IS THERE A *POLIS* IN SOPHOCLES' *ELECTRA*?

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LEONA MACLEOD'S RECENT MONOGRAPH ON SOPHOCLES' *ELECTRA* (MacLeod 2001) combines a meticulous examination of past scholarship on the play with numerous fresh and original contributions of her own, and all future students of the play will be indebted to her work. But it is only to be expected that such a thought-provoking book should cause other scholars to debate some of her more innovative suggestions. In this article I re-examine a subject which forms an important part of MacLeod's work: namely, the significance of the *polis* in the play. I investigate her arguments together with those of Jasper Griffin, who in a recent article takes a position diametrically opposed to MacLeod's. I argue that for all their insights, neither has appreciated the precise significance which the *polis* has for the drama, and hope to point towards a more nuanced understanding of what this significance might be.

For MacLeod, the *polis* lies at the heart of Sophocles' play. Throughout her monograph individual characters have their actions and motivations explained in terms which relate to it. In particular, Electra and Orestes are said to behave in a manner informed by the *polis* and its values. They may be fighting for their dead father and for the *oikos* of which he was the head, but their struggles are just as much on behalf of the much wider social unit and the ethical principles for which it stands. Unfortunately, despite the vigour with which MacLeod argues for this position, on many occasions it seems that she has read too much between the lines, and in so doing has pushed the evidence of the play too far. As a consequence, she has seen references to the *polis* in places where the play itself makes no explicit or implicit reference to it.

An example of this tendency occurs in MacLeod's interpretation of the oracle given to Orestes at Delphi (32–37). In this passage Orestes describes how he was instructed by Apollo to carry out his mission through trickery (*dolos*) rather than through force of arms. According to MacLeod (2001: 33), Apollo gives this command to Orestes because such a strategy "protects the *polis* from the dangers of an invading army." Yet the play does not tell us that this was Apollo's motivation in giving the oracle. If we choose to speculate, we can come up with many other practical reasons why *dolos* might commend itself as a strategy: the need to surprise the enemy, the difficulty of raising an army in exile, the likelihood of defeat at the hands of battle-hardened Mycenaean troops .... The play provides no more and no less evidence for these explanations than it does for

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MacLeod's theory. It simply does not invite us to speculate about such matters. It is thus difficult to see how an audience could have understood that a concern for the *polis* forms the reason for the god's command.

MacLeod is especially interested in how the values which Electra espouses reflect the values of the wider *polis*. As she puts it (2001: 19), "throughout the play, there are unmistakable signs that we are to understand the action in more broadly political terms. It is, however, the more subtle but pervasive sense of *polis* 'consciousness' evident in the ethical language of Elektra which is most revealing." That is, Electra's concern with *aidos*, *sophrosyne*, and *eusebeia* (well brought out by MacLeod throughout her monograph) marks her commitment to the *polis*, since these are essentially social values. To take just one important example, MacLeod argues (2001: 57) that "[Electra's] decision to honour her father over her mother ... is not driven solely by some need to retaliate against her mother, but by her sense of *aidos* or respect for the ideals of *eusebeia* within the broader sphere of the *polis*."

Aidos, *sophrosyne*, and *eusebeia* are often found elsewhere in connection with the *polis*.[1] To keep to Sophoclean parallels, at frs. 683 and 936 Radt *sophrosyne* is presented as a clearly civic virtue, while at *Aj.* 1076 and 1350 *aidos* and *eusebeia* respectively are mentioned in an undeniably political context. But these virtues are not limited to a political context. Rather, they are applicable to a wide variety of social relationships, such as to one's *oikos* or *genos*, to friends, to strangers, or even to the gods. They are too fundamental to have been felt as specifically associated with any particular form of social organisation. Their breadth of reference can again be exemplified from Sophocles.[2] So at, for example, *Phil.* 304, οὐκ ἐνθάδ' οἱ πλοῖ τοῖσι σώφροσιν βροτῶν ("sensible people do not sail here"), it is hard to see a political nuance to Philoctetes' statement. The *sophrosyne* which encourages harmony in the *polis* is a quite different virtue from the *sophrosyne* which dissuades sailors from voyaging to uninhabited islands. Other passages where these virtues must be interpreted in non-political terms include *OR* 646–647 (Oedipus is encouraged to show *aidos* for Creon's oath) and *Phil.* 1439–44 (Heracles urges Philoctetes and Neoptolemus to show *eusebeia* for the gods at the sack of Troy). Many other examples could be cited. We thus cannot assume that Electra's *aidos*, *sophrosyne*, and *eusebeia* necessarily have a political dimension, but instead must examine whether the characters of the play in fact see these values in such terms.

The results of such an examination do not show Electra's values in a political light. In the great *rhesis* which follows Electra's self-appropriation of *aidos* and *eusebeia* (254–309), her emphasis lies far from the *polis*. She focuses not on the fate of the city, but on the adultery of Clytemnestra with her husband's killer

[1] Cf., for example, how Cairns (1993: 214) characterises one aspect of *aidos* as "a social entity, active in interpersonal relationships within the community."

[2] For these virtues in a non-political sense in Sophocles, cf. Rademaker 2005: 141, referring to a particular kind of civic *sophrosyne* as something "of great importance for the Athenian citizen of the classical period," and yet which is "not particularly relevant to the Sophoclean protagonist."

(271–276), and the shameless pleasure which Clytemnestra takes in celebrating the murder of Agamemnon (277–281). These are the breaches of *aidos*, *sophrosyne*, and *eusebeia* which so appal her. They are all associated with the perverted relationships of the *oikos* in which she is forced to live; there is not a word of the wider *polis* or its values. True, Electra does list Aegisthus' sitting on Agamemnon's throne among the causes of her anger (266–268), which might be thought to have a political nuance. But even here the offence seems to lie in its being the throne *of her father* (θρόνοις ... / τοῖσιν πατρῴοις), rather than the symbol of rule over the *polis*; and in any case this reference is soon subsumed by the more intensely personal references which follow it. MacLeod (2001: 19, n. 44) remarks that "this is a royal *oikos* whose members rule the *polis*; their destructive vengeful acts would naturally impinge upon the *polis*." However, Electra does not emphasise this point; indeed, she does not even mention it.

The contrast with the comparable speech from Euripides' *Electra* is particularly telling. In that play the stress on the political and military aspects of the usurpation is far stronger, especially in the vivid picture of Aegisthus brandishing the sceptre with which Agamemnon had ruled the Greeks (Eur. *El.* 319–322). Sophocles' focus is elsewhere, and seems almost to eschew the political aspect of the situation for a more intimate and personal description of the degradation of the household. As Jones puts it (1962: 148–149), "we are observing [Sophocles] sharpen and narrow the subversion of the *oikos* into a theme of personal usurpation." Electra is mourning Agamemnon not as an assassinated king, but as a dead father.[3]

MacLeod's analysis in fact often seems more appropriate to Aeschylus' version of the Orestes myth than to Sophocles'. Time and again in the *Oresteia* our attention is directed towards the wider Argive setting: the impact which the Trojan war, the murder of Agamemnon, and the revenge of Orestes have on the Argive people is prominent throughout the trilogy.[4] The political concerns of the *Choephori*, the part of the trilogy which stands closest to Sophocles' play, are especially clear in connection with the revenge plot. So when describing his motives for the vengeance Orestes programmatically emphasises his desire to free the glorious citizens of Argos from the tyranny of a pair of women (*Cho.* 302–304). Correspondingly, he begins his speech over the dead bodies of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus with the words ἴδεσθε χώρας τὴν διπλῆν τυραννίδα ("behold the twofold tyranny of the land," 973), stressing the public consequences of the vengeance. The chorus then reciprocates by saying ἠλευθέρωσας πᾶσαν Ἀργείων πόλιν ("you have freed the whole city of the Argives," 1046). The liberation of the community is a theme of central importance in the play.

Sophocles, on the other hand, has gone out of his way to avoid copying his predecessor's treatment of this theme. Rather than passively accept the

[3] Griffin 1999a: 78–79.

[4] Instances are usefully collected by Griffith (1995: 76–78). At 77, n. 58 Griffith lists the references to the Argive *polis* in the *Agamemnon* alone: the sheer number of these forms a powerful contrast to the paucity of such references in Sophocles' play.

prominence of the *polis* in the story as a mythological given, he asserts his own artistic independence by "doing things differently."[5] His play's lack of emphasis on the *polis* is linked with its sustained emphasis on the figure of Electra. A minor character in Aeschylus, in Sophocles she dominates the drama, to the extent that Griffin (1999a: 78) can say that "the real subject of the play is the emotions of the heroine."[6] The play takes a profound interest in the strongly personal consequences which Agamemnon's murder has for his daughter, and subsequently in the ecstatic joy she experiences at the return of her brother. To accompany this with a correspondingly powerful emphasis on the *polis* would only dilute this intense stress on Electra's own emotions. As such, Sophocles' decision to focus attention away from the *polis* is not merely a way of marking the difference between his play and Aeschylus': it is something closely bound up with the fundamental character of his drama, whose distinctive characteristics are not politics but "feminine emotion and heroic pathos."[7]

Griffin's analysis, to which the previous paragraph is indebted, constitutes part of his more general attack on those scholars who attribute fundamental importance to the political aspects of Greek tragedy.[8] I have much sympathy for Griffin's approach. Occasionally, however, his laudable efforts to curb the excesses of this latest scholarly fashion lead him to make sweeping claims for which the evidential basis is insecure. So in his summing-up of our play, he explains (1999a: 80) that "as for the present or future state of the *polis* of Argos, our attention is never directed to them." But this is much too stark a formulation. For there *are* some definite references to the *polis* and the wider community in the play, and it is at least worth considering whether any significance can be attached to them. After all, it can often be valuable to consider the reasons why a writer makes occasional use of a motif which elsewhere, for good poetic reasons, he avoids.[9]

The play in fact begins in an emphatically public manner, with the Paedagogus pointing out to Orestes the various local sights for which he has longed (2–3). The Argolid (4–5), the Lycean temple of Apollo (6–7), the temple of Argive Hera (7–8), the city of Mycenae itself (8–9) all follow in quick succession before

[5] Cf. Fraenkel's famous comment on 77–85 (1962: 22, n. 1): "Es ist als wenn Sophokles sagte 'ich habe die Choephoren nicht vergessen, aber ich mache es anders'."

[6] Referring (as Griffin acknowledges) to Schadewaldt's "der eigentliche Inhalt des Gedichts sind die πάθη der Heldin" (1928: 57). Cf. Campbell 1879–81: 2.129: "the *rôle* of Electra [is] chiefly the expression of feeling"; Jebb 1894: xliii: "the series of her emotions is the thread which gives unity to the whole"; March 2001: 11: "[Electra] expresses the heights and depths of emotion, from bitter hatred to most tender love, from the deepest sorrow to the most exalted joy."

[7] Griffin 1999a: 82. This aspect of the play has been well analysed by Knox (1983: 7–10) and Griffin (1999a: 77–82).

[8] See especially Griffin 1998. For reactions to Griffin's piece, see Seaford 2000; Goldhill 2000; Rhodes 2003.

[9] Cf. Davies's (1981: 57) comment on Karl Reinhardt's discussion of the Judgment of Paris in the *Iliad*: "in particular, while showing in a superlatively convincing manner why the Judgement is not alluded to more often, he does not try to explain why it has to be mentioned at all."

we move by way of climax to the house of the Pelopids (10). Electra's opening words in the parodos ὦ γένεθλα[10] γενναίων ("o offspring of noble parents," 129) also look towards the world beyond the *oikos*: the address "makes it clear that the Chorus are local noble-women and places them in the context of a larger and more political community."[11] During her prayer to Apollo in the second episode Clytemnestra conceals the meaning of her words (that is, her request for Orestes' death) from Electra to prevent her from revealing it to the city (μὴ σὺν φθόνῳ τε καὶ πολυγλώσσῳ βοῇ / σπείρῃ ματαίαν βάξιν εἰς πᾶσαν πόλιν, "lest with envy and loud shouting she spread vain rumours through the whole city," 641–642). Electra herself later imagines the enthusiastic approbation of the crowd as she tries to persuade her sister to join in her attempt against Aegisthus (976–985). At the height of her emotion immediately after her recognition of her brother, Electra turns to the chorus and addresses them as ὦ φίλταται γυναῖκες, ὦ πολίτιδες ("o dearest women, o citizenesses," 1227). Clytemnestra's dying screams later provoke the chorus to exclaim ὦ πόλις, ὦ γενεὰ τάλαινα, νῦν σοι / μοῖρα καθημερία φθίνει φθίνει ("o city, o wretched race, the fate which has afflicted you day by day is perishing, is perishing," 1413–14). Finally, at 1458–63 Aegisthus asks for the doors to the palace to be opened so that all the Mycenaeans and Argives can see the dead body of Orestes and thereby learn to acquiesce in his rule.[12]

These references to the *polis* are not as numerous as those in Aeschylus. None of them is sustained for long: after each one we quickly return to the narrower world of the *oikos*. They do not justify the elevation of the *polis* to the status of a major theme in the drama. On the other hand, given the good reasons (identified above by Knox and Griffin) which Sophocles has for playing down the role of the *polis*, why does he then mention the *polis* at all? Why, moreover, should these mentions of the *polis* be located in such prominent places in the play? The Paedagogus' description of the Argolid gains considerable emphasis from its location at the opening of the work.[13] Clytemnestra's prayer forms a central set-piece for the drama, the great pivot round which the long second episode turns. The recognition of Orestes by Electra constitutes the emotional heart of the piece, the moment when Electra can at long last abandon her grief

[10] Lloyd-Jones and Wilson (1992) and Dawe (1996) print γενέθλα, but Stinton's (1977: 129–130 = 1990: 274–276) γένεθλα seems unavoidable for metrical reasons. See my forthcoming commentary *ad loc.*

[11] Budelmann 2000: 252.

[12] Most of these references are ignored by Griffin (1999a). Knox (1983: 8, n. 11) notes the references in 982, 1227, and 1413, but does so merely to show how few in number they are. MacLeod (2001) is disappointingly brief on πολίτιδες (162) and ὦ πόλις (171). By concentrating on finding the *polis* where it is not to be found, she misses the places where it is actually present.

[13] Even Knox (1983: 8) admits that "such a prologue seems the appropriate opening note for a drama which will emphasise the political aspect of Orestes' action." He goes on to claim that "in fact, nothing could be farther from the truth," but he does not say why Sophocles should have given the *polis* theme such prominence in the first place.

and display her immense capacity for joy. The killing of Clytemnestra forms a climax of a different kind: this scene of great pathos, with the queen's numerous cries behind the *skene* met with brutal rejoinders from her daughter on stage, is in every way as memorable as the joyful recognition which we have only recently witnessed.[14] Aegisthus' pompously confident speech marks the last act of empty triumph by an imminently doomed regime.[15] Far from omitting the *polis* from the play altogether, Sophocles has taken care to locate those references to it which the play does contain at moments of considerable dramatic import.

This prominence of location is often accompanied by strikingly emphatic means of expression. At 977–983 Electra's dream of acclamation by the *polis* is conveyed in a "τις–Rede" (cf. Wilson 1979), a device with an epic resonance,[16] whose length here exceeds that of almost all other examples of the genre,[17] and whose dramatic power scarcely needs to be emphasised.[18] Intertextuality is employed for emphasis at 1458–63, where Aegisthus' vivid language pointedly recalls the political threat posed by Orestes at the end of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (1646–48, 1667).[19] And at 1227 Electra hails the chorus with the unusual word πολίτιδες, a rare term[20] which "[connotes] a political and individual relationship

[14] In the line immediately after the chorus's exclamation, Electra utters her great cry παῖσον, εἰ σθένεις, διπλῆν ("strike twice as hard, if you have the strength!," 1415), hailed by Griffin (1999a: 80) as "the most vivid and memorable point in the matricide." But if the *polis* is of no significance for the play, it is hard to see why it should be invoked at such a high point in the drama.

[15] The political emphasis in this speech has already been prepared for by the phrase ἐκ προαστίου ("from the suburb," 1432): "the setting, which throughout the play has been around the house, now shifts to a *polis* context" (Budelmann 2000: 261).

[16] Cf. the use of "τις-Reden" by Hector and Sarpedon at Hom. *Il.* 7.89–91 and 12.317–321 respectively: in each case the hero imagines other people proclaiming his glory.

[17] It is surpassed only by the far less dramatic Hom. *Od.* 6.276–284 (Nausicaa on the likely reaction to a stranger accompanying her into the city).

[18] MacLeod (2001: 144) goes too far in claiming that "Elektra defines her action with reference to the *polis*" in this passage: as Griffin (1999a: 79, n. 19) correctly points out, "there is no mention of delivering the community from usurpation or tyranny, only a personal act of heroism for family motives." Cf. Knox 1983: 8: "even here the achievement for which they will be celebrated is not the liberation of Argos but the salvation of the house of Atreus." But though the act whose celebration she imagines is strongly bound up with the *oikos*, she nevertheless sees its celebration in terms of a distinctively public acclamation. Both halves of the dichotomy need to receive their proper emphasis if we are fully to appreciate the passage.

[19] The link between the passages is also stressed on the level of connected imagery: so for 1460–61 (εἴ τις ... ἐλπίσιν κεναῖς ... / ἐξῆρετ' ἀνδρὸς τοῦδε, "if anyone was encouraged by empty hopes in this man"), cf. Aesch. *Ag.* 1668 (οἶδ' ἐγὼ φεύγοντας ἄνδρας ἐλπίδας σιτουμένους, "I know that men in exile feed on hope"); and for 1462 (στόμια δέχηται τἀμά, "he may accept my bridle"), cf. Aesch. *Ag.* 1639–40 (τὸν δὲ μὴ πειθάνορα / ζεύξω βαρείαις, "as for the man who does not obey me, I will yoke him with a heavy yoke"), and also 1624 (πρὸς κέντρα μὴ λάκτιζε, μὴ παίσας μογῇς, "do not kick against the goads, lest you stumble and meet with trouble").

[20] For a (short) list of occurrences, see Patterson 1986: 66, n. 35. On this rarity Blok (2004: 6) notes that "es gab relativ wenig Gelegenheit zur ausschliesslichen Erwähnung von Frauen im Kontext des Bürgerstatus und wahrscheinlich noch weniger Anlass, solche Erwähnungen in schriftliche, jetzt erhaltene Dokumente aufzunehmen."

with the polis."[21] In the very few places where it does occur, the emphasis on the civic function identified by Patterson and others is evident. So at Pl. *Leg.* 814c2–4 women are called πολίτιδες when the speaker is asserting the importance of their taking a full part in military operations; at Eur. *El.* 1334–35 (ὦ χαῖρε, πόλις· / χαίρετε δ' ὑμεῖς πολλά, πολίτιδες, "o farewell, city; and a long farewell to you, citizenesses"), Electra is contemplating her imminent separation from the wider community, from the citizen body of which she is a member; and at Isocr. 14.51 the Plataeans declare to the Athenians ἐκ πολιτίδων ὑμετέρων γεγόναμεν ("we are descendants of your citizen women"), and thereby stress their participatory rights in the Athenian polity. This distinctive form of address allows Electra to put a special emphasis on the chorus's status as members of the community of Mycenae.[22] The implication is that the arrival of Orestes will have momentous consequences for the community at large: as Liou (1990: 5, n. 4) puts it, "les femmes du choeur sont associées à une entreprise de libération, Égisthe étant l'oppresseur."

These occasional glimpses into the world of the *polis* cannot be ignored by interpreters of the play. Taken together, in fact, they make up a remarkably consistent picture of the background to the bitter struggles of the *oikos*. The hostility of the populace towards its new rulers is apparent from Clytemnestra's fear of an appeal by Electra to the *polis* (641–642). So too Aegisthus implies that the death of Orestes will ensure the subjugation of a people who up until now have refused to acquiesce in his rule (1458–63). By contrast, the intimate association between Orestes and the land of the Argolid is established from the outset, when the Paedagogus points out the many sights for which the young man has longed. This is reinforced by the obvious sympathy which the chorus shows for Orestes and his house (see, e.g., 126–127). And references to the *polis* at the two crucial moments of the recognition and the killing of Clytemnestra stress the beneficent effects which these events will have for the wider community (see especially 1413–14: ὦ πόλις, ὦ γενεὰ τάλαινα, νῦν σοι / μοῖρα καθημερία φθίνει φθίνει, "o city, o wretched race, the fate which has afflicted you day by day is perishing, is perishing").

Such hints of a broader reality behind the play's main action lend the events of the drama added significance. Electra's devotion to her father and brother leads not only to the restoration of the *oikos*, as she intends, but also to a happier future for the land of Argos and Mycenae. The play thus acquires a greater depth, a more richly-varied texture, through its occasional gestures towards a broader

[21] Patterson 1986: 55. See further Patterson 1981: 160: "*politês* in broad Greek usage suggests a political, public context while the *astos* suggests a domestic, communal one"; Mossé 1985: 79: "l'emploi de *politis* est ici lié à la référence au *dêmos* et ... renvoie à une dimension qui n'est plus en relation avec le droit de l'*oikos* et de la famille, mais avec les pratiques politiques de la cité." For the difference between the term πολῖτις and the commoner ἀστή, cf. ps.-Dem. 59.107 with Kapparis 1999: 399–400, *ad loc.*

[22] Budelmann 2000: 258.

vision. But the brevity cultivated by this "gesturing" style allows Sophocles to deepen the significance of his work without compromising his fundamental aim of concentrating our focus on Electra. This, of course, requires a delicate balancing act on his part, involving deft and intricate control over his material. Avoiding the extremes of a play dominated by the *polis* and a play which never touches on the *polis*, he takes a middle course in which the Argive polity constitutes a feature with a limited but definite dramatic purpose.

A similar technique can be observed in Sophocles' treatment of the Atreid *genos* in the play. Like the *polis*, the *genos* plays a crucial role in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. The evils which afflict Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, and Orestes are the results of their own actions, but they also show the workings of the curse which has haunted the family since the adultery of Atreus' wife Aerope with Thyestes and the Thyestean banquet. The exploration of this recurrence of sin and guilt thus forms a major theme of the trilogy, which emphasises "the chain of causation of human action, presented through the persons of successive generations."[23] By contrast, in Sophocles the action of the play is emphatically *not* located in "the sequence of events over generations past and future."[24] He eschews the wider focus of the Atreid *genos* in favour of concentrating on the dysfunctional *oikos* of which Electra is a part. Electra's distinctive character is in part the result of the uniquely horrible nature of the murder of Agamemnon: it is this single act which has so profoundly affected her. If Agamemnon's death were portrayed as merely the latest in a long chain of killings, on the other hand, the emphasis of the play would inevitably be very different, and the focus on Electra's suffering above all other things would not quite fit. For the play to work, then, the importance of the *genos*, which is so prominent in Aeschylus, must be severely curtailed.

Nevertheless, the *genos* is by no means completely absent from Sophocles' play. The palace is introduced by the Paedagogus with the words πολύφθορόν τε δῶμα Πελοπιδῶν τόδε ("and this is the house of the Pelopids, rich in slaughter," 10), a brief but striking gesture towards the bloody history of the house of Pelops. The *genos* next attracts attention in the epode of the first stasimon (502–515), where the chorus traces the current ills of the house back to the killing of Myrtilus by Pelops. Myrtilus' death after a chariot race is then taken up in Orestes' own "death" during such a competition: it is thus no coincidence that the chorus's first reaction to the Paedagogus' tale is to lament the loss of the γένος of its ancient masters (φεῦ φεῦ· τὸ πᾶν δὴ δεσπόταισι τοῖς πάλαι / πρόρριζον, ὡς ἔοικεν, ἔφθαρται γένος, "alas, alas! The entire race of our ancient masters, it seems, has perished root and branch," 764–765). Orestes' "death" is most significant for the impact which it has on Clytemnestra and Electra, but we are briefly reminded that it can be fitted into a larger picture which extends backwards in time.[25]

[23] Knox 1964: 4.

[24] Knox 1964: 5.

[25] Stinton (1986: 79 = 1990: 471) attempts to dismiss this connection: "an unconsciously ironic reference to a non-event is a little far-fetched." But the appearance of two deaths both associated with

Chrysothemis tells Electra that she is in danger of exterminating the whole *genos* (1010), while in her speech over the urn Electra later expresses a desire to lament both herself and her *genos* (1121). The last references to the *genos* come at the killings of Clytemnestra, when the chorus call out ὦ γενεὰ τάλαινα ("o wretched race!," 1413), and of Aegisthus, who exclaims ἦ πᾶσ' ἀνάγκη τήνδε τὴν στέγην ἰδεῖν / τά τ' ὄντα καὶ μέλλοντα Πελοπιδῶν κακά; ("Is it wholly necessary that this house should see the present and future troubles of the Pelopids?," 1497–98) before being led inside to his doom.

As with the *polis*, we see a handful of brief but vivid references to the Atreid *genos* in prominent places in the drama (the opening, the end of the great messenger speech, the introduction to Electra's lament over the urn, the killing of Clytemnestra, the final moments of Aegisthus), which may also be expressed in particularly powerful terms (as with the mention of Myrtilus, which comes as a surprise after the strongly optimistic opening of the first stasimon). Such references point to the antiquity of trouble in the house, but they are neither numerous nor sustained enough to divert our attention from Electra's own situation and the particular horror of the murder of Agamemnon which was its cause. Such occasional gestures to a wider picture lend additional significance to the actions we see before us, but without forcing us to lose the dramatic advantages of concentration on the narrow world of the *oikos*. The play thus gains in depth without losing its focus.[26] In each case we are dealing with a motif which is of great importance in Aeschylus, though generally avoided by Sophocles except in a few prominent locations. Should we take these few exceptions to be mere traces of the themes left over from Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, themes which Sophocles generally omitted but was too incompetent to eliminate entirely? Or should we consider whether Sophocles may have had some definite purpose, however limited, in retaining these themes in his play in abbreviated form? Put like this, the question answers itself.

Recent scholarship has tended to exalt the political aspects of Greek tragedy over all others, even when a given play seems to have little or nothing to do with the *polis*. Yet any approach to this genre which relies on a single interpretative key is bound to be unsuccessful. Tragedy is too varied and subtle a literary genre to submit to such Procrustean tendencies. On the other hand, while the reaction of Griffin and others against recent *polis*-centred scholarship certainly has its merits,

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chariot races, both connected with the house of Pelops, within three hundred lines of each other can hardly be coincidence.

[26]The care with which these references to the *genos* are handled is evident in the account of Myrtilus at 502–515. Sophocles does not mention the curse uttered by Myrtilus as he perished (for which see Watson 1991: 15, n. 69), since this might place too great a stress on the notion of hereditary evil in the *genos* (so, rightly, Stinton 1986: 79 = 1990: 471) and thus mitigate the crime of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Rather, "emphasis lies not on the idea of crime and punishment but simply on the continuity of trouble since that time" (Parker 1999: 18). For Sophocles' general reluctance to put curses and so forth in the foreground, see West 1999.

we must be careful that it does not lead to excesses which mirror the very faults it sets out to correct. If we rid our minds both of the idea that tragedy must have everything to do with the *polis*, and of the idea that tragedy must have nothing to do with the *polis*, we can at last begin to appreciate the significance which the *polis* really plays in an individual drama such as Sophocles' *Electra*.

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