The five letters of Euripides are most certainly a product of the Second Sophistic. They seem to share the same structural outline with other collections of fictitious letters attributed to historical personalities of the fifth century BC, which Holzberg includes under the general heading of “Greek epistolary novel”: generally, the action is confined to a short period of their lives. The writer speaks in the first person and gives the readers some personal insights, but there is no intention on his part to deceive them. This is why scholars today rightly speak of them as pseudonymous letters.

The above outline of the small epistolary corpus considered in this paper points to a literary exercise of the well-known type of ethopoieia. However, this judgement of the letters of Euripides seems too restricted, since it ignores the artful composition of the collection, the clever choice of addressees, to a certain extent the intellectual background, and, in short, the very intention of the unknown author.

The present investigation of the letters of Euripides will begin (§ I) with a brief résumé of the text’s contents, followed by (§ II) a comparison of Euripides’ persona as represented in his “lives” (bioi) and in the letters, and (§ III) a reading of the letters as engaging intertextually with those attributed to Plato. It will then consider the riddling or playful nature of the text in relation to (§ IV) the identity of the characters appearing in them and (§ V) in particular the letter addressed to Sophocles.

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1 To simplify matters, though these are fictitious letters, I shall continue to refer to Euripides as their author.
I. Material Matters and Brief Résumé

Our collection consists of five freestanding letters without any connective narrative. They are all from the same sender: the late Euripides. Three of them are very short (about 20 lines in Gösswein’s edition), the final two are approximately three and four times longer. The letters are arranged in chronological order and cover the short period before Euripides leaves Athens for Macedon to travel to the court of the ruler Archelaos (1–4); the last letter is written after his arrival in Pella (5). The first three letters introduce the main themes, giving us partial insights into the author’s motifs. These insights are further developed in the last two letters which give us all the information we need for the complete understanding. Therefore, it seems suitable, in the case of the fourth, but particularly in that of the fifth letter, to speak of them as explanatory letters. This matches with Holzberg’s observation that such letters are often present in the epistolary collections which he groups under the heading of “ancient epistolary novels”. However, because of the limited nature of our collection, we can better speak of an “epistolary novelette”.

There are five letters, but only three addressees: King Archelaos, the tragedian and rival Sophocles, and Cephisophon. Three are addressed solely to King Archelaos and they form the very framework of the short novel. In the first, Euripides explains the reasons why he is sending back the money offered to him by the king for coming to his court; he then implores the king’s pardon for two young citizens of Pella who were imprisoned. The second letter is addressed to the famous tragedian Sophocles whose ship sank while he was travelling to Chios. Sophocles survived, together with his whole entourage, but unfortunately he lost all his tragedies. The second part of

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8 Hanink 2010: 544.
9 The addressees are not always mentioned explicitly, cf. infra, § IV. Morrison, in this volume (pp. 107–131), discusses similar philosophical-ethical letters, addressed in that case by Plato to the ruler Dionysius II of Syracuse.
10 Jouan and Auger 1983: 183 link this disaster with the Athenian expedition against Samos, when Sophocles had the supreme command in the Samian War in 441/40. But Athenaeus (13, 81, 603 e), citing Ion of Chios, makes no allusion to it: φιλομειαξα δε ην ο Σοφοκλης, ως Ευριπιδης φιλογυνη. Ίων γουν δ ποιης εν τοις ἐπιγραμμεναις Ἑπιθημαι γράφει ὅταν ουτώς (FGrHist 392 T 5b). Σοφοκλης τ’ επιτής ἐν Χιῳ συνήηηθη, δε Πελει εἰς Λέσβων στρατηγός, άνδρι παιδώδει παρ’ οίνων καὶ δεξιοίτω ὁ τελ. (“Sophocles was as much a lover of young boys as Euripides was a lover of women. At least, Ion the poet says the following in his work intitled epidemiai (“encounters”):