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[Bryn Mawr Classical Review](#)

BMCR 2022.09.43

# Voir et entendre dans le théâtre d'Euripide: communication et pragmatique

Rocco Maseglia, *Voir et entendre dans le théâtre d'Euripide: communication et pragmatique*. Paris: Éditions de Boccard, 2022. Pp. 360. ISBN 9782701805733 €59,00.

### Review by

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Marseglia analyzes the place of vision and hearing in *Alcestis*, *Hippolytus*, *Heracles*, *Helen*, and *Bacchae*, as tools for the characters to find things out but also for Euripides to create his plays. As he puts it, “La vue et l’ouïe sont les moyens par lesquels le spectacle tragique se réalise ainsi que les instruments qu’utilisent les personnages de l’action dramatisée pour appréhender et interpréter le déroulement de l’action” (p. 318). The book is in part a study of stagecraft, and Marseglia acknowledges a large group of other such studies going back to Taplin’s *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* (Oxford: 1997, cited p. 38 with further references in fn. 134 there). But it is also a close study of the words in the texts that relate to seeing, hearing, knowing, and believing. Marseglia pays some attention to how Euripides engages with the intellectual debates of his day, such as the relationship between illusion and reality or between sense-perception and reality (p. 39), though this is not fundamentally a philosophical study. It is a broad book, which brings in parallels from contemporary and earlier Greek literature and illuminates these familiar plays in new ways.

The introduction begins with the fundamental paradox of Greek theater: although “theater” comes from θέατρον, derived from θεάομαι “see,” many important events — Marseglia even says “la plupart des événements” — in a 5th-century tragedy happen off stage, where the chorus, some characters, and the audience only hear about them, from messengers (p. 16). Thus, sight and hearing are always working together. Heroic epic privileges hearing; Marseglia points out that κλέος, “glory,” is more literally “ce que l’on entend” (p. 17; the word is also related to English “listen”), and it is poetry that creates and propagates the hero’s glory. But sight is also a source of information, and seeing with one’s own eyes is the most reliable way to find something out; Marseglia cites examples from the *Odyssey*, the *Homeric*

*Hymns*, the pre-Socratics, other philosophers, orators, medical writers, and historians. Hearing, on the other hand, can carry more emotional weight (p. 23). The audience sees and hears what happens on stage, and at the same time the characters in the play see and hear what goes on around them. Although both ideas are in play, Marseglia's main focus is on the characters' perceptions.

Chapter 1, "Alceste sur le seuil," deals with sound and silence, representation and reality in *Alceste*. Silence is a theme: when Heracles arrives, he notices that the palace is much too quiet and wonders what's wrong. Admetus orders that all music be silenced in the entire kingdom during a year's mourning for Alceste. Seeing is also important. To begin with, "to see the light of day" is a standard expression for "to live," and Marseglia lists over a dozen examples of this expression in the play (p. 61–62), analyzing how Alceste presents and experiences her own death. He further argues that "la première moitié du drame est un *spectacle* continu de la mort" (p. 64, emphasis added) as we see Death himself arrive to fetch Alceste, and her death takes place on stage in full view of the audience. Admetus commissions a statue that will look like his late wife, but then refuses to look at the woman Heracles brings in, who looks too much like Alceste. When he finally does see and recognize her, they are both returned to life (p. 79). She must remain silent for three days, but poetry and song will make her immortal (p. 84). Marseglia shows how the reaction of Admetus and especially of the chorus to the sacrifice of Alceste assimilates her to a figure from epic (p. 85).

In chapter 2, "L'œil, l'oreille et le pouvoir destructeur de la parole dans l'*Hippolyte*," Marseglia argues that Phaedra's eroticized gaze and Hippolytus's virginal speech are a significant part of the network of oppositions within the play (p. 148). The discussion of language here is strong and brought out things I hadn't noticed, even though I teach this play regularly. For example, the Nurse, worming Phaedra's secret out of her, "excluait la possibilité du silence et ne retenait qu'un choix entre parole et parole" (p. 114); later, the oaths sworn both by Hippolytus and by the chorus mean they also don't have a choice between speech and silence (p. 119). A third oath comes in: Hippolytus swears to his father that he has not attacked Phaedra (1025–1027), but this oath is ignored (p. 122). Communication is complicated throughout the play: only Artemis speaks with unquestioned authority (p. 125), and Phaedra and Hippolytus never communicate directly (p. 132). As for sight, Hippolytus only uses the verb ὁρᾶ in this form twice, at 905 and 1447: the only things about which he says "I see" are Phaedra's dead body and the gates of the underworld (p. 147). Finally, Hippolytus asks that his face be covered as he dies (1458), just as Phaedra wanted her own face covered when she realized what she'd admitted (243). The final scene of Hippolytus's death is parallel not only to the scene in which Phaedra's body is revealed, but to the scene in which her secret is revealed (p. 147–148).

Chapter 3, "Héraclès, entre ténèbres et lumière," argues for the unity of *Heracles*

suggesting that Heracles himself has a double journey from darkness to light, from death to life (p. 196, 199). At the start of the play, he has gone to the underworld and is presumed dead. He appears, very much alive, but then, after killing Lycos, is driven mad and eventually knocked out by Athena; his revival is another return to life. A key observation here is that the second stasimon (637–700) uses some of the images from the previous choral song (the chorus's old age, the swan) in a different context, no longer lamenting loss but celebrating victory (p. 167).

Chapter 4, “*Hélène: dédoublements et jeux de miroir*,” is perhaps the strongest chapter. Marseglia observes “l’opposition entre réalité et fiction” and “le problème de la fiabilité des sens” (p. 201) throughout the play but cautions that *Helen* isn’t a work of philosophy but a play, to be analyzed in dramatic terms (p. 203). He notes all the doubling and duplication, some obvious (Helen and her phantom), some less so. The comparison between the Teucer scene at the start and the recognition scene between Helen and Menelaus is detailed and excellent (p. 215–220). Both men see that the woman before them resembles Helen, but they’re sure that she isn’t. Helen questions Teucer about what he knows about Helen and about her family, and whether he knows these things from first-hand observation; she insists that Menelaus trust his own eyes as he looks at her. The discussion brings out “le caractère paradoxal de cette reconnaissance entre deux personnages dont l’un (Ménélas) ne semble pas être celui qu’il est et l’autre (Hélène) ressemble trop à celle qu’elle ne peut pas être” (p. 217). Although sight is clearly important in the play — what someone looks like, how we know who someone is — hearing matters as well, particularly in the form of κλέος, or how people hear about you. Marseglia shows how Helen uses Theonoe’s concern for her own and her family’s κλέος to convince her not to tell her brother who Menelaus is. The chapter is also good on the staging of the play.

Chapter 5, “L’épiphanie de Dionysos,” is the longest chapter. Marseglia situates *Bacchae* in the tradition of Dionysiac stories and rituals (p. 257–261), and in the tradition of stories of interaction between humans and gods (p. 255–257). In epic, gods regularly mingle with humans; in tragedy, the gods are more aloof. Humans might hear them without seeing them, or a god might appear in the prologue or *ex machina* at the end of the action. It is not common to have a god on stage, visible and audible to the human characters, through the whole play, as we have in this one. Of course, none of the mortal characters knows that the stranger is Dionysus: instead of the intimate interactions we remember from the *Iliad*, this interaction shows just how different and how distant the gods are (p. 257). There are good analyses of the staging of the palace miracle (p. 266), of the changes in Pentheus’s perceptions, and of Agave’s scene.

A brief conclusion rounds out the book; there is an extensive bibliography and an *index locorum*. These five case studies show Euripides playing with ideas of sight and hearing, both philosophically and, especially, dramatically. He uses his

“dramaturgie des sens” (p. 309) to flesh out his characters, to illuminate key themes, and to manipulate the audience’s emotions. While many of Marseglia’s observations have been made before (and he documents them carefully), bringing them together in the context of sense perception, reality, and the theatrical illusion is an original idea and makes the book thoughtful and useful.