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Awry Crowns: Queenship and Its Discontents

Edited by Rosy Colombo

SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

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*Founded by Guido Avezzi, Silvia Bigliuzzi, and Alessandro Serpieri*

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<http://skenejournal.skeneproject.it>

[info@skeneproject.it](mailto:info@skeneproject.it)

Dir. Resp. (aut. Trib. di Verona): Guido Avezzi

P.O. Box 149 c/o Mail Boxes Etc. (MBE150) – Viale Col. Galliano, 51, 37138, Verona (I)

## Contents

### Awry Crowns: Queenship and Its Discontents

Edited by Rosy Colombo

ROSY COLOMBO – <i>Introduction</i>	5
MONICA CENTANNI – <i>The Queen on Stage. Female Figures of Regality in Aeschylus</i>	21
NADIA FUSINI – <i>One, Two, Many Medeas</i>	45
ANTON BIERL – <i>Phaedra: a Tragic Queen in Turmoil Between Violent Love and Its Chaste Suppression. An Interpretation of Euripides' Hippolytus in Initiatory Terms</i>	57
GUIDO AVEZZÙ – <i>The (Frustrated?) Regality of Electra</i>	85
ANTONIO ZIOSI – <i>Wounds and Flames: Dido and Her Sisters</i>	113
MICHAEL NEILL – <i>A "Monstruous Empire": Queenly Power in Anthony and Cleopatra</i>	155
MARISA SESTITO – <i>Unveiling Jocasta. The Brave Queen of Dryden and Lee</i>	179

### Miscellany

MILAN KROULÍK – <i>"What is expected has not been accomplished". A Historical Materialist Approach to Attic Tragedy</i>	197
MICHAEL CARROLL – <i>Prophetic Deception: The Narrative of the Chariot Race in Sophocles' Electra</i>	219

### Special Section

GHERARDO UGOLINI – <i>"Man is a terrifying miracle": Sophocles' Antigone Staged by Massimiliano Civica. An Interview with the Director</i>	243
PAUL A. CANTOR – <i>Patrick Gray, Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic: Selfhood, Stoicism and Civil War, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019, pp. 308</i>	255
ELENA PELLONE – <i>Jaq Bessell, Shakespeare in Action, London and New York: Bloomsbury (The Arden Shakespeare), 2019, pp. 213</i>	265
ROBERT SAWYER – <i>"Fine Young Cannibals": Review of Eating Shakespeare: Cultural Anthropology as Global Methodology, ed. by Anne Sophie Refskou, Marcel Alvaro de Amorim, and Vinicius Mariano de Carvalho, London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019, pp. 301</i>	279
BARRY ALLEN SPENCE – <i>Beckett, Decadence, and the Art of Revisioning. Review of Stanley E. Gontarski, Revisioning Beckett: Samuel Beckett's Decadent Turn, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, pp. 320</i>	287



GUIDO AVEZZÙ\*

## The (Frustrated?) Regality of Electra

Abstract

The story of Electra, the ‘unwedded’ princess – *alektros*: ‘excluded from the marriage-bed (*lektron*)’ – is symptomatic of a sort of inversion of the dynastic schemes: she is not destined to ensure the continuation of her own or of any other dynasty, but to cherish the memory of her father. Yet, according to Pausanias (second century CE), she becomes the custodian of the sceptre that was the sign of Agamemnon’s kingship, an object that implies a complex symbolism, in the first place dynastic but also, in Sophocles’ *Electra*, sexual and generative. However, while the Sophoclean Electra was excluded from dynastic schemes, Aeschylus’ *Choephoroi* and Euripides’ *Electra* variously focused on the preservation of kingship and its transmission to the legitimate heir. In the earlier of these two tragedies Electra suggests, albeit indirectly, a vision of her role that does not fit in with the irrelevance to which she seems confined; but when we come to Euripides’ play we can actually see the failure of the dynastic expectations with which she burdens her brother. This essay will be concerned with Electra not so much as a mythical heroine but rather as a tragic character, and will consider those elements not always in agreement with the most time-honoured conception of this character, or those that are at least considered problematic – elements which in the various ‘Oresteiai’ and particularly in Aeschylus’ and Euripides’ enable us to discern the distinguishing features of the various Electras and their expectations about the restoration of legitimate kingship.

Keywords: Electra; Orestes; kingship; *Oresteia*; Aeschylus’ *Choephoroi*; Sophocles’ *Electra*; Euripides’ *Electra*

### 1. The Princess and the Palace

In the interpretative tradition concerning the ‘Oresteiai’ (for practical reasons I have adopted this term for the three fifth-century BCE tragedies centred on the revenge of Orestes: Aeschylus’ *Choephoroi*, and the two *Electras* by Sophocles and Euripides),<sup>1</sup> and particularly concerning the character of Electra, it is taken for granted that Agamemnon’s daughter is sustained by

<sup>1</sup> Following the evidence in Aristophanes’ *Frogs* 1124, Aeschylus’ tragedy may actually have been called *Oresteia*, a title then given to the whole trilogy. Regarding the possible meanings of this testimony see Kenneth Dover (Aristophanes 1993: 332).

\* University of Verona – [guidoavezzu@skeneproject.it](mailto:guidoavezzu@skeneproject.it)

a twofold purpose, long before she is able to make any move to achieve it: this is her revenge against the usurpers and the salvage of dynastic legitimacy. She is seen as the depository of the memories of her ancestors and their lineage, and, at the same time, it is taken for granted that her participation in the murder of her mother, different accounts of which are given in all three plays, moderates Orestes' guilt, inversely proportional to how far she was involved, and therefore greatest in Aeschylus.<sup>2</sup> Correspondingly, "[t]he interpretation that views Orestes as decisive axiomatically makes Electra weak and unimportant" (Auer 2006: 251); but regarding this, it is remarkable that Sophocles' tragedy, in which Electra is, so to say, expropriated from her role as avenger, is the very one where her part is much bigger than in the others.<sup>3</sup> In the other two 'Oresteiai', those by Aeschylus and Euripides, it is possible to observe that the interaction between the brother and sister takes on specific characteristics almost imperceptibly involving the problem of kingship, at a level which is both personal and also dynastic, not to say genealogical. This suggests that we should refrain from postulating an all-inclusive 'mythic' narration. To a 'horizontal' appraisal that places side by side indiscriminately the 'witnesses' offered by the verbal mimesis implemented in different dramatic texts and in the various situations presented in each one, we should prefer an analysis of the functional interaction between the words of the discourse on power and its legitimation in a 'vertical' dimension, that is to say both within the dramatic sequence of the individual plays and in the successive reprises of the same story. Thus I intend to consider how, thanks to staging and dialogue, the Athenian audience was able to perceive Electra's attitude towards regality, something which had been legitimate in her father's case, and would also be so in her brother's, while now, usurped by two adulterous regicides, has been overturned by a crisis of legitimacy. Such a concept of Electra's mindset is difficult to reconcile with the stereotypical idea of this character, and also highlights, in this respect as well, her frustrated desire for protagonism in the *Choephoroi*, in which her role in the revenge is more marginal. This surmise, albeit a tentative one, is centred particularly on Aeschylus and Euripides, and has its roots in the epic tradition – with which the audience was completely *au fait* – considered in conjunction with the distinctive features of the individual plays which were sinking in, entrenching themselves and, in various different ways, being reshaped in people's theatre-going, during the recurring religious festivals. To refer to a well-known example, the quality of the relationship between Electra and the

<sup>2</sup> As Ormand has opportunely observed (1999: 60-1).

<sup>3</sup> Aeschylus assigns her about 15% of spoken lines and Euripides roughly 33%, but Sophocles gives her more than 40%.

royal palace is immediately evident to the spectator simply from the scenography: in the *Choephoroi* (458 BCE) she declares herself to be “what a slave is” (135: ἀντίδουλος); words that albeit they are symptomatic of the distress caused by feeling she has been “purchased” (πεπραμέν[η]), nonetheless confirm her status in the context of the Palace, in comparison with the condition of her brother, “outcast from his properties” (135-6: ἐκ δὲ χρημάτων / φεύγων).<sup>4</sup> In the Palace her role is made clear in the celebration which opens the tragedy, when she presides over the funeral rites desired by her mother to exorcise her own nightmares, and Orestes’ plan of vengeance will show that she can still move easily about the Palace.<sup>5</sup> Her brother is already able to recognise her as soon as she appears, even if he hesitates very slightly at first: “[s]urely, *I think I see* / Electra, my own sister” (16-17).<sup>6</sup> In the context of the performance it is irrelevant that as she is in mourning attire, “she is not distinct from the group because of any special features”, and so we are not able to deduce, with Madeleine Jones, that “she is differentiated because [Orestes] differentiates her, and by virtue of this recognition he sets her apart” (2012: 137). Instead the factor effectively determining her recognition, by Orestes and the audience, is the leadership she assumes in the ritual itself, when she initiates the celebration with the appropriate emphasis: “Attendant women . . . / What shall I say, as I pour out these outpourings / of sorrow?” (84-7).<sup>7</sup> These are spoken lines (not chanted or sung), and in the same way she will speak her opening words in Euripides’ *Oresteia*, though differently from how she does in Spohocles’, and yet they possess the same characteristics as the openings of hymns, isolating her from the rest of the group. As Janette Auer has noted,

in this important passage of character composition, it is not inexperience and innocence that we are meant to see in Electra. The error of the critics is to equate a question with hesitation, and this is an unjustified simplification. . . . Electra’s address to the chorus contains aspects of ritual prayer and rhetorical leading questions. The “What am I to say?” or “What prayer shall

<sup>4</sup> Electra underlines this motif in her lament in Euripides’ play, 130-5.

<sup>5</sup> 554-5: “Simple to tell them. My sister here must go inside. / I charge her to keep secret what we have agreed” (ἀπλοῦς ὁ μῦθος. τήνδε μὲν στείχειν ἔσω· / αἰνῶ δὲ κρύπτειν τάσδε συνθήκας ἐμάς), and 579-80: “Electra, keep a careful eye on all within / the house, so that our plans will hold together” (νῦν οὖν σὺ μὲν φύλασσε τὰν οἴκῳ καλῶς, / ὅπως ἂν ἀρτίκολλα συμβαίνοιη τάδε). For Aeschylus I follow the text edited by Denys L. Page (Aeschylus 1972), also adopted in Alexander F. Garvie’s edition of the *Choephoroi* (Aeschylus 1986). The translations are those of Richmond Lattimore (Aeschylus 2013), with occasional slight modifications which I indicate.

<sup>6</sup> Καὶ γὰρ Ἥλέκτραν δοκῶ / στείχειν ἀδελφὴν τήν ἐμήν (emphases, here and in the translation, are mine).

<sup>7</sup> Διμοαὶ γυναῖκες . . . / τί φῶ χέουσα τάσδε κηδεῖους χοάς;

I make?" formula in literary prayers . . . often used as a self-addressed question is here used dramatically as a series of questions posed to the chorus rather than to herself, and has its origin in the Greek concern with making the right prayer in the correct language. (2006: 254)

In Sophocles, however, she leads the life of an indigent (dressed meanly, eating with the slaves). She leaves the palace at 78 avoiding Aegisthus' surveillance,<sup>8</sup> and does not return except for the brief interval of the third choral *stasimon* (1383-97), but for almost the whole play stays on the threshold,<sup>9</sup> from where she interacts at a distance with her brother during the matricide. Sophocles' 'Oresteia' does not end with the conventional *exeunt omnes*, and even the finale contributes, perhaps crucially, to the delineation of her character.<sup>10</sup> Hofmannsthal fully understood this and developed it in his *Elektra* "freely adapted from Sophocles", as is attested in his *Aufzeichnung* dated 17 July, 1904:

This Electra suddenly transformed into a different character. Suddenly I conceived the ending too; she cannot live longer, after the blow has been struck, her life and bowels must overflow, just as life and bowels overflow from the drone, together with his fertilising spine, as soon as he has fertilised the queen bee.<sup>11</sup>

The mysterious finale is one of the several signs that Sophocles' *Electra* is really a 'tragedy of Electra' – perhaps the only one? – and not an 'Oresteia'.

However, as is well-known, it is Euripides who offers the extreme solution. His *Electra* lives on the heights of the Argolis, in a hut before which the whole of the action unfolds. As Enrico Medda observes, this "mental scenography" means that *Electra* "perceives her condition as being one of actual 'exile from her father's house' fully comparable to that suffered by her brother" (2013: 97-101). The three situations configure distinct proxemic degrees of relationship regarding the distance of the character from the Palace and its inhabitants, from the Chorus and from Orestes, who returns

<sup>8</sup> As her mother admonishes her: 516-18.

<sup>9</sup> On her relationship with the Palace and its interior, which has frequently been discussed, see Medda 2013: 85-8, with bibliography.

<sup>10</sup> In the finale "Electra's movements cannot be recovered with certainty" (so writes Patrick Finglass, Sophocles 2007: 549; see Francis Dunn's commentary in Sophocles 2019: 363 and, above all, the discussion in Medda 2013: 96, with bibliography).

<sup>11</sup> "Sogleich verwandelte sich die Gestalt dieser Electra in eine andere. Auch das Ende stand sogleich da: daß sie nicht mehr weiterleben kann, daß, wenn der Streich gefallen ist, ihr Leben und ihr Eingeweide ihr entstürzen muß, wie der Drohne, wen sie die Königin befruchtet hat, mit dem befruchtenden Stachel zugleich Eingeweide und Leben entstürzen" (Hofmannsthal 1980: 452; my translation). See Jan Marten Bremer's excellent paper (1991), unfortunately ignored by most.

to the Palace in Aeschylus and in Sophocles, but in Euripides prudently chooses to keep his distance.<sup>12</sup> Another gradual semantic movement regarding the distribution of stage, back-stage and off-stage spaces concerns Agamemnon's tomb. In the *Choephoroi* it is front-stage and close to the Palace, in Sophocles<sup>13</sup> it is off-stage but nearby, in Euripides it is far from the stage and probably from the Palace, too; and in any case Electra only visits it in the *Choephoroi*. Every genetic hypothesis must always be carefully considered;<sup>14</sup> it is, however, legitimate to postulate that these variations conferred differing tonalities on the role played by the character in each of the plays.

## 2. The Unwedded Princess

An ancient and fanciful etymology avers that the name Electra (Ἠλέκτρα ~ ἄλεκτρος, that is, excluded from the marriage-bed, λέκτρον) conveys the situation of this 'unwedded' royal daughter.<sup>15</sup> In the poetic tradition (Pindar and the three major tragedians) her destiny will actually be that of marrying her cousin, Pylades, Orestes' comrade and brother-in-arms. However, the mythographers, usually so generous with their information, make no mention of any children they may have had. Electra, who in Aeschylus aspires to be "more temperate / of heart (*sophonestera*) than [her] mother" (*Cho.* 140-1), and for this very reason openly blames her mother for her behaviour, and especially for her sexual proclivities, in Sophocles is pitied by her brother, who has not yet recognized her, since she is "without husband (*anympfos*) and ill-fated" (*El.* 1183). Here she is aware of the destiny of old maids who are excluded from their family heritage, which will be her

<sup>12</sup> After paying homage at his father's tomb, "evading the tyrants who now rule this land" Orestes proposes not to set foot "inside the city walls, but [has] come with two joint aims to this land's borders": to meet [his] sister but above all "to escape to another region should anyone look at [him] and recognize [him]" (93-7: λαθῶν τυράννους οἱ κρατοῦσι τῆσδε γῆς. / καὶ τειχέων μὲν ἐντὸς οὐ βαίνω πόδα, / δυοῖν δ' ἄμιλλαν ξυντιθεὶς ἀφικόμην / πρὸς τέρμονας γῆς τῆσδ', ἴν' ἐκβάλω πόδα / ἄλλην ἐπ' αἴαν εἶ μέ τις γνοίη σκοπῶν . . .). For the text and the translation of Euripides' *Electra* I follow Martin Cropp (Euripides 2013).

<sup>13</sup> See Medda 2013: 83-5.

<sup>14</sup> For example, as is the case of Aeschylus dependence on Stesichorus regarding Agamemnon's tomb (March 1987: 91, taken up again by Swift 2015). The number of these relationships is remarked upon shrewdly by Eduard Fraenkel à propos of Electra's very first entrance in Sophocles: "It is as if Sophocles were saying, 'I haven't forgotten the *Coephoroe*, but I'm doing things differently'" (1962: 221).

<sup>15</sup> More probably the name has its origins in the word 'amber' (ἤλεκτρον) and 'beaming sun, fire' (ἠλέκτωρ; see Condello 2010: 16n21), but this etymon has had no effect on the three major tragedians.

own fate and that of her sister, Chrysothemis, if their father's death is not avenged (959-62):

ΕΛΗΚΤΡΑ ἦ πάρεστι μὲν στένειν  
 πλούτου πατρῷου κτῆσιν ἔστερημένη,  
 πάρεστι δ' ἀλγεῖν ἐς τοσόνδε τοῦ χρόνου  
 ἄλεκτρα γηράσκουσαν ἀνυμέναιά τε.

[El. Now you must sorrow that you have been deprived / of our father's wealth; and you must grieve also / that you are growing older, to this point, / without a marriage (lit.: suffering a life without a husband, *alektra*, and without marriage, *anhymenaia*).]<sup>16</sup>

This awareness was already apparent in the *Choephoroi* (486-8; see below, p. 95). Instead, in Euripides' play, Electra has been wedded to a peasant, a *mésalliance* which has been forced on her to stop her from giving birth to claimants of "Tantalus' ancient sceptre" now possessed by Aegisthus (11-13). The social disparity between the Peasant and his wife means he feels a reverential shame towards the princess and their union is unfruitful, which however is not a cause for regret on Electra's part, for evident reasons of status (43-9). If we relinquish the idea of frequenting the less conventional realms of psychology, we are prevented from following Hendrike Freud who is of the opinion that "[Electra] disparages her husband (according to Euripides)" and that she "cuts her hair as if, in her fantasy, she is a man" (2010: 65). We must be aware that Electra's many and various appearances on the stage, before different audiences and in different situations, generates a wide range of impressions; however, in front of the Athenian public, Euripidean Electra finds her husband to be "equal to the gods for [his] friendship" (67: ἴσο[ς] θεοῖσιν φίλο[ς]), the "healer of [her] evil plight" (69-70: συμφορᾶς κακῆς ἰατρό[ς]).<sup>17</sup> In the following lines, Electra never refers to herself as a wife nor to the Peasant as her husband – before taking his leave, it is he who reminds her with veiled reproof what wonders a careful "wife" (422: γυνή) can perform, and this will be the only time this role is mentioned with reference to Electra. But, while testifying to the partnership between the couple which has contributed to gaining for this *Electra* the reductive definition of bourgeois drama, it draws attention to a personal, freely chosen reinterpretation of *philia*, in spite of Aegisthus' hav-

<sup>16</sup> For Sophocles' text and translation I follow H. Lloyd Jones, Sophocles 1994.

<sup>17</sup> Roisman and Luschnig rightly comment that "Electra's enthusiasms are always too strong" (Euripides 2011: 101). Here we find a variation on the theme of the human who saves, in the same way as Zeus *soter*; in comparison to the *loci paralleli* which are commonly appended (Hom. *Od.* 8.467-8, Eur. *HF* 521-2, *IA* 973-4), Sophocles' *OT* 31 (the Priest to Oedipus) is much more pertinent: "it is not because [I] rank you with the gods" etc. (θεοῖσι μὲν νυν οὐκ ἰσοῦμένον σ' ἐγὼ κτλ.; trans. Lloyd Jones, Sophocles 1994).

ing enforced the match (71-6). She is definitely *not* a man, she shows this on at least two occasions: she is jealous of the children Clytaemnestra has had with Aegisthus (62), and sets a trap for her mother by pretending to have given birth, thus showing she is competing with her. Besides, at the height of her diatribe over Aegisthus' corpse, after listing his crimes towards Agamemnon and his children, she recalls the dead man's amatory feats, making him seem guilty towards Clytaemnestra too, and at the same time exhibiting her aversion to them.<sup>18</sup> The idea of an Electra who is ambiguously challenging her mother for Aegisthus' attention, like that of a Clytaemnestra leading a life punctuated by petty infidelities both committed and endured, so that she no longer even recalls what binds her to Aegisthus, are modern developments, from Suarès to O'Neill and Jean-Pierre Giraudoux, from Yourcenar to Varoujean;<sup>19</sup> but it cannot be denied that Euripides' Electra transposes on to her mother's new husband the accusations that Clytaemnestra herself had uttered against Agamemnon, immediately after she had killed him, that is, to have been "the soother of all the Chryseids under the walls of Ilium" (Ag. 1439: Χρυσηίδων μείλιγμα τῶν ὑπ' Ἴλιῳ [my translation]). Electra's "similarity to Clytaemnestra", suggested by Jean-Pierre Vernant in support of his theory that "she is the mother – in truth the only mother – of Orestes" (2006: 168), pertains to the Sophoclean Electra, rather than the Euripidean.<sup>20</sup> In Euripides' tragedy the conflict between the two characters may be seen, more problematically, as part of Electra's profound unease at sustaining the part of a married woman: as she is still a virgin she feels out of place among the women of the Chorus who first try to involve her in the celebrations for Hera, and then in their rejoicing for the murder of Aegisthus (respectively at 167-21, and 859-799). She criticizes her mother for her devotion to her husband Aegisthus instead of to her children,<sup>21</sup> but this reproof is not so much an expression of jealousy as the

<sup>18</sup> "[A] subject unseemly for a maiden to mention" (945-6: παρθένῳ γὰρ οὐ καλὸν λέγειν). "Is she bitter about her status", wonder Roisman and Luschignig, "or is she being prissy in her moral superiority to her fallen enemy?" (Euripides 2011: 204).

<sup>19</sup> I am referring to André Suarès, *La tragédie d'Électre et d'Oreste* (1905), Eugene O'Neill, *Mourning becomes Electra* (1931), Jean-Pierre Giraudoux, *Électre* (1965; the revision of *Électre* by his father Jean, 1935), Marguerite Yourcenar, *Électre ou La chute des masques* (1954), Jean-Jacques Varoujean, *La ville en haut de la colline* (1969); but the list could easily be added to. On these plays see, individually and in order, Condello 2010: 121-2, 117-21, 142-3, 129-31, 143-4.

<sup>20</sup> Concerning the maternal role Electra plays regarding her brother cf. Soph. *El.* 1145-8; for the affinities between the characters of mother and daughter Vernant refers appropriately to Soph. *El.* 351, 397, 401, 983, 997, 1019-20 (2006: 445nn49-50).

<sup>21</sup> 265: "Women are friends to their *men* . . . not their children" (γυναῖκες ἀνδρῶν . . . οὐ παίδων φίλαι). I prefer to translate this *andres* as "men", rather than "husbands" with Cropp; at 1036 and 1052, in contexts connotated as matrimonial, Euripides has re-

perception of something she is not yet able to understand. Her mother will have no success when she tries to gain her daughter's sympathy for the point of view of a married woman, as she does, for example, at 1013-14 and 1032-40:

Κλ. λέξω δέ· καίτοι δόξ' ὅταν λάβῃ κακὴ  
 γυναῖκα, γλώσση πικρότης ἔνεστί τις·  
 (1013-14)

[Cl. Mind you, when bad repute takes hold of a woman, people tend to find her speaking offensive. But that in my opinion is not as it should be.]

ἐπὶ τοῖσδε τοίνυν καίπερ ἠδίκημένη  
 οὐκ ἠγριώμην οὐδ' ἄν ἔκτανον πόσιν.  
 ἀλλ' ἦλθ' ἔχων μοι μαινάδ' ἔνθεον κόρη  
 λέκτροις τ' ἐπεισέφρηκε, καὶ νύμφα δύο  
 ἐν τοῖσιν αὐτοῖς δώμασιν κατεῖχ' ὁμοῦ.  
 μῶρον μὲν οὖν γυναῖκες, οὐκ ἄλλως λέγω· 1035  
 ὅταν δ', ὑπόντος τοῦδ', ἀμαρτάνη πόσις  
 τᾶνδον παρώσας λέκτρα, μιμῆσθαι θέλει  
 γυνὴ τὸν ἄνδρα χᾶτερον κτᾶσθαι φίλον.  
 κᾶπειτ' ἐν ἡμῖν ὁ ψόγος λαμπρύνεται,  
 οἱ δ' αἴτιοι τῶνδ' οὐ κλύουσ' ἄνδρες κακῶς. 1040  
 (1032-40)

[Cl. Although I have been wronged (*scil.*: by Iphigenia's killing) I did not turn savage nor would I have killed my husband. But he came back with a raving god-possessed girl, imported her to our bed, and tried to keep two brides together in the same house! Now women are a foolish lot, I don't deny it; but when, that being the case, a husband errs and rejects his wedded wife, the woman is apt to follow his pattern and take another partner. And then the censure of it makes us notorious, while the men responsible for it don't get a bad name.]

It is not fortuitous that the Chorus leader steals the march, as it were, from Electra: even before Electra has begun her accusatory harangue, it will be she who liquidates Clytaemnestra with a peremptory condemnation motivated by the common experience of the Women of the Chorus (1051-4):

Χο. δίκαι' ἔλεξας, ἡ δίκη δ' αἰσχρῶς ἔχει.  
 γυναῖκα γὰρ χρὴ πάντα συγχωρεῖν πόσει,  
 ἥτις φρενήρης· ἧ δὲ μὴ δοκεῖ τάδε,  
 οὐδ' εἰς ἀριθμὸν τῶν ἐμῶν ἦκει λόγων.

[Cho. There's justice in what you've said, but the justice is shameful. A

course to the term *posis*, which more commonly identifies a legitimate husband.

woman should go along with her husband (*posis*) in everything, if she's sensible; one who does not think so does not even count in my reckonings.]

But it is more important that Electra's condition of *alektros* – inasmuch as in the *Choephoroi* it is implicit in her very name, in Sophocles' *Electra* for her consciousness of her own destiny,<sup>22</sup> and in Euripides' because she was forced into a sterile matrimony – engages her dynastic awareness to a different extent in each play, and influences her aspirations in this sphere accordingly. Euripides' Electra's desire to restore the ancient dynasty is much stronger than her brother's; this is the more conspicuous as she expresses a total repudiation of the court, execrates its lifestyle, and manipulates its practices and dynamics while plotting how to achieve her revenge.<sup>23</sup> This Electra has involved the Chorus in her heroic vision: she acknowledges her "courageous" brother, who would never have deigned to arrive in Argos in secret,<sup>24</sup> using the same adjective (526: εὐθαρής, literally 'with good confidence')<sup>25</sup> with which Agamemnon defines himself in Aeschylus' *Ag.* 930: an epithet predicting the successful conclusion to an undertaking that, as far as Electra knows, has not yet begun and perhaps never will. Blinded by heroic prejudice, she stumbles into a sort of irony, relative to the dramatic intrigue. And into another irony she is followed by the Chorus. Electra's capacity to engage marginal subjects, such as the Peasant and the countrywomen of the Chorus, in heroic memories, is remarkable. From the women surrounding her she obtains animated replies, perfectly in line with her point of view, both in the *parodos* (432-86), a dazzling narrative song where Agamemnon's expedition is re-evoked,<sup>26</sup> and in the brief choric song of joy, after Orestes' recognition (585-95), in which intertextual links are recognizable both with the exordium of the *Agamemnon* and with the announcement by the Herald of Agamemnon's victorious arrival (*Ag.* 522-3). Thus, Euripides' Chorus:

ΧΟ. ἔμολες ἔμολες, ὦ, χρόνιος ἀμέρα,  
κατέλαμψας, ἔδειξας ἐμφανῆ  
πόλει πυρσόν . . .  
(583-7)

<sup>22</sup> See Ormand's chapter "Electra, never a bride" (1999: 60-78).

<sup>23</sup> A concise comparison of the revenge plots in the three 'Oresteiai', with bibliography, may be found in Avezzù 2016: 65-9, 84.

<sup>24</sup> It is the same (false) premise as that assumed by the Electra of the *Coephoroi*, not less mistaken here as there, because in order to avenge himself Orestes is in any case obliged to act in secret; indeed Sophocles makes him articulate this necessity: "I think, no word that brings you gain is bad" (*El.* 61: δοκῶ μὲν, οὐδὲν ῥῆμα σὺν κέρδει κακόν).

<sup>25</sup> Thus Fraenkel in Aeschylus 1950, vol. 1: 147.

<sup>26</sup> See Csapo 2009.

[CHO. You have come, O, you have come, long awaited *day*, / *you have shown bright and clear* / to our city *a beacon light* . . .]

and here are the Watchman and the Herald of *Agamemnon* (8-9, 22-3; and 522-3, respectively):

ΦΥΛΑΞ καὶ νῦν φυλάσσω λαμπάδος τὸ σύμβολον,  
 αὐγὴν πυρός . . .  
 . . .  
 ὦ χαῖρε λαμπτήρ νυκτός, ἡμερήσιον  
 φάος πιφάσκων . . .  
 (8-9, 22-3)

[WA. I wait; to read the meaning in that *beacon light*, / *a blaze of fire* (to carry out of Troy the rumor / and outcry of its capture) . . . / Oh hail, *blaze of the darkness*, *harbinger of day's* / *shining* . . .]

ΚΗΡΥΞ ἤκει γὰρ ὑμῖν φῶς ἐν εὐφρόνῃ φέρων  
 καὶ τοῖσδ' ἅπασιν κοινὸν Ἀγαμέμνων ἄναξ.  
 (522-3)

[HE. He comes, Lord *Agamemnon*, bearing *light in gloom* / to you, and to all that are assembled here.]<sup>27</sup>

It is a dual irony: the two Aeschylean loci, both bearing a high degree of symbolic meaning, referred to the victory over a foreign enemy, but in the intertextual reprise, in which they assume a lyrical tenor lacking in the original, they allude to the eventual success in a dynastic struggle; and the original message – ambiguous because the light heralding *Agamemnon's* arrival was part of *Clytaemnestra's* plot to kill him – is taken at its face value and inspires an exultation which is absent in the other two 'Oresteiai'. This last ironic overturning assigns to *Electra* something that in *Agamemnon*, ever-present in Euripides' memory, was related to the role of her mother. Besides, it has the result that the heroic idea, with which she has infected her rural interlocutors, is redirected towards the palace that is no longer of any relevance to her, just as she is no longer of any relevance to it.<sup>28</sup>

"No longer a virgin", only according to the rumours which have reached *Orestes* following her counterfeit wedding invented by the playwright (98-9), *Electra* repeatedly defines herself *parthenos* ('young girl, virgin') and

<sup>27</sup> Emphases in the Greek text and the translation are mine.

<sup>28</sup> From this point of view, Euripides' *Electra* is, of the three 'Oresteiai', the only one that right from the exordium (the first lines of the Peasant: 1-7) maximizes heroic memories which, absent in *Choephoroi*, in Sophocles are reduced to the minimum, appearing only when a proemial homage is paid to *Orestes* for his high-sounding heritage (1-2).

is said to be so by others as well.<sup>29</sup> Here and in the *Choephoroi*, her marital status is intertwined with her heritage; if the Euripidean Peasant can say he has married “the daughter of wealthy men”, and for this very reason is ashamed to abuse (*hybrizein*) her (45-6), the Aeschylean heroine, on the other hand, had complained of being excluded from her own dowry: immediately after the funeral lament she avows her intention to dedicate the first fruits of it on her father’s tomb (486-8):

ΕΛ. κἀγὼ χοάς σοι τῆς ἐμῆς παγκληρίας  
οἴσω πατρῶων ἐκ δόμων γαμηλίους,  
πάντων δὲ πρῶτον τόνδε πρεσβεύσω τάφον.

[EL. I too out of my own full dowry then shall bring / libations for my bridal from my father’s house. / Of all tombs, yours shall be the lordliest in my eyes.]

In Sophocles too – as has already been pointed out – the virginal state and the exclusion from the family inheritance (*ploutos*) are one and the same thing. But the Euripidean Electra shows no regret for her inheritance; from this point of view, her choice is the most drastic one – and we have already seen this. However, as she is *alektros* her life is not projected towards a dynastic future – either her own or that of her descendents, at Mykenae or elsewhere – but rather backwards to the past; that is, specifically, towards her father Agamemnon, the dead king, whose murder has violently interrupted the legitimate line of transmission of sovereignty. This, the poets and mythographers tell us, and the Athenian audience were well aware of it, will not go to Orestes, but to his son Tisamenus.<sup>30</sup> Clytaemnestra is that queen who in the *Agamemnon* the Chorus apostrophize as “βασίλεια” (84), wielding authority herself in person (κρατεῖ), and thus appropriating a male prerogative, as she is gifted with a “male strength of heart” (γυναικὸς ἀνδρόβουλον . . . κέαρ);<sup>31</sup> Electra, her daughter, seems, on the contrary, to be destined to play a very secondary part, becoming the wife of her cousin Pylades, king of Krisa in Phocis, at the foot of Delphi. And yet as a tradition related by Pausanias (second century CE) would have it, Electra, following her husband, took the sceptre (or the spear) of Agamemnon with

<sup>29</sup> Eur. *El.* 44, 51, 311, 945.

<sup>30</sup> In the mythographic sources the mother of Tisamenos is either Hermione, the daughter of Menelaus and Helen, and thus a cousin to Orestes, or Erigone, daughter of Aegisthus and Clytaemnestra, so in this way his half-sister. On this tangle of family relationships at the end of the line of Tantalus see Pseudo-Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 2.8.2-3, *Bibl. Epitome* of Book 4.6.28; Pausanias, *Graeciae Descriptio* 2.18.6-8, 3.1.5-6, 7.1.7; Hyginus *Fabulae* 124; for Erigone see Ps.-Apollod. 6.25; Paus. 2.18.6; Hyg. 122.

<sup>31</sup> Ag. 10-11.

her into the territory of Phocis.<sup>32</sup> The sceptre, that would have been discovered at Panopeus, on the border between Phocis and Boeotia, was identified with the one forged by Hephaistos for Zeus and given by the god to Pelops, then passed to Atreus, Thyestes, and finally to Agamemnon (up to this point *Ilias* 2.101-8), but stolen from the rightful king and his heirs by Aegisthus, who did not just take the sceptre<sup>33</sup> but everything else pertaining to the sovereignty of the murdered king: his throne,<sup>34</sup> his robes,<sup>35</sup> his chariot,<sup>36</sup> and his woman. This sceptre is at the heart of Clytaemnestra's nightmare in Sophocles' *Electra* (419-23): back from the underworld to unite once more with his wife, Agamemnon "plant[s]" (the verb is πῆγνυμι, also used when planting a sword or a spear in a living body) his "staff . . . beside the hearth (*ephestion*)", and it bursts into vigorous bloom, "and from it grew up a fruitful bough, which overshadowed all the land of the Mycenaeans".<sup>37</sup> As Jean-Pierre Vernant points out, "the sexual symbolism (Agamemnon planting the seed of the young shoot in Hestia's bosom, where it will sprout) is inseparable in this instance from the social symbolism".<sup>38</sup>

### 3. *Electra* and her Sisters.

"I have three daughters in my well-built palace: Chrysothemis, Laodike, and Iphianassa" – so says Agamemnon in the *Ilias*, when he proposes the wedding contract with which he wishes to resolve the conflict with Achilles.<sup>39</sup> *Electra*, destined to become the most celebrated of the daughters of the *lord of men* and *king of kings*, is unknown to Homer and to the *Cyprian Tales*.<sup>40</sup> She appears for the first time in the pseudo-Hesiodic *Catalogue*

<sup>32</sup> Paus. 9.40.11-12. That the spear is a symbol of power as much as the *skeptron*, besides being attested by Iustinus 43.3.3, can be inferred from the earliest depictions of the murder of Agamemnon (Prag 1985: tavv. 1 e 2a; Davies 1969: 228, 230; Finglass in Sophocles 2007: 217). Pausanias writes "the Chaeroneans say that it was found on the borders of their territory and of Panopeus in Phocis, . . . I am persuaded it was brought to Phocis by Electra, daughter of Agamemnon." ([Χαιρωνεῖς] φασι δ' ἐπὶ τοῖς ὄροις αὐτῶν καὶ Πανοπέων τῶν ἐν τῇ Φωκίδι εὔρεθῆναι . . . κομισθῆναι δὲ αὐτὸ ἐς τὴν Φωκίδα ὑπὸ Ἠλέκτρας τῆς Ἀγαμέμνονος πείθομαι: trans. Frazer, Pausanias 1898: 496-7)

<sup>33</sup> Soph. *El.* 421; Eur. *El.* 11-12, 321-2.

<sup>34</sup> *Cho.* 572; Soph. *El.* 267-9.

<sup>35</sup> Soph., *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Eur. *El.* 320.

<sup>37</sup> 421-3: ἐκ δὲ τοῦδ' ἄνω / βλαστεῖν βρῦοντα θαλλόν, ᾧ κατάσκιον / πᾶσαν γενέσθαι τὴν Μυκηναίων χθόνα.

<sup>38</sup> For an analysis of this "tendency toward introversion" of the *oikos* see 2006: 165-70, here quoted from 166.

<sup>39</sup> 9.144-5, repeated by one of his intermediaries, Phoenix, to Achilles at 286-7.

<sup>40</sup> In the *Cyprian Tales* there are four daughters: the three named in the *Ilias* and

of Women, where Agamemnon has only two daughters: Electra “who contend[s] in beauty with the immortal goddesses”, and Iphimede, another name for the young girl who will be sacrificed to propitiate the expedition against Troy,<sup>41</sup> the same one who is instead called Iphigenia in Stesichorus’ *Oresteia* (first half of the sixth c. BCE) and Iphigone in Euripides’ *Electra*. At the beginning Electra (Ἠλέκτρα) seems to be only an epithet intended to specify the destiny of a heroine with an indistinct identity. For Xanthus, poet of the seventh century BCE, it is the name assumed by Laodike who is still “unmarried” after her father’s assassination.<sup>42</sup> In the stories about the family outlined by Electra at the beginning of Euripides’ *Orestes* (408 BCE) there are three sisters: Chrysothemis, Iphigenia and Electra herself (21-3). The different versions of family names may therefore be reduced to four identities: (a) Chrysothemis, (b) Iphigenia ~ Iphimede ~ Iphigone, (c) Laodike ~ Electra, and (d) Iphianassa; this last has however a quite different fate from the other ‘Iphi-’ sisters, and also in Sophocles’ *Electra*, as before in *Ilias* 9, is alive and resides at the Palace.<sup>43</sup> As for the name of the daughter who was sacrificed, Euripides will show no hesitation in his two *Iphigenias* (*among the Taurians* and *in Aulis*), both written in the last decade of his dramaturgical career.

Electra is primarily a character belonging to tragedy: “hers is one of the longest, most continuous stage presences in all of Athenian drama” and still survives today.<sup>44</sup> This does not necessarily imply that she was not also present in the vast amount of epic poetry that has not reached us; as Richard Hunter observes, “[t]he *Catalogue* opens up a whole network of heroic poetry which sometimes can seem like a giant system of cross-referencing to archaic epic” (2005: 252). However we cannot rule out the fact that both the author of the *Catalogue*, and Xanthus may have endowed Electra with a persona corresponding to their specific purposes. This will not be different for whoever (re)proposed the tragic Electra. In order to better assess the impression made by her repeated and variegated appearances on the theatrical stage perhaps it would be useful to begin from the *Catalogue*,

Iphigenia (*PEG* frag. 24, p. 58).

<sup>41</sup> *Catalogue*, frg. 19.15ff., trans. Glenn Most (Hesiod 2007: 68-9).

<sup>42</sup> *PMG* 700.

<sup>43</sup> 157-8; see the commentaries by Finglass (Sophocles 2007: 151), and Dunn (Sophocles 2019: 178).

<sup>44</sup> Ormand 1999: 60; she is present in the three ‘Oresteiai’, in Euripides’ *Orestes* and probably also in various other *Orestes* (or *Electra*) of the fifth and fourth century. As for the modern Electra plays see Condello 2010, who offers an exhaustive documentation (Bakogianni 2011 has many important omissions). Batya Casper has proposed “a gender sensitive study” of many Electra plays, from the *Choephoroi* to the 1984 Ophelia-Electra of Heiner Müller *Hamlet-Machine* (2019).

which places the sister who was cruelly sacrificed (Iphimede ~ Iphigenia) side by side with the one (Electra) who we know is destined to become a living sacrifice since she is dedicated to the memory of her father, who, in his turn, had sacrificed her sister. This is probably not a case of premeditated polarization, since “[in the] account of the sacrifice of Iphimede . . . responsible are the Achaians, with no role ascribed to Agamemnon and no mention of Agamemnon’s death or Clytaemnestra’s liaison with Aegisthus, although it does tell of Orestes’ killing of his father’s murderer and of his mother”.<sup>45</sup> Besides, it should be remembered that the *Catalogue* says nothing about Electra’s fate to stay unmarried, and that Iphimede is “very easily saved” by Artemis, who substitutes a “phantom” (εἶδωλον) for her.<sup>46</sup> Following the *Catalogue* the substitution of the *eidolon* for Iphigenia (but this is the name which became established in the post-tragic age) must have featured in the *Oresteia* by Stesichorus.<sup>47</sup> For tragic theatre, on the other hand, apart from Euripides’ *Iphigenia among the Taurians* (414) and *in Aulis* (posthumous), where the girl is replaced by a deer – but the passage in the second *Iphigenia* is most likely non-Euripidean – the murder of Iphigenia is a cruel and irreversible event, which Clytaemnestra accuses her husband of. In this houseful of little women the tragic Electra converses with Chrysothemis and is aware of the presence of Iphianassa (Sophocles) but minimizes, or actually keeps silent over Agamemnon’s guilt regarding Iphigenia ~ Iphimede ~ Iphigone (Euripides): she even seems to forget the sacrifice of her sister, which is, on the contrary, so evident a recurring argument in Clytaemnestra’s self-defence, from the *Agamemnon* to Euripides’ *Electra*. It would almost appear a deliberate omission on the part of the playwrights, with the intention of characterizing Electra’s position in the bosom of her family, and consequently, of recalibrating its dramatic weight. Among Agamemnon’s daughters both *Coephoris* and Euripides’ *Electra* only consider her and Iphigenia, as is the case in *Iphigenia among the Taurians*.<sup>48</sup> In Euripides the sacrifice of Iphigenia (but, as we have pointed out above, Iphigone is the version of the name adopted here) is re-evoked by Clytaemnestra in her well-articulated self-defence (1018-45, cf. 1002), in the presence of an Electra who, during the whole play, never once mentions her sister. To conclude this inventory of omissions, it should be recalled that when in the *Coephoris* – where Electra goes inside the Palace at 484 and does not come back on stage – the Chorus at the conclusion list the three “storms” (χεμῶνες) that assailed the Atreidai, mention is made of the mur-

<sup>45</sup> Osborne 2005: 20.

<sup>46</sup> Fragments 19.21-4 and 20a (Hesiod 2007: 60-71).

<sup>47</sup> Frg. 215 *PMGF* = *Catalogue* frg. 19.17-22, 20b (Hesiod 2007: 68-71).

<sup>48</sup> See at 561-2, 811, and 913 (all in dialogues between Iphigenia and Orestes).

der of the children of Thyestes, that of Agamemnon, and, at the end, that of the usurpers, but the sacrifice of Iphigenia, decisive for the Aeschylean trilogy, is omitted (1065-74). In the wide range of acts of intraspecific violence, this entails a marked differentiation between those acts whose intent is directed towards the conquest of sovereignty, and any other form of these.

#### 4. I Am Pleased with You, My Faithful and Pious Brother

And yet it is in fact in the *Choephoroi*, 35-40 years before Euripides' *Electra*, that Electra recalls the sacrifice of her "pitilessly slaughtered sister"; even so, her speech fails to mention the murdered girl's name and also gives rise to other problems. These occur in lines 235-45, immediately following the moment the brother and sister recognize one another. Here, more obviously than anywhere else in the play, "Electra's function" is articulated in an unmistakable way; this, in the words of Anton Podlecki, entails "provid[ing] a link between the dead Agamemnon and the living Orestes, to create the contact and energizing charge which can begin to impel Orestes to take the decisive step" (1981: 39). This episode, also present in Euripides, is completely remodeled by Sophocles and confirms the absolute singularity of his *Electra*. But the Electra of the *Choephoroi* does something more complex than simply reminding her brother, explicitly or implicitly, of his duties towards the house to which they both belong: the link between their father and his heir has already been established in the first lines of the tragedy. In the prologue which, as we know, lacks its beginning,<sup>49</sup> Orestes attributes his late father with "powers" (πατρῶα . . . κράτη: 1): these, as Garvie evinces, "do not refer directly here to Agamemnon's former realm", because he, "though dead, is still a mighty power, and it is the attempt to enlist that power on the side of Orestes that forms the centrepiece of the play" (Aeschylus 1986: 49-50). The subtle ambiguity is underlined by Simon Goldhill: "[krate] . . . implies both the sense of political power . . . and the wider 'authority', 'influence', 'power'; and, in a more general sense, 'capability' – which is connected with the desire for control of events as well as control of the house." (1984: 103). Orestes' "desire for control" is based both on his father's authority and on a sovereignty that his father exercised while alive and which he now brings to bear in the afterlife (*Cho.* 354-62; cf. Aeschylus 1983: 137-8). As these powers are *patroïa*, that is, not only 'of his father', but also 'inherited through him', like the "ancestral sceptre of the house of Atreus descended from Zeus himself and

<sup>49</sup> The only manuscript is missing the first lines; we can read 'our' lines 1-3, 4-5 in Aristophanes' *Frogs* 1126-8, 1172-3; on the probable extent and contents of the lines preceding 1, see Brown 2015.

so *aphthiton* [imperishable]” in *Ilias* 2.46,<sup>50</sup> Orestes’ invocation with which the *Choephoroi* opens means that he is, at one and the same time, renewing both his bond with his father and that with the land from which he had fled.<sup>51</sup> Immediately after this, Orestes asks Hermes to “be [his] savior and stand by [his] claim” (σωτήρ γενοῦ ξύμμαχος τ’ αἰτουμένω: 2), and “invoke[s his] father / to hear, to listen” (κηρύσσω πατρί / κλύειν, ἀκοῦσαι: 4-5). In this context, the return of Orestes (note, at 3, “Here is my own soil that I walk. I have come home”: ἦκω γὰρ ἐς γῆν τήνδε καὶ κατέρχομαι) configures his ephebic initiation in the name of the father, and in the framework of a “dynamics of misogyny” (Goldhill).<sup>52</sup>

As she comes on stage only at line 22 with the Chorus,<sup>53</sup> Electra could not have heard Orestes’ invocation of Hermes, and his request to the god to be an ally fighting alongside him (*xymmachos*). As soon as the recognition scene between the brother and sister is ending (211-32), Orestes’ final words (233) lead us to expect a struggle against the “nearest people (*philtatoi*)”, who “hate bitterly (*pikroi*)” the two of them (τοὺς φιλτάτους γὰρ οἶδα νῶν ὄντας πικρούς):<sup>54</sup> obviously their mother. As is often the habit of tragedians, the sister’s first words echo the last ones of her brother (235): ὃ φίλτατον μέλημα δώμασιν πατρός, literally “o dearest (*philtaton*) object of care (*melema*) of [our] father’s house”.<sup>55</sup> The dwelling (*domata*), deliberately signalled as being “of our father” (*patros*) and not of the dynasty, is personified – as it has already been in the *Agamemnon*; but if in the first play of the trilogy it was a sort of voraciously bloodthirsty organism, here it is presented as a subject animated by long-lasting “care” for her brother, who is the “hope of the seed of our salvation, wept for” (236: δακρυτὸς ἐλπίς σπέρματος σωτηρίου). This can only be Electra’s own private feeling. And its symme-

<sup>50</sup> Kirk 1985: 119. Here Agamemnon εἴλετο δὲ σκῆπτρον πατρῷον ἄφθιτον αἰεὶ (“took the sceptre inherited from his fathers and eternally imperishable”). Cf. *BK* 2010: 24.

<sup>51</sup> In the prologue of the *Choephoroi* the mention of the river Inachus is a synecdoche for the entire region; there could have been something more in the lost lines, but the river will have this same function in the prologue of Euripides’ *Electra*; instead, Sophocles’ tragedy opens by focussing on the abodes of power in Mycenae and of religious worship in Argos.

<sup>52</sup> For the motif of Orestes’ initiation see Zeitlin 1978: 161, and cf. Goldhill 1984: 193-5.

<sup>53</sup> She had been seen at a distance by Orestes and Pylades at line 16, but could not herself see them. They had thus had time to hide, undisturbed, at 20-1; see Taplin 1989: 234-5.

<sup>54</sup> “The paradox is a common one in tragedy” (Garvie, Aeschylus 1986: 103). *Pikros* is often said of something contrary to the expected lovability, cf. *LSJ*, III.1; *philtatoi* . . . *pikroi* = those who, belonging to the same family, are connected with the two of them by the strongest bonds, yet cruelly behave with them.

<sup>55</sup> Lattimore’s translation: “O dearest, treasured darling of my father’s house”.



to you. / *And as a born from the same womb (adelphos) you were faithful (pistos) and brought me reverence (sebas). / But may Force alone, and Right, / and Zeus almighty, third with them, be on my side.]*<sup>61</sup>

In these lines two distinct tonalities are immediately perceptible, at 239-42 and 243-5, respectively. At 239-42, Electra's words imitating the well-known Homeric locus crown the joyful sequence which begins at 224. Instead, 243-5 evince the fact that the special affection labelled at 241 as *stergethron*, which is often, not always correctly, translated as "love", reciprocates Orestes' faithfulness and "reverence" (*sebas*). With the help of Force (*Kratos*), Right (*Dike*), and Zeus, Electra founds the action of the play that is, revenge against the usurpers, on this reciprocity. However, the way in which Electra quotes Andromache's words is already suggestive not only of her personality, but also of the role she seems to intend to play. Her words offer two variants when compared to Homer, which we may imagine would have had quite an effect on the audience: (a) Andromache's father and brothers had been killed by the enemy (Achilles, see *Il.* 6.413-24), and her mother was also dead (6.425-8), whereas Electra's father had been murdered by his wife, who is still alive, and her sister had been sacrificed by their common father; (b) the *tournure* of the phrase, not "you are to me", as in Homer, but "I need to call you", which makes Electra the subject and focusses the attention on her. This focus is confirmed in line 243, in which Electra should define her brother's qualities, in this way corresponding to *Il.* 6.430, where Andromache had exalted her husband's reliable strength. But instead of extolling Orestes' loyalty to his *genos*, or, for instance, his strength, or indeed his dynastic ambition, Electra praises his faithfulness and reverence to her (*emoi*: 'to me'; the first singular person pronoun recurs at 243 and 245). Even more remarkable, Orestes is said to have been faithful and reverent *in the past*, with a "puzzling imperfect tense": "you *were* (ἦσθ[α]) my faithful brother, and

<sup>61</sup> I have made some changes to Lattimore's translation of 243-5 ("And now you were my steadfast brother after all. / You alone bring me honor; but may Force, and Right, / and Zeus almighty, third with them, be on your side"; Aeschylus 2013). At 244 he preferred the manuscript reading μόνος, referred to Orestes, to the correction μόνον that, referring to Force, sounds as a quasi-exclamative formula, "probably right" according to Garvie (Aeschylus 1986: 105). To these lines many other emendations have been made, from the repositioning of 237 after 243, to the postulate of a lacuna between 243 and 244, to the heavy correction of μοι to σοι (245), and to the improbable change of interlocutor, from Electra to Orestes, at 244 and not at 246. These interventions are described by Martin L. West (1990: 240-1), who adopted them in his edition (Aeschylus 1990), and they have also, in part, been espoused by Sommerstein (Aeschylus 2008). As already said, I follow the text established by Page (Aeschylus 1972), but at 240 I keep τε instead of the conjectural σε, "perhaps unnecessary" in the opinion of Garvie (Aeschylus 1986: 104).

brought me honor” (emphases are mine).<sup>62</sup> Even if this sentence has a vibrantly exclamatory tone, it seems to be constructed upon a strictly consequential relationship; we could perhaps reconstruct the general idea: “my *stergethron* (in a little while we shall have to consider this term more closely: often translated as ‘love’, it has very different implications from *philia*) towards my father and sister now lacks its objects, and my mother does not deserve it – but your return, Orestes, testifies that for all this time you were my faithful brother, who brought me his reverence; so it all turns to you”. However we interpret her thought, here Electra shows that she regards herself as the nucleus from which the family relationships radiate, as the tutelary entity of her house, recipient of the loyalty of its members (she herself, not the memory of her father nor the dynasty), and as the source of future action. The ascending line of the *genos* has been extinguished: this had been represented by Agamemnon and by Iphigenia: although she is never explicitly named, her sisterhood to Electra and her descent from the same father is confirmed when she is designated by the term *homosporos* (“from the same seed”). As for Orestes, however, Electra calls him *adelphos* (“from the same womb”);<sup>63</sup> the vagueness with which *adelphos* is often used is here redeemed by its complementarity with *homosporos*. The emphasis on the fact that they were both delivered from the same womb, that of a reprehensible woman, on the one hand endorses the necessity for him to share with her the quite awful loathing she feels for Clytemnestra, and on the other is compounded with the constraint of calling him *πατήρ*, and thus paradoxically redesigns the relationship.

It should be noted that here there is no hint of foreboding, as there is in Andromache’s supplication to her husband, or indeed in the reprise in Sophocles’ *Ajax*. Electra trusts that Force, Right and Zeus will permit Orestes to recapture the palace and possessions (237: cf. p. 15) of his father, and the audience knows only too well that Orestes is not destined to die like Hector and Ajax, but to kill. In any case, the sentiment that Electra nourishes towards her brother is not *philia*, neither as a sense of belonging to a community (so that superlative *philtatoi* at 234 is properly translated as “the nearest people”), nor as that “certain form of affection which

<sup>62</sup> On this imperfect and the significance of Orestes’ reverence Sommerstein rightly observed that “an explanation of the sense in which Orestes has ‘shown . . . respect’ to Electra is badly needed; despite the verb . . . it can hardly refer to the time of exile” (Aeschylus 2008: 243); see by Garvie a review of the diverse and totally unsatisfactory explanations of this passage (1986: 105). The attempts to break the deadlock at this point of the translation seem equally inadequate such as this, for instance: “and now you were my steadfast brother after all, you alone (μόνος) bring me honor” (Lattimore). Emphases are mine.

<sup>63</sup> Beekes 2010: 20 and Chantraine 1990: 18-19.



murdered father the love which would have been bestowed on her mother or on her sister, but she diverts it to her brother and makes him an *alter ego* of their father. Yet *stergethron* is not nostalgic *philia* for their father, and even less is it for their sister; perhaps we could assimilate it to “the love of a tutelary god for the people” (*LSJ*), like Athena’s for the Athenian jurors of the Areopagus (*Eum.* 911). It is in any case a sort of mutual satisfaction, motivated by something gratifying to the receiver (in this case the brother’s faithfulness and reverence for his sister), and which requires the receiver to reciprocate this, and in this way underwrite the bestower’s proposal (cf. *Eum.* 637 and 970). By addressing her brother as father Electra seems to prepare the ground for the regal legitimation Orestes will expressly demand of his father at the end of the long funeral lament: “Father, O King who died no kingly death, I ask / the gift of lordship (*kratos*) at your hands, to rule your house”.<sup>67</sup> At the same time, she extols her own position when she insists on her brother’s faithfulness (*pistos*, cf. *pistis*) and reverential awe (*sebas*), both allocated to her. In this instance too, far from being simply pertinent to family affection, *sebas* is a reverence usually addressed to a deceased divinity or sovereign, as is the case with Agamemnon in the choric song in *Choephoroi* at 157: “Hear me, oh hear, my lord, / majesty (*sebas*) hear me” (κλύε δέ μοι, σέβας, κλύ’ ὦ δέσποτ[α]).

To wind up this argument, it is in this very play, the *Choephoroi*, where she has an exiguous part in the actual assassination, and does not seem to appreciate her father’s regal and military reputation,<sup>68</sup> that Electra claims the tribute of faithful worship appropriate to a sovereign. And this indeed in her last speech of a certain length, and in a prominent position in the play, that is, immediately following the recognition scene when announcing – as proper to herself (245: *moi*) – the action that must be accomplished with the aid of Force, Right and Zeus.

## 5. Euripides’ Electra

Ελ. κάγώ χοάς σοι τῆς ἐμῆς παγκληρίας  
οἴσω πατρώων ἐκ δόμων γαμηλίους  
Aesch. *Cho.* 486-7

<sup>67</sup> *Cho.* 479-80: Πάτερ τρόποισιν οὐ τυραννικοῖς θανών, / αἰτουμένω μοι δός κράτος τῶν σῶν δόμων.

<sup>68</sup> About this we have to consider the long *kommos* at the tomb of Agamemnon and, in it, the symmetrical and contrasting stanzas of Orestes: “If only at Ilium, / father, . . . / you had gone down at the spear’s stroke” (345-53: εἰ γὰρ ὑπ’ Ἴλιω / . . . πάτερ, δορίτμητος κετηναρίσθης) and Electra: “No, but not under Troy’s / ramparts, father, should you have died, / nor . . . / have found your grave” (363-71: μηδ’ ὑπὸ Τρωιάς / τείχεσι φθίμενος, πάτερ / . . . τεθάφθαι).

[El. I too out of my own full dowry then shall bring / libations *from my father's house at the time of my wedding.*]<sup>69</sup>

The Aeschylean Electra is fully aware that she may only recover her inheritance and dedicate the requisite libations to her father if the revenge plot succeeds. The dialogue between the two siblings which crowns the long funeral lament has just evinced that the “customary” (*ennomoi*) mourning rites,<sup>70</sup> as different from the apotropaic version of the ritual desired by Clytaemnestra, may only be celebrated after the *kratos* has passed to Orestes.<sup>71</sup> However she will leave the stage at 584 – like Pylades never to return for the rest of the trilogy – and nothing further will be heard of her wedding.<sup>72</sup> The ‘disappearance’ of the Sophoclean Electra has already been discussed. So it is even more singular that Euripides foresees for his Electra two separate marriages: the childless one with the Peasant and then the one with Pylades. This last is mentioned by Castor at the conclusion of the tragedy, in the context of a detailed exposition of the future awaiting the three characters (Orestes, Electra and the Peasant), but he does not mention the likelihood of any progeny. In the prologue, whose mouthpiece is the Peasant, Euripides realistically outlines the dynastic tangle of kinship with which the fifth-century audience was faced whenever they were going to attend an ‘Oresteia’. The spectators were aware that Electra was not destined to be the mother of kings, and that Orestes was not going to inherit his father’s throne (cf. above p. 95 and n30), and this shared knowledge regulated the horizon of their expectations. Nonetheless, as soon as they have learned of Aegisthus’ murder, the Chorus of this *Electra* exult for the return of the dynasty: the “beloved kings of old” (not Orestes and Electra, but more probably Orestes and his descendants) “shall *rightfully* rule over [the] land since they have destroyed the *unrighteous!*”<sup>73</sup> Up to this point only Aegisthus has been elim-

<sup>69</sup> I prefer Sommerstein’s translation (Aeschylus 2008), in italics, to Lattimore’s (“for my bridal from my father’s house”).

<sup>70</sup> “The feasts that men honor in custom” (483: δαῖτες ἔννομοι βροτῶν).

<sup>71</sup> In Orestes’ words: “Father . . . I ask / the gift of lordship at your hands, to rule your house” (479-80; quoted at p. 105). And it is probable that in her turn Electra affirms at 482, unluckily a very corrupt line, that the death of Aegisthus will enable her to marry: “a wish for marriage . . . seems highly likely in view of 487” (Sommerstein in Aeschylus 2008: 273n104).

<sup>72</sup> One of the discrepancies in the plot woven by Orestes lies in the fact that we never know if and how great a part his sister played “inside” (554: ἔσω), or what in fact is meant by her “keep[ing] a careful eye on all within the house” (584: φύλασσε τὰν οἴκῳ καλῶς). For the inconsistencies between revenge plot and action in the *Choephoroi* see Dawe 1963 and Avezzi 2016: 65-8.

<sup>73</sup> Emphases are mine; 876-7: νῦν οἱ πάρος ἀμέτεροι / γαίης τυραννεύσουσι φίλοι

inated, and the restoration of the legitimate dynasty – as the brother and sister are well aware, but the Chorus seem to have forgotten – may only take place if Clytaemnestra is destroyed. While the abyss of a primordial guilt begins to yawn, the matricide reiterates the conflict between he who wields a *kratos* obtained through violence and he who intends to re-establish the right of succession, but in order to achieve this must commit another act of violence, this too within the *genos*. This new act of violence, in its turn, is distinguished from all those already perpetrated for dynastic ends because it is no longer committed within the line of male descent (Atreus on the sons of Thyestes; Aegisthus, son and grandson of Thyestes, with the aid of Clytaemnestra on Agamemnon). The *kratos* which Clytaemnestra, precisely because of her “male strength of heart” (Ag. 10-11), has appropriated for herself, in a certain sense ‘displaces’ her into the male line, which is the one traditionally deputed to ensure legitimate sovereignty. If we have recourse to the categories established by Jean-Pierre Vernant, we are obliged to reckon with the conflict between genealogical transmission, linked to the *oikos* and its hearth (deified as Hestia),<sup>74</sup> and the accomplishment by means of deception perpetrated by an outsider, sanctioned by Hermes. The social symbolism of Clytaemnestra’s dream in Sophocles lies in its restoration of the “correct” lineage – male seed, female vessel – claimed by Apollo in *Eumenides* 657-61. But in the meantime, and, perhaps, for good, the Queen has overturned the canon; to reestablish it is, at best, wishful thinking, upon which Sophocles prudently lets down the curtain, but both Aeschylus and Euripides explicitly open prospects, the first of a different idea of the state, the second of a centrifugal scattering which annihilates the *genos*.

Euripides’ ‘Oresteia’, however, is missing both Hestia and Hermes. This is the only play in which the Palace is not to be seen looming over both the characters and the audience. We must realize that the court represents a scenographic equivalent of the family (*oikos*) which is only to be relinquished with the intention of realizing a radical innovation, as is the case here in Euripides. Even modern remakes retain it as a symbolic presence, from the Mannons’ grey colonial-style house in O’Neill, to the long, dark wall emphasized by Miklós Jancsó’s sequence shots in his *Electra, My Love* (Szerelmem *Electra*, 1974); to the point that Jean Giraudoux, another

βασιλῆς / δικαίως τοὺς δ’ ἀδίκους καθελόντες. I prefer to maintain in the translation the correspondence δικαίως . . . ἀδίκους of the original (“in justice . . . wicked” trans. Cropp).

<sup>74</sup> When discussing Clytaemnestra’s nightmare (Soph. *El.* 419-23, see above p. 11), Vernant observes “The dream could not say more clearly that Agamemnon in fact begot Orestes beyond the person of Clytaemnestra, in his own hearth, which roots the royal house of Mykenae” (2006: 161).

er who is influenced by Euripides, also includes the concept of the “palace that laughs and cries” (Act I, scene 1: “en ce moment le palais rit et pleure à la fois”). The *hestia*, repository of memories and dynastic legitimacy, has been excluded, even simply as an idea, from the stage of Euripides’ *Electra*. It cannot be replaced either by the Peasant’s hut, which, at the very most, could epitomize the degree zero of conjugal solidarity, or by the offstage *locus amoenus* where Aegisthus, that irreproachable guest, is murdered. Deprived of Hestia, the manifestation of continuity is lacking, but at the same time Hermes, too, is absent, he who in the other ‘Oresteiai’ is the guarantor of the decided, unequivocal intention of Orestes. Here Orestes does not declare that he has come back to avenge himself and to reclaim supremacy, as he did in the *Choephoroi*, neither does he expound, as in Sophocles, the particulars of his plan, which is deceitful (*dolos*) and for this reason under the sign of Hermes. Terribly alone, with only the unsettling silence of Pylades by his side, he does not seek help from his father, as he did in Aeschylus, with a ritual invocation governed by Hermes, and he does not even have an active accomplice to whom he may confide the terms of his deceit; like the Old Slave in Sophocles. Hermes who, “as the god of travellers, is naturally associated with the completing of a situation”,<sup>75</sup> is a helpful presence in overseeing the dynastic upheaval in the other two ‘Oresteiai’. Developing the idea of the Aeschylean Hermes who, chthonian and nocturnal, supervises the mortal game standing beside those who ask for justice,<sup>76</sup> Sophocles, in his *Electra*, even more explicitly than his predecessor, makes him the lord of the *dolos*, of intrigue, of discourse that “brings profit” (61, cf. 37), gifted with the ambiguous virtue of “insidious Persuasion (*Peitho doliā*)”, the deity to whom the Chorus had addressed its prayer in *Cho.* 726-7. Invoked by the Sophoclean Electra as propitiator of vengeance (with the epithet of *chthonios*, the same as before in Aeschylus, at 111), Maia’s son will finally be associated by the Chorus, in the second stanza of the brief fourth *stasimon*, with Orestes “stealthy of foot” (*doliopous*; 1391-2). Instead, Hermes plays no part in Euripides’ *Electra*, where he is only an icon on Achilles’ shield, in a sort of artificial overlapping between the shield in the *Iliad* and the aegis of Zeus and Athena.<sup>77</sup>

As the Palace is missing, the two opposing forces, Hestia and Hermes, have nowhere to work out their function. We are witnessing, in its stead, a sort of diffraction of the two principles. Electra’s expectations, deeply rooted as they are in the *oikos* and in the heroic figure of her father, emerge clearly both in the blindness with which she disputes the Old Man’s tale – an ep-

<sup>75</sup> Dunn, Sophocles 2019: 348.

<sup>76</sup> *Cho.* 727-9 and 812-13.

<sup>77</sup> First *stasimon*: 462.

isode which provides information on the character of this Electra and is not simply a vain attack against Aeschylus on Euripides' part.<sup>78</sup> To give voice to her sentiments, she involves the Chorus, who are not slaves of the Palace (as in the *Choephoroi*), not Argive maidens (as in Sophocles' *Electra*), but mature countrywomen – the social class from which we would least expect such a sophisticated involvement in the epic dimension (the kind we witness in the first *stasimon*, 432-86). But her brother stays outside of this; having appeared almost unwillingly,<sup>79</sup> he is devoid of any apparent plan and goes along, passively as her “only ally” (*symmachos* . . . *monos*; 581), with his sister's plot, thought up with the help of the Old Man.<sup>80</sup> This Orestes, a “fugitive” who does not have Hermes beside him, is only too aware of the risks he runs in his attempt at “foul play” (*dolos*).<sup>81</sup> Electra is left alone to uphold the restitution, at any price, of legitimacy – right up to the point of the material execution of the matricide. This is understood perfectly by the Messenger, who, before telling her of the murder of Aegisthus, feels it his duty to reassure her of her brother's intentions, by spelling out a thought that Orestes has not expressed: “my master prayed . . . , not voicing the words, to regain his ancestral home” (808-10: δεσπότης δ' ἔμους / . . . ηὔχετ', οὐ γεγωνίσκων λόγους, / λαβεῖν πατρῶα δώματ[α]). However the objective and, even more so, the strength of purpose of Orestes remain unuttered – only to be conjectured by the Messenger and saved for the ears of Electra.

This Electra who, as different from the one of the other ‘Oresteiai’, takes leave of the audience with the other characters (Orestes, the divine uncles Castor and Polydeuces, and the Chorus), will in the end in great sorrow be forced to leave her fatherland (*patria ge*) for Phocis, to follow Pylades. At

<sup>78</sup> If putting textual criticism on trial had any longer a *raison d'être*, it would be interesting to subject this scene of the Euripidean *Electra* to a thorough close analysis: the innate prejudice against the attack on Aeschylus has caused, through time, a quantity of hostile *atheteses*. In his “Notes” on this *Electra*, deemed to be not fully philologically correct, a verdict which probably owes a lot to the well-known judgement (and/or, in my opinion, political prejudice) of T.S. Eliot on his qualities as a translator, Gilbert Murray reminds us that the theory of an attack on Aeschylus – “a very weak and undignified attack”, he adds – has the result of saddling Euripides with the responsibility of “such an artistically ruinous proceeding . . . [for which] no parallel is quoted from any Greek tragedy” (Euripides 1908: 89-90). We are at liberty not to share Murray's thesis that Electra's words were dictated by “a sort of nervous terror”, however we can be certain that this scene and its counterparts in the works of other tragedians should be interpreted using more complex and refined critical tools.

<sup>79</sup> See 93-7; he recognises his sister at 115, yet does not reveal himself until 579.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Avezzi 2016: 68-69, and 84.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. the words of Orestes to Aegisthus (834-5): “so, you fear foul play (*dolos*) from a fugitive – you, the lord of the city?” (φυγάδος δῆτα δαιμαίνεις δόλον, / πόλεως ἀνάσσων);

this point she will exclaim regretfully: “what other griefs are greater / than to leave *the confines* of one’s ancestral land?” (emphasis is mine; 1314-15: καὶ τίνες ἄλλαι στοναχαὶ μείζους / ἢ γῆς πατρίας ὄρον ἐκλείπειν;) – and these confines designate her fatherland not simply as an object of affection, but also as the seat where sovereignty is exercised. We do not know if and in what measure this conclusion could have influenced the birth of the tradition about the Atreidic *skeptron*, known to Pausanias. Without doubt, however, this is the only one among the Electras of the three ‘Oresteiai’ to have left the inheritance of an unequivocal, though frustrated, idea of sovereignty.

*Translation by Susan Payne*

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