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SOPHOCLES ELECTRA



Translation with Notes, Introduction,
Interpretive Essay and Afterlife

Hanna M. Roisman

SOPHOCLES

Electra

**Translation with Notes, Introduction,
Interpretive Essay and Afterlife**

Hanna M. Roisman
COLBY COLLEGE

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PREFACE

Sophocles' *Electra* was the first play I read in Greek, but the years that passed have not made it any less of a challenge for me. Each reading of this tragedy presents new questions, provokes doubts about previous interpretations, and demands new scrutiny. I enjoyed writing this book, yet I still do not have absolute answers to the troubling feeling with which a reader is left after reading this drama about matricide. If the book brings the reader to delve further into the many questions the play raises about matricidal revenge and the motives that prompt it, it has achieved its goal.

The book is intended mainly for students and non-professionals. The Introduction discusses briefly the Greek theater and performance, the myth of Electra, and Aeschylus' and Euripides' treatments of the myth. It also briefly notes the scholarly debate regarding the play's judgment of the matricidal revenge it dramatizes and presents some of the issues of concern in the translation of the play. The translation, which aims to combine readability with fidelity to the Greek, is accompanied by notes aimed at helping the reader with the play's mythic, historical, cultural and literary aspects. In the Interpretative Essay, I present my own reading of the play, and in the Afterlife a brief account of the legacy of Sophocles' treatment of the myth. I was unfortunately unable to consult the most recent and substantial commentary, by P.J. Finglass, *Electra: Sophocles edited with introduction and commentary* (Cambridge, UK , New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), since it arrived at my college library only after the completion of my manuscript.

I owe thanks first to the many students who studied Greek drama with me over the years. Their original thinking and questioning of accepted views made me repeatedly reconsider my interpretations and look at the play for fresh perspectives. I owe special thanks to my friend and editor Dr. Toby Mostysson for her many insights and probing questions, and for her invaluable help in turning my manuscript into a readable text. My friend Cecilia Luschnig read the entire manuscript (excluding the notes), and I owe much to her level-headed and helpful comments. I would like to thank Karen Gillum who copy-edited the manuscript with great care and saved me from many embarrassing mistakes.

Last but not least, I am deeply indebted to my husband Yossi Roisman, my sons Elad Roisman and Shalev Roisman, and my good friend Beatrice Rosenberg, on whom I can always rely for encouragement and support.

INTRODUCTION

Theater and Performance

Electra is one of Sophocles' seven extant plays, out of an opus of over 120. Sophocles (496-406 BCE) himself is one of only three classical Greek dramatists, along with Aeschylus (525-456 BCE) and Euripides (480-406 BCE), whose plays have survived.¹ The fate of the theater or theaters where the plays were performed is similar.

Records indicate that *Electra*, like most of the extant Greek tragedies, was performed at the City Dionysia (or Great Dionysia) of Athens, a religious festival held in late March in honor of Dionysus, god of wine and vegetation. This was the largest and most magnificent of Athens' annual state-sponsored religious festivals. By the time the *Electra* was performed, it had become a major Greek festival with an international audience.²

On each of three days of the festival, a different playwright mounted three tragedies, followed by a satyr play. The three tragedies, or trilogy, could tell a single story or different ones, as most probably did. The satyr play was a raucous production, rife with obscenity, which provided relief from the emotional intensity of the tragedies.³

Like the rest of the festival, the tragedies were sponsored by the state and their production overseen by the *archon eponymos*. This official selected the year's tragedians from among the contestants and assigned each the *choregos* (literally chorus leader, in effect financier and producer)⁴ who would mount his plays and, later in the century, the actors who would perform in them. From the mid-fifth century on, the state paid the lead actors and the tragedians. While the playwrights were not quite state employees, they were not independent of the state either.

Being state sponsored, the plays had a strong didactic element. They familiarized the public with the myths that comprised their cultural heritage and engaged them in considering the myths' meanings and implications.

1 On Greek tragedy, see Sommerstein (2002). On Greek theater, see Ley (2006).

2 On the Dionysia, see Csapo and Slater (1995)103-121, 287.

3 On the satyr plays, see Sutton (1980)

4 On the institution of the *choregoi*, see Wilson (2000).

The involvement of the state seems to have ensured that the issues treated in the plays were of public interest, and probably defined the outer boundaries to the questioning and criticism found in many of the plays.⁵ It did not, however, have the stultifying effect one might expect.

The plays were produced before huge audiences of between 15,000 and 20,000 spectators. The first few rows of the theater were occupied by the elite,⁶ but most of the audience consisted of the ordinary citizens of Athens—by definition adult males—though women and boys were also permitted to attend the tragic performances.⁷ From the middle of the fifth century, tickets were subsidized for those who could not afford them.

The plays were part of the formal competitions that were held at the festival. They were judged by a panel formed through a combination of selection and lot.⁸ Although the judges were probably chosen from among the educated elite, they were often swayed, even intimidated, by the reactions of the audiences⁹ — making it likely that the winning playwrights were appreciated by the ordinary folk as well as by the upper tiers. (Sophocles won some twenty first prizes in his sixty-two years as a playwright.)

Thus classical Greek drama was also popular drama, in the best sense of the term: drama written not for the elite, but for the entire *polis*, which moved the ordinary Athenians of the time, addressed their concerns, and was fairly congruous with their thinking and world-view.

The plays were performed in the open air Theater of Dionysus, on the southeast slopes of the Acropolis. The performances began in the early morning and continued, with breaks, through the day. The performing area, located on a leveled space at the bottom of the hillside, consisted of a large *orchestra*,¹⁰ or dancing place, for the Chorus and a narrow, elevated platform that served as a stage for the actors and was connected to the orchestra by several steps in the center.

Behind the playing area stood a stage-building, about twelve meters long and four meters high. It was termed a *skênê*, after its origin as a tent or hut. When *Electra* was produced, it was probably still a temporary wooden structure that could be dismantled after the festival. Most of the action

5 See Griffin (1999) on the impact of the historical events and democratic ideology of fifth century Athens on the tragic drama.

6 See also Csapo and Slater (1995) 289-290.

7 On women in the audience, see Csapo and Slater (1995) 286-287, 290-293; Taplin (1978) 193-194.

8 Pickard-Cambridge (1988) 96-98. For the problematics of the lottery and the decision procedure, see Csapo and Slater (1995) 158-160.

9 Pickard-Cambridge (1988) 97-98.

10 Wiles (1997) 44-52 maintains the *orchestra* was circular; others, that it was rectangular or trapezoidal.

SOPHOCLES: *ELECTRA*

SPEAKING CHARACTERS:

- Orestes** son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, arrived in Argos to avenge his father's murder.
- Electra** grieving daughter of the murdered Agamemnon, the former king of Mycenae, and Clytemnestra.
- Chrysothemis** Electra's sister, daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra.
- Paedagogus** The word refers to a personal slave who took young boys to their teachers. Here the Paedagogus is the elderly slave who smuggled Orestes to Phocis when Agamemnon was murdered and who has now brought him back to his homeland. He has more standing and authority with Orestes than we today associate with slaves.
- Clytemnestra** Agamemnon's wife, who together with her lover, Aegisthus, murdered Agamemnon on his return from Troy. She now rules Argos along with Aegisthus.
- Aegisthus** Agamemnon's cousin, who, with Clytemnestra, murdered Agamemnon. Now he rules Argos with her.

SILENT CHARACTERS

- Pylades** Son of Strophius, King of Crisa in Phocis, and of Anaxibia, Agamemnon's sister. Orestes was raised with Pylades in Strophius' court.
- Maid servant** to Clytemnestra
- Attendants** of Orestes and Pylades

* When a line is split among two or more speakers, except for the first speaker their words are indented.

The Paedagogus, Orestes, and Pylades enter by a side entrance (eisodos) on the left of the spectators. They stand in front of the central door of the stage-building, which represents the palace of the Pelopids in Mycenae. It is early morning. A statue of Apollo stands near the palace.

Paedagogus

Son of Agamemnon, who once commanded the
troops at Troy, now you can cast your eyes
on the sights you've always yearned to see.
For this is the ancient Argos for which you've longed.
Here, the sacred grove of the gadfly-stung daughter of Inachus. 5
And this, Orestes, is the Lycean marketplace
of the wolf-slaying god; and here to the left, the
famous temple of Hera; and from here
you can say you see Mycenae, wrought in gold,
and the palace of Pelops' sons, plagued by disasters. 10
From there, after your father's murder,
I took you from your sister, your flesh and blood,
carried you and saved you and raised you from childhood
to your young manhood to avenge your father's murder.

-
- 1-2 Although it was customary to introduce characters by their patronymic, in doing so at the very opening of the play and in highlighting Agamemnon's military identity, Sophocles leads the audience to expect that Orestes, too, will act heroically.
- 2-10 This verbal scene painting, coming in place of elaborate stage props, tells us that Orestes, Pylades, and the Paedagogus are standing in front of Pelops' sons' palace in Mycenae and draws the surroundings—the grove, market, and temple of Hera—for the audience to envision in their mind's eye.
- 5 *the gadfly-stung daughter of Inachus*: The Inachus river flows into the plain of Argos from the northwest. Io, Inachus' daughter, was a victim of the love of Zeus and revenge of Hera, who sent a gadfly to sting her continuously.
- 10 *the palace of Pelops' sons, plagued by disasters*: Pelops' sons are Atreus and Thyestes, respectively the fathers of Agamemnon and Aegisthus, who are thus first cousins. *Plagued by disasters* refers to the murders that took place there before the play's start. Thyestes seduced the wife of Atreus, who was the king of Mycenae. Atreus banished Thyestes, but then recalled him on pretense of being reconciled and prepared a banquet in which he served him the flesh of his two sons. When Thyestes realized the ploy, he fled and called down a curse on the house of Atreus. He fathered Aegisthus by his own daughter. She left the baby out to die, but he was cared for by shepherds. When Atreus learned of the boy's existence he brought him up as his own child. When Aegisthus grew up, Atreus sent him to kill his father, but Thyestes recognized him as his son, and the two contrived the death of Atreus instead.
- 12 *from your sister, your flesh and blood*: Sophocles seems to highlight right from the beginning the idea of blood relations. See 532.

So now, Orestes, and you, most beloved of hosts, 15
 Pylades, the time has come to promptly decide what must be done.
 For the sun's bright rays stir up
 the birds' clear, early morning songs for us,
 and the black and starry night has gone.
 So now, before anyone leaves the house, 20
 we must confer, because we've reached the point where
 it's no longer time for holding back, but high time to act.

Orestes

Dearest of my servants, how clear the signs
 you show me of your loyalty.
 For just as a well-bred horse, even when old, 25
 does not lose his courage in time of danger,
 but pricks up his ears, so you too urge me forward
 and are among the first to follow my commands.
 I will explain my decision.
 Give sharp ear to my words, and if I'm 30
 off the mark, correct me.
 When I came to the Pythian oracle
 to learn how to exact
 retribution for my father from his murderers,
 Phoebus gave me this prophecy, which you will hear right now: 35
 that, unfurnished with army or armed men, I use guile
 to steal the just slaying with my own hands.

-
- 20-22 This is the first of three times in the play that the Paedagogus urges Orestes to get on with his revenge. His repeated references to time create a sense of urgency. The word *kairos* signifying the "right time" is used by Orestes in lines 40, 75, 1259, 1368.
- 23-27 The comparison of the Paedagogus to a horse may be both a sign of regard, as horses were considered spirited and intelligent animals, and an assertion of status, since it is ultimately the rider, Orestes, who is master.
- 32-36 The Pythian oracle is the oracle of Apollo, son of Zeus. Sophocles, like Aeschylus before him (*Libation Bearers* 269-305, 554-59, 900-902), has Apollo sanction the revenge because he is the god who determines whether a murder is justified. In Euripides' *Electra*, Orestes *post factum* disputes the right of Apollo to tell him to murder his mother. Note that Orestes does not ask Apollo whether to avenge his father's death, but how to do so. The rightness and necessity of the revenge are assumed. See Introduction 15.
- 36-37 The use of guile to exact the revenge is common to all three dramatic treatments of the story (*Libation Bearers* 554-84; Euripides' *Electra* 635-68). The guile has a certain retributive propriety in that Aegishus and Clytemnestra had killed Agamemnon using guile. In Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers* (274), Orestes says he was bidden to take revenge in the same way as his father had been killed.

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The Focus Classical Library is dedicated to publishing the best of Classical literature in contemporary translations with notes and introductions, so as to provide modern students access to the thought and context at the roots of contemporary culture.

In this new take on Sophocles' *Electra*, Hanna M. Roisman gives a clear and close translation of the original Greek. Included in the text are a fresh interpretation of the play and an essay that examines the Afterlife of the play *Electra* in literature. Extensive notes highlight cultural issues to help readers understand the underlying themes in the story, as well as make comparisons to other, contemporary Greek versions of the myth, giving a well-rounded and comprehensive view of the tale of *Electra* as a whole.

Hanna M. Roisman is the Francis F. Bartlett and Ruth K. Bartlett Professor of Classics at Colby College in Waterville, Maine. Her special interests are Homeric epic, Greek and Roman tragedy, and Classical literature and modern film.

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