PART IV

THE ORAL AND WRITTEN CONTROVERSY: PRIVILEGING ORALITY
Scholarship on letters in tragedy has highlighted the multiple functions they can perform within the dramatic matrix. Many critics have explored the relationship between memory and literacy, the role of letters as instruments of deception, and the ability of letters to implicate the reader in different discourses. Torrance has recently argued that the role of letters in Euripides is far more complex than is usually accepted, that letters are a valuable dramatic prop, and that letters are shown to be useful tools of communication. This chapter will explore a different aspect of Euripidean letters, analysing their temporal status as instruments of political control. The argument is not about historical realities but about a dramatic device. I will suggest that there is a configuration of ideas, a discourse of letter writing, in which characters attempt to “fight the future.” This use of literacy proves ultimately unsuccessful, and thus the motif is linked to a narrative pattern seen in Thucydides’ History whereby confidence in political control is often shown to be illusory.

Oral and Literate Drama

The medium of drama encourages reflection on the ontological status of a written text. This is particularly true of Greek tragedy which involves a complex interplay of authority and time frames. The “now” of the dramatic present is contrasted with the “now” of the audience experience, and the “now” of the author when poet experiences a