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The renowned Greek actor Polus (fl. c. 300 B.C.) is said, when acting the title-role of a revival of Sophocles' *Electra*, to have made his performance more moving by using the urn containing his late son's ashes to represent that supposed to hold the remains of Orestes. In this article I consider the use made of the anecdote by theorists of acting and of rhetoric from the Renaissance onwards; I notice a change during the eighteenth century from approval to disapprobation, a loss of interest in the nineteenth century, and a revival—both for praise and for blame—in the twentieth, and attempt to correlate the judgments made of it, positive and negative, respectively with empathetic and imitative theories of acting. I conclude by considering the metatheatrical exploitation of the story made by Thomas Goffe in the early seventeenth century.

In Sophocles' *Electra*, probably written in the ninth decade of the fifth century B.C., whether before or after Euripides' play of the same title is disputed, the slain Agamemnon's son Orestes, returning from exile to Mycenae for revenge, sends his old *paidagogos* or guard-slave to spy out the palace where the murderess, his mother Clytaemestra, lives with her lover Aegisthus, entry being gained by a false tale of Orestes' death in a chariot-race at the Pythian games. The news delights Clytaemestra, whom it relieves of fear, but dismays her unhappy daughter Electra, who had lived for the day when Orestes should return and avenge their father and themselves. Finding her alone, Orestes, still in disguise and accompanied by the faithful but silent Pylades, hands her the urn purported to contain his own ashes; she breaks down, and bemoans his death in a long speech whose opening and closing lines are as follows:

> ὃ φιλτατον μυμμείων άνθρωπον ἐμοί
> ψυχής Ὀρέστου λοιπόν, ὃς <α'> ἀπ' ἐλπίδων

This article, improved by the helpful comments and suggestions of Prof. Wolfgang Haase and of Dr. Ismene Lada-Richards, is based on a lecture given in Oxford to the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama on 2 February 2005; my thanks are due to all who participated in the discussion afterwards, in particular Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh, David Raeburn, and Mary Faith. Some of the material had been used in a paper on "Survival by a Thread: Knowledge Owed to Single Authors", delivered on 26 August 2004 at the Eleventh Congress of the Fédération Internationale des Études Classiques at Ouro Preto, Minas Gerais, Brazil, due to be published in *Classica: Revista da Sociedade Brasileira de Estudos Clássicos*.

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This speech, expressing Electra's total despair, is delivered, as the audience already knows, in the very presence of Orestes, who is moved by it into revealing his identity. Nevertheless, occupying 42 trimeters with a three-line deviation into lyric, it is capable of trumping knowledge, and is said to have been so delivered at least once.

The actor Polus son of Sosigenes from Aegina, publicly honoured by the citizens of Samos in or after 306 B.C., was particularly admired in his representation of Sophoclean roles; he could perform with as fine a voice and as pleasing a manner the wandering beggar Oedipus at Colonus as the domineering Oedipus at Thebes; these virtues, together with that of gesture, are noted by Aulus Gellius, according to whom, having absented himself from the stage to mourn his son, on returning to it in the role of Sophocles' Electra he carried his son's ashes in the urn over which he had to weep, thus exhibiting not feigned but genuine grief:

Histrio in terra Graecia fuit fama celebri, qui generis et uoci clariudine et uenustate ceteris antistabat: nomen fuisse aiunt Polum, tragedias poetarum nobilium scitque asseuerate actitavit. Is Polus unice amatum filium morte anisit. Eum luctum quoque iam satis uisus est elusisse, redit ad quaestum artis. In eo tempore Athenis Electram Sopho-

1. I. Ε. Σταφάνης = I. Ε. Σταφάνης, Διονυσιακοί τεχνίται (Iraklio: Πανελλήνιακός Εκδόσεις Κρήτης, 1988), 382-4, no. 2187; the 'Polus son of Charicles from the deme Sounion' of Lucian, Necysomanteia 16 appears to be a figment, cf. ibid. 384–5, no. 2188.
2. Epictetus/Arrian, Dissertationes, fr. 11 Schenkl, ll. 7–9.