

Classics / WAGS 38: Second Essay

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Due: Sunday, Nov. 1, at 12:00 noon by e-mail
Length: 1250-1500 words

Office hours:
Tues. 10:00-12:00
Fri. 11:00-12:00

Editorial conferences Oct. 28 – 31
Available hours posted on the CMS page



THE BELLE OF ARGOS

The battling divas of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* take no hostages, as we have discussed. Clytemnestra waits until *Agamemnon* 256 to make a spectacular Troy-Is-Burning entrance and then upstages everything that walks. Indeed, she teaches Agamemnon that *upstage* (the palace door) is where you die. But Clytemnestra cannot out-sing, out-rave, out-convulse, out-strip, out-prophecy Cassandra in her *I-Am-Burning* scene. Marching to her death, which will bring the house down, Cassandra *owns* upstage. The queen comes back splattered in blood, wielding props (corpses, including her rival), and flaunting her boy toy. But it may be too little too late. Where Cassandra, though doomed, has the power to draw the elders into her lyric meters, the triumphant Clytemnestra gets drawn by the protesting elders down into unglamorous anapests (*Agamemnon* 1462ff.).

By the end of the trilogy, Athena and the Furies have silenced everyone else. By a
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wonderful irony, Athenian men get the vote in *The Furies* (in the democratic court of the Areopagus), but get no voice in the end of the trilogy. Apollo and Orestes are relieved to escape intact as of *The Furies* 777. They may as well be accountants.

If the audience in March of 458 BCE were asked which diva deserves her own play, doubtless few would reply, “what’s-her-name, the old maid sister.” (“Electra” means “unmarried”). Aeschylus’ Electra is a quivering mass of good intentions, a pleaser, and a woman willing to be guided by the chorus (of slaves!) more than any character we have seen. She is even content to let her brother do the dirty work. All this mild, Andromache-like young woman ever does is become the high priestess of her mother’s assassination.

Obviously fascinated by all that Aeschylus had let go about the good daughter who gets murder to happen, Euripides and Sophocles let her be the focus of single plays that distill and reinterpret the issues of Aeschylus’ monumental trilogy.

Write on one of the following topics, or design one in consultation with me.

I. The General Electra Company

► *Discuss how Sophocles’ Electra in going beyond the role of Aeschylus’ Electra incorporates and transforms elements from the succession of female characters among whom Aeschylus places his Electra, including the victims (abducted Helen, Iphigenia and her mother, Cassandra and the other Trojan women, the Pythia at Delphi), the agents and vehicles of vengeance (Helen the lion cub, Clytemnestra, Cassandra, the Furies), and possibly even the administrator of justice (and ultimate daddy’s girl), Athena.*

Try to address the paradox that, even as Electra takes over Sophocles’ whole play, the distinctively “female” powers dramatized in the Oresteia have diminished, that is, the powers of song, prayer, fertility, and ritual enactment. What means does Sophocles’ Electra have to exert her will?

You cannot cover all angles of this topic. Six or seven telegraphic paragraphs successively relating Electra to the whole catalogue of *Oresteia* females would be a mess. Classics / WAGS 38: Essay 2 (Nov. 1, 2009)

Decide which connections matter most and aim for a cohesive argument that shows how Sophocles gets the expanded but unnerving Electra-role to work on stage.

Issues that may be fruitful:

- What is Electra's verbal style? Why does she quote other people so much?
- How does she stand in relationship to expressive freedom (i.e., being allowed to speak or not, as well as allowing and others to speak or not). It may be helpful to recall, but you need not discuss, Sophocles' Tecmessa.
- What is Electra's place in the space defined by the tragedy? Where does she belong? (Again, recall Tecmessa.)
- Is she possessed? Is she prophetic? Is she mad? (Cf. Sophocles' Ajax and Aeschylus' Orestes at the end of *The Libation Bearers*)
- What is her relationship to the gods? Is she capable of summoning or putting herself in contact with the powers of the dead (the Fury, *Erinyes*) or of *Dikē* (Justice)?
- What is the importance of the status of the chorus (matrons) in contrast to the elders of the *Agamemnon* and the bondswomen of *The Libation Bearers*? Who influences or incites whom?
- How does the change in staging set up Aeschylus' and Sophocles' Electras for contrasting reactions?
- What is her view of family? Why has her collaboration with Orestes in *The Libation Bearers* been in effect replaced through much of the play by her dealings with Chrysothemis?

II. Sacrifice

Compared to the murders in the *Agamemnon* and *The Libation Bearers*, the murders in Sophocles' *Electra* are surprisingly late and quick, coming only in the last one-hundred verses of the play. With similar compression, the repeated ritual of double assassination followed by display of the corpses has become corpse-display-cum-assassination. That is, we never see Aegisthus' corpse, and Clytemnestra's shrouded corpse is used as a prop in duping him. The stage business of these hundred verses is unusually complex, and ends abruptly. Where Euripides in his *Electra* uses a *deus ex machina* to seal things off, Sophocles simply ends.

Internecine slaughter and the display of corpses are primordial stuff indeed.
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Clytemnestra treats herself to a triumphal *rhesis* (*Agamemnon* 1372ff.) as she impersonates Mother Earth, splattered with regenerative blood. In *The Libation Bearers* Orestes stages the same sort of spectacle with Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, though holding a suppliant's branch as well as a sword. But even with this added piety, Orestes, polluted from his viper-mom or bloody like a new-born infant, begins to see a band of snaky-haired Gorgons.

The intrigue staged by Sophocles' Orestes and Electra lacks such ritual display, though not because they are trying to hush up the family scandal (Electra: "If you have strength – again!", v. 1417). They do have the benefit of a skilled atrocity-coordinator, the Paedagogus. But Electra's verbal accompaniment to the assassination gets us into strange territory, as does Orestes' penchant for props that stand in for his own dead self, first the urn and now mom.¹

► *In comparison with the antecedents in the Oresteia, what kind of ritual have these murders become? Why are they so late, quick, and without commentary or sequel? Have they been stripped of the elements of public ritual (or the travesty of such ritual) so as to become simple justice or, alternatively, simple atrocity? Have they become some other sort of ritual? The Furies (Erinyes) have long been expected²; what (if anything) do they turn out to be?*



¹In *The Libation Bearers*, Orestes' locks on his father's grave play a large symbolic role in the reunion of the siblings and almost seem to turn into Orestes. Though there is an offstage lock of hair in the *Electra* (v. 901), the urn that is supposedly "Orestes" fulfills functions comparable to the Aeschylean hair.

²*Electra*, vv. 112ff., Chorus, vv. 489ff., 1078ff. (in reference to Clyt. and Aeg.), vv. 1387 (in reference to Or. and El.).

III. We'll Make You a Man

Heroic literature naturally concentrates on the attainment of glory (e.g., the *Iliad*), as well as on the rites of passage that turn ephebes (ca. age 18) into men. Though Achilles is at the pinnacle of manhood in this society, his experience in the *Iliad* recalls the processes of adolescent initiation rites. Like other boys-to-men, he must cut the apron strings and come to identify with dad. That is, Achilles moves from selfish identification with his mother and her divine privileges to full identification with his mortal father. Between these points he must experience ordeals and dislocations typical of *rites de passage*: withdrawal (typically, going to sea or into the dark forest; in Achilles' case, *not* fighting), masking or enacting other categories (animals, women, gods), extreme risk, and loss (Patroclus and, in effect, the forfeit of his own life). Achilles also finds a mentor: Uncle Athena, who in some ways defines masculinity because of her own triumph over femininity. By book 24, he is the supreme warrior, but also gracious to the weak, a respecter of elders, a giver of hospitality and of other customs (funerals). These transitions are wrenching, but Achilles experiences them in the mode of wrath rather than madness.

Tragedy frequently touches on something like ephebic initiation. Maturing sons of the war-dead received their armor (and, symbolically, citizenship and manhood) from the *polis* itself at the start of the Greater Dionysia, and the various parades and ceremonies of that festival make clear to all what relationship to war all the males in Athens have. We have seen how the *Philoctetes* stages the initiation of Neoptolemus through something like the situation of *Iliad* 24.

The initiation of Aeschylus' Orestes, however, involves a far more radical renunciation of an old identity, followed by immersion in the powers of Earth, the female, the dead, and the irrational. Indeed, the mother of whom he has to get free is more violent than was his father.

► *Compare Orestes' role in the Electra to that of Aeschylus' Orestes as a coming-of-age ritual. In their cycle of (fictive) death and rebirth, how much does each participate in the realm of the Other: that is, the dead, the past, the wild, the female, the non-Apolline? What kind of development is apparent in each by the end of the process?*

IV. Bringing out the Bodies (Euripides)

This question resembles II above, but with a somewhat narrower focus. Euripides elaborates the final corpse-display tableaux of *Agamemnon* and *The Libation Bearers* into two scenes: Electra's *rhesis* over the corpse of Aegisthus and then the final display of the two corpses. Far more directly than does Sophocles, Euripides restages the final tableau of *The Libation Bearers*, but with Electra as a central participant alongside Orestes and without the madness of Orestes. For Orestes' hallucination of the Furies as agents of retribution, Euripides substitutes the disciplinary intervention of Castor.

► Discuss how Euripides' adaptation of the ending of *The Libation Bearers* revises our view of the characters of Electra and Orestes and their justification in committing the murders. How does Castor's speech serve as a substitute for *The Furies*?

We'll avoid discussing this area in our class discussion on Oct. 28.

V. Electra in Action

► Chart the stage action of Sophocles' *Electra* in respect to the central question, Where does Electra belong?

Some specific issues, but of course make your own choice of what you find interesting and important:

How is that Electra, usually under house arrest, manages to be outside the palace, and how does her relationship to this space (i.e., her perspective on it and her claims on it) contrast with that of Orestes and the Paedagogus in the first scene? How does the chorus of matrons come to be here?

Electra enters at v. 85 and does not leave until the end – extraordinary for a female protagonist. Does she have the power position here outside the palace, or is she at a disadvantage in respect to the other characters, who tend to use their mobility to accomplish specific missions?

Is this the superior position for keeping track of events, or does it leave her

vulnerable to being spied on and dependent on reports from elsewhere?
How much does Electra actually control the space that she does not leave?
Why has Sophocles put her in neither of the two expected locations for a female:
in domestic space or at the tomb? How does Chrysothemis' role (in transit
between these two locations) shape our view of Electra's location?
How does the staging of Clytemnestra's prayer to the statue of Apollo repeat and
contrast with Electra's prayers at the outset?
How can she use her space when the important action finally happens offstage?



Some suggestions on all topics, much the same as for the first essay:

Please send me your rough drafts well in advance of the session in which your conference is scheduled. With the first essay, final drafts written without feedback on a rough draft ended up reading like rough drafts.

As before, tell me what I do not know. The primary criterion in grading is the question of how much new ground an argument breaks.³ That is, please get beyond where we left things off in class discussion and in the e-mailed questions from the class. There is no point in summarizing the plots unless you are drawing out some issue that we have not emphasized. Do not waste the first paragraph in summarizing the assumptions behind the assigned questions.

In issues as complex as these, it may be helpful to indicate in your introduction what your argument or angle is going to be, or what questions you are going to answer. (Some of the above topics pose particular questions; others indicate areas for comparison that leave you to focus the questions.)

You need to address and cite the texts closely, and to quote directly when the particular wording matters. Do not waste space on block quotations. Cite the passages instead by verse number (not page), and I'll have the assigned translations at hand.

³ Essay grading is necessarily comparative. My standards are based on all the students I have taught in recent decades, not the students in this class. That is, you are not in competition with each other but with expectations that are now habitual for me.

Please indicate which topic you are addressing. Titles are a way to engage the reader's attention, that is, titles more expressive than "Assignment two."

There is no expectation that you consult secondary literature on this topic, but you should of course fully attribute your sources if you do. The best use of time is to reread the passages in play that bear on your topic.

Feel free to use abbreviations to control the confusion, e.g.,

Aeschylus' Electra = Electra (A) Sophocles' Electra = Electra(S).

Euripides' Electra = Electra (E)

Or any other system that seems convenient.



Orestes kills Clytemnestra; Fury watches