

ELECTRA

Sophocles

Overview The *Electra* of Sophocles was probably composed near the end of the writer's career, in the last decade of the fifth century. The play turns around the murder of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, by the returning Orestes, son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. Once again, as in the treatments by Homer and Aeschylus, this theme is given a distinctive twist, that springs from the imaginative position of the author. In Sophocles the stress falls on Electra, the sister of Orestes, who does not figure importantly in the revenge accounts by the two other writers.

Story Sophocles' *Electra* (410 B.C.E.) works the ancient legend of the return of Agamemnon from Troy. The story, which was favored already in the *Iliad*, was dealt with powerfully by all three of the fifth century tragedians; most starkly by Sophocles, for whom revenge killing is its own justification.

As the play opens, it has been many years since the death of Agamemnon, and Clytemnestra and her spouse are long settled as rulers of Mycenae. Orestes has long ago been sent to Phocis, for security sake, while Electra has remained at home, in virtual servitude to the regal family. Orestes, by this time a grown man, arrives at the palace with his old friend Pylades; the two of them have hatched a plot by which they can justify entrance to the royal portals. (Their story is that they are returning the urn with the ashes of Orestes, who has died.)

Meanwhile, in dialogue between Electra (and her timid sister, Chrysothemis) and the chorus, we learn that Electra has never relented in her bitterness toward her mother, or her hatred for her stepfather. This mindset has brought her into continual conflict with her sister, and made her long for the return of her brother—even just for news of him. When an old messenger arrives from Phocis, to announce the death of Orestes, Electra is in despair, although her mother is relieved. Chrysothemis however speaks to her sister at just this time—not yet knowing of her brother's return-- telling her some offerings and a lock of hair have been seen at Agamemnon's tomb, and giving that as evidence that Orestes must have returned. Once again Electra rejects this theory, and sets her mind to the necessity of killing her parents by herself. The play is destined, in short order, to bring devastated Electra together with revenge plotting Orestes.

Just as Orestes and Pylades arrive at the palace, the two parties at first fail to recognize one another. A moment later, however, the spark of recognition is lit, and an emotional brother-sister encounter ensues. The siblings' plan goes into action at once. Orestes and Pylades make their ways into the palace, while Electra stays outside on guard. Orestes kills his mother, then hides her corpse under a sheet; this he presents to Aegisthus, on his return home, with the explanation that it is the corpse of Orestes he is about to see. Upon lifting the veil, Aegisthus discovers Orestes, waiting to take the adulterer off stage for murder, at the very hearth where Agamemnon was killed by Clytemnestra.

For Aeschylus, in *The Libation Bearers*, the manly determination of Orestes, to avenge his father, is not only undisputed but incorporated in the inevitable scheme of divine justice. For Sophocles, the emphasis is less on Orestes, who remains essentially an ingenu type, but on Electra, and on the ups and downs of her needs for vengeance. We enter the mindset of Electra through seeing her in conflict with her timid and self-interested sister, who would prefer not to make trouble in the dangerous household, a risk Electra gladly takes.

Themes

Hatred. Sophocles rarely goes into such individual depth as he does in characterizing Electra and her hatred. We come to know this anxious, beset, hag-ridden young woman, whose nights are still broken by her fury toward her mother. Her desire for vengeance powers her hatred.

Vengeance. While the children of Clytemnestra thirst for vengeance on her, for the killing of their father, it is ultimately a sense of unfulfilled justice which drives them. Electra is especially maddened by exposure to her step father Aegisthus, who has no right to be in charge of her household.

Characters

Orestes is the son of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, and stepson of Aegisthus, who (along with Orestes' mother) has for a long time been ruler of Mycenae. Having been sent away from home as a youth, shortly after the patricide, Orestes returns at the end of this play, and plans with his sister to murder his mother and Aegisthus.

Electra, the sister of Orestes, has been planning for decades to take revenge on her mother. She has given up on seeing Orestes alive, or on changing the timid mind of Chrysothemis who is afraid to join in a murder plot. She is the true mastermind of the revenge plot in Mycenae.

Aegisthus is to Clytemnestra, after the murder of Agamemnon. He is the particular object of hatred of the children of Clytemnestra.

MAIN CHARACTER

ELECTRA (Emotional)

Character The character of Electra, in Sophocles' play, is involved with deep and slow burning desire for revenge. For years the young lady has been sequestered in the palace where her father was murdered by her mother, and her chief company is the very woman who committed that murder, plus the woman's lover—and replacement for Agamemnon. Electra is a brooding and intense volcano, waiting for her brother, or any savior, to appear, and to allow her to free her passionate desire for vengeance.

Parallels The major parallel is to the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus (458 B.C.), the second play of which, *The Libation Bearers*, brings together Orestes and Electra for the revenge killing of Clytemnestra. Euripides also wrote an *Electra* in the last decade of the fifth century; the *Electra* of Euripides, contemporary to that of Sophocles, deals in remorse and guilt, more than in revenge. The outstanding modern remake of the *Oresteia* theme is Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning becomes Electra* (1931), which transposes the trilogy into an inverted and doom-ridden New England household. Lavinia (Electra) broods with all the inversion of the cloistered Electra, at home with mom in Argos.

Illustrative moments

Wailing/pained Our first encounter with Electra occurs near the beginning of the drama. Orestes and his faithful tutor have returned to Mycenae, where Orestes intends to carry out his revenge for the killing of his father, Agamemnon. As the two returners talk, we hear a loud '*Aha! Aha!*' From the palace, and though the tutor thinks it might be the cry of some servant within, Orestes rightly interprets this as the anguished cry of his sister, in the Palace. Fittingly, Electra is wailing, and with that sharp cry opens our minds to the pain that lies buried in the story of the royal house.

Suffering/vengeful Electra makes her appearance, calling on her companions Air and Light, who have for so long listened to her dirges, and witnessed her laments. Recalling the murder of her father—'But my mother and the man who shared her bed, Aegisthus, split his head with a murderous axe'—Electra seems totally immersed in the brutal events which have defined her family life. She calls on the underworld to support her claims for vengeance, and to send her brother back, to aid her in taking revenge. She seems to be at the limit of her endurance.

Self-pitying, vengeful In lengthy exchange with the chorus Electra lays out the full misery of her life in the palace with the people who have killed her father. She has essentially lost her life, to the corrosive

potency of hoped for revenge. 'I am one wasted in childlessness, with no loving husband for champion...I tenant my father's house in these ugly rags...' Without resources to avenge herself, she passes her life in misery. Yet little does she know that Orestes is nearby. All she can do, she thinks, is to beg Zeus to provide punishment for the evil done to her.

Neurotic/unstable Hard pressed by the chorus, to calm down and take care of herself, Electra gives us a glimpse, which will later become an eyeful, of her serious mental instability. (One might think of Medea!) She reflects, to the chorus, on the mindset that has beset her in the palace: 'terrors compelled me, to terrors I was driven...I will not hold back these mad cries of misery, so long as I live.' The audience will be wondering to what extravagance of behavior this exhausted spinster will be driven. 'Never shall I give over my sorrow...'

Agonized/disgusted Electra elaborates on the nature of her daily suffering, as she waits for the return of her brother. The particular point of loathing, that agonizes her, is the private life of her mother and stepfather. Her mother carries out monthly sacrifices in memory of the slaying of her ex-husband, then goes to bed with Aegisthus, in Agamemnon's bed. Clytemnestra fears no Furies. Electra is eaten up in silence. Only the expectation of a return of Orestes can keep her alive. Each time she utters this lament, Sophocles has moved Orestes a step further into appearance onstage.

Discussion questions

What are the salient differences among the treatments of Electra in the three major ancient Greek tragedians? Do Sophocles and Euripides both deal with psychology more than with ritual? Can you explain this difference in terms of the development of cultural history in fifth century B.C. Athens?

What role does the chorus play, in helping to out the stress and turmoil of Electra's inward life in Clytemnestra's house?

It is widely agreed that the basic principles of Freud's psychology underlay O'Neill's thinking in *Mourning becomes Electra*. Can you explain that connection? Is the connection a source of literary power for O'Neill?

Reading <http://central.gutenberg.org/wplbn0002952977-electra-by-sophocles.aspx?>