

CAUSALITY AND INNOVATION IN EURIPIDES' *ELECTRA*

A Greek tragedy is better understood if we bear in mind that it constitutes an interplay between received myth and the dramatist's tendency to innovation. The mythical tradition endowed the tragedian with the broad outlines of plot and character, while his literary predecessors set for him an example from which he had to deviate if he intended his play to present a new interpretation of the myth he chose to dramatize. In search of the meaning of a certain tragedy we must always take into account the playwright's innovations, as well as differentiations from the work of his fellow tragedians. Then, we must examine their dramatic function in the overall structure of the play, which should be understood as a chain of cause and effect. This paper is an attempt to apply the above interpretative method to Euripides' *Electra*, in order to shed some light on certain aspects of the drama which still remain a matter of scholarly debate. Although I am well aware that Euripides' tendency to deviate from the received myth is considered as a given, surprisingly, only one study, as far as I know, has so far appeared that treats a specific Euripidean innovation in this play, Orestes' scar.¹ The task of attempting to determine the precise dramatic function of several innovations in the *Electra* has not been undertaken before.

In analyzing the play critics have been divided into two categories. Most of them, notably O'Brien, Conacher and Arnott, promote an interpretation which is based on a negative portrayal of Orestes and Electra.² This, of course, is largely due to the fact that Euripides presents the matricide as problematic. On the other hand, Lloyd concludes his study of the tragedy by stating that "if the matricide is shown at the end of the play to have been a mistake, it is no less tragic that such an act should be the responsibili-

1) T. A. Tarkow, *The Scar of Orestes: Observations on a Euripidean Innovation*, *RhM* 124, 1981, 143–53.

2) M. J. O'Brien, *Orestes and the Gorgon: Euripides' Electra*, *AJPh* 85, 1964, 13–39, D. J. Conacher, *Euripidean Drama* (Toronto 1967) and W. G. Arnott, *Double the Vision: A Reading of Euripides' Electra*, *G&R* 28, 1981, 178–92.

ty of plausible and sympathetic characters than of the warped and inadequate individuals that Electra and Orestes are thought to be”.³ However, Lloyd’s arguments have not been accepted by the majority of the scholars, who tend to adopt what has been termed as the “traditional” interpretation of the play. This is the case with Raeburn, whose relatively recent article on the significance of props in *Electra* tries to reinforce the negative view of the two siblings’ character.⁴ I am more sympathetic to Lloyd’s thesis. Nevertheless, I believe that there still remain important things to be noted that point to a relatively positive evaluation of Orestes and Electra. In the course of my article I will try to provide arguments that more or less support and complement Lloyd’s thesis, with one important difference. I do not share his certainty that the matricide is shown to have been a mistake.

To begin with, the setting of the play is different from that of the respective plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles. Instead of Atreus’ palace, the center of power in legendary Argos, the scene is situated outside the boundaries of the city, in front of the cottage of a yeoman farmer. The apparent reason for this revolutionary change of setting is that, according to Euripides’ account of the myth, the farmer is Electra’s husband. Aegisthus was afraid that his step-daughter might give birth to an avenging offspring and so devised to kill her. Her mother, on the other hand, saved her life. So instead of killing her, Aegisthus involved her in a “deadly marriage” (θανάσιμον γάμον, 247)⁵ with a social inferior, thinking that the low status of her child would not constitute a serious menace for him. This fact prefigures Electra’s personal motive for the revenge that is going to be exacted from Agamemnon’s murderers. The poor dwelling of the farmer together with Electra’s rags is a constant reminder to the spectators of the humiliation she has suffered, which constantly spurs her to seek revenge. This is compatible with the structure of the tragedy, a large portion of which is concerned with the presentation of Electra’s sufferings and her incitement to her brother to ac-

3) M. Lloyd, *Realism and Character in Euripides’ Electra*, *Phoenix* 40, 1986, 19. A somewhat favourable portrait of Electra is also sketched by F. I. Zeitlin, *The Argive Festival of Hera and Euripides’ Electra*, *TAPhA* 101, 1970, 649–51 and A. N. Michelini, *Euripides and the Tragic Tradition* (Madison 1987) 188–91.

4) D. Raeburn, *The Significance of Stage Properties in Euripides’ Electra*, *G&R* 47, 2000, 149–68.

5) I follow Diggle’s OCT edition. Translations are my own.

compish the murders that will restore her to the position she has unjustly lost, that of a princess. In that sense, the change of setting corresponds to several other innovations Euripides has introduced to his play: although the initial intention of Orestes in rejoining his sister is to use her as an accomplice for the murders he plans, we are given the impression that it is she who uses him. This is the only Electra who wishes to die once she has shed her mother's blood in vengeance (278–81), the only Electra who devises the scheme for her mother's murder (647–61), the only Electra who reviles the corpse of Aegisthus (907–56), the only Electra who incites her brother to proceed with the matricide (967–87), the only Electra who even touches the sword that kills her mother (1225).⁶ This play is clearly about the vengeance of Electra upon the persons who have reduced her status in a most disgraceful way. By the change of setting the murders are dissociated from the ancestral curse of the Tantalids and the revenge is largely disconnected from the plea for justice on account of Agamemnon.⁷

Apart from that, the change of setting can be connected to certain other innovations which probably aim at dramatic realism; the farmer informs us that Aegisthus has actually put a price on Orestes' head (31–33). Moreover, access within the city walls is impossible for Orestes, because there are watchmen and bodyguards (615–17). Aegisthus and Clytaemestra cannot be murdered inside the palace; they must be somehow lured outside the city walls. These facts are ignored by those critics who characterize Orestes as more or less cowardly and reluctant because he does not reveal his identity to his sister immediately after she has reassured him that the women of the chorus are well disposed to them (272–73).⁸

6) Th. Gärtner, Verantwortung und Schuld in der *Elektra* des Euripides, MH 62, 2005, 6, is right in stating that "soweit es der Mythos zuließ, ist also Elektra in dieser euripideischen Version die Muttermörderin".

7) This does not necessarily entail that Orestes and Electra have no excuse for the matricide. As will be shown subsequently, the fact of Electra's social demotion and rejection by her own mother provides a sufficient, albeit different from that of the mythical tradition, motive. The same applies for Orestes' wish to regain his patrimony. Critics who erroneously and subconsciously view the siblings' behavior through the distortive lens of Christianity tend to underestimate the fact that, according to ancient Greek mentality, any sort of insult or misdemeanor calls for its requital.

8) See J. T. Sheppard, *The Electra of Euripides*, CR 32, 1918, 138, E. T. Englund, *The Electra of Euripides*, CR 40, 1926, 100, D. H. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*

The truth is that at this particular point Orestes does well to maintain his anonymity. One of his objectives for joining his sister was to get reliable information on the situation inside the city walls (τά γ' εἴσω τευχέων σαφῶς μάθω, 101).⁹ This information probably included the ways in which he could avenge Aegisthus and Clytaemestra and whether he could find any supporters in the palace or in the city who would offer him their assistance. This seems to be the exact meaning of the questions he asks Electra after he has found out about the credibility of the chorus (274, 276). But instead of providing him with any practically helpful piece of information Electra tries to shame her brother into action and affirms her determination to help him with the murder of her mother. Orestes' exclamation in line 281 far from being an aversion to his sister's "hysterical hatred" of her mother¹⁰ is rather a sign of desperation because at this particular juncture no course of action seems available. It is no coincidence that immediately after that Euripides introduces the theme of the old pedagogue who is the only one who can recognize Orestes (283–87). Not only will the old man recognize the avenging hero in the following episode, but also he will offer him the information necessary for the accomplishment of his revenge on Aegisthus, which Electra would have been unable in any case to provide: the fact that Aegisthus is offering a sacrifice outside the city walls with some slaves as his attendants. Had Orestes immediately revealed his identity to his sister, he would have been urged to act without any possibility of success whatsoever, because the old pedagogue would not have been summoned. Furthermore, he would not have heard about the bad condition of Agamemnon's grave and Aegisthus' insolent behavior on it (323–31), a report which aims at firming his resolve.¹¹ Far from being reluctant Orestes is simply cautious.

(London 1961) 336f., O'Brien (above, n. 2) 28, Tarkow (above, n. 1) 147 and Raeburn (above, n. 4) 155.

9) This statement probably reveals that Orestes is aware that there are men of watch inside the city walls. Furthermore, his fear that someone might recognize him (94–95) is meant to prefigure the fact that taking action inside the palace or the city is impossible.

10) As G. M. A. Grube, *The Drama of Euripides* (London 1941) 302 suggests.

11) In addition, Lloyd (above, n. 3) 13 makes the interesting point that "it is important that Orestes himself should have a full appreciation of what his sister has

Another notable Euripidean innovation is Electra's unconsummated marriage to the yeoman farmer. Most of the critics tend to underestimate the fact that a marriage of a princess to such a social inferior is not only a disgrace, but also an insult to her sense of propriety and honor. In the play it is stressed that her hand was asked by the foremost men of Greece (21) and that she was nearly married to someone who later on became a demigod (312–13). Although she shows respect and affection for her current so-called "husband" (67–76), the fact remains that her marital expectations were unfulfilled in the most brutal way and it is quite natural that she should feel resentment towards her mother. No critic has ever objected to the fact that Oedipus curses his own son and condemns him to a sure death because he has failed to bestow on him the honors that he considers his due (Soph. OC 1348–96). Yet Electra is condemned for being "fantastic in hatred, callous to the verge of insanity",¹² as well as "the most ostentatious martyr in Greek tragedy".¹³ However, the allegations of Electra's supposed self-martyrdom can be easily refuted by a careful reading of the text. When Electra is alone her lamentations concern exclusively her dead father and her exiled brother, not her own predicament (122–66). Her complaints about her own fortune appear during her conversations with the chorus and with the supposed emissary of Orestes. In the first case, she complains about her clothing in order to show to the chorus that their invitation to the festival of Hera is totally inappropriate, since not only does she still mourn for her unavenged father, but also her participation would painfully remind her of the loss of her royal status. Electra cannot lead the dance anymore because Agamemnon is no longer king. Secondly, during her discussion with her brother Electra dwells on her hardships because Orestes tells her that the purpose of his errand is to see "whether she is alive and in what misfortune does she live in" (ὅπως τε ζῶσα συμφορᾶς ἔχεις, 238; cf. 354). That is the reason why during her rhesis (300–38) she mentions first her own woes and then those of her father. Since Orestes is her true κύριος, it is nat-

suffered so long in his absence, and this can best be derived from his actually seeing her condition before she realizes that he has returned".

12) Kitto (above, n. 8) 332. This is a case where Christianic notions are misapplied to Greek tragedy.

13) O'Brien (above, n. 2) 28.

ural that she considers her own sufferings to be also his (τὰμὸν κἀκείνου κακόν, 303). Consequently, it is important that he forms a comprehensive image of what his sister is going through (304–13).

And yet it is true that one of the causes of Electra's hatred is her social displacement: most of her complaints are centred on the fact that she has been expelled from the palace and has lost her rightful place in her paternal house (61, 209, 306, 1005, 1008). However, this fact does not necessarily imply that Electra's exclusive concern is the unjust loss of regal prosperity and status. Perhaps we should be more inclined to view her resentment against her mother as the result of her rejection by her. This is made explicit by her very first words. She may be carrying the pot in order to show Aegisthus' insolence to the gods, but her accusations concern Clytaemestra, "for the shameless daughter of Tyndareus, my mother, has thrown me out of the house, doing a favour to her husband; having born other children to Aegisthus, she has turned Orestes and myself into second-class offspring in our home" (60–63). The lines clearly express the bitterness and the disappointment of a child who is not accepted by her own mother, by a mother who shows her preference to her new husband and neglects her offspring. "Women give their love to their husbands, oh stranger, not to their children", she says later on to the disguised Orestes when he enquires of her whether her mother tolerated her marriage (265). And during her confrontation with Clytaemestra just before her murder we can discern the same kind of grievance: "if, as you say, my father killed your daughter, how have I and my brother wronged you? Why after killing your husband did you not grant us our paternal home but rather you brought an outsider into your bed, buying your marriage for a price. And neither is your husband exiled instead of your son, neither has he died in my place, he who has made me endure my sister's death twice, although I am alive?" (1086–93). Since Clytaemestra "bought" her marriage to Aegisthus, Electra (and we) believes that she had the power to keep her in the palace, had she wished to, and not to involve her in a "deadly" marriage. Euripides had been previously careful to prevent his audience from feeling any sympathy for the queen by having the farmer declare that Clytaemestra saved her daughter's life not out of motherly affection but out of fear for public opinion (27–30). Even in her tirade over Aegisthus' corpse the emphasis lies on his relationship with her mother, not on him exclusively.

Electra's complaints about her mother's negligence towards her are confirmed by Clytaemestra's last words, when she is in a hurry to finish the supposed ritual for the birth of her fictitious grandchild, in order to join Aegisthus as soon as possible (1131–37). The χάρις that Clytaemestra wishes to grant her husband (1138) is reciprocated by Electra's χάρις to offer to her a marriage in death with Aegisthus (1144–46). Rejected love can be easily converted into hatred. This is precisely the reason why after her mother's murder Electra repents for her deed; because she has loved her.¹⁴ If she was truly a matricidal monster, as many critics tend to assume, she would have felt only satisfaction after the accomplishment of the murder, as happens in the case of the Sophoclean heroine, who urges her brother to strike Clytaemestra twice, if he can (1415). But Electra characterizes her mother as φίλαι τε καὶ φίλαι (1230). The adjective does not only mark the relationship of kinship between the two women, but is also indicative of Electra's frustrated feelings towards her mother, a view which is reinforced if we accept that the phrase τέρμα κακῶν μεγάλων δόμοισιν (1231) means "the climax of the house's misery".¹⁵ The above evidence, if it is interpreted correctly, is apparently contrary to the contention, shared by most critics, that Electra views things in a materialistic way, while Clytaemestra is more emotional.¹⁶ If she is characterized by a fixation on the value of nobility, this happens because it serves an important dramatic purpose: the recognition, as well as the revenge itself, is finally achieved due to Electra's standards of nobility. It is she who considers her husband's offer of hospitality to the distinguished strangers improper and sends him

14) Although this opinion seems to be in accordance with certain well-known views of modern psychology, I believe that it is substantiated by the passages quoted in the previous paragraph (60–63, 265 and 1086–93). I think that it is one of the cases in which Euripides has foreshadowed modern psychology. However, this point should not be stressed too far; it is only conjectural. Moreover, I must emphasize that Electra's rejection by her mother, if valid, must be considered as a secondary motive for her revenge, the primary one being her wish to regain her royal status. An argument which might reinforce my psychological interpretation is that, as it will be demonstrated below, the matricide is viewed in an ambivalent light, which implies that Electra is up to a certain extent morally vindicated.

15) As M. A. Harder, *Right and Wrong in the Electras*, Hermathena 159, 1995, 22 maintains.

16) See for example E. M. Thury, *Euripides' Electra: An Analysis through Character Development*, RhM 128, 1985, 19.

off to the old tutor for the provision of food (404–14). Electra's demand, then, for the restoration of her status by revenge is inextricably connected to the feeling of rejection from her mother.

Another important Euripidean innovation is the presentation of Aegisthus' character and the way in which his murder is accomplished. According to Euripides' account, Aegisthus seems to be the dominating member of the royal couple. The farmer tells us that he was the one who actually murdered Agamemnon; Clytaemestra only devised the killing (8–10).¹⁷ This is consistent with the antithesis of the prevailing moods that follow the two murders of the play: while Aegisthus' murder is followed by paens of victory and celebration, the killing of Clytaemestra is followed by feelings of regret and remorse.¹⁸ Aegisthus also had the intention to kill Orestes, who was nevertheless saved by the old tutor, and Electra. This fact must be remembered by those who condemn Orestes' incitation to mutilate his corpse (896–98) or the tirade delivered by Electra over it (907–56). In this tirade Electra, far from demonstrating the effects of her suppressed sexuality, primarily attempts to demote Aegisthus' status as a man by insinuating that his children are not even his own due to Clytaemestra's supposed infidelities. The trustworthiness of her account of Aegisthus' and her mother's character is, nevertheless, undercut by the application of the phrase “though you have suffered no wrong” to the usurper (οὐδὲν ἡδίκημένος, 915). Electra's contention is contradicted by the audience's mythological knowledge of the Thyestean banquet, for which Aegisthus had every reason to seek revenge from Atreus' progeny, Agamemnon. This apparent contradiction between Electra's conception of her adversaries' characters and their real ones, as they are presented in the play, has urged certain critics to advance their argument of the heroine's distorted “double view” or “dual vision”.¹⁹ However, as far as this particular point is con-

17) There is a certain confusion in this play as to who exactly was the actual murderer of Agamemnon (see also 86–87, 123–24, 163–66, 1152 and 1159–60). However, the impression we acquire is that Clytaemestra was not its primary agent or even instigator, as happens in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, but rather Aegisthus' accomplice.

18) We must notice that Electra's degree of participation in each action varies, but Orestes undertakes both murders.

19) See Arnott (above, n. 2) 181 ff. and K. V. Hartigan, *Ambiguity and Self-Deception* (Frankfurt am Main / Bern / New York / Paris 1991) 122.

cerned, they have disregarded Euripides' tendency to revert to the mythical tradition by attributing to the royal couple of Argos their traditionally conceived characteristics at the point of their murder; these characteristics are known from previous accounts of the myth and the audience is familiar with them, but at the same time they are at odds with their profile sketched so far by Euripides: Aegisthus is not exactly the vassal of Clytaemestra (931) and the queen is far from being "a mountain-bred lioness" (1163–64). I believe that this reversion to these known attributes of Clytaemestra and Aegisthus is an attempt by the dramatist to justify their killing. There is certainly no doubt raised in the play about the propriety of the usurper's murder and, as for the queen, the only objection is that the act of retribution had to be undertaken by her own son (1244).

The contradiction we have detected in *Electra's* cacology does not necessarily support the argument of her "double view". In all probability lines 518–44 should be deleted, because the dissonance between the heroine's belief that her "bold" brother will return like a knight in his shining armor (524–26), on which the refutation of the tutor's arguments is founded, and her former statement that "a man in exile is helpless" (352) is intolerable.²⁰ Furthermore, I do not think that there is a direct disagreement between the image of the drunken Aegisthus who insults Agamemnon's grave (326–31) and the supposedly affable host who cordially welcomes Orestes and Pylades to the sacrifice in honor of the Nymphs (774–89).²¹ The first image depicts a man who is

20) There is no contradiction between this statement of *Electra* and her incitation to her brother to kill Aegisthus, since "it will be disgraceful, if his father has sacked the Phrygians, and he [Orestes] will not be able to kill one man, though he is younger and was born from a better father" (336–38). The second statement is not an objective appreciation of the situation but principally aims at making him resolute. I believe that D. Kovacs' (Euripides, *Electra* 518–44: Further Doubts about Genuineness, BICS 36, 1989, 67–78) hypothesis that lines 518–44 originate from a poet of Middle Comedy is highly probable. M. L. West's (*Tragica* IV, BICS 27, 1980, 9–22) assumption that the passage is interpolated by Euripides himself is less likely. Deletion is also supported by D. Bain, [Euripides], *Electra* 518–44, BICS 24, 1977, 104–16, while H. Lloyd-Jones, *Some Alleged Interpolations in Aeschylus' Choephoroi and Euripides' Electra*, CQ 11, 1961, 171–84, G. W. Bond, *Euripides' Parody of Aeschylus, Hermathena* 118, 1974, 1–14 and M. Davies, *Euripides' Electra: the Recognition Scene Again*, CQ 48, 1998, 389–403 defend the authenticity of the passage.

21) As S. Barlow, *The Imagery of Euripides* (London 1971) 93, Arnott (above, n. 2) 184 and Raeburn (above, n. 4) 162 suggest.

haunted by thoughts of possible retaliation for his past crimes and whose fear is discharged in a way by which, as he believes, his superiority is shown towards his victim and the victim's avenging son. Aegisthus' fear of Orestes is well documented in the play: the city walls are guarded, says the old tutor to Orestes, because "he [Aegisthus] fears you and does not sleep sound" (617); Aegisthus himself expresses his fear to the disguised Orestes by telling him "oh stranger, I dread of (ὄρρωδῶ, 831) some alien trickery. There is a man who is my greatest enemy and a foe to my house, Agamemnon's son" (831–33). The verb Aegisthus uses to express his fear is most telling. But neither is Aegisthus an impeccable host, as is suggested. He invites Orestes to participate in the sacrifice simply because he seems noble, as the tutor has previously remarked (550). According to the messenger's description, Orestes' cloak is handsome (εὐπρεπῆ πορπάματα, 820). Moreover, he and Pylades are accompanied by slaves. On the other hand, Aegisthus certainly does not invite the old man who happens to be passing by the place of sacrifice alone (621–25) and who wears ragged clothes (τρύχει, 501). In addition, Aegisthus violates the protocol of receiving guests by asking the strangers about their names before offering them food (779–80).²² And he is probably suspicious and doubtful of their identity; this is the reason why he asks Orestes to butcher the bull and "prove that the reputation about the Thessalians is true" (818).²³ It is a dramatic irony that Aegisthus' suspicion brings about his own murder, as it is a dramatic irony that Clytaemestra dies at the time when she thinks that the fear of an avenging child has been almost eliminated. And if Aegisthus' murder more or less equates him to a sacrificial beast (839–43) this only enhances the heroic stature of Orestes, who re-

22) For the contrary practice see for example Nestor's reception of Telemachus and his companions in *Od.* 3.34–74.

23) Consequently, J. D. Denniston's (*Euripides. Electra* [Oxford 1939] xxx) view that Aegisthus and Clytemaestra expose themselves to murder by acts of kindness loses some of its weight. I believe that J. E. G. Whitehorne's opinion (*The Ending of Euripides' Electra*, *RPh* 56, 1978, 9 n. 9) that "in both cases the acts of generosity are of a very conventional type" is more valid and that A. P. Burnett, *Revenge in Attic and Later Tragedy* (Berkeley / Los Angeles / London 1998) 240 is probably right in maintaining that Clytaemestra visits her daughter because the message she received suggested the presentation of Electra's son to his paternal kin-group, a ceremony that will fix him forever in the low status that Clytaemestra intends for him.

sembles the figure of Perseus on Achilles' shield (458–62).²⁴ This enhancement is verified by the crowning of Orestes' head by the servants (854–55) and by his sister (880–82).

But the most important innovation that Euripides has introduced to his account of Electra's myth is the conception of the matricide. The dramatist makes clear that the Delphic oracle is not binding for Orestes. Nowhere does the hero mention any dire consequences that await him should he choose not to obey Apollo by murdering his own mother, as is the case in Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* (269–97). The two references made to the oracle before Clytaemestra is seen approaching the scene are indirect and reveal nothing of its content (87, 399–400). It is Electra who seizes the opportunity to stress the god's supposed wisdom (972) and verify his very existence (980) to her faltering brother in order to further her plan to exact revenge from her mother. The reservations Orestes feels about committing matricide (967–81), his acceptance to proceed only because the gods think that it is right (986–87) and his final admittance that "the trial is bitter, not sweet to me" (987) are entirely to his credit, since in this way he confirms his formerly expressed views about nobility, which should be judged according to one's conduct (384–85).²⁵ This fact, however, does not diminish his responsibility for the matricide, particularly since his freedom of choice is implied by the way stated above.

24) J. R. Porter, *Tiptoeing through the Corpses: Euripides' Electra*, Apollo-nius, and the Bouphonia, GRBS 31, 1990, 265, on the contrary, assumes that the vivid use of detail serves to heighten the audience's aversion to the murder. His view is based on the belief that murder committed in the midst of a sacrifice was regarded as a desecration and as an offence against the divinity concerned. Cf. Grube (above, n. 10) 308 and Arnott (above, n. 2) 183. Lloyd (above, n. 3) 16, however, rightly asserts that a person in the act of sacrificing, unlike a suppliant, did not enjoy any special protection from the gods and cites literary parallels which suggest that such circumstances can reveal the will of the gods with particular clarity. The parallelism of Orestes to Perseus is noted by Sheppard (above, n. 8) 140, who stresses the connection of lines 457–62, 856 and 1221, and O'Brien (above, n. 2) 25. It is also no coincidence that the shield of Athena, with which she will protect Orestes at Athens, is gorgon-like (1257).

25) In light of the above observation Orestes does not condemn himself out of his own mouth, as S. M. Adams, *Two Plays of Euripides*, CR 49, 1935, 120 and S. Goldhill, *Rhetoric and Relevance: Interpolation at Euripides' Electra* 367–400, GRBS 27, 1986, 171 maintain.

The matricide is not wholly unjustified. It is rather viewed in an ambivalent light.²⁶ And this owes much to Euripides' portrait of Clytaemestra. She has displaced her own daughter in a disgraceful way, although she clearly had the power to keep her unmarried in the palace, her son has lost his rightful patrimony and is exiled because of her and, last but not least, she displays an inhuman interest in wealth (1000–3).²⁷ At the same time, however, she appears repentant for Agamemnon's murder (1105–10) and displays a conciliatory disposition towards Electra. These two facts prefigure the remorse of her children after the murder. The ambivalence of the matricide is also reflected in the balance of punishments and rewards that Orestes and Electra receive from the *deus ex machina*: because of his mother's murder Orestes does not achieve his primary objective, to regain his patrimony (810); he is forbidden to set foot on Argos (1250–51). Furthermore, he will have to be separated from his sister, confront the Furies, stand trial in Athens and be exiled again. However, a city will be called after his name (1273–75) and, after having fulfilled his destined lot for the matricide, he will find happiness (1290–91). Similarly, Electra will never see Argos and Orestes again – and this is something for which she laments intensely –, but she will find what she always longed for, a prosperous and consummated marriage by which she can regain her royal status (1249).²⁸

I believe that this balance of punishments and rewards should be linked to the siblings' invocation to the gods before the murders take place. Orestes, Electra and the old tutor call on Zeus and Hera. "And Hera who rules over Mycenae's altars", says Orestes, to which Electra replies "grant us victory, if what we ask for is just"

26) This is the reason why it is Castor and Pollux, not Apollo, who appear as *dei ex machina*.

27) How else can one characterize a mother who can even entertain the thought that she can be compensated for the daughter she lost by Trojan slaves? Gärtner (above, n.6) 9 is correct in maintaining that this comment refutes Clytaemestra's supposed love for her child and makes her repellent to the spectators.

28) In this sense Orestes' acquittal and Electra's marriage to Pylades are, contrary to Conacher (above, n.2) 210 and G. Gellie, *Tragedy and Euripides' Electra*, BICS 28, 1981, 9, relevant to the plot of the play. Furthermore, Castor's statement that the Dioscuri do not help the polluted but save those who know piety and love justice (1349–53) is not contradictory to their role in the exodus, as Michelini (above, n.3) 226 claims.

(674–75). Hera occupies a central place in the drama, since the festival in honor of her comprises the ritual background of the play²⁹ and since the royal couple's violations concern marriage,³⁰ of which the goddess is the protector. Moreover, the reference to her altars may be connected to the fact that both murders are performed as a kind of perverted sacrifice. The victory that Hera grants them is, however, not complete; they may have managed to kill their adversaries, but, as we saw, they are also compelled to suffer grave consequences. Similarly, Zeus' pity, for which they pray (671–72), is not complete. Consequently, what they ask for is and, at the same time, is not just. This dialectic is consistent with Castor's verdict of the matricide: "her punishment is just, but you have not acted justly" (1244). In this way Euripides repeats a pattern he had previously used in *Hippolytus*. The hero in his moment of despair calls upon Zeus to die ingloriously and in anonymity, if he was born an evil man (εἰ κακὸς πέφυκ' ἀνὴρ, 1031). In fact, he does die, but his death is not inglorious, as Artemis later on reassures him (1423–30). He is and, at the same time, he is not κακός. His ideal must be adjusted to the needs of the human community in order to be acceptable, something which happens during the course of the play.³¹

Finally, an innovation which often passes unnoticed is the impressive causational void created by Castor's revelation that Helen did not even go to Troy and that Zeus sent her phantom there "so that strife and bloodshed was made amongst mortals" (1282).³² Helen's supposed adultery has been the primary cause that set in motion the whole chain of the events of this tragedy (213–14, 1027–28). Castor's revelation entails that all that has passed during the course of the play, all the anticipations and the killings, was in vain. It seems like Euripides is converting his tragedy at its closure into a kind of mythological parody. This view is up to a certain extent reinforced by the attribution of the deeds of the heroes and

29) As Zeitlin (above, n. 3) has convincingly demonstrated.

30) Not only Clytaemestra's adultery, but also the marriage she and Aegisthus imposed on Electra. It is probably significant that Orestes is to be judged by a court that was founded when the gods sat to give their vote for a case which also involved ἀνόσια νομφεύματα (1261).

31) See L. Papadimitropoulos, *Ἡ Ἔννοια τοῦ Οἴκου στὸν Εὐριπίδη: Ἀλκίση, Μήδεια, Ἰππόλυτος*, doctoral thesis (Athens 2005), 124–25.

32) The concept of Helen's phantom of course belongs to Stesichorus (32B., 11D.). Euripides' innovation is the causational void created by the introduction of this idea.

their fates to “a curse inherited from their ancestors” (ἄτη πατέρων, 1307). But, as we have noticed before, the tragic action is disconnected from the famous curse of the Tantalids and is mostly motivated by Electra’s desire to regain her regal status by exacting revenge on the murderers of her father, as well as by her frustrated feelings of affection towards her mother. Certainly, this dissonance does not imply that the appearance of the *dei ex machina* is gratuitous or unconnected to the rest of the tragedy’s action.³³ The Dioscuri have the important role of actually saving the siblings from the remorse they feel immediately after the matricide by informing them about their future and by answering their questions about what city will receive Orestes (1194–97) and who will marry Electra (1199–1200). And this is, as we have seen, in accordance with the ambiguous ethical valuation that the matricide receives in this play.³⁴

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33) Denniston (above, n. 23) ad 1233–7 is wrong when he says that “Euripides was not much interested in these epiphanies”.

34) I would like to thank the editor of RhM for his helpful suggestions.