

THE SUFFERING OF ELECTRA: VARIOUS INTRODUCTORY TECHNIQUES ADOPTED BY EURIPIDES AND SOPHOCLES

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In a perfect sonnet, what you admire is not so much the author's skill in adapting himself to the pattern as the skill and power with which he makes the pattern comply with what he has to say. Without this fitness, which is contingent upon period as well as individual genius, the rest is at best virtuosity: and where the musical element is the only element, that also vanishes.

T.S. Eliot, *The Music of Poetry*¹

Two dramas called *Electra* have been transmitted. They are the works of Sophocles and Euripides, and probably represent the mature creative period of both poets, but it is not known which was written first.² The two works are self-contained; they both possess a degree of such completeness that we can read or perform each without a thought of consulting the other. The scholarly world has nevertheless regarded the transmission of both works with great enthusiasm as they provide an excellent opportunity for comparing and contrasting the approaches of the two dramatists.³ Moreover, *The Libation Bearers* by Aeschylus, the model of at least one of these dramas, has also been transmitted, providing stimulus for scholarly study of the manner in which Euripides and Sophocles either adopt or transform the work of their predecessor.

All these works are focussed on the same event: the killing of the adulterous pair, Aegisthus and Clytaemestra, who are executed for treacherously murdering Agamemnon, the rightful king of Argos and the father of Orestes and Electra. The event has tragic potential inasmuch as Clytaemestra's killing is an act of matricide; accordingly, it forms the tragic substance of all three works. The main difference between Aeschylus and the two younger dramatists lies in the dramatic dynamics leading up to this event. In *The Libation Bearers* the dramatic necessity for vengeance is embodied by Orestes, but this character does not act merely of his own volition; he is compelled and permeated by divine forces to such an extent that they participate in his avenging deed.⁴ In this development Electra does not play a prominent role.

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¹ In *On Poetry and Poets*, 5th impression in Faber Paper Covered edition, London 1969, 37.

² On this problem see the brief, but thorough discussion and bibliography in Cropp (1988: xlviii-li).

³ For an extensive scholarly comparison and a bibliography of such approaches see Vögler (1967).

⁴ On the level of human motivation Orestes wishes to avenge his father, assert his lawful right to regain his inheritance and to live as rightful successor to the throne of the fatherland from which he has been banished (see 299-306 and cf. 130ff. as well as 235ff.); on the level of godly motivation he has been commanded by Apollo and stands under the threat of the Furies who work in conjunction with the god (see 269-296). Through the prayer shared by Orestes, the Chorus and Electra (246-509) the poet conjures up the complex forces converging within the avenger before he proceeds to perform the dire deed. The common prayer portrays the accumulation of human and the pervasion of godly forces within Orestes: his forceful realization of the humiliation brought upon his father and himself elicit the former; the rich and various invocations evoke the latter: Reinhardt (1949:112ff.) von Fritz (1962:122-126). Thus Orestes finally becomes the very embodiment of godly forces.

After she has been united with Orestes at their father's grave (212-245), Electra joins Orestes and the Chorus in a long common prayer for vengeance (246ff.), but she then disappears from the stage, having fulfilled her dramatic role. In the two *Electra* dramas, by contrast, the burden of suffering providing the necessity for vengeance falls on Electra, and on her alone. What are the inner forces impelling this character in respectively Euripides and Sophocles?

The present article attempts to contribute towards answering this question firstly by concentrating on the introductory sections representing the state of injustice calling for restitution of the order in the drama of Euripides, and secondly by comparing and contrasting these with corresponding sections in the work of Sophocles. Two principles will condition the treatment of the relevant sections in the *Electra* of Euripides, viz. their genre-dependence and their dramatic function within the whole. These principles are self-evident, but perhaps require explication. The sections will firstly be treated as part of the introductory "sub-genre" of Attic tragedy called prologue and *parodos*, which by convention has the fixed function of introducing the audience to the imminent dramatic action;⁵ the sections will secondly be treated in relation to their dramatic function within a self-contained and original whole. The principle of genre-dependence has been followed also in the comparative part of the study, inasmuch as the sections from Sophocles selected for the purpose of comparison have been chosen on the basis of their close generic correspondence with those from Euripides, permitting observation of both similarities and differences between the two poets.⁶ It is not the purpose of the comparative component of the study to establish either the influence of one poet on another or the interdependence of the two works; if the axis for the interpretation has been properly laid down and has proved instructive in this study, it should generate sufficient light for further reflection on such questions.

The sections motivating the necessity for vengeance by the character of Electra appear in a complex introductory whole requiring a brief outline for the sake of clarity. The dramatic opening is extensive, since it introduces incisive changes in the traditional myth concerning the setting and circumstances of the main event. The place of action is not the palace of Argos as in Aeschylus and Sophocles, but the country cottage of Autourgus, a peasant to whom Electra has been given in marriage. This dramatic situation unfolds in three scenes of verse spoken in iambic trimeter, and two scenes of verse sung in lyrical metre:

The iambic section of the prologue (1-111)

- (1) Enters Autourgus and in narrative epic style delivers a *rhesis* or set speech with the factual background to the action: on his return from Troy Agamemnon was treacherously killed by Clytaemestra and her paramour, Aegisthus (1-13); Orestes was saved from death by a paedagogus who secretly sent him, while still a baby, to Strophius in Phocaea (15-18); Electra remained in the palace and when noble suitors for her hand arrived, Aegisthus threatened to kill her, but Clytaemestra intervened (19-30); Aegisthus thereupon devised the following scheme to forestall

⁵ The various "sub-genres" or "Bauformen" developed by Attic tragedy are separately discussed in a number of excellent studies stimulated and collected by W. Jens; in this collection the introduction to Attic drama is discussed by Schmidt (1971:1-46). For the treatment of the prologue and *parodos* as a combined unit see (Schmidt 1971:1-2). Erbse has recently published an excellent work on the function of the prologue in Euripides (1984). This work includes a comprehensive survey of both ancient and modern critical views concerning the prologue of Euripides (Erbse 1984:1-19). With Erbse (1984:20) the name "prologue" is applied only to the introductory *rhesis* of Euripidean tragedy, in contrast with Schmidt, who calls the introductory *rhesis* "Prooem", and the entire iambic section preceding the *parodos* "prologue".

⁶ For criticism of an approach not based on this methodological principle see footnotes 10 and 12 below.

vengeance: a prize was put on Orestes' head, and Electra was given in marriage to Autourgus, a poor but noble peasant, who has out of respect not touched his "bride" (31-53);

- (2) Enters Electra and a scene dramatically demonstrating both her existence as a peasant and the loyal support of Autourgus now follows (54-81).
- (3) Enter Orestes and Pylades initiating the *anagnorisis* action, i.e. the portrayal of the recognition between Orestes and Electra, which will extend over the first half of the play. In a *rhetic* directed to Pylades Orestes explains that he has arrived in Argos to exact vengeance for the murder of his father and is looking for his sister to enlist her help (82-103); when they see Electra returning they hide on the stage (104-111).

The lyrical section of the prologue (112-212)

The two lyrical scenes repeat in the more emotional mode of lyrics the information we have received in the previous scenes spoken in iambic trimeter:

- (1) In a monody Electra's sorrow is again represented directly by herself when she laments her own and her father's fate (112-166).
- (2) In the *parodos* Electra's suffering is underlined when she refuses the invitation of a Chorus of Argive women to join them in celebrating a festival of Hera (167-212).

Two sections dominated by the character of Electra are pertinent to the problem treated in this article: the iambic section under (2), following the *rhetic* of Autourgus, viz. verses 54-81 and the entire lyrical section under (1) and (2), following the *rhetic* of Orestes, viz. verses 112-212.

1. The iambic section (54-81) and Electra's monody (112-166)

The dramatic function of the iambic section is clearly marked by its position within the introductory scenes. The *rhetic* of Autourgus introduces the state of injustice calling for restitution without any subjective judgement;⁸ thus it forms the objective basis for judging the iambic passage now following and dramatically portraying Electra's perception of the theme announced by Autourgus. The translation of this section is presented first.⁹

⁷ Aeolic metre forms the basis of both the monody and the *parodos* whereby the close unity of the two sections is expressed: Schmidt (1971:16; see also p.41).

⁸ Autourgos offers a moral judgement only on a matter affecting him personally, i.e. his abstaining from sexual approaches to Electra (43-53). For Euripides' choice to employ Autourgos rather than Electra as speaker of the prologue, since only he is able to provide us with an objective account see Erbse (1984:158).

⁹ For the sake of greater accessibility only the English translation of the texts treated is provided in this paper. For those wishing to consult the original exact verse references are given to the Greek text. The transmitted sequence of verses 54-59 is followed with the text of Murray; thereafter the text of the new Oxford edition by J. Diggle is used. Diggle inserts verse 59 before 57-58, "but 57-58 seem to explain the water-carrying, not the lamentations" (Cropp 1988: *ad loc*). Similarly in a full discussion Erbse (1984:163f.) who explains that Electra's intention is given in two sections ("and I go for", "and I send forth") between which 57-58 is a parenthesis. The translation offered above is that of Cropp, but his rendering of 57ff. has been adapted for the purpose of accommodating the transmitted sequence of the lines. (In his parallel translation Cropp is forced to translate the sequence of Diggle).

Electra

O sombre Night, nurse of the golden stars,
wherein I bear this pitcher, set here on my head,
and go for water from the stream -
not that I have come to this degree of want,
but to exhibit to the gods Aegisthus' hybris -
and I send forth into the broad Heaven laments for my father.
For the fiendish child of Tyndareus, my mother,
cast me from home, as a favour to her husband,
and getting other children with Aegisthus,
robs Orestes and me of our status in the house.

55

Peasant

Why is it, unhappy one, you labour so for my sake,
accepting toils though finely raised before,
and do not refrain from them though I tell you?

65

El.

As a friend I rate you equal to the gods.
You have not taken advantage of my troubles.
It is a great blessing for mortals
to find a healer of an evil plight, as I am finding in you.
So even unbidden I ought, so far as I have strength,
to share your toil with you and lighten your labours,
so you may more easily bear them. You have enough
in the outdoor tasks; my job is to keep things in the house
in order. A worker coming in
from outside likes to find things properly set up within.

70

75

Pe.

Well, if you think so, go on - in fact the stream is not far
from this dwelling of ours. At daybreak I'll put
the oxen to the field and sow the furrows.
No one, you know, can gather a living in idleness,
just by keeping the gods on his lips,

80

without toil as well.

The iambic monologue of Electra dramatises the information imparted by Autourgus, but is nevertheless remarkable for its lack of focus. Electra opens the monologue on a dramatic note with the apostrophe "O sombre Night ..." (54). However, she does not call on "sombre night" to give ear to her lamentations; on the contrary, when she proceeds to describe her present activity ("wherein I bear ..." - 55), the element is immediately abandoned as the partner of her intended dialogue. The realistic description disrupts the invocation, with the result that dramatic intensification is abruptly checked. Moreover, the brusque parenthetic explanation ("not that I ... hybris" 57-58), stating her purpose of demonstrating the hybris of Aegisthus, again arrests the natural flow of thought. The result is that the conclusion of the monologue, announcing the lamentations to her father (59), and specifying the nature of the hybris (60-63), does not form a proper climax to the monologue. What is the function of the decline in dramatic tension, and, more particularly, what does it imply concerning the portrayal of Electra?

The absence of a prayer after the invocation reveals that Electra does not intend to direct an appeal to the deities for assistance in her suffering; it suggests that she does not really expect any help from them. The parenthesis explains that it is not necessary for her to perform these tasks, but that another purpose motivates her action, viz. to demonstrate to the gods the hybris

of Aegisthus. However, when the nature of the hybris is defined in the final part of the monologue (observe "For" - 60), Clytaemestra emerges as the guilty party: Clytaemestra has banned Electra from the palace, is begetting other children with Aegisthus, and is treating her and Orestes as strangers of the house (60-63). The final verses are calculated to convey a subjective interpretation of the clemency shown by Clytaemestra when she saved Electra from death by Aegisthus' hand (27-30, 34ff.) From the Peasant we learnt that the marriage is the more humane compromise; in the distorted view of Electra it is a favour done to Aegisthus by Clytaemestra (61).¹⁰ Thus the monologue expresses both an ambivalent attitude towards the gods and a distorted perception of Clytaemestra. Electra demonstrates her humiliation to the gods, but regards them with an attitude of resignation inasmuch as she does not even invoke them; she gives an exaggerated exposition of her hostile treatment by Clytaemestra, proving that she reacts to her mother with unfounded bitterness.

The dialogue which ensues (64-81) on Autourgus addressing Electra, dramatically establishes two preceding themes, viz. the loyal support of Autourgus and the lack of necessity for Electra to perform the task of fetching water. The dramatic representation of these themes serves firstly to show that Electra is not alone in her suffering (see especially 67-70), and secondly to cast new light on her motives for publicly performing household duties. A new motive, complementing what we have heard in the monologue, is now added, viz. the desire to express her gratitude towards Autourgus by making his tasks easier (71-76). These verses explain that Electra is indeed motivated by gratitude towards Autourgus, but that by performing these duties, she is creating the opportunity to express the inner need of displaying to the gods her unworthy condition. The demonstration proper is represented in the monody (112-166) after Orestes has entered and hidden on the stage. The translation of the monody now follows.

El.

Hasten on (for it is time) your urgent step; O,
press on, press on in lamentation.

[Strophe I]

Ay me, me!

115

I was begotten of Agamemnon,
and she who bore me was Clytemnestra,
the hated child of Tyndareus.

I am known as poor Electra
amongst the people.

Alas, alas for my hard toils,
my hateful life,

120

And you, my father, Agamemnon,
lie in Hades, slaughtered by your
wife and Aegisthus.

Come, rouse the same lament,
stir up the pleasure that comes from many tears.
Hasten on (for it is time) your urgent step; O,
I press on, press on in lamentation.

[Mesode I]

126

Antistr. I

Ay me, me!

What city, what home, O
suffering brother of mine, do you wander,
leaving in these ancestral chambers
your sister, piteous in her
most grievous plight?

130

May you come, a liberator from toils
for me in my misery -
O Zeus, Zeus! - and for our father

135

¹⁰ See Appendix.

an avenger of that most shameful bloodshed; may you
run your wanderer's way ashore at Argos!

Take this vessel from my head and set it
down, so I may raise high these
night-cries for my father.

[*Strophe 2*

141

*A wail, a song, a chant
of Hades, father, for you*...
down through the earth I utter the cries
with which continually day by day
I pine, slashing with nails
this throat of mine,
beating hand against shorn head
for sorrow at your death.

145

Ah, Ah, tear my head,
And as some moaning swan
by river's streams
calls to its dearest father,
perished now in the guileful corded
net, so do I lament
for you, poor father,

Mesode 2

151

washed with those final waters upon your flesh
in a most pitiable repose of death.

Antistr. 2

Ay me, ay me,
for the bitter cut of the axe
upon you, father, the bitter
planning of your return from Troy.
Not with ribbands did your wife
receive you, nor with wreaths.
To the two-edged sword of Aegisthus
she delivered you, to foul outrage; and so
she got her guileful husband.

160

165

The lamentations of the monody are structured in two strophic pairs (112-124 - 127-139 and 140-149 - 157-166), which are each separated by a mesode (the first pair by 125f.; the second by 150-156). The strophe of the first pair opens with self-exhortations to Electra followed by a brief lament (112-114), develops into an elaborate self-introduction (115-121), and concludes with an invocation of Agamemnon (122-124); the antistrophe "answers" the opening of the strophe by a repetition of its first three lines (127-129), an "introduction" to Orestes' plight conveyed through Electra's mournful calling on her brother (130-134), and a plea for his help (135-139). The second strophic pair presents the lamentations for Agamemnon. After being introduced and intensified by gestures of mourning in the strophe (140-148), they finally follow in the antistrophe (157-166).

What does the character of Electra presented during the monody contribute towards the representation of the necessity for vengeance? A striking feature of this monody is the peculiar self-exhortations to mourn, sometimes emphatically repeated: 112-114 = 127-129; 125f.; 140ff.; 150. Such repeated self-exhortations are certainly not a spontaneous expression of sorrow; they belong to the language of ritual, where their function is to exalt the worshipper to an emotional state appropriate to spiritual communion and identification with the divinity.¹¹ Thus the self-exhortations are calculated by Electra to act as a spiritual

¹¹ Compare, for example, the exhortation *ἴτε Βάκχαι, ίτε Βάκχαι* ("come Bacchae, come Bacchae!") in *Bacchae* 83f. = 152f. and *βρύνετε βρύνετε* ("flourish, flourish!") in *ibid.* 107 with Dodds (1944: *ad loc.*). See also Barrett (1964: *ad Hipp.* 58-60).

preparation for the lamentations for her father in the second strophic pair. But if there is no urgency in her lamentations, what is the true nature of Electra's suffering?

The long self-introduction at the start of the monody is relevant to this question. Here she is introduced as "poor Electra", because of her "hard toils" and "hateful life" (119ff.). The suffering appears to revolve primarily around her life as a peasant. The treatment of the absence of Orestes in the first antistrophe confirms this impression. The existence of Orestes in some foreign country forms the theme of the antistrophe (130ff.), a theme corresponding with the sombre representation of Electra's own sorrow in the strophe (115ff.). It is remarkable that even here Orestes' suffering is not treated absolutely, but only in relation to Electra's own desolation (see 132-134 and observe the exaggeration).¹² The wish that Orestes should return is furthermore not motivated primarily by vengeance for the original crime: Orestes is first called on as liberator from her toils (135-136), and only afterwards as avenger. Liberation from her own suffering is clearly foremost in Electra's mind. However, the lamentations for her father in the second strophic pair clearly express the emotional intensification of the monody. These are accompanied by gestures of ritual mourning (140-149) and culminate in a vivid description of the original crime (157-166). Still, they follow only after Electra has aroused herself into a state of mourning; moreover, the absence of a prayer to the gods for assistance in punishing the murderers of Agamemnon in these lamentations is notable. The monody does thus not convey an intense and urgent sense of need on the part of Electra; it rather depicts an attitude of resignation to suffering which is in marked contrast with the reality that Orestes, having come from Apollo's temple with the purpose of requiting his father's murderers with murder (87-89), is already present on the stage to offer assistance. How do the sections discussed compare with corresponding parts in Sophocles' *Electra*?

The monody of the main character of Sophocles' drama, uttered on her first appearance on the stage (86-120), is relevant to this purpose. It corresponds very closely to the parts discussed above. In Sophocles' *Electra* Orestes has also returned to Argos and has announced vengeance, but he departs from the stage to offer libations at his father's grave (1-85), before Electra makes her entrance. Thus Electra is here too unaware of his return and her monody, in representing the necessity for vengeance, forms the exact correlate of the sections discussed in the play of Euripides. A translation of the monody now follows.

Electra

O holy light, and air
That shares the world with earth.
How many songs of lamentation you have heard,
How many blows that strike my bloody breast,
Whenever the mists of night have failed.
The hateful couches of this wretched house
Know well the rites of my night-long watches

90

¹² Lloyd (1986:4-5) and Cropp (1988: 108) attempt to moderate the view that Electra is characterised as "self-absorbed" in this monody on the basis that it is a *γέος* (lamentation) which conventionally expresses the personal loss of the speaker. Cropp adduces Homeric and Lloyd Euripidean examples of such expressions in support of their view. However, Cropp's Homeric examples are not strictly parallel: they express fresh grief in view of supposed (*Od.* 4.722ff.), or real sudden death (the Iliadic examples), or the self-centred suffering has a dramatic function (thus *Od.* 14.137ff. establishes the loyalty of Eumeus towards Odysseus). Lloyd's Euripidean examples similarly express spontaneous sorrow directly after or before (thus *I&A* 1276ff.) the bereavement of a loved one. The monody of Electra, by contrast, is a formal, well-rehearsed *γέος*, honouring Agamemnon as "Heros" (Schadewaldt 1966:159f.), which cannot be regarded as spontaneous: "So stellt sich die Monodie der Elektra (112ff.) im wesentlichen in dem 'schönen' lyrischen Stil dar, der Klang und Stimmung sucht, den Impuls aber meidet" (p.159).

As I lament my ill-starred father. The bloody war-god in a foreign land- It was not he who took Agamemnon in; It was my mother and the man who shares her bed, Aegisthus. They, like woodsmen splitting oaks, Split that head with bloody axe.	95
And pity for his fate surges From no one, only me, though you, my father Are shamefully and pitifully dead. Never shall I cease from lamentation, Never from hateful groan, while I still see Heaven filled with quivering flash of stars, While I still see this very light of day.	100
No, like the nightingale mourning her child I shall pour forth to all before these doors, My father's doors, an echoing wail. O house of Hades and Persephone,	105
Underworld Hermes, and Curse, proud goddess, Furies, lofty children of the gods, Who see whenever men unjustly die, Who see whenever treachery stains their beds,	110
Come help me now; take vengeance on My father's murderer; send me my brother here. Alone I can no longer find the strength To lift the countervailing weight of pain. ¹³	115
	120

The monody is a transparent structure with a clear dramatic focus. It culminates in the urgent invocations at the conclusion, motivated by Electra's inability to continue to bear the burden of suffering (110-120). The element of time is employed as a structural principle dividing the monody into two sections (respectively 86-102 and 103-120). The act, content and cause of the lament is given in the first section - after depicting her lamentations as present and continuous in time (86-95a), Electra provides a flashback to the crime of the past on the grounds that she alone keeps alive its memory (95b-102); the continuation and purpose of her lament, drawing attention the future, follows in the second section - after vividly comparing her continued cries to a mythical expression of wailing incarnate (103-109),¹⁴ she directs an impassioned appeal to the nether powers responsible for exacting vengeance for the crime,¹⁵ since she is at the critical point of her suffering (110-120).

The main themes of the lament may be summarised as follows: Electra is lamenting alone in a forgetful world, and is portrayed at the critical point of her ability to suffer. The content of her lamentation defines the nature of her anguish - Agamemnon did not die a brave death at Troy, but was shamefully killed by Clytaemestra and her paramour. Thus moral and existential suffering are inextricably combined in the portrayal of this Electra. Nothing is said about her individual and subjective agony, but her sorrow derives solely from the unavenged crime, and this moral suffering forms the very essence of her being.

¹³ The Oxford text edited by Pearson is printed above; the translation is by Sale (1973).

¹⁴ The comparison with Procne, wailing eternally in the transformed form of a nightingale after slaying her son Itus, lends perpetual mythical dignity to Electra's mourning.

¹⁵ The nether powers are first called generally ("house of Hades ..." - 110), then more specifically ("Underworld Hermes, and Curse ..." - 111: "Underworld Hermes" as the steward of the underworld powers, "Curse, proud goddess" as the unactivated curse of the victim on his murderers), and finally directly ("Furies" - 112 since they not only activate "Curse", but also are responsible for punishing both the murderers of kin and adulterers). The three imperatives follow (115), since one calls on the powers associated with the dead thrice: von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf (1959: *ad HF* 494).

The similarities and contrasts between the monody in Sophocles Electra and the relevant sections in Euripides' play are obvious. Comparable themes are the invocations, the absence of Orestes, and the lamentations. Yet the treatment of these themes underlines the fundamental differences between the two poets. Firstly, the invocations in Sophocles develop into an intense appeal to the avenging deities, whereas the call on "sombre night" in Euripides is left in abeyance; secondly, in Sophocles the call for Orestes as liberator and avenger forms the culmination of a prayer for vengeance, since liberation from the agony of solitary suffering is imperative, whereas in Euripides the plea for this character to appear as liberator from personal suffering has precedence, although no great urgency for liberation is conveyed; finally, the continued lamentations concerned with the murder of Agamemnon form the very essence of the sorrow in Sophocles, whereas they lack both spontaneity and intensity in Euripides.

To conclude, in contrast with the lamentations in the Sophoclean work, whose sole purpose is to keep alive the memory of the original crime, those of the Euripidean play express a strong concentration on the personal condition of Electra, which is an indirect consequence of the murder of Agamemnon. Moreover, unlike the expression of sorrow portrayed in Sophocles, the utterances of Euripides' Electra are no spontaneous outbreak of inner anguish. They are strictly composed, they are isolated for their own sake and not dramatised, as in Sophocles, but ritualised. Electra's daily situation is represented as an end in itself, and she is not shown at the critical point of suffering, which would make revenge imperative. The question whether the *parodos* confirms these observations may now be briefly discussed.

2. The *parodos* (167-212)

Discussion of this lyrical section is again introduced by the translation of the Greek text.

Chorus.

O child of Agamemnon, Electra, I have come
to visit this rustic dwelling of yours.
There came, there came a Mycenaean man,
milk-drinking, mountain-going.
In Argos, he reports, they are proclaiming
a sacrifice two days from now;
the maidens one and all
will go in procession to Hera.

/Strophe

170

El.
No fineries, my friends,
no golden necklaces
give flight to my wretched
heart; nor setting dances
along with the brides of Argos
shall I pound out my whirling step.
In tears I spend my nights, tears are my sorrowful
care day after day.
Observe my sordid hair,
this filthy clothing of mine;
see if they are seemly for Agamemnon's
royal child,
for Troy which does not forget
her conquest by my father.

175

180

185

Cho.

Great is the goddess; come now, and borrow from me
close-woven robes to put on,
and golden adornments for the graceful finery.

Antistr.

191

Do you suppose that tears alone
will bring you triumph over your foes,
while you neglect the gods? No, prayers
and reverence to the gods, not groans,
will bring about your day of joy, my child.

195

El.

None of the gods hearkens to the voice
of this ill-fated one, nor to my
father's slaughter long ago.
Alas for him who perished,
and for him who lives a wanderer,
who abides in some other land,
wandering in misery to a hireling hearth,
though sprung from that glorious father.
And I am dwelling in a labourer's
house, my soul wasting away,
a fugitive from my ancestral home,
up amongst mountain scarps,
while my mother lives joined in murderous
wedlock with another.

200

205

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The strophe and antistrophe of this *parodos* correspond closely in both metre and division of lines. Both open with an exhortation on the part of the Chorus (167-174 - 190-197) and conclude with a refusal on the part of Electra (175-189 - 198-212).

In the verses opening the strophe the Chorus attempts to create an attractive situation by announcing a festival of Hera, thereby implying that Electra must attend! Electra rejects the suggestion with an extended abnegation (festive "fineries" or "golden necklaces" do not excite her, nor will she lead a choral dance of brides - 175-180) and a concise assertion concerning her sorrow (her life is daily filled with mourning - 181f.). Yet she does not explain the nature of her anguish, but immediately proceeds to draw attention to her neglected appearance, thereby creating a strong contrast between festive attire and her own shabbiness which belies her noble descent (184ff.). In the opening of the antistrophe the Chorus, offering Electra clothes appropriate to the festival, encourage her to do honour to the gods in order to overcome her enemies (190ff.). However, Electra responds negatively with themes which have already become familiar: she now explicitly states that none of the gods gives heed to either her prayers or the murder of Agamemnon (198-200), continues by lamenting the fate of her father, of her brother (201-206), and concludes with her own dismal state of poverty in banishment from her paternal house, contrasting this with the "murderous" relationship of her mother (207-212).

The theme introducing the *amoibaion* of the *parodos* comes as a slight surprise in so far as it is not fully integrated into the dramatic exposition; the exhortation to attend the festival of Hera constitutes a reality extraneous to the dramatic situation. Why does the poet introduce this theme into the *parodos*? Firstly, the immediate and spontaneous response of Electra, combined with the lingering on her neglected appearance, offer the reason for this: the trappings of celebrations do not excite her.¹⁶ The emphasis is not lost on the Chorus, as its offer of suitable clothes proves, and even if Electra proceeds to the fate of her father and

¹⁶ See Denniston (1939: ad El. 175-177): "A festival, for a woman, at once suggests the question, 'What shall I wear?' Electra says in effect: 'I care nothing for fine clothes, and I have none to wear. Look at these rags'". The significance of this *motif* is denied by both Lloyd (1986:6) and Seaford (1985:319 footnote 38) quoted with approval by Cropp (1988:112) who argues that Electra's state of mourning is the real reason for her refusal to which the clothes come as an additional motive. See further note 17 below.

brother, she nevertheless concludes with her own poverty. Thus the festival of Hera is introduced into the exposition to produce a concentration on the external nature of Electra's suffering.¹⁷ This conclusion is confirmed by a comparison with the *parodos* of Sophocles' *Electra* (121-250). (Space does not allow full quotation of this passage, but a brief paraphrase highlighting its main themes will suffice.)

The *parodos* in Sophocles corresponds with that of Euripides both in form - it is an *amoibaion* or lyrical exchange between Chorus and Electra structured in strophic pairs (here more extensively structured in three strophic pairs, concluded by an epode) - and in function - it takes up the themes of the preceding monody. However, it differs from the *parodos* of Euripides in its close association with the monody; the *amoibaion* develops two particular themes introduced in the preceding song: Electra's despair, resulting from her solitary effort to maintain recollection of the original crime, and her hope for redemption by Orestes as instrument of the gods.

The lyrical exchange opens the first strophic pair as the Chorus addresses Electra with a gentle tone of criticism in the question "with what kind of endless and insatiate sorrow" she is "wasting away" (122f.), but it suppresses the implied censure with a strong condemnation of the original crime causing her anguish (124-127). Electra responds positively to the benevolent effort but, not missing the tone of criticism, forcefully pleads with the Chorus to bear with her persistence in sorrow (129-136). This interaction sets the basis for terrific dialectical tension in the *amoibaion* of this *parodos*. The Chorus and Electra have great goodwill and understanding for each other, and yet they fail to overcome the fundamental differences separating them. The Chorus starts attempting to moderate Electra's grief by urging the senselessness of her suffering, as this cannot restore her father to life (137-144). The theme of comfort is conventional, and typical of the rational, realistic Chorus, but it betrays a misunderstanding of Electra's purpose. One wishes for the restoration to life of a dead person when sorrow is new, directly after the death of a loved one; does Electra want this? She responds by saying that it is unseemly to forget parents who have died "pitifully" (145), affirming through extravagant mythical examples that her will to suffer and her actual suffering constitute her very being (147-152).¹⁸

The Chorus opens the second strophic pair with the theme of comfort that Electra is not alone in her suffering, attempting to lend force to this by the examples of her sisters, Chrysothemis and Iphianassa, who embody moderation, and her brother, Orestes, who symbolises the hope for redemption (153-163). At the mention of Orestes Electra for the first time dwells on her individual fate, as she is reminded of the suffering she has been forced to bring upon herself in indefatigable waiting (164-172). Two opposed approaches concerning Orestes mould the thinking of the Chorus and Electra: the Chorus concludes that Orestes is coming and that she must therefore not suffer so excessively; Electra concludes that he is not coming, and that she must therefore suffer all the more. In view of her doubt and despair the Chorus attempts to reassure Electra by reminding her that Zeus who oversees everything does not forget, nor Hades, and that Orestes will return (173-184). Now the motif that she no longer has strength recurs with an emphatic illustration of her daily existence and appearance (185-192).

¹⁷ Cropp (see footnote 16 above) believes that the function of the Chorus is to form "part of the ordinary-life background to El.'s unnatural state of extended mourning, 'exile' and unconsummated marriage". His view represents a serious attempt to come to terms with the Chorus' function. Yet it explains only in general terms why the Hera-festival is introduced here. The concentration on external appearances in the *parodos* is too striking to be ignored and must be directly related to the function of the *amoibaion*, i.e. to stress the external nature Electra's suffering.

¹⁸ The mythical examples are depicted as ideal beings to enhance the quality of Electra's suffering: Schadewaldt (1966:73).

In the final strophic pair the Chorus refrains from further attempts at comforting Electra, and starts with lamentations for the dead Agamemnon, thereby approaching her view more closely than during their consolatory commonplaces (193-200). Electra responds with intense lamentations culminating in the prayer that the murderers should suffer vengeance (201-212). Hereafter the Chorus again distances itself from her position, resorting to its previous practical advice of moderation (213-220); but Electra refuses to abandon excessive lamentation on the ground that the excess of the past crime justifies the degree of her anguish; and she now finally begs the Chorus to desist from trying to persuade her (221-232).

The epode (233-250) repeats the themes previously treated with a universalisation: Electra concludes that if her father were to be unavenged there would be no "respect" and no "piety" (*αἰδώς* and *εὐσέβεια*) amongst mortals (349f.).

The above discussion illustrates the profound differences between the Sophoclean and Euripidean *parodos*. Whereas the theme of the exhortation in Sophocles is directly related to the intensity and nature of Electra's lamentations about the killing of Agamemnon, that of the *amoibaion* in Euripides is not motivated by a situation directly relevant to the original crime. The change in theme has significant consequences for the various developments of thought in the two *parodoi*. Whereas the Chorus' advice to show moderation in Sophocles highlights the suffering of the exceptional individual, its invitation to a festival in Euripides produces a marked externalisation of suffering. A strong contrast thus emerges between the nature of the suffering of the two main characters: whereas inner moral suffering forms the substance of Electra's sorrow in Sophocles, a clear emphasis on external appearances may be observed in the suffering of Electra in Euripides. The differences in exposition may be assessed properly only if viewed in the light of the two tragedies as a whole.

The exposition in Sophocles follows after Orestes has arrived and the plan to exact vengeance has already been announced. He in fact hears Electra's cries within the house, but is forced away by the stratagem (80-85). The interlocking scenes create dramatic situation of terrific irony stemming from the discrepancy between reality and illusion. Orestes has already arrived to redeem Electra; moreover, he has almost come directly face to face with her. However, he is again separated from her, so that she remains under the illusion that he is still absent. The result of this physical separation is that brother and sister later do not recognise each other (110ff.).

The whole drama unfolds against the background of the irony mentioned. The exposition serves the purpose of portraying Electra at the very limit of her ability to suffer. On the one hand, she no longer has the inner strength to maintain her purpose of keeping alive the memory of the original crime; on the other, the external threat of being locked up in a dungeon is later added to her anguish (378-384). Furthermore she is thrown into the depths of despair by the nature and dramatic portrayal of the stratagem of the unrecognized avenger: after an ominous dream Clytaemestra pours libation offerings, utters a prayer to avert evil from herself, and immediately the false message that Orestes is dead is introduced into the dramatic situation as an ironic answer to the supplication (634-822). The despair of Electra now reaches such a high point that it makes possible the solution: her anguish leads to the *anagnorisis* or recognition between herself and Orestes when the latter arrives pretending to be a stranger who is bringing the ashes of her brother, but realizes, through her reactions, that the woman facing him at the Argive palace is his sister. Electra thus firstly becomes a victim of the intrigue, whereby she is thrown into such despair that the *anagnorisis*, introducing her liberation from anguish, forms the climax of the play (1098-1287).

The actions and reactions of Electra are the result of an individual moral choice and not of the activity of daemonic and divine powers. Her fate may be seen as the almost futile effort of the noble mind to assert itself in a corrupt world. It is extremely ironical that her very nobility threatens to destroy her. Yet another level of irony is developed in counterpoint to this

ironical key-note. The gods are already helping and restoring the just order; thus, in a sense, her suffering becomes the final test of her nobility.

In the drama of Euripides the appearance and presence of Orestes on the stage also creates ironic effects, though very different from those of Sophocles. Orestes' presence arouses an expectation on the part of the audience that the recognition between brother and sister is imminent, but the poet delays this until 577-589. Hereafter the vengeance unfolds in a clear antithesis: the killing of Aegisthus ends with a song of victory celebrating the triumph of δίκη or "justice" (860-958); the killing of Clytaemestra ends with lamentations opened by Orestes' intense self-accusatory invocation of the elements to observe the defilement he and his sister have brought upon themselves (1177-1232). The exposition of the iambic section introducing the dramatic action represents Electra in an everyday action, as demonstration of the narrative of Autourgus. This representation is related only loosely to the trend of the drama, which constitutes the deed of revenge, and as a preliminary step to this, the *anagnorisis*. The purpose of Electra's everyday action is to demonstrate her "unworthy" fate, as well as her relation to her husband before her lyrical lamentations. Now Orestes and Pylades appear to start the liberating action, and Electra's suffering in the monody and *parodos* is represented against this preparation.

The changed habitation of Electra has consequences for the nature of her suffering, as is evidenced by the exposition of her suffering. It has the result that she no longer has to observe the continuation of the unjust world in which she is living, but the deed of injustice exists merely in her memory. Thus her lamentations are not dramatised but ritualised, her suffering is more strongly individualised, and becomes more subjective than that of Sophocles' Electra. Thereby the absolute necessity for the revenge becomes relative, and indeed weakens. Viewed in the structure of the tragedy as a whole, the reason for this characterisation is transparent. Euripides wishes to make a problem of the deed of matricide; for this reason the depiction of Electra stresses the negative element of the vengeance portrayed in this drama, an aspect to which Electra is blind until the matricide has been committed.

The above discussion illustrates the tremendous freedom and originality of approach followed by the poets when dramatising the same myth, even when the introduction to the main action of the drama follows fixed traditions. Sophocles and Euripides both employ the various forms of exposition with sovereign control to suit their own, individual purposes. Both works appear so original that it is impossible to decide which was the "model". The present discussion raises only further questions concerning this problem. Did Euripides inhibit the dramatic force of the expositional forms manifest in those of Sophocles in a conscious effort to create a new drama, with the rationalistic purpose of showing how matricide becomes both possible and repugnant? Did Sophocles, reacting to the low dramatic key of the expositional sections of Euripides, fill them with emotional life to create the existential potential of an exceptional individual in a corrupt world as a paradigm adumbrating the problems of matricide? It is hoped that the comparative approach followed above has set these questions into a new perspective.

APPENDIX

In recent scholarly literature reaction has come against the view that the poet intends to convey a negative portrayal of Electra: Erbse (1984: 162f., 167f., 172f.) and Cropp (1988:xxxv-xxxviii, *ad* 54-81). Verses 61 and 58 are adduced in support of this view: Erbse (p.162) maintains that Electra in 61 correctly makes her mother responsible for the humiliating marriage, since Clytaemestra tolerated this, despite the fact that she, not Aegisthus, rules the house - he quotes of 932f. in support of this view; Cropp (*ad* 58), following Lloyd (1986:3), believes that Electra demonstrates the hybris done to her not merely on account of self-indulgence, but because she is forced to publicly perform a quasi-legal exhibition of her suffering in order to elicit redress.

The view of Erbse can hardly be correct. The audience at 61 cannot know what Electra is going to say about the nature of the relationship between Clytaemestra and Aegisthus at 932f.; at this point it can judge Electra's utterances only by the *rhetic* of Autourgus who has stated that Clytaemestra "saved" Electra from Aegisthus' hand (28). Nor can the view of Lloyd and Cropp be correct. The examples adduced by Lloyd to establish the quasi-legal nature of Electra's utterances are not parallel to the intention of her monologue. Those examples belong to the custom of raising the *βοή* ("cry of alarm") to the men of the community after violent treatment with the primary purpose of moving them to come and defend one (*βοηδρομεῖν* - "run in response to the cry of alarm"), and the secondary aim of obtaining these men as witnesses to attest to the injury done to one. Examples of the cry may be found in Fraenkel (1950: *ad* Aesch. Ag. 1317) cited, but misunderstood by Lloyd, and some are collected by Barrett (1964: *ad* Eur. Hipp. 884). A full discussion of the Indo-Germanic habit of raising a "Notruf" is in Schulze (1966:160-189, especially 182f.). These pages are quoted also by Lloyd, followed by Cropp, but they are not relevant to Electra's invocation of the elements. Observe that even when the gods are included in the *βοή*, the cry is raised when there is the threat of an act of physical violence: see the examples quoted in Schulze (1966: 183-186 and cf. Schadewaldt 1966:68, footnote 2). Morphologically Electra's iambic passage belongs to the genre of 'self-expression' in the form of an invocation, as emerges from the systematic treatment of Schadewaldt (1966): in Aeschylus invocations represent expressions of great emotional stress (pp.37-54), but they express a gradual decline in the degree of tension from Sophocles (pp.69-77) to Euripides (pp.101-122). Sophocles favours the invocations of the elements as a form of "self-expression" (pp.64-69), whereas Euripides employs these for various dramatic purposes (p.111ff.). The present invocation, like many which open prologue speeches, has simply become stereotyped: p.99f. In 1177 *infra*, in clear contrast with Electra's opening verse, this type of invocation retains its full force when Orestes, in intense horror at the deed he committed, calls on the elements to witness his matricide.

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