

Reaching the *καιρός* in Sophocles' *Electra**

The word 'καιρός' and its cognates – for example, *καίριος* – appear more frequently in the *Electra* and the *Philoctetes* than in Sophocles' other extant plays¹. While the word 'καιρός' has a wide variety of uses, its fundamental meaning, as, for example, William Race has shown, is 'the appropriate' or 'the fitting'². For instance, the temporal use of *καιρός* to mean 'the right time' refers to the time that is *appropriate* for one's endeavor. Again, the quantitative use of *καιρός* to mean 'the right measure' refers to the measure of something that is *appropriate* for one's purposes. Attending to the *καιρός* in an endeavor involves recognizing the time, place, quantity, or manner appropriate to it. For example, in order to reach the *καιρός* in repaying a favor, it is not enough simply to reciprocate, but one must do so in the appropriate time, place, and manner – if, say, my friend bought me a beer last night, I will not repay him adequately by surprising him at breakfast with a Leffe. Rather, I should buy him a beer when I can reasonably expect him to welcome one. If, on the other hand, an action is appropriate at any time and in any amount, then observing the *καιρός* in performing it is trivial.

In this essay, I argue that the concept of the *καιρός* plays an important role in the characterization of Orestes and Electra. In particular, a significant feature of Electra's character is her insensitivity to the *καιρός*, which contrasts with Orestes' marked sensitivity to it. Appreciating the role of the *καιρός* in the *Electra* is also significant for resolving the ethical dilemma posed by Orestes' obligation to avenge his father's murder by killing his mother. I argue that his attention to the *καιρός* of vengeance helps to defuse this dilemma. By killing Clytemnestra and Aegisthos in as similar a way as possible to their own murder of Agamemnon, and so appealing to a well-attested archaic and classical Greek line of thought about the due measure of punishment, his matricide is less problematic than it otherwise would be.

This essay has two parts: In the first, I discuss some uses of the word 'καιρός' in the *Electra*, and its role in the characterization of Electra and Orestes. In the second and final section, I argue that seeing the matricide in light of Orestes' earlier appeals to the *καιρός* helps to explain the play's surprisingly positive portrayal of it.

I.

The prologue includes four of the eight occurrences of the word 'καιρός' in the *Electra*. In the first instance, the Pedagogue urges Orestes to give counsel before an-

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¹ There are 38 instances of *καιρός* and its cognates in Sophocles' extant plays and fragments, of which 8 occur in the *Electra* and 10 in the *Philoctetes*.

² I take 'the appropriate' and 'the fitting' to be equivalent in sense to Race's «propriety», which he describes as «the basic sense» of the word *καιρός* in Race 1981, 197 f. Cf. Barrett 1964, 386. For a fuller discussion of the range of meanings of the word *καιρός*, see Trédé 1992.

yone discovers them, ‘since it is no longer *καιρός* to hesitate, but it is the moment for deeds’ (22)³. *Καιρός* is used by Orestes in the same sense shortly afterward, when he tells the Pedagogue to approach the palace ‘when *καιρός* leads you’ (39). In both cases, *καιρός* has a non-ethical, prudential sense. That is, the Pedagogue is to approach the palace when it is opportune to do so, not when doing so is good in a more robust sense.

The meaning of *καιρός* is quite different when Orestes, in explaining his plan for taking vengeance, asks the Pedagogue to correct him ‘if I do not hit the *καιρός*’ (31). The sense of *καιρός* here is broader than in the above cases, since Orestes presumably wants the Pedagogue to correct him if he goes astray *in any way*, prudential or ethical.

The final instance of *καιρός* in the prologue again differs from the earlier uses. In concluding his opening speech, Orestes says: ‘And we are off. For it is the *καιρός* – and the *καιρός* is the chief ruler of every action for men’ (75 f.). The primary sense of *καιρός* here is temporal: it is ‘the right time’ for Orestes to carry out his plans for vengeance. However, the maxim describing the *καιρός* as the «chief ruler» of every human action presumably also refers to the broader sense of *καιρός* as ‘the appropriate’. For it is the appropriate more generally, whether in time, quantity, location, or manner, that is «the chief ruler» of every human action. This is supported by the similarity of Orestes’ closing line to traditional Greek maxims describing the significance of the *καιρός* for human endeavors. For instance, Hesiod, in warning against overloading ships or wagons with too many goods, writes: «Observe due measure. *Καιρός* is best in all things» (*Op.* 694). While due measure and *καιρός* here refer especially to the appropriate quantity of goods one should put into a particular wagon or ship, both are also clearly intended to apply more broadly to «all things». Again, in *Olympian* 13, Pindar writes: «Due measure follows in each endeavor. It is best to recognize what is *καιρός*» (47 f.). In this passage also, *καιρός* refers generally to the appropriate. The final use of *καιρός* in the prologue thus alludes to the archaic and classical Greek view that observing the *καιρός* plays an essential role in right and successful action.

The prologue therefore characterizes Orestes as sensitive to the *καιρός* in a variety of senses. It also portrays him as endeavoring to observe the *καιρός* in each stage of his planned vengeance on Clytemnestra and Aegisthos. While some scholars see Orestes’ concern for the *καιρός* as indicating a crass interest in avenging his father, irrespective of means⁴, we have seen that the use of the term *καιρός* in the prologue is not merely prudential. Thus, to the extent that Orestes aims to observe the *καιρός* in taking vengeance, he is not unconcerned with the means by which he takes vengeance, but is rather intent on taking vengeance in the most appropriate way.

Matters are quite different when we meet Electra. The first lines of her speech introduce us to her endless mourning: ‘Holy light and air having an equal share as earth, how many songs of lament and blows aimed at my bleeding breast have you heard, whenever gloomy night has left’ (86-90). Not only has she mourned her father’s murder continuously, but a few lines later she promises to continue doing so

³ All translations from the Greek are my own.

⁴ See, for instance, Schein 1982, 72 and Woodard 1964, 165.

as long as she lives: 'But I will not cease from gloomy laments and cries, as long as I look on the bright twinkling of the stars, and on the day' (103-6).

Electra does not choose certain, opportune times for mourning her father's murder – as, for instance, Orestes chooses certain times for each stage of his planned vengeance – but mourns continuously, all the time. Indeed, in criticizing Orestes' failure to return in her opening comments, she complains: 'But he forgets the things he has suffered and learned. For what message from him does not come to me as a disappointment? For he always wants to appear, but despite wanting to, he does not deem it right to appear' (169-72). Electra's description of Orestes is, in fact, perfectly consistent with his sensitivity to the καιρός. On the basis of the prologue, we should expect Orestes to have long desired to return to his ancestral home, but to have waited for the καιρός of returning nevertheless. For Electra, however, the difference between Orestes' wanting to return and his deeming it the right time to return indicates that he 'forgets the things he has suffered and learned', rather than that he is waiting attentively for the καιρός of returning. As far as Electra is concerned, one moment is as good as any other for Orestes to return; to the extent that she recognizes the καιρός as applying to his return, every moment is καιρίος.

Her insensitivity to the καιρός is vividly depicted in the recognition scene, which involves the other cluster of instances of the word καιρός. Electra, once she recognizes Orestes, passionately celebrates their reunion. Indeed, she celebrates it so passionately that, only 12 lines into the recognition scene, Orestes counsels her that 'it is better to be silent, lest someone inside should hear' (1236-8). When Electra refuses and begins to describe their unfortunate family history, he replies: 'I also know these things very well. But when opportunity (παρουσία) calls, then it is right to remember these deeds'. To which, Electra replies: 'In my view, all, yes all, of time, as it comes, is fitting to say these things with justice' (1250-5). Once again, for Electra any moment of time is καιρίος for recalling and lamenting her misfortunes. A few lines later, Orestes tries again, in vain, to silence her: 'Do not wish to speak at length when it is not καιρός' (1259).

Shortly afterward, Orestes again requests that Electra cease to celebrate their reunion, and rather tell him where he, Pylades, and the Pedagogue should appear, or hide, in order to accomplish the matricide. 'Leave aside superfluous words... for such a speech would take from you the καιρός of time. But tell me what is fitting for the present time, right now' (1288-93). In this passage, Orestes sharply distinguishes between 'the superfluous' (τὰ περισσεύοντα), on the one hand, and the καιρός, which he glosses as 'what is fitting for the present time, right now' (ἃ δ' ἀρμόσει μοι τῷ παρόντι νῦν χρόνῳ), on the other. In Orestes' view, then, Electra, in recalling their mother's crimes and in loudly celebrating their reunion, is inadequately attentive to the distinction between the superfluous and the καιρός.

For Electra, as she explains in the first episode, the same course of action, mourning, has been fitting since her father's murder (86-90, 103-6). Accordingly, observing the καιρός has been irrelevant to her since Agamemnon's death. The recognition scene, in which she readily jeopardizes her and Orestes' opportunity for vengeance by loudly celebrating their reunion, illustrates that her insensitivity to the καιρός is not peculiar to her mourning, but is a more general character trait.

II.

As has often been noted, unlike both Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* and Euripides' *Electra*, Sophocles' *Electra* plays down the murder of Clytemnestra⁵. Most notably, her murder receives both less attention than, and occurs before, that of Aigisthos. Moreover, at the end of the play, after the vengeance has been accomplished, there is no explicit description of her murder as ethically complicated or even regrettable. Matricide is simply not an issue the play explicitly discusses; however, given the dramatic and cultural context, the occlusion of the ethical difficulties involved in the matricide is a puzzle for readers of the *Electra*. I will argue that the attention Orestes, following Apollo's oracle, gives to the *καιρός* of vengeance contributes to the minimization of the ethical dilemma posed by his filial obligation to murder his mother. I argue for this by both discussing the specific method of execution pursued by Orestes, and contrasting the quite different views of Orestes and Electra regarding how best to take vengeance.

In the prologue, Orestes tells the Pedagogue: 'Phoibos gave a prophecy to me of such a sort as you will soon hear. Without men at arms or an army, I should accomplish secretly, by deceit, slaughter performed by a just hand' (35-7). As has often been commented, the oracle's juxtaposition of slaughter accomplished secretly by deceit (*δόλοισι κλέψαι*) with slaughter performed by a just hand (*χειρὸς ἐνδίκου σφαγᾶς*) is quite surprising⁶. For many readers, this suggests that the murder of Clytemnestra and Aigisthos is not, after all, as unproblematic as the surviving characters seem to believe. For example, in commenting on this passage, Seth Schein writes: «We are... given moral pause when we learn that the chosen *action* consists in fact of treachery, of *verbal* deception. ...Despite the traditional moral approval in Greek literature, as far back as the *Odyssey*, of lying and deception as positive heroic practices, such a statement in a late fifth-century tragedy must be viewed as morally shocking, or at least provocative»⁷.

In arguing that the murder of Clytemnestra and Aigisthos is ethically problematic, scholars have also focused on a passage near the end of the play⁸. As Orestes is leading Aigisthos into the palace to execute him, Aigisthos asks: 'Why are you leading me into the house? How, if this deed is noble, does it require darkness, and are you not ready to kill me now' (1493 f.)? Aigisthos' taunt picks up the same tension as that suggested by the oracle's recommendation that Orestes murder Clytemnestra and Aigisthos through deceit rather than openly. While Aigisthos is not an especially credible witness as to either the justice of Orestes' vengeance or the best method of pursuing it, his question reveals a tension between Orestes' manner of vengeance and the ordinary ethical intuition that, *ceteris paribus*, actions performed without deceit and in the public eye are more just than those performed deceitfully or secretly.

Orestes replies to Aigisthos: 'Do not give me orders! Go where you killed my father, so that you may die in the same place' (1495 f.). Orestes evidently takes killing

⁵ See, for instance, Jebb 1894, xl-xli; Stevens 1978, 111-20, esp. 114-7; and Whitman 1951, 161-4.

⁶ For a survey of such interpretations, see Macleod 2001, 28 n. 17.

⁷ Schein 1982, 72.

⁸ For instance, Kells 1973, 5 and Kirkwood 1958, 241 n. 22.

Aigisthos in the same place where Aigisthos killed Agamemnon to be more important than conforming to the norm that he execute him openly, in the public eye. Although scholars have often taken this to be a weak response to Aigisthos' objection – for instance, Kells writes: «Orestes has *no* answer, except to express his intention that Aigisthos shall die 'in the same place' as Agamemnon»⁹ – Orestes' response picks up a recurrent theme in his pursuit of vengeance. For instance, it matches the Delphic oracle's advice on how he should take vengeance on Aigisthos and Clytemnestra. As we saw above, the oracle, in responding to Orestes' inquiry regarding 'in what way' he should pursue vengeance for his father's murder, urged him to pursue vengeance through deceit. Like his decision to murder Aigisthos inside the palace, pursuing vengeance through deceit runs against ordinary ancient Greek ethical intuitions. Orestes' reply to Aigisthos suggests, however, an explanation for the oracle's advice. By avenging his father's death through deceit, Orestes will take vengeance *in the same way* as Clytemnestra and Aigisthos killed his father.

This is further supported by the close intertextual parallels between the murder of Clytemnestra in the *Electra* and Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon in the *Oresteia*. Both murders take place off stage, with the audience and chorus listening in from outside. Two moments in the scenes are especially similar¹⁰. First, similar to Agamemnon's cry, 'Alas! I have been struck a mortal blow inside' (ὄμοι πέπληγμαι καιρίαν πληγὴν ἔσω), Clytemnestra on being stabbed the first time yells 'Alas! I have been struck' (ὄμοι πέπληγμαι). Again, similar to Agamemnon who ends his life yelling 'Alas! I have been struck again, a second time' (ὄμοι μάλ' αὖθις δευτέραν πεπληγμένος), Electra, in responding to Clytemnestra's first yell, shouts 'strike a second time, if you have strength' (παῖσον, εἰ σθένεις, διπλῆν). Which is shortly followed by Clytemnestra's final shout: 'Alas! I am struck again' (ὄμοι μάλ' αὖθις). The verbal parallels between the two scenes support the notion that Orestes' vengeance closely tracks the manner in which Agamemnon was murdered¹¹.

I have been arguing that Orestes, in avenging his father, endeavors to mirror the manner of his father's murder. Electra, by contrast, does not evince any concern for such constraints in her own discussion of avenging Agamemnon. Rather, while she tells Clytemnestra that she would gladly have raised Orestes as an avenger of Clytemnestra's crime (603-5), and criticizes Orestes for not returning to avenge Agamemnon's death sooner (169-72), she nowhere describes any constraints she would place on her manner of vengeance. Again, when she hears of Orestes' spurious death, she seeks her sister Chrysothemis' aid in murdering Clytemnestra and Aigisthos, but neither suggests that they take vengeance in any special way, nor expresses interest in visiting the Pythian oracle for advice (947-89). It therefore seems likely that she is indifferent to the manner of vengeance. This difference between Orestes' and Electra's concern for the manner in which they avenge Agamemnon's murder tracks their different sensitivities to the *καίρος*. While Electra does not care how she avenges her father's murder, so long as she avenges it, Orestes insists on taking ven-

⁹ Kells 1973, 5, my emphasis.

¹⁰ The following quotations are from Aesch. *Ag.* 1343, 1345 and Soph. *El.* 1415 f.

¹¹ For further discussion of the similarity between these two passages, see Finglass 2007, 516.

geance in a particular way, that tracks Agamemnon's own death as closely as possible.

I want to argue that Orestes' concern for observing the *καῖρός* in avenging Agamemnon helps to mitigate the ethical dilemma posed by his obligation to avenge his father by murdering his mother. The sense of the *καῖρός* I have in mind is that present, as discussed above, in Orestes' general maxim at the end of the prologue about the significance of the *καῖρός* for human endeavors (75 f.). Observing the *καῖρός* in his pursuit of vengeance thus involves recognizing the right time, place, and manner of action appropriate to avenging his father. While it may, generally speaking, be vicious to murder one's mother irrespective of her crimes, that executing her in the *right* place and in the *right* way, and so observing the *καῖρός* in murdering her, is less obviously impermissible. More particularly, there are two ways in which Orestes' manner of murdering Clytemnestra and Aigisthos may make his matricide less blameworthy.

First, by mirroring Clytemnestra and Aigisthos' own murder of Agamemnon in taking vengeance on them, Orestes makes their punishment fit their crime as closely as possible, and so eases any concerns over whether their punishment is appropriate. This is to apply what Trevor Saunders refers to as a «*talio* with mirror» model of punishment¹². While the *lex talionis* more generally demands a high degree of symmetry between a crime and its punishment – for instance, an eye for an eye – the *talio* with mirror model of punishment aims at an even higher degree of symmetry between a crime and its punishment¹³. For example, it demands not only an eye for an eye, but an eye gouged out by a knife for an eye gouged out by a knife. The *talio* with mirror model of punishment is also present in the *Oresteia*; most notably, Orestes bids the chorus to keep silent about his plan to murder Aigisthos and Clytemnestra, 'so that, having killed a man of standing by deceit, they may also be taken by deceit, and die in the same snare, as Loxias foretold' (*Ch.* 556-8)¹⁴. Similarly, in the *Electra*, Orestes, by reenacting Clytemnestra and Aigisthos' own murder of Agamemnon, endeavors to make their punishment as appropriate as possible to their crime, and thereby to observe the due measure or *καῖρός* of punishment¹⁵. This both contributes to the impression that his execution of them is just, and defends him from the charge that in punishing them he either fails to exact retribution for Agamemnon or exacts too heavy of a penalty from Clytemnestra and Aigisthos.

Second, I want to suggest that Orestes' manner of murdering Clytemnestra and Aigisthos gives them a more active role in their own execution, and so diminishes his responsibility for killing them. In this sense, his murder of them once again echoes Aeschylus' *Choephoroi*, in which Orestes, as he leads Clytemnestra off to her death, replies to her complaint that he is about to kill his mother by telling her, 'know well, you will kill yourself, not I' (922 f.). In the *Choephoroi*, Orestes thus disowns responsibility for killing Clytemnestra on the grounds that her crime has

¹² Saunders 1991, 77 f.; for examples, see his appendix at pp. 357-61.

¹³ For a detailed discussion of the *lex talionis*, see Hirzel 1907-10.

¹⁴ Compare Hermann Fraenkel's discussion of the murder weapon Clytemnestra uses to kill Agamemnon in Fraenkel 1950, 806-9.

¹⁵ For a discussion of *καῖρός* as due measure, see Wilson 1980.

compelled him to murder her¹⁶. Orestes has an even better claim to diminished responsibility in the *Electra*; for, in the *Electra*, he is not only punishing Clytemnestra's crime, but to the best of his ability simply reenacting her own previous actions.

To sum up, I have argued that the *καρὸς* plays an important role both in the characterization of the siblings, and in minimizing the ethical dilemma involved in Orestes' matricide. While interpreters of the *Electra* have often argued that Orestes' use of deceit in taking vengeance and the consequent similarity between his manner of killing Clytemnestra and Aigisthos and their own murder of Agamemnon call into question the justice of the matricide, I argue that killing Aigisthos and Clytemnestra by deceit is an essential part of his killing them justly. That is, insofar as Orestes' use of deceit contributes to making his manner of vengeance as similar as possible to their murder of Agamemnon, it helps to resolve the ethical conflict between his obligation to avenge his father and the prohibition against matricide. Of course, ancient as well as contemporary audiences of the *Electra* might not be persuaded that the matricide is as unproblematic as the characters surviving at the end of the play seem to believe. Still, whatever one thinks of the ethical status of Orestes' murder of Clytemnestra, I hope to have shown that in portraying the matricide the *Electra* appeals to a line of reasoning characteristic of classical Greek ethical thought, albeit perhaps foreign to contemporary readers.

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¹⁶ Compare Euphiletos' response to Eratosthenes' plea that he be allowed to pay a fine rather than suffer death for seducing Euphiletos' wife: 'I will not kill you, but rather the law of the city will kill you, which you transgressed and had less regard for than your pleasures...' (Lys. 1.26). For further parallels, see Todd 2007, 120.

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Abstract: This paper argues that the use of the term *καυός* in Sophocles' *Electra* is important both for the characterization of Orestes and Electra, and for mitigating the ethical dilemma posed by Orestes' filial obligation to commit matricide. It shows that a significant feature of Electra's character is her insensitivity to the *καυός*, which contrasts with Orestes' sensitivity to it. Orestes' sensitivity to the *καυός* is illustrated by his endeavor, in killing Clytemnestra and Aigisthos, to mirror their own murder of Agamemnon. The paper ends by showing that Orestes, by observing the *καυός* of vengeance, helps to defuse the ethical dilemma posed by the matricide.

Keywords: Appropriateness, characterization, justice, matricide, Sophocles.