

Sophocles' *Electra* and the Revolutionary Mind*

This is perhaps one of the greatest dramas of a leader: he must combine an impassioned spirit with a cold mind and make painful decisions without flinching one muscle¹.

In a recent, influential reading of Sophocles' *Electra*², Helene Foley, drawing on anthropological studies of clan-based justice and women's lament in modern Greece, argues that, not only Electra's lamentation, but also her attempt, after she thinks Orestes is dead, to assume the male role of actual avenger, should be understood in terms of an «ethics of vendetta», and its associated practices, attested in some parts of the modern Greek world. Foley rejects the psychotic Electra born in Hofmannsthal's adaptation³: far from being mad, Electra merely acts in accordance with cultural expectations and prerogatives.

While illuminating and partly persuasive, this interpretation tends to sidestep the larger issues of freedom, subjugation, and revolt at stake in the play. For Foley, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus represent an «unjust tyranny»⁴, and to oppose them as Electra does raises no deep questions. On the other hand, to stage the play as a tyrannicide drama would not, it seems, be inappropriate. The great Greek actress Anna Synodinou's *Electra*, produced in Athens in 1972, at the height of the junta, must have been one of the most powerful such stagings⁵. Synodinou described the experience in her autobiography:

We worked with passion and breathed the air of freedom in our rehearsals... [T]he *Electra*'s theme was the punishment of the usurpers of power. Electra herself and Orestes were the ones who sacrificed the tyrants, not their sacrificial victims. That theme sustained our morale⁶.

Clearly Synodinou's staging, like Hofmannsthal's adaptation, should be seen as an artistic (and political) act in its own right. But it is worth asking whether Clytemnestra and Aegisthus really are tyrants – or, to put it another way, one should ask what is at stake in this characterization. In Foley's reading, blood vengeance is both Electra's primary motivation and what justifies the two killings within the (primitive)

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¹ Che Guevara, *Socialismo y El Hombre Nuevo en Cuba* («Socialism and the New Man»); Anderson 1990, 601 f.

² Foley 2001, 145-71.

³ Id., 159 n. 72.

⁴ Id., 172.

⁵ van Steen 2002, 222-34.

⁶ I quote from van Steen 2002, 224.

«ethics of vendetta;» tyrannicide comes in by the back door, as a bonus. This feels like sleight of hand... but who is the magician?

Electra clearly wants us, and anyone within the play who will listen to her, to think of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus as tyrants. She is, she claims, ‘enslaved by force’ (δουλεύω βίαι, 1192; also 189-92, 264 f., 814-6); she has no husband or offspring (187 f., 961-6, 1183); she faces the threat of imprisonment outside the city (379-86); she has been ‘cast out’ (ἐκβαλοῦσ’) and replaced with other heirs (589 f.). She is deprived of her father’s possessions (959 f.); her mother is «more a tyrant (δεσπότην) than a mother» (597 f.; 1195 f.); her body is ruined (1181 f.).

Does anyone else in Argos suffer similarly under the new regime? Chrysothemis’ status appears undiminished (357-64). Indeed, Electra’s talk about her sister’s ‘honor’ (τιμῆς) should make us suspicious when she later turns around and claims that neither she *nor* Chrysothemis has any hope of wealth or marriage (958-66).

Some have turned to the chorus as a window into the hearts and minds of the citizens of Argos.⁷ In my view, the chorus gives no useful evidence one way or another. Yes, they make sure Aegisthus is not around before asking whether Orestes might return (310-8); but in asking this (obviously somewhat subversive) question they seem motivated more by sympathy for Electra and her plight than by some hope that Orestes will rescue *them* from a reign of terror. Notice also that when the chorus speaks in the play’s final lines of ‘freedom’, it is referring to Orestes and *his* freedom (ἐξῆλθες, 1509), not theirs. Aegisthus’ order, in lines 1458-63, that the body of Orestes be displayed from the palace before the Mycenaeans and Argives does refer to the (hypothetical) ‘vain hopes’ (ἐλπῖσιν κενᾶς) of unspecified persons. More significant perhaps is his indirect threat to compel submission to his ‘bridle’ (στόμα) with violence (πρὸς βίαν). One might characterize this language as verging on the tyrannical, but within the bounds of the kingly. Aegisthus, after all, did not kill Orestes, and there is no indication that his ‘bridle’ will be unduly harsh (or transgress universal laws – contrast Creon in *Antigone*) except for those, like Electra, who refuse to accept his very existence.

Let us look closely at what, in Clytemnestra’s words, Electra has done to deserve her special treatment (516-26):

ἀνεμμένη μὲν, ὡς ἔοικας, αὖ στρέφη.
οὐ γὰρ πάρεστ’ Αἰγισθος, ὅς σ’ ἐπειχ’ αἰεὶ
μή τοι θυραΐαν γ’ οὔσαν αἰσχύνειν φίλους·
νῦν δ’ ὡς ἄπεστ’ ἐκείνος, οὐδὲν ἐντρέπη
ἐμοῦ γε· καίτοι πολλὰ πρὸς πολλούς με δὴ
ἐξεΐπας ὡς θρασεῖα καὶ πέρα δίκης
ἄρχω, καθυβρίζουσα καὶ σὲ καὶ τὰ σά.
ἐγὼ δ’ ὕβριν μὲν οὐκ ἔχω, κακῶς δέ σε
λέγω κακῶς κλύουσα πρὸς σέθεν θαμά.
πατήρ γάρ, οὐδὲν ἄλλο, σοὶ πρόσχημ’ αἰεὶ,

520
525

⁷ Juffras 1991, 107; Gardiner 1987.

ὥς ἐξ ἑμοῦ τέθνηκεν.

You are ranging about once more, it seems, at large; because Aegisthus is not here, he who always used to prevent you from shaming your family at least outside the house. But now that he is away, you disregard my authority, and yet⁸ you have declared often and to many people that I am insolent and rule unjustly, doing violence to you and what is yours. I do no violence, but I abuse you because you often abuse me. Your father, and nothing else, is always your pretext, because I killed him.⁹

If Clytemnestra is to be trusted – and here she has no reason to lie – Electra, an unmarried girl, is not merely lamenting outside the house; she is going about town openly rejecting the rule of Clytemnestra (520 f., also 641 f.) and calling for it to be overthrown. Electra clearly wants vengeance, and vengeance, in this situation, implies killing the city's rulers¹⁰. But no government allows its citizens to engage in open revolt with impunity. Yes, the Athenian democracy allowed Plato to discuss, in hypotheticals, the merits of alternative constitutions; but had he proposed a change of constitution in the assembly, he would have been executed. In the *Laws*, Plato made violent political subversion an offense punishable by death (856b-c). In other words, it is at least far from obvious that Electra's oppression objectively qualifies the rule of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus as an 'unjust tyranny'.

Clytemnestra even rejects the idea that she does 'violence' (ὑβρίν) to her daughter (522 f.), and her behavior in this scene – allowing Electra to criticize her (630 f.), though threatening retribution when Aegisthus returns (626 f.) – lends this claim some credence. Indeed, all things considered, Sophocles' Clytemnestra is rather sympathetic. She alone gives a voice to the dead Iphigenia (548), whereas the necessity of her sister's death – not to mention her father's ultimate culpability – seems not even to trouble Electra. Clytemnestra cannot hate her children, though they hate her (766-8, 770 f.). In fact, though Electra claims that Orestes 'barely escaped the hand' of Clytemnestra (601 f.), it is far from clear that Clytemnestra ever meant to kill him (775-9),

ὅστις τῆς ἐμῆς ψυχῆς γεγώς,
μαστῶν ἀποστάς καὶ τροφῆς ἐμῆς, φυγὰς
ἀπεξενούτο· καί μ', ἐπεὶ τῆσδε χθονὸς
ἐξῆλθεν, οὐκέτ' εἶδεν· ἐγκαλῶν δέ μοι
φόνους πατρῶους δεῖν' ἐπηπεῖλει τελεῖν·

⁸ Finglass 2007, *ad loc.*

⁹ Translations are based on Hugh Lloyd-Jones' Loeb, with some modifications.

¹⁰ Juffras 1991, 107: «In *Electra*, political roles are a function of family roles». (Beer 2004 looks at it in a slightly different way (130): «In *Electra*, the *oikos* stands as a microcosm of a polis».) With regard to Electra's later decision to exact vengeance herself, Juffras says, «In as much as both male and female roles are now represented in *Electra*, the restoration of house brings not only the possibility not only (sic) of marriage, but of possession of the throne» (106). As the example of Harmodius and Aristogeiton shows, an act of tyrannicide need not have an overtly, or exclusively, political motive (I thank Jeffrey Rusten for this point).

who, though sprung from my life, turned away from the nurture of my breast, and became a foreigner in exile. After he left this land he never saw me, but he reproached me with his father's murder and swore to do terrible things...

This would be a bizarre way to refer to someone she had always wished to kill; on the contrary, it seems that she had for some time held out hope of reconciliation¹¹. This suggestion might be strengthened by reading against the grain of Electra's comment that Clytemnestra often accused her of 'bringing up' (τρέφειν) Orestes to be his father's avenger (603 f.). By τρέφειν Electra seems to suggest that the very act of Orestes being reared to adulthood was against her mother's wishes. But if we consider what Clytemnestra might *actually* have said, it seems far more likely that she accused her daughter of trying to *bias* Orestes against her¹².

Electra's trump card is the bloodstained adultery her mother and Aegisthus have committed (585-92)¹³. Perhaps, in the final analysis, that is the deciding factor. My aim is merely to show that, with regard to their behavior as rulers in the present, it is Electra's *choice* to see Clytemnestra and Aegisthus as tyrants that makes them so, for her. She has decided that their existence is incompatible with her own, and to define her own existence by a militant fidelity to her dead father (354-6):

οὐ ζῶ; κακῶς μὲν, οἶδ', ἐπαρκούντως δ' ἐμοί.
λυπῶ δὲ τούτους, ὥστε τῷ τεθνηκότι
τιμὰς προσάπτειν, εἴ τις ἔστ' ἐκεῖ χάρις.

Do I not live? Miserably, I know, but sufficiently for me. For¹⁴ I give pain to them, so that I do honor to the dead, if any pleasure can be felt where the dead are.

This is, in the first place, her response to Chrysothemis' view that freedom requires submission: εἰ δ' ἐλευθέραν με δεῖ ζῆν, τῶν κρατούντων ἐστὶ πάντ' ἀκουστέα (339 f.). The latter is *not* a paradox, as one can easily see by taking τῶν κρατούντων to be one's favorite police force, or indeed anyone charged with upholding the laws of one's country¹⁵. But for Electra – *la femme révoltée* – *life itself* consists in *harming* those who have power over her, to honor one who is dead¹⁶.

¹¹ It is true, as various scholars have noted, that the current relationship is framed in political terms (Finglass 2007, 341, on φυγάς). But Clytemnestra represents herself as victim, not agent, of that politicization.

¹² τρέφειν in the sense of «educate», *LSJ IV*.

¹³ de Wet 1977, 29-31.

¹⁴ δέ for γάρ is very common in poetry; Denniston 1981, 169.

¹⁵ Foley 2001, 150: «[Chrysothemis] wishes paradoxically to win freedom by obeying those in power». The word πάντ' does give the phrase a paradoxical flavor; but presumably Chrysothemis does not mean literally *everything*, but only such things as «the stronger» actually tell her to do.

¹⁶ Schein 1998, 300 n. 16: «One might compare the ordinary human weakness of Ismene in the Prologue of *Antigone*, in contrast to the extraordinary ethical and practical strength of her sister». This comparison masks an important contrast, however: Antigone's resistance does not include violence or the threat of violence. λυπέω is used by the historians to denote constant attacks by

Is Electra's «life» really a «living death»¹⁷? That question is not answered until midway through the play, and the answer is very nearly, yes. In the beginning, Electra's revolt has not gone all the way: she 'harms' her father's killers, those in power over her, but that is all. She still holds out hope that the absent male savior will appear to complete the job for her. But of course, as it happens, these hopes are dashed – brutally. Not only must Electra accept the *fact* that her hoped-for savior, is dead; she must *experience* that death in a visceral, graphic narrative (749-60):

στρατὸς δ' ὅπως ὄρᾳ νιν ἐκπεπτωκότα
δίφρων, ἀνωτότυξε τὸν νεανίαν,
οἷ' ἔργα δράσας οἶα λαγχάνει κακά,
φορούμενος πρὸς οὔδας, ἄλλοτ' οὐρανῶ
σκέλη προφαίνων, ἔστε νιν διφρηλάται,
μόλις κατασχεθόντες ἰπικὸν δρόμον,
ἔλυσαν αἵματηρόν, ὥστε μηδένα
γνῶναι φίλων ἰδόντ' ἄν ἄθλιον δέμας.
καί νιν πυρᾷ κέαντες εὐθύς ἐν βραχεῖ
χαλκῶ μέγιστον σῶμα δειλαίας σποδοῦ
φέρουσιν ἄνδρες Φωκέων τεταγμένοι,
ὅπως πατρῶας τύμβον ἐκλάχη χθονός.

And when the crowd saw his fall from the chariot, they cried out with pity for the young man, seeing what misfortunes followed upon such deeds, as at one moment he was borne earthwards, at another with legs skywards, until the charioteers with difficulty checked the horses' career and released him, all bloody, so that none of his friends that saw him could have recognized his wretched shape. Men appointed from among the Phocians burned him on a pyre, and at once carried in a small urn of bronze his mighty form, now miserable dust, so that he should be accorded burial in the land of his fathers.

Absent, unable to touch him or bury him (864-70), Electra must die with Orestes to be cleansed on his funeral pyre. It is only after hearing Chrysothemis' message of false hope (892-919) that she is resurrected. Significantly, Electra *pitieis* (ἐποικτιῶ, 920) Chrysothemis – the one and only time – as the latter tells her tale. Perhaps Electra sees in her sister an image of her own former self.

Electra's decision to take upon herself the task of vengeance (which happens sometimes before line 938) is, as Foley rightly points out, «the only ethical choice undertaken in the course of the drama»¹⁸. That alone requires us, I think, to see this decision as the core of the play, its *raison d'être*. It is what definitively distinguishes Sophocles' treatment of the myth from those of Aeschylus and Euripides; and it might further explain why there are no Furies, no trial, no drama, in fact, to the play's conclusion. The play's only decision is made *without* the benefit of an oracle; once Orestes and the oracle intervene – as formal requirements dictate they do even-

cavalry and light troops on the enemy (*LSJ* I.3). Electra's position is a radical one, and must be dealt with as such.

¹⁷ Foley 2001, 156; Segal 1966.

¹⁸ Foley 2001, 164.

tually – the existential drama is over. But not quite – Electra will maintain, looking back (1319-21),

ὥς ἐγὼ μόνη
οὐκ ἂν δυοῖν ἤμαρτον· ἢ γὰρ ἂν καλῶς
ἔσωσ' ἑμαυτὴν ἢ καλῶς ἀπωλόμην.

For if I had been alone, I should have had one of two things; either I should have saved **myself** with honor, or I should have perished with honor.

By this point, as line 1321 indicates, something more than vengeance has been put at stake. Clytemnestra, for what it's worth, always considered Electra's fidelity to her father a 'pretext' (πρόσχημα, 525)¹⁹. At the very least, in her great speech to Chrysothemis (947-89), Electra subsumes fidelity to the dead into a much greater project. It starts with killing Aegisthus, τὸν αὐτόχειρα πατρῷου φόνου (955). Much ink has been spilled on why she does not mention Clytemnestra. Seeing that, in their earlier conversation, mother and daughter both agreed that Clytemnestra *did* kill her husband (526 f., 558), and especially considering Electra's unwavering enthusiasm in the midst of the actual matricide (1411-6), I think we must assume that Electra intends to kill her mother even now. She does not spell it out in black and white for two reasons: Aegisthus is the more difficult one to kill, and she does not want to make her sister any harder to convince than necessary. But there is another reason: whatever the dictates of blood vengeance, Aegisthus controls the *living* sisters' fate – *he*, not Clytemnestra, is «the stronger».

This speech displays a remarkable shift of focus from the dead to the living, from vengeance to positive aspirations both personal and political. As she encourages her sister to think of *herself*, of her own wealth and marriage (958-66, 71 f.), Electra moves beyond the dichotomy of freedom as either obedience or pure revolt (970-2):

ἔπειτα δ', ὅσπερ ἐξέφυς, ἐλευθέρα
καλῆι τὸ λοιπὸν καὶ γάμων ἐπαξίῳ
τεύξει· φιλεῖ γὰρ πρὸς τὰ χρηστὰ πᾶς ὄραν.

and further, for the future you will be called free, as you are by nature, and you will obtain a worthy marriage; for what is excellent draws the eyes of all.

While one can be free by nature, to be truly free is both to be *called* free by others and to possess that which one should possess by right: for a freewoman, marriage. Electra is raising her sister's political consciousness. But she goes even further, imagining, in their own words, the praise the male citizens will bestow on the sisters, in public feasts and assemblies, both while they are living and after their death (973-85). This passage must be meant to recall the tyrannicides, Harmodius and Aristo-

¹⁹ Finglass 2007, 256: «Clytemnestra implies that Electra's true motive is different; the audience is aware that this is not the case». Actually, the audience does not *know* anything of the sort; it chooses whom it will believe.

geiton, and their cult²⁰. Having decided, before, to make her mother a 'tyrant', Electra now decides to apotheosize herself and her sister as tyrannicides.

It is significant, however, that the citizens in Electra's imagination do not mention any benefit to themselves, or to the city as a whole, that has resulted from the sisters' actions. Electra's political consciousness is still rudimentary – not because it is aristocratic (989), but because it remains self-centered (987 f.).

In the end, of course, none of this happens. Orestes appears, in the flesh, and Electra rejoices. To understand this scene, and what follows, some comparisons with Camus's *Les Justes* may prove illuminating²¹. In both plays, tragedy lies in the conflict between humanity and a logic – whether revolutionary, vengeful, or both – that necessitates murder. Kaliyev says of the Grand Duke, «Ce n'est pas lui que je tue. Je tue le despotisme». And yet he must hate the Grand Duke in order to do it: «Dieu aidant, la haine me viendra au bon moment, et m'aveuglera» (326²²). Hate, however, is a dangerous thing. Kaliyev can hate the Grand Duke, but not the children who happen to be with him during the first attempt; thus, he does not throw the bomb. Stepan, who has suffered much from the regime, lashes out (336):

Stepan: Je n'ai pas assez de cœur pour ces niaiseries. Quand nous nous déciderons à oublier les enfants, ce jour-là, nous serons les maîtres du monde et la révolution triomphera.

Dora: Ce jour-là, la révolution sera haïe de l'humanité entière.

Stepan: Qu'importe si nous l'aimons assez fort pour l'imposer à l'humanité entière et la sauver d'elle-même et de son esclavage.

Hatred may bring about triumph; but at what cost? Stepan will balk at nothing: «Rien n'est défendu de ce qui peut servir notre cause» (337). Likewise, in the *Electra*, the end will justify any means: treachery, deception, murder in secret, matricide. And in both plays, the revolutionary end leaves no room for love. Dora, surrendering herself to an irrational, all-too-human passion, wants Kaliyev to love her outside the bounds of revolutionary logic – would he love her even if she were *unjust*, even if she were not in the Organization (352)? He struggles to rein her in. Recall Orestes (1243 f.):

ὄρα γε μὲν δὴ καὶ γυναιξὶν ὡς Ἄρης
ἔνεστιν· εὔδ' ἔξισθα πειραθειῶσά που.

But remember that women too have martial valor; and you know it well, I think, from experience.

²⁰ Juffras 1991; Finglass 2007, 404

²¹ Dahl 1987, 71-97, details many connections between the Orestes myth and *Les Justes*, which tells the story of the assassination of the Grand Duke by the terrorist assassins of the Organization for Combat of the Soviet Revolutionary Party.

²² I give page numbers from the 1962 Gallimard edition.

Electra responds (1245-50),

ὄπποτοῖ ὄπποτοῖ,
ἀνέφελον ἐνέβαλες οὔποτε καταλύσιμον,
οὐδέ ποτε λησόμενον ἀμέτερον
οἶον ἔφνυ κακόν.

Alas, alas! You have brought to mind the nature of our sorrows, never to be veiled,
never to be undone, never to forget!

Suddenly, like Dora, Electra – ironically – wants to forget the whole project, right when the moment of truth is at hand! Orestes' poignant τί μὴν οὐ; (1280), a crack, corresponds to Kaliayev's «*Il hésite et très bas*) Je meurs d'envie de te dire oui» (353). Finally, however, Kaliayev must tell Dora, «brutally», to *shut up*; just as, in Sophocles, Orestes asks Electra to tell him only what is necessary to complete the task (1288-92), then to be silent (1322 f.); then, the Paidagogos enters and shuts them both up (1325-38).

Camus's play ends with the lovers forever separated. Kaliayev throws the bomb, and is executed. Dora then makes Electra's (earlier) decision: she wants to throw the next bomb, though women are not ordinarily allowed to do such things (392). Stepan remarks, significantly, «*Elle me ressemble, maintenant*» (393). The play leaves her decision – and the future of the revolution – forever suspended.

In Sophocles, the separation of brother and sister – Orestes inside the house, on the point of committing his second murder; Electra outside – is likewise frozen in time, as is the future of their house and city. Earlier, Electra said of her mother (1311-3):

μῖσός τε γὰρ παλαιὸν ἐντέτηκέ μοι,
κάπεῖ σ' ἐσείδον, οὐ ποτ' ἐκλήξω χαρᾶ
δακρυροοῦσα.

For so long, hatred of her has seeped into me, and now that I have seen you, I shall
never cease to weep for joy.

But in the end, hatred, it seems, has conquered, and Orestes is again out of sight. As for the city, Orestes' last words sound ominous (1505-7):

χρῆν δ' εὐθὺς εἶναι τήνδε τοῖς πᾶσιν δίκην,
ὅστις πέρα πράσσειν γε τῶν νόμων θέλοι,
κτείνειν· τὸ γὰρ πανοῦργον οὐκ ἂν ἦν πολὺ.

This punishment should come at once to all who would act outside the laws—death.
Then crime would not abound!

The dark undercurrent in these lines has not been fully appreciated. Orestes' hatred, like that of Camus's Stepan, has become universalized. These do not sound like the

words of a man soon to rule his people with kindness and sympathy. In fact, they sound more like a soon-to-be tyrant.

In the playbill for Synodinou's *Electra*, Hero Lamprou spoke ostensibly about the past, to evade the junta's censors:

This unique Electra – a symbol – with her flaming anger that does not subside, ... but also with her high moral values, ... would give the Athenians at the time the bittersweet joy of seeing and hearing their own condition personified in Agamemnon's un-subdued daughter, who is being devoured by her passion for justice ... [Orestes,] the avenger will be seen cleansing his paternal home from pollution ... Orestes does not need a law-court any more, as in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, to judge his act of matricide; he is *hosios*, «holy»²³.

In fact, this production was a thinly veiled call revolution in the present, and the audience got the message²⁴. Few would dispute that the junta qualified as a 'tyranny', and the power of this performance should surely be celebrated. But if Sophocles – and Camus – show us anything, it is that to sanctify tyrannicide with the blood of hatred is dangerous. For what *is* tyranny? That is the question. There is, after all, a sharp unintended irony in Lamprou's reference to «the Athenians at the time». It is true that the play *might* have been produced soon after the (short-lived) oligarchic revolution of 411²⁵. But the Athenian democrats who overthrew this revolution had long been struggling – and were now suffering – to sustain an empire many characterized, with good reason, as a 'tyranny'. Those democrats, in a frigid calculus of self-interested, had weighed the strategic advantages and disadvantages of murdering the Mytelineans; they had wiped out the Melians. Nothing has changed.

Dept. of Classics, Princeton University
Princeton NJ, USA

Samuel Cooper

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²³ I quote from van Steen 2002, 225 f.

²⁴ van Steen 2002, 28-30.

²⁵ Konstan 2008 argues that the play is a «political allegory» representing the «overthrow of the brutal oligarchy of the Four Hundred» and the «forcible restitution of the democracy in Athens» (79 f.). According to Aristotle (*Rh.* 3.18, 1419a 25-30), Sophocles was one of the *probouloi* who established this oligarchy; though he supposedly regretted this decision afterwards, he maintained that «there was no better alternative» (Konstan 2008, 80). While «allegory» is surely not the right word, Konstan's argument is a salutary reminder against locating the play's origin in some ideal, apolitical Classical past, and the evidence he adduces seems generally to support my analysis of the play's political complexity. On the other hand, the date of the play is not known (Finglass 2007, 1-4). Beer 2004, who also mentions Sophocles' connection to the oligarchy (117), thinks the play «presents a world in which hatred is so deeply ingrained and traditional moral values so debased that no one even stops to ask the moral consequences of their actions» (131).

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Abstract: Many scholars have characterized Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, in Sophocles' *Electra*, as tyrants, and their murder as tyrannicide. I partly dispute this characterization, arguing that it only clearly applies to Electra: her decision, initially based on fidelity to her dead father, that the existence of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus is incompatible with her own, *makes* them tyrants for her. Later she subsumes this fidelity into a broader, more positive project of liberation, which she articulates but does not fulfill. Comparing the end of the *Electra* to Camus's *Les Justes*, I assess the effect of tyrannicide on Electra's relationship with Orestes, and on the possible future of the *polis*.

Keywords: tyrannicide, freedom, fidelity, Synodinou, Camus.