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Receptions of Ophelia:
from the Early Modern Period to the *Fin-de-Siècle*

Edited by Emanuel Stelzer

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A Hidden Corpse Seen Twice: Staging Death in Euripides' *Phaethon*¹

Abstract

Euripides' *Phaethon* centres on the tragic death of Phaethon, the son of the Sun god Helios, who perishes on his wedding day following a fateful attempt to drive his father's chariot. This partially preserved tragedy has been the subject of numerous philological and thematic studies, but there is still room to explore some of its dramaturgical aspects, particularly those related to staging. Even in its fragmentary form, the play presents several uncommon and striking theatrical features, such as the decision to have Phaethon's corpse concealed in the backstage space and the possibility that the corpse was shown to the audience twice. These devices allow Euripides to vividly bring to life on stage a myth that was incredibly difficult to represent, rendering it both tangible and emotionally resonant for the audience. Through a masterful use of all available scenic spaces and the profound disparity in knowledge among the characters (and the Chorus) involved in the action, Euripides stages the complete annihilation of the protagonist. Simultaneously, he conveys the mounting grief of those who surround him, depicting a progressive catastrophe that this article aims to analyse from the perspective of compositional and staging technique.

KEYWORDS Euripides; tragedy; *Phaethon*; corpse; theatre studies

1. Foreword

Among Euripides' fragmentary plays, *Phaethon* (frag. 771-786 K.) stands out for the quantity and coherence of its surviving lines, second only to *Hypsipyle*. While its textual, metrical, narrative and thematic elements have been

¹ I would like to thank the editorial board of *Skenè. Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies* as well as the anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments. I would also like to thank Professor Oliver Taplin, Alessandro Giardini, Francesco Morosi, and Roberto Indovina for providing me with their valuable feedback. This paper originates from a seminar I held at the University of Pisa as part of the 'Filologia Classica II' course (AY 2023/2024) taught by Professor Maria Serena Mirto. I also thank her for the feedback she provided during the seminar discussion.

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extensively studied,² dramaturgical and especially staging aspects have not yet been fully explored, except for a few noteworthy articles dealing with the Chorus of this tragedy.³ This gap is understandable, given the fragmentary nature of the text. Yet *Phaethon* benefits from an exceptional convergence of sources: fragments from indirect tradition and two direct sources, the Parisian palimpsest and the Berlin papyrus.⁴ This provides a coherent textual basis, offering sufficient material for dramaturgical and scenic analysis and allowing for an interpretation of the play's overall structure, even if some details remain speculative.

A closer dramaturgical examination of *Phaethon* is also justified by the rarity of certain compositional choices detectable in the fragments. For example, the simultaneous entrance of all three speaking actors (the Herald, Merops, and Phaethon) in the first episode of the play,⁵ or the notable scene in which Phaethon's body is hidden within Merops' palace (the backstage area, see Section 3), stand out in terms of staging, as does the probable double exposure of Phaethon's corpse to the audience (see Section 4). These dramaturgical choices, with their scenic implications and emotional impact on characters, Chorus and spectators, demonstrate the play's theatrical sophistication and highlight its potential for powerful staging, even in its fragmentary form.

² The bibliography on *Phaethon* is quite extensive, considering its fragmentary state: the critical edition of the fragments by Diggle 1970 is still fundamental, followed by the more recent ones by Collard in Cropp and Lee 1995, 195-239, van Looy in Jouan and van Looy 2002, 225-67, Collard and Cropp 2008, 323-67, and Onori 2023, with respective plot reconstructions. The text that has been printed here follows the edition of Euripides' fragments by Kannicht (2004, 798-826). All translations from Greek are mine.

³ See Kousoulini 2020 and Andújar 2020, who deal with interesting dramaturgical issues about the Choruses of *Phaethon* (the main and the secondary one). Some aspects of the staging of *Phaethon* are succinctly set out by Di Benedetto, Medda 1997, 151-2 and Collard in Collard, Cropp, Lee 1995, 200 (dramaturgy) and 202-3 (staging). See also Carpanelli 2024 for an attempt to sketch a script of *Phaethon*.

⁴ The direct tradition of *Phaethon* consists of two palimpsest folios (162-3) from a codex containing Euripidean dramas (possibly from the fifth century AD), later merged in the codex Claromontanus (now Par. Gr. 107, sixth century AD, containing the epistles of St Paul), and a papyrus fragment containing the text of the *parodos* (P. Berol. 9771, third century BC, probably from an anthology of tragic lyrical passages). In addition, there are a dozen indirect quotations from later authors. The narrative hypothesis of *Phaethon* is partially preserved by the renowned P. Oxy. 27, 2455 (second century AD), containing a collection of Euripides' narrative *hypotheses* (see Meccariello 2014, 332-4). On the tradition of *Phaethon* see Onori 2023, 21-8.

⁵ On the triple entrance of Merops, Phaethon and the Herald in the first episode of *Phaethon* see Collard in Collard, Cropp, and Lee 1995, 202-3 and Onori 2023, 139 (who also refers to the case of Aeschylus' *Prometheus*, in whose prologue there is the entrance of no fewer than four characters on stage, one of whom is a silent figure, see Griffith 1983, 80-1).

The impact of *Phaethon* was already evident in antiquity. The Anonymous of the Sublime praised Euripides for achieving both literal and metaphorical heights of ὕψος (“sublimity”) in depicting Phaethon’s chariot ride and fall.⁶ More recently, Oliver Taplin has recognised the play’s performative strengths, citing it as an example of a perfect σύστασις τῶν πραγμάτων (“combination of events”), which is the Aristotelian definition for the interweaving of the events within a dramatic plot (see Arist. *Po.* 1450a 15; see Taplin 2003, 104). Taplin also notes Euripides’ use of some notable dramaturgical strategies in *Phaethon*, such as Clymene’s frantic exit to hide Phaethon’s body (fr. 781 K.) followed immediately by the entrance of Merops with a secondary Chorus, as well as the use of a second chorus itself, which, while uncommon, is not unprecedented in Attic tragedy.⁷

In this article, I will focus on two key dramaturgical and staging choices that contribute actively to the impactful representation of Phaethon’s death in Euripides’ play. The first is the concealment of Phaethon’s corpse behind the *skenè*, creating a cognitive divide between characters aware of the disaster (Clymene, the main Chorus) and those who remain temporarily ignorant of it (Merops, the secondary Chorus). This choice, that establishes a crucial dramatic tension that persists until the final revelation of the truth, will be discussed and confronted with the only other tragic case (also from Euripides) in which something similar occurs, in order to analyse the similarities and the differences between the two plays in such a peculiar scenic and spatial handling of the corpse (Section 3).

The second is the possibility that Euripides in this play chose to showcase Phaethon’s lifeless body to the audience no less than twice (Section 4), intensifying the impact of Phaethon’s death as much as possible. In this way, Euripides frames the catastrophe so that this crucial event, revealed to different characters (and to the Chorus) at different times, resonates across every part of the theatrical space (offstage, onstage and backstage).⁸

⁶ See [Longin.] *De sublim.* 15, 4 ἄρ’ οὐκ ἂν εἴποις, ὅτι ἡ ψυχὴ τοῦ γράφοντος συνεπιβαίνει ἄρματος καὶ συγκινδυνεύουσα τοῖς ἵπποις συνεπτέρωται; οὐ γὰρ ἂν, εἰ μὴ τοῖς οὐρανίοις ἐκείνοις ἔργοις ἰσοδρομοῦσα ἐφέρετο, τοιαῦτ’ ἂν ποτε ἐφαντάσθῃ (“Would you not say that the writer’s soul goes up together [sc. with Phaethon] on the chariot and, running the same risks, is carried in the air together with the horses? For if it had not been taken to run the same course as those celestial facts, [sc. the poet’s soul] could never have conceived such visions”). For commentary on this passage see Halliwell in Halliwell, Fusillo, and Lulli 2021, 304-5.

⁷ See Taplin 2003, 104 who speaks of “unusual resources”. On secondary choruses in tragedy (a device mainly used by Euripides) see Di Benedetto and Medda 1997, 244-5.

⁸ For the concepts of stage space (corresponding to the orchestra, visible to the audience), offstage space (the imagined space beyond the two *eisodoi*) and backstage space (corresponding to the space behind the facade of the *skenè*, which could become partially visible to the audience) I refer to the terminology and extensive discussion of

2. The Plot

Before delving into the way in which Euripides intensifies the emotional drama of Phaethon's death through outstanding directorial choices, it is important to recount the plot of the tragedy, which can be largely reconstructed.⁹ *Phaethon* begins at dawn on the young man's wedding day.¹⁰ The protagonist, raised as the son of the Ethiopian king Merops and the Oceanid Clymene, learns from his mother that his true father is the Sun god Helios. Eager to confirm this revelation, Clymene urges Phaethon to seek proof of that from Helios himself. After the parodos, performed by the Chorus of palace handmaids, Merops enters with Phaethon and the Herald, announcing the young man's marriage. In the now-lost portions of the text, a debate probably ensues between Phaethon, who resists the marriage, and Merops, who supports it.

Following this confrontation, Phaethon departs to Helios' palace, where he asks for permission to drive his true father's winged chariot as proof of his divine lineage. As Phaethon loses control of his chariot, his disastrous ride is interrupted by Zeus, who strikes him down with his lightning bolt. Therefore, Phaethon's death occurs offstage, in the celestial heights of his ill-fated flight (αἰθέρος πτυχάς, see fr. 779, 7 K.; the "heights of heaven") from which he plummets. The account of Phaethon's death, delivered by a character whose identity is unclear (possibly the boy's Pedagogue, who later in the play converses with Merops after the discovery of Phaethon's corpse in the palace, fr. 781 K.),¹¹ is probably addressed to Clymene and the Chorus of handmaids.¹²

The surviving text does not include the transportation of Phaethon's body from where he fell to the stage,¹³ but Clymene's lament (φίλος δέ μοι /

Di Benedetto, Medda 1997, 10-69.

⁹ See the plot reconstructions of *Phaethon* in Diggle 1970, 35-46; Collard in Collard, Cropp, Lee 1995, 200-3; van Looy in Jouan and van Looy 2002, 234-45 and Onori 2023, 29-30.

¹⁰ There is uncertainty about the identity of Phaethon's betrothed bride, who is never referred to by name in the surviving fragments (among the various proposal, Aphrodite, Eos or Selene have been thought of, see Diggle 1970, 155-60 and Onori 2023, 249-51).

¹¹ On the identity of the character who narrated on stage Phaethon's death see Diggle 1970, 41-2 and Onori 2023, 217-22.

¹² See Collard, Cropp 2008, 349.

¹³ Stage transport of the corpse is common (yet not compulsory) in the case of extra-scenic deaths (see Di Benedetto and Medda 1997, 286-9) and see Section 3 below. On the scenic potential of the corpse's presence see Di Benedetto, Medda 1997, 284-86. With regard to the possible modes of ancient scenic representation of the corpse, critics usually weigh up two alternatives: the use of a dummy or a mute extra. Some useful discussion on the scenic representability of the corpse (in relation to Ajax's

ἄλουτος ἐν φάραγι σήπεται νέκυς, fr. 786 K.; “and the corpse dear to me rots unwashed in a ravine”)¹⁴ suggests a time lapse between the announcement of Phaethon's death and the arrival of his body to the stage.¹⁵ This interval was possibly filled with expressions of grief and uncertainty (see Collard in Collard, Cropp, and Lee 1995, 232-3).

When the text becomes legible again, Phaethon's lifeless body, scorched from Zeus' thunderbolt,¹⁶ has now been brought to the stage to his grieving mother (as suggested by the deictic τόνδ[ε], fr. 781, 12 K.; “this one [here]”), and is now visible to the audience. At this tense moment, Clymene decides to hide Phaethon's body in the king's treasure chamber to prevent the approaching Merops – still unaware of the catastrophe and believing his son is about to marry – from discovering the truth (fr. 781, 1-13 K.).

However, the disaster soon comes to light in a relatively well preserved scene which begins with a Servant rushing out from the palace into the orchestra to inform the king of a sinister cloud of black smoke emanating from the treasure room (fr. 781, 43-51 K.). Initially, the king assumes that this smoke comes from the sacrificial fires burning throughout the palace for Phaethon's wedding, but the Servant confirms it is coming only from the treasure room (fr. 781, 52-4 K.). This worries Merops, who follows the Servant's suggestion to inspect the palace to ensure no fire is spreading within (fr. 781, 55-60 K.). As Merops exits, the Chorus sings an alarmed iambic-dochmiac chant, expressing their despair over the imminent revelation of Clymene's secret (fr. 781, 61-74 K.) and the discovering of Phaethon's κρυφαῖος νέκυς (fr. 781, 67 K.; “hidden corpse”).

suicide in the Sophoclean play of the same name) can be found in Most, Ozbek 2015.

¹⁴ For commentary on this fragment see Onori 2023, 297-301.

¹⁵ A comparable situation is to be found Euripides' now lost *Stheneboea* (fr. 661-71 K.): a character dies offstage, falls from the heavens, and their body is later retrieved and brought to the stage. In that play, Proetus' bride, deceived by Bellerophon, dies in a fatal winged ride on Pegasus, and her body is recovered from the sea by fishermen and returned to the king. See Collard in Collard, Cropp, and Lee 1995, 79-92. On *Stheneboea* see also Collard and Cropp 2008, 121-41, and Jouan in Jouan and van Looy 2002, 1-27.

¹⁶ The scenic rendering of the smoke exhaling from Phaethon's corpse is ruled out by Collard in Collard, Cropp, and Gibert 1995, 203, who thinks rather of two possibilities: the mere imagining of the smoke, evoked only verbally, or the hypothesis that Phaethon's corpse emanated smoke from the backstage space. The latter possibility is to be ruled out in view of the fact that Clymene refers to her son's smoking body as being present with her on stage and (more importantly) that she orders the servants to remove it from the orchestral space and bring it inside the palace. On the possibility that ancient theatre was able to generate smoke effects (e.g. by burning incense), not entirely ruled out by critics, see Arnott 1962, 63, Hammond and Moon 1978, 374 (and note 16) and Hammond 1988, 17.

After the chant ends, the Chorus hears Merops' lamentations from within the palace, signaling his discovery of Phaethon's body (fr. 781, 75-9 K.) and in all probability commanding the doors to be opened to display his son's corpse. Of the forty or so verses that follow (fr. 781, 83-121 K.), only traces of the first letters or a few words are legible. This portion doubtless contained a section in which Merops mourned Phaethon, followed by a dialogue between Merops and Phaethon's Pedagogue, summoned by the king to learn more about his son's death.¹⁷ While the play's conclusion is uncertain, it is plausible that Merops learns of Clymene's deception and threatens her, only for a *deus ex machina* to intervene and resolve the conflict, perhaps securing future honors for Phaethon (see Diggle 1970, 44-6).

3. The Concealment of the Corpse Backstage

One of the most striking dramaturgical choices in *Phaethon* is Clymene's decision to hide her son's corpse inside the palace, behind the *skéné* doors. This is frantically carried out to prevent Merops – approaching with a secondary chorus of chanting virgins – from discovering the truth (see fr. 781, 1-10 K.):¹⁸

ΚΛΥΜΕΝΗ πυρός τ' Ἐρινὺς ἐν νεκρῷ †θερηνυαί†
 ζώσης δ' ἀνίησ' ἀτμόν ἐμφανῇ [~ -].
 ἀπωλόμην· οὐκ οἶσέτ' εἰς δόμους νέκυν;
 πόσις πόσις μοι πλησίον γαμηλίου
 μολπὰς αὐτεῖ παρθένους ἡγούμενος.
 οὐ θᾶσσον; οὐ σταλαγμόν ἐξομόρξετε,
 εἴ πού τις ἔστιν αἵματος χαμαὶ πεσών;
 ἐπείγετ' ἤδη, δμω(ί)δες· κρύψω δέ νιν
 ξεστοῖσι θαλάμοις, ἔνθ' ἐμῷ κείται πόσει
 χρυσός, μόνῃ δὲ κληῖθρ' ἐγὼ σφραγίζομαι.

[CLYMEENE A fiery Erinys (stirs?) in the corpse, sending out a visible breath (of flame?). / I am destroyed! Won't you bring the body into the house? / My husband, my husband is near, leading the virgins in chanting wedding songs! / Hurry! Won't you wipe away any drop of blood that's fallen to the ground? / Make haste, servants! I'll hide him in the chamber of polished stones, / where my husband keeps his gold, and I'm the only one to hold the seals.]

¹⁷ See Collard in Collard, Cropp, Lee 1995, 238.

¹⁸ With respect to what Kannicht printed, I accept for the fragment Rau's (πυρός τ' Ἐρινὺς, l. 1), Hartung's (νεκρῷ, l. 1), and Diggle's conjectures (ζώσης δ', after Ellis, who proposed ζώσης τ', l. 2). For textual issues related to this fragment see the apparatus of Kannicht 2004, 816-17 and the discussions of Diggle 1970, 141-4 and Onori 2023, 233-6.

The choice to have Phaethon's body concealed inside the palace creates a deep cognitive gap between the characters regarding Phaethon's death: from here forward, the play will develop through a double dramaturgical line, one that follows Clymene's early awareness of Phaethon's death, and another that instead focuses on Merops' total unawareness and joy for his deemed son's wedding (see also Wright 2019, 204). The concealment of the corpse crucially separates the characters of Clymene and Merops, who importantly never cross paths on stage in the surviving text. This act isolates them within their own distinct universes, one locked in a joy now tragically founded on nothing, the other trapped in a disaster built on a lie. They are unable to (and theatrically, they cannot and must not) communicate with each other due to a fundamental asymmetry in their knowledge of the truth that grows even deeper and more dangerous: an imbalance that the very act of concealing the corpse materialises and translates into theatrical terms. Naturally, the more time passes between the creation of this cognitive barrier and its demolition with the emergence of the truth, the greater the dramatic tension that will accumulate. This will make the revelation moment (Section 4) highly impactful, with fundamental consequences for the interaction between the two, who will be then positioned on the same side of knowledge of the facts.

Therefore, the cognitive duplicity that the hiding of the corpse generates can be seen as a fundamental dramaturgical device that complicates significantly the plot of *Phaethon*, creating two storylines within the same drama that mirror precisely the different awareness levels of the characters. Such incompatibility of perspectives, presumably bound to explode in a serious conflict between Clymene and her husband after Merops' discovery of Phaethon's corpse, is further amplified in the play by the presence of a double Chorus itself: the first shares Clymene's awareness and despair over Phaethon's death, the secondary one joins Merops in his merry ignorance of the disaster. Thus, the juxtaposition of these two plot lines serves as another mirroring device at play in *Phaethon* – in addition to the use of two Choruses – that creates multiple and incompatible universes of knowledge within this tragedy.¹⁹

Strictly seen as a staging choice, the concealment of the corpse behind the *skéné* proves outstanding particularly considering its extreme rarity in fifth-century theatre. While extrascenic deaths, their announcement through a witness' speech, and subsequent transportation of the body to the stage are very common in Attic theatre (see Di Benedetto and Medda 1997, 286-7), the decision to hide a corpse in the backstage area is unheard of in Aeschylus and Sophocles. This could be seen as a striking Euripidean innovation to complicate his already elaborate plots, as well as to draw as much emotional

¹⁹ For the spectacular 'choral mirroring' in *Phaethon*, created by the involvement in the plot of a secondary Chorus led by Merops, see Andújar 2020.

intensity as possible from the scenic use of the corpse and its ability to impact the action.

The closest parallel for such a solution within surviving Greek tragedies is found in Euripides' *Electra* (ca. 416-413 BC), chronologically not distant from the estimated date of *Phaethon* (ca. 420 BC).²⁰ In the third episode of *Electra*, the lifeless body of Aegisthus is hidden by Electra inside the Peasant's hut, whose interior is represented by the backstage space.²¹ This similarity is part of a more intricate network of structural analogies, in which *Electra* and *Phaethon* share a comparable dramaturgical sequence:

- 1) a character dies offstage;
- 2) their corpse is transported to the stage;
- 3) the corpse is hidden in the backstage space;
- 4) an unsuspecting character enters the space where the corpse has been concealed.

In *Electra*, this sequence develops as follows: 1) Aegisthus is killed offstage by Orestes while sacrificing to the Nymphs (761-858);²² 2) his corpse is brought to the stage, not for mourning but for Electra's vituperation (907-56);²³ 3) Electra hides the corpse inside the hut to prevent her mother Clytemnestra from discovering Aegisthus' death (959-61); 4) Clytemnestra enters the hut unaware, but she too is killed by her children before realising what has happened (1139-46).

In both plays, the pivotal moments are the concealment of the body (3) and the arrival of the unsuspecting character (4). In *Electra*, the first moment is represented by the scene in which Electra, after having unremittingly insulted the corpse of the hated Aegisthus,²⁴ decides to hide his body inside the Peasant's hut to prevent the approaching Clytemnestra from becoming aware of the vengeance underway:

²⁰ As regards the uncertain date of *Phaethon*, which metrical criteria would suggest as near to 420 BC, see Collard and Cropp 2008, 328.

²¹ On the staging of *Electra* (in particular as regards the spaces of the action) see Cropp 2013, 16-18.

²² On the scene of the killing of Aegisthus in Euripides' *Electra*, which plays on the thematic sphere of ritual, going so far as to identify the sacrificing subject with the sacrificial victim, see Medda and Taddei 2021. *Phaethon*, too, creates dramatic effects by playing on the motif of reversed ritual, staging the preparations for a wedding that will not take place due to the death of the betrothed bridegroom (see Wright 2019, 204 on the case of *Phaethon*; more generally on the theme of the 'tragic wedding' see Seaford 1987 and Rehm 1992).

²³ Di Benedetto and Medda 1997, 288-9 note the particularity of the scene.

²⁴ On the scene of the vituperation of the corpse, made effective precisely by the stage presence of Aegisthus' body, see Worman in Telò and Mueller 2018, 197.

ΕΛΕΚΤΡΑ Εἶέν· κομίζειν τοῦδε σῶμ' ἔσω χρεῶν
 σκότῳ τε δοῦναι, δμῶες, ὥς, ὅταν μὲν
 μήτηρ, σφαγῆς πάροιθε μὴ 'σίδῃ νεκρόν.
 (Eur. *El.* 959-61)

[ELECTRA Well then, servants, you must take the body of this man (*sc.* Aegisthus) inside (*sc.* of the house) and hand it over to the darkness so that, when my mother comes, she will not see the corpse before her own slaying.²⁵]

This scene can be compared, as much in its wording and dramaturgical articulation (and presumably staging), to that of *Phaethon* in which Clymene, in the imminence of Merops's arrival, orders her servants to bring Phaethon's body "into the house" (see fr. 781, 3 K. εἰς δόμους and *El.* 959 ἔσω, "inside [*sc.* the hut]"). Here too we have a character who knows of the death of another character who has perished in the offstage space (Electra and Clymene), a corpse on stage (Aegisthus' and Phaethon's), and the impending arrival of a character from whom this death must be concealed (Clytemnestra and Merops).

However, there are important differences between the two plays that highlight how Euripides skillfully uses the device of hiding the corpse behind the *skené* to create very distinct dramatic effects. In *Electra*, the concealment of Aegisthus' corpse is part of a bloody revenge plot culminating in the murder of Clytemnestra. This concealment aims to prevent Clytemnestra from suspecting Aegisthus' death, which could jeopardise Electra and Orestes' plans. Clytemnestra is then lured unaware into the same place where Aegisthus' body is hidden, leading to her own demise (1143-5), which is made possible precisely by her ignorance of the facts.

In *Phaethon*, by contrast, Clymene is not represented as the guilty murderer of her son but a mother who is involuntarily caught in a disaster. She is desperately trying to hide a double secret: Phaethon's true parentage and his death, which occurred because he wanted to test the divine paternity revealed by herself. Therefore, the concealment of the corpse is not a calculated decision like Electra's schemes but a frantic reaction to a crisis, with Clymene seeing this as the only way to temporarily obscure the truth. And the audience's empathy towards the corpse is completely reversed between the two plays: in *Phaethon*, the body is that of a beloved son, mourned by his mother and hidden to avoid revealing a delicate truth; in *Electra*, on the contrary, the body is that of a detested enemy, whose

²⁵ For commentary on these lines see Cropp 2013, 261, and Distilo 2012, 2, 468-72 (also on the attribution issues concerning these lines, whose speaker is identified as Orestes in the manuscripts).

murder is only the first half of a more intricate revenge plan that cannot be compromised by the discovery of Aegisthus' slaying.

The process leading to the discovery of the corpse also differs significantly between the two plays. In *Phaethon*, Merops is gradually, yet swiftly, confronted with the devastating reality of his son's death (see below, section 4). In *Electra*, instead, Clytemnestra may never have learned about Aegisthus' death, as she is killed almost immediately upon entering the house, without even having time to notice anything amiss. The dramatic potential of Aegisthus' concealed body is not focused on a tense discovery process, as happens in *Phaethon* (see Section 4), but is instead exploited in the stage interactions between Electra and the unsuspecting Clytemnestra before the latter's entrance into the hut. Through the strong tragic irony that permeates their dialogue, Aegisthus is here referenced as if he were still alive (1116-22; 1134-8), while the audience knows his body lies inside Electra's house, awaiting Clytemnestra, who will meet the same fate.²⁶ The final revelation of the bodies in *Electra* serves more as an 'inter-dramatic' device for the spectator, linking immediately to the joint appearance of Agamemnon and Cassandra's corpses in the fifth episode of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (458 BC).²⁷

4. The Double Exposure of the Corpse

The second outstanding staging choice displayed by Euripides in *Phaethon* to scenically highlight the disaster at the core of the play can be glimpsed in the scene where Merops discovers his son's corpse inside the palace. Here, the playwright seems to employ another somewhat unconventional technique to intensify the impact of Phaethon's death: he opts to display the lifeless body of the same character to the audience for the second time within the same play. Part of the remarkability of this choice lies in its almost uniqueness in Greek tragedy; but within the internal dynamics of *Phaethon*, the double sight of the corpse is extremely impressive especially as 1) it marks the definitive revelation of Phaethon's death, 2) closes the cognitive gap between the characters regarding his demise (see above, section 3) and, at the same time, 3) brings the corpse back into the visual and emotional attention of the spectators, making it reappear in an unsettling manner.

²⁶ See Cropp 2013, 223 ("each of Electra's lines mockingly alludes to Aegisthus lying dead in her cottage. Clytemnestra unconsciously compounds the irony"). See also the other references to Aegisthus in lines 1134-8.

²⁷ See Cropp 2013, 227. On the scene of the exposition of Agamemnon and Cassandra's corpses in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (and the possible technical modalities of their revelation) see Medda 2017, I, 140-7.

After Merops discovers his son's body by crossing the threshold of the palace, it is likely that part of the backstage was revealed to the audience, possibly through the opening of the *skené* doors,²⁸ to show Phaethon's lifeless body a second time. Although the palimpsest is badly damaged here, the surviving text on the left margin of the column allows this staging reconstruction, and could be supplemented as follows (fr. 781, 107-108 K.):

ΜΕΡ. εἶέν· θύρ[ας

ὥς εἰσο[ρᾶτε

[MEROPS Alas! (Of) the door(s) (open the bolts?) / For you to see (the dead Phaethon?)]²⁹

The use of the word θύρ[ας/αν] or θυρ[ῶν], likely referring to the palace doors, aligns with similar stage direction in other Euripidean plays. For example, in *Hippolytus* (line 170), the word θυρῶν, spoken by the Chorus, refers to the open or opening doors of the palace of Theseus in Troezen (represented by the *skené*) from where Phaedra's nurse is coming: ἀλλ' ἦδε τροφὸς γεραιὰ πρὸ θυρῶν ("But here is the aged nurse in front of the doors [sc. of the palace]").³⁰

Furthermore, a possible form of the verb εἰσοράω ("to see") in line 108 of the *Phaethon* fragment suggests Merops commands the doors to be opened to reveal to the sight of the Chorus and the audience what is hidden behind them: at this point of the action, this can hardly be other than Phaethon's lifeless and just discovered corpse.³¹

For parallels of similar standardised indications of opening the *skené* doors to see what lies or comes from behind them with entries of the verb (εἰς)οράω, one may recall again *Hippolytus* (808-9), where Theseus urges his servants to open the palace doors in order to reveal Phaedra's corpse:

χαλᾶτε κλῆθρα, πρόσπολοι, πυλωμάτων,

ἐκλύεθ' ἄρμούς, ὥς ἴδω πικρὰν θέαν

[THESEUS Loosen the bars of the doors, servants, / open the joints, for me to see the bitter sight . . .]³²

²⁸ On the possible modalities of direct revelation of the backstage space (or at least part of it), see Di Benedetto and Medda 1997, 65-8.

²⁹ On the supplement proposals to this text see the apparatus in Kannicht 2004, 822.

³⁰ See Barrett 1964, 194-5.

³¹ See Collard in Collard, Cropp and Lee 1995, 238: "In 313-4 Merops appears to command opening the stage-door, to disclose Phaethon's body".

³² On these lines see Barrett 1964, 317.

Similarly, in *Med.* 1314-5 Jason commands his servants to open the doors of the palace, falsely expecting to see his slain children's corpses inside it:

χαλᾶτε κλῆδας ὥς τάχιστα, πρόσπολοι,
ἐκλύεθ' ἄρμούς, ὥς ἴδω διπλοῦν κακόν

[JASON Open the locks without delay, servants, / unlock the joints, for me to see a double misfortune . . .]³³

The case of *Medea* is particularly interesting in comparison to that of *Phaethon*, as it presents a situation similarly based on subverting both character and audience expectations through the appearance of the corpse and specifically through the place where the corpse comes into view. In *Medea*, Jason already knows that his children have been slain by their mother, as revealed in his dialogue with the Chorus (1306-12), and expects to discover their bodies inside the palace, where they have found death. However, the children's corpses are not there; instead, they appear above him, raised in their mother's chariot, surprising Jason, the Chorus, and also the spectators (since the corpse of a character who dies backstage is usually revealed through the opening of the *skēnē* doors, see below).³⁴

In contrast, in *Phaethon*, Merops is completely unaware of his son's death and does not expect to come across Phaethon's corpse at all. Yet he does, and in a place he least expected, suddenly falling from the greatest joy to the darkest grief. Thus, Euripides plays with the expectations of his characters in both tragedies: in one, showing them the corpses of their beloved ones in an unexpected place; in the other, having the unaware character come to terms with his son's death through the discovery of the corpse in an unforeseen location. The spatial placement of the corpse (and its very stage presence) is therefore a crucial element in the representation of the characters' grief, and Euripides demonstrates a keen ability to maximise the emotional potential of it.

To these Euripidean cases one may also add a Sophoclean one with εἰσοράω (as eventually in the *Phaethon* fragment, see above), from the scene from *Oedipus the King* where the second Messenger (ἐξάγγελος) says that the doors of Oedipus' palace are opening for something to be suddenly revealed – Oedipus himself coming into the orchestra with his pupils horribly blinded (see Soph. *OT* 1294-5):

κλῆθρα γὰρ πυλῶν τάδε
διοίγεται· θέαμα δ' εἰσόψῃ τάχα

³³ On these lines see Mastronarde 2002, 376.

³⁴ On this scene from *Medea* see Mastronarde 2002, 372-3 and 377.

[SECOND MESSENGER These joints of the doors are opening; / And soon you will witness a sight . . .]³⁵

In *Phaethon*, the opening of the *skené* doors at this thrilling moment of the play is further supported by the fact that in the preceding lines Merops calls for Phaethon's Pedagogue to explain the tragedy that has struck him (fr. 781, 102-3 K.): καλεῖτε . . . / ὅς ἐμὸν . . . ("MEROPS . . . call [someone? The boy's pedagogue?] / that my [e.g. misfortune shall explain to me]"). The Pedagogue's sudden arrival is announced by the Chorus as he comes out from the palace, so the doors of the palace must be open now either way (fr. 781, 105-6 K.): ὄδ' ἐκ δόμων . . . / παιδὸς . . . ("CHORUS . . . behold he (comes) from the house . . . / the boy's [sc. pedagogue]).³⁶

However, also other supplementary proposals have been made to fill the gap in the text of fr. 781, especially for line 108. These, if correct, would restore a completely different meaning of these lines, such as the voices of the verb οἶδα proposed by Blass (εἴσ[ομαι, "so that I will know") and Wecklein (εἰσ[όμεσθα, "so that we will know", followed by Cropp in Collard, Cropp and Lee 1995, 222; see Kannicht 2004, 822). In this case, the meaning of the line would not involve the *sight* (of Phaethon's corpse) but rather Merops' will to *know* more about Phaethon's death by questioning the Paedagogue. Others, such as Diggle, have instead proposed to divide the text differently: ὥς εἰς ο[or ὥς εἰ σο[, deeming Blass and Wecklein's supplements unpromising as regards the sense (see Diggle 1970, 174).

Given the faultiness of the text and the potential validity of any of the proposed supplements, it is possible to add another element in favour of the reconstruction of the staging of this scene as involving the second appearance of Phaethon's corpse with the opening of the *skenè* doors. This comes from the comparison of *Phaethon* with two other Euripidean plays – both entirely preserved – where a corpse is actually shown to the audience twice: *Electra* (on which see also section 3) and *Alcestis*.

In *Electra*, as discussed above, Aegisthus' corpse is transported from the offstage space to the stage in the third episode of the play, when it comes into view for the first time; then, it is hidden in the Peasant's hut and subsequently revealed again together with Clytemnestra's corpse towards the end of the play. In *El.* 1174, the bodies of the two are probably referred to as τροπαῖα, δειγμάτων ἀθλίων προσφαγμάτων, "trophies, signals of grievous sacrifices" (with δειγμάτων involving the semantic sphere of the verb δείκνυμι, "to show", see LSJ s.v. δείκνυμι). Moreover, at lines 1178-80 we find a stage deictic (τάδ[ε]) that makes it almost certain

³⁵ See the commentary by Finglass 2018, 563.

³⁶ On the various possibilities of integrating these lines see Kannicht 2004, 822.

that the audience could see the two corpses lying on the ground at this point of the action:

ἴδετε τὰδ' ἔργα φόνι-
α μυσσάρά, δίγονα σώματ' ἐν
†χθονὶ κείμενα πλαγᾶ†

[CHORUS look at these bloody, abominable deeds, / these two bodies lying on the ground (struck) by a blow].³⁷

Another lifeless body that appears twice in an Attic tragedy is that of Alcestis in Euripides' play of the same name (438 BC), with the obvious difference that in *Alcestis* the twice-shown corpse is brought back to life, while in *Phaethon* this doesn't happen. In *Alcestis*, the eponymous heroine dies in a manner uncommon in Greek theatre conventions: on stage, directly before the audience's eyes.³⁸ Her body is then brought inside the palace (into the backstage space) to be prepared for the funeral rite (see *Alc.* 420-34). Later, at the beginning of the fourth episode, Alcestis' body is brought back to the orchestra by a group of πρόσπολοι following Admetus, heading towards her burial site (in the offstage space of the action, see *Alc.* 606-10).³⁹ Thus, in *Alcestis*, as in *Phaethon*, the corpse crosses the threshold of the *skēnē*, not to be concealed but to be prepared for the funeral; it later re-emerges from the backstage and becomes visible to the spectators again.

Moreover, in both plays, the temporary removal of the corpse from the stage and its transport to the backstage space is part of a comparable dramaturgical strategy that aims to keep the occurred death hidden from an unsuspecting character. In *Alcestis*, the character in question is Heracles, who enters the stage in the third episode shortly after Alcestis' body has been brought inside the palace – similar to Merops, who appears just after Clymene has hidden Phaethon's body within the palace. Then, Heracles returns to the stage only after the procession with Alcestis' body has already departed. Euripides' reason for using such a strategy of alternating entrances and exits is to ensure that Heracles and the body of the dead Alcestis never

³⁷ On these lines see Cropp 2013 (2nd ed), 178.

³⁸ In the entirely preserved tragedies there are only two cases in which a character dies before the eyes of the spectators: Euripides' *Alcestis* (with the death of Alcestis) and *Hippolytus* (with the death of the eponymous protagonist). On these cases see Di Benedetto and Medda 1997, 293-4. Ajax's suicide in Sophocles' *Ajax* is more problematic from the point of view of staging, because it is likely that the spectators did not see Ajax' suicide directly, even though the character actually threw himself on his own sword in the orchestral space. On the possible performative modalities of Ajax's suicide see Most and Ozbek 2015.

³⁹ On the structure of *Alcestis* see Conacher 1988, 37-43.

cross paths on stage. In this way, Heracles remains unaware of Alcestis' death until his revealing dialogue with the Servant (see *Alc.* 773-860). Something similar happens in *Phaethon*, with Merops continuing to know nothing about Phaethon's death until his disquieting exchange with the Servant, that pushes him to return to the palace.

As in *Phaethon*, also in *Alcestis* the unsuspecting character's awareness of the occurred death is a crucial turning point in the action, leading towards a decisive and happy denouement (*Alcestis*), or a terrible and miserable development (*Phaethon*). In *Alcestis*, this revelation – which does not imply Heracles' sight of Alcestis' corpse, but only the news of her demise – leads to the play's happy resolution, with Heracles successfully undertaking the task of rescuing Alcestis from Thanatos. In *Phaethon*, the autoptic discovery of the corpse by Merops results in his mourning and then probable anger towards Clymene for her lies, significantly advancing the plot (see above section 2) by bringing to the forefront its main issues.

In conclusion, the parallels of *Electra* and *Alcestis* attest that Euripides did use the double exposure of the same corpse twice in the same play at least in two certain cases: as a clear means of revealing a longed-for and now completed act of vengeance (*Electra*), and to emphasise the deep sense of mourning and the emotional engagement of the household in the funeral rites performed for the dead queen (*Alcestis*). Moreover, in the case of *Alcestis*, the repeated appearance of the corpse emphasises the interplay of missed encounters between the lifeless body of Alcestis and the unaware Heracles, with a strategy of staggered alternations and delayed revelations which is partially shared by *Phaethon*.

This strengthens the hypothesis that this solution could also have been employed in *Phaethon*, with a particular and unparalleled scenic effect obtained from this device regarding the expectations and the emotional reactions of the characters (and Chorus) and the audience. In classical tragedy, in fact, the revelation of a corpse by opening the *skéné* doors is typically reserved for characters who die in the backstage space, such as Phaedra in *Hippolytus* or the children of Heracles and Megara in *Heracles*.⁴⁰ Conversely, when a character dies offstage, their body is often brought to the stage via one of the *eisodoi*, as Neoptolemus in *Andromache* or Haemon in the finale of Sophocles' *Antigone* (see Di Benedetto and Medda 1997, 286-9).

In such a scenario, the possible double revelation to the audience of Phaethon's corpse can be described as innovatively following both patterns, one after another: subsequent to his offstage death, the corpse is brought onto the stage as usual through one of the *eisodoi*; but then it is hidden backstage and eventually revealed again through the opening of the *skéné* doors. This

⁴⁰ For a broader sample see Di Benedetto and Medda 1997, 289-93.

unique combination of the two typical ways of showing corpses in Greek theatre heightens significantly the impact of Phaethon's death, intensifying the emotional response of the other characters, the Chorus and the audience by displaying the corpse twice (as if he had died dead twice), and having it mourned twice, first by Clymene (and the main Chorus) and then by Merops.

5. Conclusion

The theatrical study of some of the strategies enacted by Euripides in *Phaethon* to represent Phaethon's death reveals some insights into his dramatic technique. In this very elaborate play, Euripides employs remarkable ways to make the myth of Phaethon, a tale extremely difficult to represent on stage, fully accessible to the audience. Given the impossibility of directly portraying a tragedy whose main event is set in the vast and celestial space where the Sun's chariot hovers, Euripides shifts focus primarily to its aftermath, exploiting the dramatic potential of Phaethon's lifeless body.

By using the corpse as both physical and visual proof of the protagonist's death, Euripides constructs a complex system of cognitive asymmetries, with characters (and Choruses) becoming aware of Phaethon's terrible fate at different times.⁴¹ The corpse itself is scenically moved from one point to another within the tragic space, correlating these movements with respective turning points of the action.

This subtle play of uneven knowledge, which principally affects Merops and Clymene (but also involves the two Choruses, the Pedagogue, the Servant, and the spectators), is permitted by the unusual device of concealing the corpse in the backstage space, a technique not found in the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles. In this way, Euripides keeps alive the dramatic impact of Phaethon's death, allowing the tension to linger and progressively increase as the truth is revealed to Merops, who remains in celebratory ignorance of his son's fate until late in the tragedy. This choice not only prolongs temporally the dramatic tension, delaying the final revelation of Phaethon's death, but also involves spatially the backstage area of the palace, expanding the physical and emotional dimensions of the disaster.

Moreover, in *Phaethon*, Euripides possibly chooses to showcase the protagonist's lifeless body to the audience twice: firstly, as Phaethon's corpse is returned to the stage to his mother Clymene some time after his death; then, as Merops orders to open the doors of the palace, revealing Phaethon's corpse for the second time.

⁴¹ This is also a notable feature of *Phaethon* for Wright: "What is especially striking is the ironical juxtaposition of elements within the plot, together with the varying levels of knowledge and ignorance among the characters and chorus" (2019, 204).

The combination of these two unusual and striking devices allows Phaethon's death to permeate in sequence all the available theatre spaces, spreading in a sinister manner throughout them and erasing, scene by scene, the joyful wedding atmosphere with which the drama begins: first, the offstage space, where Phaethon dies; then, the main stage, where his still smouldering body is brought and mourned by Clymene and by the main Chorus; finally, the backstage area, where the corpse is concealed, discovered by Merops and possibly revealed to the audience for a second time.

Through the masterful staging of the corpse, moved deliberately across the theatrical space, and the asymmetrical unveiling of the truth, Euripides represents the devastating tragedy of Phaethon with an unprecedented depth, driving it through an unrelenting emotional crescendo. The spatial and temporal graduality mirrors the progressive and inexorable ascent of grief that reverberates across every corner of the stage and inundates the characters, the Chorus, and the spectator like a tidal wave. The audience is profoundly entangled in the drama, feeling the characters' excruciating anguish first one by one – Clymene's and the main Chorus', then Merops' –, and finally as a whole, culminating in a torrent of collective sorrow.

Even the sequence in which the characters confront this catastrophic loss reflects the playwright's design to lead both the characters and the audience through each stage of this intensifying emotional escalation. The first sorrow is that of Clymene, a mother shattered by the death of her son and crushed by the guilt for unwittingly leading him towards his ruin. Yet Merops' following grief is even more excruciating: to the agony of learning of Phaethon's death is added the bewildering revelation that he was not truly his son. This double blow – loss entwined with the bitter recognition of having lived in deception – multiplies his torment, elevating his tragedy to unbearable emotional heights and rendering his suffering perhaps the most harrowing of the play.

In conclusion, the study of these devices demonstrates how even a drama that is fragmentary today can enhance our understanding of Euripides' dramaturgical technique, shedding light on some striking staging solutions that would remain underappreciated due to their extreme rarity in the fully preserved theatre. In the case of *Phaethon*, these theatrical choices allow Euripides to skillfully portray a multi-layered catastrophe, fully deserving of Aristotle's praise of him as τραγικώτατος (see Arist. *Po.* 1453a 30; "the most tragic") among the three great fifth-century playwrights, specifically in his mastery of directing tragedies that end disastrously for the protagonists.⁴²

⁴² For a commentary on this Aristotelian definition, see Lucas 1968, 147-8.

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