

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Electra. mid 410's B.C.E.

Euripides

Overview.

The *Electra* of Euripides was probably written in the mid 410's, and probably before 413 B.C.E. (It is virtually contemporary with the *Electra* of Sophocles, probably composed between 420-414). 458 B.C.E. is the date of Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers*, the second play in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, his trilogy dealing with the struggles of Orestes against his parental fixation figures, Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, his parents, and in collaboration with his sister Electra. The tale of Orestes, of his need to avenge the murder of his father, and the madness (and meaning) that these crimes generate, is implicit in the *Odyssey* of Homer, textually established centuries before Euripides and Sophocles, but rehearsing, in the accounts of Menelaus to Telemachus in Book Three, the same characters and revenge motifs driving Orestes, Electra, and their parents in the fifth century B.C.E. treatment of the theme.

Characters

Electra
Orestes Electra's brother,
Farmer, Electra's husband
Pylades. A mute character, Orestes' friend
Chorus of young unmarried peasant women
Old Man. Former tutor to Agamemnon
Messenger Orestes' servant
Clytemnestra. Mother of Orestes and Electra
The Dioskouri. Castor and Pollux, sons of Zeus, brothers of Clytemnestra

Synopsis.

Electra, daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, addresses us from the modest farm where she lives with her farmer husband, to whom her parents have married her off. Every effort is made to keep her from a noble marriage from which she might produce a male child capable of avenging her—on her mother who has murdered her father, and her mother's lover. Into this modest pastoral scene come, disguised, Orestes (Electra's brother) and his best friend, Pylades. Orestes quickly makes his identity apparent, as he had already done, by leaving—on the grave of his murdered father—tokens of hair, prints, clothing which made evident that 'brother was back.' Before long Orestes and Electra are reunited, and begin to form the plot by which Orestes and Pylades will kill Aegisthus—at a pastoral country sacrifice. Electra will induce her mother down from the palace, on the threat that she, Electra, has given birth to a son. Before the day ends both Aegisthus and Clytemnestra have been killed. At that point Clytemnestra's defied brothers Castor and Pollux appear; they inform Orestes and Electra that Clytemnestra was justly punished, but that the matricide was still a shameful act; Orestes will, as in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, be pursued by the hounds of madness and guilt, until in flight he reaches Athens and the Areopagus, and, tried by a court which comes out evenly divided, be absolved in the end by Apollo.

Story.

Farm. Electra and her farmer husband stand outside their modest plot, when a couple of strangers appear—disguised; they are in fact Orestes, Electra's long absent brother, and his best friend Pylades. There is introductory chatter, gradually recognition and great excitement, and as if there were remaining

identity doubts, an old manservant of Orestes identifies, on Orestes' brow, a scar which the young man had acquired in a childhood accident. This is *truly* Orestes.

Plans. The old manservant informs Orestes that his step father is about to celebrate a rural festival in some nearby lands, and Orestes and Pylades decide to coincide with the activity, to insinuate themselves into the festivities, and to murder the hated family destroyer. This they do. Meanwhile Electra has lured her mother from the Palace, informing Clytemnestra that she, Electra, has given birth to a son, a threatening development to the guilty mother.

Matricide. As Orestes and Pylades return to the farm, from the murder of Aegisthus, they discover Clytemnestra arriving from the Palace. Electra goes over to her brother, quickly lays out a plan for murdering Mom in the house, but finds that Orestes is dubious about killing his mother. Electra persuades him, though he remains deeply reluctant.

Departure. Immediately after the double murder, Orestes and Electra leave the house, overwhelmed with guilt and grief. In their despair, the deified brothers of Clytemnestra—the gods Castor and Pollux—appear to Orestes and Electra. The gods explain that matricide is a terrible crime, even though it was, in the present case, justified. The adjudication is that Electra and Pylades are to marry, and leave the scene, while Orestes will bear the brunt of the punishment.

Punishment. The gods inform Orestes that he is doomed to wander, driven by the forces of madness, until eventually he reaches Athens, where he must make his way to the Supreme Law Court, the Areopagus. There he is to beg mercy from the goddess Athena. A trial will then be held, to determine Orestes' destiny, and it will result in a fifty fifty balance, a stalemate which must be broken by the intervention of Apollo.

Resolution. Orestes, say the gods, must continue wandering until he comes to 'Arkadia's wild river, near the shrine sacred to Zeus of the wolves.' There Orestes will found a city bearing his name. Aegisthus will be buried in his native soil, Clytemnestra will be given a burial by Menelaus, a burial which Helen, leaving her retreat in Egypt, will attend. (Helen never went to Troy, for Zeus intended war and violence for the battleground, and didn't want a supreme figure of beauty to be tarnished by it.)

Themes

Revenge The story of the house of Atreus, soaked in blood and bitterness as it is, bequeaths to Agamemnon and Clytemnestra a complex destiny from which there is no eventual escape except purgation by the gods. Agamemnon's decision to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia, in order to advance the Greek invasion of Troy, triggers a line of revenge actions, culminating in the revenge taken on Agamemnon (and Cassandra) by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus (upon Agamemnon's return from war), and the vengeance taken by Orestes and Electra against their mother.

Family Family and revenge are tightly interlocked elements of Greek myth—in fact of world myth. The family in the social sense is a powerful foundation of Greek society as a whole, respect for elders, desire for children, concern for motherhood—all these elements of what might be thought a Mediterranean or African social pattern, are building blocks of the loving but vendetta-alert cultures that generate corresponding mythological patterns.

Humility Electra's husband is imbued with the kind of traditional social humility that accompanies the Greek extended family sense of order and pattern. The former husband of Electra feels such respect for her—she has been socially degraded, by her Mother, so that she will not present a rivalry to the palace—that he will not sleep with her. He is a genuine lover of the order of social rank.

Vanity Electra's parents are portrayed as very 'palace,' proud and unrepentant, and in all ways eager to neutralize their two children. Aegisthus, in particular, conducts his country sacrifice with the bravado of a landlord rather than with the style befitting him, that of an adulterer, complicit with regicide; like Claudius, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Destiny Castor and Pollux intervene at the end, onto a scene which appears to be without final coherence. It is necessary to find the meaningful threaded in the sequence of paybacks that the House of Atreus has inherited. Only by divine intervention, which alleviates the guilt-weight from the last active member in the family chain, can the murder curse originally instituted by the half brothers, Atreus and Thyestes, be expurgated.

Character Analysis

Orestes is arguably the main character, for it is on him, at the end, that the payback for matricide falls; he is the one who must endure the assault of the Furies, who pursue him into madness after he has killed his mother. It is Orestes who, through surviving the punishment for guilt, will be shown the way to a landscape in which he can build a suitable eponymous city. Orestes has proven himself capable of killing—he and Pylades have no compunctions about dispatching Aegisthus—and yet Orestes shrinks along the way, at the idea of matricide. It is this traditional horror, of killing the mother, that particularly deepens the character of Orestes, in all versions of this drama.

Jubilant Upon discovering Electra, Orestes is at first cautious how to insinuate to this girl, whom he has not seen since childhood, that he is her long lost brother. After the two exchange stichomythic chatter, Electra begins to trust her brother and Pylades, and brother and sister are reunited in unity of feeling and intention.

Cunning. Orestes takes careful advantage of the opportunity to intrude on Aegisthus' country sacrifice. Once inside the festive gathering, at the moment of animal sacrifice, Orestes grasps the opportunity to kill the adulterer, and does so with panache.

Reluctant Orestes is reluctant to kill his mother, Clytemnestra, even when Electra has set up the conditions, and is ushering the children's mother into the farmhouse. When it comes to matricide, Orestes shows that he knows what hallowed ground he is trampling on.

Targeted Orestes is targeted, by Castor and Pollux, as the bearer of the guilt of mother killing, but given a large promise to light his way to the end of the road: he is to found a major city in his name.

Transcendent In the end Orestes is the figure who has lived through the curse on the House of Atreus, and once again reaffirmed the value of the ancient Greek adage *pathei mathos, through suffering wisdom*.

Discussion questions

Review the treatments, of the murder of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, in the three major ancient playwrights: Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. In which dramatist does Orestes most become a full bodied character, of interest for his personality rather than simply for his mythological role?

Euripides takes chances with the hallowed literary mythological tradition that precedes him. For example, he makes Orestes identifiable to the old man servant by a scar caused by a childhood accident with a domestic animal, rather than by a wild boar, as in Homer. Why do you think Euripides 'plays' with the tradition in this way?

What is the attitude of Euripides toward the curse on the House of Atreus? Does he see it as a genetic inheritance that cannot be sidestepped by the members of the family? What kind of intervention does Euripides entertain, as a possible freer from the constrictions of a traditional family curse?