

KLYTAIMNESTRA'S DREAM: PROPHECY IN SOPHOKLES' *ELEKTRA*

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ὃ γὰρ προσεῖδον νυκτὶ τῇδε φάσματα
δισσῶν ὀνείρων, ταῦτά μοι, Λύκει' ἄναξ,
εἰ μὲν πέφηεν ἐσθλά, δὸς τελεσφόρα (Soph. *El.* 644–646)

THERE ARE TWO PROPHECIES in Sophokles' *Elektra*: the oracle of Apollo to Orestes, and the dream of Klytaimnestra. Both prophecies are in different ways used to emphasize the political theme underlying the play and to enforce or reinforce the re-establishment of the proper and legally constituted political order, the rule of the Atreidai over Mykenai. Characters who are not necessary for the transfer of political power are not mentioned in the prophecies and are marginalized in the closure of the play.

Closure in tragedy is frequently produced by the fulfilment of prophecy (cf. Roberts 1984: 27–38) and, according to some critics, by exclusion of the feminine.¹ In the *Elektra* the two are united: fulfilment of the prophecies of the play, the oracle of Apollo and the dream of Klytaimnestra, entails exclusion of the feminine, in the person of Klytaimnestra, who is dead, and Elektra, whose primary act, lamentation for her father, has been finally rendered unnecessary. As Froma Zeitlin points out, “*functionally* women are never an end in themselves” in Greek tragedy, though they may occupy center stage. They function, however, as adjuncts, as catalysts, agents, blockers, destroyers, or, as in the *Elektra*, assistants to the males whose concerns define the play (Zeitlin 1990: 69).² The enormous emotional impact of the play is the product of the central role of Elektra, which acts as a vehicle for the representation of the passions raised by abuse, grief, and the desire for vengeance; but these emotions are ultimately represented as a hindrance to the very vengeance Elektra longs for, and her marginalization is represented as necessary to the fulfilment of the prophecies at the end of the play.

Scholarship on the *Elektra* has tended to divide into two groups, “optimists” and “pessimists,” primarily over the evaluation of the revenge of Orestes. The optimists hold that the play shows the carriage of justice and the punishment of evil, that Orestes is justified, and that his actions bring not only justice, but Elektra's salvation and happiness. The pessimists argue that Orestes is not justified in the matricide, that the tone of the play is unreservedly dark, that

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¹Cf. Rabinowitz 1992: 37, 50; Shaw 1975; and Foley 1977, 1981. Goldhill (1986: 58–59, 67–73) links the exclusion of women in tragedy to their position in the Athenian polis.

²Cf. Katz 1994 on the use of female characters to represent the disruptive demands of the individual against the needs of the collective in tragedy.

Elektra's soul has been destroyed by hatred, and that there is ample evidence in the play to suggest that Orestes will be pursued by Furies directly after his final exit.³ The role of prophecy in the play has generally been discussed only with reference to its use to justify—or not—the murder of Klytaimnestra,⁴ and the dream of Klytaimnestra has rarely been considered in the context of the play at all.⁵ It is not my intention to contribute specifically to this debate, except where the function of prophecy in the play bears directly on questions raised by other critics. However, as will be seen, the prophecies act to minimize the importance of Klytaimnestra and of her death, and thereby to reduce the moral questions which would otherwise surround the killing.

The dream of Klytaimnestra is first revealed to the audience by Chrysothemis on her way to sacrifice on Klytaimnestra's orders at Agamemnon's tomb. She tells Elektra that Klytaimnestra has ordered the sacrifice after a nightmare, ἐκ δειμάτων του νυκτέρου (410). Elektra responds ecstatically, even before she hears anything more—ὦ θεοὶ πατρώοι, συγγένεσθέ γ' ἀλλὰ νῦν (411), and says she will explain her reaction if she is told the dream (ὄψιν, 413). Chrysothemis disclaims first-hand knowledge—she has heard all she knows from a bystander (424–425)—but gives the following account:

λόγος τις αὐτὴν ἔστιν εἰσιδεῖν πατρός
τοῦ σοῦ τε κάμου δευτέραν ὁμιλίαν
ἐλθόντος ἐς φῶς· εἶτα τόνδ' ἐφέστιον
πῆξαι λαβόντα σκῆπτρον οὐφόρει ποτὲ
αὐτός, τανῦν δ' Αἴγισθος· ἔκ τε τοῦδ' ἄνω
βλαστεῖν βρόντα θαλλόν, ὃ κατὰσκιον
πᾶσαν γενέσθαι τὴν Μυκηναίων χθόνα. (417–423)

³Those critics who argue that Orestes' actions can be expected to have negative consequences, however nebulous, and those who argue that the play "justifies" his actions rather than simply asking no moral questions about them tend to believe that the matricide is given great weight in the play. Thus Minadeo (1967: 115), who claims Orestes is justified, calls the matricide "the event upon which all of the divine and human forces in the play converge." Kamerbeek (1974: 17) and Bowra (1944: 218), also "justifiers," believe that the matricide is the climax, and the event on which the whole play hinges; cf. Kells 1973: 10. Gellie (1972: 106) and Segal (1966: 474), who give more ambivalent readings, agree that the matricide is kept in our minds by various means throughout the play. Gellie (1972: 127) argues that the matricide is designed to showcase Elektra's feelings rather than Klytaimnestra's suffering, while Segal (1981: 261) argues that it is the killing itself which awakens "deep emotional resonances" in the audience. Critics who claim that the play asks no moral questions of Orestes' act argue that the matricide is downplayed, e.g., Wilamowitz 1969: 215–216 or Reinhardt 1979: 161.

⁴The debate has centred on the question Orestes asked of the oracle, and on Orestes' use of the word ἐνδίκους to describe the killings in his report of Apollo's response. Segal (1981: 280) points out that it is unclear whether the adjective is Orestes' or Apollo's. Bowra (1944: 217) and Gellie (1972: 107) both assume it comes from the god. Sheppard (1927: 5–9) and Kells (1973: 5–7) argue that Orestes has asked the wrong question of the oracle, and that Apollo has not authorized the killings. Kirkwood (1958: 76) and Reinhardt (1979: 137, 259) assume without argument that Apollo has authorized them.

⁵Devereux (1976: 219–255) psychoanalyses Klytaimnestra by means of the dream, but with little reference to the play. Few other critics have even mentioned it; Bowra (1944: 223–226) is the notable exception. His approach is discussed in more detail below, n. 17.

Elektra does not interpret the terms of the dream, though she comments that she thinks its sending concerns Orestes (οἶμαι μὲν οὖν, οἶμαί τι κάκείνῳ μέλειν/πέμψαι τάδ' αὐτῇ δυσπρόσοπτ' ὀνείρατα, 460). She advises Chrysothemis to throw away Klytaimnestra's offerings for the tomb, sacrificing instead gifts from herself and Elektra, and asking for assistance for themselves and Orestes against their enemies (that is, Klytaimnestra and Aigisthos); but she asks Chrysothemis to perform the alternative sacrifice not because of the dream, but in order to assist herself, Elektra, Orestes and Agamemnon (461–463).

The chorus, in the following ode, says that unless it is a poor seer (παράφρων μάντις, 472), the dream is a favourable one (ἀδυνάων . . . ὀνειράτων, 479–480), from which they take courage, and the belief that Justice will shortly arrive (476–478); Agamemnon and the axe which killed him have not forgotten, and the Erinyes is on the way to punish the killers (482–497); they are certain that the τέρας of the dream will be fulfilled (497). They conclude this section of the ode saying that if the dream is not fulfilled, there are no prophecies available for men in dreams or from oracles⁶.

The chorus is here taking the dream in its entirety as a τέρας, a sign to be interpreted like the flight of birds or the results of a sacrifice. Its claim to be a μάντις is a claim to be able to interpret omens, as μάντιες do elsewhere.⁷ The chorus has no doubt that the dream itself portends vengeance on the murderers, or more specifically, that justice will be brought by the Erinyes (cf. Winnington-Ingram 1980: 217–247, 218–219). It considers dreams and oracles as equally trustworthy bearers of prophecy. But the chorus treats the existence, rather than the content, of the dream, as a signifier; its existence is portentous and is interpreted as signifying disaster for the murderers, but its terms are never given specific referents.⁸ The chorus does not resolve the terms of the dream any more than Elektra does.

Klytaimnestra's reaction to the dream is similar to that of the chorus, in that she treats it as a portent, but makes no attempt to interpret its terms. She prays to Apollo for deliverance from her fears, but says that she cannot be specific because

⁶ ἢ/τοι μαντεύεται βροτῶν / οὐκ εἰσὶν ἐν δεινοῖς ὀνει/ροῖς οὐδ' ἐν θεσφάτοις, / εἰ μὴ τότε φάσμα νυκτός / εὖ κατασχέσει, 497–501.

⁷ Tiresias, for example, expects, as a μάντις, to be able to interpret the calls and behaviour of birds (*Ant.* 998 ff.)

⁸ This dream, like almost all others in tragedy, is without speech; the message is given entirely in visual terms, and the dream is in that sense literally a “portent” rather than a “prophecy,” a τέρας rather than a μαντεῖον. However, as Manetti (1987: 27–29) points out, despite the ancient distinction between the two there is ultimately no difference in their interpretation: both linguistic and visual signs must equally be decoded by a skilled or inspired interpreter. (Kalchas in the *Iliad*, for example, interprets [μαντεύεται, 2.300] the σῆμα of the snake and the nine sparrows [*Il.* 2.308–319]). All prophecies in Sophokles besides the dream of Klytaimnestra are spoken, that is, are coded linguistically rather than visually; but the methods of interpretation required are the same, and the absence of speech here does not disqualify the dream from prophetic status. The dream is, therefore, treated here as a τέρας not in that its terms are visual—either visual or linguistic terms can be interpreted as μαντεῖα—but in that its terms are not interpreted at all.

she is speaking in the presence of enemies (i.e., Elektra and the chorus, 637–640). An explanation is thus provided for an absence of any discussion of the actual content of the dream in her prayer. She likewise treats the dream as prophetic, and asks Apollo to fulfil it if it is favourable, or avert it if it is not:

ἃ γὰρ προσεῖδον νυκτὶ τῇδε φάσματα
 δισσωὼν ὄνειρων, ταῦτά μοι, Λύκει' ἄναξ,
 εἰ μὲν πέφηνεν ἐσθλά, δὸς τελεσφόρα,
 εἰ δ' ἐχθρά, τοῖς ἐχθροῖσιν ἔμπαλιν μέθες. (644–647)

Klytaimnestra had earlier reacted to the dream by sending Chrysothemis to sacrifice at Agamemnon's tomb, which shows that she accepted the dream as portentous. Her prayer here likewise shows her treating the dream as prophetic; that is, she prays as if she believes that it will be fulfilled. She is not capable, however, of interpreting it, even as a portent. The dream is δισσωὼν, doubtful, capable of two interpretations, and so she prays for different resolutions of its prophetic power, depending on which interpretation is to be fulfilled. Her prayer to Apollo, like that of Jocasta in the *Oidipous Tyrannos*, is immediately followed by the entrance of a messenger bringing false news of a relative's death.⁹ As in the *O.T.*, the messenger by implication comes in fulfilment of the prayer; in the *Elektra*, his arrival also sets in motion the fulfilment of the dream. The implication that Apollo has sent the dream as in the *O.T.* he has given the oracle is unmistakable.

This is the last reference to the dream of Klytaimnestra in the play. When Orestes arrives and finally identifies himself to Elektra she does not tell him the dream, nor does Klytaimnestra recall it in her dying cries offstage. The dream remains formally uninterpreted by anyone in the play, although the events of the play clearly fulfil it and resolve its terms.

The dream of Klytaimnestra is treated as prophetic by Elektra, Klytaimnestra, and the chorus, all of whom speak of it as a portent to be fulfilled. As a portent, the dream is used to motivate Chrysothemis' sacrifice at Agamemnon's tomb, and Klytaimnestra's entrance and prayer to Apollo. The content of the dream is never directly interpreted, however, and seems to stand to one side of the plot, ultimately having no effect on the action. It is this apparent lack of connection between the content of the dream and the action of the play which leads Devereux to claim that the dream has no literary use whatever in Sophokles' play and is inserted there only on the model of Aischylos' *Choephoroi*.¹⁰ But while the content of the dream

⁹ Cf. Peradotto 1992: 7.

¹⁰ "I cannot persuade myself that it plays any truly *necessary* role in the Sophoklean tragedy. It is, in some respects, a literary heirloom, which tends to clutter up the scene, simply because one refuses to get rid of it. One moves it from the mantelpiece to the piano and then to a shelf, one tries to renovate it by giving it a new coat of paint (a new manifest content) ... but it still remains an encumbrance. Stesichoros and Aeschylos had already squeezed the last drop of dramatic usefulness out of it. Euripides quietly turned the old battle-horse out to the pasture ..." (Devereux 1976: 251).

is never interpreted and does not directly affect the action, it precisely describes it and is fulfilled in the climax of the play. The use of the dream in interpreting and describing the action of the play can best be seen by comparison with the use of similar dreams in Aischylos' *Choephoroi* and Herodotos' *Histories*.¹¹

The three plays of the *Oresteia* explore the consequences of the disruption of different family relationships and the priority to be given each. While there are undeniable political consequences to these relationships, as the one who marries (or kills) Klytaimnestra will rule Argos, it is the relationships themselves rather than their political associations which are emphasized in the trilogy, and especially in the *Choephoroi*. This play examines in detail the relative importance of the relationships between a son and his father or mother. Klytaimnestra's role as Orestes' mother thus assumes great importance, and both her status and fitness as a mother are called into question throughout the play. Elektra claims that Klytaimnestra does not deserve the name of mother (*Choe.* 190–191), as she has exchanged her children for a husband and has allowed them to be ignored (444–446), treated like slaves or exiled in penury (133–136); she offers Orestes the love due a mother, since Klytaimnestra deserves only hatred (240–241). The disruption of the relationship between parent and child is commemorated in the next ode of the chorus, who sing of Althaea's murder of her son Meleager (605–611) and Scylla's betrayal of her father (612–621); the Lemnian women's murder of their husbands, a disruption of the tie between husband and wife, is mentioned only third (631–634). Klytaimnestra's moderate grief at the news of Orestes' death, as shown in her response to the messenger (691–699), is contrasted immediately with the uncontrolled maternal emotion of his nurse, who recalls her fondness for him as an infant vividly and at length (734–765) and whose memories of raising him call into question Klytaimnestra's later claim to have done so herself (908). Klytaimnestra pleads for her life on the grounds that she is Orestes' mother (κτενεῖν ξοικας, ὃ τέκνον, τὴν μητέρα, 922), who took care of him when young (908) and nursed him (896–898),¹² and warns him of the power of a mother's curse (912, 924). Orestes cannot deny that she is his

¹¹The influences on Sophokles' treatment of the story are not limited to Aischylos and Herodotos, of course: Homer and, some critics argue, Euripides also affected Sophokles' play. Jebb (1962: xl–xlii), in an attempt to explain the Sophoklean treatment of the story, suggested that it completely ignored the Aischylean version and presented instead a dramatization of the version of events found in Homer; cf. Sheppard 1927. Winnington-Ingram (1954–55) argues for pronounced and deliberate use of Aischylean reminiscences throughout the play; cf. Minadeo 1967; but Stevens (1978) argues that the *Oresteia* had been produced so long before the *Elektra* as to be nearly forgotten by the audience. Kamerbeek (1974: 18) argues that Sophokles' play was written after Euripides' and was intended to justify Apollo's oracle, criticized in Euripides' *Elektra*, by justifying Orestes' actions; Kells (1973: 5) disagrees.

¹²Devereux (1976: 206–209) sees Klytaimnestra's baring of her breast to Orestes here as an erotic rather than a maternal gesture. Whether or not one accepts Devereux' interpretation of this act, Klytaimnestra's sexuality is used elsewhere in the play to undermine her status as a mother: the conflict between her sexual and maternal roles is raised and resented by Elektra, for example (133–136).

mother, but claims instead that it is she herself, and not he, who is responsible for her death (923). Her claim to the loyalty due a mother is undercut not only by the reminiscences of Elektra and the nurse which show her actual neglect of her children, but by her own act: she responds to the news that “the dead are killing the living” (τὸν ζῶντα καίνειν τοὺς τεθνηκότας λέγω, 886) by saying that she understands the riddle, and commanding “May someone—quickly—give me a man-killing axe! We’ll see if we win or are conquered” (δοίη τις ἀνδροκμήτα πέλεκυν ὥς τάχος· / εἰδῶμεν εἰ νικῶμεν ἢ νικῶμεθα·, 889–890). She knows that the attacker is her son Orestes, but she is willing, nevertheless, to kill him to save her own life. Orestes likewise shows acute awareness of Klytaimnestra’s status as his mother, and after she reminds him that she suckled him he hesitates and asks, “Pylades, what should I do? Should I be ashamed to kill my mother?” (Πυλάδῃ, τί δράσω; μητέρ’ αἰδεσθῶ κτανεῖν, 899). Pylades’ answer that he must before all obey the oracle of Apollo (ἅπαντας ἐχθροὺς τῶν θεῶν ἡγοῦ πλέον, 902) is the turning point of the play. After Orestes kills her, he shows to the light of day the net which his mother used to trap Agamemnon, so that Helios can bear witness that he has killed her justly (ἐνδίκως, 988); he is not concerned to justify his killing of Aigisthos (Αἰγίσθου γὰρ οὐ λέγω μόρον, 989), who has only received his deserts as an adulterer. When Orestes begins to fear the arrival of the Furies, he reiterates, “I say I killed my mother not without justice!” (κτανεῖν τέ φημι μητέρ’ οὐκ ἄνευ δίκης, 1027), on Apollo’s authority (1030); and his mother’s Furies, visible only to him, chase him offstage at the conclusion of the play.¹³

The dream of Klytaimnestra in the *Choephoroi* vividly emphasizes the blood relationship of Klytaimnestra and Orestes and highlights Orestes’ double role as both child and killer. Klytaimnestra’s emotional reaction to the dream, fear, is the dream’s first interpreter, and the terms of the dream are recounted and resolved in detail by both Orestes and Klytaimnestra before her death.

The chorus of women first mention the dream when they describe how they have been sent out of the house to carry libations for Agamemnon’s tomb in response to Klytaimnestra’s nightmare:

τορὸς γὰρ ὀρθόθριξ δόμων
 ὄνειρόμαντις ἐξ ὕπνου κότον πνέων
 ἀωρόνυκτον ἀμβά-
 μα μυχόθεν ἔλακε περὶ φόβωι,
 γυναικείοισιν ἐν
 δώμασιν βαρὺς πίτνων·

¹³ Segal (1986: 351–357) compares the relationship between the mother and children in the three plays by focusing specifically on the matricide, and points out in particular the vivid physical language describing Klytaimnestra’s body and the damage done to it in Aischylos and Euripides, which emphasizes in both cases the intimate relationship between mother and son. He does not, however, recognize the significance of the lack of such vivid description in Sophokles: the physical description of her body and its wounds serves to emphasize the relationship between Orestes and Klytaimnestra in the other two authors, and this relationship in Sophokles is given as little significance as possible.

κριταί <τε> τῶνδ' ὄνειράτων
 θεόθεν ἔλακον ὑπέγγωι
 μέμφεσθαι τοὺς
 γὰς νέρθεν περιθύμως
 τοῖς κτανούσι τ' ἐγκοτεῖν. (Aesch. *Choe.* 32–42)

The “interpreter of dreams,” the ὄνειρόμαντις (33), is Klytaimnestra’s cry of fear in the night, her reaction to her dream: and those who are called in to interpret the dream (κριταί τῶνδ' ὄνειράτων, 38) tell her that Agamemnon, though buried, is still angry. The interpretation of the dream is given before its contents are told to the audience. Klytaimnestra’s first reaction to the dream in both plays is fear, and she responds in both cases by sending a daughter to sacrifice at Agamemnon’s tomb. Thus the dream in both plays is treated as prophetic by Klytaimnestra. In Aischylos, however, an intermediate step between her dream and her response is introduced with the interpretation of the terms of the dream to Klytaimnestra by experts. Klytaimnestra in the *Choephoroi* is acting on an informed understanding of the import of her dream, which she is never given in the *Elektra*; and interpretation of the contents of her dream plays an important role throughout the *Choephoroi*.

After Orestes’ entrance and recognition and the *kommos* of Orestes and Elektra, Orestes asks what has motivated Klytaimnestra to send offerings to Agamemnon’s tomb. The chorus then describes in detail Klytaimnestra’s dream and her reaction. Klytaimnestra has dreamed that she gave birth to a serpent, which she wrapped in swaddling clothes as if it were a human infant; when she nursed it, it bit her breast and drank both blood and milk together (*Choe.* 522–539). Orestes says that her dream was not empty (μάταιον, 534) and interprets the details of the dream as analogically referring to himself. If the serpent was born from the same place as he, was wrapped like him in swaddling clothes,¹⁴ and nursed at the same breast, whose milk it mixed with blood, then it is clear, says Orestes, that Klytaimnestra is to die by violence and that Orestes “becomes” the snake who kills her (*Choe.* 540–552). The chorus responds enthusiastically, “Let it be so” (γένοιτο δ' οὐτως, 552). Klytaimnestra herself interprets her dream in the same terms at the end of her interchange with Orestes, directly before they exit to her death:

ΚΛ. οἷ 'γώ, τεκούσα τόνδ' ὄφιν ἐθρεψάμην
 ἢ κάρτα μάντις οὕξ ὄνειράτων φόβος. (928–929)

The terms of the dream are thus of specific importance in Aischylos’ play and are resolved in detail. Orestes is the snake because he himself has gone through the same sequence of birth and nurture, point for point, as the chorus describes for the snake in Klytaimnestra’s dream; and Klytaimnestra is destined to die by violence because the serpent is described as performing a violent act upon the one

¹⁴The text of line 544 is dubious (τεπᾶσα σπαργανηπλειζετο† Page; τεπᾶσασπαργανηπλειζετο† West), but this seems to be the general sense.

who suckles it. It is Klytaimnestra's fear which provides, for her, the interpretation of the dream and is described by her as a μάντις. Even before she understood the terms, she knew the dream portended disaster for her, as Klytaimnestra only suspects of her dream in the *Elektra*. But in Aischylos' treatment, Orestes and Klytaimnestra resolve the terms of the dream specifically, by recognizing their relationship—that between mother and child—and identifying Orestes as the serpent/child. Orestes' identity as Klytaimnestra's son as well as her killer is the crux of the play and in fact the trilogy and is symbolized in the dream by the serpent's drinking both her milk and her blood. The identical interpretation of the dream by mother and son emphasizes that relationship, and Orestes' detailed interpretation of the terms of the dream makes clear his consciousness of his filial relationship with Klytaimnestra and thus the implications of his act in killing her. Both Klytaimnestra and Orestes "understand" the dream, know what it refers to and interpret its terms as prophetic.

Klytaimnestra, as the mother of Orestes, is central to the *Choephoroi*, and the dream emphasizes her role in the play. The dream motivates Klytaimnestra's sacrifice at Agamemnon's tomb, and its narration to Orestes and his interpretation of it motivates his decision to move ahead and kill Klytaimnestra and Aigisthos. Its interpretation by Klytaimnestra is used to close the scene between her and Orestes with her acceptance of the inevitability of her death; and it is the dream as much as the oracle of Apollo which provides closure for the action of the *Choephoroi*, in that both are resolved in the climax of Klytaimnestra's death, after the killing of Aigisthos, to which the play gives little emphasis. By problematizing the relationship between Orestes and Klytaimnestra, the dream's content emphasizes the basic conflict of the play. Klytaimnestra's and Orestes' identical interpretation of the dream underlines that relationship and is necessary to the action of the play.

The use of the dream in the *Elektra* mirrors that of the *Choephoroi* in terms of the identity of the dreamer and the way in which the dream (and her fear) is used to motivate the sacrifice at Agamemnon's tomb. The content of the dream in Sophokles' play, however, is modelled rather on the two dreams of Astyages in Herodotos' *Histories*.¹⁵ In Herodotos' account, Astyages, the King of the Medes, dreamed that his daughter, Mandane, urinated so copiously that she flooded all

¹⁵ Sophokles will have been acquainted with Herodotos' account, or with its sources. According to Tertullian (Tert. *De anim.* 46 = *FGrH* 14), Herodotos took the dreams of Astyages from Charon of Lampsacus. However, Jacoby (*ad FGrH* 14) dates Charon later than Herodotos, a judgment contested by Drews (1973: 24–25), who cites Plut. *Mor.* 859a–b (who calls Charon πρεσβύτερος), as well as Dion. Hal. *Pomp.* 3.7 and Suda s.v., concluding that at least Charon's *Persika* predates Herodotos. Fornara (1983: 18–22), however, distrusts Hellenistic dating, which he believes was based largely on style. Herodotos gives a fuller account of the dreams than does Charon of Lampsacus and seems more likely to have elaborated on Charon than the reverse. A friendship between Sophokles and Herodotos existing long before the production of the *Elektra* is attested by Plutarch (*Mor.* 785b), who cites a poem written for Herodotos by Sophokles when he was 55, i.e., in 445 B.C., if the traditional dating of Sophokles' birth is kept. A friendship between the two men does not of course argue a necessary

Asia (Hdt. 1.107). Frightened by the detailed interpretation of the dream given him by the *ὄνειροπόλοι*, Astyages married her to Cambyses, who, because he was a Persian, was no dynastic threat. After Mandane was married, however, Astyages had another dream, in which a vine grew from her private parts which shaded all Asia (1.108). He referred this dream also to the *ὄνειροπόλοι*, and on hearing their answer he brought his already-pregnant daughter back to his palace, and handed the son born to her over to his kinsman Harpages to kill; for the *ὄνειροπόλοι*, Herodotos explains, had interpreted both dreams to mean that Mandane would have a son who would be king in his place (1.108)—that is, by usurping his throne. The child, Cyrus, does in fact survive and overthrow his grandfather Astyages by civil war (1.129).

Both dreams follow the same pattern: something issuing from Astyages' daughter's genitalia overcomes all of Asia, by flooding or by overshadowing it.¹⁶ We are told that the *ὄνειροπόλοι* give him a point-for-point interpretation, but not what it was: only the general gist, which is that Mandane's son will rule in Astyages' place. But it is not hard to perform the detailed interpretation Herodotos does not provide. Both the urine and the vine, because they issue from his daughter's private parts, signify a child by her: the flooding or the shading of all Asia signifies the rule by her child of the country. Astyages reacts as Klytaimnestra does in the *Choephoroi*, with fear and an attempt to avert the fulfilment of the dream.

Herodotos tells the story of the dream at the point in the narrative at which he is describing Cyrus' rise to power. Cyrus' power is based partly on his hereditary right to rule (as Astyages' grandson) and partly on his having taken the throne by force from Astyages. The dream reflects both of these and represents Cyrus' rise to power in dynastic terms, as dependent on his birth from his mother, Astyages' daughter. For Astyages, however, the importance of the dream is not the family relationships it delineates, but its political implications. It is Cyrus' identity as

familiarity on Sophokles' part with the contents of Herodotos' *Histories*, the date of the publication of which is uncertain. How and Wells (1912: 1.7), however, cite ancient evidence that Herodotos recited parts of his work in Athens in 446–445 B.C., and there are numerous correspondences between Sophokles' and Herodotos' work besides the dreams of Astyages and Klytaimnestra, e.g., at *Ant.* 904 ff.: Hdt. 3.119.6, or O.C. 337–341: Hdt. 2.35.2. (My thanks to Malcolm Wallace of the University of Toronto for these references.)

The similarities between the dreams and their use in Sophokles and Herodotos, together with the other correspondences between the two authors, indicate that Sophokles was acquainted with Herodotos' work. However, it is not necessary to prove that Sophokles was necessarily influenced by Herodotos here. Even if he was not directly influenced by Herodotos, a comparative analysis of the dream in the *Elektra* and the use of dreams similar by content or structural function in other works of the period will reveal the range of possibilities available to Sophokles in his use of a dream here, and draw closer attention to the choices he made in his representation of Klytaimnestra's dream and its function in the play.

¹⁶ Devereux (1976: 237–238) associates Mandane's urine with the fire in the hearth of the palace at Mykenai. However, even if his arguments for the identity, in psychoanalytic terms, of fire and urine were more convincing, fire is not mentioned in Sophokles' version.

his usurper, not his grandson, that concerns him. Cyrus' ability to seize the throne is based on his birth from Astyages' daughter, but for Astyages that is her only significance in the dream. The importance in Herodotos' narrative of the political implications of the dream is shown by its interpretation, which is given in the text and which is concerned solely with Astyages' loss of the throne. It is necessary for Astyages in his turn to understand the dream—that is, to receive the interpretation of it—as he is a primary actor in the ensuing events: it is his throne, and the fulfilment of the dream comes about as a result of his attempts to evade it, by marrying his daughter to a Persian and by attempting to have her son killed.¹⁷

In both Klytaimnestra's dream in the *Elektra* and Astyages' second dream in Herodotos, the dreamer sees a plant grow from an unexpected place to overshadow the territory over which they themselves currently rule. Astyages is explicitly told that this dream portends rule by another who comes from the source he saw in his dream (his daughter), and he takes measures to avert it. The similarity between the two dreams in this respect is too striking to be coincidental: the βρύνοντα θαλλόν, ᾧ κατάσκιον / πᾶσαν γενέσθαι τὴν Μυκηναίων χθόνα (*El.* 422–423) of Klytaimnestra's dream, like the ἄμπελον ἐπισχεῖν τὴν Ἀσίην πᾶσαν (*Hdt.* 1.108) of Astyages' dream, signifies a new ruler, in this case over Mykenai.

The source of the new ruler is as important in Klytaimnestra's dream as it is in Astyages'. In Klytaimnestra's dream the source is not a direct representation of the genitalia of a parent, but a transparent symbol of these. The "sceptre

¹⁷ Bowra (1944: 223–226) is the only critic to discuss the dream of Klytaimnestra in the context of the play in any detail. He argues that the Sophoklean dream does not show Orestes as a snake, as he appears in Stesichoros and Aigisthos, because this would depict Orestes as too one-sidedly vengeful and because the dream could then bear only one possible interpretation: Klytaimnestra could not but immediately understand it and know her doom. The Sophoklean dream, however, is ambiguous. Bowra parallels her dream with another dream from Herodotos, the dream of Xerxes that he is crowned by the branch of an olive tree, from which boughs spread and cover the earth, but then the garland vanishes (*Hdt.* 7.19), which can equally portend good or ill, and cites Artemidoros and Hippocrates to show that by the rules of ancient dream interpretation Klytaimnestra's dream has both positive and negative aspects. He argues that Klytaimnestra, like Xerxes, after first being made uneasy by the dream, ignores its negative aspects in favour of its favourable ones, and fatally "relapses into her old self-satisfaction." The dream is her final warning from the gods, as Xerxes' dream warns him not to invade Greece, but both dreamers misinterpret the warning as a favourable omen and are, therefore, doomed. Bowra's analysis of the dream from the perspective of ancient dream-interpretation is highly enlightening, but contains two errors. First, the origin of the branch in Klytaimnestra's dream, like the origin of the vine in Astyages', cannot be ignored, as it is by Bowra, since it is the key to its interpretation in the context of the play. Second, while it is true that dreams and oracles in Herodotos frequently come to warn the dreamer before they embark on a fatal course of action, and thus do represent their "last chance to amend," prophecy never serves such a function in Sophokles, and does not here. There is no hint anywhere in the play that Klytaimnestra is anything but doomed; there is nothing she can do to avoid her fate. Her "last chance" came many years before, when she decided to kill Agamemnon; the dream does not offer her another. So this dream follows the pattern of Astyages' rather than Xerxes', in that it does not supply a final warning, but simply tells the dreamer what will happen, if they are equipped to understand it.

which once Agamemnon wielded, but now Aigisthos" (σκήπτρον οὐφόρει ποτὲ αὐτός (sc. Agamemnon), τανῦν δ' Αἴγισθος, *El.* 420–421) is a political symbol of rule over Mykenai, but also a metaphor for the phallus of the (male) ruler. In the dream, Agamemnon appears and takes back the sceptre (= the rule, and the procreative function) which he used to wield, before Aigisthos took it; he then plants the sceptre in the hearth, which can be seen as a metaphor for the sexual act, in which the hearth represents Klytaimnestra's womb.

The result of this quasi-sexual act is the production of the shoot which springs from the sceptre. The sceptre here signifies both Agamemnon's authority as the rightful ruler of Mykenai, who has returned to retrieve his power, and his sexual and procreative power as a father, the producer of a son.¹⁸ In Homer, the sceptre is moreover the symbol of the rule not only of Agamemnon personally, but of the whole line of the Atreidai, passing from father to son by divine right (as it originates as a gift from Zeus himself to Pelops: *Hom. Il.* 2.100–108). The sceptre does not itself grow up to shade Mykenai, but a shoot springing from it does. The obvious interpretation is that the rule of the Atreidai will "flower" again, that it will be taken away from the interloper Aigisthos and brought back to the direct line in the person of Orestes, Agamemnon's son, who will return (as Agamemnon "returns") and rule Mykenai.

Klytaimnestra does not appear in her own dream at all, except faintly and metaphorically, as the hearth in which Agamemnon fixes his sceptre. The procreative power of the female does not function in the dream except in the symbol of the hearth, which is not represented as producing anything itself, but instead simply facilitates the creative power of the male in producing offspring apparently singlehanded. In the dream the passage of power is from Agamemnon via his sceptre directly to his son: the female is not necessary even as a medium for transmission. Klytaimnestra has no power: she (as the hearth) is ruled

¹⁸ Segal (1981: 251) points out that ὀμλία can have sexual connotations, but it is a mistake to interpret the δευτέραν ὀμλίαν Klytaimnestra dreams of as an act of sexual intercourse with Agamemnon (cf. Devereux 1976: 247–248). This reading places too much emphasis on the ὀμλίαν, and gives Klytaimnestra's role in the dream more importance than it has in the text. The entire dream is introduced with the words λόγος τις αὐτὴν ἔστιν εἰσεῖν, and it is represented throughout as a tale of what Klytaimnestra saw, not what she did. For the hearth as a metaphor for female genitalia in tragedy see Aesch. *Ag.* 1434–36, in which Klytaimnestra responds to the threats of the chorus, after the killing of Agamemnon, with the obvious *double entendre*: οὐ μοι φόβου μέλαθρον ἑλπίς ἐμπατεῖ / ἕως ἂν αἰθῆρ πῦρ ἐφ' ἐστίας ἐμῆς / Αἴγισθος; cf. also Artemidorus 1.43 and 1.74, in which the hearth represents respectively a woman's reproductive ability and the dreamer's wife. Devereux (1976: 232–233, 243–244) discusses in this connection the use of the "home" as the domain of the female and the hearth as the centre of the home and thus as the female genitalia, and makes the point that the hearth here is the hearth of the palace of Mykenai, and thus represents the genitalia of the *queen* (that is, the political entity of the female ruler) rather than the genitalia of Klytaimnestra considered as a person or a mother. If one accepts this interpretation, even the female procreative force in this dream is considered only in its political aspect: the palace hearth as the mother of a ruler, rather than Klytaimnestra as the mother of a son. Vernant (1985: 165–167) discusses in detail the relationship between the hearth and the procreative power of Klytaimnestra in her dream.

by Agamemnon, Aigisthos, and Agamemnon in turn, but has no independent function. The retrieval of the sceptre from Aigisthos and the passage of power to Orestes are the active elements of the dream: Klytaimnestra has no importance in the story.

Both the dream of Klytaimnestra in the *Elektra* and that of Astyages in Herodotos use the growth of an unusual plant as a symbol for the transfer of political power, to which family relationships are secondary and of interest only in so far as they affect the transfer. Mandane's importance in Astyages' dream is only as the mother of a potential usurper; Klytaimnestra in her own dream has even less importance and does not even figure as the mother of her son. The content of both dreams implies the transfer of power without the consent of the person currently holding it,¹⁹ and Astyages' unwillingness to allow his daughter's offspring to take power is made evident by his attempts to avoid it. Members of the audience who, like Sophokles, were familiar with the story of Astyages' dream and its outcome will thus have had additional reason to expect the resolution of Klytaimnestra's dream to involve the violent overthrow of Aigisthos by Agamemnon's son Orestes.

In Aischylos' and Herodotos' versions the understanding of the dreamer is necessary because the dreamer is himself or herself essential to the story. In Aischylos, the plot centres on the relationship between Klytaimnestra and Orestes, and that relationship is given increased emphasis by the interpretation of the dream and Klytaimnestra's own understanding of it. Orestes' understanding of the dream, moreover, is used as the impetus which finally induces him to put his plans in motion. In Herodotos, Astyages' understanding of the dream is necessary to the plot, as it motivates his actions which in turn bring about its fulfilment. But in Sophokles' treatment the content of the dream is never explicitly interpreted; Orestes is not even told of its existence. There are several reasons for this omission.

While the interpretation of the dreams in Aischylos and Herodotos motivates the later action of the protagonists, the existence of the dream in Sophokles is itself sufficient to motivate the sacrifice at Agamemnon's tomb and Klytaimnestra's prayer to Apollo, and thus the scenes between Elektra and Chrysothemis and Klytaimnestra, without the necessity of interpretation. The content of the dream in Sophokles' play provides a note of dramatic irony in that it informs the audience, rather than the protagonists, whose understanding of its terms is irrelevant to the action. But finally, the understanding of the dream by the dreamers is necessary in Aischylos and Herodotos because the dreamers themselves are central to the story. Klytaimnestra, however, is not central to the plot of the *Elektra*; neither

¹⁹ In Astyages' dream the unnatural size of the vine can imply its growth beyond normal bounds, hence transfer of power by usurpation. In Klytaimnestra's dream the audience is reminded that Aigisthos currently holds the sceptre which the ghost of Agamemnon retrieves and by implication that the current holder is likely to be unwilling to relinquish power.

her political power nor her relationship with Orestes affect the action of the play in any significant way.

Klytaimnestra's dream represents her as an onlooker to the action. She watches as Agamemnon returns, retrieves the sceptre and plants it in the hearth, and watches the shoot grow up to overshadow Mykenai. She does not see herself in the dream, nor does she act in it. Agamemnon retrieves the political power signified by the sceptre from Aigisthos and transfers it to Orestes with no reference to Klytaimnestra. Klytaimnestra's position in the play is exactly analogous to her position in the dream: she is an onlooker, overcome by events in which she is not an active participant. In the *Choephoroi* the climactic confrontation between Orestes and Klytaimnestra is the most emotionally powerful scene in that play and the turning-point for Orestes' fortunes. In Sophokles' *Elektra* Orestes and Klytaimnestra never meet on the stage at all. She is killed in the palace, and the climactic final confrontation between Orestes and Klytaimnestra in the *Choephoroi* is replaced in the *Elektra* by the confrontation between Orestes and Aigisthos, which represents the transfer of political power, the central theme of the play.

The dream of Klytaimnestra is the only prophecy in the extant corpus of Sophokles' work which apparently originates from a female. However, as this analysis shows, it does not come "from" her, but only "through" her. Although she is the dreamer, she does not "own" the dream, in that she does not understand it, and it does not include her: she is only the matrix of the dream just as the hearth in the dream is only the matrix from which the shoot can flower, without having any direct association with it. Klytaimnestra has the dream, but cannot benefit by it, just as she "has" Orestes, but does not benefit from her relationship with him. She does not recognize the meaning of the dream, and similarly does not recognize the visiting stranger as Orestes. Orestes' plans on his return to Mykenai similarly exclude Klytaimnestra, or include her only incidentally as an ally and co-usurper, to be cleared out of the way en route to his main objective, the killing of Aigisthos and the transfer of the rule to himself. The dream thus underlines the political theme of the play: Klytaimnestra's understanding does not matter because her role is unimportant in the transfer of political power. Aigisthos' death, which effects this transfer, is given correspondingly more significance than Klytaimnestra's, and so occurs after hers, at the climax of the play.²⁰ Klytaimnestra's dream, which shows the transfer of political power with Klytaimnestra as a mute observer, is

²⁰ The importance of the order of the killings has been contested. Wilamowitz (1969: 218) thought that Klytaimnestra's killing introduced and led up to the climactic killing of Aigisthos, while Gellie (1972: 119, 127–128) argues that the killing of Aigisthos, not Klytaimnestra, is represented as Orestes' and Elektra's most difficult task and the climax of the play. Lloyd-Jones (1972) and Reinhardt (1979: 225) on the other hand dismiss the killing of Aigisthos as almost irrelevant, necessary simply to tie off the loose ends. It is hard to argue that the reversal of the order does *not* minimize the importance of the death of Klytaimnestra, though Kells does (1973: 10); and Winnington-Ingram (1980: 235) argues that Klytaimnestra's death comes first so that the audience, distracted by the following scenes, will not wonder where the Furies are. I would agree with Blundell (1989: 181), who argues that

fulfilled not with her own death, as Klytaimnestra's death in the *Choephoroi* fulfills her dream in that play, but with the death of Aigisthos.

The oracle of Apollo in the *Elektra* does not perform the primary function of motivating the actions of Orestes, as it does in the *Choephoroi*. The only explicit prophecy of Apollo ever given in the *Elektra* recommends Orestes' method rather than commanding his act, and Orestes is represented as having determined his course of action before he ever consulted the oracle. Orestes' motives in returning to Mykenai are explicitly political, as given in his opening prayer to the local gods:

ἀλλ', ὦ πατρώα γῇ θεοί τ' ἐγγώριοι,
δέξασθέ μ' εὐτυχοῦντα ταῖς αἰσὶν ταῖς ὁδοῖς,
σύ τ', ὦ πατρώων δῶμα· σοῦ γὰρ ἔρχομαι
δίκη καθαρτῆς πρὸς θεῶν ὠρμημένος·
καὶ μή μ' ἄτιμον τῆσδ' ἀποστείλῃτε γῆς,
ἀλλ' ἀρχέπλουτον καὶ καταστάτην δόμων. (67–72)

Orestes has come to Mykenai to cleanse the house, for which he has divine authority, which he uses as justification for requesting a favourable reception. The precise kind of favourable reception he asks for reveals his motives for coming—that he be able to remain in the land as a wealthy ruler and establisher of his household. The oracle of Apollo is referred to only briefly and for the most part in Orestes' first speech. On his entrance, after the introductory laying of the scene, Orestes gives instructions to his comrades Pylades and the Paidagogos, prefacing them with his authority from Apollo:

ἐγὼ γὰρ ἡνίχ' ἰκόμην τὸ Πυθικὸν
μαντεῖον, ὥς μάθοιμ' ὅτ' ἄντρον πατρὸς
δίκας ἀροίμην τῶν φονευσάντων πάρα,
χρῆ μοι τοιαῦθ' ὁ Φοῖβος ὦν πέυσῃ τάχα·
ἄσκευον αὐτὸν ἀσπίδων τε καὶ στρατοῦ
δόλοισι κλέψαι χειρὸς ἐνδίκους σφαγὰς. (32–37)

Orestes has not, as in the *Choephoroi*, been ordered to kill his mother and Aigisthos. Instead he has gone to Delphi to enquire how to take vengeance on his father's murderers, and Apollo has told him to come by stealth, rather than with an army.²¹ It is not the deed but the method which is, in this retelling, authorized

Klytaimnestra's death comes first because the audience is urged to look at the murder as vengeance rather than as matricide.

²¹ In his defense of his unheroic methods Orestes accepts deception in the cause of victory, saying: δοκῶ μὲν, οὐδὲν βῆμα σὺν κέρδει κακόν (61). The word κέρδος, which never has positive connotations in Sophokles, points up Orestes' self-serving motives even further: compare Neoptolemos' question when asked to participate in the deception of Philoktetes: κέρδος δ' ἐμοὶ τί τοῦτον ἐς Τροίαν μολεῖν; (*Phil.* 112). On hearing that without Philoktetes he cannot take Troy, Neoptolemos abandons his defense of honesty and declares his willingness to lie (*Phil.* 116). In the *Philoktetes* the conflict between deception and honour is made explicit: here the word κέρδος only hints at the negative implications of Orestes' decision to use deceit. Orestes' primary motives, when they are noticed by critics (e.g., Segal

by Apollo; the rectitude of the killings themselves is never questioned.²² Apollo has also instructed the conspirators to begin by sacrificing at Agamemnon's tomb (51–53). As they move to do so, Elektra's voice is heard lamenting inside the house, and Orestes wishes to stay to listen; but the Paidagogos urges him to begin his mission as the god commanded, by sacrificing (81–85), and they depart. Orestes' first act of obedience to the oracle of Apollo in the play is thus to refuse to be distracted by the suffering of his sister Elektra. Family relationships which have no political importance are by the authority of Apollo firmly given second place to political action, and Orestes' relationship with his dead father, which gives him the authority to take over the rule of Mykenai, is given priority by Apollo, and in obedience to him also by Orestes and the Paidagogos, over his relationship with, and concern for, the living and suffering Elektra.

The same priority is apparent in Orestes' question of the oracle: he asks simply how to take vengeance on "my father's murderers." Klytaimnestra's identity as Orestes' mother is given no significance. For Orestes' purposes, she exists only as Aigisthos' ally in his father's death. In the *Choephoroi* as well, Orestes' relationship with his father ultimately carries more weight than that with his mother, but assigning this priority is the central issue of the play and the trilogy. In the *Elektra* the question is not even raised. Klytaimnestra's role as far as Orestes' question to the oracle of Apollo is concerned is thus the same as her role in her own dream: she is marginalized, an adjunct to the story, no more than the co-killer of Agamemnon, whom Orestes must clear from his path together with Aigisthos. If Apollo does not explicitly authorize this point of view, neither does his answer to Orestes deny it.

Orestes returns from the palace after killing Klytaimnestra saying "All is well in the house (i.e., it is a good thing that Klytaimnestra is dead), if Apollo has prophesied well" (τὰν δόμοισι μὲν / καλῶς, Ἀπόλλων εἰ / καλῶς ἐθέσπισεν, 1424–25). This is the only other explicit reference to the oracle of Apollo in the play, and shows that Orestes believes Apollo to have authorized, via prophecy, his action in killing Klytaimnestra. Orestes' statement here makes clear his belief that the gods do in fact support his actions, as he has claimed in his initial speech (67–72). Apollo has also been invoked by both Klytaimnestra and Elektra just before the major turning points of the play, and Orestes' success, by implication of the events following those prayers—the entrance of the messenger, and the

1981: 255, 279; Segal 1966: 513; Bowra 1944: 247–249), are usually thought of as somehow ignoble, but it has not previously been noted that these motives, by giving political action first priority, explain the movement of the play.

²² Zeitlin (1990: 82) points out that the method—guile—must be authorized by Apollo because it is not heroic, and that it is authorized in the *Elektra* and the *Choephoroi* because it produces exact retribution: Klytaimnestra and Aigisthos die as they killed, by deceit. This balance is made explicit in the *Choephoroi* (556–559); Sophokles does not explain why Apollo commands guile, but the same mechanism may well be operating in the *Elektra*. Divine authorization for the use of guile, however, should not be taken as authorization for the act as well, which is represented as needing none.

death of Klytaimnestra²³—as well as by his own statement here, is based on the support of Apollo. Orestes' line should not be taken to indicate doubt (which he shows nowhere else) that Apollo *has* prophesied well,²⁴ but rather the reverse, to emphasize his certainty that things inside the house have gone very well indeed.²⁵

Some critics have suggested that Orestes' original question was the wrong one, and that by asking *how* rather than *whether* he should kill his mother, he lays himself open to future torments by his mother's Furies, directly after the close of the play.²⁶ In the *Choephoroi*, by this argument, Apollo authorizes Orestes' murder of his mother, and it is ultimately the fact that Orestes acted in obedience to

²³ By Klytaimnestra just before the entrance of the Paidagogos (660) and by Elektra as Orestes exits to kill Klytaimnestra (1376–83).

²⁴ It has been argued that this line calls to mind Aischylos' treatment of the story, and by so doing both shows Orestes' doubts over his own actions and fear of the consequences and hints at future retribution for Orestes (e.g., Segal 1981: 272, 280; Bowra 1944: 252–253; cf. Gellie 1972: 127). But this reading receives no support elsewhere in the play, as no other passage hints that Orestes has any doubt of the justice of his actions or fear of later retribution. The absence of Furies in the following scene, where reminiscence of Aischylos would expect them, and the later absence of any reference to negative consequences of the act show that this line has the same function as Aigisthos' references to prophecy at the end of the play—that of raising uncertainty in the audience's mind in order to lay it to rest. On this point see Minadeo 1967 arguing that Sophokles raises Aischylean references in the *Elektra* in order to challenge Aischylos' treatment.

²⁵ The belief of the conspirators that the gods support them is shown throughout the *Elektra*. Orestes' claim that the gods have sent him to cleanse his father's house (δίκη καθαρτῆς πρὸς θεῶν ὀρμημένος, 70) indicates that he believes that the gods in general and perhaps Apollo in particular (the only god so far mentioned) have authorized him to kill Klytaimnestra and Aigisthos. In Elektra's opinion Agamemnon was involved in sending her mother the troubling dream (459–460); the chorus believes that Dike will soon come to avenge the murder (476–477); the chorus believes that Elektra should be rewarded for her piety towards Zeus (1093–97, where the chorus interprets Elektra's loyalty to her father explicitly as piety towards Zeus). When Orestes tells Elektra that he came when the gods urged him to (1264), she rejoices at this as a sign of divine support for his mission (1265–70), and later speaks of their service to τῷ παρόντι δαίμονι (1306), again implying a belief in divine support for their acts. But while Apollo's authorization—and divine support generally—for the murder of Klytaimnestra and Aigisthos is thus assumed throughout the play by conspirators and chorus, and frequently critics as well (see, e.g., most recently Batchelder 1995: 28), its terms are never given in the form of a prophecy explicitly authorizing the act. The lack of such a prophecy, however, does not indicate that the audience should doubt Orestes' assumption that he has divine support. Rather, the lack of a specific prophecy indicates that divine support for the killings is to be accepted without question, precisely because there is no "authorizing" prophecy for whose terms alternative interpretations could be proposed, or which suggest a fulfilment which might surprise Orestes. The prophecy of Apollo cited by Orestes at the beginning of the play authorizes his mission precisely by not mentioning it, and speaking only of his method of carrying it out.

²⁶ Sheppard (1927) was the first to argue this, followed by Kells (1973: 1–11). It was within the range of possibilities envisioned by fifth-century Athenians to ask the "wrong" question at Delphi, as the story of Socrates' criticism of Xenophon's question at Delphi shows (ὁ . . . ἥτις αὐτὸν ὅτι οὐ τοῦτο πρῶτον ἡρώτα πότερον λῶν εἴη αὐτῷ πορεύεσθαι ἢ μένειν, ἀλλ' αὐτὸς κρίνας ἴτερον εἶναι τοῦτ' ἐπυνθάνετο ὥπως ἂν κάλλιστα πορευθεῖη, Xen. *Anab.* 3.1.7); the god's response is then a "test" of the piety of the questioner, who will (if he follows the oracle's advice) be punished for his impiety in asking the wrong question to begin with. But as Bowra (1944: 216–217) points out, there is no hint that this is such a question or response. In fact, such responses appear only in Herodotos, and

Apollo's command that secures his acquittal in the *Eumenides*. But in fact Apollo's authority to so command Orestes is itself questioned in Aischylos' treatment (for example, *Eum.* 148–152, 162–172, 208–210, 321–353). Orestes' obedience to Apollo in the *Choephoroi* does not in fact render him immune to the Furies, but rather lays him open to persecution by them.

Orestes, therefore, does not make himself vulnerable to the charge of murdering his mother without proper divine authority by asking the oracle how, rather than whether, to take vengeance on his father's murders. In fact, this formulation of the question defends him from the charge, in that it does not suggest the possibility of wrong-doing on his part. The form of his question signals rather that the propriety of the killing of Klytaimnestra will be assumed without question throughout the play. And in fact, the justice of the killing of Klytaimnestra is never an issue in the *Elektra*; and no one in the play, not even Klytaimnestra, hints at the possibility of the Furies pursuing him as a result of her murder.

The terms of the Apollo's prophecy, as reported by Orestes in the first scene, are fulfilled with the death of Aigisthos at the end of the play. Orestes has asked for the best means of taking vengeance on his father's murderers, which goal is accomplished only on Aigisthos' death. The prophecy of Apollo thus performs the structural function of framing and providing closure to the play. In so doing, it has encompassed the murder of Klytaimnestra without ever specifically mentioning her, granting her death without giving it any significance. Orestes' actions in obeying the oracle began with the neglect of Elektra, and he continues his mission only by once again ignoring her. Elektra's distress, although it occupies centre stage for most of the play, is represented at the end of the play as a hindrance to Orestes, whose sympathy for her delays him and is the final obstacle to be overcome in carrying out his mission.²⁷ Orestes is represented as being well aware of this, and several times asks Elektra to be silent for fear of jeopardizing his plans.²⁸ The Paidagogos finally interrupts to scold them both for staying to talk and orders Orestes into the house.²⁹ But lamentation has been Elektra's only action in the play. When it is cut off, she is left with no active role and can do nothing but look on as Orestes carries out his vengeance. When Orestes kills

there is no clear example of either a "wrong question" or a "testing" response anywhere else in tragedy; nor does Orestes' question here fit the parameters, as no negative consequences of his question arise or are suggested.

²⁷ Zeitlin (1990: 81) points out that the success of Orestes' mission is in Aischylos and Euripides dependent on his meeting with Elektra, who in Aischylos renders him psychologically capable of the act and in Euripides lays the plot which makes Klytaimnestra's murder possible. In Sophokles, however, Elektra has no such function: Orestes enters primed for the murders, for which he has already laid a plan, and the recognition scene with Elektra only delays its execution.

²⁸ ἀλλὰ σίγ' ἔχουσα πρόσμενε, 1236; σιγᾶν ἄμεινον, μή τις ἔνδοθεν κλύη, 1238; ὅταν παρουσία / φράξῃ τότ' ἔργων τῶνδε μεμνησθαι χρεών, 1251–52; οὐ μὴ 'στί καιρὸς μὴ μακρὰν βούλου λέγειν, 1259; τὰ μὲν περισσεύοντα τῶν λόγων ἄφες, 1288; σιγᾶν ἐπήνευ', 1322.

²⁹ καὶ νῦν ἀπαλλαχθέντε τῶν μακρῶν λόγων / καὶ τῆς ἀπλήστου τῆσδε σὺν χαρᾷ βοῆς / εἴσω παρήλθεθ', ὥς τὸ μὲν μέλλειν κακὸν / ἐν τοῖς τοιοῦτοις ἔστ', ... 1335–38.

Klytaimnestra Elektra calls from outside the door "Strike, if you have the strength, a second time!" (παῖσον, εἰ σθένεις, διπλῆν, 1415), taking what little part in the action she can. But the killing of Klytaimnestra is only an initial step in the fulfilment of the oracle and does not even figure in fulfilment of the dream, for which it is simply an unspoken precondition. Fulfilment of both is accomplished, and closure for the play produced, only with the death of Aigisthos; and in this climactic action Elektra does not even have a speaking role, but remains silent through the final scene of the play. The oracle of Apollo is thus fulfilled in a way which robs the women in the play of any significance in the action: Klytaimnestra dies not on her own merits but as Aigisthos' partner; Elektra's cause succeeds, but through Orestes, not Elektra, who has no active part in the accomplishment of the vengeance she has longed for.³⁰

The fulfilment of the two prophecies in the *Elektra* thus effectively and finally exclude the female presence and the female voice from the play. They do so literally, in that by the end of the play Elektra is silent and Klytaimnestra dead, and figuratively, in that Elektra's only "action" was the speech-act of her lamentation; Orestes' appropriation of all action once his plans are set in motion leaves Elektra no part in the denouement. Finally, the prophecies exclude female voice from the play by appropriation, just as female procreative power is appropriated by the male, for the uses of the male political order, to which that female power would (if it remained in the control of women) be an obstacle. Thus Klytaimnestra dreams the dream and speaks it to the sun just as she gives birth to Orestes and allows him to be sent out into the world, with no control over either; she recognizes the true identity, or meaning, of neither and so does not benefit by her own creative power. Klytaimnestra is represented as the matrix of the male creative power which works through her, not as the source or authorizer of that power. Klytaimnestra's prayer to Apollo implies that he is the one who has authorized the dream which spoke through her, and brings about its fulfilment without reference to her; in the same way Agamemnon, in her dream, was the author of the son she bore, and in the course of the play is the motivator of Orestes' actions as well as the source of his (political) power. Apollo and Agamemnon are in this way represented as the true authors of Klytaimnestra's creations. Both the dream and Orestes are produced through Klytaimnestra, but are not part of her, descending, instead, entirely from the male.

There is one further reference to prophecy in the play. As Orestes and Aigisthos enter the palace, Aigisthos to die and Orestes to take over rule of Mykenai, Aigisthos asks if it is necessary (ἀνάγκη, 1497) for this building to see "the present and future evils of the Pelopidai" (τά τ' ὄντα καὶ μέλλοντα Πελοπιδῶν κακά, 1497-98). Orestes responds brusquely "Yours, at least—I

³⁰The silencing and isolation of Elektra at the play's end has been noted by other scholars, cf. Kirkwood 1958: 136; Gellie 1972: 123; Winnington-Ingram 1980: 229; Segal 1981: 251, 267; Kitzinger 1991: 320, 323-325, 327. Seaford (1985) argues that Elektra's isolation is a product of her ritual separation from the community as a mourner; but while her role as mourner has immense importance in the play, this reading ignores the political implications of her isolation.

am an accurate seer of these things for you" (τὰ γούν σ'· ἐγώ σοι μάντις εἰμὶ τῶνδ' ἄκρος, 1499). This response closes the door to prophecy about the future. Orestes is willing to prophesy, to be a μάντις, only about those events over which he has direct knowledge and control, that is, the death of Aigisthos himself. The prophecies which framed the play will be fulfilled with Aigisthos' death, and Orestes declines to speculate further. The audience is thus discouraged as well from speculation about a future beyond the end of the play. It ends, all prophecies resolved, with the death of Aigisthos, and the Furies which pursue Orestes offstage at the end of the *Choephoroi* are nowhere implied in the *Elektra*.³¹

The prophecies in the *Elektra*, the oracle of Apollo and the dream of Klyt-aimnestra, have each in their way acted to produce closure and to emphasize the basic political thrust of the play. The fulfilment of these prophecies in the re-establishment of the legitimate political order, the reign of the Atreidai at Mykenai, make unimportant female action and understanding, which have no direct role in the transfer of political power from one male to another. According to Froma Zeitlin, "In the end, tragedy arrives at closures that generally reassert male, often paternal, structures of authority, but before that the work of the drama is to open up the masculine view of the universe."³² In the *Elektra*, this "opening of the masculine universe" is performed in the service of the masculine transfer of political power.

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³¹ Winnington-Ingram (1954-55: 24; 1980: 226-227) disagrees, as do other "pessimist" critics of the play; Segal (1981: 286) likens Aigisthos to Cassandra, prophesying just before he dies. The debate has centred on the merits or otherwise of the killing of Klytaimnestra, and all of the hints which the "pessimists" have looked for throughout the play have been chosen with a view to showing Orestes' questionable moral status, especially with respect to his murder of his mother. But this play does not function on the plane of moral probity as it operates within family relationships; it portrays instead political relationships between males, to which females and families throughout take second place. Attempts to judge the play on the grounds of the morality of the matricide have thus been misguided, and the few lines in the play which can in any way be construed as hints of Orestes' future punishment for this crime have been far over-analysed in quest of this interpretation.

³² Zeitlin 1990: 86-87; on the *Elektra* cf. Woodard 1964: 199: "The opening and closing of our play both show the world of *ergon* dominant; both present the men in control, and affirm their world dramatically as well as conceptually."

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