

## SOPHOCLES' *ELECTRA* 973–85 AND TYRANNICIDE

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After Sophocles' Electra hears the Paedagogus' vivid account of the death of Orestes (*Electra* 680–763), she resolves to kill Aegisthus herself (951–57). Chrysothemis' response to Electra's plan, and that of most critics, focus on Electra's heroic delusion that she could take on a job that requires a man's physical strength. "You are a woman, not a man," Chrysothemis reproaches her in 997–98, "and you are not as strong as your opponents." Both Electra's continual mourning, carried on in defiance of her mother, and her decision to slay Aegisthus, are rightly cited as examples of the behavior considered typical of the Sophoclean hero, for both her opposition to Clytemnestra and Aegisthus and her decision to act are based on principle rather than practicality. But the significance of this resolve to do a man's job goes beyond merely characterizing her as idealistic and stubborn. When Electra appeals to Chrysothemis for assistance, she imagines an extraordinary future for herself and her sister: they will not only win *kleos*, but will be celebrated by fellow-citizens and strangers alike in festivals and in gatherings of the *demos* (973–85). Commentators compare the public reception Electra imagines in 975–76 and 982–83 with *Oedipus Tyrannos* 1489–90, where Oedipus wonders what gatherings and festivals will welcome his daughters in the future, and Jebb argues that in the *Electra* passage "the poet is thinking of festivals or spectacles at which Athenian women could appear in public."<sup>1</sup> This assumption that we are meant to think of the social opportunities open to an ordinary fifth-century Athenian woman obscures the fact that Electra imagines herself not only acting with masculine courage (ἀνδρεία, 983), but performing a deed which belongs to and is rewarded by the masculine world of the citizen: tyrant-slaying. I suggest that Sophocles has designed the reception Electra imagines in 975–85 so as to recall the cult of the Tyrannicides, and that this association both underscores the political dimensions of Orestes and Electra's desire to reclaim their inheritance, and helps to explain why Aegisthus, and not Clytemnestra, is singled out as the intended victim of Electra's plan.

*Electra* 973–85 is part of a longer speech (947–89) and comprises the third in Electra's series of reasons why Chrysothemis should help her slay Aegisthus. Electra's first two arguments are closely linked. She begins by pointing out that it is only by killing Aegisthus that the sisters can reclaim their inheritance and have any hope of marrying (959–66). Her plans, she continues, will insure first, that the sisters win recognition of their *eusebeia* toward both Agamemnon and Orestes (968–69), and second, that as free noblewomen (ἐλευθέραι) they make

<sup>1</sup> R. C. Jebb, *Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments*, Part VI: *The Electra* (Cambridge 1907) at 975–76.

fitting marriages. With the words λόγων γε μὴν εὐκλειαν in line 973, Electra introduces the third and final section of her appeal and the larger question of public renown:

Λόγων γε μὴν εὐκλειαν οὐχ ὀρᾷς ὅσῃ  
 σαυτῇ τε κάμοι προσβαλεῖς πεισθεῖς' ἐμοί;  
 Τίς γάρ ποτ' ἀστῶν ἢ ξένων ἡμᾶς ἰδὼν  
 τοιοῖσδ' ἐπαίνους οὐχὶ δεξιώσεται;  
 "Ἴδεσθε τῷδε τῷ κασιγνήτῳ, φίλοι,  
 ὃ τὸν πατρῶον οἶκον ἐξεσωσάτην,  
 ὃ τοῖσιν ἐχθροῖς εὖ βεβηκόσιν ποτέ,  
 ψυχῆς ἀφειδήσαντε, προϋστήτην φόνου·  
 τούτῳ φιλεῖν χρή, τῷδε χρή πάντας σέβειν·  
 τῷδ' ἔν θ' ἑορταῖς ἔν τε πανδήμῳ πόλει  
 τιμᾶν ἅπαντας οὐνεκ' ἀνδρείας χρεῶν."  
 Τοιαῦτά τοι νῶ πᾶς τις ἐξερεῖ βροτῶν,  
 ζῶσαιν θανούσαιν θ' ὥστε μὴ 'κλιπεῖν κλέος (973–85).

The structure of this section is complex: Electra begins with a rhetorical question (973–74); imagines herself and Chrysothemis out among the citizens after the murder (975–76); herself recites the very words of praise with which she thinks the citizens will greet them (977–83); and tells Chrysothemis that this praise will be an undying *kleos* (984–85). Lines 986–89 form a conclusion to the speech as a whole and enjoin Chrysothemis to act for father, brother, sister and self.

The *kleos* of Electra and Chrysothemis, however, will take an unusual form. When Electra first speaks of “so great a reputation” in line 973, she seems to mean nothing more than public approval of the kind Antigone imagines and Haemon confirms in *Antigone* 502–5 and 692–700,<sup>2</sup> although her language does not preclude a *kleos* like that won by the Orestes of the *Odyssey*, one extending beyond the borders of Argos and making his behavior a paradigm for other young men. Yet where both *Antigone* and the *Odyssey* stress fame conveyed through speech and song,<sup>3</sup> Electra imagines praise evoked in response not to their story, but to a visual encounter: “Who among our fellow-citizens or *xenoi*, when they see us, will not greet us with praises such as these?” she asks. Both seeing (ἰδὼν, 975) and greeting (δεξιώσεται, 976) suggest a face-to-face meeting, and indeed, the literal meaning of δεξιόμοι is “to greet by clasping

<sup>2</sup> *Ant.* 502–5: καίτοι πόθεν κλέος γ' ἂν εὐκλεέστερον  
 κατέσχον ἢ τὸν αὐτάδελφον ἐν τάφῳ  
 τιθεῖσα; τούτοις τοῦτο πᾶσιν ἀνδάνειν  
 λέγοιτ' ἂν, εἰ μὴ γλῶσσαν ἐγκλήιοι φόβος.

*Ant.* 692–95: τὴν παῖδα ταύτην οἱ' ὀδύρεται πόλις,  
 πασῶν γυναικῶν ὡς ἀναξιώτατη  
 κάκιστ' ἀπ' ἔργων εὐκλεεστάτων φθίνει·

*Ant.* 699–700: οὐχ ἦδε χρυσῆς ἀξία τιμῆς λαχεῖν;  
 τοιάδ' ἐρεμνὴ σῖγ' ἐπέρχεται φάτις.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., *Od.* 1.298 (ἢ οὐκ αἰεὶς οἶον κλέος ἔλλαβε δῖος Ὀρέστης) and the χαρίεσσα ἀοιδὴ and στρυγγερὴ ἀοιδὴ of Penelope and Clytemnestra respectively in *Od.* 24.192–202. Cf. also *Ant.* 692 and 700 (above, note 2).

the right hand." The imagined praise that Electra quotes in the following lines again stresses the visual. "Do you see (ἴδεσθε) those two sisters?" the citizen or stranger will ask, before going on to describe their accomplishment. The quotation itself suggests an occasion for the encounter: "because of their bravery," the imaginary citizen says, "all should honor them in our festivals and in the gathering of the *demos*" (981–83).

Yet the imaginary praise maintains a marked distance between the *laudator* and the sisters. Although the word δεξιῶσεται suggests a personal exchange, the *laudator* is in fact pointing out the sisters to third-parties and describes their action in the third-person in 977–80. The three lines which then follow sound more like a proclamation than a direct address: the sisters must be loved, venerated, honored. Line 983 concludes the praise Electra puts in the mouth of the imaginary citizen, for she says in 984, "such are the things everyone will say." The repeated use of the dual in this imaginary quotation, although grammatically sound, is striking nevertheless, and further heightens the sense of distance between the *laudator* and the heroines.<sup>4</sup> It is used when the passer-by asks, "do you see these two sisters?" (τῷδε τὼ κασιγνήτω, 977). Then each of the five clauses which follow begins with a form of the dual pronoun (in 978, 979, and 982 the dual is the first word in the line) and each of the relevant verbs or participles is also in the dual. The use of this form not only associates the sisters more closely, but within this imaginary vignette sets them apart from those surrounding them, as well.

Quotation of imaginary praise or blame is an epic convention adopted by the tragedians, and it generally falls into one of two categories. The speech of praise imagined by Electra is unusual in that it combines features of both types of imaginary speech. The first type is delivered at a tomb or monument, as in *Iliad* 7.87–91, where Hektor imagines himself victorious in the duel to which he has challenged the best of the Achaeans. He will return his opponent's body to the Greeks, says Hektor, so that they might build him a tomb, "and some day one of the men to come will say, as he sees it... 'This is the mound of a man who died long ago in battle, who was one of the bravest, and glorious Hektor killed him'" (Lattimore trans.).<sup>5</sup> Such a speech can also be one of blame,

<sup>4</sup> The duals in 977–83 are grammatically unobjectionable; Electra and Chrysothemis form a natural pair, and duals are used elsewhere in this scene: by Electra to stress the isolation of the sisters now that Orestes is dead (μόνα λελειμμεθον, 950); and to similar effect by Chrysothemis in her reply to Electra (1003–6). Thus, the choice of duals for this quotation is consistent with the desperation and isolation the sisters feel at this moment. On the use of the masculine form of the dual, see Kühner-Gerth, *Ausführliche Grammatik der Griechischen Sprache* Volume II.1 (Hanover and Leipzig 1898) 73 and E. Schwyzler, *Griechische Grammatik* Volume II (Munich 1966) 31 n.9.

<sup>5</sup> This type of speech is a subcategory of the Homeric τις-speech, a speech attributed to an anonymous speaker and typically signalled by the presence of τις in its introductory and capping formulas. A τις-speech is either an actual speech, introduced by the narrator/poet, or a potential or imaginary speech that is embedded in the speech of a character. For discussion and further references, see J. Wilson, "KAΙ KE TIE ΩΔ' EPEEI: An Homeric Device in Greek Literature," *ICS* 4 (1979) 1–15; and I. de Jong, "The Voice of Anonymity: tis-Speeches in the *Iliad*," *Eranos* 85 (1987) 69–84. Wilson divides potential τις-speeches into those which seek to persuade or dissuade (purposive) and those which predict (as here in

as at *Iliad* 4.176–82, where Agamemnon imagines the scorn of the Trojans should Menelaus die and be buried at Troy. Sometimes this imaginary speech is evoked not by a tomb, but by the sight of someone closely associated with a dead hero. For example, at *Iliad* 6.459–62, Hektor envisions Andromache's future without him thus: "and some day seeing you shedding tears a man will say of you: 'This is the wife of Hektor, who was ever the bravest fighter of the Trojans, breakers of horses, in the days when they fought about Ilion.'" This speech that Hektor imagines in response to Andromache's presence functions as a kind of eulogy for himself.<sup>6</sup> Scholars have long recognized that the speech Tecmessa attributes to the Achaeans in *Ajax* 500–504 is modeled on *Iliad* 6.459–62: both are introduced by the *topos* "someone will see you/me and say" and conclude with "so someone will say;" both speeches imagine the comments the enemy will make when these women pass into their hands. Although in both Homer and Sophocles the speech is imagined as a response to the sight of the hero's wife, neither quotation is really about the living woman but is rather about the actions and might of the dead hero. Andromache and Tecmessa function as remembrances of the hero and stimuli to praise, in much the same way as does the tomb in the passage from *Iliad* 7.<sup>7</sup>

The second type of quotation is imagined as a response to the behavior of the speaker himself, and is usually a speech of blame. In *Iliad* 8.68–150, for example, Nestor counsels Diomedes to withdraw after Zeus signals an end to the Greek advance. While acknowledging the appropriateness of Nestor's advice, Diomedes nevertheless fears that "some day Hektor will say openly before the Trojans, 'the son of Tydeus, running before me, has fled to his vessels'" (148–49). Similarly, when Admetus begins to comprehend what his wife's death means for his own existence in *Alcestis* 954–60, he imagines that his enemies will point him out (ἰδοῦ, 955; cf. ἴδεσθε, *El.* 977) and dub him a coward. This imaginary speech casts blame on Admetus for not dying, and is opposed to the speech of praise that the chorus envisions being made at the tomb of Alcestis (1000–1005).<sup>8</sup>

Electra's quotation differs from both types of imaginary speech in that it appears to be a speech of praise evoked by the sight of the very person whose actions it commends. But Electra's concluding remarks about this praise further complicate the issue. Where earlier, in 975ff., she imagined a fame responsive

*Iliad* 7.87–91). Note that Electra's imaginary speech is introduced not by enclitic τις, but interrogative τίς ("Who among our fellow-citizens will not greet us with praises such as these?"); it concludes with the tag "such are the things *everyone* will say about us" (πᾶς τις ἐξερεῖ βροτῶν, 984). I would like to thank the two anonymous referees and the editor for parallels and other helpful suggestions on imaginary speeches.

<sup>6</sup> As the bT-scholia note, the line has an epigrammatic character (ἐπιγραμματικὸν ἔχει τύπον ὁ στίχος). Cf. *Iliad* 6.479, where Hektor imagines hopefully that people will one day praise Astyanax as better than his father.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Aeschylus, *Eum.* 756–60, where Orestes predicts that his restoration to Argos will act as a reminder of the power of Athena and Zeus.

<sup>8</sup> For other imaginary blame speeches of the "someone will say about me" variety, cf. Soph., *OT* 1493–1500; Eur., *Heracleidae* 515–18; *Heracles* 1286–90. On other kinds of speeches in tragedy which predict public reaction, see Wilson (above, note 5).

to her physical presence, in line 985 she concludes that as a result of local honors, *kleos* will belong to the sisters both living and dead (ζώσανιν θανούσανιν θ' ὥστε μὴ 'κλιπεῖν κλέος). Kamerbeek notes at 976 that the quotation resembles a laudatory epitaph, and indeed, the word ποτέ with a future point of view (ὡ τοῖσιν ἐχθροῖς εὐ βεβηκόσιν ποτέ ψυχῆς ἀφειδήσαντε, προϋστήτην φόνου, 979–80) is most often found in epitaphs and in celebratory athletic inscriptions, rather than in speech describing the recent past.<sup>9</sup> The ambiguity about whether the sisters are honored in life or after death shows that “the decision to be taken is envisaged under the aspect of the *kleos* to be won in life and death,” i.e., the heroic *kleos* of epic.<sup>10</sup> But what is striking is that in 982–83 Electra imagines not song, but honors offered in the context of cult, and cult celebrated not by her family, but by the *polis*.

Sophocles uses the conventions of imagined speech in such a way that Electra's quotation of imaginary praise can suggest both the honors to be awarded the sisters while living, as well as a more lasting monument to their achievement. More specifically, I suggest that the image Sophocles evokes here is of a public statue commemorating Electra and Chrysothemis, on a parallel with the paired statues of Harmodius and Aristogeiton that stood in the Agora from the fifth century on.<sup>11</sup> Thus, δεξιώσεται would also allude to the practice of greeting and touching such images; the ἐορταί and the πανδηῆμος πόλις would become spatial as well as occasional designations, while the laudatory remarks become, as Kamerbeek suggests, an epitaph appropriate to an inscribed memorial. What Electra imagines is not a reception fitting for men or for women *per se*, but more specifically, the appropriate response to tyrant-slaying.

The bronze statues of Harmodius and Aristogeiton that the Athenians set up in the middle of the Agora were an important part of the public consciousness and political landscape of the fifth century. These statues were first set up sometime before 480, when they were carried off by Xerxes; in 477/6 the Athenians replaced them. The statues, which were inscribed with epigrams at the base, were the subjects of many full and smaller-scale copies and are thought to be depicted on vases.<sup>12</sup> Both sculptors and vase-painters appropriated the stance of the two figures to depict traditional mythological heroes.<sup>13</sup> No one else was granted the honor of a representational statue in the Agora during the course of the fifth century, and Demosthenes reports that the first exception, a statue of

<sup>9</sup> On inscriptional use of ποτέ, see D. C. Young, “Pindar *Pythians* 2 and 3: Inscriptional ποτέ and the ‘Poetic Epistle’,” *HSCP* 87 (1983) 31–48.

<sup>10</sup> J. C. Kamerbeek, ed., *The Plays of Sophocles: Electra* (Leiden 1974). On the heroic *kleos* of epic, see G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans* (Baltimore 1979).

<sup>11</sup> In his commentary, Kaibel notes in passing that Electra's vision of posthumous honors in line 985 is reminiscent of the grave-offerings the Polemarch made to Harmodius and Aristogeiton. See G. Kaibel, *Sophokles Electra* (Leipzig 1896) 22. On the grave-offerings see Aristotle, *Ath. Pol.* 58.1.

<sup>12</sup> For an overview of the archaeological evidence for the statues and further bibliography, see H. A. Thompson and R. E. Wycherley, *The Athenian Agora, Vol. 14: The History, Shape and Uses of an Ancient City Center* (Princeton 1972) 155–160. For a more detailed study see S. Brunnsåker, *The Tyrant-Slayers of Kritios and Nesiotes* (Lund 1955).

<sup>13</sup> See M. W. Taylor, *The Tyrant Slayers: The Heroic Image in the Fifth Century B.C.* (New York 1981).

the general Konon, was made because the city felt that he too had ended a tyranny in overthrowing the Spartan regime in 394 (ἡγοῦντο γὰρ οὐ μικρὰν τυραννίδα καὶ τοῦτον...πεπαυκέναι, 20.70).<sup>14</sup> Two inscriptions, from the late fourth and early third centuries, show that the erection of new statues did not significantly lessen the distinction accorded Harmodius and Aristogeiton: permission was granted provided the statues were not in close proximity to the tyrannicide group (πλὴν παρ' Ἀρμόδιον καὶ Ἀριστογείτον[α] [IG II<sup>2</sup> 450 lines b7–12; cf. IG II<sup>2</sup> 646 lines 37–40]). That the statues of the tyrannicides both honored an exceptional act and themselves embodied an exceptional honor is clear. The existence of copies, their depiction on vases, and geographical references in Old Comedy show that the statues of the tyrannicides had captured the public imagination.<sup>15</sup>

Allusion to a statue group accords well both with the convention that locates quotations of imaginary *praise* at tombs or monuments and with the emphasis in this passage on the visual aspect of the city's praise: not only will the passer-by see the sisters (ἡμᾶς ἰδὼν, 975) and be moved to praise them, but part of that praise will consist of pointing them out to others (ἴδεσθε τῶδε τὴν κασιγνήτην, φίλοι, 977). Electra's claim that their fellow-citizens will greet them (δεξιόσεται) need not refer to a meeting between two persons; at Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 851–52, Agamemnon says that on entering his palace again after so many years he will greet the gods first: νῦν δ' ἐς μέλαθρα καὶ δόμους ἐφεστίους ἐλθὼν θεοῖσι πρῶτα δεξιόσομαι. Fraenkel notes the unparalleled use of the dative after δεξιόσομαι, and Denniston and Page comment that the verb is a peculiar one to use with respect to the gods.<sup>16</sup> But clearly Agamemnon means to offer thanks at the palace shrines, where the gods may well be represented by statues. Lucretius notes that the right hands of statues are worn away by the frequent touch of those greeting them while passing by.<sup>17</sup> Here at *Electra* 975–83, rather than greeting the sisters and then addressing his comments to a third-party, the passer-by imagined by Electra would pay his respects to the memorial.

The fact that the audience knows that Orestes is alive might make Electra's decision to kill Aegisthus and the civic reception she imagines in lines 973–85 seem like sheer bravado on her part and a display of technique on the poet's. But the allusion to the tyrannicides is thematically tied to the attempt of Agamemnon's children to reclaim their patrimony and to the larger question of the

<sup>14</sup> The ancient testimonia for the statue-group is conveniently collected in R. E. Wycherley, *The Athenian Agora Vol III: Literary and Epigraphical Testimonia* (Princeton 1957) 93–98, as well as in Brunnsåker (above, note 12).

<sup>15</sup> For comedy, see e.g., Aristophanes, *Eccl.* 681–82 (εἰς τὴν ἀγορὰν καταθήσω· κατὰ στήσασα παρ' Ἀρμόδιον κληρώσω πάντας...); *Lysis.* 633–34 (ἀγοράσω τ' ἐν τοῖς ὅπλοις ἐξῆς Ἀριστογείτονι, ὧδε θ' ἐστήξω παρ' αὐτόν). Sources as late as the 4th c. A.D. mention the statues, and as Brunnsåker (above, note 12) notes, the tyrannicides were "the principal symbol of Athenian freedom and democracy" throughout antiquity (41).

<sup>16</sup> Eduard Fraenkel, *Aeschylus, Agamemnon*, Volume II (Oxford 1950) at line 852; J. D. Denniston and D. Page, *Aeschylus, Agamemnon* (Oxford 1957) at line 852.

<sup>17</sup> Lucretius, I.316–18: *aena / signa manus dexteras ostendunt adtenuari / saepe salutantur tactu praeterque meantur.*

relationship between Aegisthus and the city of Argos. For while the filial piety of Electra and Orestes is strong, the wish to reclaim property and social and political position is no small part of their motivation.

To her laments for her father Electra joins complaints about her mother's shameful betrayal of her family and her own subsequent loss of place within the family. In taking Aegisthus as her new husband and giving birth to his children, Clytemnestra has cast out Electra (ἐκβαλοῦσα, 590), and the most important result of Clytemnestra's new family order has been the inability of Electra and Chrysothemis to find suitable husbands (164–65, 187–90, 1183). In her appeal to Chrysothemis to help her slay Aegisthus, Electra links their inability to wed with the loss of their inheritance:

[sc. σοι] ἧ πάρεστι μὲν στένειν  
 πλούτου πατρώου κτήσιν ἔστερημένη,  
 πάρεστι δ' ἀλγεῖν ἐς τοσόνδε τοῦ χρόνου  
 ἄλεκτρα γηράσκουσαν ἀνυμέναί τε (959–62).

A few lines later, Electra contrasts the servile roles they now play with the status (ἐλευθέρᾳ, 970) that can lead to marriage (γάμων ἐπαξίων τεύξη, 971). Electra implies that they are destitute as the result of a deliberate policy on the part of Aegisthus; keeping Electra and Chrysothemis unwed and childless suits Aegisthus, who fears a male child who can take Orestes' place (964–66).

The prologue establishes that Orestes has been made a stranger to Argos and deprived of places of rightful association. Orestes there declares himself to have two objectives, to purify the house and to restore himself to it:

... ὦ πατῶν δῶμα· σοῦ γὰρ ἔρχομαι  
 δίκη καθαρτῆς πρὸς θεῶν ὠρμημένος·  
 καὶ μή μ' ἄτιμον τῇσδ' ἀποστείλητε γῆς,  
 ἀλλ' ἀρχέπλουτον καὶ καταστάτην δόμων (69–72).

The use of the word ἀρχέπλουτον, "wealthy of old," clearly shows the importance of his inheritance to Orestes, as does the word ἄτιμον, for line 71 can be understood in two ways: "do not send me away from this land *dishonored*" and "do not send me away *deprived of my share* in this land." That the estate of Agamemnon is an object of both contention and desire is also suggested by Clytemnestra's prayer at 648–54, where she asks for protection of her present wealth (πλούτου τοῦ παρόντος, 648).

In lines 973–85, the praise imagined by Electra honors her action in slaying Aegisthus as one which, in addition to avenging murder, restores the rightful heirs to the house of Atreus (ὦ τὸν πατῶν οἶκον ἐξεσωσάτην, 978). Orestes' role has always been to wrest control of their inheritance from Clytemnestra and Aegisthus by killing them. Electra's role has been that traditionally assigned to the women of the *oikos*, to mourn their father. In so doing, however, she keeps alive both the truth about his death and his children's claim to their share of their father's legacy.<sup>18</sup> With the report of Orestes' death,

<sup>18</sup> Athenian forensic speeches suggest both a legal and moral relationship between mourning and burial and the right to inherit. On this topic and on the political implications of mourning in sixth- and fifth-century Athens more generally, see S. C. Humphreys, *The Family, Women and Death* (London 1983)

Electra resolves to take on his role as well. In as much as both male and female roles are now represented in Electra, the restoration of house brings not only the possibility not only of marriage, but of possession of the throne. That Orestes' establishment of himself as the rightful heir of the house of Atreus would mean not just physical and legal possession of his property, but assumption of the kingship is clear. Clytemnestra dreams that Agamemnon has replanted his scepter, the symbol of political legitimacy, at the hearth and that this scepter blooms until it casts a shadow over the land:

εἶτα τόνδ' ἐφέστιον  
 πῆξαι λαβόντα σκῆπτρον οὐφόρει ποτὲ  
 αὐτός, τανὺν δ' Αἴγισθος· ἐκ δὲ τοῦδ' ἄνω  
 βλαστεῖν βρύοντα θαλλὸν ᾧ κατάσκιον  
 πᾶσαν γενέσθαι τὴν Μυκηναίων χθόνα (419–23).

Later, Clytemnestra asks Apollo that she be allowed to retain control of the scepter (651).<sup>19</sup>

Electra's resolve to fulfill Orestes' mission is expressed as a decision to kill Aegisthus; she makes no mention of Clytemnestra:

εἰς σὲ δὴ βλέπω,  
 ὅπως τὸν αὐτόχειρα πατρώου φόνου  
 ξὺν τῇδ' ἀδελφῇ μὴ κατοκνήσεις κτανεῖν,  
 Αἴγισθον (954–57).

This has given some critics pause.<sup>20</sup> The singling out of Aegisthus, however, is consistent with Electra and Orestes' concerns about inheritance and position. Clytemnestra may have cast out from her affection both Electra and Orestes (588–92, 775–77), but it is through her marriage to Aegisthus that she has brought forth their replacements, and it is he and their children who lay claim to all once held by Agamemnon. In Electra's eyes, Aegisthus is not brave (ὁ

83–88 and M. Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Cambridge 1974) 14–23.

<sup>19</sup> See J.-P. Vernant, *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks* (London 1983) 134–38 (translation of *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs* [Paris 1965]) for a detailed analysis of the function of the hearth generally and in this passage in particular.

<sup>20</sup> Most critics who discuss this line connect the omission of Clytemnestra with Electra's or Sophocles' feelings about matricide, although their explanations differ widely. To take the editors of three major commentaries as examples, Jebb (above, note 1) at 957 attributes Electra's omission of Clytemnestra to the poet's wish to avoid "everything that could qualify our sympathy with Electra." J. H. Kells (*Sophocles, Electra* [Cambridge 1973]) acknowledges ad loc. that Aegisthus was the "most formidable adversary" as "the male representative of the anti-Agamemnon faction," but sees greater significance in the fact that Electra avoids ignobility by focusing on Aegisthus rather than her mother. For Kamerbeek (above, note 10) it is a question of deceiving Chrysothemis about her true intent. Cf. H. Friis Johansen, "Die Electra des Sophocles," *C & M* 25 (1964) 21–22; T. M. Woodard, "Electra by Sophocles: the Dialectical Design," *HSCP* 63 (1964) 204 n.74; B. Alexanderson, "On Sophocles' *Electra*," *C & M* 27 (1966) 88–89 and see now M. W. Blundell, *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies* (Cambridge 1989) 160–61, who sees in Electra's choice of Aegisthus as sole victim and Chrysothemis' response a reflection of the contrast in *sophrosyne* between the sisters.



πάντ' ἀναγκῆς οὗτος, 301), and he only wages the kind of wars that need a woman as his chief ally (ὁ σὺν γυναιξὶ τὰς μάχας ποιούμενος, 302), but he is the *tyrannos*. As she says in lines 266–71, it is Aegisthus who sits on her father's throne, wears his clothes and pours libations at his hearth. The Paedagogus pointedly asks for the house of the *tyrannos* Aegisthus in 660–61.<sup>21</sup>

In *Electra*, political roles are a function of family roles; the only political role which is independent of the house of Atreus is that of its subjects. Recent work has shown convincingly that an important aspect of the role of the chorus in this play is to suggest the relationship of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra with the *polis* of Argos.<sup>22</sup> The chorus' initial dialogue with Electra shows that the city is ruled by fear and that they themselves despise the royal couple (121–26, 310–16). The choral song preceding the murders (1384–97) suggests that the chorus approves of the ultimate murder plan,<sup>23</sup> and their response to Clytemnestra's death at 1413–14 shows that they see the troubles of the house as inexorably bound with the city (ὦ πόλις, ὦ γενεὰ τάλαινα, νῦν σοι μοῖρα καθημερία φθίνει, φθίνει<sup>24</sup>). Outright opposition is neither staged nor suggested. Both Burton and Gardiner stress the significance of having a chorus composed of free noblewomen, for as Gardiner notes, a chorus of women, rather than one of male citizens, can be expressive of public sentiment without raising issues of political complicity or dissent.<sup>25</sup> Clearly, Electra's lamentation has kept her cause alive among the chorus of noblewomen and irks Clytemnestra and Aegisthus (379–82, 556, 654, 784–87). Clytemnestra's secret prayer to Apollo refers to Electra's spreading idle talk throughout the city (μὴ σὺν φθόνῳ τε καὶ πολυγλώσσῳ βοῇ / σπεῖρη ματαίαν βάζειν εἰς πᾶσαν πόλιν, 641–42), and Aegisthus himself implies the existence of political dissatisfaction somewhere in the city when, after hearing the false report of Orestes' death, he speaks of the necessity for all citizens now to submit to his rule (1458–63). Although the focus of the play remains on the family itself, these expressions of civic discontent are consistent and repeated.

Thus, the murder of Aegisthus is, in a civic sense, tyrannicide. Aegisthus has seized power violently and rules harshly. In the dramatic moment in which Electra envisions the consequences of his murder, the immediate effect of the

<sup>21</sup> When the Paedagogus asks in 663–64 whether Clytemnestra is the wife of Aegisthus, pretending to guess that she is because of her royal appearance (ὡς τύραννος), it is unclear whether what is being suggested is that Clytemnestra's role is subordinate to that of Aegisthus or that Clytemnestra is in fact the *tyrannos*.

<sup>22</sup> See R. W. B. Burton, *The Chorus in Sophocles' Tragedies* (Oxford 1980) and C. P. Gardiner, *The Sophoclean Chorus* (Iowa City 1986).

<sup>23</sup> For differing interpretations of the presence of Ares in 1385 in this ode, cf. Gardiner (above, note 22) 156, esp. n. 28, Burton (above, note 22) 216 and C. Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles* (Cambridge, MA 1981) 259.

<sup>24</sup> On the emendation of σοι for σε in 1413 and on μοῖρα καθημερία as "the fate which has afflicted the house day by day", see Kamberbeek (above, note 10) and Jebb (above, note 1) at 1413, and Burton (above, note 22) 219–20. Cf. Kells (above, note 20) ad loc. I do not find his "metaphorical" interpretation convincing.

<sup>25</sup> Gardiner (above, note 22) 163.

murder on the *polis* is briefly suggested by the allusion to the statues of Harmodious and Aristogeiton. The suggestion of civic honors is appropriate here, for once the action proceeds to the actual killings, the focus shifts to the larger, more problematic question of the value of retributive justice. For Orestes, the avenging of Agamemnon's death implies the reclaiming of his own civic place. In lines 973–85, as Electra takes on Orestes' role, she imagines not only the public favor due any heroic act, but an honor that an Athenian audience might recognize as that bestowed on its tyrannicides.