

THE DESTRUCTION OF LIMITS IN SOPHOKLES' *ELEKTRA*

Greek tragedy is full of rituals perverted by intra-familial conflict. To mention some examples from the house of Atreus: the funeral bath and the funeral covering, normally administered to a man's corpse by his wife as an expression of *φιλία*, have in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* become instruments in the killing of Agamemnon;¹ the pouring of libations at the tomb, normally a *θελκτήριον* for the dead, becomes in the *Choephoroi* an occasion for his arousal;² Euripides has Klytaimnestra 'sacrificed' while performing the sacrifice for her (fictitious) newly born grandchild.³ On the important question of why it is that tragedians pervert ritual I hope to shed some light in future publications. The purpose of this paper is to examine the radical form taken by the perversion of mourning in Sophokles' *Elektra*.

In the first decade of this century the comparative anthropologists Hertz and van Gennep discovered as a widespread feature of the period of mourning its character as participation in the transitional state of the recently dead, to be ended by the incorporation of the dead person into his or her proper destination and the reincorporation of the mourners into the flow of everyday social life. The mourning relatives in a sense share the condition of the dead. They are separated from the rest of the community and may not eat, dress, etc. like other members of the community, a condition from which they are liberated by the eventual incorporation of the dead into the world of the dead.⁴ This analysis has been exemplified in, for example, a recent study of the ideas and practice of modern rural death rituals in Greece: the seclusion of the mourners is a 'reflection of the isolation of the corpse lying buried in the ground', and their conversation with the dead

draws to a close with the rite of exhumation, when the deceased is fully incorporated into the world of the dead. Over the course of the liminal period following death, the religious perspective within which the conversation between the living and dead is sustained is gradually replaced by a commonsense perspective in which the finality of death is accepted.⁵

As for ancient Greece, continuity with modern mortuary ritual and lamentation is manifest in numerous details.⁶ To take some examples relevant to our argument: the direct address to the dead was an element in the ancient Greek lament no less than it is in the modern;⁷ Aristotle refers to the 'homoeopathy' of the mourners with the

¹ R. Seaford, 'The Last Bath of Agamemnon', *CQ* 34 (1984), 247–54.

² E.g. *E. IT* 166; *Cho.* 42–5; cf. *Cho.* 87ff., 132, 456, etc.; for funerary ritual stirring up feelings of revenge against outsiders see M. Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Cambridge, 1974), 21–2.

³ *E. El.* 1125, 1133, 1141–4.

⁴ R. Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand* (trans. R. and C. Needham, London, 1960); A. van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (trans. M. B. Vizedom and G. L. Caffee, London, 1960), ch. 8; a recent assessment is R. Huntingdon and P. Metcalf, *Celebrations of Death* (Cambridge, 1979).

⁵ L. M. Danforth, *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece* (Princeton, 1982), esp. 54–6, 60–1, 140–1. For the concept of 'liminality' see e.g. V. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* (1967), 93–111; Danforth, 35–7.

⁶ See esp. N. Polites, *Laographika Symmeikta*, iii (1931), 323–6, and Alexiou, op. cit. n. 2, whose treatment demonstrates continuity rather than mere similarity, both in the basic pattern of the ritual and in numerous (though not all) details, and illuminates the tenacity of the tradition in ritual and lament even in periods of historical and religious change.

⁷ Alexiou, op. cit. n. 2, 8, 31, 46, 59, 109f.

dead;⁸ ancient mourners, like the mourning women of rural Greece today, wore distinctive dark clothing and did not participate in communal religious life;⁹ we also hear, as might be expected, of rituals marking the end of the period of mourning.¹⁰ That ancient mortuary rituals 'fit neatly enough into van Gennepe's scheme' has been noted recently by Robert Parker.¹¹ And so in the words addressed to Sophokles' Elektra, 'you have chosen a lifetime (*αἰών*) shared (with your dead father) and full of weeping',¹² there is nothing anomalous about sharing with the dead. What is anomalous is the *αἰών*:¹³ Elektra is determined never to cease from mourning (104, 211, etc.).

In terms of the scheme discovered by Hertz and van Gennepe, one aspect of this anomaly is the absence of a group into which to be reintegrated: Elektra cannot feel at one with the killers of her father. Another aspect is the failure of Agamemnon to be properly incorporated into the world of the dead. Such incorporation depended traditionally on the performance of funeral ritual.¹⁴ Whether or not it was possible to appease successfully a murdered husband,¹⁵ in none of the three tragic versions is even the normal funerary ritual properly performed,¹⁶ and in Aeschylus and Sophokles Klytaimnestra is prompted by a dream to appease her victim with libations which are claimed by her enemies to be ineffective.¹⁷ In Aeschylus the ritual was carried out, but without lamentation, praise and honour; Elektra was not allowed to take part; Agamemnon's body was subjected to mutilation (*μασχαλισμός*);¹⁸ and Orestes and Elektra eventually address their dead father, whose anger has outlived his cremation.¹⁹ In Sophokles the situation is even worse: Klytaimnestra subjected the corpse to *μασχαλισμός* and wiped the bloodstains on his head *ἐπὶ λουτροῖσιν*;²⁰ and the only

⁸ Fr. 101 Rose, ap. Athen. 675a; see further R. Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford, 1983), 64. S. *El.* 847 τὸν ἐν πένθει (of the dead) assimilates their state to the mourners.

⁹ Danforth, op. cit. n. 5, 54; Parker, op. cit. n. 8, 37; Alexiou, op. cit. n. 2, 8; etc.

¹⁰ Harpokration and *Suda* s.v. *τριακός*; Pollux 1.66; Plut. *Lyc.* 27, *Mor.* 297a; cf. Lys. 1.14.

¹¹ Op. cit. n. 8, 60; he quotes *Il.* 23.49–53; but it should also be remembered that the period of mourning/exclusion from shrines or festivals (Parker, 37, 65 n. 110) does not necessarily end with the funeral.

¹² 1085–6: *σὺ πάγκλαυτον αἰῶνα κοινὸν εἴλου*. Many have suspected *κοινὸν*. But (1) Consider what precedes. The song moves from the theme of (birds') care for parents (or 'family solidarity', Kells) to the dead Ag. (whether or not we read *πατρός* in 1075) and the lamenting El. as *εὐπατρὶς* (1081, with a secondary reference to her loyalty to her father). All this facilitates the sense 'in common with your dead father' in 1085. (2) *κοινός* is frequent of suffering (e.g. *Aj.* 267), of sharing in death (e.g. *Aj.* 577), and of kinship (e.g. *OC* 533–5). But much more significant is that in Soph. the senses may be combined to express the shared death of kin (*Ant.* 57, 146, 546; cf. 1, 202), even by El. herself fifty lines later (1135 *τύμβου πατρώϊου κοινὸν εἰληχῶς μέρος*). (3) The idea of association with the dead father is what we might expect (n. 8 above), and indeed has already been expressed recently by El. (986 *συμπόνει πατρί*).

¹³ *αἰών* means her whole span of life: cf. e.g. S. *Trach.* 2; also A. *Cho.* 442 (see below n. 18).

¹⁴ *Od.* 11.72–3; *Il.* 23.71; etc.

¹⁵ *μασχαλισμός* (see n. 18 below) was an attempt to control the ghost. On the victim's anger see now Parker, op. cit. n. 8, ch. 4.

¹⁶ See E. *El.* 289, 323–31; for A. and S. see below.

¹⁷ A. *Cho.* 519; S. *El.* 442–3.

¹⁸ See n. 15 above; Ag. 1553–4, *Cho.* 429–39 (of which the continuation, *ἔπρασσε δ' ἄπερ νιν ὧδε θάπτει, | μόρον κτίσαι μωμένα | ἄφερτον αἰῶνι σώι*, seems to imply that the dishonour done to Ag. was intended to produce a lifetime (*αἰών*, see n. 13 above) of lamentation for his surviving children); 444–50.

¹⁹ *Cho.* 315ff., 324–7, 332ff., etc.

²⁰ (445–6) i.e. to cleanse herself, with the implication also that this was the only funeral bath Ag. got. For the possibility of the water in which the mourners washed being offered to the dead see Parker, op. cit. n. 8, 36 n. 15.

other rites²¹ we hear of are *χοροί* and monthly sacrifices to the saviour deities on the day of Agamemnon's death (278–81). It is therefore quite understandable that the Sophoklean Elektra justifies her excessive lamentation by the sight of her father's *πήματα* constantly *θάλλοντα μάλλον ἢ καταφθίνοντα* (258–60), and that Agamemnon 'comes to the light' (419) to appear to Klytaimnestra in a dream, rather as in rural Greece today dreams are considered to be a channel through which the dead may make demands of the living – but only, on the whole, in the limited transitional period following death.²²

Elektra says that when she sees the monthly *χοροί* and sacrifices instituted by Klytaimnestra, *κλαίω, τέτηκα, κάπικωκύω πατρός | τὴν δυστάλαιναν δαίτ' ἐπωνομασμένην | αὐτὴ πρὸς αὐτήν* (283–5). Rites were performed, in the classical period, on the thirtieth day after death.²³ And there is lexicographical evidence for a meal shared by the relatives in honour of the dead person 'on the thirtieth day'.²⁴ If the Attic thirtieth-day rite did include such a meal, then the consumption of sheep which presumably accompanied Klytaimnestra's monthly *χοροί* and *μηλοσφαγία* is a specific perversion of this ritual meal; and this (rather than, as is supposed by the latest commentator, the meal at which Agamemnon was killed²⁵) is the meal which Elektra means by 'the wretched meal named after my father': the usurpers even named their celebratory feasts after Agamemnon, like a hero cult.²⁶ Perhaps they also envisaged them as a celebration of the fatal meal. When Elektra sees all this she weeps all alone.

There is reason to believe²⁷ that in classical Athens the thirtieth-day rite concluded the period of mourning, or at least was a significant stage in the separation of the mourners from the dead. If so, then another dimension of the perversion of Klytaimnestra's celebration consists in its monthly repetition. So far from contributing to the restoration of normality, it renews every month the insult to Agamemnon, and thereby contributes to the dual impossibility of incorporating Elektra back into the world of the living on the one hand and her angry, suffering father into the world of the dead on the other. She must respond to the perverted and protracted rites of her mother with anomalously protracted lamentation of her own: *δεῖν' ἐν δεινοῖς ἡναγκάσθην* (221).

Klytaimnestra responds, in her turn, by using a traditional consolation (cf. 153–4) – 'you are not the only one to suffer bereavement' – as a reproach, and adds the malicious hope that 'the gods below' may never release Elektra from her lamentations. As we have seen, Elektra shares her *αἰών* with her dead father. There are even plans to put her, if she does not cease lamenting, in a place where she will not see the sun, *ζῶσα . . . ἐν κατηρεφεί | στέγῃ, χθονὸς τῆσδ' ἐκτός*²⁸ (379–82). This

²¹ It is true that Ag. has a tomb, which implies that he was buried. But cf. *E. El.* 289 (burial denied) with e.g. 323 (his tomb). The story needs a tomb. The question does not arise of whether Elektra was prevented from performing the rites (cf. *A. Cho.* 444–50).

²² Danforth, *op. cit.* n. 5, 135. Cf. Achilles and Patroklos.

²³ *IG* xii. 5.593 = *SIG*³ 1218 = *LSCG* 97; cf. Harpokr. and *Suda* s.v. *τριακάς*; Pollux 1.66.

²⁴ Phot. s.v. *καθέδρα*; *Lex. Rh.*, in *Anektd. Bekk.* 268, 19ff.; E. Rohde, *Psyche* (trans. 1925), 195 n. 86.

²⁵ Kells *ad loc.*; cf. *S. El.* 203; *Od.* 4.531–5; Eustath. (*ad Od.*, p. 1507) says that Soph. meant by *Ἀγαμέμνονος δαῖς* a (yearly) celebration.

²⁶ There were e.g. monthly sacrifices to Herakles in fifth-century Attica: Polemon ap. Athen. 234e; cult of Agamemnon: Roscher, *Lex. Myth.* i. 96. For (later) monthly celebrations or sacrifices see D. L. 10.18; Gow on Theocr. 17.127; Wissowa in *Hermes* 37 (1902), 157–9.

²⁷ Lysias 1.14: *ἔδοξε . . . τὸ πρόσωπον ἐπιμυθιώσθαι, τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ τεθνεώτος οὕτω τριάκονθ' ἡμέρας*.

²⁸ Kaibel reads *ἐν κατηρεφεί | χθονὸς στέγῃ τῆσδ' ἐκτός*, i.e. *ἐκτός τῆσδε (στέγης)*, 'not in the palace but underground'.

will suit her position between the living and the dead. In the same way Antigone, as a result of what is regarded as undue attachment to the dead, is put alive into a *κατηρέφης τύμβος*,²⁹ where, says Kreon, she can pray to Hades, *ὃν μόνον σέβει θεῶν* (777).

Already Elektra is suffering deprivation (187–92): *ἄτις ἄνευ τεκέων κατατάκομαι, | ἄς φίλος οὐτις ἀνὴρ ὑπερίσταται, | ἀλλ' ἀπερεί τις ἔποικος ἀναξία | οἰκονομῶ θαλάμους πατρός, ὧδε μὲν | ἀεικεῖ σὺν στολᾷ, | κεναῖς δ' ἀμφίσταμαι τραπέζαις*. Are these sufferings self-imposed, or are they inflicted on her directly by her enemies? This ambiguity seems to me unresolvable, but significant. On the one hand they are appropriate to the condition of the mourner,³⁰ and may seem therefore to be self-imposed. Why then does Elektra seem to imply here that the sufferings are inflicted on her by her enemies? In the same spirit perhaps as Euripides' Elektra adopts humble tasks entirely voluntarily in order to display to the gods the *hybris* of Aigisthos (*Elektra* 58). On the other hand, the imprisonment with which Elektra is threatened has provided a clear example of a punishment which is imposed by her enemies but also appropriate to the condition of the mourner. Indeed the welcome she extends to this prospect of a living death, and even her bitter desire to be far removed from her sister (391), are based on the realities of mourning: participation in the state of the dead and seclusion from the non-mourners. And although it may appear paradoxical to punish Elektra's excessive mourning by inflicting on her sufferings which are a more extreme manifestation of the same condition, we find the same paradox in a third-century B.C. law from Gambreion,³¹ which imposes certain restrictions on funerals, requires the women to 'take part in the processions written in the law' after the official period of mourning is over, and at the same time imposes on the women a ten-year exclusion from sacrifice and from the Thesmophoria as a *penalty* for ignoring the restrictions. That is to say, the penalty for excessive mourning is a further long period of the kind of exclusion that is appropriate to the condition of mourning.

It may indeed be supposed that Elektra's enemies fear the threat that might be posed by her offspring, as in Euripides' version. This is, however, never indicated in the play. And it is anyway unthinkable that Elektra should want to be married while absorbed in mourning. Husbandless, she lives like an outsider in the *θάλαμοι* of her father. Now the word *θάλαμος*, which refers here to an inner room of the palace, refers in three of its four other occurrences in Sophokles either to a bridal chamber or to a tomb.³² And however incompatible these two places may seem, the traditional association of the death of an unmarried girl with her wedding³³ allows Sophokles to exploit in *Antigone* the ambiguity of *θάλαμος*: the tomb in which Antigone is to be put alive, and where she dies in a kind of wedding ritual with Haimon (*νυμφικὰ τέλη*, 1240–1), is compared to the *τυμβήρης θάλαμος* in which Danae was united with Zeus (947); and in the hymn to *Ἔρως* Antigone is said to be on her way to *τὸν παγκοίταν θάλαμον*

²⁹ S. *Ant.* 885–6; cf. 888 *εἴτ' ἐν τοιαύτῃ ζῶσα τυμβεύειν στέγηι*, 774–80, etc. Houses sealed off when death imminent? (Men. *Asp.* 466ff.; Parker, op. cit. n. 8, 35 n. 10).

³⁰ Obviously a wedding could not be held in mourning; less obvious is the idea that contact with death might endanger the female reproductive processes: Parker, op. cit. n. 8, 53; some evidence for fasting: Parker, 36 n. 16, and *Il.* 24.612–13; torn clothes: e.g. F. Sokolowski, *Lois Sacrées d'Asie Mineure* (1955), n. 16.

³¹ Sokolowski, op. cit. n. 30, n. 16; Alexiou, op. cit. n. 2, 17.

³² *Ant.* 804, 947 (see below), *Trach.* 913, *OT* 195. On the chthonic and bridal associations of *θάλαμος* generally see J. P. Vernant in *Myth and Thought among the Greeks* (1983), 149.

³³ (and of the wedding with death): see e.g. M. Alexiou and P. Dronke in *Studi Medievali* 12.2 (1971), 819–63.

(804; cf. 813–16).³⁴ In the *Elektra* passage too, it seems to me, the word is chosen for its association with both the tomb and the bridal chamber. The primary reference of *θαλάμους πατρός* is of course the palace, but it cannot avoid connoting in this context the abode of the dead,³⁵ with the result that Elektra seems to belong both to the world of the dead and (but as an outsider) to the world of the living. This is the paradox of mourning, sharpened here by the isolation of the mourner.

This isolation is expressed by a further layer of ambiguity. Any *θάλαμος* of death occupied by an unmarried girl would readily be imagined also as bridal, as for example in *Antigone*. This connotation is particularly likely here, where Elektra is complaining that she has no husband. Normally it is at her wedding that a girl feels isolated from her father's home, an isolation associated apparently with death,³⁶ as the necessary prelude to incorporation into the *bridal θάλαμος*. The bride undergoes a temporary, solitary liminality, between the two households.³⁷ Elektra, however, suffers a comparable isolation in mourning. The unusually solitary liminality of Elektra's mourning has in this passage been assimilated, albeit faintly, to the solitary liminality of the bride. But for Elektra it is permanent. She lives in the *θάλαμοι* of the palace. But she does not belong there. She should have made the transition to the *θάλαμοι* of her husband. But because she belongs to the dead, to the *θάλαμοι* of her dead father, she cannot make this transition. There is something similar in Euripides' version, where she is a married *παρθένος*: being in mourning, she rejects participation in the celebrations of the *παρθένου* (167–83), but she also says of herself... *ἀνέορτος ἱερῶν καὶ χορῶν τητωμένη | ἀναίνουμαι γυναῖκας οὔσα παρθένος*,³⁸ and so is in a sense permanently in the transitional position ascribed by John Chrysostom to the bride: *ἡ νύμφη μεταξὺ τούτων* (i.e. the chorus of women and the choruses of maidens) *ἐστίν, οὔτε παρθένος οὔτε γυνή. ἐκείθεν γὰρ ἐξέρχεται κτλ.* (PG 62.386).

To return to the main line of argument: it appears that the deprivations characteristic of mourning are inflicted on Elektra, in an intensified form, by her enemies. Or so at least she seems to suggest for some of them. Ritual liminality appears as what might be called social liminality. And it might be added here that this liminality or exclusion is provided with a visual dimension by the conditions of performance: Elektra spends

³⁴ Cf. also e.g. E. *Su.* 1021–2... *χρῶτα χρῶτι πέλας θεμένα, | Φερσεφονείας ἤξω θαλάμους; Simonides' οὐκ ἐπιδὼν νύμφεια λέχη κατέβην τὸν ἄφυκτον | Γόργυππος ξανθῆς Φερσεφόνης θάλαμον* (xxxi Page, 406–7); Vernant, as cited in n. 32.

³⁵ Cf. e.g. n. 34, and A. *Cho.* 315–16, where Orestes speaks of the *εὐναί* of his dead father.

³⁶ See I. Jenkins in *BICS* 30 (1983), 142; Alexiou, op. cit. n. 2, 58, 120–2; etc.

³⁷ Seaford in *Hermes* (forthcoming).

³⁸ 310–11. *γυναῖκας* in 311 is Triclinius' correction of *γυμνὰς* (though he left the *δὲ*). D. Kovacs in 'Castor in Euripides' *Electra* (*El.* 307–13 and 1292–1307)' in *CQ* 1985 (I am grateful to the editors for showing me the proofs) reads *ἀναίνουμαι γὰρ γυμνὰς οὔσα παρθένους* (he also deletes 308, and reads Scaliger's *Κάστορ(ε) ὦ* in 312). But (1) He dismisses Zuntz' view that Tr. derived the correction from another MS, but without mentioning one of the two pillars of Zuntz' argument (see Zuntz 107, on *El.* 168). (2) More importantly, *El.* cannot mean by *γυμνὰς* 'without festal attire'. The examples K. gives of *γυμνός* meaning 'something less than total nakedness' all refer to the absence of an (outer) garment – a very different matter from poor *quality* of clothing. (The modern 'I've nothing to wear' is irrelevant.) And of course *El.* has just stated that she weaves her own *πέπλοι* (308). The corruption may have entered from 309. (3) It is not true that 'lack of clothing was precisely the reason she gave the Chorus in 175–9 for declining their invitation' to the festival. The reason she gave there was lamentation, to which she added (181ff.) the complaint that her clothes were unsuitable for the daughter of Agamemnon. And so the chorus' offer of fine clothes (189ff.) is of course not taken up. (4) It is not true that *El.*'s other complaints at 307ff. 'describe real and not imaginary or self-inflicted injuries'. With 309 cf. 55–9. (5) K.'s objections to the sense of 311 underestimate the isolation inherent in *El.*'s position.

almost the entire play outside the door of the palace, and on the news of the death of Orestes she resolves to wither away ἄφελος and τῆιδε πρὸς πύλῃ (818–19). Now according to the analysis proposed by van Gennepe and Hertz, death rites, by maintaining temporarily the reality of the dead person, articulate an ordered integration of the dead into the next world and of the mourners back into society. ‘In the final analysis’, writes Hertz at the end of his study, ‘death as a social phenomenon consists in a dual and painful process of mental disintegration and synthesis. It is only when this process is completed that society, its peace recovered, can triumph over death.’³⁹ What happens in Sophokles’ *Elektra* is the reversal of this function of death rites. Deprivation, separation, and association with the dead, which are normally preliminary responses to the disruption caused by death, and so agents of an articulated restoration of social cohesion, have in this case become instruments in the struggle, agents of disruption within the family. In the same way Elektra, for her part, gives as one reason among others for her continued lamentation (355–6): λυπῶ δὲ τούτους, ὥστε τῷ τεθνηκότι | τιμὰς προσάπτειν, εἴ τις ἔστ’ ἐκεῖ χάρις. It is an instrument in the apparently endless conflict with her mother and stepfather, a response, certainly, to the disruption caused by death, but also an *agent* of disruption in the family. It is true that she attributes to her lamentation the orthodox purpose of honouring the dead; but in this case the honour derives from the λύπη caused to other members of the family. So far from being a response by the kinship group to the disruption caused by a death, a response which though relatively unrestrained is nevertheless contained within an articulated framework of separation and reintegration, the ritual of mourning has been perverted by both sides into a weapon in a conflict within the kinship group, a conflict which is uncontained by any temporal, moral, or ritual limit, and which is intensified by the perversion of the natural relationship between mother and daughter. The blood which Elektra drinks from the soul of her mother is ‘unmixed’ (786). So far from containing disorder, the ritual is employed in its service.

In its provision of an articulated framework for a grief which has no *natural* limits, ritual may be supported by exhortation⁴⁰ or legislation. For example,⁴¹ Lykourgos was said to have prescribed for the Spartans a χρόνος πένθους of only eleven days: on the twelfth day they had to sacrifice to Demeter and λύειν τὸ πάθος. (As is so often the case in tragedy, Sophokles’ *Elektra* represents the prevalence, in exotic circumstances, of a tendency⁴² which in life had to be kept under control.) Inherent in death ritual are socially constructed limits on the potentially unlimited, natural expression of grief. The conflict in the house of Atreus, on the other hand, is without measure or limit. To the chorus, who urge restraint, Elektra replies (236) καὶ τί μέτρον κακότητος ἔφνυ; φέρε, | πῶς ἐπὶ τοῖς φθιμένοις ἀμελεῖν καλόν;. κακότης here refers to the behaviour of the usurpers, perhaps also to the resulting suffering of Elektra. The point of ἔφνυ is that there is no *natural* inherent limit in it. The absolute, unrestrained κακότης of her enemies must produce in Elektra misery which is absolute and unrestrained and lamentation without end. Where socially constructed ritual norms are swept away, or perverted into the service of a natural, unrestrained conflict, there are no limits. Elektra is drawn into the paradoxical state of absolute liminality.

The eventual victory over Klytaimnestra and Aigisthos constitutes a further stage

³⁹ Hertz, op. cit. n. 4, 86; Danforth, op. cit. n. 5, passim.

⁴⁰ E.g. *Il.* 24.549; *El.* 154, 289; Cic. *Tusc.* 3.79.

⁴¹ Plut. *Lyk.* 27; see also Alexiou, op. cit. n. 2, 16–17.

⁴² Cf. the *pleasure* of lamenting: E. *Tro.* 608–9, *El.* 125–6; A. *PV* 637–9; Alexiou, op. cit. n. 2, 230 n. 69.

in the reciprocal perversion of death ritual. Klytaimnestra is struck down at the very moment when ἐς τάφον | λέβητα κοσμεῖ, τῷ δ' ἐφέστατον πέλας (1400–01). κοσμεῖν is often used of the ordered beauty of death ritual, as just recently by Elektra of the rites that she could not perform for Orestes (1139; cf. e.g. *S. Ant.* 396, 901). In τῷ δ' ἐφέστατον πέλας there is a sinister ambiguity: on the one hand it signifies attendance at the solemn deposition of the urn,⁴³ on the other hand the imminent attack.⁴⁴ As in the *Oresteia* (see above, n. 1), death ritual has become an instrument of murder. A few lines later Aigisthos arrives and sees the covered body which he thinks is Orestes'. The concealment of the head would arouse no suspicion, as this was not unknown in the funeral.⁴⁵ Aigisthos declares his desire to lament his kin (1469), a declaration which has the same effect as the earlier κοσμεῖ (1401) about Klytaimnestra: after the reciprocal perversion of death ritual, here at last appears the (false) prospect of the restoration of ritual order. The critics react either by suspecting hypocritical piety (e.g. Jebb) or by supposing that Sophokles has decided to give the villains decent emotions after all (e.g. Kells). Both these reactions are wrong because they both miss the point, which is that the suggestion of ritual order is introduced only so that it may once again be horribly subverted. A further stage is reached in the reciprocally perverted use of death ritual in absolute conflict.

It is true that this further stage does at least put an end to the anomalous lamentation of Elektra. Her τάδε . . . ἅλυστα (230) was too pessimistic, and after the victory she finds the κακῶν | μόνον . . . τῶν πάλαι λυτήριον (1489–90). But just as, earlier in the play, she denied that the offerings sent to the tomb could constitute λυτήρια τοῦ φόνου for the anxious Klytaimnestra (447; cf. 635), so here the 'only λυτήριον' of her own sufferings involves (unlike e.g. the Spartan λύειν τὸ πάθος) neither ritual nor reintegration. Quite the reverse. It consists rather in giving the corpse of Aigisthos (1488) ταφεῦσιν ὦν τόνδ' εἰκός ἐστι τυγχάνειν, that is to the birds or dogs.⁴⁶ The victory has only confirmed the mutual destruction of limits normally imposed on emotional behaviour by ritual.

Indeed, despite the λυτήριον devised at 1488, and despite her joy, Elektra says (1246–55) of her (inherently unlimited) suffering (οἶον ἔφυ κακόν; cf. 236) that it is οὔποτε καταλύσιμον, that it will never forget (οὔδ' ὅτε λησομένον), that it would be appropriate to speak of it constantly and without end (ὁ πᾶς ἐμοὶ ὁ πᾶς . . . παρών . . . χρόνος). The prospect of unending weeping, this time for joy – οὔ ποτ' ἐκλήξω χαρᾶς | δακρυροῦσα (1312–38)⁴⁷ –, is the reverse image of her earlier οὐ μὲν δὴ | λήξω θρήνων κτλ (103–4); again, it confirms the destruction of the limits inherent in the cyclical ritual process of mourning followed by the reintegration of the mourners back into society. And as for the anomaly of her apparently permanent, miserable virginity (187, see above), this too is reaffirmed by the appearance, after her recognition of Orestes, of its reverse image: it moves onto a triumphant offensive (1238–42): ἀλλ' οὐ τὰν Ἄρτεμιν | τὰν αἰὲ ἀδμήταν | τόδε μὲν οὔ ποτ' ἀξιώσω τρέσαι | περισσὸν ἄχθος ἔνδον | γυναικῶν ὃν αἰεῖ. Elektra was once τῶν ἔνδον περισσά (155);

⁴³ Cf. e.g. *E. Andr.* 1102 ἐσχάrais ἐφέσταμεν (at Delphi), *Su.* 1009 τὴν ἥς ἐφέστηκας πέλας πυράν (of an anomalous situation, but perhaps employing a familiar phrase).

⁴⁴ Cf. e.g. *Hdt.* 3.78; *Thuc.* 8.69.4.

⁴⁵ Seaford, art. cit. n. 1, n. 41. For lamentation though it seems always to have been uncovered: cf. 1468 χαλᾶτε πᾶν κάλυμμα . . . , ὅπως κτλ. Notice the bitter ambiguity of προσγορεῖν φίλως (1471): cf. art. cit. n. 1, n. 19.

⁴⁶ Cf. e.g. *Od.* 3.259; *A. Sept.* 1020–1; *E. El.* 895–6.

⁴⁷ χαρᾶι (Schaefer) is generally printed: but the MSS χαρᾶς appropriately (cf. 1311) emphasises her *feeling* of joy, reassures Or. (cf. 1309–10) that weeping will require no pretence, and intensifies the irony that Kl. will misinterpret her tears.

but now it is the γυναῖκες whom she envisages as a permanent περισσὸν ἄχθος ἔνδον, in contrast to herself, for she associates herself by her oath with the fearless, homicidal,⁴⁸ extra-mural, permanent (ἀεί) virginity of Artemis.⁴⁹

Corresponding to the reintegration of the mourners back into society is, as we have seen, the integration of the dead into the world of the dead. How does Agamemnon fare? In Aeschylus Orestes complains in the prologue, on his arrival in Argos, that he was not present (παρών) to perform the rites over the body (8–9); and after his victory over the usurpers he says νῦν αὐτὸν αἰνῶ, νῦν ἀποιμῶζω παρών (1014). But there is of course even now no body;⁵⁰ and so he continues πατροκτόνον θ' ὕφασμα προσφωνῶν τόδε | ἀλγῶ μὲν ἔργα κτλ, addressing not the body but the cloak in which it was wrapped. But this cloak, as Orestes has himself said in a style characteristic of the funeral αἶνος,⁵¹ should be called a net rather than a funerary cloak; and his attempt to praise and lament his father descends immediately into madness. This failure to perform the ritual, and thereby perhaps to establish his succession,⁵² is of course the work of the Furies. But it seems also to proceed from the original perversion of Agamemnon's funerary ritual arising from the conflict within the family and embodied in the funerary cloak which has functioned as a net.⁵³

In Sophokles' version, on the other hand, there is no such attempt after the victory to perform the rites. Quite the reverse. After proclaiming her intention never to cease crying for joy, Elektra goes on to say that εἰ πατήρ μοι ζῶν ἵκοιτο, μηκέτ' ἂν | τέρας νομίζεω αὐτό, πιστεύειν δ' ὀράν. So far from passing, after his prolonged πῆματα, into the world of the dead, Agamemnon might even, so Elektra says, now reappear, as Orestes has seemed to do (1314–15), in the world of the living. This is of course an ἀδύνατον, expressing her amazement. However, the content of the ἀδύνατον is not chosen arbitrarily. Rather, it must be seen in the light of her anomalous lamentation, which, apart from inflicting pain directly on the usurpers (see above), also had the role of sustaining the reality of the dead Agamemnon. This is a more defensive role than the lament has in Aeschylus, where the assistance of the dead Agamemnon, whose independent reality is not at stake, is invoked for the coup. The Sophoklean Elektra on the other hand implies that if she does not lament, ὁ μὲν θανὼν γὰρ τε καὶ οὐδὲν ὦν | κείσεται τάλας (245–6). This does not mean merely that the dead man will be treated as if he were nothing; there is also the implication that without her lamentation he will actually be no more than earth.⁵⁴ It is on these lines that we can resolve the contradiction between her reference to the sufferings of Agamemnon and her conception of her own desired death (by entering the house of Orestes, i.e. the urn in which she supposes his ashes to be) as τὴν μηδὲν ἐς τὸ μηδὲν (1166), to which she adds that the dead suffer no distress. Whereas Agamemnon had been lamented by herself, she is now left with nobody in the world (1150–2), and so when she is united in death with Orestes they will have nobody in the world above to lament them.

⁴⁸ Cf. e.g. *Il.* 21.483–4 σὲ λέοντα γυναῖξί | Ζεὺς θῆκεν, καὶ ἔδωκε κατακτάμεν ἦν κ' ἐθέλησθα.

⁴⁹ Cf. the Danaids rejecting marriage: . . . ἀδμήτος (i.e. Artemis) ἀδμήτα ῥύσιος γενέσθω (*A. Su.* 150). For the deity expressing state of swearer see e.g. E. Ziebarth, *De iure iurando in iure Graec. quaest.* (1892), 13. It is almost as if the γοναὶ σωμάτων ἐμοὶ φιλάτων (1233) sublimate El.'s need for children; cf. also *Plut. Mor.* 265a; *Hsch.* s.v. δευτερότοπος.

⁵⁰ αἶνος and ἀποιμῶζειν normally require a body: Seaford, art. cit. no. 1, nn. 51 and 52.

⁵¹ Seaford, art. cit. n. 1, n. 54.

⁵² Cf. e.g. *Isaeus* 2.36–7, 4.19, 4.26, 8.21–7, 9.4–5.

⁵³ Cf. the point made in n. 18 above.

⁵⁴ Cf. also 356, 833–6. Dead person as earth: Peek, *Griechische Vers-Inschriften* 1702.2; *E. fr.* 757.7, *Su.* 531–6.

In rural Greece today a woman in the early period of mourning can 'inhabit the socially constructed reality that existed prior to the death of the relevant significant other. She can continue to interact with the deceased; she can carry on a reality-sustaining conversation with him through the performance of death rituals in his memory'.⁵⁵ Elektra seems to move between (subjectively) sustaining the reality of the dead man on the one hand and reacting to his (objective) sufferings on the other. And the specific capacity of the lament to sustain the reality of the dead person is no longer the necessary first stage (reaction to the shock caused by death) in an articulated process leading to the acceptance of death and the restoration of normality; it takes rather the form of a defensive move in a bitter struggle. Here again, then, the role of ritual is perverted. And after the recognition of Orestes, it is almost as if the abnormally antagonistic subjective element has moved, now that victory is in sight, onto a triumphant offensive, as if Elektra, who is sometimes thought to be losing her mind in this scene, is ready to believe in the actual return of Agamemnon from the dead. Here too, then, the destruction in conflict of the limits inherent in ritual is confirmed in the eventual reversal of circumstances.

In conclusion, these considerations seem to me central rather than peripheral to the understanding of the play. They also shed some light on the controversial problem of how Sophokles evaluates the revenge. Furthermore, this kind of analysis produces fruit elsewhere in tragedy. For example, the horror surrounding the destruction of the limits of (wedding) ritual is central to Sophokles' *Women of Trachis*.⁵⁶ Limited progress can be made towards understanding the emotional effect of tragedy on the original audience. Literary criticism, if it ignores contemporary ritual, cannot make even this limited progress.⁵⁷

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⁵⁵ Danforth, *op. cit.* n. 5, 140.

⁵⁶ See *art. cit.* n. 37 above.

⁵⁷ I would like to thank Robert Parker for his helpful criticisms without incriminating him in my argument.