

## Three Different Electras in Three Different Plots

In this paper<sup>1</sup> I shall consider how the role of Electra has helped to determine the structure of each of the three plots, and I shall ask how far it contributes to closure, or to indeterminacy, at the end of each play. Electra makes her first appearance in the Hesiodic *Catalogue*<sup>2</sup>, and from the 7<sup>th</sup> century onwards she has occasionally been identified on artistic representations. She may be shown on a Proto-Attic krater dated to c 670-660<sup>3</sup>, but it is not until c 480-470 that she is named on a work of art<sup>4</sup>. A Melian relief, variously dated between the 470s and 450s, portrays her recognition of Orestes at Agamemnon's tomb, a popular subject in 4<sup>th</sup> century art.<sup>5</sup> In the *Oresteia* of Stesichorus she recognised Orestes by means of the lock of hair.<sup>6</sup> But it is unlikely that Stesichorus gave her a major part in the story, or, as Wilamowitz believed<sup>7</sup>, that his poem included her marriage to Pylades. It seems to me, therefore, that Aeschylus inherited a tradition in which Electra's role was largely confined to her recognition of her brother, and that she had little to do with the killing of Clytaemestra and Aegisthus. If she *had* taken an active part in it, one would expect to find at least a trace of it in the tradition. The consequences of the matricide for Orestes are well-known in all their various versions, but we can find nothing until the late 5<sup>th</sup> century about what happened afterwards to Electra. In this respect, if not in others, Aeschylus was content to accept the tradition more or less as he found it, adapting it only as it seemed necessary to the requirements of his dramatic plot. Electra's role is to recognise her brother, which she does early in the play, in a scene whose joyful conclusion contrasts splendidly with the horror that will eventually follow. Her prayer (Appendix 1) that she may be a better woman than her mother establishes her as the opposite of the wicked and unnatural woman, Clytaemestra. In the great central *kommos* she joins the Chorus in urging Orestes to make his decision to punish the murderers, and we note, with misgivings, her admission (Appendix 2) that she has inherited her mother's savage heart<sup>8</sup>. With Orestes' decision made, Electra's role is complete. Orestes dismisses her to keep watch inside the palace (Appendix 3a and b), and we see her no more. In the context of the trilogy as a whole only Orestes

<sup>1</sup> This text was presented at the 21<sup>st</sup> Colloquium of CorHaLi, Lille 9-11 June 2011. I thank the organisers of the Colloquium for the invitation and the participants in the discussion for their remarks and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> Hesiod fr. 23 (a) 16.

<sup>3</sup> Berlin Staatl. Mus. 31573 (A32) (but now lost); *LIMC* III.1 717.75.

<sup>4</sup> A stamnos by the Triptolemus Painter representing the death of Aegisthus: *LIMC* I.1 373, I.2 287.

<sup>5</sup> See Garvie 1986, XVI-XVII. In metope 24 from the temple of Hera at Foce del Sele at Paestum (c 570-550 BC) the woman who is shown apparently restraining Clytaemestra as she attacks Orestes could be either Electra or the nurse. For the metopes see Zancani Montuoro – Zanotti-Bianco 1954, 106 ff., and 1951 271 ff.; Giuliani 1979, 67-71, pl. 18.1 and 2. For the Melian relief (Paris, Louvre MNB 906) see Garvie 1986, xxii; *LIMC* III.1 712, III.2 546.

<sup>6</sup> Stesich. fr. 217 *PMGF* Davies. Against the view that Stesichorus was a major innovator see Garvie 1986, XXI-XXII.

<sup>7</sup> Wilamowitz 1883, 221 n. 1. See also pp. 289 f. below.

<sup>8</sup> The language is ambiguous; it could mean 'as a result of what my mother has done', or (less well, with ᾗσαντρος) 'not to be fawned on by my mother'; see Garvie 1986, on 420-2. But the idea of what Electra has *inherited* from her mother is certainly present.

will suffer the consequences. Electra's presence from now on would, therefore, be irrelevant. Apart from Orestes himself, Electra is the only major human character who will still be alive at the end of the trilogy. But we are not required to think of her there, and even at the end of *Choephoroi* she is entirely forgotten.

Just after the *kommos*, however, there is a momentary glance at a possible future for Electra: at 486 f. (Appendix 4), and probably at the corrupt 482, she promises her father that, if he helps Orestes to take vengeance, she will offer libations at his tomb on her wedding-day. If the marriage of Pylades and Electra were already known to the audience as part of the tradition, would the audience feel some reassurance that she would in fact obtain her wish? But if, as I prefer to think, that was not yet part of the tradition, would the audience find pathos in the etymology of her name, ἄλεκτρος ('unmarried'), which Aelian attributes to Xanthus<sup>9</sup>, the predecessor of Stesichorus? Electra was, then, destined never to fulfil her proper role as a married woman. Of course her prayer may be simply the conventional wish of a woman in her situation, to balance the prayer of Orestes that he may recover the power in his father's house. But I am not convinced that, just because Aeschylus does not explicitly suggest that she will never marry, it is illegitimate for us, or for the original audience, to speculate for a moment about her future.

Any later tragedian who wished to give Electra the central role in the tragedy must either keep Orestes out of the way and delay the recognition for as long as possible, or make Electra a more interesting and positive character than Orestes. Sophocles chose the first alternative, Euripides the second. There can be no doubt that both had Aeschylus in mind when they composed their plays, most obviously Euripides, as he shows by his, I think good-humoured, demolition of the recognition scene in *Choephoroi*<sup>10</sup>. Both may have inherited from Aeschylus the paradox of one who prays to be more pious than, but ends up almost as bad as, her mother, while Euripides at last gives Electra the marriage for which she had only momentarily wished in *Choephoroi*. I have always felt that Sophocles' play is earlier than that of Euripides<sup>11</sup>, that the kind of changes that Euripides introduces would have made it difficult for Sophocles to write *his* play if he came after Euripides. But I certainly cannot prove it.

The structure of Sophocles' plot was perfectly adapted firstly to the presentation of a character who, as in so many Sophoclean plays, despite all the attempts of others to make her learn sense and to compromise and yield to her superiors, remains true to herself, and whom we admire for doing so. I still basically accept Bernard

<sup>9</sup> Xanthus fr. 2 *PMG* Page.

<sup>10</sup> The old view, that it is to be regarded as a serious and tasteless attack on Aeschylus, seems now to have been largely abandoned. The idea of Mau 1877, that 518-44 are interpolated, found a strong supporter in Fraenkel 1950, III, 821-6, and has been revived more recently by Bain 1977, West 1980 (who argues that Euripides was himself the interpolator), and Kovacs 1989. Against this see Bond 1974, Basta Donzelli 1980, Halporn 1983, Davies 1998.

<sup>11</sup> Even if the evidence from metrical resolution suggests a date c 422-16 for Euripides' play, Sophocles' *Electra* may have been composed before 416; see Finglass 2007, 1-4: «the evidence does not allow even a provisional decision» (2).

Knox's conception of «the Sophoclean hero»<sup>12</sup>, with the proviso that we should not take it to mean that we are to indulge in 'hero-worship' in the modern sense or to follow him/her as a role-model. Secondly the plot is adapted to Sophocles' well-known liking for the juxtaposition of a joyful scene with one that is deeply tragic. His recognition-scene comes very late in the play, and the juxtaposition between it and what follows is much more striking than in Aeschylus. Indeed it is central to our understanding of the tragedy as a whole.

I like to imagine that Sophocles composed his play backwards<sup>13</sup>. He begins with the great emotional and joyous climax of the recognition scene, which can come only after the other great climax in which Electra rises, I believe admirably, to her full stature as a Sophoclean hero, when she discovers that she does not need Orestes to carry out the killings; she can take action herself. Before that, she had to reject the news brought by the joyful Chrysothemis that Orestes has come home. She rejects it because in the preceding scene the Paedagogus has brought the false news of Orestes' death in the Pythian Games. Before that, Electra has to be presented to us as the loyal daughter of Agamemnon, who is determined, again I think admirably<sup>14</sup>, to lament his death forever, and whose whole life depends on her brother's return to take vengeance on the murderers, but who feels incapable of doing the job herself. Every scene is in exactly the right place.

All of that concerns Electra. Orestes is confined to the framework of the play, in the prologue making his plans, and at the end putting them into effect. In the joy of the recognition it is ironical that Electra, who throughout the play has been so single-mindedly intent on vengeance, now forgets about it altogether, and has, along with Orestes, to be reminded by the Paedagogus that the time for action has come. The audience too has put it to the back of its mind, so that what follows the recognition-scene comes as an unpleasant shock<sup>15</sup>. In little more than 100 lines Orestes has killed his mother inside the palace, and the play ends with Aegisthus being led off to die beside her. It all seems so perfunctory. Some older scholars thought that this was because Sophocles wanted a happy ending<sup>16</sup>, so he hurries over the unpleasantness as quickly as possible. I doubt whether many would take that view nowadays. It is the sudden change of mood and the precipitate nature of the matricide that make the ending of this play perhaps nastier than that of any other Greek tragedy. And we note that, while Orestes, as the traditional killer of Clytaemestra, is doing his work offstage, it is Electra who is at the centre of our attention, as she stands at the door, screaming to her brother, 'strike her a second time, if you have the strength' (Ap-

<sup>12</sup> Knox 1964; see also Winnington-Ingram 1980 (especially 239-46 on Soph. *El.*), and the edition by Garvie 1998, 11-7. In a review article of Garvie's edition Rosenbloom 2001 offers a rather less favourable analysis of the nature of Ajax's heroism.

<sup>13</sup> See Garvie 2005, 55 f.

<sup>14</sup> Wright 2005 takes a different view; Electra's emotions strike him as morbid from the very beginning, so that the joy of the recognition will be undermined and made to appear sinister. Seaford 1985 too finds Electra's lamentation anomalous; the prospect of unending weeping nullifies the ritual process of mourning followed by the reintegration of the mourners into society.

<sup>15</sup> Wright's interpretation (previous n.) removes that shock.

<sup>16</sup> A positive, rather than a 'dark', reading is still maintained in the edition of the play by March 2001, 15-20, and in Ead. 2004.

pendix 5)<sup>17</sup>. This play has no real closure. The murder of Aegisthus may be technically ἔξω τοῦ δράματος, but somehow it makes it even worse that behind the scenes the killing continues beyond the end of the play. If Sophocles does not explicitly question the justification for the matricide, it may be because he prefers to leave that question open. Whether it was just or not, Sophocles certainly presents it as horrible.

As for the future, there are no Erinyes to pursue Orestes, no prophecy of his wanderings and his ultimate acquittal before the Areopagus at Athens. But that does not mean that Sophocles wanted the ending to be happy, the horizon to be ‘free of all clouds’, as one scholar wrote in 1951<sup>18</sup>. In almost his last words (Appendix 6) Aegisthus refers prophetically to the present and *future* troubles of the Pelopidae. What are they? Are we to think after all of the Erinyes, or of various other versions of the story that may have been familiar to the audience<sup>19</sup>? It may be that there is no specific reference at all. As Finglass says, ‘the prospect of μέλλοντα κακά is just one of the factors which make this conclusion so uneasy’<sup>20</sup>. One may suppose that, if a tragedian gives even a tiny hint of something that depends on the spectators’ knowledge of the myth, he wants them to be aware of it, or at least has no objection to their remembering it. Even if there is no hint, he cannot positively *prevent* them from speculating. There are five references to the Erinyes earlier in the play (Appendix 7a-e), all of them in the context of the family. If Sophocles had wanted to expel them altogether from his version of the story, he should have been more careful not to mention them at all<sup>21</sup>. The real reason why there are no Erinyes at the end, or any mention of the future tribulations of Orestes, is that this is the play not of Orestes but of Electra, and the tradition has nothing to say about any sufferings that *she* was to endure. The question of *her* future is therefore best left vague and indeterminate. If Sophocles knew the version in which Electra was to marry Pylades, he certainly gives no hint that marital bliss of that kind was in store for her.

For that we have to wait for Euripides. We are astonished at the very beginning of the play to find that she is indeed already married, to a poor peasant-farmer – probably not the kind of marriage that she had hoped for in *Choephoroi*. The background is his country-cottage, and this sets the scene for all that is to come. While this, like Sophocles’ play, belongs primarily to Electra, Orestes now has a much fuller role. It soon becomes apparent that both of them, but especially Electra, are trying to be traditional heroes against the untraditional background of ordinary, everyday domestic life. This is their tragedy. Electra’s emotional lamentation for her father parallels that of Sophocles early in his play. The theme is the same, but, because the background has changed, the tone is completely different. While Sophocles’ Electra

<sup>17</sup> March (previous n.) argues that the original audience would have found nothing wrong with Electra’s words.

<sup>18</sup> Waldock 1951, 174.

<sup>19</sup> Sommerstein 1977, 214 n. 75, suggests that the audience may think of the killing of Aletes, the son of Aegisthus, or the near killing of Erigone, his daughter. It is unlikely, as some have proposed, that Aegisthus has in mind his own imminent death.

<sup>20</sup> Finglass 2007, 527.

<sup>21</sup> So Winnington-Ingram 1980, 218, 225-35. The opposite case, that neither here nor anywhere else in the play is there any allusion to events outside the play, was forcefully argued by Stinton 1986. For an excellent discussion of ‘the difficulty of determining what constitutes an allusion in light of the reader’s knowledge of the aftermath’, see Roberts 1997, 259 (in the context of this play).

seemed, I think, admirable for her determination not to forget her father or to yield to her enemies, there is something excessive about Euripides' Electra, who seems almost to enjoy the self-martyrdom of performing domestic chores for her husband. Could Sophocles have expected his audience to take seriously his own treatment of Electra's lamentation if it had already seen Euripides' almost paratragic version? When the Chorus arrives to sing the *parodos* it brings Electra an invitation to a dance. She declines the invitation on the familiar grounds that she has nothing to wear. Do we not feel with some impatience that she ought to go, that it would do her good to forget her troubles for a little while?

There is no great build-up to the recognition-scene as there is in Sophocles. On the other hand, it does not come quite as early as it does in Aeschylus. First we are kept in suspense by a preliminary encounter between brother and sister, in which Orestes bumbles the opportunity of revealing his identity to Electra. If he cannot manage a simple recognition-scene, how will he succeed in avenging his father's death as the hero whom Electra imagines her brother to be? When it does come, the treatment of the recognition is fairly perfunctory, and so is the joy, as the thoughts of the characters and of the audience turn to the plans for the murders. In this play there is much more emphasis on the killing of Aegisthus than in Aeschylus and Sophocles. His murder while taking part in a religious festival is horrible, and even more horrible is the murder of Clytaemestra inside the country-cottage, to which she has been invited on the pretext that Electra has had a baby and wishes to show it to her mother.

The surprise comes when the killers emerge from the cottage, unexpectedly shattered by what they have just done, and full of remorse. Already Euripides invites us to think about the future, when Orestes in his despair asks what city or host will be prepared to receive him, and Electra echoes his cry by asking what dance would she be able to take part in, and who would want to marry her now (Appendix 8). She who at the beginning of the play declined an invitation to go dancing will no longer be admitted to a dance. And she seems, strangely, to forget that she is already married. There the play might have ended, in total despair and with total lack of closure. But this is Euripides, whose preference is of course to bring on a *deus ex machina* to satisfy his audience's natural curiosity by tidying up loose ends with predictions of the future. Such endings vary in their dramatic effect. Sometimes, while the device does provide apparent closure, there are some loose ends that are not tidied up, and a few questions remain. In *Electra* Castor, having settled once and for all the question as to whether Orestes was right to kill his mother, devotes much of his speech to a full account of what is to happen to Orestes, including his pursuit by the Erinyes and his eventual acquittal before the Areopagus in Athens. None of this is problematic. Castor ends with the promise of final closure for Orestes in the distant future, with the good news that when he has been released from these troubles he will be happy (Appendix 9)<sup>22</sup>.

But what about Electra? It is supposed to be her play. But in a mere five lines of his long speech Castor says only that she is to marry Pylades, who will take her home to Phocis, accompanied strangely by Electra's first, peasant, husband. I would

<sup>22</sup> The language recalls Eur. *Hec.* 1291 f., Agamemnon's wishful-thinking at the end of that play: εὖ δὲ τὰν δόμοις / ἔχοντ' ἴδοιμεν τῶνδ' ἀφεμμένοι πόνων.

like to think, but cannot prove, that none of this was traditional, that it was Euripides himself who invented Electra's two marriages, and that he did so for this play. The marriage with Pylades is predicted also at the end of *Orestes*, produced certainly later than *Electra*, and it has already taken place in *Iphigenia in Tauris*, whose date, like that of *Electra* itself is uncertain. The historian Hellanicus refers to the marriage, with the additional information that their children were called Medon and Strophius<sup>23</sup>. Hellanicus' dates are unclear<sup>24</sup>, but he does seem to have been still writing in the last decade of the century. It is more likely that the marriage was invented by a tragedian than by a historian<sup>25</sup>. But of course Hellanicus may have had a source unknown to us.

Castor's speech does not come quite at the end of the play. It is followed by a dialogue in which Electra and Orestes make it clear that they are by no means happy with Castor's explanations or with the arrangements that he has outlined. Electra had asked despairingly who would want to marry her. Now she has the answer. But she finds no consolation in the thought of having to leave Argos as the wife of Pylades. Now she has two husbands, but she is not happy with either. It was no doubt a conventional element in a Greek wedding for the bride to express sorrow at the thought that she was leaving her natal family and home, to acquire a new *κύριος*, and to start a new life<sup>26</sup>, but I think that there is more to it here. What is uppermost in the minds of both Orestes and Electra is that they are losing each other. The joy of being reunited was perfunctory in the recognition-scene, but now the emotionalism rings true. As Deborah Roberts remarks, the burial of Clytaemestra, the ritual which often provides closure at the end of a tragedy, is here described by Castor in a few passionless lines. Orestes and Electra will have no part in it; 'the real mourning is grief for a separation felt to be worse than death'<sup>27</sup>. It is difficult to imagine Pylades and Electra as a conventional married couple. What did they talk about round the fire on a winter's evening in Phocis? I have never thought of Pylades as one of the world's great conversationalists. In Aeschylus he speaks three lines, in Sophocles and in this play none. It is only in *Iphigenia* and *Orestes* that he becomes more talkative. At the end of Sophocles' play our sympathy for Electra receives a nasty jolt. It is, for me, the other way round with Euripides. I have become more sympathetic to Electra in this final scene, and I should like her to have found peace. I find it sad that I shall never know whether she did live happily ever after. Euripides does not tell us, and, as far as Electra is concerned, there is no real closure.

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<sup>23</sup> *FGrH* 4 F 155; cf. Paus. 3.1.6.

<sup>24</sup> See Gudeman 1932, 110 f.

<sup>25</sup> See also the view of Wilamowitz cited on p. 285 above.

<sup>26</sup> See Alexiou 1974, 120-2, and Seaford 1987.

<sup>27</sup> Roberts 1993, 588.

Appendix

1. αὐτῆι τέ μοι δὸς σωφρονεστέραν πολὺ  
μητρὸς γενέσθαι χεῖρά τ' εὐσεβεστέραν (Aesch. *Cho.* 140 f.)
2. λύκος γὰρ ὄστ' ὁμόφρων  
ἄσαντος ἐκ ματρὸς ἐστι θυμός (Aesch. *Cho.* 421 f.)
3. (a) τήνδε μὲν στείχειν ἔσω (Aesch. *Cho.* 554)  
(b) νῦν οὖν σὺ μὲν φύλασσε τὰν οἴκωι καλῶς (A. *Cho.* 579)
4. κἀγὼ χοάς σοι τῆς ἐμῆς παγκληρίας  
οἴσω πατρῶϊων ἐκ δόμων γαμηλίους (Aesch. *Cho.* 486 f.)
5. Κλ. ὅμοι πέπληγμαι. Ηλ. παῖσον, εἰ σθένεις, διπλῆν (Soph. *El.* 1415)
6. ἦ πᾶσ' ἀνάγκη τήνδε τὴν στέγην ἰδεῖν  
τά τ' ὄντα καὶ μέλλοντα Πελοπιδῶν κακά; (Soph. *El.* 1497 f.)
7. (a) Ηλ. ...ὦ χθόνι' Ἐρμῆ καὶ πότνι' Ἄρᾳ,  
σεμναί τε θεῶν Ἐρινύες... (Soph. *El.* 111 f.)  
  
(b) Ηλ. ἦ δ' ὄδε τλήμων ὄστε τῶι μιάστορι  
ξύνεστ', Ἐρινὺν οὐτὶν' ἐκφοβουμένη (Soph. *El.* 275 f.)  
  
(c) Χο. ἦξει καὶ πολύπους καὶ πολύχειρ ἅ  
δεινοῖς κρυπτομένα λόχοις  
χαλκόπους Ἐρινύς (Soph. *El.* 488-91)  
  
(d) Χο. διδύμαν ἐλοῦσ' Ἐρινὺν (Soph. *El.* 1080)  
  
(e) Χο. βεβᾶσιν ἄρτι δωμαίων ὑπόστεγοι  
μετάδρομοι κακῶν πανουργημάτων  
ἄφυκτοι κύνες (Soph. *El.* 1386-8)
8. Ορ. τίνα δ' ἑτέραν μὲν πόλιν;  
τίς ξένος, τίς εὐσεβῆς  
ἐμὸν κάρα προσόψεται  
ματέρα κτανόντος;  
Ηλ. ἰὼ ἰὼ μοι. ποῖ δ' ἐγώ, τίν' ἐς χορόν,  
τίνα γάμον εἶμι; τίς πόσις με δέξεται  
νυμφικὰς ἐς εὐνάς (Eur. *El.* 1194-200)
9. πεπρωμένην γὰρ μοῖραν ἐκπλήσας φόνου  
εὐδαμονήσεις τῶνδ' ἀπαλλαχθεὶς πόνων (Eur. *El.* 1290 f.)

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**Abstract:** In Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* Electra's traditional role is subordinate to that of her brother. The decision of Sophocles and Euripides to give her the principal role in their versions of the story determined in different ways the construction of their plots. In Sophocles the recognition-scene is postponed until Electra has risen to her full stature as a characteristic 'Sophoclean hero', but the joy of the recognition is followed immediately by the horror of the matricide. The play ends without closure as Aegisthus is led away to a death which takes place ἐξω τοῦ δῶματος. In Euripides the recognition comes much earlier, and is relatively perfunctory and unemotional. The matricide, however, leaves both Orestes and Electra distraught. The deus ex machina provides, at some length, a final and distant closure for Orestes, but, although this is Electra's play, only five lines are devoted to her forthcoming marriage to Pylades. She shows no joy at the prospect, and now the genuine emotion is confined to the sadness of the separation of brother and sister. Euripides leaves the question of Electra's future happiness indeterminate.

**Keywords:** plot-construction, hero, emotionalism, closure, indeterminacy.