A Study in Form: Recognition Scenes in the Three Electra Plays[*]

> The effects of recognition have to do with know-ledge and the means of acquiring it, with secrets, disguises, lapses of memory, clues, signs, and the like, and this no doubt explains the odd, almost asymmetrical positioning of *anagnorisis* in the domain of poetics… Structure and theme, poetics and interpretation, are curiously combined in this term…
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> Terence Cave[1]

The fortuitous survival of three plays by each of the three tragic poets on the same story offers an unparalleled opportunity to consider some of the formal aspects of the genre, those which dictate the limits and possibilities of its dramatic enactment. Three salient elements constitute the irreducible minimum that characterizes the Orestes-Electra plot and is by necessity common to all three versions. These consist of *nostos* (return), *anagnorisis* (recognition) and *mechanêma* (the intrigue). This sequence is known to us already from the *Odyssey* as the masterplot in the story of Odysseus himself and his return home, and it will come into play once again, notably in Euripides' version. Yet, at the same time, the *Odyssey* already contains the story of Orestes, who returns home to avenge his father, and it is this deed that provides a contrapuntal line to the main story, which is that of the trials of Odysseus, his homecoming, his eventual vengeance on the suitors, and revelation of identity to friends and kin. The epic, however, gives only the bare facts of Orestes' deed, which are recorded at the very outset in the proem (*Od.* 1.40 f.) and thereafter, and these for wholly different purposes: to establish the ethics of personal accountability for the regicide (Aegisthus), to encourage Telemachus, who has now come of age, to emulate Orestes as a moral exemplum regarding his obligation to punish the equally transgressive suitors (but with implicit comparison also to Odysseus himself as avenger of his household), and finally, to incriminate Clytemnestra by the dead Agamemnon, while eliding as far as possible, the responsibility of Orestes for matricide[2].

Whatever the elaboration of the Orestes saga in the post-Homeric tradition[3], it is Aeschylus who amplifies the myth, gives it a structured plot, and establishes the formal ingredients of a stage version. These consist of the cast of characters (especially the figure of Electra, not known from the epic tradition, except perhaps by name), the sequence of events «in which the siblings meet first as strangers and

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[1] Cave 1988, 2 f.

[2] See, for example, D'Arms – Hulley 1946, and Goldhill 1986, 148-51, to name only a few. Mentions in the *Odyssey*: 1.28-43, 298-300, 3.197-200, 253-75, 303-10; 4.512-37; 11.409-34; 24.24-34, 96 f., 199 f.

[3] There are some tantalizing hints from the 6th century poet, Stesichorus, *PMG* 214, that are the most relevant to subsequent dramatizations. See Moreau 1984 and Garvie 1986, xxii f.

gradually overcome the barriers imposed by ignorance and/or disguise»[4], and the three essential elements of the intrigue as I just outlined above: *nostos*, *anagnorisis*, and *mechanêma*. Orestes returns incognito from exile (how long this exile lasted we do not know). He is reunited with his sister (at one time or another in the course of the play) through a variety of means in scenes of *anagnorisis*, and a plot is devised, whether singly (as in Sophocles) or jointly by the siblings (Aeschylus, Euripides), to kill Aegisthus and Clytemnestra in revenge for their father's murder. Aeschylus' *Choephoroi*, therefore, sets the ruling paradigm in response to which the other two tragic poets compose their own contributions to the saga of the house of Atreus. By treating the same plot and engaging the same themes, there are inevitably allusions to and reminders of the earlier work, which now become an integral part of the textures of the plays and command our attention[5].

What must be emphasized, therefore, in the first instance is that there are two sets of relations: that of the drama with its mythic plot in its basic outlines (Orestes must return and kill his mother and her lover or else he is not Orestes), and that of one drama with another, whereby the creative capacity of the later dramatists to work with and against its august predecessor immeasurably enriches the tragic experience and instructs us on the range of possibilities within a theater ruled by convention.

I have chosen as my major focus an examination of the *anagnorisis* or recognition scenes in the three plays under consideration. I have done so, which I will explain shortly at greater length, because the premise of Aeschylus' drama and of those that follow him is that the plot cannot proceed without the reunion of brother and sister – the one an exile returning from abroad, and the other, who was left behind to live with her father's murderers. The insistence on this gendered pair and the necessity of constructing or reconstructing their relationship in a symbiotic dependency to make an alliance of common interest (whenever and however it is managed) is the fundamental basis on which each drama entirely relies, despite the siblings' differences in character, outlook, and experience, and despite the poets' different ways of reestablishing that familial bond. Electra in all three plays is waiting for Orestes, not just as her rescuer, but also as her complement, and eventually (at least, in Sophocles and Euripides), as an active co-conspirator in the actual conduct of the revenge. Whether the spotlight falls on Orestes (as in the *Choephoroi*) or on Electra who dominates the proceedings in the later eponymous plays, the *anagnorisis* in its epistemological, psychological, social, and practical implications, eventually entails a change of belief about another's identity, particularly between one *philos* and another, that goes far beyond Aristotle's schematic enumeration of the means to achieve it (Ar. *Poet.* 1452a-b). In this case, what is essential is the restitution of kinship ties that were severed long ago, so that beyond its generic enumeration, recognition must eventually be a shared experience that requires the brother and sister to interact in one way or another as they grope towards the longed for goal. Moreover, the «technical means employed by each playwright to effect this *anagnorisis*», as Boitani observes, «have a bearing on the artistic construction of each play and imply

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[4] Post 1980, 179.
[5] I omit here consideration of the relationship between Sophocles' and Euripides' *Electra* plays, in the first instance, because I believe the question of priority can never be satisfactorily resolved, and second, because that relationship is not entirely germane to the discussion I have in mind.

different gnoseological and epistemological attitudes, in particular regarding the value of signs and modes of 'reasoning'»[6]. Finally, from a dramaturgical point of view, «for understandable theatrical reasons, recognition scenes are paced by anticipation and delay, which enacted by deliberation and skepticism, thus reveal the cognitive activity behind the recognition, and add tension and suspense to the scene itself»[7]. In other words, recognition scenes are pure theater with immense dramatic potential from every point of view.

1. Convention and Invention.

Given the fact that Aeschylus stages the *anagnorisis* almost at the start of his play, another expectation is raised when it comes to Sophocles and Euripides, each of whom, in his own way, teases us by further delaying (as well as complicating) the obligatory scene (or scenes) until later in the drama. Yet the inexorable requirement of this encounter (whatever the various ways and means of achieving it) insure that the recognition between the siblings *must* take place. So, for example, on a purely formal level, I suggest further Aeschylean elements that are needed to set the stage for the reunion:

1. The return of Orestes, when and why: Who sent him into exile; why is he now returning? In each case, before his entrance on stage, Orestes is presumed to be absent but alive.

2. The prominence (or absence thereof) of the tomb of Agamemnon as a focal point of interest. Is it onstage or offstage? How does this affect the proceedings?

3. The motivations that lead Orestes in the first instance, and later, the other participants in the drama, to the tomb and what they do there: Offerings by Orestes (lock of hair) upon his return (all three plays); libations from the chorus and Electra in Aeschylus, or in Sophocles by Chrysothemis, Electra's sister, as her surrogate, or finally, in Euripides, by the old servant. He had been a tutor to Agamemnon in the past and when on his way to Electra's hut, he makes a detour by the tomb as a sign of respect to the dead king, pouring his own libation and leaving a sprig of myrtle as well.

4. The material tokens offered to validate Orestes' identity: a lock of hair (Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides); footprints (Aeschylus, Euripides); a scar (Euripides); a signet ring (Sophocles), and a woven cloth (Aeschylus, but merely suggested in Euripides). The first two demonstrate some hereditary trait of family resemblance; the second two are acquired signs (one on the body, the other an inherited heirloom). The third item, the weaving, an object made by Electra's own hand, bearing her signature, as it were, is an external sign that links the present with the past. If invoked, it should indicate a previous intimate relationship between the siblings (Aeschylus, Euripides).

5. The presence (and attitude) of Electra: her initial resistance to the reality of her brother's return, and the means, the process (often prolonged or postponed), to overcome it.

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[6]   Boitani 1991, 101. One might even go as far as to claim that recognition as a trope becomes «key to the way we make meaning and to the way we read» Kennedy – Lawrence 2008, 2.
[7]   Gibert 1995, 84. Quoted in Lush 2008, 13.

6. The *anagnorisis* itself: Temporally speaking, it takes place almost at the beginning of the drama in the *Choephoroi*; in Euripides it happens about one-third of the way through, staged over a space of 350 lines or more, and for Sophocles, only in the final third of the play.

The later poets enjoy what has been called a «constrained freedom»[8]. They are free to dislocate the event in time and place; free to stage the conditions and means of discovery, and free, of course, within these limitations to put a different valence on the success and the outcome of the *anagnorisis*, along with further implications for the thought-world of the play. These include, first, interrogating the uses of reason and inference as an intellectual exercise (how to interpret the signs); second, the psychology of loss and recovery in the reunion of the pair (what do they expect and how do they respond); third, the position granted to the role of the house and its history in determining the dynastic impact of their reunion; and finally, the notion of justice (or more precisely, a just revenge), along with other moral considerations. All these issues vary according to the dynamics of a given play and the characters who inhabit it.

This not to say, I hasten to add, that Aeschylean influence begins and ends here: So, for the sake of completeness, let me just add: The accomplishment of vengeance itself: how is it plotted; what happens to make it come about?

1. First, the lying story that requires Orestes to assume a false identity needed to gain entry into the palace (Aeschylus, Sophocles). In both plays, the story consists of a false report of Orestes' death; it is delivered by Orestes himself in Aeschylus, while the Paidagogos assumes this task in Sophocles. Given the change in venue for Euripides, Orestes need only adopt a momentary disguise as a Thessalian stranger, when invited to participate in Aegisthus's sacrifice. But however managed, if the plot depends on the *recognition* between Orestes and Electra, it equally depends upon the initial *misrecognition* of Orestes by those he intends to kill.

2. Next, are the victims themselves: In what order are they killed? Aegisthus first and Clytemnestra second (Aeschylus and Euripides), reversal of this order in Sophocles, and additionally, for Euripides, the separation of the killings that now take place in entirely different settings, each one, however, far away from the palace.

3. Furthermore, are these acts of (or preparation for) revenge expanded or contracted? Do they take place onstage or offstage?

4. Additionally, what are the terms of confrontation with one or the other of the royal pair? The highlight of the *Choephoroi* was the interchange between and the son and the mother: she pleads for her life and he is tempted for the last time to turn back from the horrible deed (Aesch. *Ch*. 885-99). There is no such dialogue in either of the other two plays, although in Euripides, we hear echoes of the emotional exchange in Orestes' hesitation before the matricide and the description of his anguish afterwards (Eu. *El*. 967-87; 1190-228). Otherwise, the major confrontations are between Electra and her mother in scenes of passionate and hostile intensity (Sophocles, Euripides) and, in Sophocles, between Orestes and Aegisthus in a scene that constitutes the climax of the play (Soph. *El*. 1475-507).

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[8]   Boitani 1991, 101. I owe much in this essay to his excellent insights, as will be evident throughout.

5. Next, there are the auxiliary characters, in addition to the obligatory Pylades, Orestes' companion. First are the links between the family's past and the present: the nurse in Aeschylus, the Paidagogos (Sophocles), the old tutor servant (Euripides); second, are entirely new personages: Chrysothemis, Electra's sister, in Sophocles and the farmer husband of Electra in Euripides. The identity of the chorus remains stable, however; it always consists of female attendants, in keeping with the domestic setting, wherever it may be situated.

6. Finally, is the role of Apollo and the gods, more generally speaking. Apollo's influence pervades the proceedings in both Aeschylus and Sophocles, albeit in different ways, but the divine behest colors the entire action with a moral imperative. His is a more conflicted presence (or should I say, absence) in Euripides until the *dei ex machina* in the persons of the Dioscuri, condemn him: 'Still, wise god though he is, his oracle to you was not wise' (Eu. *El.* 1246 f.). And the list could continue. But back to *anagnorisis*.

2. The Anatomy of Recognition Scenes.

Much of what I have to say on this well travelled road will not perhaps be entirely new, although scholarly agreement is hard to come by[9]. What I will want to emphasize, however, are some of the formal details attesting to the weight of literary influence. This approach may throw into sharper focus some of the conventions and breaches thereof that give the second two plays, at any rate, a richer and more nuanced texture, revolving around the issue of *anagnorisis* and its extension to other characters in the drama, along with its opposite, *misrecognition*. Each play, after all, is constructed on an opposition between *philoi* and *echthroi*, complicated, of course, by the fact that the enemies are those who should be *philoi*. In practical terms, if the plot requires the sister's recognition of her brother, the intrigue itself requires deception, which itself is envisioned as just retribution for one who was killed in just the same way: *dolos* is matched against *dolos*. (Aesch. *Ch.* 555-7; cf. 274; Soph. *El.* 35-7, 197, 1495 f.). Hence, Orestes' disguise as a stranger, a *xenos*, unrecognized by his foes, is maintained until only at the moment of truth, when he at last reveals his identity to those upon whom he will take his revenge[10].

But now to the details. The lock of hair is the most significant proof of identity in the *Choephoroi* and its identity, therefore, plays a major role in the recognition scenes of the other two poets. It is a token of respect to the dead and hence has ritual import, a sign of piety from the one who dedicated it on the tomb of the dead Agamemnon[11]. Its anonymity may be open to question, but the audience in each case

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[9] See, e.g., Solmsen 1967 and Deforge 1997, who look at all three plays. Comparisons between Aeschylus and Euripides, centering especially on the *anagnorisis*, are far more common: e.g., Pucci 1967, Paduano 1970, Mejer 1979, Halporn 1983, Hammond 1984, Cropp 1988, 134 f., Deforge 1997, Mezzadri 1997, Kucharski 2004, and Torrance 2011. I have also consulted Denniston 1939, Cropp 1988, and Roisman – Luschnig 2011 on the relevant scenes. Sophocles is less well served, but I have found Boitani 1991 and Segal 1966 and 1980 the most useful.

[10] The insistence that in his mode of revenge Orestes match *dolos* to *dolos* in a precise working out of the *lex talionis* does not, however, apply to Euripides, given the change of venue away from the palace and the generally changed circumstances of the plot.

[11] See, most recently, Kucharski 2004 on the lock's more multivalent meanings.

knows to whom it belongs. For Electra in the *Choephoroi*, who discovers it herself during her own mourning ritual in the pouring of libations, it bears a striking resemblance to her own hair, as she says: a sign of likeness, of family resemblance, and finally, of identicality, that unites the brother and sister in lineage as it will in purpose (Aesch. *Ch*. 168-79). True, the footprints that are proportionate with her own[12], and the weaving she identifies as made by her own hand combine finally to leave no doubt, here, at the very beginning of the play, that it is her very own brother who has returned home[13]. Yet, unlike the other tokens, Orestes' dedication of the lock of hair has a special intimate value as a metonymic token of his very person. It is, moreover, a deliberate action on his part, which we witness on stage. For both Sophocles and Euripides, however, the lock of hair is the starting point, as it were, for complexifying, not simplifying, the process of recognition, which occupies a more contested place in the unfolding of the plot, albeit for different reasons. For Sophocles, it is circumstantial – a matter of timing. It is, in fact, a belated discovery, this time by Chrysothemis, rather than Electra, who has taken her sister's place at the tomb, but whose import seems to be negated by the prior account of Orestes' death. The audience, having seen him on stage in person, knows, of course, as the text tells us from the start, that he intended to go first «to honor his father's tomb, as the god commanded, with libations and with a tribute of luxuriant hair» (Soph. *El*. 51 f.). But given the other characters' ignorance of this action, the change from the *Choephoroi* in the sequence of episodes in a kind of *hysteron proteron* significantly changes the dramatic tenor of the play, especially once Electra despairingly learns of her brother's supposed death. For Euripides, on the other hand, the old servant's discovery of the lock of hair produces only Electra's scorn as to its value as a legitimate token of identity: His hair could not resemble hers – it belongs to a male nurtured in the wrestling schools of young aristocrats, while hers is that of a woman – and anyway, many people, who are not of the same blood possess similar locks (Eur. *El*. 527-31). How did it get there then? Some other sympathetic stranger could have brought it or it was sent by Orestes himself, who would not have been so cowardly to have come in secret (Eur. *El*. 524-26; 545-46). Electra's trichology may be logical enough, according to her own standards of evidence, but it turns out to be wrong. And for Sophocles, why should Electra believe her sister's account, when she has just been persuaded of her brother's death by the Paidagogos's convincing description of how Orestes met his end? One eyewitness account (true) is trumped by another (false).

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[12] The matching of footprints has occasioned much discussion, especially in the light of Euripides' Electra's dismissal of the token altogether, both on the basis of size (his feet must be bigger than hers) and on probability (how could there be footprints on a rocky ground). She is thinking of an exact fit, misreading the Aeschylean expression which tells of correspondence and commensurability (*summetros*), not of exact accuracy (*isos*, Eur. *El*. 522 f., 536). See Burkert 1963 and especially the thorough discussion of Jouanna 1997, who looks to both the literary context and the scientific theories of the day regarding hereditary traits. As for family resemblance based on the similarity in shape of feet (and hands), recall Menelaus' 'recognition' of Telemachus in *Od*. 4.149 f., according to the same criteria.

[13] Each token has its own function: the lock of hair (lock of hair) points to the existence of Orestes and his devotion to his father, the second (footprints) infers that he has indeed arrived, and the third (weaving) is the proof of Orestes' identity. See Jouanna 1997, 74 f.

The disbelief, however, that attends the discovery of the lock of hair also attests, for both poets, to the gulf that divides the brother and sister in character, outlook, and way of life. Unlike the symbolic affinity between kin that the physical inherited token of the lock implies as a sign of their mutual accord, the Electra and Orestes of these two plays are either strictly identified by gendered differences, as a conventional polarization of male and female roles (Sophocles), or emphasized in Electra's expectations of what those differences might mean (Euripides). Moreover, unlike the *Choephoroi*, which begins with the recognition of brother and sister, both cases postpone the fateful scene until later in the drama, thereby enlarging the context and increasing the dramatic tension[14]. The lock of hair (the only sign common to all three versions) is, therefore, the best point of entry into scenes of *anagnorisis*. It leads the way to examining the mechanisms of recognition and the attendant problems it invokes in the uses of reason, both inductive and deductive, along with the obstacles to belief that endow the transition from ignorance to knowledge with such theatrical potential.

3. Sophocles' *Electra*: Recognition and Misrecognition.

For Sophocles, the question of recognition affects all the characters in the play to a remarkable degree. The *anagnorisis* between brother and sister, we may recall, is delayed to the last third of the plot, at a point, in fact, when Electra has despaired of any reunion – and perhaps we have too. But this *anagnorisis* is not alone; it is preceded by two sub-plots and two 'false' recognitions, which occupy the entire middle of the drama. First, is the arrival of the Paidagogos at the palace, who announces and elaborates to Clytemnestra and Electra in almost two hundred lines the report of Orestes' death in the chariot race at Delphi. Almost at the midpoint of the text, he concludes that «after the fall he [Orestes] was dragged in the dust; so stained by blood, that none of his *philoi* would have recognized him by looking at his wretched corpse» (Soph. *El*. 755 f.). The body was cremated immediately and Orestes' ashes placed in the bronze urn, which Electra 'recognizes' as that of her brother when brought on stage by none other than Orestes himself – the first time he has actually laid eyes on his sister and she on him. (Soph. *El.* 1126-70). But just before the urn scene, Chrysothemis reports to her grieving sister the sighting of a lock of hair on Agamemnon's tomb. She saw it with her own eyes, 'sure signs' (*saphê sêmeia*, 886), she says, in which she could trust (*pistis*). The proof (*tekmêrion*, 905) is incontrovertible, since by a process of elimination she deduces the hair could only be that of Orestes himself. Electra, trusting in the Paidagogos's detailed fictional report, rejects her sister's eyewitness testimony, convinced that her brother is dead. And her belief is verified, once the disguised Orestes enters the scene with the fateful urn.

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[14] In Sophocles, we know the plot, as it were, from the start in the exchange between Orestes and the Paidagogos: the directions given by Apollo's oracle on how to accomplish the revenge, the details of the false story the is to tell of Orestes' death, the preliminary errand to Agamemnon's tomb to make a libation and cut a lock of hair, a second entrance for both with the fictive urn, and a decision not to identify themselves at this time to Electra, when they hear her cries. What intervenes, however, which takes up most of the rest of the play, between Orestes' first and second appearances, remains available to the poet's dramatic conception.

This is the 'real' proof, for her, the *emphanê tekmêria* (1109), this solid visible object she pleads with him to let her hold in her embrace. Soon enough, however, this 'proof' is proven false by Orestes' face-to-face revelation of his identity, validated finally by Agamemnon's signet ring (an entirely new entry into the game), which Electra accepts as the 'sign' of the true recognition (1223).

But there is more to come. One hundred lines later, at his prompting, Electra joyously recognizes the Paidagogos as the very one to whom she had given the child, Orestes, who saved him after Agamemnon's death (1345 f.; cf. 11-4). His identity was unfamiliar to her when he brought the dreadful news of Orestes' death; she sees him now as the savior of the house, welcome like a father to her. 'You can be sure', she exclaims, 'there's no one in the world I hated so much and loved so much as you on the same day' (1363). The wheel has turned full circle; the present is finally, if belatedly, now linked with the past, mediated by the Paidagogos, who has been instrumental in the entire affair, both then and now.

As Boitani suggests in his analysis of what he calls the 'recognition plot,' the proliferation of these episodes – the various proofs and the confusion they cause – indicate something more than the excitement of suspense and delay. «It introduces into the play the notion that reality can be ambiguous, that truth may be hidden behind it, and that recognition is a process which might have to retrace its steps through *méconnaissance*»[15]. Electra's misrecognition of the urn's identity introduces «an inextricable knot of reality and appearance, truth and deception, knowledge and ignorance that the audience now knows must be untied»[16].

But the game continues. *Méconnaissance* is also exactly what happens in the cases of both Clytemnestra and Aegisthus at the end of the play, when the *peripeteia* now coincides with yet another *anagnorisis*, for each of them in turn. Clytemnestra, at the moment when she is dressing the empty urn for burial within (1400 f.) will soon belatedly recognize that the man, who stands behind her, weapon in hand, is none other than Orestes (1409 f.). Even more compelling, however, is the final scene when Aegisthus has come, as he says, to ascertain whether the news of Orestes' death was true. His desire is to see in person the corpse within the house as visual proof (*emphanê*, 1454) of this happy turn of events. But he realizes instead, when he lifts the covering of the body that it is none other than Clytemnestra herself and the author of the deed is very much alive (1466-80). 'Whom do you fear?' says Orestes, 'whom do you not recognize (*ouk agnoeîs*)'? Two recognitions: the one Aegisthus thought alive is dead; the one he thought dead is alive[17]. And as Boitani concludes:

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[15] Boitani 1991, 104 f.
[16] Boitani 1991, 113.
[17] 'Didn't you perceive a while ago that although you're alive, you've been matching words with the dead' (1477 f.). The prototype, of course, is the servant's exclamation from within the house at the scene of Clytemnestra's murder in Aeschylus that «the dead are killing the living» (Aesch. *Ch.* 886). This is the moment of recognition for Clytemnestra, who understands the 'riddle,' as it is for Aegisthus in Sophocles. This shift is entirely in keeping with Orestes' main concern from the beginning in reclaiming his father's patrimony, which accounts as well for the climactic moment of confrontation, not with his mother, as in Aeschylus, but with her husband, the hated usurper.

«The revenge is made to coincide with *anagnorisis*, justice is accomplished at the same time as truth and reality are unveiled»[18].

The play resorts to the Aeschylean lock of hair to convince one (Chrysothemis) of Orestes' identity, only to see it negated for Electra by another sign, a false one, namely the urn. But the urn too is not a pure invention of Sophocles. He takes his cue from another Aeschylean hint: Orestes's report about his own death, which, disguised as a Phocian stranger, he delivers to Clytemnestra in the *Choephoroi*. For as he concludes there in his initial speech to his mother:

> Whether it turns out that the preferred decision in his family is to bring him home, or whether it is to bury him as a foreign resident, a permanent and perpetual alien, please convey back here their instructions about this affair. The walls of a bronze urn already enfold the ashes of the man, who has been well wept over (Aesch. *Ch.* 683-7).

One false story engenders another, amplifying a seemingly 'realistic' reference into what is arguably the centerpiece of dramatic action in Sophocles' *Electra*. The urn is a substitute for the living Orestes; likewise, his mother's body will be a substitute for his own, its true identity unveiled on stage. The interplay between true and false signs depends, of course, on the contradictory reports about Orestes. Is he alive or is he dead? Sophocles elevates Orestes' short-lived disguise in Aeschylus into the conceptual framework that rules his play[19]. The urn in Orestes' hands is the most potent symbol of this riddle: death-in-life, life-in-death, as Segal observes, a «stratagem that continues the confusion of life and death that persists to the very end of the play (cf. 1384-97, 1417-21, 1477-78)»[20]. Electra's repeated references to herself as subject to a living death within the house includes her in the same existential paradox, this time on a metaphorical level. The recognition scene between brother and sister therefore results in a kind of resurrection for both herself and her kin. 'The unimaginable has come to pass. One and the same journey brought you first as dead and then in life'. Under these circumstances, 'if my father should come to me alive, I would no longer think it a wondrous prodigy, but would believe that I indeed saw him'. (1313-7; cf. 1419-21). Hence the initial misrecognition of the visual evidence (the urn, the body), whether by friend or by foe, invests the contest between illusion and reality, between falsehood and truth, with an ontological gravity that surpasses the clever contrivances of the plot and elevates the import of the *anagnorisis* to a more reflective level of cognizance.

4. Euripides' *Electra*: Riddles of Identity.

The Paidagogos in Sophocles occupies a focal position in the play, not only as the bearer of the elaborate story of Orestes' death, but as a figure too in his own recogni-

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[18] Boitani 1991, 105.
[19] In Aeschylus, Orestes's plan to gain entry into the house involves no further details other than that he and Pylades will pretend to be Phocian strangers to gain entry into the house (*Ch.* 560-4). The dramatic surprise in the ensuing scene is his unexpected meeting with his mother at the door instead of Aegisthus, whom he was ready to kill on the spot.
[20] Segal 1966, 482, 518. See also Segal 1980.

tion scene, the one between himself and Electra. (Soph. *El*. 1354-63). Another old man, this time, Agamemnon's own aged tutor, plays an equally, if not more, important role in Euripides' *Electra*. He is the one who discovers the lock of hair on the tomb. He is the one who finally overcomes Electra's resistance when he meets Orestes in person and identifies the scar on his brow as proof of her brother's identity. Moreover, the old man's recognition is founded not only on this bodily sign, but on the circumstances that led to it – the siblings' childish horseplay, which led to the boy's fall that occasioned the telltale mark[21]. It is typical perhaps of Euripides' marked interest in children that he resorted to this realistic vignette[22]. Yet, perhaps no other scene has engendered more controversy than Euripides' revisions of and challenges to Aeschylean strategies of recognition. Some go so far as to excise the text altogether as unworthy even of what they consider a poor rendition of the Orestes myth. The vexed status of what might seem to be an outright parody (whether critical and/or comical) in the dismissal of Aeschylean tokens only reinforces the sense that Euripides has gone too far in the collision he stages between tradition and so-called reality, a 'realism' that offends with its change of venue to a homely locale, its focus on material things, especially food and drink, its whining heroine and indecisive hero, and, above all, its broader generic transgressiveness[23].

'Generic transgression' is the term that Simon Goldhill uses in this context. Characteristically, he offers a nuanced and convincing explication of the term. His remarks are worth quoting in full:

> The intertextuality with Aeschylus, the transposition of the recognition tokes of the *Oresteia* into a different narrative, not only emphasizes the generation of Euripides' play within a theatrical tradition – it has a specifically dramatic genealogy through which it derives its sense and force – but also brings to the fore the *conventionality* of the devices of recognition. For although Electra's reasoning demolishes the logical connection between the signs and the old man's argument – as if she were demanding an Aristotelian logic of dramatic cause and effect – nonetheless, the old man's conclusion proves correct. We are left with a characteristic Euripidean juxtaposition… of the arbitrary assumptions of the old man, which make sense only as they advance the traditional norm of myth [or previous dramaturgy, *my addition*], and the logical requirements of Electra, which fail to account for the truth. As Euripides forces awareness of the incongruity and arbitrariness of the Aeschylean recognition tokens, he also marks the conventionality involved in the recognition process itself. He displays the recognition of long-lost relatives as a literary, theatrical theme, a game complete with rules and conventions. For conventions, to function, they must remain unrecognized, but it is precisely recognition that Euripides' writing enforces[24].

[21] He is also author of the plot to kill Aegisthus (611-39), unlike the other two plays in which it is Orestes himself who takes the lead.
[22] See Zeitlin 2008. Electra's ploy of a fictitious birth is a variant on the same preoccupation.
[23] For bibliography of scholars who would delete, in whole and in part, see Cropp 1988, 138. For Euripides' recognition scene, see the list in n. 9. Add to this list Bond 1974, Davies 1998, and Gallagher 2003. Aside from parody, critics have argued for a serious critique of Aeschylus, an interrogation of valid evidentiary criteria, an indictment of character for both Electra and Orestes, an intertextual tour de force, an instance of generic instability, or most recently, an exercise in metapoetics or metatheater.
[24] Goldhill 1986, 249.

True enough, and note that Goldhill adds another species of recognition, as it were, by including the idea of an audience's response to the game of well-known authorial strategies. But let us go further in examining Euripides' revisionism of the traditional story and its paradigmatic forms. The success of an *anagnorisis* lies in the claim to a stable identity, constructed not only on signs and tokens that can be believed, but also in the belief that the person in question can fill his or her assigned role. I have already pointed out, if briefly, that contrary to the intimacy created for the brother and sister in Aeschylus' rendition, enhanced by the long *kommos*, in which they unite for a common cause, the Sophoclean version avoids this outcome as long as it can. It relies instead on the stark contrast between male and female roles, one that for most of the play maintains the two in separate spheres, according to their nature and experience, until Orestes, still cruelly incognito, is touched with compassion at hearing Electra's pitiful eulogy over the urn. The gulf between the sexes in Euripides takes a different turn. Electra's over-idealization of her long lost brother, based on her conceptions of heroic conduct, prevents her for as long as possible from accepting this stranger as her longed for kin. Yet the mismatch between the two is also based on realistic circumstances, which Euripides spells out in some detail. Orestes returns in secret, not because he is a coward, but because Aegisthus has placed a reward on his head. Not daring to approach the palace, rightly concerned with the guards that the king has placed on the borders (Eur. *El.* 32 f., 93 f., 615 f.), his caution is not misplaced. Aegisthus, he is told, lives in fear of him and does not sleep well at night (617), and when, at the scene of the sacrifice over which the king presides, Aegisthus prays to the Nymphs to grant that his enemies fare ill, the messenger makes certain that the target of his words is clear (807). Alarmed when after the slaughter of the ox, the king notes the unfavorable omens in the entrails, he interprets them correctly: 'I fear deceit from abroad. The son of Agamemnon is my bitterest enemy, a foe to my house' (831-3). This is precisely the cue, in fact, for Orestes, disguised as a Thessalian stranger, to deliver the fatal blow. If this scene is rife with revisions of the Aeschylean theme of corrupted sacrifice[25], ritual energy is now harnessed to the very circumstances of Orestes' revenge.

A second and perhaps more important point is the emphasis on the absence of a living memory for both siblings alike[26]. In Aeschylus we learn that Clytemnestra had sent off Orestes from the palace, but the time frame is vague, and no great distance of years seems to hinder the rapidity of the long desired reunion[27]. In Sophocles, we are told that Electra herself gave the child, Orestes, to the Paidagogos for safekeeping after the murder of Agamemnon[28]. In Euripides, although we do not know how old Orestes was when he was taken away to safety, Electra herself admits she herself

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[25] Zeitlin 1965; cf. Zeitlin 1970.

[26] In this respect, their situation is far from Aristotle's invocation of memory as one of the acceptable means of *anagnorisis* (1454b37-1455a4).

[27] See Mejer 1979.

[28] It is rather bizarre that Electra does not recognize the Paidagogos at their first meeting, but perhaps this ploy is necessary to heighten the dramatic focus on the theme and scenes of *anagnorisis*, as previously discussed, which Boitani 1991, 114, rightly calls «the problematic pivots» of the play.

was just a child herself at the time: 'Were Orestes to appear before me, I would not recognize him', she tells the as yet unknown Orestes, who with typical restraint, needs to know his sister's situation before venturing any further, claiming in this instance to learn the facts so he can transmit them to Orestes himself. 'No wonder' Orestes replies, 'you were both very young when you were parted'. Electra continues: 'Only the old man who had been Agamemnon's tutor might recognize my brother'. Orestes agrees: 'Yes, the man whom they say stole him away from certain murder' (283-7)[29]. This is, of course, the same old man, as it luckily happens, who will find the lock of hair on the tomb and will bring the news to Electra, along with notice of the footprints he had observed. Electra was too young, she also claims, to have woven any garment that she could recognize (the third of Aeschylus' tokens) and anyway, how could a grown man be wearing the same garments? (541-4).

Electra's complaints about the Aeschylean signs (the lock of hair could belong to anyone; how could one leave footprints on rocky soil, and the aforementioned dismissal of some sample of her weaving) fits in with her skewed expectations of Orestes. She was apparently even too young to remember, or has conveniently forgotten, her childish play at home with her brother on the occasion that his injury left a telltale scar (573 f.)[30]. Electra's critique of Aeschylean verisimilitude doesn't «deny the validity of the process as such—that is, the reasoning of Aeschylus' Electra» but rather «the specific value of Aeschylus' signs and the context in which they are inserted»[31]. Orestes does leave the lock of hair on Agamemnon's tomb but this is now an insufficient proof of family resemblance, and opens the way to a more general concern: How do you prove another's identity, especially in a case where a sign of a shared heredity (like the lock of hair) cannot convincingly attest to a family history and bonds of kinship? The refusal of this token only reinforces the sense of estrangement between the two[32]. In such circumstances, only an eyewitness will do, and it must be one who alone is capable of joining the past to the present. Then all the signs make sense. Once again Boitani offers a compelling analysis:

> Instead of relying for its effect on the mounting anguish of reason, on the excitement of a new tool of analysis [as in the *Choephoroi*], the *anagnorisis* simultaneously resorts to an intellectual game, to surprise, and finally to tradition… just after a long logical exchange, which has proved that Orestes *cannot* be present… That surprise is the scar about which we knew nothing before. Nothing could be more unexpected in this intellectual atmosphere than finding a Homeric solution to the ever-present problem of recognition – Odysseus' scar beheld by a male nurse[33].

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[29] Note that Orestes at first does not recognize Electra, in her enforced disguise as a lowly servant (109-11). Only when he overhears her lament, does he realize who she is. In turn, she is terrified by the arrival of the strangers, whom she at first takes to be evil rascals (215-9).

[30] This is the only play in which they have a shared past event – although it is only mentioned in order to show their ignorance of it. Thanks to Anna Uhlig for this observation.

[31] Boitani 1991, 110.

[32] See also Roisman – Luschnig 2011, 165.

[33] Boitani 1991, 111.

Others have noted the numerous Odyssean echoes in the play in mood and setting. Some even insist that the entire plot alludes to the second part of the *Odyssey*[34]. «By making Orestes' return and revenge systematically recall the *Nostos* of Odysseus», it is claimed, «Euripides both distances his account from its established heroic background and makes the *Odyssey* a foil for the story which had itself been a foil for the *Odyssey's* story of Telemachus»[35]. Michelini, for example, points to:

> the pastoral scene, frequented by herdsmen and approached by a steep and arduous path, obviously reminiscent of Ithaca where Odysseus first begins to test his prospects for return. Like Eumaios, the peasant farmer, who has married Electra, is a poor man, whose high standards of loyalty put to shame the lower morals of people at court. Like Odysseus, Orestes is cautious in planning his revenge and delays long in identifying himself, even to his friends. Like Laertes, Electra lives in the country, imposing upon herself need, labor, and physical misery as a token of her inner suffering. Like the suitors, the opponents of the protagonists are characterized by sexual corruption and a taste for luxury. And like the suitors, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus suffer a cruel revenge, plotted secretly and carried out with considerable brutality[36].

Under these circumstances, she might have added as well the figure of Telemachus, who is the most obvious foil to Orestes in age and experience, a comparison, which is reinforced by the pastoral setting. This is the venue, after all, where Odysseus discloses his identity to his skeptical son in Book 16, who, like his counterpart, has no previous memory of his kin on which to rely[37].

The scar, nevertheless, is the nodal point around which the scattered Odyssean allusions crystallize. By merging prototypes of both epic and drama, the scene creates a web of intertextual echoes that transforms the *anagnorisis* into a more challenging exercise of interpretation. The comparison with the *Odyssey* in the matter of the scar, it is often argued, does not redound to Orestes' credit. Goff proposes that «the token both compares Orestes to a heroic exemplar and simultaneously denies him the possibility of living up to the claims thus implied for him. Far from being simply demonstrated, his identity is thus put into a problematic relation with the identity of another»[38]. Odysseus' scar is the evidence of his transition to manhood in an initiatory scene of the dangerous boar hunt; Orestes' is, by contrast, the result of a youthful game (with a girl no less), thereby «locking him into a symbolic childhood,»

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[34] See especially, Lange 2003.

[35] Cropp 2006, 291, reviewing Lange.

[36] Michelini 1987, 185 f.

[37] Allusions to the *Odyssey* multiply in addition to those enumerated above, especially regarding gender, age, and status: All the recognitions in the *Odyssey* (with the exception of Penelope) are invoked in one way or another in this scene in the *Electra*. The old man plays the role of the female nurse, Eurycleia, who discovers the scar on her own in the course of washing Odysseus' feet. But, in point of age, as an old man, in his own persona, he can play the role of Laertes: Instead of the son, Odysseus, revealing himself to his father; the father-figure reveals his son's identity. Finally, in status, as a household retainer, he earns a comparison with Eumaios (and Philoitios) as loyal to their master, and more generally, to the family and its interests. The comparison of Electra to Laertes, as Michelini suggests, also inverts age and gender.

[38] Goff 1991, 260.

which as his character shows, she claims, he never outgrows[39]. Hence, «the *Electra* deliberately complicates the relation between model and copy in that Orestes must follow the example of both the son who helps to avenge his father and the returning paternal hero», with dismal results[40].

This is a plausible reading, but in focusing solely on the scar itself rather than the entire scene, it misses other critical differences from the epic. Odysseus' scar is the clue to a recognition that is based on a long-standing relationship of familiarity, whether with his nurse, Eurycleia (Hom. *Od.* 19.389 f.; cf. 23.74 f.), with his servants, Eumaios and Philoitios (21.17-20) or with Laertes, his aged father (23.331-5). Hence the pivotal role of the old man in Euripides, who «finds the 'acquired sign on the body'… which he can tie to a particular episode in Orestes' life. Once he has attentively scrutinized the young man, then all the signs start meaning something [the lock of hair, the scar] and Electra is convinced»[41]. In this context, the old man's authority relies on the fact that he is the sole custodian of the family history, one that Electra in this instance might have – logically should have – shared, since she shared in that childish play with her brother[42]. Even more significant, perhaps, is that Orestes does not identify himself, as he could have, should have (as he does in both Aeschylus and Sophocles). Rather he leaves it to the old man, who himself was the tutor of Agamemnon, their father, to reconnect the familial bonds. As a personal proof, «unlike the garment of Aeschylus and the ring of Sophocles, the scar has no representative value as a token. It can neither show the love of sister for brother (as the garment does in Aeschylus) nor serve as a symbol of ruling power (as the signet ring does in Sophocles)»[43]. At the same time, by thickening the intertextual matrix that situates the myth of Orestes in an Odyssean landscape – thereby inviting both comparison and contrast – the play advertises a series of mismatches between the hero and the role (or roles) he is expected to play, between an identity he must claim and a disconcerting set of circumstances he did not himself initiate, but to which he must adapt if he is to remain (or become) Orestes, the son who killed his mother and her paramour. The very artificiality of the scene, with its signs that point in two directions, paradoxically perhaps, presses home the psychological burden this belated Orestes is asked to bear.

5. Conclusion.

To conclude. This examination of the formal aspects of *anagnorisis* in a three-way conversation among the dramatists has demonstrated, I hope, the range of creative potential in staging a compulsory and conventional scene. The *Choephoroi* differs, of course from its later versions, not only in that it is the model for the others, but by reason of its theatrical position as the second play of a trilogy. Midpoint between the murder of Agamemnon and the trial of Orestes, it looks backward in repetition and

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[39]   Goff 1991, 264.
[40]   Goff 1991, 266. On the scar, see also Dingel 1969 and Tarkow 1981.
[41]   Boitani 1991, 110.
[42]   Goff 1991, 260 remarks: «It seems to me almost comic that the definitive proof of identity is finally found to be one that has been available for Elektra's inspection throughout the entire scene».
[43]   See Halporn 1983, 108.

reenactment even as it looks forward to redemption and resolution. The two Electra plays, with Aeschylus as their prototype, obey entirely other dictates in their stand-alone versions of the same story of *nostos-anagnorisis-mêchanêma*, as they stage the obligatory reunion of brother and sister as a precursor to the action of revenge. Sophocles' Electra, we might say, uses his received plot for entirely different purposes: to exploit to the fullest the complications that revolve around the very idea of recognition and the cognitive missteps by one character after another that delay the *anagnorisis* before the truth is known. His is the most intense engagement with the epistemological issues of recognition, while providing the maximum thrill of suspense in the game of disguise and revelation. For Euripides, in exposing the literary conventions of recognition, only to validate them in the end, his Electra play resorts to a dual confrontation with tragic and epic models that highlights the problem of a character in need of a stable identity through a proliferation of crisscrossing signs. In the dislocation of the scene from the palace to the countryside, with its attendant pastoral and rustic undertow, the *anagnorisis* is a flashpoint that, by igniting a host of competing and contradictory allusions, focuses attention on the uneasy relationship between mythic constraints and a messy reality (for brother and sister alike) that is the hallmark of the play.

Much more, of course, could be said about these recognition scenes and their implications for both the conduct and outlook of an individual drama in the exercise of a poet's creative ingenuity. But in closing, let me emphasize the practical functionality in every case, rather than a psychological acuity, in the advance of the plot. Brother and sister – the one who has returned, the one who has stayed – need one another to unite in a common cause. These recognition scenes are therefore high pieces of theater; they are the necessary preludes to the enactment of the revenge, as I have emphasized throughout, engendering anticipation and suspense as to how the *anagnorisis* in question will come about, while displaying the variety and limits of credible signs. True, the reunion of Electra and Orestes, once achieved, is accompanied by varying measures of poignant elation. But in the *Choêphoroi*, let us recall, Electra vanishes once Orestes enters the palace. In Sophocles the Paidagogos cuts short their joyful exchange as untimely and even dangerous, lest someone within the house overhear them and ruin their plans (Soph. *El.* 1326-38). Euripides, for his part, offers only a few perfunctory exchanges between the pair, before Orestes postpones 'the sweet pleasure of embraces' until a later time, 'when we will share them again' (Eur. *El.* 580-4; 596 f.). Retrospectively, Orestes' promise turns out to be yet one more species of dramatic irony: the end of the play will separate them forever, and the chorus' prayer that he 'set foot in the city with all good fortune' (594 f.) will never come to pass. This *nostos* is short-lived indeed[44].

The transition, therefore, from ignorance to knowledge in Aristotelian terms and the means to achieve it, to my mind, lack a certain emotional depth that, from Homer on, require evidence of a like-minded affinity between apparent strangers as a necessary precondition for a mutual *anagnorisis*, which, when it comes, fully authenti-

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[44] One might say that ironically, their moment of parting at the end is where their affective bonds are truly forged. 'I have seen you at last', cries Orestes, and at once am robbed of your affections (*philtra*). I shall leave you and alike be left by you' (1308-10). Only Euripides stages an aftermath of the murders between the siblings.

cates the affectionate bonds of kinship. Hence, the scene by the fireside in *Odyssey* 19, when the beggar converses with Penelope establishes their *homophrosunê* that makes the final reunion of the wedded pair so satisfying (unlike Odysseus' revelation of himself to others, especially to his son and father). Euripides himself understands this dual progression in two other extant plays, the *Ion* and the *Iphigenia in Tauris,* where the extended scenes leading up to the recognition establish an affective sympathy between persons, who are entirely unknown to one another[45]. Tokens are necessary, of course, but their conventional use has been duly earned by what has preceded them.

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Abstract: This essay is a formalist study in dramatic conventions that examines the recognition scenes in the three Electra plays. It relies on the premise of Aeschylus' drama and of those that follow him that the plot cannot proceed without the reunion of brother and sister – the one an exile returning from abroad, and the other, who was left behind to live with her father's murderers. The insistence on this gendered pair and the necessity of constructing or reconstructing their relationship in a symbiotic dependency to make an alliance of common interest (however and whenever it is managed) is the fundamental basis on which each drama entirely depends, despite the siblings' differences in character, outlook, and experience, and despite the poets' different ways of achieving that familial bond. These scenes are both epistemological (what constitutes proof of identity?) and theatrical (how will they be enacted?), with implications for each poet's exercise of creative ingenuity.