

# EURIPIDES' *ELECTRA*: AN ANALYSIS THROUGH CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Toward the end of Euripides' *Electra*, the main characters reach what they have taken to be their goal: revenge for the murder of Agamemnon. Yet after the murder of Clytemnestra, the chorus, Orestes, and Electra seem horrified at their deed (1168–1237)<sup>1</sup>). The brother and sister<sup>2</sup>) vividly recall the details of matricide (1206–1225) and recognize that their deed has altered their place in the universe (1194–1200). Orestes faults Apollo while Electra, who has been fiercely resolute throughout, blames herself. The chorus, which has earlier condemned Clytemnestra and hoped to see her punished, blood gushing from her neck (484–6), now pities the dead queen and, for the first and only time, turns on Electra and condemns her deed (1226). The charac-

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1) Textual references to the *Electra* will be cited from the Oxford Classical Text, *Euripidis Fabulae*, vol. 2, 3d ed., ed. G. Murray (Oxford 1913).

The following bibliographical references are used: Barlow = S. Barlow, *The Imagery of Euripides* (London 1971), Conacher = D. J. Conacher, *Euripidean Drama* (Toronto and London 1967), Denniston = J. D. Denniston, *Euripides, Electra* (Oxford 1939), Diggle = J. Diggle, "Notes on the *Electra* of Euripides," *ICS* II 1977 110–122, Jones = J. Jones, *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* (London 1962), Kubo = M. Kubo, "The Norm of Myth: Euripides' *Electra*," *HSCP* 71 (1966) 15–31, O'Brien = M. J. O'Brien, "Orestes and the Gorgon: Euripides' *Electra*," *AJP* 85 (1964) 13–39, Pohlenz = M. Pohlenz, *Die Griechische Tragödie*<sup>2</sup> (Göttingen 1954), de Romilly = J. de Romilly, *L'Évolution du Pathétique d'Eschyle à Euripide* (Paris 1961), Rivier = A. Rivier, *Essai sur le tragique d'Euripide*<sup>2</sup> (Paris 1975), Schwinge = E.-R. Schwinge, *Die Verwendung der Stichomythie in den Dramen des Euripides* (Heidelberg 1968), Spira = A. Spira, *Untersuchungen zum Deus ex machina bei Sophokles und Euripides* (Kallmünz 1960), Steidle = W. Steidle, *Studien zum Antiken Drama* (Munich 1968), Walsh = G. B. Walsh, "The first stasimon of Euripides' *Electra*," *YCS* XXV (1977) 277–290, Zeitlin = F. I. Zeitlin, "The Argive Festival of Hera and Euripides' *Electra*," *TAPA* 101 (1970), 645–669.

2) Denniston gives 1213–17 to Electra, arguing that it is more natural to take *τάλαινα* at 1218 as addressed to Electra than to consider it an exclamation referring to Clytemnestra. In addition, Denniston argues from symmetry of the distribution of speakers, which is not as persuasive an argument for this play as it is for the *Choephoroi*. No matter who speaks 1213 ff., the reference to Clytemnestra at 1218 may follow from the description of her in the preceding lines.

ters are suffering from participation in a bloody and unnatural act which has jerked them abruptly from those several senses of identity and purpose which sustained and nourished their plan for vengeance.

My argument in this paper is that the appearance of the Dioscuri at the end of the *Electra* soothes the psychic disturbance which results from the murder of Clytemnestra in those who planned and executed the crime and returns them from their profound shock to the real world<sup>3</sup>). I find that the Dioscuri express an understanding of the psychic structure which the major characters display throughout the play in their expressed views of the nature of things. They perceive the terms in which Electra, Orestes, the chorus and Clytemnestra interpret reality, as well as the values they hold within these terms. The Dioscuri proclaim, in accordance with a higher order of reality<sup>4</sup>), that Clytemnestra has been justly punished but that her murderers (specifically Orestes) have not acted justly (1244). Therefore they provide Electra and Orestes with both a kind of reward and a kind of punishment: the first to help them realize in terms each of them understands that they have fulfilled Apollo's command and their own strivings – that they have achieved, in their own terms, a kind of virtue; the

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3) The characters seem not to recognize or identify with their own actions. They project their self-revulsion on the outside world (1194 f. and 1198 f.). They behave as though they had been possessed by an external force of vengeance. (See 1190 ff., cf. Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* 1500 ff.) Pohlenz is right in noting that in comparison with the characters of Aeschylus, the struggle of Orestes and Electra in Euripides is internal (p. 313–315), but it is nonetheless reflected in or projected on the outside world. Agave in the *Bacchae* undergoes a similar sort of self-alienation: she needs to be brought back to everyday life after the murder of Pentheus (1264 ff.) from a disorientation even more severe than that experienced by the characters in the *Electra*. See E. R. Dodds, *Euripides' Bacchae* (Oxford 1960) Introduction p. xiv ff. and notes ad 1264 ff.

4) B. M. W. Knox, "The *Hippolytus* of Euripides," *YCS* 13 (1952) 3–31, p. 20 f. and 28 f., notes a similar relationship at the end of the *Hippolytus* where Artemis embodies a level of cosmic reality beyond the understanding of Theseus and Hippolytus. In his analysis of the *Electra*, Pohlenz (p. 315) recognizes that the *deus ex machina* ending results in a human coming to terms with happenings motivated or caused by elements on the divine level. See also Spira, p. 105 ff., who focuses on the restoration of the human level by the divine level while attempting to defend the *deus ex machina* ending of the play. D. J. Conacher, review of *Untersuchungen zum Deus ex machina bei Sophokles und Euripides*, *Phoenix* XVI 1962, 127–129, and also Conacher, 209–210, argues against the restorative function of the ending, maintaining that the Dioscuri do nothing to alleviate the grief of Orestes and Electra. I argue to the contrary in the present paper.

second to reintegrate the matricides into society while clearly marking their act as unacceptable to the structure of that society<sup>5</sup>).

Most critics regard the *deus ex machina* scene as a dramatically insignificant attempt to tidy up the loose ends created by the earlier action. Prominent among recent critics who hold this view is D. J. Conacher, who maintains that Euripides' primary intention in this play was to present the sort of Electra who would on her own initiative and without divine motivation seek to slay her mother<sup>6</sup>). However, this interpretation does not account for the ending of the play, or the choral odes, since these elements are not involved in the characterization of Electra<sup>7</sup>). A notable exception to the predominant critical view is the interpretation of A. Spira, who maintains that the epiphany at the end of the *Electra*, like other *deus ex machina* endings in Euripides, serves to restore order and provide insight into the earlier action of the play<sup>8</sup>). But Spira is reduced to saying that the relationship between humans and gods in the last scene mirrors that relationship throughout the play, only expressing it more clearly. In his view the philosophy of the ending is a natural outgrowth of the philosophy of the play. My analysis, on the other hand, will focus on the ending as a fulfillment of the earlier action of matricide, or as a resolution of the dilemma of those who committed matricide. I propose to describe the characters as Euripides develops them, with a view to

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5) Contra Pohlenz, p. 313, who argues that Euripides has written the play to repudiate the religious and moral implications of the myth it contains, I believe that the playwright intends to illustrate and question the customs and values of his own time. As Pohlenz himself notes, p. 310, Euripides renders the myth consistent with contemporary conditions. I believe he does this because he is concerned with questions of political science and individual psychology as explained by philosophical rather than theological insights or perspectives.

6) Conacher, p. 203, hypothesizes that Euripides said to himself, "My play will present the sort of Electra who, shored up by no divine commands or absolute ideas of loyalty, will, in certain circumstances, seek to slay her mother." In accordance with his estimation of Electra's importance to the play, Conacher attaches little value to the role of the chorus (210–12). In this matter, he has been opposed by Kubo, O'Brien and Zeitlin.

7) Jones, p. 36 ff., points out that tragedy, for Aristotle at least, was more concerned with action than with character. On Jones' view that Euripides' Electra is more a "character" than most figures in tragedy, see p. 260, but Electra's "character" does not obliterate the central action of the play: the matricide.

8) Spira (see note 4) is an exception, as is G. Murray, *Euripides and his Age* (New York 1943), p. 152. Most recent critics, like Conacher, hold with Denniston ad 1233–7 that Euripides regarded these epiphanies as little more than a dramatic convenience. E.g., Rivier, p. 121 and 123., and Steidle, p. 78 ff., regard the action of the tragedy as occurring exclusively on the human level.

explaining those aspects of the characters that are touched and those needs that are met by the Dioscuri at the end of the play.

In marrying his Electra off to a peasant, Euripides places her in the context of poverty. However, her reduced material circumstances do not, and are not intended by the poet, to provide motivation sufficient for the enormity of matricide<sup>9</sup>). Throughout the play, Electra is aware of her lot and expresses it in lamentation. She laments the situation which compels her to carry water (112 ff.). Although her husband does not demand this of her, she sees that her situation does demand it. This for the moment is the only revenge she can take upon Aegisthus, the only release from her pain (58–59). It is also a way that she can show her gratitude to the farmer and help him in his hard life (73–6).

For Electra materialistic terms are almost a metaphor for her dishonored and outcast state<sup>10</sup>). It seems that her lack of material possessions is the only aspect of her condition with which she can deal and into which she translates all aspects of her conditions. She tells the chorus that she cannot go to the festival of Hera because she has no heart for finery, and she lacks appropriate attire (175–189)<sup>11</sup>). She refuses their offer to lend her clothes with a list of her sorrows: her unanswered prayers, her murdered father, her exiled brother, and her poverty (198–212). Electra recognizes that borrowed clothes would not render her circumstances appropriate for a daughter of Agamemnon – she recognizes that they would only emphasize her plight.

Electra's use of materialistic terms endures throughout the play. When Orestes comes, disguised as his own messenger, she wishes him happiness, the wages of his most pleasant words (231) – the news of her brother. She inquires from the "messenger" about Orestes' degree of prosperity in exile (235) and sends her brother a message describing her own destitution – her poor hall,

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9) Pohlenz (314 f.) notes that the physical and psychic indignities suffered by Electra contribute to her motivation for revenge, but he believes that the tragedy grows not from the personality of Electra but from ethical and religious problems inherent in the myth. Steidle defends Electra against those who imagine that she intends to kill her mother because of resentment for her poverty, p. 66–85. See also Zeitlin, p. 648–650 and n. 23.

10) Barlow, p. 53–55, 82 f., *inter alia*, has noticed that Electra's concern with physical appearances is an indication of the state of her emotions, (which Barlow characterizes as bitterness and envy) and points out that Electra's comparison of herself to a swan at 150 ff. indicates her desire to appear beautiful.

11) See Zeitlin, p. 649 for a defense of Denniston's interpretation of 178.

her clothes (300 ff.). When her husband invites the strangers to stay, Electra is embarrassed at the poor reception she must give them (408 ff.) and sends for the old man to provide her with goods and services<sup>12</sup>). It is by this act of Electra that Euripides moves the action forward, for it is the old man who recognizes the messenger as Orestes. When the old man arrives and deduces Orestes' return by stealth from the signs at Agamemnon's tomb, Electra refuses to believe him (524 ff.), for she is sure her brother will return boldly with an entourage. This conviction lies at the heart of her elaborate sophistical refutation of the old man's arguments for Orestes' return<sup>13</sup>). The idea of a humble and stealthy return runs counter to her idea of virtue.

When at last Electra acknowledges her brother and they plot to murder the usurpers, she volunteers (647) to contrive the death of Clytemnestra, whom she holds responsible for her poverty (1088 f.) and for whom she reserves the major part of her hatred, even when Aegisthus is already dead. When Electra receives news of her brother's success, she laments the lack of adequate resources to crown a victor properly (870 f.)<sup>14</sup>). Electra greets the returning Orestes, saying he has done no profitless thing (883). She has perceived their victory, but has interpreted it in materialistic terms.

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12) There is no need to suppose, with Denniston (p. 64 ff.), that Electra and her husband possessed slaves. Electra could be speaking to herself throughout 112 ff. We often give ourselves commands in our thoughts, and even utter them aloud if we are alone. Electra, in her desperation, may wish to seem just a little better off than she really is; alternatively she may forget the extent of her woe in a flurry of hostility, and recruit the services of her old household servant, who is now obviously far above her. Electra wants services which only the old man can render; if she wanted only supplies she needn't bid him to come or could obtain them from the chorus. See also Steidle, p. 70, on this scene. Diggle, p. 110 f., wants to read *ἔλθ' ὡς παλαιὸν τροφέα μοι φίλου πατρός* at 409, to improve the style of the line, and, because, as he points out, the old man was Orestes' *τροφεύς* not *τροφός*.

13) See Denniston *ad* 520–584, where he maintains that Euripides brings in the traditional Aeschylean signs only to expose them as romantic and to present the simpler recognition by a scar. J. Dingel, "Der 24. Gesang der Odyssee und die *Elektra* des Euripides," *RhM* CXII (1969), 103–109, notes that Euripides' recognition scene recalls the recognition of Odysseus by a scar. Euripides, then, presents a recognition scene which is both romantic and sophisticated in its rejection of Aeschylus in favor of Homer. Whatever the allusion of the recognition scene, the rejection of the signs possesses a motivation within the action of the play itself: Electra's expectation of the flamboyant return of her brother causes her to reject for as long as possible the sign brought by the old man.

14) I interpret *οἷα* as having a negative connotation here: "Such (poor) ornaments for his hand as I have and my halls (ironically) hide." Cf. Soph. *Aj.* 923.



Electra's view is not that wealth produces nobility, but that it ought to be a *sign* of nobility. She indicates this view in her dealings with Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. She berates Aegisthus for believing that with Clytemnestra's wealth he has bought himself nobility (938–944). Her expressed sentiment here denies the connection between nobility and wealth, but her statements, seen in the light of her other expressions, indicate her emphasis on wealth as a significant element of true nobility.

When Electra sees the approach of Clytemnestra (965 ff.), she first comments on her mother's splendid entourage, then proceeds to goad Orestes to "avenge their father<sup>15</sup>". In her mind, the first statement, in material terms, leads naturally to the question of nobility-to-be-avenged, which can then be translated into such terms as Orestes' nature will allow him to appreciate<sup>16</sup>). It seems inappropriate to ask whether genuine belief is behind her answer to her brother's doubt, "Where Apollo is stupid, who are wise?" (972). Orestes wavers; she sees his hesitation expressed as distrust in the god, and defends Apollo as necessary to help Orestes. She has her own motivation, for the values she holds sacred have been as disgraced as Orestes' Apollo. The disgrace of brother and sister is equal, and, although their ways of apprehending disgrace are different, Electra can understand her brother well enough to deal with him.

In the *agôn*, Electra first accuses her mother of killing her father, then of lacking morals and eventually describes both these

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15) On the distribution of speakers at 959–966, see Denniston, *ad loc.*, who would alter the distribution in the MSS., and Steidle, p. 74 f., who, rightly, in my opinion, defends it. See also Schwinge, p. 87 ff. It is most likely that Orestes, who has returned in charge of Aegisthus' body, give the order for its disposition (959), and as Schwinge notes, that Electra, who has most recently seen their mother, recognize her in the distance (964). In addition, the reference *τὴν τεκοῦσαν ἢ μ' ἐγείνατο* need not be Orestes' horrified dwelling on the maternal tie, as Denniston suggests, but the expression of Electra's hatred of her mother (Schwinge, p. 88). I do not however agree with Schwinge that 965 and 966 should be reversed. At 965, Orestes' matter-of-fact statement that Clytemnestra has walked into their trap does not so much indicate the firmness of his resolution (which would then evanesce two lines later) as it provides his first, still objective formulation of the situation at hand. He does not begin to express the complex emotions that the objective situation arouses in him until 967. At the same time, Electra, completely true to her character as I have described it above, focuses on the richness of Clytemnestra's entourage (966).

16) See below, p. 14. Electra persuades him by appealing to his courage. Schwinge, p. 95 and p. 98, recognizes that it is by this argument that Electra prevails completely over her brother's doubts.

charges in materialistic terms. Electra says that Clytemnestra killed her husband and then diverted her dowry from her children. Clytemnestra not only bought herself a husband, she bought herself a stupid husband (1097 ff.), such as would wed a wanton like her. (1097–1110 should, as Vahlen argues<sup>17</sup>), be retained. If they are excised Electra's speech ends on a note of justice, a note that does not harmonize with her personality as expressed throughout the play, whereas if they remain she climaxes and focuses her speech in materialistic terms, which are suitable for her character throughout.) Electra has already reviled Aegisthus with selling his authority for money (938 ff.) and now she is telling Clytemnestra that she has bought a husband, and a bad one. Electra's underlying thoughts are a) he was ignoble and you had to make him rich, b) I can't even make the virtuous Argive farmer rich and, therefore, noble, c) you are responsible for this powerlessness of mine. Electra ends her argument by affirming that her mother was wanton in materialistic terms, with her money as well as her body, rounding out the issue in terms of her own character, and she reminds herself in her own way of the evils done her, as a final accusation to her mother as well as to steel herself for what is to come. Electra, who has throughout been violently agitated in materialistic language, is now rousing herself from the comparative calm of the *agôn*. It is not until Clytemnestra mentions Agamemnon that Electra voices her feelings in terms of bitterness at his death once more (at 1114–46). This is Electra's first expression of her bereavement since 1066<sup>18</sup>).

After Clytemnestra's expression of her all-too-human regrets, Electra activates the plot to kill her mother. Again her explanation is her poverty. She says she was too poor to have had anyone help her in childbirth (1131), which is not true, as Denniston points out<sup>19</sup>). This exaggeration shows Electra's estimation of her neighbors, who we are to suppose are also poor. This estimation of the chorus takes place as part of the plot to kill Clytemnestra. The chorus is on stage, and tolerates such slander precisely because of its generosity. The poor, Electra says, are ignoble and uncharitable. This is a fitting statement within her lie, precisely

17) On this question, see Denniston *ad loc.*

18) See below, n. 26. On Electra's motivation for killing her mother, see Steidle p. 68. Electra speaks of her father (1146) just before she enters the house, but begins the same speech with mention of the poor abode her mother is entering (1139). Both her mother's crime and its symbol are present in Electra's mind.

19) See Denniston, *ad loc.*

because it fits the rest of her personality as well. Ironically, Electra relies in her lie on the chorus' generosity not to controvert her statement.

Yet Electra must believe that the poor are ignoble, because she is not moved to treat even her very virtuous husband as her equal. Although she finds him noble (253), she may be unaware of his noble birth, which he discloses while she is off stage (37). By his own judgment, though he is noble, his straitened circumstances make him unfit to touch her<sup>20</sup>). Yet the only difference between them in his eyes is her money and the position it gives her. At any rate, Electra believes that she can plausibly persuade her mother by depicting her neighbors in this unfavorable light. And she succeeds. Whether we are to attribute this to Clytemnestra's lack of experience with peasants, or to her tacit accord with Electra's standards is not stated, but the Queen nowhere else expresses concern for material circumstances or contempt for the poor. The apparent indifference of Clytemnestra to the non-aristocratic element contrasts with Electra's strong condemnation of the poor and powerless.

In her second scene with a corpse (1182 ff.), Electra briefly feels pity for her mother, and remorse as she (quite rightly) takes the blame for having goaded Orestes to commit the deed. This scene serves as a contrast to Electra's earlier scene with Aegisthus. De Romilly shows<sup>21</sup>) that the strong contrast is expressed by triumph replaced by suffering, but her argument that Electra has changed greatly in her suffering is not convincing. At 1198, Electra has returned to lamenting her fate and asking who will wed her now. The matricide had shaken her and for a moment turned the chorus against her at 1201, but she has not changed her views about money and nobility. Even as a matricide, she – and this is a

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20) The farmer's evaluation of himself as poor, but not low born (35 ff.) is a reflection of Electra's view in the same terms (253). She admires her husband, but does not take him into her confidence, like an equal: at 67 she disguises her motive for carrying water (cf. 58 but see Denniston *ad loc.*). Walsh, p. 280, points out that Electra's need for gold is different from that of her husband: for her it represents (her rightful) nobility. Her need is more symbolic than concrete. Less pragmatic still is the estimation of the chorus, for whom gold embodies a magical splendor not at all connected with utility.

21) On Electra's scene with Aegisthus' corpse and her scene with the dead Clytemnestra, see de Romilly p. 73 ff. The two scenes contain similar elements, but their comparison indicates the movement from Electra's jubilation at the first death to her subsequent suffering. See also Schwinge, p. 83 f.



fact Denniston fails to comprehend –<sup>22</sup>) does not regard herself as married to the Argive farmer, any more than she did at 948f., when she reviled the dead body of Aegisthus. As far as Electra's standards are concerned, even self-admitted matricide cannot bridge the gap between the nobility she feels is her right and the poverty of the farmer.

Euripides' *Electra* can be seen as a subtle and complex character, capable of showing kindness (to the farmer) and insult, of jubilation and remorse. Her keen wit allows her to fashion plans readily, her personal insight to adapt them readily so that the environment in which she perceives herself will allow them to bear fruit, and her agile tongue will defend her position and argue her case convincingly both to herself and others. But underneath this versatility she is a woman of unshakeable faith in that concept of nobility which attaches true virtue only to the rich and well born. She is, for all her versatility and insight, incapable of reassessing or reevaluating this position.

Euripides' Orestes cuts quite a different figure from what Electra expects<sup>23</sup>). He returns as best he can, with his father's death and Apollo's oracle uppermost in his mind (82 ff.). He is not as concerned as his sister with the outward trappings of nobility. He indicates his concerns in his musing upon the noble nature of Electra's farmer-husband<sup>24</sup>). Orestes can see the perils of both wealth and poverty, and never absolutely chooses between them<sup>25</sup>). True virtue for Orestes is not indicated by material pos-

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22) Denniston *ad* 1199 says, "The farmer is forgotten," and (p. 165) notes that Euripides sometimes loses sight of the dramatic situation. But, Electra explains to Orestes that her husband has not touched her, for he did not consider that the one who gave her in marriage was empowered to do so (259). The farmer himself, like Elektra, felt that their marriage was invalid.

23) See Walsh, p. 283–285. As he notes (p. 283), although Orestes is not manly in the way that Electra expects, he does prove his manhood in a way satisfactory both to his sister and to himself by the murder of Aegisthus. Pohlenz (p. 311–313) notes that Orestes' use of cunning to achieve the murder reflects Euripides' correction of Aeschylus' improbable plotting, which had the young man walk into the enemy camp and capture it through the astuteness of his nurse. Indeed, Orestes does display physical courage in being ready to tackle the attendants of the dead Aegisthus (844–847). See also Schwinge, p. 90 f.

24) As Denniston says (p. 93 on 364 ff., and 367 ff.) throughout this speech, Orestes presupposes an intrinsic link between birth and virtue; but he is open-minded enough to consider that perhaps in the person of the farmer, the usual scheme of inherited nobility and virtue might have been circumvented in some way to produce the farmer's apparent noble nature. It is not obvious (see Denniston, p. 99) that Orestes is ungracious to the farmer at 396.

25) Euripides does not decide, in the person of Orestes, what the relation-

sessions or even physical attributes, but by strength in battle (388–390). It is to this standard that Electra appeals (976 ff.) when she sees him waver in his resolution to kill their mother. She reminds him of his loyalty to his father – he must not impiously reject his noble birth. She goes on to strengthen his wavering belief in Apollo, the god who could command such a deed, for Orestes' nobility demands loyalty to the gods. Orestes questions the wisdom of such an oracle. Electra answers with what might be a *non-sequitur* if she didn't understand that his loyalty to the god was bound up in his concept of nobility. She appeals (982) to his courage. For she understands that Orestes' concept of nobility finds its most telling manifestation in battle. Whether or not she was on stage (and we have no reason for positing a modern "soliloquy" here) she knows he would have said, "for the man strong of arm does not wound with the spear better than the weak, but this is in a man's nature and his spirit." (388–9)<sup>26</sup>, as the culmination of his speculations about the nature of nobility. His response is instantaneous – he has resolved the question of whether to kill his mother, and without actually answering her question, now asks her the best means<sup>27</sup>). It is by this decision as well as by the

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ship between wealth and virtue is, but rather presents, in the characters of the play, various views of the matter, none of which is affirmed or denied absolutely. On one level, the *Electra* presents a representative sampling of fifth century views of *aretê*. See Denniston *ad* 253 and A. W. H. Adkins, *Moral Values and Political Behavior in Ancient Greece* (New York, 1972), p. 115 ff., and *Merit and Responsibility* (Oxford, 1969), p. 176 ff., for commentary upon Orestes' speech.

26) Reading *δοῦναι* and *θέλει* at 388–9. Denniston *ad loc.* would assign 982–4 to Electra for reasons of balance. Steidle, p. 77 n. 86, finds such an assignment unlikely, and following Zürcher, finds that the warning not to be cowardly has less importance than the warning against destruction in 976 and 978 (p. 77). But, if the line distribution of the manuscripts is allowed to stand, Orestes turns from his doubts to planning the deed after this warning of Electra's, not the earlier ones.

Orestes' statement shows not that he values battle strength for its own sake, but that he approaches the question of moral value from a perspective which uses battle strength as a criterion of moral worth. In the case of the farmer, of course, Orestes is forced to reject this criterion. Now according to Walsh, p. 281, Orestes leaves the question of the proper criteria for human worth open, but in the first stasimon the chorus affirms the importance of legendary heroism as embodied in wealth and war. In my view, this stasimon reinforces Orestes' choice of battle strength as a proper criterion, but formulates the criterion in the chorus' characteristic non-utilitarian terms (see below, p. 16–17). On the tendency of the playwright to present conflicting values by the juxtaposition of realistic and mythical elements, see Walsh, p. 288.

27) Schwinge, in his discussion of the stichomythia in which Electra persuades her brother to give up his hesitation (p. 91–96) rightly states that legitimization through Apollo is not important to Electra. But for Orestes the question of

remorse he anticipates (985 ff., fulfilled in 1308 ff.) that Euripides best defines Orestes as a man who lives up to his own standards of nobility<sup>28</sup>).

The chorus of Euripides' play enters (167), inviting Electra to a festival of Hera. Kubo sees that it serves as Euripides' scenery throughout the whole play. The chorus introduces mountain imagery and the festival of Hera, the goddess of the sacred institution of the family, whose violation constitutes the backdrop of this play (Kubo, p. 21 ff.). For it is of this violation that Clytemnestra accuses Agamemnon, as justification for having murdered him. And it is of this violation that she is accused by Electra, who charges that she murdered her own husband and Electra's father, and broke up the family still more by taking in Aegisthus, banishing Orestes, and marrying off Electra to the farmer. It is by a stratagem of Hera that Electra induces her mother to come to the place where she will be ambushed. Thus the chorus is woven throughout the fabric of Euripides' play<sup>29</sup>).

The mountain neighbors arrive with friendly intent, and

acquiescence to the commands of the god introduces the element of shame. Electra intimates that it is impious to disobey the god (972): this causes Orestes to express fear of the shame which will devolve upon him for the impiety of matricide (975). I do not, however, agree with Steidle (p. 95 and p. 97) that Electra's prevailing argument, her appeal to her brother's manliness, is unconnected with her previous appeal to obedience to Apollo. Electra has here shifted the earlier discussion of impiety to Apollo to the issue that she has perceived (in the course of that discussion) means more to Orestes – the more direct issue of shame at cowardice. She has perceived that to someone like her brother who sets a high value on battle strength, shame would be a significant deterrent to hesitation. (See Adkins, p. 48 f.) Now Electra appeals directly to Orestes' standards as she perceives them.

28) See above, note 23. Electra expects her brother to display courage from the start (526). His way of doing so is different from what she expects. But in addition, according to the messenger's report (845), Orestes lives up to his own standards of battle courage in the attack on Aegisthus. Orestes is a crafty young man, but also an energetic and brave one. His craftiness does not indicate his lack of courage: when he is required to act, he acts forcefully. Schwinge (p. 86 f.) notes that Orestes is hesitant and cautious until he is sure of his sister's loyalty. Yet this hesitation, as Schwinge points out, does not indicate Orestes' resistance to the deed or his cowardice: he indicates his determination to perform the deed from the first lines of the play, in the consultation scene with Electra, as well as in the forceful lines 959–960.

29) Not only does the chorus remain silent while Electra leads Clytemnestra into the trap (see above p. 11), they provide a fawning welcome for the queen (988 f.). Zeitlin 651 ff. demonstrates that the chorus embodies both aspects of the ritual motif which pervades the play: celebration and sacrifice. In the course of the play the motif is distorted: "Celebration has proved an illusion and ritual sacrifice has become murder," (p. 659, Zeitlin). See also Wash, *passim*.

with only one loss of faith, remain friendly to Electra throughout. As noted above, it is by their complicity that Electra is able to deceive her mother successfully. Yet although the chorus is friendly to Electra its standards are from the beginning very different from hers. It offers to lend her clothes she cannot accept to attend a festival which she cannot attend. The chorus puts to music the simple nobility of the farmer by its overwhelmingly generous nature.

At 432 ff. the chorus sings an ode characterizing Agamemnon through an account of the expedition to Troy, which is viewed through a description of the arms of Achilles<sup>30</sup>). The armor which the chorus attributes to Achilles is different from that depicted in Homer, and more fearful. O'Brien explains that the Gorgon's head, the central ornament of the armor, evokes fear, which is the main emotion underlying the play as a whole (O'Brien, p. 17 ff.)<sup>31</sup>). But, as Zeitlin notices, the ode expresses celebration as well as fear, by its description of the golden armor with its representation of the shining circle of the sun at its center (444 and 464–6) and the daring which is ascribed to the ships of the expedition to Troy and to the Stars around the Sun (434–7 and 467–8, Zeitlin, p. 655). Beneath the surface, this ode conveys the fear which falls upon everything at the death of Agamemnon, while on the surface it expresses the awe and respect which the chorus has for the golden trappings and dancing actions of the nobility. The glitter of Achilles' armor embodies for the chorus the very image which Clytemnestra played false in murdering her husband<sup>32</sup>).

About halfway through the play (699–746), the chorus sings about Thyestes' theft of the golden lamb which was to indicate the rightful ruler of Argos. Once again the chorus glorifies the nobili-

30) See Diggle (p. 112–115) for an attempt to show, by emending 483–484 to *τοιγά σοί ποτ' οὐρανίδα*

*πέμψουσιν θανάτου δίκαν*,

that it is not the gods who will kill Clytemnestra but that they will provide only the means or agent of her punishment.

31) As Walsh notes, p. 285, Aegisthus' head is only analogous to the Gorgon's head, and more horrible than it because of the contrast it evokes between legendary trophies and cruel, gory acts of violence in real life.

32) See Walsh for a perceptive analysis of the importance of this ode for the play as a whole. Walsh himself notes (p. 280) that the gold which the chorus values belongs to a different category of values than that sought by Electra and her farmer husband. However, I would not go along with his conclusion (p. 286) that Electra subscribes to the same standard as the chorus and looks forward to a social order determined by heroic achievement.

ty of its rulers with this tale of the golden sign of power. Kubo sees that the golden lamb which, in the choral ode, was to indicate the ruler, represents the lamb that the old man brings. He is the character who will accomplish the recognition of Orestes by his sister, indicating the present rightful ruler of Argos (Kubo, p. 20). From the chorus' point of view the recognition has already taken place. It has seen Orestes the rightful ruler of Argos identified by the lamb, but it doesn't believe that there will be a concomitant supernatural interaction with human events. The chorus does even more here than Kubo suggests, by voicing its unbelief in tradition. For the imagery of the golden lamb presents as much of a challenge to the nobility of Orestes as Electra does four hundred lines later. The chorus presents him with its own conception of nobility, challenging him by its unbelief to live up to its standards. When at last Orestes fulfills his duty and kills his mother, the Dioscuri appear as the supernatural sign to prove to the chorus that the myth of the golden lamb (the story that they doubted at l. 732), and the sign of the lamb carried by the old man, which it represents, here are, indeed, true.

On the surface the chorus provides legendary-historical perspective, as Grube maintains (*The Drama of Euripides*, London, 1941, p. 117 ff.). Further, it accuses Clytemnestra in its own name, and also as a gesture of sympathy to Electra and Orestes. Beneath the surface it points to Orestes as the noble ruler of Argos and encourages him to act as such.

The role of the chorus for the rest of the play is restricted to interjections of sympathy with the suffering of Orestes and Electra until, at 1204, they begin to be overwhelmed by the enormity of the deed. By 1226, they have no kind words left in their generous souls, but must face the stark deed with their nobility eroded, as Electra and Orestes had done earlier.

In general, Euripides' chorus sympathizes with high born nobility and embodies an abundant free-giving nobility of its own, which does not wear out until the play is almost over. In its odes the chorus expresses a nature far more generous than either of Euripides' chief characters. Its odes indicate an exalted view of the noble rich, although it never expresses itself in the accounting-book terms of Electra, but transmutes these concepts to magical gold. The chorus functions as the noble and irrepressible compass of Euripides that always throughout the movement of the play comes to rest pointing at Orestes, for he is the dedicated enforcing agent of its high standards of nobility.



Clytemnestra, in contrast with her children and with the chorus, interprets the world in terms of her own subjective emotional responses to events. She justifies herself not in terms of wealth or battle-courage, or heroic deeds, but in terms of feelings. Unlike the chorus, she does not admire the expedition to Troy, but sees it as a manifestation of the double standard (1018 ff.)<sup>33</sup>). Her concerns are voiced in terms of love and hate, fear and pity<sup>34</sup>). She forgives Electra for what she perceives is her basic nature (1102–1106), acknowledges regret for the result of her actions (1105 f. and 1109–10), and shows concern for Electra's state of health and general condition (1107–8). Clytemnestra is, as O' Brien and Zeitlin note (p. 31 and p. 668 respectively), in some respects similar to Electra, but the mother's horrible crime is in the past, beyond the direct bounds of the play, while the daughter's crime is recounted in detail before our eyes. By this distance from her evil deeds, and by her very human concerns and motivations, Clytemnestra is perceived as more sympathetic than her daughter: she displays a greatness, a virtue, which is totally imperceptible to Electra. Clytemnestra's concessions are meaningless to Electra, and she will not make the one concession Electra demands – the recall of Orestes<sup>35</sup>).

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33) As Zeitlin maintains, Euripides shrewdly suggests Electra's thwarted sexuality at various points in the play, notably in her speech over Aegisthus's corpse (Zeitlin 666 f.). In the *agôn*, however, the note of sex is introduced by Clytemnestra, and Electra's emphasis on her mother's sexual *mores* has the character of a rhetorical *reductio ad absurdum*. See J. Duchemin, *L'AGÔN dans la Tragédie Grecque* (Paris 1968) p. 204–5 and p. 208. The argument which explains the Trojan war as a result of Helen's wantonness is typical of Clytemnestra, not Electra.

34) Diggle, p. 119–120 would have us read *κακῶς* instead of *καλῶς* at 1015, but I believe that the MS reading should be retained here. This is Clytemnestra's apology for a harshness which it is not her intention to convey. She is prepared here to achieve a reconciliation with her daughter. I do not believe that Euripides intended to present Clytemnestra as an unsympathetic character.

35) As Pohlenz notes (p. 315), Euripides' Clytemnestra is both weaker and more sympathetic. Electra's hatred of her mother is unmitigated, but the rest of the characters usually qualify their condemnation of Clytemnestra. The farmer thinks that she is savage (27), but does not think that she participated in the physical act of the murder of Agamemnon (9). Orestes comes back to kill his father's murderers, who are, presumably, Aegisthus and his mother (276), but he later distinguishes between his father's murderer (599) Aegisthus and the latter's bed-mate (600). Similarly, the messenger speaks of Aegisthus as Agamemnon's murderer (763 f.) and not Clytemnestra. Even Electra's allusion to her mother's role in the murder is vague enough to allow doubt about Clytemnestra's degree of involvement (1066 ff.). Although Pohlenz believes that Euripides could not alter the

Electra, Orestes and the chorus each contribute successfully in their own way to the building and execution of the plan to avenge the murder of Agamemnon, the plan which culminates in the murder of Clytemnestra. Electra's calculating, bookkeeping mind affects the structure of the plot from the moment she sends her husband after the old man. It is operating throughout the recognition scene, and finally comes to the surface when Electra and her brother begin to plan actively after the recognition. Electra's particular genius provides most of the impetus and much of the actual contriving which lies behind the plot against Clytemnestra. Orestes' courage enters the plot for revenge, and contributes the well planned and reasoned murder of Aegisthus. He works out carefully the point in the sacrifice at which he must kill his host in order to avoid sacrificial pollution. The murder of Clytemnestra too begins at his hands, relies on his courage. The chorus contributes its support throughout, and in particular, at 998–1146, where it does not betray Electra as she spins out her lies for her mother. Clytemnestra must feel safer in the atmosphere the chorus provides. Just as the characters of the others provide them with their unique contribution to the plot for vengeance, so it is with Clytemnestra. For although her actions are based on noble feelings, her personality is such that she and her daughter cannot understand or appreciate each other. Electra views human action and virtue in materialistic terms, Clytemnestra derives human motivations from emotional and sexual sources. The diver-

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fact that Clytemnestra delivered the death-blow to her husband, yet it seems that Euripides' Clytemnestra did not take as active a part in her husband's murder as did her Aeschylean counterpart.

However, in this play, the charge that Clytemnestra displaced her children receives more emphasis than does the similar charge in the *Choephoroi* (913). Electra greets her mother with this charge (1004 ff.) and returns to it after charging her mother with her father's murder (1088 ff., 1112 f.). The farmer says Clytemnestra, by banishing Electra, saved her daughter's life, but only to avoid reproach (28). Steidle (p. 66) takes this as evidence of the queen's baseness, noting that the old man also describes fear of reproach as her motive in travelling separately from Aegisthus (643). But Clytemnestra herself mentions ill repute as one consideration among others (1013 f.) in her defense and Electra fears reproach, describing her city as peevish and blame-loving (902 ff.). Perhaps the farmer's condemnation is a reflection of Electra's (see n. 20) view and an indication of a general city-wide concern with reputation. But see Schwinge's analysis of 998–1123 in the table at the end of his work. In his view (p. 47–50), the scene in general and the stichomythia at 1116–1123 serve only to display Clytemnestra's unsuspecting and unrealistic estimation of her daughter's attitude, as well as to highlight Electra's enjoyment of her imminent success.

gent value systems of mother and daughter assure that they will never understand each other, or become reconciled. Perversely, Clytemnestra's nature, in her encounter with Electra, contributes to her own destruction.

After the murder of Clytemnestra comes the frustration of the plan to which all the characters have contributed. All the expected results – the joy, the triumph, even the petty chance at vile insults afforded Electra by the death of Aegisthus – are lacking here. Instead there is suffering and remorse on the part of the conspirators. The Dioscuri must appear, to console the sufferers, provide an explanation for their suffering and restore them to society, without reversing the divine purpose which underlies their action. Without the *deus ex machina* scene of the play Euripides would be presenting us with the hopeless drama of frustrated individuals caught in their own trap.

The Dioscuri never view Orestes and Electra as anything but guilty, and indeed the brother and sister receive their punishments – he is exiled from his land and must endure the persecution of the Furies; she must leave her home; the brother and sister, who have only recently discovered each other with great delight, must part from each other forever<sup>36</sup>).

Although the Dioscuri respond to the guilt and horror produced by matricide in its perpetrators with sanctions to purify the murderers of their deed, their role is not limited to punishment. The gods of the double epiphany reveal the real nature of the situation by explaining that Helen never went to Troy (1280 ff.). So that in addition to indicating the truth of the guilt of Orestes and Electra, in fact, the Dioscuri also show that Clytemnestra was at fault according to her own argument for killing her husband, for she relied in this argument on Helen's being a wanton and going to Troy (1027). This is the small but significant enlightenment provided by the *deus ex machina* at the end of the *Electra*.

More importantly, it is by the intervention of the gods at the end of the play that Orestes, Electra and the chorus come to understand that they have fulfilled their goal. These gods see that, in a sense, responsibility for their crime is lacking in these unenlightened humans. Therefore, they provide rewards of a sort to restore to the humans faith in their earlier senses of themselves. For the chorus, the very appearance of the Dioscuri serves as a

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36) In Steidle's view this separation constitutes the tragedy which the play depicts (p. 80f.). See also Pohlenz, p. 313.

supernatural sign which answers their earlier scepticism about the capacity of the gods to intervene in human affairs. The epiphany proves to the chorus that the myth of the golden lamb, which they doubted earlier (732), and the sign of the lamb carried by the old man, which the golden lamb represents, are true. The deed of Orestes, horrible as it was, proves comparable to the golden deeds of mythical times.

For Orestes, the Dioscuri provide eventual judgment and acquittal in Athens. In making this promise, the gods suggest that Orestes is akin to Ares who, they explain, was the first to undergo a trial like the one Orestes will face (1258 ff.). This suggestion of a comparison to the god of martial strength serves to assure Orestes that he has acted courageously and fulfilled his own standards of virtue.

The farmer's earlier conviction – that those who betrothed Electra to him had no right to do so (259) – is upheld, and the gods provide Electra with the rich and noble Pylades as a husband (1284). Prosperity assures Electra that she has fulfilled her goal. In addition, Electra learns that Orestes, after his acquittal, will achieve prosperity (1291), and that the Argive farmer will become wealthy as well as noble. Thus Electra sees her standard of material possessions as a sign of nobility restored throughout her world.

In this way, the Dioscuri soothe the troubled souls of Orestes, Electra and the chorus, providing each with virtue in their own terms, while disposing their fates justly in conformity with a higher order of reality. For the gods of the epiphany, Apollo, with whose standards they are not entirely comfortable, represents a higher order of reality. The standards of Apollo are as foreign to the Dioscuri as are the standards of the human characters of the play, who understand reality less well than they. But as the actions of the Dioscuri are based on their comprehension that there is a reality beyond their own, so they set standards for these humans and provide them with limited enlightenment and comfort in terms they can understand, since they understand that some strata, at least, of humanity must be allowed to remain unenlightened. This principle governs their disposition of Electra's fate, if no one else's. For in one sense Electra and Orestes do not understand the cause of their suffering. They know they have done wrong but they do not know how to avert such suffering in the future. Perhaps, if we can believe the chorus at l. 1357 ff., they have become enlightened enough by the events of the play to

avert suffering in the future. Or perhaps such enlightenment remains within the persons of the Dioscuri, who were once human themselves, and is to be seen as unattainable to ordinary humans<sup>37</sup>).

Finally, this analysis sheds some light on what has been to critics a great puzzle connected with Euripides' *Electra*: namely, why the playwright chose to depict the daughter to Agamemnon as living in a straw cottage<sup>38</sup>). Euripides' portrayal is meant to show that in the minds of people in his world, rich people remain in castles, while poor people remain in straw cottages without regard to their individual virtue. By shocking his spectator into questioning the validity of this principle, precisely as Orestes questioned the validity of Apollo, Euripides brings that spectator to the level of understanding belonging to the Dioscuri.

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37) Or it can be maintained with W. Arrowsmith, "A Greek Theater of Ideas," *Arion* 1963, 32-56, p. 53 ff., that *anagnorisis* takes place within the spectator, who recognizes that the main characters' conception of human virtue have all proven inadequate in their narrowness, and in their connection of virtue with wealth, noble birth and courage rather than with the internal qualities of piety and justice (1351).

38) Rivier (p. 120 f.) notices the contrast between the charming peace of nature and the foul disturbance of the murders committed in the rustic setting, but not Euripides' unromantic emphasis on the practical details of the struggle to earn a living in the country. On Euripides' representation of the distinction between appearance and reality in the character of the peasant possessed of heroic generosity and tact, see Jones, p. 246 f. and 252 f.