narrator. In fact, there are frequent cases in the history of drama when these two character-types cannot be clearly distinguished. As narrative naturally penetrates into the dramatic discourse (be it in characters' monologues or the messenger's report), it is a part of the dramatic language. Thus, narrators of various degrees appear in drama quite often, be it in a "hidden" manner, such as in the occasional narratives by characters or in the messenger's reports, or openly, such as in case of Brecht's Epic Theatre. An example of a drama which deserves mentioning in the context of traditional uses of the messenger who is standing on the border between the narrator (substituting action with narration on the stage) and the messenger (delivering reports about events or facts outside the stage), is Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*

Self-defined as "a memory play" (Williams xvii), *The Glass Menagerie* has already stepped across the line towards the use of the narrator on the stage, rather than the messenger. Written in 1944, the play claims a "non-realistic" stage and its story is a recollection of family events from the past. Tom, the central character and the audience's guide, steps in and out of his role as the narrator during the play. His comments shape the point of view and this focalization is present in all his narratives which serve to supplement the action on the stage, revealing the character's inner state as well as delivering information about the development of the events in the past. For example, at the beginning of scene 3, Tom tells the story of Mother's obsession with finding a gentleman for Laura: "After the fiasco at Rubicam's Business College, the idea of getting a gentleman caller for Laura began to play a more and more important part in Mother's calculations. It became an obsession. Like some archetype of the universal unconscious, the image of the gentleman caller haunted our small apartment" (14). This small-scale narrative, which is also a reportage about events from the past, alienates Tom from the action as well as makes him a part of it. It will be his own memories and his point of view that are to be played out in the following scenes. *The Glass Menagerie* shows another typical use of the messenger – or better put, of reportage in a narrative form, and the character who delivers it. Tom is firmly inside the action for most of the play, both as a character interacting with the other characters or through his voice, which he uses to comment on the action from his position as the narrator. In other words, he is a fully-fledged character of the play

(the central character with a name, for that matter) and its narrator at the same time. In the narratives he often, as in the example given above, uses the technique of reportage and becomes, for a short while, a messenger from the past and from the landscape of his memory, or the memory of the place which is to be created in the characters' and spectators' imagination. Still, the fact that he is integrally interconnected with the dramatic action of the play serves as an illustrative example of the features of messenger-like qualities used when a narrator is present in a play as a character.<sup>9</sup>

However, the genre of the memory play places a theoretical problem before us. Nolan reminds us that in the memory play, “as a particular form, the world of the drama is the memory of a single character, the narrator-protagonist” (75). What happens when Tom refers to the past and tells his memory of the events is that the world outside the stage is shaping the world on the stage, as both are a creation of a single mind, the “narrator-protagonist”, as Nolan puts it. The two spaces are not independent, they are re-shaped and re-created interdependently. Even Tom admits that most characters appearing in his memory narrative are distorted. On the other hand, these distortions are an integral part of the narrator's point of view and, therefore, all the discrepancies in effect even better illustrate insecurities and indeterminacies of the world in the making on the stage.

Nolan even goes as far as to claim, “[If] the play is true, the memory is true”, which is based on the genre-based observation that “memory is all the world there is” (75). Tom's narrative together with the staged action therefore transgress the time and space of the stage to such a degree that one influences the other and cannot be perceived without keeping this relationship in mind. The relationship is not logical in terms of succession of events or motivational, it is formative. Richardson uses the example of *The Glass Menagerie* for explaining the use of “generative narration”, where a character “comes on stage and narrates events which are then enacted before the audience” (152). A generative narrator, such as Tom in this play, also often becomes a part of the story. Although Tom is a fully-fledged narrator, he takes advantage of reportage and in some scenes may be considered a plain messenger of the facts and events from the fictional past.

### A Summary of the “Old” Messenger

*Oedipus the King* by Sophocles is one of the key dramas built upon the conventional use of the messenger (or, in actual fact, two of them), who in this case report on fictional events which took place outside the space created by the stage in the past (Oedipus's patricide) and the fictional present (Oedipus's self-blinding and Jocasta's suicide). *Antony and Cleopatra* by William Shakespeare is an example of such use of the messenger which helps to define it as an agent referring to fictional events in other places and enabling communication between fictional events represented on the stage and concurrent

9) As we have approached this point from the view of the mode of delivery (narration) and character-type, this claim is valid in this context only and does not aspire to universal applicability. In other words, it is not necessary for a narrator to use reportage in the sense as defined above, nor to become a messenger. There are, of course, endless possibilities for a narrator to be involved in a play.

fictional events elsewhere (Rome, Alexandria). The messenger of this play also refers to actual historical events thus informing the characters, as well as the audiences, about the historical facts the play is based on, creating in principal a potential for topical political application of the messenger and his or her report. The messenger in *Antony and Cleopatra* also briefly becomes a fully-fledged character with his own personal properties and qualities when Cleopatra prompts, threatens and seduces him, and he thence steps out of his character type. Some of the conventions associated with the messenger are also illustrated.

A brief excursus into the twentieth century has presented another use of the messenger and the technique of reportage, which has become so extensive and vast that it has a shaping effect on the dramatic structure as a whole. In other words, when is it more appropriate to identify the reporting character as a narrator rather than a messenger even though they share many common features – such is the case of Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams.

The three short case studies of the plays of Classical, Renaissance and twentieth-century drama serve to present the tradition of the use of the reportage technique and the messenger character type in the history of drama, setting and shaping the conventional use of both. Together with certain aspects of Bertolt Brecht's theatre, who undeniably contributed to these issues (which will be studied in a chapter further on), they thus represent points of reference and delimiting factors for the further analyses of the more contemporary uses of reportage and the messenger.

I call the recent transformations of these conventional components of drama the “new messenger” to distinguish them from the traditional ones, such as those presented above. The new messengers are built upon the traditional uses (Sophocles, Shakespeare), and also take advantage of more recent innovations (Williams, Brecht) to arrive with transformed applications of reportage and the messenger.