Classical Quarterly **53.2** 377–388 (2003) *Printed in Great Britain*

GENDER AND TRANSGRESSION IN SOPHOCLES' *ELECTRA*[1]

This study investigates some of the ways in which Sophocles' *Electra* debates and subverts elements of classical Athenian gender-ideology. Its primary concern is to explore the issue of whether Electra can be said to get what she deserves in the course of the play.

I

The most recent scholarly commentary on the *Electra* argues that its eponymous heroine 'approaches the revenge-action uplifted by love for her brother and radiant with the joy of their reunion', the episodes immediately preceding the close of the drama constituting 'her finest hour'.[2] This judgement has the great merit of avoiding the naïve Christianizing trap of condemning the revenge-act *qua* revenge, which places us in the impossible position of arguing that the morally correct course of action for the siblings was to turn the other cheek. I hope, however, to establish that there is reason to dissent from it.

Having begun the action at breaking-point (119–20), Electra steadily deteriorates. The messenger-speech, the urn scene, the ἀναγνώρισις and the killings destroy an emotional balance already disturbed. By 817–22, she is falling into suicidal despair, as also again at 1165–70 after receiving the urn. When Orestes reveals his identity, her extravagant (*too*-extravagant?) joy at 1232–87 is followed by a disturbing hallucination as she briefly identifies the *paidagogos* as her father (1361). By the end of the play, she is a broken woman, and it is not simply misplaced sentimentality which may lead us to shudder at the bitterness and savagery of 1483–90. Critics have frequently recognized that victory comes too late and cannot heal Electra's denatured psyche: Winnington-Ingram memorably described her as 'at once the victim and the agent of the Furies'.[3]

Generally disregarded, however, is the fact that—on Athenian principles—Electra receives no more and no less than her just deserts. Although the details of Athenian women's quotidian existence are ultimately unrecoverable and we should probably not exaggerate the crassness of contemporary prejudice, the men of Athens were no feminists: ancient Greek texts repeatedly stress the inherent deficiencies of women.[4]

[1] This paper is dedicated to Dr Fiorella Sultana De Maria. Sincere thanks must go to Professor Pat Easterling for the help and advice with which she has furnished me in its composition, and also to Dr Johannes Haubold, Cressida Ryan, Richard Fletcher, the *CQ* referees and (last but certainly not least) Phil Lally.

[2] J. March, *Sophocles:* Electra (Warminster, 2001), 19–20.

[3] R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles: An Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1980), 228. See also e.g. H. Friis Johansen, 'Die *Elektra* des Sophokles', *C&M* 25 (1964), 8–32; J. H. Kells, *Sophocles:* Electra (Cambridge, 1973), *ad* 1313ff., 1346–88. Interestingly, the set of the RSC's 1992 production of the play was evocative of a mental hospital: see E. Hall, 'Sophocles' *Electra* in Britain', in J. Griffin (ed.), *Sophocles Revisited* (Oxford, 1999), 261.

[4] See e.g. Arist. *Pol.* 1260a, 1277b; *HA* 608b; see also D. C. Richter, 'The position of women in classical Athens', *CJ* 67 (1971–2), 7, n. 59. M. A. Katz, 'Ideology and the "status of women" in ancient Greece', in R. Hawley and B. Levick (edd.), *Women in Antiquity* (London, 1995), 22–31 reviews the long-running controversy over the position of Athenian women.

Male views on the proper place of respectable females are best summed up by the crucial defining term σωφροσύνη, which connoted unassuming modesty generally and, frequently, sexual propriety in particular.[5] Aeschylus' Electra prays that she will possess this quality in greater measure than her mother (*Cho.* 140), but Sophocles' is σώφρων in neither sense, as she herself admits at lines 307–8: rather, she is sexually highly transgressive and anything but unassuming and modest.

Against such a gender-based reading of Electra's character, March argues that 'Electra is a Sophoclean hero, who happens to be also a woman.'[6] That she *is* a woman, however, must not be forgotten, especially since gender is such an important component of characters' identity elsewhere in Greek tragedy. Euripides' Medea provides only the best-known example of this: indeed, as we shall see presently, critics have offered several persuasive 'gendered' readings of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, a work on which the *Electra* draws heavily. Electra's gender has played a significant part in determining responses to the play at various points in its reception history,[7] and the suggestion that Sophocles himself wished to use the character of his heroine to explore issues surrounding contemporary gender-ideologies seems very plausible.

The significance of these points is generally overlooked or denied, and they tend to receive at best only cursory attention.[8] They possess considerable importance, however, and lead us to the crucial question of this study: to what extent may Electra's fate be seen as an appropriate punishment for—or, at any rate, as a natural consequence of—her failure to behave in a properly womanly, σώφρων fashion?

II

Male nervousness at the prospect of women escaping control informs much of Greek myth and tragedy.[9] The *Oresteia* in particular narrates, arguably not without irony, a species of myth familiar from many cultures across human time and space, sanctifying patriarchy by describing an earlier, disastrous matriarchal period, in this case Clytemnestra's hegemony (and, interestingly, identifies an earlier πολυάνωρ γυνή as a major source of the Atreids' travails: *Ag.* 60–7). The victory of patriarchy is, apparently, total: even the Furies ultimately consent to buttress the new order (*Eum.* 834–6).[10]

Electra squarely hits this raw nerve. Orestes' supposed demise precipitates her gravest transgression: having already indicated a willingness to exact her revenge herself—and intimately involved herself in Orestes' escape—she crosses her Rubicon

[5] See e.g. Phintys, *De Mul. Mod.*; J. J. B. Mulder, 'Quaestiones nonnullae ad Atheniensium matrimonia vitamque coniugalem pertinentes', dissertation (Leiden, 1920), 136–50; H. North, *Sophrosyne* (Ithaca, 1966), 1, n. 2.

[6] March (n. 2) *ad* 328–403.

[7] See e.g. Hall (n. 3), 271, 289.

[8] See most recently C. E. Sorum, 'The family in Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Electra*', *CW* 75 (1981–2), 209; C. P. Gardiner, *The Sophoclean Chorus* (Iowa City, 1987), 173.

[9] Cf. e.g. J. Gould, 'Law, custom and myth: aspects of the social position of women in classical Athens', *JHS* 100 (1980), 55–6; P. Walcot, 'Greek attitudes towards women: the mythological essence', *G&R* 31 (1984), 37–47; E. Hall, 'The sociology of Athenian tragedy' in P. E. Easterling (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1997), 103–10.

[10] See W. B. Tyrrell, *Amazons* (Baltimore, 1984), 123–4 (with reservations). See generally F. I. Zeitlin, 'The dynamics of misogyny: myth and mythmaking in the *Oresteia*', in J. Peradotto and J. P. Sullivan (edd.), *Women in the Ancient World* (Albany, 1984), 159–94 (cf. e.g. M. B. Arthur, '"Liberated" women: the classical era', in R. Bridenthal and C. Koonz [edd.], *Becoming Visible* [Boston, 1977], 62–3; N. Loraux, *The Experiences of Tiresias* [Princeton, 1995], 183–9).

and decides to take matters into her own hands (954–7).[11] Her language acquires a dangerously masculine patina: she eschews δειλία, and references to her conduct draw heavily upon the lexicon of manly heroism.[12] Most revealingly, when announcing her intention to kill Aegisthus, she predicts that she will receive εὐκλεία (973–4), her concern for which the Chorus lauds also at 1082–9; yet the word and its cognates never refer to women elsewhere in Sophocles—except, significantly, in the *Antigone*—and, as in Homer, regularly denote specifically *masculine* glory. The tyrannicide, Electra further declares at 982–5, will be a deed of ἀνδρεία meriting κλέος, a heavily loaded epic term otherwise used only by Orestes at 59–60.[13]

Of course, Electra does not ultimately carry out any of her plans—but she need not even touch a sword to demonstrate her insubordinacy and lack of σωφροσύνη, since her very words serve her as weapons.[14] The drama itself resists the imposition of a wholesale opposition between static λόγοι and dynamic ἔργα: λόγοι have perlocutionary consequences, affecting, altering, *acting*, just as they do in real life, not least in Athens' (male-dominated) institutions of government.[15] Most memorably, Electra's exclamation at 1415 implicates her almost as heavily as Orestes in Clytemnestra's slaying, and even the sort of 'wild', 'irrational' female lamentation to which she is addicted was potent and potentially transgressive in Greek ideology and thought.[16] This blurring of the words/deeds boundary, incidentally, problematizes the view articulated in the *Ajax* that, while women should generally remain passive, a little gentle verbal πειθώ is permissive: in the *Electra*, words are powerful and persuasion is a dangerous thing (560–2, 938–9, 976).

As a final point here, though in tragedy women do not necessarily transgress in entering public space, Electra's physical unconfinement is repeatedly emphasized.[17]

Chrysothemis provides an illuminating contrast. The sisters' conflict is frequently interpreted simply as principle clashing with expediency, perhaps recalling fifth-century philosophical controversies.[18] Certainly, Chrysothemis claims 'wisdom',

[11] Cf. 296–7, 399, 1021–3, 1319–21, 1348; A. Sommerstein, 'Alternative scenarios in Sophocles' *Electra*', *Prometheus* 23 (1997), 204–6.

[12] Cf. 320–1, 351, 1027; R. W. B. Burton, *The Chorus in Sophocles' Tragedies* (Oxford, 1980), 211; A. Serghidou, 'Électre ἔποικος: aliénation domestique et réintégration dans l'«Électre» de Sophocle', *QS* 38 (1993), 89–91.

[13] See S. L. Schein, '*Electra*: a Sophoclean problem play', *A&A* 28 (1982), 76–7.

[14] Although it is perhaps worth noting that Electra shows no awareness at 947–89 that homicidal women generally employ suitably feminine weapons such as poison (see e.g. K. J. Dover, *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle* [Oxford, 1974], 100; also, interestingly, *Cho.* 493–4 on Clytemnestra).

[15] See e.g. C. P. Segal 'The *Electra* of Sophocles', *TAPhA* 97 (1966), 531–2; id., *Tragedy and Civilization* (Cambridge, MA, 1981), 283–4; R. Kitzinger, 'Why mourning becomes Elektra', *ClAnt* 10 (1991), esp. 305–8; March (n. 2) *ad* 349–50. *Contra:* esp. T. M. Woodard '*Electra* by Sophocles: the dialectical design (part I)', *HSCPh* 68 (1964), 163–205, (part II) 70 (1965), 195–233; R. W. Minadeo, 'Plot, theme and meaning in Sophocles' *Electra*', *C&M* 28 (1967), 114–42.

[16] See e.g. M. Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Cambridge, 1974), 14–23 (with reservations), 171; G. Holst-Warhaft, *Dangerous Voices* (London, 1992), 33, 114–24 (cf. 135–60); N. Loraux, *Mothers in Mourning* (Ithaca, 1998), 19–28, 43–56. Note also the role played cross-culturally by lamentation in *vendette*. On 1415, see esp. A. Salmon, 'L'ironie tragique dans l'exodos de l'*Électre* de Sophocle', *LEC* 29 (1961), 243–7.

[17] 312–13, 328–31, 516–18, 1238–42 (see, however, P. E. Easterling, 'Women in tragic space', *BICS* 34 [1987], 15–26).

[18] See e.g. Kells (n. 3), 241–2, etc.; id., 'Sophocles' *Electra* revisited', in J. H. Betts et al. (edd.), *Studies in Honour of T. B. L. Webster* 1 (Bristol, 1986), 157–60; B. X. de Wet, 'The *Electra* of Sophocles—a study in social values', *AC* 20 (1977), 23–8.

'sense', and so forth, and to some extent lines such as 333–6 and 339–40 betray discreditable self-interest. In context, however, such *loci* are as much declarations of 'normal' feminine impotence as sophistic manifestos.[19]

Electra is not morally evil. δίκη is attributed to her and Orestes and/or denied to Clytemnestra frequently and by almost every character. Similarly, Electra—along with the Chorus, which is usually defending her—monopolizes the vocabulary of piety.[20] Yet even moral rightness cannot justify certain transgressions, as she herself admits: the powerful αἰσχ-pejoratives are applied much more even-handedly both to Electra and to her adversaries (never, interestingly to Orestes)—twice even by Electra to herself. She pleads a necessity defence, but τὸ αἰσχρόν is essentially indefensible.[21]

III

While Chrysothemis apparently lacks any vestige of female sexuality, her sister's erotic needs and longings are painfully apparent: the ancient association of Electra's name with ἄ-λεκτρα[22] is at least *ben trovato*. Electra's first iambic lines in particular attest her jealous frustration, which concentrates her invective upon Clytemnestra rather than Aegisthus; indeed, she exhibits passion and pique throughout the play, notably forgetting her concern for δίκη in the ἀγών.[23]

In one sense, Electra's very status as a παρθένος renders her unsettling. The Greeks constructed women as liminal, half-'natural' beings, and virgins—liminal females—predictably sited themselves towards the wild/'natural' side of the *limen*; Artemis the huntress, who is mentioned several times in the *Electra* (more often, indeed, than in any other surviving Sophoclean tragedy), is illustrative here.[24] Preoccupations with Lévi-Straussian raw/cooked, civilized/wild, sane/mad dichotomies are present throughout ancient Greek literature, and females often slipped into the 'wrong' categories, most notably in the *Oresteia*.[25] Possible traces also exist of deeper-seated parthenophobia: Pandora and the Danaids are suggestively threatening figures, and death meant marriage to Persephone, the archetypal Κόρη.[26]

[19] See esp. 997–8 (cf. Dover [n. 14], 100).

[20] δίκη: 32–5, 69–70, 100–2, 110–17, 245–50, 298, 338–9, 466–7, 472–6, 521–2, 537–8, 560–2, 1037, 1041–2, 1211, 1253–5, 1505–7. Piety: see e.g. A. A. Long, *Language and Thought in Sophocles* (London, 1968), 151–2 (307–9 may indicate some psychological confusion: cf. Burton [n. 12], 195).

[21] Admission: 558–60 (cf. *Ant.* 73; Eur. *El.* 1051–3). αἰσχ-words: 254–5, 482–7, 517–18, 558–60, 614–21. Defence: 221, 254–7, 308–9, 617–20. In general, A. W. H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility* (Oxford, 1960), 30, 156 (cf., however, 181–6) still seems essentially correct; 45 and 161–3 are particularly interesting on female breaches of 'quiet' virtues as αἰσχρά.

[22] Ael. 4.26; [Schol.] Eur. *Or.* 22; Eust. *ad Il.* 742.

[23] Jealousy: cf. G. M. Kirkwood, 'Two structural features of Sophocles' *Electra*', *TAPhA* 73 (1942), 86–95, 91. Agon: cf. 610–11 (a notorious crux: doxography at J. Bollack, 'Une question de mot: δίκη dans Sophocle, *Électre*, V. 610 sq.', *REG* 101 [1988], 173–80).

[24] See generally R. Just, *Women in Athenian Law and Life* (London, 1989), 231–5; A. Carson, 'Putting her in her place: woman, dirt, and desire', in D. M. Halperin et al. (edd.), *Before Sexuality*, (Princeton, 1990), 137–45; R. Padel, 'Women: model for possession by Greek daemons' in A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt (edd.), *Images of Women in Antiquity* (London, 1993²), 3–19. Artemis: e.g. S. G. Cole, 'Domesticating Artemis', in S. Blundell and M. Williamson (edd.), *The Sacred and the Feminine in Ancient Greece* (London, 1998), 33–5.

[25] C. P. Segal, 'The raw and the cooked in Greek literature: structure, values, metaphor', *CJ* 69 (1973–4), 289–308.

[26] *Anth. Pal.* 507b, 508 (cf. *Ant.* 810–16); L. Kahn-Lyotard and N. Loraux, 'Mort. Les mythes grecs', in Y. Bonnefoy (ed.), *Dictionnaire des mythologies* (Paris, 1981), 121–4; id., 'Feminine figures of death in Greece', in F. I. Zeitlin (ed.), *Mortals and Immortals* (Princeton, 1991), 95–110.

We may, however, go further. Electra's virginity has been disturbingly prolonged, and ancient physicians linked *παρθενία* with mental instability, suicidal tendencies and hallucinations in a pseudo-biology which helped buttress the dominant ideology of patriarchal patriliny.[27] The appearance of maddened *παρθένοι* in tragedy from Aeschylus' Io onwards has certainly been noted by scholars, and we may suggest that Electra's increasing instability is simply the natural consequence (or just desert?) of her unnatural virginity.[28] If she were merely supposed to be traumatized by Agamemnon's murder, one would not have to be a thoroughgoing Freudian to expect the powerful *Abreaktion* of the revenge-killings to provide at least a palliative, but it clearly does not.

Nor does her sexual transgressiveness end here. Fruitful too, perhaps, is the 'Electra complex' hypothesis attributing to Electra an unhealthy fixation on Agamemnon.[29] Electra, no longer enrolled in any domestic system, attempts to reconstitute her natal *οἶκος* with herself as *γυνή*, but the reconstitution is humanly impossible, and nuptial motifs appear in her discourse only when she faces death.[30] Incest-motifs were not uncommon in tragedy: within Sophocles' own extant *oeuvre*, we find the *OT*, while 'incestuous' interpretations of the *Antigone* possess considerable cogency.[31] (We must, however, tread carefully here: a thoroughgoing *psychoanalytic* reading of the *Electra* seems inappropriate: post-Freudian theories on female oedipalism fit it only uncomfortably, and such interpretative strategies beg important questions concerning the nature of dramatic character. Johnson's connection of incest in drama with widespread oedipalism in Athenian women also seems over-speculative.[32])

Electra's passionate, obsessive devotion to Agamemnon scarcely requires demonstration. Her principal source of grief is Agamemnon's death, not the murderers' impunity: at 86–120 and in the parodos, *mourning*-motifs predominate. Witness, for example, *θρήνω(ν)* and similar terms, the reference to breast-beating and the ironic *παννυχίδες*. The murder remains unmentioned until 97, Electra's desire for revenge until 110–17. The nightingale/Procne and Niobe metaphors too relate to bereavement, and some intriguing scholarly work suggests that they hint at the themes of incest and perverted marriage.[33]

[27] Prolonged virginity: 92–9, 110–17, 266–74, 585–90, 1183. Medical opinion: e.g. [Hipp.] *De Virg.* (cf. *De Mul.* 127, 177 (also compare 2 with *El.* 817–19); Plut. *Mor.* 249b–d).

[28] Maddened virgins: e.g. Hall (n. 9), 109–10; also esp. J. Ferguson, *A Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Austin, 1972), 381–95 on the Euripidean Electra. Application to Electra: e.g. G. Méautis, *Sophocle* (Paris, 1957), 231.

[29] Cf. G. Ronnet, *Sophocle: poète tragique* (Paris, 1969), 220–1; G. Fréris, '*Electre*: l'incarnation d'une enigme', *ΔΩΔΩΝΗ* 6 (1977), 23. Some scholars have suggested that she is fixated on *Orestes* (C. Ramnoux, *La Nuit et les enfants de la Nuit* [Paris, 1959], 161–2; G. Steiner, *Antigones* [Oxford, 1984], 158–9); this, however, seems less likely.

[30] R. A. S. Seaford, 'The destruction of limits in Sophokles' *Elektra*', *CQ* 35 (1985), 318–19.

[31] See e.g. R. A. S. Seaford 'The imprisonment of women in Greek tragedy', *JHS* 110 (1990), 77–79, 86–7; P. J. Johnson, 'Woman's third face: a psycho/social reconsideration of Sophocles' *Antigone*', *Arethusa* 30 (1997), 369–98 (cf. [Schol.] Stat. *Theb.* 11.371).

[32] Johnson (n. 31), 376, 393–4. Freudian readings: e.g. A. R. Chandler, 'Tragic effect in Sophocles analyzed according to the Freudian method', *The Monist* 23 (1913), 80; A.Green, *The Tragic Effect* (Cambridge, 1979), 58. Post-Freudian theories: e.g. N. J. Chodorow, 'Family structure and feminine personality', in L. Lamphere and M. Z. Rosaldo (edd.), *Woman, Culture and Society* (Stanford, 1974), 43–66, 125–29, etc.

[33] See Seaford (n. 30), 87; R. Rehm, *Marriage to Death* (Princeton, 1994), 46–7, 174, n. 22. They also recall Antigone: *Ant.* 578–9, 823–31.

Various other pieces of evidence point in the same direction: *οἰκονομῶ θαλάμους πατρός* at 190 is particularly suggestive, and this latter phrase, along with her threatened confinement, links in with various motifs associated with incest and the natal family in the *Antigone* and elsewhere.[34] More generally, the father–daughter relationship is rendered problematic *ab initio*, notably in the early series of metaphors directly inverting it, and Electra variously identifies both herself and all her male *φίλοι* with her father.[35]

An incestuous desire for Agamemnon would also explain the tension between remarks suggesting that Electra's *παρθενία* is a consequence of Orestes' absence and other statements implying that her present condition is necessarily permanent[36]—not merely because, as 168–72 suggests, Orestes will never return (1245–50 is delivered in Orestes' presence), but because Agamemnon is gone, notwithstanding his daughter's hallucinations and pathetic conviction that he is still in some sense alive.[37] It is hard to imagine Sophocles' Electra delivering lines like *Cho.* 486–8 (*El.* 959–72, suggesting that the sisters will marry after the murders, is an inducement offered to Chrysothemis, whom it predictably leaves unmoved, not an exposition of Electra's own wishes).

Electra's incestuous inclinations would undoubtedly have seemed intrinsically repellent.[38] They were, however, *subversive* too. The marriage-bond upon which Athenian patriliny depended was, paradoxically, also its Achilles' heel, undermined both by women's inevitable emotional attachment to their natal households and by law and custom: witness, for example, the legal ties binding wives to their natal *οἶκοι* and the dowry system.[39] Inappropriate valuations of kinship- and wedlock-ties recur in Attic drama: one thinks particularly of Antigone, Polynices, and Haemon.[40]

Electra seems generally incapable of entering into normal *φίλος*-relationships.[41] Particularly troubling is her attitude towards Orestes: 'self-pity' was neither unusual nor necessarily condemnable in Greek lamentation, but Electra's speeches consistently dwell less upon the horror of Orestes' violent, untimely death than upon its consequences for her.[42] Not for nothing, however, is she compared to Niobe, the archetypal example of *maternal* grief: she has stepped into the maternal role vacated by Clytemnestra, and what affection she does exhibit towards him seems decidedly

[34] See Seaford (n. 30), esp. 78–80.

[35] Inversions: 103–9, 147–52 (cf. 1074–81). Identifications: see M. W. Blundell, *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies* (Cambridge, 1989), 153.

[36] Compare 103–9, 129–33, 145–6, 221–32, 1245–50 with 187–92, 164–7.

[37] See e.g. 459–60; Kells (n. 3) *ad* 1361–2; Segal (n. 15, 1966), 496. She is already apostrophizing him at 100–2.

[38] Athenian attitudes to incest: Just (n. 24), 76–9; A. R. W. Harrison, *The Law of Athens* (London, 1998^2), 22–3.

[39] See e.g. H. J. Wolff, 'Marriage law and family organization in ancient Athens', *Traditio* 2 (1944), 46–51; H. P. Foley, Review of P. E. Slater, *The Glory of Hera* (Boston, 1968), *Diacritics* 6 (1976), 3; L. H. Foxhall, 'Household, gender and property in classical Athens', *CQ* 39 (1989), 32–9. See also e.g. J. F. Collier, 'Women in politics', in Lamphere and Rosaldo (n. 32), 94. *Od.* 15.21–3 is exceptional.

[40] Cf. e.g. C. Sourvinou-Inwood, 'Sophocles *Antigone* 904–920: a reading', *AION phil.* 9–10 (1987–8), 19–35; ead., 'Le mythe dans la tragédie, la tragédie à travers le mythe: Sophocle, *Antigone* vv. 944–987', in C. Bérard and C. Calame (edd), *Métamorphoses du mythe en Grèce antique* (Geneva, 1988), 177–8. See also, in the *Oresteia*, *Cho.* 585–651; *Eum.* 211–21.

[41] Segal (n. 15, 1966), 497–501 (cf. 493–504); Blundell (n. 35), 151–4.

[42] For example, 804–22, 1126–70, 1176–1200 (cf., however, 861–3); she utters nothing comparable to *Cho.* 238–42 (cf. Segal [n. 15, 1966], 504; Ronnet [n. 29], 221–2). Self-pity: cf. M. Lloyd, 'Realism and character in Euripides' *Electra*', *Phoenix* 40 (1986), 5.

motherly.[43] Electra, then, is the virgin who would be her father's wife, the sister who mothers her brother.[44]

Interesting here are some features of later, modern *Electras*. Von Hofmannsthal's anti-heroine is unquestionably oedipal, though Chrysothemis assumes most of her virginal longings; so, perhaps, is O'Neill's, while Sartre's Électre is painfully frustrated and apparently desires both father *and* brother.[45] Of course, we should give Sophocles' successors some credit for originality, but it is not improbable that they have uncovered something of considerable significance in his text.

IV

An Athenian man might be forgiven for experiencing considerable *Schadenfreude* at the downfall of the insubordinate Electra—and, indeed, at that of Clytemnestra in the *Oresteia*. Neither work, however, offers unequivocal support to Athenian gender-ideologies.[46]

Firstly, we may consider the heroine herself. In societies acknowledging only two, rigidly differential sets of gender-roles, women wishing to succeed in 'male' spheres frequently assume wholesale the masculine set.[47] Clytemnestra is essentially an (imperfectly) masculized woman of this kind, but Electra's gender-definition is more problematic. She is pugnacious yet motherly, emotional yet rational; she transgresses—but in defence of patriarchy and patriliny, despising Aegisthus' effeminacy and finally deciding to carry out the revenge only after Orestes' death has been reported (299–302).[48] For some contemporary feminists, she is the archetypal defender of the patriarchal order.[49]

Electra is *hors catégorie*: and, as Hardwick wrote in her study of the Amazons, 'It is that possibility—which represents the real challenge to Greek social and political assumptions.'[50] Certainly, adultery cannot prosper—it never does in Greek myth—and Agamemnon's property cannot pass to Aegisthus' offspring (cf. 585–90); but do patriarchal ends justify such transgressive means? If Aeschylus' Clytemnestra questions Athenian prejudices, Sophocles' Electra makes them fight each other. The 'just deserts' question has no simple answer.

[43] See e.g. O. Navarre, 'Sophocle imitateur d'Eschyle', *REA* 11 (1909), 125; Segal (n. 15, 1966), 517 (cf. a disquieting passage in the *Choephoroi*: Loraux [n. 10], 33–4). Notable too is Electra's association with fertility imagery: 217–19, 233–5. That oedipal women often do experience maternal fantasies (G. Devereux, *Femme et mythe* [Paris, 1982], 207) is probably coincidental.

[44] See M. A. Katz, 'The character of tragedy: women and the Greek imagination', *Arethusa* 27 (1994), 93–5 on Antigone.

[45] Hofmannsthal: *Elektra* (Berlin, 1909), 77–8 (cf. esp. 15–20; also M. Ewans, 'Elektra: Sophokles, von Hofmannsthal, Strauss', *Ramus* 13 [1984], 145 on Strauss' scoring). Eugene O'Neill: *Nine Plays* (New York, 1941), 712–18, 729–35, etc. (cf. perhaps S. Plath, *Collected Poems* [London, 1981], 92–3, 116–17, 129–30). Sartre: *Altona and Other Plays* (London, 1962), 250–3, 268, 277, 295–6.

[46] See, famously, R. P. Winnington-Ingram, 'Clytaemnestra and the vote of Athena', *JHS* 68 (1948), 130–47 on the *Oresteia* (reprinted in slightly revised form in his *Studies in Aeschylus* [Cambridge, 1983], 101–31).

[47] See e.g. M. Z. Rosaldo, 'Women, culture and society: a theoretical overview', in Lamphere and Rosaldo (n. 32), 37; S. B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves* (New York, 1975), 98.

[48] S. Wiersma, 'Women in Sophocles', *Mnemos.* 37 (1984), 48.

[49] J. Kristeva, *About Chinese Women* (New York, 1986), 32.

[50] L. Hardwick, 'Ancient Amazons: heroes, outsiders, or women', in I. McAuslan and P. Walcot (edd.), *Women in Antiquity* (Oxford, 1996), 173.

Even the terms of the question are problematized, because Electra is in many ways an admirable and sympathetic character, in spite of and perhaps because of her lack of σωφροσύνη. The play suggests a distinction between the woman as a human being demonstrably endowed with intellectual and moral qualities comparable to those of men, and the woman as the necessary evil guaranteeing the survival of the οἶκος—a distinction that was heterodox from the standpoint of Athenian ideology and contemporary medicine.[51] Electra transgresses well and convincingly, her courage, persistence and fidelity being eminently sympathetic: when watching the play, one cannot help but think, *c'est magnifique*, even if *ce n'est pas la guerre*. She deftly wields and exchanges λόγοι, and by 1058ff. has apparently won over even the mature, level-headed Chorus-women.[52] While she is certainly passionate and emotional, an assessment of her and Clytemnestra simply as 'representing the uncontrolled and irrational forces that characterize females in Greek thought' seems inadequate.[53]

Electra is a victim of circumstance, imprisoned in the narrative of a past that she did not create and cannot control. Without necessarily endorsing Knoxian analyses of Sophoclean heroism as sufficient or complete, we may feel that her 'heroic temper' places her in distinguished company, whether or not it involves gender-transgression:[54] Reinhardt, for example, declared that she 'appears in a world of the wicked and the false as the extreme of great-heartedness'.[55] Her plan to kill Aegisthus even recalls the Athenians' tyrannicidal civic heroes Harmodius and Aristogeiton.[56] Even her mental distraction finds expression which is unsurpassed, unforgettable: powerful, poetic, *beautiful*—while, conversely, Chrysothemis' circumspection has appeared unengaging to Victorian clergymen and modern feminist intellectuals alike.[57]

Electra's positive qualities also raise questions regarding the equity of the functional 'splitting' of women into virgins, wives, ἑταῖραι, and so on.[58] Paternity does not admit of the same empirical verification as maternity, as contemporary husbands and fathers knew well: even leaving aside their fears concerning adultery, they worried, apparently sincerely, about such absurdities as women smuggling alien babies into their οἶκοι.[59] Their fears fed and fed on the wild, liminal constructions of women noted above: the γυνή—untamed, wanton, sexual, and fertile—simultaneously sustained and menaced the οἶκος. 'Splitting' and the confinement of παρθένοι and γυναῖκες

[51] See e.g. P. Manuli, 'Fisiologia e patologia del femminile negli scritti ippocratici dell'antica ginecologia greca', in M. D. Grmek, *Hippocratica*, Coll. int. CNRS 583 (Paris, 1980), 393–408.

[52] See e.g. Gardiner (n. 8), 161–2 (cf. 141; M. Ierulli, 'A community of women?', *Metis* 8 [1993], 217–29 [with reservations]). The Chorus also apparently speaks for the πόλις (cf. F. Budelmann, *The Language of Sophocles* [Cambridge, 2000], 257–60)—and that females do so is itself significant.

[53] S. Des Bouvrie, *Women in Greek Tragedy*, SO Fasc. Suppl. 27 (Oslo, 1990), 267–8.

[54] See B. M. W. Knox, *The Heroic Temper* (Berkeley, 1964), 1–61 (cf. North [n. 5], 50–68).

[55] K. Reinhardt, *Sophocles* (Oxford, 1979), 138.

[56] D. M. Juffras, 'Sophocles' *Electra* 973–985 and tyrannicide', *TAPA* 121 (1991), 99–108.

[57] See e.g. H. F. M. Blaydes, *The* Electra *of Sophocles* (London, 1873), 4; H. P. Foley, 'The conception of women in Athenian drama', in ead. (ed.), *Reflections of Women in Antiquity* (New York, 1981), 142; also, most recently, March (n. 2) *ad* 328–403.

[58] Term from E. C. Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus* (Berkeley, 1985), 204, etc.; [Dem.] 59.122 is the *locus classicus* (cf. Xen. *Mem.* 2.2.4).

[59] Paternity: S. Pembroke, 'Women in charge: the function of alternatives in early Greek tradition and the ancient idea of matriarchy', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 30 (1967), 30–5. Adultery: e.g. E. M. Harris, 'Did the Athenians regard seduction as a worse crime than rape?', *CQ* 40 (1990), 375. Baby-smuggling: J. F. Gardner, 'Aristophanes and male anxiety: the defence of the *oikos*', in McAuslan and Walcot (n. 50), 150–1.

guaranteed the household's integrity and provided outlets for the Athenian men's own (frequently disavowed[60]) excess passions.

In this context, Electra's single-minded devotion to Agamemnon is thought-provoking, especially in comparison with Agamemnon's own sexual appetites as memorably presented in Homer and Aeschylus: recall too that Electra's fellow Sophoclean heroine Deianeira is primarily the victim of unscrupulous, lustful *men*. Clytemnestra's affair with Aegisthus may further question the double-standard, as it certainly does in Euripides (1036–40):[61] Jones well noted that her adulterous motivations receive a prominence that they lack in the *Oresteia*.[62] Agamemnon emerges distinctly unfavourably from a dispassionate comparison with his wife and daughter: and what, we may ask, does that say about the justice of his own deserts?

There is, moreover, another irony. The *Eumenides* concludes with the paradoxical establishment of patriarchal civic order under the aegis—a notoriously threatening object in Freudian theory—of an androgynous *παρθένος* who succeeds the vigorously patriarchal Apollo as *Διὸς προφήτης*.[63] In Aeschylus, Athene conceivably counterpoints Clytemnestra, maybe even the Furies—the virginal, virgin-born daughters of Night. As Vernant and Vickers have noted, she is counterparted in the *Electra* by the eponymous heroine, another androgynous virgin who is *κάρτα τοῦ πατρός*—and who is chastized mercilessly while Apollo's authority remains unchallenged.[64] Athene's androgyny and virginity are acceptable, even empowering;[65] Electra's condemn her. One of them at least is failing to get what she deserves.

V

We may at this point consider Clytemnestra in more detail. She is deeply embedded in the play's concerns with gender, and her portrayal perhaps lends some support to our argument.

The *Oresteia* has prepared us for an *ἀνδρόβουλος* harridan; and, though Sophocles' Clytemnestra is drawn slightly less boldly, she is scarcely a model of *σωφροσύνη*.[66] Most obviously, she violates fundamental sexual mores; and, as Vernant in particular stresses, comprehensively exchanges gender-roles with Aegisthus.[67] *She* decided to commemorate Agamemnon's murder after taking her (gender-transgressive) revenge; *she* owns the household's property; it is *she* whom Chrysothemis fears and Electra

[60] Dover (n. 14), 208–9; see, however, S. G. Cole, 'Greek sanctions against sexual assault', *CPh* 79 (1984), 97, nn. 4–5.

[61] See also J.-P. Vernant, 'Hestia–Hermes: the religious expression of space and movement in ancient Greece', *Myth and Thought among the Greeks* (London, 1983), 166, n. 63.

[62] J. Jones, *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* (London, 1971), 149–53.

[63] Athene's androgyny: e.g. S. D. Goldhill, *Language, Sexuality, Narrative: The* Oresteia (Cambridge, 1984), 259. She is always 'ultimately' female, however: she receives feminine adjectives, for example, arouses Hephaestus' passions, and is associated with the *πέπλος*.

[64] Athene as counterpointing Clytemnestra: Winnington-Ingram (n. 46, 1983), 125–6. Athene as counterpointing Electra: Vernant (n. 61), 137; B. Vickers, *Towards Greek Tragedy* (London, 1973), 557.

[65] Cf. *H.Hom.* 5.1–35.

[66] Cf. e.g. C. M. Bowra, *Sophoclean Tragedy* (Oxford, 1944), 235; A. Vögler, *Vergleichende Studien zur sophokleischen und euripideischen Elektra* (Heidelberg, 1967), 135; Pomeroy (n. 47), 98–9. I wish to beg no questions concerning the differences between the *Agamemnon*-Clytemnestra and the *Choephoroi*-Clytemnestra: suffice it to say that we come to Sophocles' text from Aeschylus expecting to meet a woman with little respect for conventional gender-roles and *σωφροσύνη*.

[67] Sexual mores: see esp. Segal (n. 15, 1981), 261. Gender-roles: Vernant (n. 61), 134–6.

blames for her plight; and *she* is responsible, at least jointly, for the plan to imprison the latter.[68] She even looks ὡς τύραννος (664).

Her transgressions uncannily mirror those of her daughter. Particularly suggestive is ἄλεκτρ' ἄνυμφα . . . ἀμιλλήμαθ' at 493–4: licentiousness and prolonged virginity are equal, opposing, comparably negative deviancies; and, like Electra, Clytemnestra perverts her φίλος-relationships generally.[69] One could multiply even minor points of contact between the women: their prayers to Apollo, for example, are disquietingly symmetrical (though the god admittedly does not receive them in the same spirit), they attack each other in similar terms and they even share motifs, the ἀγών in particular points up their similarities.[70] Interesting comparisons could also be made between them and their kinswoman Helen.

Clytemnestra, moreover, is a woman of both destructive and constructive accomplishments. Both her οἶκος and her regime have survived for many years before Orestes' return, and her deployment of λόγοι is anything but 'womanly': she transgresses thoroughly competently. The harsher lines of the Aeschylean Clytemnestra are somewhat softened in her: her antipathy towards Orestes and Electra is hardly perverse, and her ambivalent grief for Orestes, which has generated several readings, deserves mention.[71] Clytemnestra appears to have become a popular bogey in the wake of the *Oresteia*,[72] and the radicalism of any softening of her character should perhaps not be underestimated; the Sophoclean Clytemnestra's relative mundanity both questions her predecessor's credibility (and thus that of the fantasy which she represents) and offsets her savagery with a certain sympathy. Is justice really seen to be done when she meets her fate any more than it is in the case of her daughter?

That the answer to this question is not an uncomplicated 'yes' finds confirmation elsewhere, and we may raise here the question of the morality of Orestes' matricidal vengeance, which is repeatedly associated—most memorably in Clytemnestra's dream—with the restoration of patriarchal, patrilineal order[73] (the identification of the avengers with the *Furies* being particularly ironic[74]). Orestes' position as a youthful ephebe-equivalent is interesting: he slays his natural genetrix and is reborn as a man under circumstances recalling those of cross-cultural initiation-rites.[75] More generally, his masculinity and that of his companions are emphasized from the start.[76]

Sheppard's famous 'ironic' reading possesses superficial appeal, but is gravely

[68] 277–81, 379–82, 471–2, 648–54 (cf. Eur. *El.* 994–5), 1194, 1476–7 (see Salmon [n. 16], 263–4). See also 299–302 (and, against 517–20, cf. 520–2: ἄρχω).

[69] Licentiousness/virginity: e.g. J.-P. Vernant, 'Between the beasts and the gods', *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece* (Brighton, 1980), 139, n. 61, 138; Just (n. 24), 245. Perverted relationships: J. March, 'The chorus in Sophocles' *Electra*', *Sophocles'* Electra *in Performance*, *Drama* 4 (Stuttgart, 1996), 68–70.

[70] Cf. e.g. Segal (n. 15, 1981), 261–2; Blundell (n. 35), 172. On the ἀγών specifically, cf. e.g. Woodard (n. 15, 1964), 184.

[71] Antipathy: cf. L. Parmentier, 'Une scène de l'«Électre» de Sophocle', *Mélanges Henri Weil* (Paris, 1898), 341. Grief: e.g. A. J. A. Waldock, *Sophocles the Dramatist* (Cambridge, 1951), 183; C. H. Whitman, *Sophocles* (Cambridge, MA, 1951), 273, n. 46; Kells (n. 3), 7–9.

[72] Antiph. 1.17 is particularly revealing.

[73] See G. Bona, 'Note all'*Elettra* di Sofocle', in E.Corsini (ed.), *La polis e il suo teatro* (Padua, 1986), 97–8; L. Bowman, 'Klytaimnestra's dream: prophecy in Sophokles' *Elektra*', *Phoenix* 51 (1997), 131–51 (cf. also the play's opening words).

[74] Especially since the malefactors are 'Furies' too: compare 1386–8 (cf. 275–6, 489–91) with 1074–81. Mention of the Furies in a play featuring Orestes inevitably recalls the *Oresteia*.

[75] Cf. Zeitlin (n. 10), 170–7.

[76] Cf. e.g. 20–1, 23–4, 75–6 (cf. the heavily Homericizing messenger-speech: J. F. Davidson, 'Homer and Sophocles' *Electra*', *BICS* 35 [1988], 59–71).

overstated and ultimately untenable. Apollo has sanctioned the usurpers' execution, and Orestes suffers no *crise de conscience*; the matricidal nature of the revenge-act and its enormity are not stressed.[77] Moreover, the Furies are absent, the killing of Agamemnon and his avenging being presented as a single episode, bipartite but self-contained. While the grim history of the Pelopids is certainly noted, Sophocles' text does not forge any Aeschylean chain of retaliations: the Chorus is at best ambiguous on this point, and Electra challenges Clytemnestra when she mentions Iphigeneia's killing and attributes to her other, equally plausible motives.[78]

Equally problematic, however, are suggestions that the play is actively defending the killings, perhaps in reaction to Euripides' work, as are 'amoral' readings and the view that the play simply poses an irresoluble dilemma.[79] The text avoids a crude, emotionally manipulative presentation of the matricide, but matricide it is nonetheless—1410 makes that much unmistakably clear—and matricide was no small matter. Further, Orestes seems an unattractive character, certain thematic patterns in the text conjure an uneasy atmosphere at the drama's close, and even the chorus' final exultation eerily echoes *Cho.* 931–64.[80]

Interpretations seeing Aegisthus' final taunts as overtly menacing are plausibly refutable[81]—but the *impression* of menace remains. In the same way, nothing in the text *specifically* entitles us to conclude that Orestes' patriarchal restoration has polluted him[82]—but we are troubled nonetheless. Just as we might ask ourselves whether Clytemnestra really deserves to die, we might wonder uneasily what sort of punishment Orestes deserves for killing his mother: it is not only the women in the *Electra* who might have cause to fear getting their just deserts. The triumph of patriarchy rings hollow indeed.

Clytemnestra's similarity to Electra suggests one further point concerning contemporary ideologies of gender, which we may briefly note. Winnington-Ingram asked rhetorically whether Electra's 'violence and extremism' were 'part of her inheritance in the female line'.[83] Ironically, they cannot be: the central question of the *Electra*'s towering predecessor is decided by denying the possibility of matrilineal heredity, sanctifying the 'Apollonic fantasy' which informs numerous primitive biologies, was

[77] See J. T. Sheppard, '*Electra*: a defence of Sophocles', *CR* 41 (1927), 2–9 (cf. esp. Kells [n. 3], *passim*). *Contra:* e.g. D. A. Hester, Review of J. C. Kamerbeek, *The Plays of Sophocles* 5 (Leiden, 1974), *Mnemos.* 28 (1975), 203–5; H. Erbse, 'Zur «Elektra» des Sophokles', *Hermes* 106 (1978), 284–300.

[78] Pelopids: 8–14, 504–15 (cf. H. Musurillo, *The Light and the Darkness* [Leiden, 1967], 99; T. C. W. Stinton, 'The scope and limits of allusion in Greek tragedy', in M. Cropp et al. [edd.], *Greek Tragedy and its Legacy [Festschrift D. J. Conacher]* [Calgary, 1986], 79), 1508–10. Ambiguity: 197–200 (cf. Pind. *Pyth.* 11.22–5). Iphigeneia, etc.: 530–48, 560–76, 585–94; also e.g. G. Swart, 'Dramatic function of the "agon" scene in the *Electra* of Sophocles', *AClass* 27 (1984), 23–9; Kitzinger (n. 15), 313–17 (both with reservations).

[79] Justificatory: e.g. Bowra (n. 66), 212–60; Woodard (n. 15, 1965), 216–19. Amoral: e.g. R. C. Jebb, *The Electra* (Cambridge, 1894), xl–xli. Irresoluble: e.g. H. Lloyd-Jones, Review of J. H. Kells, *Sophocles:* Electra (Cambridge, 1973), *CR* 25 (1975), 11; de Wet (n. 18).

[80] Orestes: e.g. Ronnet (n. 29), 208–9; Schein (n. 13); Blundell (n. 35), 173–8. Thematic patterns: e.g. Segal (n. 15, 1966), 477, 486, 524–5, etc.; R. A. S. Seaford, 'Sophokles and the mysteries', *Hermes* 122 (1994), 275–81.

[81] See e.g. A. S. Owen, '*Τὰ τ' ὄντα καὶ μέλλοντα*', *CR* 41 (1927), 50; B. Alexanderson, 'On Sophocles' *Electra*', *C&M* 27 (1966), 95–7.

[82] With, perhaps, one exception: C. S. Smith, 'The meanings of *καιρός* in Sophocles', *CJ* 85 (1989–90), 341–3.

[83] Winnington-Ingram (n. 3), 246 (cf. esp. line 608; D. Cairns, 'Shaming friends: Sophocles' *Electra*', *Prudentia* 23 [1991], 19–30 [with reservations]).

well-known in antiquity, and is repeatedly alluded to in Sophocles' play,[84] who refers to Clytemnestra as μήτηρ only when denying her maternity.

Now, Electra's *male* forebears were notoriously philiocidal and sexually wayward: she displays inappropriately masculine behaviour generally and recalls her male ascendants' vices in particular. The Oresteian physiology is arguably ironic: certainly, contemporary medicine and jurisprudence never embraced it wholeheartedly, and Athene's birth was counterparted by Hera's own parthenogenic endeavours.[85] The *Electra* perhaps pushes the irony to its logical conclusion: if women descend only from men—indeed, notoriously transgressive men—should we be surprised if they behave like them?

Not all gender-based readings of the *Electra* are equally convincing, and it would be foolish to see the play as a piece of proto-feminist proselytizing. Even in its concern for contemporary issues, it ranges far beyond questions of gender and gender-ideology. But when it does engage with such questions we cannot ignore the fact.

Essentially, ethical and biological justice is done: the mannish usurper succumbs to the valiant ephebe, crying for her husband (1409), and the φιλία-perverting, homicidal virgin becomes appropriately deranged. The justice, however, is rough. Excessive speculation on what meanings the *Electra* held for its original receivers—who were hardly a homogenous group—is unwise, but one wonders whether its first readers laid down their texts or its first audience left the Theatre of Dionysus—the place where boundaries fall and 'men imitate women who imitate men'[86]—recollecting with satisfaction the tedious γνῶμαι of Chrysothemis and feeling only *Schadenfreude*.

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[84] 341–2, 365–7, 585–90, 1171, 1411–12; Ierulli (n. 52), 221–2, 228–9 (cf. e.g. A. Peretti, 'La teoria della generazione patrilinea in Eschilo', *PdP* 11 [1956], 241–62; Vickers [n. 64], 636–43). The wording of 324–7 is perhaps significant; interestingly, Clytemnestra appears to challenges the 'fantasy': 531–3 (cf. 1410–11; Eur. *El.* 1102–4). Denial of Clytemnestra's maternity: Parmentier (n. 71), 339.

[85] See e.g. *H.H.Apol.* 332–52; Apollod. 1.3.5; Hyg. *Fab. Praef.* 60; Harrison (n. 38), 22–3; A. Rousselle, *La contamination spirituelle* (Paris, 1998), 72–6.

[86] G. Holst-Warhaft, *Dangerous Voices* (London, 1992), 133.