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THE *ELECTRA* OF SOPHOCLES

CHARLES PAUL SEGAL

I

Despite the Parthenon-like solidity and monolithic unity often attributed to the work of Sophocles, his *Electra* is a play of inversions and reversals.¹ For this reason it is a difficult play. The ground shifts under our feet from one scene to the next. For the same reason there has been little agreement on the meaning or even on the fundamental issue of whether its tone is one of hope and confidence or one of pessimism. Indeed, it is hard to find two critics who agree on all major points.² One commentator has described the play as “sombre

¹ It is a pleasure to acknowledge my thanks to several scholars for friendly advice and criticism: to Dr. Thomas Woodard for patiently and generously discussing with me some of the large general problems of the meaning of the play and for making available to me in advance of publication the second part of his valuable study; to Professor Bernard M. W. Knox, Director of the Center for Hellenic Studies, for the opportunity to present a part of my interpretation as a lecture at the Center and discuss it with a gifted group of Fellows of the Center, under the expert guidance of Professor Knox; to Professor Cedric Whitman of Harvard for taking the time and trouble to read and comment on a long manuscript; and, by no means least, to the Association's anonymous referee for providing a thoughtful and most conscientious critique which improved the paper at several points.

I shall make use of the following abbreviations: **Jebb**: Sir Richard C. Jebb, *Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments, Part VI, The Electra* (Cambridge 1894). **Kaibel**: G. Kaibel, *Sophokles Elektra* (Leipzig 1896). **Sheppard (I)**: J. T. Sheppard, “The Tragedy of Electra, According to Sophocles,” *CQ* 12 (1918) 80–88. **Sheppard (II)**: J. T. Sheppard, “*Electra*: A Defense of Sophocles,” *CR* 41 (1927) 2–9. **Sheppard (III)**: J. T. Sheppard, “*Electra* Again,” *CR* 41 (1927) 163–65. **Woodard (I)**: Thomas M. Woodard, “*Electra* by Sophocles: the Dialectical Design,” *HSCP* 68 (1964) 163–205. **Woodard (II)**: Thomas M. Woodard, *idem*, part 2, *HSCP* 70 (1965) 195–233. The excellent study of Holger Friis Johansen, “Die Elektra des Sophokles—Versuch einer neuen Deutung,” *Classica et Mediaevalia* 25 (1964) 8–32, came to my attention unfortunately only after my essay had already been prepared for the press. With Johansen's general interpretation of the play and his treatment of Electra's character (pp. 23–24 and 31–32) I feel much in accord.

² For a brief review of the diversity of opinion see R. W. Corrigan, “The ‘Electra’” 16 + T.P. 97

and unrelieved beyond any other play of Sophocles,"³ while another finds it "not even (in a deep way) a tragedy."⁴

There has been as little consensus on the question of Sophocles' treatment of the matricide. It is fairly clear that the matricide is hardly a central issue in the play in the way in which it is in Aeschylus; yet it is kept before us throughout and fulfilled in a climactic scene of unforgettable power. Are we to think, as many interpreters have suggested, that Sophocles wishes us simply to accept it as a fact given by the literary tradition, a necessary means of restoring justice and in itself neither good nor bad?⁵ Or are we to regard all these issues as chimaeras and view the play as an exercise in brilliant stage effects?⁶ Tempting as this last solution may look, it only eludes the substance of the work and puts one of its elements in the place of the whole. Worse still, such a solution is false to the spirit of Sophoclean tragedy. The fifth-century tragic poets and their audience took the moral content of these works most seriously; one need only refer to Aristophanes' *Frogs* (see especially 1053–56).

Of the many problems in the play one of the most widely discussed and most fundamental is the ending, for on this obviously depends one's basic interpretation. Positions as extreme as the following pair have been taken:

It is surely idle to contend that the congratulations of the Chorus, "Freedom after many sufferings has dawned upon the seed of Atreus," or the serenity with which the matricide condemns all would-be law-breakers

of Sophocles," *Tulane Drama Review* 1.1 (1955) 36 ff. (part of "Sophocles' *Electra*—A Symposium"); also Johansen (preceding note) 8–10.

³ H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*² ("Doubleday Anchor Books," New York 1955) 135.

⁴ A. J. A. Waldock, *Sophocles the Dramatist* (Cambridge 1951) 195.

⁵ There has been a recent tendency to dismiss the importance of the matricide as a moral issue. See I. M. Linforth, "Electra's Day in the Tragedy of Sophocles," *Univ. of Cal. Publ. in Classical Philology* 19.2 (1963) 120–21 and *passim*; also Woodard (II) 232–33, note 98. The opposite view has been strongly stated by Sheppard and several other scholars, most recently R. P. Winnington-Ingram, "The 'Electra' of Sophocles: Prolegomena to an Interpretation," *Proc. of the Cambridge Philol. Soc.*, no. 183 (new series, no. 3) (1954–55) 20–26. Also Johansen (above, note 1) 24–27.

⁶ Such is the approach of Tycho von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Die Dramatische Technik des Sophokles = Philologische Untersuchungen* 22 (Berlin 1917) and Waldock (above, note 4). See *contra* G. Perrotta, *Sofocle* (Milan 1935) 327–28, 332 ff. For a general criticism of this "theatrical fallacy" see B. M. W. Knox, *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy*, "Sather Classical Lectures," vol. 35 (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1964) 170–71, note 29.

... converts this tragedy to joy. The Pelopids were bad interpreters of signs. The Athenians were experts. Orestes is pronouncing sentence on himself. As for Electra, she stands silent. There are worse tragedies than death, as even the weak Chrysothemis knew (1007-8).⁷

The *Electra*, then, ends with the re-establishment of justice, the appeasement of the dead, and the fulfilment of oracle and dream. Whatever the immediate results for Orestes, the ultimate justification of his obedience is secure. The final words of the chorus are always Sophocles' own epilogue; and here, taking past, present, and future equally into account, it can exultantly proclaim that at last the seed of Atreus has emerged from suffering to freedom, made whole by the day's emprise.⁸

Sheppard so overstated his case that he produced reactions which have sometimes gone too far in the opposite direction. Yet despite his one-sided reading of the play, he pointed to a number of elements which cannot simply be disregarded. There is danger of exaggeration on both sides. As often, Sophocles does not vouchsafe us a choice between simple black and white issues.

Those who interpret the play as ending optimistically have much on their side. The general tenor of the plot seems to be positive: a movement out of evil and tyranny toward justice (*diké*, 1505) and freedom (*eleutheria*, 1509). There are, however, qualifications; and Sheppard, granted his limitations, has at least done good service in banishing from the play Schlegel's ideas of its "heavenly serenity" and the "happy matricide." In dealing with a myth of this character, moreover, Sophocles does not need to lay much stress on the sinister side. Even a slight hint would be enough to cloud an otherwise clear picture and raise large—very large—questions.

But granted that the outcome of the action is good, the means which are employed are questionable. And the author of the *Philoctetes* is not a man to justify the means by the end. Treachery and deceit, in the form of *doloi* and *logoi*, seldom come off well in Sophocles. His heroes, in sharp distinction from those of Euripides, look back to the Homeric ideal of *areté*: bold forthrightness, nobility of temper and purpose, singlemindedness, lack of duplicity.

One difficulty with concentrating on the ending, however, is that

⁷ Sheppard (ii) 9.

⁸ F. J. H. Letters, *The Life and Work of Sophocles* (London 1953) 260.

this focuses attention on Orestes. As the title indicates, Sophocles' primary concern is with Electra. What distinguishes his play from the work of Aeschylus, in fact, is his interest in dramatizing and exploring her rich and complex character rather than in tracing the fate of the House of Atreus.⁹ Indeed it is precisely because Electra's life after the matricide is so obscure and unimportant in the myth by comparison to Orestes' that she is more suitable for such treatment. Much of what is interesting in the myth of Orestes comes *after* the matricide. Electra's story, however, has a single, sharp focus of interest which culminates and is essentially complete at the matricide itself. Hence her story allows of a more unified treatment and is singularly adaptable to the Sophoclean "single play."¹⁰

A second focus of the drama (really a means to the first) is the atmosphere surrounding Electra: on the one hand, death, darkness, the lurking presence of the unavenged dead, the pervasive sense of outrage (the strong word *αἰκία*, "outrage," occurs repeatedly in the first half of the play); on the other hand, the grossly obtrusive prosperity of the murderers, enjoying to the full the fruits of their crime. This atmosphere is an essential backdrop for Electra. It places her character in a larger perspective and indicates the magnitude of the struggle in which she is engaged.

This atmosphere is not only relevant to Electra's character. It also shows that the play is more than a character study. It helps define a larger, more universal reality: the ebb and flow of human existence between life and death, light and darkness, desperation and action. The interplay between life and death and light and darkness is not merely a clever device, an extraneous metaphor or a convenient frame for the ricochet of the dramatic action. It also *is* the action. The two

⁹ On Sophocles' refocusing of the Oresteia-legend on the character of Electra see the suggestive remarks of Hans Diller, "Göttliches und menschliches Wissen bei Sophokles," *Kieler Universitätsreden*, Heft 1 (Kiel 1950) 6–8, now reprinted in *Gottheit und Mensch in der Tragödie des Sophokles* (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 1963) 2–4. See also Johansen (above, note 1) *passim*, especially 24–26.

¹⁰ In speaking of the "single play" here, I do not mean to imply that Sophocles necessarily "invented" this form. Rather, his use of it (regardless of its origins) as opposed to the connected trilogy obviously requires a reorganization of the material of the myth. With regard to the Sophoclean heroic character and the Sophoclean "single play," form and content are one. To speak in terms of cause and effect here is false and irrelevant.

sets of contrasts are a controlling element in the play; and they revolve in increasingly rapid succession as the play gains momentum.

The interplay between life and death is deeply embedded in the structure of the play and is more closely related to its symmetry than has usually been appreciated. Both in plot and imagery the play moves from death to life, from the moral death of Mycenae and the false death of Orestes to the revival of Electra, the House, and Orestes. This movement involves the literal death—just and necessary—of Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus. An opposite movement seems to qualify the main death-to-life progression, for the play moves also from light (the dawn of Orestes' arrival) to darkness (the execution of the vengeance in the dark, 1494). This motif is underlined in the structure through the punctuation of the action at its three critical points by three appeals to Apollo Lykeios. Of these prayers more will be said later. Here, in connection with this movement from light to darkness, let it be noted only that in line 6 the Paedagogus' etymology of Lykeios from *lykoktonos*, "wolf-slaying" (and not, for instance, from the root **luk-*, "light"), strikes that note of violence which will dominate and finally end the play (*-ktonos*: cf. *kteinēin* in 1507, the play's last iambic trimeter).¹¹ Sophocles thus invokes at the beginning of the action not the god's restorative clarity, but his associations with an ambiguous, destructive power and a remote past of sinister legend.

The light-dark theme is important in another way: it creates a sense of the broad rhythms of the cosmos that lie beyond the narrow concentration of the human action. Thus it serves both as a relief to the grimness of the action, a suggestion, perhaps, of an ultimate release from death and evil, and as a reminder of a larger world, a world from which Electra has been long shut away. The expansive reference of the theme thus stands in welcome contrast to the play's fixed concentration on a single spot and a single juncture of events. One might

¹¹ The actual etymology of Lykeios is obscure; and the connection with **luk-*, "light," is far from certain, though assumed by Jebb in his appendix on line 6 (pp. 205–6) and in his note on line 645 (p. 94). See also Kruse, "Lykeios," *RE* 13 (1927) 2268–69. Given the prominence of the light-dark theme, however, it is by no means impossible that some connection between "light" and Lykeios is relevant. Note, for instance, that Lykeios in 645 comes in a context where the light-dark motif is heavily concentrated. Lykeios in 645, moreover, is preceded by the more explicit Phoibos in 637. For a different interpretation of Lykeios-*lykoktonos* see Woodard (ii) 231–32, note 77. For another possible play on Lykeios-*lykos* see Aeschylus, *Ag.* 1257, 1259.

compare the beginning of the Second Part of *Faust*, where the dawn both suggests an expansive frame for the ensuing action and contrasts with the night scene on which *Faust* I ends, although the hope-filled voices of the ethereal spirits of air and forest strike a tone very different from that of the Paedagogus' initial speech or Electra's opening song.

The life-death theme, however, is the major one in the play; the light-dark motif is subordinate to it, although actually the two are inseparable. Both cooperate closely in the two firmly bracketed scenes which lie at the heart of the play and form, literally, its center: namely Clytaemnestra's prayer to Apollo Lykeios (634–59) and her "answer" in the form of the Paedagogus' entrance with the fabrication of Orestes' death. Clytaemnestra prays for life out of death, for the continuation of her life (*αἰεὶ ζῶσαν*, 650), just when she enters the trap that now moves into active operation against her and when she accepts the *logos* which forms the bait (*ἐδεξάμην τὸ ῥηθέν*, 668). Indeed her very invocation of Apollo Lykeios recalls the plot hatched in the presence of the god (6–7) and with his sanction (35–37), just as her reference to *doloi*, "deceptions," (649) echoes Orestes' words there (37). Hers is a prayer in darkness, "hidden" (638), to the god of light. She cannot bring the truth "into the light" (640) with Electra standing nearby. The immediate impulse for her prayer is also dark and sinister, namely the fearful vision of the night (*ἄ γὰρ προσεῖδον νυκτὶ τῆδε φάσματα*, 644). Here at the center of the play literal death and darkness are only the outer manifestation of the moral death and darkness into which the land has been plunged for so long.

The answer to the prayer is immediate. It is also one of the finest pieces of stagecraft in Sophocles. The Paedagogus announces Orestes' death. The prayer, ostensibly, has been granted. But death and life in this play mean different things to different characters. The tale of death is the means to new life. Yet not for all: for Clytaemnestra it signifies a real death. To Electra it brings for the moment an emotional death (see 817–22). In the disturbed world of the play, death can be overcome only by death; moral "life" can be won only by the appearance of physical death. So the hypocrisy and concealment of Clytaemnestra's prayer are countered by still deeper concealment and deception.

The inversions involved in this central scene are more complex still. The immediate victim of the falsehood is not Clytaemnestra, but

Electra. She feels that she has now died indeed: "Alas for me, I have been destroyed on this day" (674). The intended victim, however, rejoices at her new lease on life, granted her, she says echoing Electra's phrase of 674, "on this day" (783). And a further result of the stratagem will be other reversals of life and death in the ensuing scenes between Chrysothemis and Electra and between Electra and Orestes, until at the end the truth of who is living, who dead will be asserted in the real death that ends the play: "Don't you perceive that you have been addressing the living as if they were dead," Orestes tells Aegisthus (1477-78), whereupon Aegisthus re-echoes Electra's cry of line 674, "I have been destroyed" (1482).

This central scene, then, to return to 634-763, is not only the vital hinge of the plot, but, with its complex reversals of life and death, appearance and reality, is also a microcosm of the action of the rest of the play. Around it all the main scenes group themselves in symmetrically balancing pairs. This structure is presented diagrammatically in the accompanying figure (Figure 1).¹²

As a glance at the diagram shows, the play falls into four main sections which correspond roughly in an ABAB pattern. In the two long sections (1-633 and 764-1375) Electra dominates the stage (except of course for the prologue up to line 76). In the two shorter sections (634-763 and 1376-1510) Electra is less prominent, though still on stage. It is noteworthy that the corresponding sections are of approximately equal length. The recurrence of Apollo Lykeios at the cardinal points articulates this structure with further clarity.

The longer sections focus primarily on Electra's struggles to overcome the death-in-life in which she exists. In the two shorter sections the death-life reversal is actually set right (or begins to be set right), and this happens through an agency outside of Electra. In 634-763 the stratagem that will accomplish this righting of death and life is actually put into operation, though for the moment it only deepens Electra's involvement in death. In the section which corresponds to this and closes the play, the true relation of death and life, dead and living, is revealed. In the former scene (634-763) a morally false prayer,

¹² A symmetrical structure of scenes (based, however, on the recurrence of characters rather than subject-matter) is elaborated by Eva Brann, "A Note on the Structure of Sophocles' *Electra*," *CP* 52 (1957) 103-4.

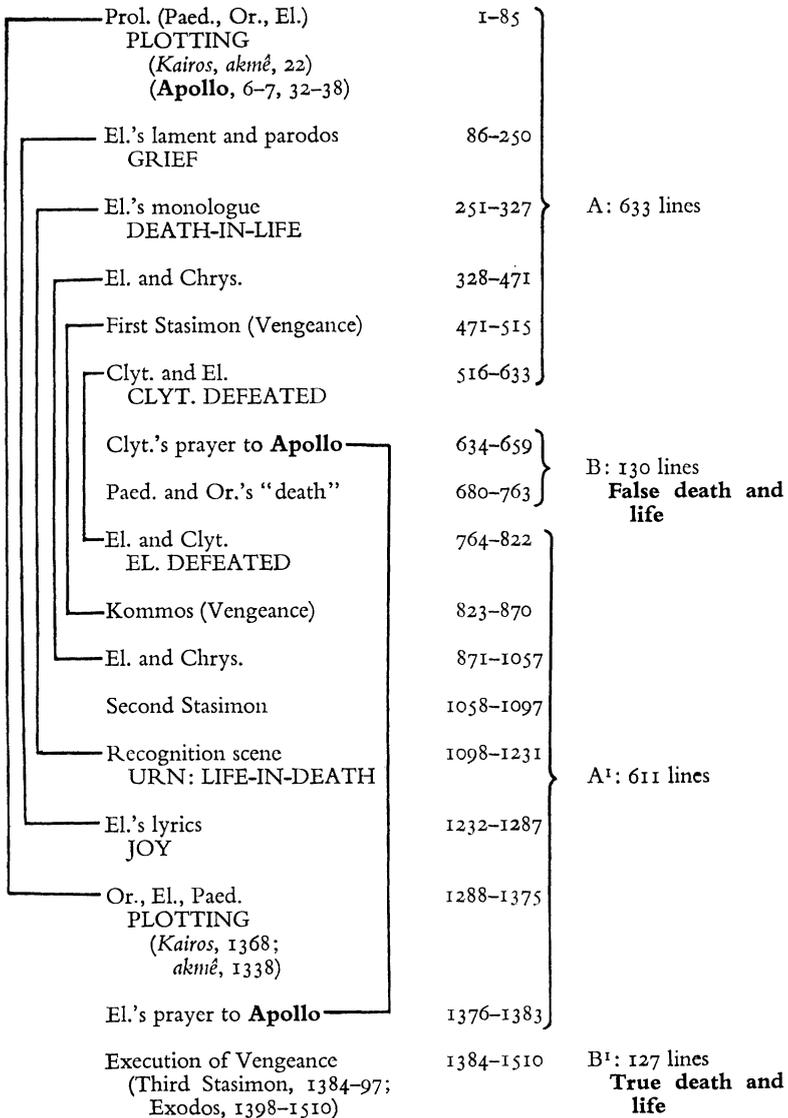


FIGURE I

followed by a false death, confuses the truth of life and death; in the latter scene (1376–1510) a true prayer is followed by real life (Orestes) and real death (the killing of Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus).

As in the *Oedipus Rex* the structure of the play is inseparable from its meaning. Or to put it differently, the meaning is fully apprehended at the same time as the structure is apprehended. In both plays the essentially tragic element is contained in the structure, which is more than a plot devised to hold together plausibly a certain concatenation of events. The structure is itself an image of reality, an ideal pattern which contains a fundamental perception about the laws of human existence.

At the same time these inversions are responsible for the theatrical effectiveness of the play. In almost every scene the audience knows a truth hidden from the protagonist and experiences with her the despair and elation through which the circle of deception and discovery takes her. As a play of recognition and reversal the *Electra* is second only to the *Oedipus Rex* in Sophocles' work.¹³ The range of significance and the broad implications of the *Electra* are perhaps less profound than those of the *Tyrannus*. But, like the *Tyrannus*, the *Electra* too is concerned with the problematical nature of appearance and reality, illusion and truth. Unlike the *Tyrannus*, illusion and appearance are not the main focus of attention. They are, rather, necessary means, requisite accessories of the plot. To a far greater extent than the *Tyrannus*, the *Electra* is a play of emotion and action. Its characters are measured more by what they feel and do than by what they are. It reaches one of its high points, after all, in *Electra's* resolution to act; and it ends with a gripping action in the very process of fulfilment. Hence the inversions with which the *Electra* is concerned also lie in the realm of action: life and death, whether moral or physical, are the result of action and provoke further action. If the *Tyrannus*, then, is concerned with the paradoxes of identity and knowledge, the *Electra*

¹³ The structure of the *Electra* has been much admired and often compared, rather loosely, to that of the *Oedipus Rex*: see Wilhelm Schmid in Schmid-Stählin, *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur* 1.2 (Munich 1934) 396; Karl Reinhardt, *Sophokles* (Frankfurt a. M. 1933) 147; G. M. Kirkwood, *A Study of Sophoclean Drama*, "Cornell Studies in Classical Philology," vol. 31 (Ithaca, N.Y., 1958) 55–56; Perrotta (above, note 6) 334–35 and 342–43. Kitto (above, note 3) 177 even calls the *Electra* "probably his best constructed play"; and Albin Lesky, *Die tragische Dichtung der Hellenen* (Göttingen 1956) 126, finds analogies with the art of the Parthenon.

is concerned with those of despair and resolution, weakness and strength, failure and hope, and, finally, death and rebirth.

Another major difference between the two plays is the fact that the reversals of the *Tyrannus* occur “naturally” and, from the point of view of the human characters, accidentally. The “accidents” are totally within the realm of purely human possibility; but, through the presence of the oracles and Apollo, the accidental becomes the inevitable. Once the initial search is begun, given Oedipus’ character, the skein of his past unravels itself with the fearful inevitability that has been the marvel of critics since Aristotle. In the *Electra* the reversals are less inevitable and less inherent in the structure of the situation or the character of the agent. They come about not through divine will or as part of the “natural” course of events, like the plague in the *Oedipus*, but through the intervention of man, as part of a deliberate human intention (Apollo’s sanction is, of course, important, but is kept subordinate to Orestes’ will and guile). Hence the design of the *Electra* is, from an Aristotelian standpoint, less perfect than that of the *Oedipus*, for the reversals derive from a more “artificial” and arbitrary impulse, the *logoi* and *doloi* of Orestes’ scheme.

The themes of life and death, however, do for the *Electra* something of what the oracles do for the *Oedipus Rex*: they suggest a large frame against which the human action looms as grander, more portentous, more sombre. In Aeschylus the basic inversion of the deceit, the live Orestes as dead, is simply a necessary mechanism of the plot. As elsewhere, Sophocles has seen a possibility in an aspect of a myth and given it deeper significance.¹⁴ He has taken a minor detail and expanded it into a vast metaphor which permeates every part of his drama. As the play unfolds, the boundaries between real and metaphorical life and death, as those between truth and falsehood, are crossed and re-crossed. And although the relations are set right at the end, the prior entanglements suggest that the resolution may not be entirely simple, or at least that something has been lost in the strain of deaths and rebirths to which the main characters have been subjected.

¹⁴ With S. *El.* 1420–21 and 1478, cf. Aesch. *Cho.* 886, τὸν ζῶντα καίνειν τοὺς τεθνηκότας λέγω. It is also perhaps not impossible that the idea of the horse race as the content of the stratagem and the theme of racing elsewhere in the play (25–27, 49–50, 504–12) was developed from hints in Aeschylus: see *Cho.* 794 and 1022–23.

However one views the outcome of the action, this rapid succession of reversals disturbs our equilibrium and suggests a certain element of instability. It is hardly the violent, menacing instability with which the *Choephoroe* ends, but neither is it the utter confidence of the end of the *Eumenides*, divine justice made manifest among men. In Sophocles there are no Erinyes (at least explicitly) to terrify Orestes, nor is Sophocles much interested in the Erinyes at all (though they are there, on Orestes' side: 1386–90).¹⁵ But as far as the basic dramatic material of the play is concerned, there is something sinister in the very fact that the inversion of life and death is so deeply embedded in the plot and structure. It does not bode well for a hero to pretend that he is dead (compare Menelaus in Euripides' *Helen*, 1049–52); and even the bold, action-bent Orestes has misgivings on this point (59–66).

Electra dominates the play to such an extent that we tend to see the action almost entirely in terms of its effect upon her. It is the sheer force of her conviction and personality which can still threaten the otherwise unchallenged power of Clytaemnestra and can reverse the truth of what Chrysothemis has seen with her own eyes. Yet Sophocles does also give us another perspective from which to survey the action and the heroine. I wish to suggest in this essay that this perspective is contained not in the other characters so much as in the atmosphere created by the basic inversion of life and death. Electra's tragedy, then, lies in the fact that she exists in a world where life, both physical and moral, has become death. In such a world heroic endurance and self-affirmation, though no less great, are yet incomplete, perhaps ultimately hopeless.

Seen in such terms, Electra's greatness does not diminish, but becomes the more deeply tragic because it is engulfed by the evils (*kaka*), both subjective and objective, inner and outer, which form the setting of the play: Mycenae, the House of Atreus, the tomb of Agamemnon. This ambience of death, then, is the matrix from which Electra's greatness evolves and to which, ultimately, it is still referred. "In such conditions, my friends, one cannot practice moderation (*sôphronein*) or piety

¹⁵ For the Erinyes see also 112, 276, 491, 1079–80; that their presence here is a hint at Orestes' future torments has been re-argued by Winnington-Ingram (above, note 5) 20–21; but the case against this view has been strongly put by C. M. Bowra, *Sophoclean Tragedy* (Oxford 1944) 258 ff. See also Woodard (i) 200, note 4.

(*eusebein*), but amid evils there is much necessity to engage in evils too," is her concise and self-conscious statement of her situation (307-9).

For Orestes too there is a tragic "necessity" (see his *ἀναγκαίως τύχης*, 48) enforced upon him by the given character of the world into which he has come and in which he must act. For him the god-commanded duty to restore justice by lying and deceit (*doloisi klepsai*, 37) is the equivalent of the death-in-life inversion which Electra lives out. Apollo's command, then, is a cosmic reflection of the negative terms through which a more valid existence is at last to be realized.

We should hardly demand that the Sophoclean hero be a "good man" in any conventional sense or be destined to any kind of conventional happiness. The hero's greatness lies precisely in his gigantic independence of conventional estimates of human limitations, and this very greatness is a source of torment and suffering.¹⁶ These massive figures are never so independent of their world as they strive to be, and this is what makes them tragic. Victorious by the sheer force of their will, they are yet defeated by the ultimate inexorability of the universe and by the gods who uphold its laws, or by the very power of their own natures, or by all of these in some combination. Electra too, for all her triumph over her enemies, is deeply tragic in a way that approximates other Sophoclean heroes. Like Oedipus in the *Tyrannus*, like Antigone and Ajax, she too is both victorious and defeated. Her tragedy like theirs is a complex mixture of victory and defeat, independence and "necessity" (*anankê*), strength of will and subjection. In the *Oedipus at Colonus* (393) the aged protagonist asks, "When I am no longer, then am I a man?", a formulation which lies close to the heart of Sophoclean tragedy. Electra too feels herself as "nothing" *τὴν μηδέν*, 1166) just before "rebirth" and triumph. But if heroes like Oedipus, Antigone, Ajax are victorious in defeat, are everything

¹⁶ On this aspect of the Sophoclean hero see in general Knox (above, note 6) chapters 1 and 2, *passim*. The point has been well made by G. Norwood, *AJP* 74 (1953) 172: "Personality and will, both gigantic, both intensely focused—these mark the hero everywhere, on the tragic stage and the floor of earth alike. In him mere existence wields a strange potency; against man and circumstance he thrusts a will that death itself cannot break, only annul. Whether he is virtuous or wicked matter nothing here: he may excite our love, even our worship; or our hostility, even our abhorrence; invariably he casts upon us a spell of awe and passionate concern. Beside him, the commonplace upright man dwindles to a pygmy."

when they are "nothing," it is the paradox of the *Electra* that its protagonist is, in a sense, defeated in her victory: her victory is her tragedy.

II

In no other Sophoclean play is death (literally and metaphorically) so dominant a theme. In the *Electra* death appears, in some form, in nearly every scene and touches all of the characters. Electra herself is repeatedly resigning life; and Orestes contrives his own false death effectively enough to be present, in person, at the formal *thrénos* he receives (1126–70). Hades is a vivid and insistent presence (see 110, 137, 463, 542, 833, 939, 1342). The only other Sophoclean play in which he occurs so frequently is the *Antigone*.

The dead not only become "alive" in the choral song at the end of the play (1417 ff.), but in the appeals of Electra they are made and felt to be vividly present throughout the action. It is in the shadow of the murdered king that this action unfolds and with him that it begins: "O son of Agamemnon once general at Troy" (ᾠ τού στρατηγήσαντος ἐν Τροίᾳ ποτὲ / Ἀγαμέμνονος παῖ, 1–2). This impressive beginning, with its polysyllables and stately predominance of spondees, is recalled in the first stasimon ('Ελλάνων ἀναξ, 483) and in the Paedagogus' long account of Orestes' "death" (694–95):

ὄνομα δ' Ὀρέστης, τοῦ τὸ κλεινὸν Ἑλλάδος
'Αγαμέμνονος στρατεύμ' ἀγείραντός ποτε.

Agamemnon's tomb is a focal point for much of the action and is, in fact, the goal of Orestes' first efforts (51 ff.).¹⁷ The murder of Agamemnon, though not described at length, is visualized painfully for us by Electra who has it fixed in her mind's eye as vividly as if the wounds were still fresh (see 96–99, 201–6, 444–46; also the chorus at 492–94). She and Clytaemnestra debate the morality of the act as if the space of seven (or more) years did not exist (520 ff.).

¹⁷ For the significance of Agamemnon's tomb see Paul Friedländer, "Die griechische Tragödie und das Tragische," Part 2, *Die Antike* 1 (1925) 301: "In dem er (Sophocles) den Raum für Elektras Tragik weitet, legte er das Grab von der Bühne weg in irgendeine Ferne, doch so, dass es dauernd in unserem Bewusstsein bleibt, dem geistigen Raum also gleichsam eine Tiefendimension zuwächst."

It need scarcely be pointed out that the violent death of the king of the land involves more than the murder of a single man. From the *Odyssey* to *Hamlet*, from the *Parzival* to *The Waste Land*, the king's death or debility signifies a deep violation of the right relation between man and the life-giving powers of nature and the gods. Aeschylus had dealt with this theme in its full complexity and fused it inseparably with the myth of Agamemnon's murder and its aftermath. Apollo says in the *Eumenides*, echoing *Iliad* 1.279, "It is not the same thing for a man of noble blood to die, one honored with the scepter given of Zeus (οὐ γάρ τι ταῦτόν ἄνδρα γενναῖον θανεῖν / διοσδότοις σκήπτροισι τιμαλφόμενον), and that too at the hand of a woman" (*Eum.* 625-27).

Electra is, of course, the center of this negation of life. But if she were the only character to reflect it, one could perhaps regard it merely as an indication of her nature and as the result of the wasted, reduced condition of her own life. In fact the negation of life by death permeates the language of *all* the characters in the play and persists to the very end—indeed is most strongly asserted in the scene of Orestes' triumph (1417-21, 1477-78). The dead, it is true, are reborn to life. But the imagery of the play, so heavily weighed on the side of death, leaves the exact significance of their return ambiguous. The brief choral passage which describes the "life" of the "long dead" (1417-21) is one of the most sinister in the play:

τελοῦσ' ἀραί· ζῶσιν οἱ
 γᾶς ὑπαὶ κείμενοι.
 παλῖρρυτον γὰρ αἶμ' ὑπεξαιροῦσι τῶν
 κτανόντων οἱ πάλαι θανόντες.

The curses accomplish. Those who lie below the earth live. For the long dead drain gradually from their killers the blood that flows in retribution [or, that flows back, sc. into the earth: cf. *A. Ag.* 1018 ff.; *Cho.* 48].

This passage evokes not the lucid Justice that some have seen as the culmination of the action, but rather the dark, barbaric past, haunted by vampire-like ghosts. These ghostly figures, real enough in their own right, seem to have a physical incarnation in the human actors. Electra, who "drinks down neat the life's blood" of Clytaemnestra (τοῦμόν ἐκπίνουσ' ἀεὶ / ψυχῆς ἄκρατον αἶμα, 785-86), seems herself

almost an Erinys (note her appeal to the powers of the Underworld, 110–20), one of those who “drain the blood of the murderers” (1420–21). Sophocles has here borrowed from the *Choephoroe* a phrase used of the Erinys (ἄκρατον αἷμα πίνεται, *Cho.* 578) and boldly applied it to Electra herself. In the case of Orestes too a description of the Erinyes entering the House (δωμάτων ὑπόστεγοι, 1386) immediately precedes his own entrance (εἴσω στέγας, 1392). Here too the phrasing is important (1384–88):

ἴδεθ' ὅπου προνέμεται
τὸ δυσέριστον αἷμα φυσῶν Ἄρης.
βεβᾶσιν ἄρτι δωμάτων ὑπόστεγοι
μετάδρομοι κακῶν πανουργημάτων
ἄφυκτοι κύνες.

The language is such as to suggest an identification between the hopeful young men (Orestes is referred to in the ἄρωγός of the antistrophe, 1392) and the grim goddesses (note the ambiguously masculine endings of the adjectives in 1386–88 and the suspension of the key word κύνες to the very end of its clause).

On the other hand the play is full of the language of growth, birth, fertility. Yet it is death and corruption which flourish and “blossom.” The verbs βλαστάνειν and θάλλειν, “grow” and “bloom,” are used consistently of the moral rottenness of Mycenae. Night and day Electra sees the evils of the palace “blooming rather than wasting away” (θάλλοντα μᾶλλον ἢ καταφθίνονθ' ὄρω, 260). As if to confirm her judgment, Clytaemnestra has dreamed of the scepter from which “there blooms a swelling shoot” (βλαστεῖν βρύοντα θαλλόν, 422) which rises “into the light” and overshadows the land. Here the imagery begins to become operative as action. The dream of the blooming scepter is the first sign that those below may live, that vengeance may come upon the living. It is also an indication that the processes of “growth” and life in this play imply their opposites, namely “wasting away” (φθίνειν, τήκεσθαι, and compounds) and death.

This inverted significance of the life processes is the natural answer to the murderers' own deed. And this deed, as we first hear it described by Electra, appears as a destruction of organic life: the killers cut down their victim “as a woodcutter an oak” (ὅπως δρῦν ὑλοτόμοι /

σχιζουσι κάρα φονίῳ πελέκει, 98–99). When Electra later uses the verb “blooming,” it is also in connection with death. After the Paedagogus’ false message, she says (951–53), “As long as I heard of my brother as still *blooming with life* (βίῳ θάλλοντα), I had hopes that he would come as the *avenger of our father’s murder* (φόνου πράκτορα).” The juxtaposition is significant: the blooming of Orestes’ life is for Electra primarily an instrument of death (φόνου, 953).

In the chorus which comes between Electra’s resolution to act (1017 ff.) and Orestes’ entrance (1098), the verb *βλαστάνειν* is especially prominent (see 1060, 1081, 1095).¹⁸ The triple recurrence of this word at such a point underlines the tragic reversal of life and death in the play: the organic processes of nature are invoked in this ode as models for a deed which, however necessary, is neither “natural” nor life-giving. The ode begins (1058–62),

τί τοὺς ἄνωθεν φρονιμωτάτους οἰω-
νοὺς ἐσορώμενοι τροφᾶς
κηδομένους ἀφ’ ὧν τε βλά-
στωσιν ἀφ’ ὧν τ’ ὄνασιν εὖ-
ρωσιν, τὰδ’ οὐκ ἐπ’ ἴσας τελοῦμεν;

Why, when we see the birds above most wisely concerned for the nurture of those from whom they grow and from whom they found their succor, do we not accomplish these things equally?

The birds’ care for their parents (ἀφ’ ὧν βλάστωσιν) is the paradigm in nature of Electra’s care for her father. Yet her care is not manifested in “nurture” (τροφᾶς, an important word in the play), but in its reverse. Not only is the *trophê* which Electra is to render to her father a deed of death, but it involves the death of her other parent, the mother who is the child’s immediate source of *trophê*. Thus the chorus’ ἀφ’ ὧν τε βλάστωσιν carries an unstated, but terrible ambiguity which lies, of course, in the myth itself. Regardless of whether Clytaemnestra is morally “no-mother” (597–98, 1154, 1194), she is undeniably included among those ἀφ’ ὧν τε βλάστωσιν, the fact of biological relation.

There is yet a further irony in this first sentence of the ode. The birds are called *phronimôtatoi*, “most sensible” or “most intelligent,”

¹⁸ For a different view of the verb *βλαστάνειν* and the ode of 1058–97, see Woodard (n) 214.

because of their care for their parents. But “good sense,” in its usual meaning, is precisely what Electra—along with other Sophoclean heroes—lacks, though she claims that it is *she* who has “sense” (e.g. 403, 1023). The previous scene with Chrysothemis ends with just this contrast between the careful, “sensible” attitudes of the one sister and the heroic but reckless courage of the other. This contrast is articulated through the verb *phronein* (see 1038, 1048, 1055–56; also *φρένες*, 992) and related words like *νοῦς* (1013, 1016, 1023–24), *μάθησις* (1032), and *προμηθία* (1036). But Chrysothemis understands “sense” (*phronein*) only as a cautious, self-protective reasonableness. Her parting injunction in 1055–56 hammers in this *phronein* motif (*εἰ σεαυτῇ τυγχάνεις δοκοῦσά τι / φρονεῖν, φρόνει τοιαῦθ' . . .*) and the present ode, with the chorus' *phronimōtatoi* in its first line (1058), follows almost at once. The divergent views of *phronein* taken by the sisters from their first encounter (334, 345, 384, 390, 394) are thus connected with the large framework of the nature-imagery.

The ode ends with the eulogy of Electra as “wise and best child” (*σοφά τ' ἀρίστα τε παῖς*, 1089) who “wins the first prize of excellence by piety toward Zeus for those custom-laws which have *burgeoned* as greatest” (1095–97):

ἀ δὲ μέγιστ' ἔβλα-
στε νόμιμα, τῶνδε φερομένην
ἄριστα τᾶ Ζηνὸς εὐσεβεία.

The chorus' *ἔβλαστε* harks back to the dichotomy implied in this verb in the first strophe (1060). This passage, however, has other ambiguities. Ending strongly on *eusebeia*, piety, it recalls the essence of Electra's tragic situation as framed in her first long iambic speech: amid such evils she cannot practice piety (*eusebein*, 308). It also recalls another statement of hers earlier in the play which is all the more relevant because it too uses the figure of birds. In the parade Electra answered the chorus' plea for moderation with the words (236–38):

καὶ τί μέτρον κακότητος ἔφν; φέρε,
πῶς ἐπὶ τοῖς φθιμένοις ἀμελεῖν καλόν;
ἐν τίνι τοῦτ' ἔβλαστ' ἀνθρώπων;

And what measure of evil [or, with Jebb, 'of my suffering'] has there

been? Come, tell me, how is it noble to be neglectful in the case of the dead? In what man has this been born?¹⁹

Thematically and verbally this passage is closely related to the ode of 1058 ff. In both cases care for dead parents is stated as a universal law; and in both cases birds are involved (see 241 ff., *ἐκτίμους ἰσχυοῦσα πτέρυγας / ὄξυτόνων γόων*). The second passage, however, extends this “law” from man (*ἀνθρώποι*, 238) to all of nature (note too the reference to Zeus in 1097). Yet both passages create a tense opposition between life and death that resides in part in the verb *βλαστάνειν* (note *φθιμένοις . . . ἔβλαστε* in consecutive lines, 237–38). Electra’s rejection of any “measure” (*metron*) in the first passage is analogous to her dismissal of “good sense” (*eu phronein*) just before the ode of 1058 ff. Hers is a situation of impossible extremes, a situation in which she is drained of life as a creature of nature and a woman so that justice may flourish. Death has replaced life on a large scale, and Sophocles presents Electra standing almost alone against this massive disturbance of the cosmic balances.

The first third of the play is heavily laden with words of growth, generation, birth. Deceit and lust (*dolos* and *erós*), sings the chorus, perpetrated Agamemnon’s murder, “engendering (*προφυτεύσαντες*) terribly a terrible form” (196–98). A few lines later the chorus describes Electra herself as “always bringing to birth (*τίκτουσα*) wars for your soul” (218) and asks her “not to bring to birth disasters upon disasters” (*μὴ τίκτειν σ’ ἅταν ἄταις*, 235). The chorus’ metaphor is cruel reality for Electra, who has twice in this same parode lamented her childless state (*ἄτεκνος*, 164; *ἄνευ τεκέων*, 187). This negation of birth and life extends beyond Electra to the fundamental situation of the play: Clytaemnestra is recurrently the mother who is “no-mother” (273–74, 597–98, 1154, 1194). Yet for all her baseness she cries at the news of Orestes’ death, “Fearful it is to have a child” (*δεινὸν τὸ τίκτειν*, 770) only to be cut down at the end by the child who rejects her last appeal, her motherhood: *ὦ τέκνον τέκνον, / οἴκτιρε τήν τεκοῦσαν* (1410–11).

¹⁹ Jebb translates line 236, “But what measure is there in my wretchedness?” Given the context, however, Kaibel 107 may be right in understanding the line to refer, not to Electra’s condition, but to the evil of the murderers.

This negation of life is not only inherent in the human situation, but spreads from the very earth of Mycenae outward. The "earth of his fathers" (πατρῷα γῆ, 67) which Orestes is to reclaim is itself accursed (see 505-6 of Pelops, αἰανῆς τᾶδε γᾶ). It will send up nothing life-giving, only the omen of the blooming scepter which will "bring shadow over the land of the Mycenaean" (422-23). Electra calls Agamemnon up "from the earth" (γῆθεν, 453) to aid in the vengeance. For her "earth" is not a source of life, but the nothingness into which the dead dissolve (245-46): εἰ γὰρ ὁ μὲν θανὼν γᾶ τε καὶ οὐδὲν ὦν / κείσεται τάλας. . . .

The inversion of life and death, as noted earlier, is accompanied by that of light and dark. It is true that the play begins on an ostensibly bright note: dawn and the voices of birds (18-19). Yet before Orestes leaves the stage in this first scene, light begins to assume a sinister meaning. He compares his ruse with that of clever men who obtained fame and success by pretending to be dead (59-64). This motif begins to build the play's large metaphor of inverted fertility, for the stories of such men (Salmoxis, Aristeas) reflect a fundamental mythical pattern of death and rebirth in the cycles of seasonal change.²⁰ Orestes then boasts (ἐπ'αυχῶ, 65—a dangerous thing to do in Greek tragedy) "that I shall shine living on my enemies as a star" (66). The gentle light of the dawn thus gradually becomes destructive, for Orestes' simile recalls the baleful stars of the *Iliad* to which the warrior in his most murderous moment is compared (*Il.* 5.4-8, 11.61-66; cf. also 22.26-32 and 314-19).²¹ Orestes' boast that he will shine like a star suggests, furthermore, the *return* of the night from which he and his companions have emerged ("the black night of stars," 19). The prologue already contains in small the play's large movement from light to darkness (see 1396, 1494; and see below).

The dawn itself in this first scene is described, in part, in a curiously contorted, indeed a *negative* manner (17-19): "The bright light of the

²⁰ For the associations of Salmoxis (Hdt. 4.95) and Aristeas (Hdt. 4.14) with myths of fertility and rebirth, see Rhys Carpenter, *Folk Tale, Fiction, and Saga in the Homeric Epics*, "Sather Classical Lectures," vol. 20 (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1946) 113 ff., 160 ff.

²¹ For the destructive significance of the shining star of the *Iliad* see Cedric H. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958) 142-44. See also Jebb on lines 65-66.

sun is stirring up the clear dawn voices of birds, and the *black peace of the stars has failed,*"

μέλαινά τ' ἄστρον ἐκλέλοιπεν εὐφρόνη.

Line 19 hardly suggests exuberant hopes. The verb ἐκλείπειν is in fact taken up in Electra's song a bit later: she laments "whenever the darkling night fails" (ὑπολειφθῆ, 91); and, more strikingly still, "But abundant life, hopeless now, has failed me" (ἀπολέλοιπεν, 185). In her despairing speech over the urn, Electra twice uses ἐκλείπειν itself of the utter "failing" of her life (1131, 1149); and Aegisthus uses the verb, finally, of Orestes' death (1444). Hence the verb develops the contrast of Orestes' bright hopes and Electra's night-like misery. The contrast is made more directly, still in terms of light, in Electra's entrance at 86 with her address to "the pure light" when night and day, light and dark are for her equally a time of grief, and she finds both the light of the stars and the sun hateful (104-6). The adjective which describes the "bright" sunlight in line 17, moreover, λαμπρός, is used in its only two occurrences later in the play in close connection with Orestes' "death," namely in the Paedagogus' *rhêsis* (685) and Electra's dirge over the urn (1130).

Nor are the birds which greet Orestes at dawn happy in their associations. Birds in Greek literature, and especially tragedy, seldom are.²² Their clear voices in 17-18 soon become the mournful complaints of the lonely girl, weeping like the nightingale (107-9, 147-48; see 243-44). The myth of Procne and Itys connects the song of birds with the grimmer aspects of Orestes' task (note τεκνολέτειρα, of the nightingale in 107).²³ The nightingale is also relevant to Electra's grief: it is connected with sleeplessness.²⁴ And there is perhaps a larger connection of the nightingale and Procne with the general reversal of life, for Electra calls the bird "Zeus' messenger" (148), a phrase which may allude ambiguously both to the coming of spring and to the vengeance: the nightingale, traditional harbinger of the

²² For the sinister side of the birds see W. Beare, "Sophocles, *Electra*, ll. 17-19," *CR* 41 (1927) 111-12; also Sheppard (t) 81-82, with note 3, p. 81.

²³ For the ambiguity in τεκνολέτειρα see below, note 30.

²⁴ For the associations of the nightingale with sleeplessness see Homer, *Od.* 19. 515-24; Aelian, *V.H.* 12.20 (citing Hesiod), and generally D'Arcy W. Thompson, *A Glossary of Greek Birds* (Oxford 1895) 12.

rebirth of life in the spring, brings only a message of grief and death.²⁵

Electra's language in the early part of the play reinforces the interweaving of the light-dark reversal and the negation of fertility. Her opening words combine "light" and "earth" in the inclusive singleness of her grief ("O pure *light* and air that extends in equal portion over the *earth*, many the songs of grief, many the beatings of bloodied breast you have perceived," 86–90). Her first non-lyric speech also juxtaposes in consecutive lines "day and night" and "evils blooming rather than wasting away" (259–60):

ἀγὼ κατ' ἡμᾶρ καὶ κατ' εὐφρόνην ἀεὶ
θάλλοντα μᾶλλον ἢ καταφθίνονθ' ὄρω.

In Clytaemnestra's dream shortly afterward, the "blooming" scepter "overshadows" the earth (*χθόνα*) as the murdered father comes "into the light" (417–23). Chrysothemis has learned of the dream when Clytaemnestra revealed it to the light of the sun (424). And later the chorus places the dream among the dark things of night: it is, they say, the "vision of night" (*φάσμα νυκτός*, 501–2).

Clytaemnestra's prayer to Apollo brings this interweaving of light-dark and fertility-death to a sharp focus at a crucial point of the action. She makes "full-fruited" (*πάγκαρπα*, 635) offerings to the Bright God (*Phoibos*, 637), yet cannot bring forth the whole truth "into the light" (640) lest her daughter "sow" (*σπείρη*, 642) an envious tale. She repeats the chorus' description of the dream as a "vision of the night" (644), mentions her desire to keep hold over the scepter (651), and ends with a culminating twist of Sophoclean irony: "For it is likely that the sons of Zeus *see* all things" (659). The deep irony of the prayer turns precisely on this compound inversion of light and fertility. After invoking Apollo as "Bright" (637), she says that she must keep her words "hidden" (638), and offers the fruits of the earth (635) to enjoy her illicit sexuality (note the sexual implications of *ξυνοῦσαν οἷς*

²⁵ For the nightingale as a messenger of spring see Sappho's *ἡρὸς ἄγγελος ἱμερόφωνος ἀήδων*, fr. 121 Diehl (136 Lobel-Page) and *Od.* 19.519 (both cited in the schol. on *El.* 149); Simonides, fr. 45 Diehl (586 Page), where the nightingale is called "of spring"; and Soph. *O.C.* 673. See in general Thompson (preceding note) 10–12. On the other hand the phrase "Zeus' messenger" is referred only to the justice of the revenge by Bowra (above, note 15) 243, and P. Suys, "Recherches sur l'Électre de Sophocle," *LEC* 11 (1942) 74–75. Kaibel *ad loc.*, p. 94, rather arbitrarily denies the possibility of the former interpretation despite its ancient authority.

ξύνειμι, 652). When she uses the verb “sow” of Electra’s threats in 642, she also connects sexuality with the central negation of life contained in the myth, for she herself used this verb earlier of Agamemnon’s “sowing” the daughter he sacrificed (533).²⁶ Electra had earlier accused her mother of bearing children to her lover while disregarding her legitimate children (589–90):

καὶ παιδοποιεῖς, τοὺς δὲ πρόσθεν εὐσεβεῖς
καὶ εὐσεβῶν βλαστόντας ἐκβαλοῦσ’ ἔχεις,

and her verb, βλαστόντας, in 590 closely links the inverted sexuality of the human realm with the negations of life in nature generally. Here too the language only expands and emphasizes what is given in the plot: the sexual license of the mother is purchased through the enforced celibacy of the daughter. The natural yielding of the older generation to the younger in sexual energy and child-bearing is suppressed and reversed.

This reversal is strongly indicated in the chorus’ description of the guilty pair in the first stasimon (493–94):

ἄλεκτρ’ ἄννυμφα γὰρ ἐπέβα μαιφόνων
γάμων ἀμιλλήμαθ’ οἷσιν οὐ θέμις.

For bedless, wedless, eager striving for blood-stained marriage came upon those who had not the right.

The adjective ἄλεκτρα recalls Electra’s very name;²⁷ and here the two adjectives, ἄλεκτρος, ἄννυμφος, which are used of the girl herself (164, 962), are now used of her mother’s guilty licentiousness. Not only is the marriage called “bloody,” but the words ἐπέβα and ἀμιλλήματα both fuse the erotic and the deadly in a characteristic example of Sophoclean linguistic virtuosity. The verb ἐπιβαίνειν can be used of a hostile attack, but also of the male animal “mounting” the female.²⁸ The noun ἀμιλλήματα suggests not only “the eager haste for marriage,” the zeal with which “both partners in guilt were

²⁶ Note the recurrence of compounds of *speirō* in unhappy contexts later: 748 and 1219.

²⁷ The ancients at an early date were sensitive to the etymology of Electra’s name: see Aelian, *V.H.* 4.26; also Jebb xix–xx, and J. D. Denniston, *Euripides, Electra* (Oxford 1939) x.

²⁸ See the comment on the passage by Kaibel 150: “Diese Lust befiel (ἐπέβα, wie ein Feind) sie die von ihr nicht befallen werden durften.”

striving for that goal" (Jebb), but also the striving and "contests," more deadly than loving, between Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra.²⁹

It is interesting in this regard that Clytaemnestra, in justifying her deed, makes no mention of Cassandra. Sophocles perhaps wishes to avoid a theme so masterfully handled by Aeschylus. But in omitting Cassandra he also shifts the emphasis from the struggle between male and female lust (Agamemnon's and Clytaemnestra's) to the contrast between the mother's sexual license and the daughter's privation. In making Clytaemnestra's main charge against Agamemnon only the sacrifice of Iphigeneia (530-48), Sophocles deliberately simplifies Aeschylus' motivation and stresses once more the inversion of life-values: the parent who "sowed" the child will destroy it; when he is killed in turn, his death will be avenged on the mother by her child. The myth of Procne and Itys, twice invoked by Electra in the parode (107 ff., 147 ff.), thus becomes a reality parallel with the main action of the play. Procne, the mother who kills her child to avenge herself on her husband, is actually more applicable to Clytaemnestra than to Electra. But Electra, bitterly deprived of children (164, 187), is the one to turn to this myth and find it meaningful for herself. The adjective she uses of herself in 107, *τεκνολέτειρα*, may be a reference to her childlessness ("she who has lost children"). But it certainly has as one of its meanings, "child-destroying."³⁰ Electra thus makes herself the active and destructive one.

It is Electra, then, who bears the full weight of this reversal of life and death. The first we hear of her is the cry, offstage, "Alas for me, unhappy" (*ὠὸ μοί μοι δύστηνος*, 77); and she enters, in striking contrast to the dawn and Orestes' blooming youth (cf. 14), with emaciated visage and miserable garments (*ἀεικεῖ σὺν στολᾷ*, 191). When

²⁹ Kaibel 150 seems to limit the implications of these "contests" unnecessarily in seeing in them only "das wechselseitige Streben des Aigisth und der Klytaimnestra nach der Ehe." Note that "contests" have a sinister significance throughout the play: e.g. *ἄγων* in 1441 and 1492; *ἄμιλλαι*, 861. Cf. also the use of *φέρειν* in 84-85 and 1096-97. The same image is probably present in 1020: see Kaibel, *ad loc.*, p. 228.

³⁰ For *τεκνολέτειρα* and the possibilities of both active and passive meanings see Kaibel *ad loc.* (p. 87), who finds the adjective "nicht sehr glücklich gebildet" and seems to prefer the passive meaning. Jebb, however, *ad loc.* doubts that the word "could mean merely 'having lost her child'." Cf. Aesch. *Ag.* 1465-67, where *ἀνδρολέτειρα* (of Helen) is clearly defined by the context as active: *πολλῶν ἀνδρῶν ψυχὰς Δαναῶν ὀλέσασ(α)*.

Orestes finally encounters her in person, he notes at once her wasted form (1177, 1181). The unchanging sadness of her mask would give special point to her later assurance that there is no danger of her joyful looks betraying the plot (1309–11). She is consistently characterized by verbs of “wasting away” or “drying up” (*τήκεσθαι*, 123, 283, 835; *αὐανῶ*, 819). In her opening lament she compares herself to Niobe in her rocky tomb (150–51)—a comparison fraught with cruel irony for the unmarried, childless girl. But it is the petrified, lifeless, not the life-giving quality of Niobe which is relevant to her. Then, perhaps still thinking of Niobe’s weeping (*αἰαῖ* [*αἰεῖ*?] *δακρύεις*, 152), she describes herself as “damp with tears,” *δάκρυσι μυδαλέα* (166); and her adjective *μυδαλέα* suggests not only moisture, but also decay, decomposition, as of a corpse (compare the verb *μυδάω*, “to be damp with decay,” and *Antigone* 410). Expressions like *ἀπόλλυμαι*, *μ’ ἀπώλεσας* fall easily and frequently from her lips (e.g. 304, 306, 674, 677, 808, 831).

So far we have seen how this general negation of life overhangs the action and connects the individual lives dramatized in the play with the vast realms of nature, the earth, the sky. This same negation, however, also dominates the relations between the individual characters. Here too Electra stands at the center, for nearly all the personal relations depicted in the play are relationships with her (Orestes’ bond with the Paedagogus is the only exception, and not a major exception; note also the lack of emphasis on the friendship between Orestes and Pylades). In Electra’s personal life, then, is shown the impact on a living human being of all the larger forces of death discussed above. Agamemnon, the murdered king, is the most intense of her relationships. For her, he is real and “alive” (see 341–42, 453–54, 1361). She lists him among her *philoî* as if he were still living (e.g. 346, 495). The other two positive relations she has, namely those with Orestes and with Chrysothemis, are important to her only as they bear on death, on the killing of the murderers (e.g. 951–57). And fundamentally underlying this negation of human relationships is the negation of the most basic relationship of all, that between parent and child.

Crucial to the parental relationship is the theme of “nurture” or “nourishment,” *τροφή*, which plays such an important part in the second stasimon (1058 ff.) discussed above. As the simplest bond

between parent and child, *trophé* is the tie wherein the human parental bond most closely approximates the natural world. Hence the question of the second stasimon, "Why, when we see the birds above caring for the nurture (*trophé*) of their parents, do we not do likewise?" By thus putting this simple tie into broad perspective, this ode also suggests the enormity of the negation involved.

In the human world delineated in the play parents refuse *trophé* to their children, and children repay with death the *trophé* they have received from their parents. On learning of Orestes' death, Clytaemnestra complains that "he stood off from my breasts and my nurture" (*trophé*, 776). It is Electra, however, not Clytaemnestra, who feels herself as the giver of "nurture" to Orestes and who feels this "nurture" now wasted at his death: "Alas for my past nurture of you, useless now—that nurture which I provided often for you with sweet toil" (1143–45). She has been, she claims, Orestes' "nurse" (*τροφός*, 1147). Both these passages gain significance from the fact that they follow so closely upon the important second stasimon (1058 ff.). Orestes too, some forty lines after this lament of Electra, commiserates on her "wedless and ill-fated nurture" (*φειτῆς ἀνύμφου δυσμόρου τε σῆς τροφῆς*, 1183); and Electra replies that her "nurture" has been death itself, to be brought up with the murderers, literally "sharing their nurture" (*φονεῦσι σύντροφος*, 1190).

The reversal is thus double: the mother's "nurture" of her son has been usurped by the daughter; and the daughter, hating the mother, seeks, she says herself, to "nourish" (*trephein*) the son as an avenger (603). Correspondingly, Electra has been denied the "nurture" that would permit her to become a wife and mother herself (cf. *ἀνυμφος τροφῆ*, 1183). These reversals, as suggested above, have been prepared for by the myth of Procne and the adjective *τεκνολέτειρα* (107); and this early passage, through the leitmotif of birds, begins to relate the inversions to the larger realms of myth and animate nature, with the connection heavily underlined in the second stasimon.

The reversals which center on *trophé*, however, have a more specific and poignant application to the human realm. Early in her debate with her daughter, Clytaemnestra makes this counter-charge: "I speak ill of you because I have been spoken ill of by you many a time" (*κακῶς δέ σε / λέγω κακῶς κλύουσα πρὸς σέθεν θαμά*, 523–24). Clytaemnestra

uses the traditional language of retaliatory morality, namely to requite with evil whoever does you evil (see Archilochus, fr. 66 Diehl). But the principle is applicable only between enemies, not between mother and child, as Clytaemnestra herself realizes in what is probably a moment of sincere feeling: "Terrible it is to have a child, for not even when you are done ill (*κακῶς πάσχοντι*) can you come to hate the children you have borne" (770–71).

Clytaemnestra, however, does not hold this mood long. Shortly after this outburst of instinctive maternal feeling, she coldly asks for "trustworthy evidence" (*πιστὰ τεκμήρια*, 774) of Orestes' death. Then she describes his absence not as a parent speaking of a child, but as a ruler speaking of a dissident subject: he has "*revolted from her breasts and nurture*" (*ἀποστάς*, the regular word for civic dissension and political rebellion) and has become an "exile" (*φυγάς*, 776). Here speaks the woman whom her daughter characterizes as "tyrant (*despotis*) rather than mother" (597–98).

In the period of the *Electra* Sophocles' contemporaries were re-examining and questioning the sanctity of the parental bond, along with the sanctity of other traditional ties. The primary tool of analysis here is, of course, the dichotomy between *nomos* and *physis*, human "convention" and the amoral world of nature where survival and self-interest, rather than restraint, respect, veneration, are the primary drives. The relevance of this dichotomy to the parental bond was vividly pointed out by Aristophanes (*Clouds* 1409–29 and *Birds* 1346–68) and by Democritus (*VS* 68B275–80; see also Antiphon the Sophist, *VS* 87B49). This line of argument usually invoked the animal world (where affection and respect are absent) in order to criticize the "unnaturalness" of the sanctities and taboos in the relations between human parents and children. Sophocles, however, inverts this argument and gives a tragic twist to the traditional attitude (see Hesiod, *Op.* 276–80). In the *Electra* the animal (or, more properly, avian) world serves as a paradigm of the *positive*, affectionate parent-child relation, whereas the human world, with its language of retaliation and political hostility, presents the hard, *negative*, sanctionless attitude associated with brute nature and *physis*.

Sophocles too seems to be aware of the Sophistic discussions of his time and makes much of the term *physis* in presenting the moral

conflict.³¹ *Physis*, like *trophé*, spans both human and “natural” worlds. Though Sophocles uses *physis* in its traditional, non-Sophistic sense, i.e. one’s inherited, inborn “nature,” the themes discussed above and the play’s focusing on the parent-child relation against the background of the natural world hint at contemporary statements of the issue.

Electra herself poses the question of her “nature” in terms of her biological inheritance. She is continually defending the noble “nature” she has acquired from her *father*, and she persistently denies the right of Clytaemnestra to regard herself as her mother. But despite this separation of herself from her mother, she seems to owe more to this parent than she would (or could) admit. At the emotional peak of her encounter with Clytaemnestra, she cries (605–9), “For this announce me to all, if you wish, as base or impudent-tongued or full of shamelessness. For if I am born so as to know these things by nature, at least I do not shame your nature”:

εἰ γὰρ πέφυκα τῶνδε τῶν ἔργων ἴδρις,
σχεδόν τι τὴν σὴν οὐ καταισχύνω φύσιν.

The last two lines reveal once more the depth of the inversion of traditional values involved in Electra’s world. In Hellenic (and other) morality it is praiseworthy *not* to shame one’s parent’s nature.³² For Electra the implication is just the reverse; and the heated passion with which she utters the statement perhaps betrays, against her intention, that she does indeed possess something of her mother’s “nature.”

The irony of this last passage is the greater because of her earlier remark, also at the end of an indictment of her mother, that “in such circumstances, my friends, one can neither be moderate nor act reverently, but amid evils one must of necessity practice evils too” (307–9):

ἐν οὖν τοιούτοις οὔτε σωφρονεῖν, φίλοι,
οὔτ’ εὐσεβεῖν πάρεστιν· ἀλλ’ ἐν τοῖς κακοῖς
πολλή’ στ’ ἀνάγκη κάπιτηδεύειν κακά.

³¹ For *physis* see 322, 325–26, 605–9, 940–41, 989, 997, 1023. The term gains a certain sinister meaning because of the curse of the House: cf. 1249–50.

³² For “not shaming” a parent’s nature, “commonly in a good sense” (Jebb), see Eur. *Or.* 1169, Soph. *Ajax* 1304–5. The moral paradox is well pointed out by Kaibel 168.

Here Electra is clearly echoing the words of her Aeschylean counterpart in the *Choephoroe* (140–41):³³ “Grant that I myself may become far more moderate *than my mother* and more reverent in hand”:

αὐτῇ τέ μοι δὸς σωφρονεστέραν πολὺ
μητρὸς γενέσθαι χεῖρά τ' εὐσεβεστέραν.

Yet Aeschylus' Electra can hope to break with her mother's character. For Sophocles' heroine the “necessity” of circumstances renders blurred and problematical the completeness of this break. Hence, shortly after her statement about “not shaming” Clytaemnestra's nature in 607–9, Electra returns to the “necessity” she mentioned in 307–9: “But enmity from you and your deeds *compel* me to do these things performe. For shameful acts are taught by shameful acts” (619–21):

ἀλλ' ἢ γὰρ ἐκ σοῦ δυσμένεια καὶ τὰ σὰ
ἔργ' ἐξαναγκάζει με ταῦτα δρᾶν βία·
αἰσχροῖς γὰρ αἰσχρὰ πράγματ' ἐκδιδάσκειται.

As the language of *trophé* and the *physis*-theme of 608–9 reflect a basic inversion in the biological and hereditary connection between parent and child, this last passage (619–21) reflects an inversion of the *moral* connection. Greek ethics considered it the duty of parents to teach their children *ta kala*. But Electra here boasts of having learned only the opposite, *ta aischra*, what is base or shameful: “For shameful deeds (*aischra*) are taught (*ekdidasketai*) by shameful deeds” (621; cf. 615–16). Electra's words here are also to be connected with an earlier passage in which she charges Chrysothemis with excessive care for her mother rather than the father “whose child she is” (οὐδ' σὺ παῖς ἔφους, 341) and accuses her of having *learned* from her mother what to reply to Electra (ἄπαντα γὰρ σοι τὰ μὰ νουθετήματα / κείνης διδακτά, 343–44; see also 330, 352, 359–96).

Hence both physically and morally the traditional relation between parent and child is negated. Both “nurture” and the “teaching” recoil upon the parent in the final act of matricide, for which Electra has “nurtured” Orestes (603). But in this recoil, the child also suffers.

³³ The parallel is noted without comment by Jebb *ad loc.* Kirkwood (above, note 13) 140 connects lines 606–9 with 309 and remarks, “It is as though Electra recognizes in herself an evil inheritance from her mother, and it tortures her.” See also Johansen (above, note 1) 16–17.

It is part of the tragic irony of Electra's position that in fact she does "not shame" her mother's nature. She assumes her mother's role in a positive way when she mourns over Orestes as the true mother failed to do (see 804 ff.). Yet there is perhaps a suggestion that she shares something of her mother's sinister nature in her cry at the matricide, *παῖσον, εἰ σθένεις, διπλήν* (1415). This scene, in its verbal echoes of the *Agamemnon* (*Ag.* 1343-45), now exhibits in the daughter something of the monstrous force and energy of the mother as they appeared at the climax of her powers, the cutting down of Agamemnon.³⁴

This echo of the *Agamemnon*, one of the boldest borrowings in Greek literature, does, of course, underline the justice of the *lex talionis*: the vengeance calls up the crime being avenged. Yet it also casts a shadow over Electra herself. Above her looms still the *physis* of Clytaemnestra, the Clytaemnestra of the *Agamemnon*. Hence it suggests a partial confirmation of Electra's initial fears, that "amid evils one must of necessity practice evils" (307-9). That speech takes on tragic substance and a deeper "necessity" as the play proceeds to its end. Itself a sharp modification of the pious hopes of Aeschylus' Electra, it receives a still sharper edge in this even bolder use of the *Oresteia* at the end of our play.

From this negation of the most fundamental of all human relationships there follows a corresponding negation of other relationships. This negation is expressed in part in the use of *philos*, "dear one," "beloved," throughout the play. At the beginning Electra complains that she has no *φίλος ἀνὴρ* to protect her (188), and much of the action consists in her finding and losing *philoï*. Her dearest *philos* is among the dead: Agamemnon. He is "most loved" (*philtatos*) by her (462) as he is "most hateful" (also "most hostile," *dysmenestatos*, 407) to Clytaemnestra (note also the changes rung on *philos* and *dysmenês* in 439-446).

As Electra gains *philoï*, Clytaemnestra loses them. For these two *philoï* by blood, the meaning of *philos* has become twisted. Clytaemnestra

³⁴ There is perhaps a further connection between Electra and Clytaemnestra in that the adjective *dystênos*, Electra's cry in 77, is very shortly after applied to the mother, 121-22, where Electra is addressed as "child of a most unfortunate (*dystênos*) mother." Electra later herself applies the adjective to Clytaemnestra, 806.

charges Electra “not to *shame* those dear to you” (μη . . . αἰσχύνειν φίλους, 518), meaning by *philoî* here herself; but she is answered near the end of the exchange by Electra’s reply (discussed above), “. . . at least I do not *shame* your nature” (609). With the terrible logic of the progression from small to great, from individual to cosmos in this play, the inversions present in the *physis*-theme are amplified in the entire personal realm of *philoî*. With the rupture of the “natural” parental bond comes the dissolution of *philia* in general.

Clytaemnestra makes this inversion explicit in her secret prayer: here her daughter becomes avowedly not a *philos* (see 638–40), but an *echthros*, an enemy (647), an open contradiction of her injunction of 518, μη αἰσχύνειν φίλους. The intervening debate has clarified the truth of the relation. The prayer finds its answer in the arrival of the Paedagogus, “bearing sweet words from a man who is dear” (φίλου παρ’ ἀνδρός, 667), and the irony is underlined by Clytaemnestra’s repetition of these words in 671–72: “Since you are from a *man who is dear* (παρὰ φίλου . . . ἀνδρός), you will speak, I know well, words *dear* (προσφιλεῖς) to me.” At the beginning of the play Electra used this same phrase, φίλος ἀνὴρ, to complain of her isolation (188). Here at the center of the play she is indeed *aphilos* (818).³⁵ Death has deprived her of *philoî*. Orestes’ body, the Paedagogus reports, was so mangled that no *philos* would be able to recognize him (755–56).

Electra chooses her *philoî* in terms of her service to the dead. In her opening song she invokes the *philotês* of the chorus for permission to continue her lamentations (see especially 133–36). She criticizes her sister for neglecting her *philoî*, i.e. Agamemnon (346), and replies sharply to her attempt at moderation, “Teach me not to be base to those dear to me” (τοῖς φίλοις εἶναι κακῆν, 395; cf. 518). Indeed she makes no attempt to reciprocate Chrysothemis’ terms of endearment and sympathy (ὦ κασιγνήτη, 329; ὦ τάλαινα, 388; also 325–26) until Chrysothemis speaks of Clytaemnestra’s dream of the dead king. At that point *and not before*, Electra calls her “dear one” (ὦ φίλη, 431). The pattern is repeated in her second scene with her sister. Despite Chrysothemis’ opening *philtatê* (871), Electra calls her “dear” only when she seeks to enlist her aid in the vengeance (986). But she withdraws her affection as soon as Chrysothemis hesitates. As she

³⁵ For Electra’s isolation in general see Friedländer (above, note 17) 303.

began with insults and ended with affection in their first encounter, here she begins with affection and ends with insults.

In the last third of the play *Electra* at last rediscovers in Orestes a true *philos*. She showers endearments on the lifeless urn (1126, 1138, 1146, 1158, 1163, etc.), for this has become *ta philtata* (1208) for her. Yet she is now able to exchange the cry of *philtaton*, "dearest," with a living human being in mutual love: ὦ φίλτατον φῶς—φίλτατον, ξυμμαρτυρῶ (1224). And a flutter of *philtatai* follow (1227, 1233, 1273, 1286, 1353, 1357, 1397). The intensity of *Electra* here indicates that despite her sufferings she has retained something of her capacity to hold *philoï*, to love. Yet this more affectionate spirit is reawakened when all her thoughts (and Orestes') bend to the matricide, the deed which cancels the most fundamental bond of *philia*. At the end, then, *philoï* discover one another only to destroy another *philos*: *philoï* bring death to *philoï*. And perhaps the play's most terrible single line is Clytaemnestra's cry just before Orestes strikes: "O house empty of dear ones, but full of destroyers" (φίλων ἐρήμοι, τῶν δ' ἀπολλύντων πλέαι, 1404-5).

The very mechanism which accomplishes the deed brings a reversal in the meaning of *philos*. The opposite of *philos* is *xenos*, "stranger," and it is by becoming *xenoi* that Orestes and the Paedagogus succeed (see 44 and 660). Clytaemnestra, however, claims that Orestes has "made himself a stranger" (ἀπεξενοῦτο, 777), so that the estrangement of mother and son is mutual. In becoming a *xenos*, however, Orestes almost destroys his one true *philos*, *Electra*, who laments that he has been deprived of the final care of *philoï*, buried a stranger by strange, not dear, hands (1138-41; see 865). Here too the proper terms of endearment are suspended, for *Electra* naturally addresses her disguised brother as "stranger" (*xene*, 1180, 1206).

The reversals enforced by the "necessity" of the situation are such that Orestes must violate not only the right of *philia*, but those of *xenia* as well. *Xenos* means both stranger and guest. It is the sanctity of *xenos* in the latter sense that Orestes must betray to accomplish his end, just as he must be prepared from the beginning to betray the sanctity of the oath (47). The irony of the *philos-xenos* reversal reaches its peak in *Electra's* scene with Aegisthus. Asked if she knows the whereabouts of the *xenoi* (1442), she replies, "How not? for otherwise

I would be outside the fortune (misfortune) of those dearest to me” (*συμφορᾶς γὰρ ἂν / ἕξωθεν εἶην τῶν ἐμῶν γε φιλτάτων*, 1448–49). There is tragic point as well as clever deception here, for in terms of kinship both Orestes and Clytaemnestra, both agent and victim, are *philtatoi*. Similar is Electra’s next reply. “They have made their way to the heart of a hostess dear to them” (*φίλης γὰρ προξένου κατήνυσαν*, 1451): a *proxenos* is one who looks after “strangers”; but their *proxenos* (i.e. Clytaemnestra) should have been especially *philos*, yet had made her *philoï* into *xenoi* (*ἀπεξενούτο*, 777).³⁶ The line sums up all the play’s inversions between strangers and dear ones, life and death, love and hate.

The inversion of love and hate is an almost necessary corollary to that of *philoï* and *xenoi*. In the *Electra* it is hate itself which feeds love. Electra’s love for Orestes rests heavily upon her hatred for Clytaemnestra. To Chrysothemis, with whom she has equally strong bonds of blood, she is indifferent, except in so far as her knowledge and aid may serve the execution of the vengeance. Electra has immense emotional energies, and these may move equally into love or hate. From her opening lament it is clear that intense hate is an ever-present complement to equally intense love. In her the two are fixed in an inseparable polarity. Because of this polarity she rests within herself, has a complex unity of character absent from all the other figures. Orestes acts on the advice of oracles and is prodded by the Paedagogus. Electra hates, loves, and acts from within the depths of her own passionate soul. She needs Orestes to help complete the deed, but he can add little to the range of hate and love, despair and resolve which she contains within herself.

This coexistence of intense love and intense hate within Electra, though a mark of an extraordinary character, contributes not a little to the sombre atmosphere of the play’s ending (see below, Section III). Pure love hardly radiates steadily from Electra. It rises lyrically in her first moments of response to the revealed Orestes, only to move back once more to its dark union with her hatred of Clytaemnestra. “Do not fear that our mother will ever see my face bright with

³⁶ For the irony and ambiguity of 1451 see Jebb *ad loc.* Kaibel 294 is again arbitrary in dismissing this possibility. For *κατανύειν* in the sense of “dispatch,” “slay,” see Eur. *Or.* 89, *El.* 1164, schol. on *Phoen.* 1062.

laughter," she tells Orestes shortly after the recognition; "for old hatred has melted deep into me" (*μίσος τε γὰρ παλαιὸν ἐντέτηκέ μοι*, 1309–11). The past (*παλαιόν*) once more dims the present. The verb *τήκω* recalls the language of "withering" and "wasting" that Electra has so often used earlier to describe her living death (123, 187, 283; cf. 819). Soon after the speech of 1309 ff., she hails the Paedagogus as a father, but tells him that "in one day I both loved and hated you most of all" (1362–63). Both in the specific actions of the individual characters and in the larger situation which surrounds them, life and love, death and hate swing toward their opposites.

The negation of life by death has its counterpart in the negation of the present by the past. Electra is again the center of this motif. She lives in the past and looks to it as her source of energy. It is the whetstone of her hatred (see e.g. 201–8). Much of the play is concerned with the unfolding of her past, her years of repressed, powerless hate. Electra's life and character are continually illuminated in terms of this past. This retrospective illumination of Electra is almost as important as the forward movement in the present toward her final decision. That decision, in fact, has been taken in the past (see 1049: "I decided these things long ago and not just now").

Electra's character, then, gains its full dimensions only with reference to the past. Then she had experience of more than the hatreds that have formed her as she appears now; and her speech in the recognition scene (1126–70) bears witness to the affection of which she was once capable. Scholars who have not given this element of the past its due have found it difficult to see Electra "as a real person."³⁷ The *Electra* is, of course, hardly the only Sophoclean play where the past gives fullness and reality to characters; the *Oedipus at Colonus* is a striking example, and in the *Tyrannus* the past brings "confirmations of traits that we see elsewhere in the play."³⁸ Yet in the *Electra* the relation between the protagonist and her past has a special significance. Electra is not only deeply absorbed in the past, but much of her strength and

³⁷ Thus David Grene, in his introduction to the University of Chicago translation of the play (Chicago 1957) 124, seems mistaken in his characterization of Electra: "I think we are meant to see Electra not as a real person in her own right, but as a mass of responses to other persons and their deeds and words, whether true or false."

³⁸ Kirkwood (above, note 13) 68.

heroism are involved in preserving and defending it; indeed, she does so at the risk of life itself (see 354–61).

The effect of this past, like that of other motifs in the play related to it, is primarily negative. As the play proceeds, we are shown how the past has destroyed Electra, physically and emotionally, wasting and wearing down her remaining capacities for life. The prologue and parodos sharply juxtapose on the stage the future (Orestes' hopes and plans) and the past (Electra's laments). Visually, as noted above, the toll of the past is measured in the immense and terrible contrast between Orestes' blooming youth (*τοσόνδ' ἐς ἡβης*, 14) and Electra's reduced condition (see 141, 1309–11). The past has had corrosive effects on others too, notably Clytaemnestra. Yet Electra's situation is the more tragic as her life contains the more unfulfilled potentials. Waiting (*προσμένουσα*, 164, 303) has blasted her beauty (see 1177) and her hopes for marriage and children (see 164–65, 185–92). Time (*chronos*), in which Orestes and the Paedagogus trust so firmly for success and later happiness (see 42, 1293), has destroyed Electra: “destroyed,” she complains (*ἀπόλλυμαι*, 304; *διέφθορεν*, 306) by Orestes' delays. Orestes can hold off and choose just the right moment, the *kairos* (31, 39, 75, etc.), or the very peak, *akmé* (22), for action. But while he does so, Electra dies by inches (305–6). Near the end too, when vengeance and freedom seem at last imminent, Electra is again asked to wait and defer present joy to a remote-sounding future (1364–66): “As to the tales of what's between, many are the circling nights and equal days which shall show them to you clearly, Electra.”

“Destroyed” (*διέφθορεν*) is Electra's word for the effects upon her of Orestes' long thought out plot (305–6); and Orestes confirms these words in using the same verb of her when they meet (*ὦ σῶμ' . . . ἐφθαρμένον*, 1181; cf. also 765, *ἐφθαρται γένος*). Yet Electra faces another, and more serious, kind of destruction from her past: destruction in her moral being as well as in body. It is immediately after her words about being “destroyed” by Orestes' delays (305–6) that she makes the ominous utterance of 307–9:

In such circumstances, my friends, one cannot practice moderation or piety; but amidst evils there is much necessity to practice evils too.

Repression and enforced silence are also vital parts of Electra's

past and cause her griefs to break forth all the more freely when they can (see 285–86; 310–13). The eagerness with which she leaps on Chrysothemis' news (407–16) dramatically recreates what her past has been: she is always at the pitch of expectancy for what never comes, alert for every sign of guilt or weakness from the murderers, grasping and squeezing each bit of information that comes to her, reading meanings into every look or word. The early scenes of the play, then, build up a picture of how she has lived for years and prepare us for the unrestrainable and reckless burst of language after the recognition of Orestes (1233–87). After years lived amidst nothing but hatred, she opens fully to the return of compassion (1199–1200) and rejoices simply in the *sound* of a friendly voice (see 1225, 1281 ff.).

The play may thus be viewed, at one level, as a humane, if sombre, presentation of a life lived amid the hates and evils of a horrible past. Electra, as she first appears, is essentially fully formed; and the play is concerned with why she is so and what, given this past, she may yet become. There are sinister suggestions that Electra has not escaped her past, that the commiseration of Orestes and the love his presence reawakens may have come too late. The matricide, for instance, cancels the past on the one hand, but, on the other, in its echo of the *Agamemnon*, re-enacts it. So too Electra's final encounter with Aegisthus (1442–65), though the culmination of her vengeance, is also a return to her past, to the insults, callousness, deliberate cruelty (see 1445–47) which have been her daily bread for years (see *φονεύσι σύντροφος*, 1190).

The significance of the past has a broader basis than Electra's life. It includes also the remoter past of Mycenae and the Pelopids and the deep moral violations contained therein. It is thus connected with the other motifs of inverted or negated life discussed above. The further one penetrates into this past, the more destructive it becomes: Iphigenia (530–48), Agamemnon's death (193–200), "the horse race of Pelops in time before" (504–15), "the much destroying house of the Pelopids" (10). Electra finds her life in this past and reasserts its force against the death-in-life of the present. Thus in 587–90 she vindicates, against Clytaemnestra's new illicit union, the rights of "the legitimate children of before" (*πρόσθεν*; cf. 504, *Πέλοπος ἀ πρόσθεν/πολύπονος ἰππεία*). Yet Electra is, as Clytaemnestra in a different way becomes,

a victim of the past: the joy of her countenance is destroyed by the "old hate" (*μῖσος παλαιόν*, 1311).

This word, "old" (*παλαιός, παλαιά*), occurs throughout the play with special emphasis and recalls the dangerous background against which the action unfolds. Orestes and the audience are introduced at once to "old Argos" (4). The axe that killed Agamemnon is "old" (484–85). Electra has taken her resolution "of old" (1049). The disguised Orestes had been seeking Aegisthus "of old" (1101) and on seeing Electra says that he "has been pitying her of old" (1199). Immediately after the matricide the "dead of old" are said to live and drink the blood of the living (1417–21). For Electra the deaths of the murderers are "the only deliverance from the woes of old" (1490). But, far from being obliterated, this past reaches dangerously into the future in Aegisthus' final vision of "the present and future woes of the Pelopids" (1498).

Electra thus stands in a complex relation to the past: crushed by it on the one hand, she continually reactivates it on the other. Only she stands in a fully meaningful moral and emotional relation to the past. Clytaemnestra and Chrysothemis would suppress it; Orestes does not know it deeply enough. Orestes did not know Agamemnon as Electra did, was not old enough to feel the shock of the murder, and has not lived with its consequences every day as Electra has (see 1190).³⁹ The Paedagogus, though an older man even at the time of the murder, lacks both the temperament and the bonds of blood which create the intensity of Electra's involvement. Because of this intensity, it is inevitable that the act which most painfully and most fully satisfies the demands of justice, that is, the killing of Clytaemnestra, comes as the fulfilment of Electra's will and is accompanied by her greatest outburst of emotion (1415), a full release at last of those demonic energies which she had harbored so long.

This past and the reversals of life related to it all constitute a massive "necessity" or *anankê* to which all the characters, and of course Electra especially, stand subject. The large negations of life by death discussed above give to this "necessity" a broad inclusiveness: it is the basic condition of the whole of Electra's world, the natural as well as

³⁹ On these differences between Orestes and Electra in their relation to the past, see P. Suys, *LEC* 10 (1941) 277.

the moral world. She accepts this "necessity," then, as a given fact of her life (see 221, 256, 309, 620, 1193), much as she accepts at face value the "compulsion" (*bia*) that lay upon Agamemnon to sacrifice his daughter (575).

One cannot tone down the stridency of this tragic *ananké* by emphasizing, as did Sheppard, Electra's qualms. She is not simply a decent-minded Victorian heroine involved in a conflict between "the stern conviction" of her duty and "her natural, womanly *sôphrosynê*."⁴⁰ There is no question of a struggle on her part to resist what she must do. The course of her action has been clear to her from the beginning: "I have reached this decision long ago and not just recently" (1049). Her tragedy is precisely this clarity and immovable fixity of mind, her knowledge that she must act in an impossible situation. It is the tragedy of being immersed in a world where death, evil, hate are "blooming rather than wasting away" (260), of being aware of this fact, and of still having to act. "Amid fearful circumstances I have been compelled to fearful things (*δείν' ἐν δεινοῖς ἠναγκάσθην*, 221); I know it fully (*ἔξοιδα*); my temper is not hidden from me;" and her phraseology in 221 anticipates the even bleaker statement of *ananké* in 308-9 (*δείν' ἐν δεινοῖς*, 221; *ἐν τοῖς κακοῖς . . . κακά*, 308-9).

It is part of the general negation of positive values in the play that the heroic spirit too is dead. The dead Agamemnon, grandly invoked in the first line and elsewhere (see above), expresses this eclipse of heroic values. Licentiousness and meanness, in the persons of Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus, have succeeded him. The adjective *κλεινός*, "glorious," in the first half of the play underlines this fall from a past greatness. The Paedagogus points out to the returning heir the "glorious temple" (*ὁ κλεινὸς ναός*) of Hera (8). Later the chorus, thinking longingly of the absent Orestes, speaks of the "glorious land of the Mycenaean" (*ἂ κλεινὰ γὰ ποτε Μυκηναίων δέξεται*, 161-62) as something lying in the remote future. There is a bitter irony in the discrepancy between past and present when Electra applies the adjective to Aegisthus, "the glorious spouse" (*ὁ κλεινὸς . . . νυμφίος*, 300) of the reigning queen, or when the Paedagogus twice uses the phrase *τὸ κλεινὸν Ἑλλάδος* (681, 694) when the point of his speech is

⁴⁰ Sheppard (n) 6. On Electra's *ananké* see also Sheppard (n) 83 ff. and Letters (above, note 8) 258-59.

to prove the death of the only son of great Agamemnon (694–95). The adjective reflects too the shameful difference between the dignity and beauty that belong to Electra's rank and lineage and her present state: "Is this Electra's glorious form?" (τὸ κλεινὸν εἶδος, 1177), asks Orestes when he sees her.

Both Electra and Orestes are of course concerned with restoring "the glorious land of Mycenae" to its former dignity, and this means vindicating the "honor" (τιμῆ, κλέος) of Agamemnon. Orestes, heir to the House and the throne, naturally has a particular interest in this effort. But for this very reason he is also concerned with the *material* aspects of heroic "honor." In the prologue he prays to the House that he may not be without honor (*atimos*, 71); but in the next line he partially defines this "honor" in terms of possessions and property (ἀρχέπλουτον καὶ καταστάτην δόμων). Orestes is sincere in wishing to be "a cleanser by justice" (70). Yet he wishes to take what Clytaemnestra wants to keep: wealth, the scepter, the House (πλοῦτος, σκῆπτρα, δόμοι, 648, 651)—the external attributes of authority and power. Contrast the uses Electra has for wealth (452, 457, 960) and her renunciation of pleasure in her existence (see 359–64, 817–22).

Her concern is not only with her own "honor" (*timê*), but also with Agamemnon's (see 356, 444). As part of her special relation to Agamemnon, she feels an intensity of grief for his "dishonor" equalled by no other figure in the play. It is against heavy pressures that she defends the dignity of being Agamemnon's child (e.g. 365–68; cf. 1081). While Orestes is the heir to Agamemnon's royal *position* and *goods* and comes as the "restorer and cleanser" of the *House* (69–72), it is Electra who, by her years of difficult devotion, has most fully vindicated Agamemnon's "honor." It is she who speaks most often of "honor" in the heroic sense, she who is willing to face death for the sake of *timê* or *kleos* (e.g. 982–85), she whom the chorus praises as having succeeded in her aspirations toward "honor" (cf. *eupatris*, 1081; *eukleia*, 1083).

There is in Orestes, moreover, a curious contradiction between his heroic aims and the means he is to employ. He will obtain *kleos* and *timê* by *logos* and *dolos* (56–64). After speaking of *kleos* in line 60, he justifies his conduct by means of a most unheroic sophism (59–61):

What pain is it to me when I have died in word (*logos*) but in deed am

saved and win fame (*kleos*)? No word, I think, is base if profit accompanies (*οὐδὲν ῥῆμα σὺν κέρδει κακόν*).

According to Athenaeus, Cephisodorus, pupil of Isocrates, included line 61 in a list of "base sayings" (*πονηρῶς εἰρημμένα*) which contained Euripides' notorious, "My tongue has sworn . . ." (*Hippol.* 612).⁴¹ A similar argument, in an analogous situation, appears in the mouth of one of the basest characters in Sophocles, Odysseus in the *Philoctetes* (108–11):⁴²

Neopt. Do you not then think it shameful to speak lies?

Odys. No, if lying brings with it safety (*σωθῆναι*).

Neopt. How then will anyone who sees this dare to utter it?

Odys. Whenever you act with a view to profit (*es kerdos*), it is fitting not to hesitate.

The terms, moreover, which Orestes uses to describe his stratagem—*dolos*, *kleptein*, *kryptein* (37, 55, 56, etc.)—are precisely those which, elsewhere in the play, describe the murderous act of Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus.⁴³ Unlike Neoptolemus, Orestes has no Philoctetes through whom he may be recalled to a higher vision of himself. He has only the Paedagogus, a former domestic servant. Paradoxically it is this "commoner" who speaks of the glories of Mycenae's past (1–10), while the plans of deceit (first mentioned in line 37) are initiated by the son of the glorious Agamemnon (see lines 1–2).

What is truly heroic in the play, then, rests with Electra. She, rather than Orestes, has been able to win her way, in a debased world, to a living sense of the past greatness. She is the one who defends the bonds of *physis* most vigorously. She sees herself against the large backdrop of myth: Procne (107, 147–48), Niobe, Eriphyle, and Alceon (837–48).⁴⁴ Her very language has an epic cast, as when she

⁴¹ Athenaeus 3.122B–C. Kaibel 78 is not convincing in denying these overtones of Orestes' statement.

⁴² I cannot agree with Woodard (i) 166 ff., 170 with note 28, 202, that Odysseus is a paradigm for the action of Orestes. If he were, he would hardly be a positive paradigm. On Sophocles' unfavorable attitude toward stealth and trickery see L. A. Post, "Sophocles, Strategy, and the *Electra*," *CW* 46 (1953) 150–51. See also Johansen (above, note 1) 12.

⁴³ E.g. 114, 125, 197, 229, 279, 490, 638, etc.

⁴⁴ On Electra and the mythical world see Cedric H. Whitman, *Sophocles: A Study in Heroic Humanism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1951) 165; also Woodard (ii) 198.

speaks, in Homeric terms, of Agamemnon's murder (98–99):

ὄπως δρῶν ὑλοτόμοι
σχίζουσι κᾶρα φονίῳ πελέκει,

or of her own bereft state (1150–51):⁴⁵

πάντα γὰρ συναρπάσας,
θύελλ' ὄπως, βέβηκας.

She is the one to use passionately the absolute, life-and-death categories that underlie the action. If Agamemnon is unavenged, *all* morality is gone (ἔρροι τ' ἄν αἰδῶς / ἀπάντων τ' εὐσέβεια θνατῶν, 249–50). When she finds the laws (*nomoi*) urged by Chrysothemis inadequate and crippling, she rejects them outright (1043), just as she can reject life itself (820 ff.). She can envisage her condition, at Orestes' "death," as absolute "nothingness"—τὴν μηδὲν ἐς τὸ μηδὲν (1166). One might compare the similar passion of total loss in Achilles: οὐ μὲν γὰρ τι κακώτερον ἄλλο πάθοιμι (*Il.* 19.321).⁴⁶

This very tendency in Electra to experience life with utter commitment to a single idea or a single mood, this readiness to accept the worst and project it against a cosmic scale—myth, nature, all morality—this lies also at the roots of her credulity. She has little skill at deceptive *logoi* herself, and so is an innocent victim of such *logoi* when employed by others. Like other Sophoclean heroes, she is also a victim of what is best in her own nature: "Such natures are justly most painful for themselves to bear," says Creon of Oedipus (*O.T.* 674–75), and the dictum applies also to Electra. Because of her very intensity, she suffers to the full the terrible reversals inflicted on her by Orestes' schemes. Yet because of this same intensity her suffering and her involvement in the general negation of life in her world have an heroic dimension.

Orestes, on the other hand, is far from being "almost a blank," as Linforth has suggested.⁴⁷ Yet neither is he as important as others have maintained.⁴⁸ Aside from his obvious function in the plot, there

⁴⁵ Jebb on 1151 cites *Iliad* 13.39. Compare also Penelope's speech in *Od.* 20.63 and Helen's in *Il.* 6.345–48.

⁴⁶ On the "Achillean" affinities of the Sophoclean hero in general, see Knox (above, note 6) 50–53; also Whitman (above, note 44) 59 ff. and 64.

⁴⁷ Linforth (above, note 5) 89.

⁴⁸ E.g. Woodard in both his essays (above, note 1); see especially (1) 163.

is an important development in his character which must be counted on the positive side of what the play presents. Even here, nevertheless, this development is important not so much for itself as for its relation to the tragedy of Electra. Orestes' cool practicality becomes touched by a true and deep compassion for Electra; and yet their rediscovery of one another occurs in straitened circumstances, amid dangers, and under the shadow of the deed they must perform. Thus again life emerges clear and bright for a moment, as in the prologue, only to be submerged in death.

The contrast in temperament between Orestes and Electra has often been noted.⁴⁹ Orestes sees in the slain father simply the titled king into whose position and property he, as rightful heir, is to enter. He feels little of Electra's almost morbidly close bond to Agamemnon, and can announce without emotion his intention to visit the grave because the god commanded it (*ὡς ἐφίετο*, 51). Death has not the emotional reality for him that it has for Electra. He is ready to adopt the ruse of his own death as a useful expedient, with no thought of the effect on his sister. There is no question here of his being forced to inflict pain that he would rather avoid: he simply has not thought of Electra's response at all. He has not lived amid the reality of death—all kinds of death—as Electra has. With his readiness to plan and to act, he is a successful product of the Paedagogus' education. The Paedagogus' closing words in the prologue are the appropriate cue for Orestes: "We are at that point where it is no longer the right time to hesitate, but is the sharp point of deeds," (21–22). As Reinhardt has pointed out,⁵⁰ the Paedagogus' long *rhêsis* on Orestes' death reflects the basic qualities of the young man's nature: involvement in the competitive male world, with its brightness (cf. *lampros*, 685), throngs, sudden vicissitudes, as opposed to the actionless, dark, involuted world of Electra.

The confrontation with Electra, however, awakens a gentler side

⁴⁹ On the contrasts between Orestes and Electra see Kirkwood (above, note 13) 142–43; Woodard *passim*, especially (i) 173 ff. and (ii) 219–23; Reinhardt (above, note 13) 151 ff.

⁵⁰ Reinhardt (above, note 13) 164–65: "Und doch muss auch dieser falsche, totgemeldete, von Glanz, Sieg, Spiel umgebene Orest etwas vom wahren haben: denn der wahre wie der totgemeldete sind von Elektras Leiden gleich entfernt und denken, von der Not der Schwester unberührt, an Sieg und Ruhm."

of Orestes. His first response to his sister (whom he does not yet recognize) is as abrupt and matter-of-fact as one would expect from a protégé of the Paedagogus (1108–11):

El. Alas, unhappy that I am; you do not then bring clear proofs of the rumor which we heard?

Or. I know not your rumor; but old Strophius commanded me to announce the news about Orestes.

Yet after Electra's poignant request for the urn in 1119–22, he gives it up with no further protest, not even asking who she is (1123–25):

Bring it here and give it to her, whoever she is; for it is not in enmity (*dysmeneia*) (to the dead man) that she asks for it, but as one of those dear to him (*philôn tis*) or related to him by blood.

Orestes is thus deflected away from his initial purpose to an action which certainly delays the deed and, as the Paedagogus points out later, even jeopardizes it. The cool deviser of clever *logoi* soon finds himself at a loss for words and no longer master of his tongue (1174–75):

φεῦ φεῦ, τί λέξω; ποῖ λόγων ἀμυχανῶν
ἔλθω; κρατεῖν γὰρ οὐκέτι γλώσσης σθένω.

To this spontaneous reaction of fraternal love is added a tenderness, new in Orestes, in the manner in which he reveals his identity. After ascertaining the good will of the chorus in 1203, he might simply have blurted out his name. Instead he gently leads Electra to the truth. He first persuades her to give up the urn (1205), a necessary symbolical relinquishing of her hopeless involvement in sterility, isolation, and death.⁵¹ In what follows too (1231–87), though Orestes tries repeatedly to check Electra's exultation, he does so gently and even joins sympathetically in her cries despite himself (see 1276, 1279–80). Even after the scene returns to iambic trimeters with Orestes' firmer stand at 1288, he still allows Electra to go on for over twenty lines (1301–21), until the suspenseful moment when the palace door opens and the Paeda-

⁵¹ On Orestes' delay in revealing his identity after 1203 see T. von Wilamowitz (above, note 6) 209–10. Even he, though rejecting all psychological interpretations, still admits that Orestes' request that Electra give up the urn is an "anschauliche symbolische Forderung." See also Kaibel 257–58. On this compassionate side in Orestes in general see Letters (above, note 8) 250–51; Reinhardt (above, note 13) 172. For a more qualified interpretation see Kirkwood (above, note 13) 142–43, with note 33.

gogus emerges with his sharp rebuke: "You greatest fools, utterly deprived of wits" (1326).

The recognition scene is all the more moving because of the surrounding gloom. Yet this compassionate potential in Orestes has been subtly prepared for already in the prologue. His opening words in the play are a statement of gratitude and affection for the Paedagogus, ὦ φίλτατ' ἀνδρῶν προσπόλων (23), although he follows this up with a simile of a noble horse (25–27) which is characteristic of his bent toward action and glory. More important is his response to Electra's off-stage cry of line 77, ἰὼ μοί μοι δύστηνος. The Paedagogus conjectures the cry to be that of some slave; but Orestes at once, instinctively, leaps to the thought of his sister and repeats her word (79–80): "Is it the unfortunate (*dystēnos*) Electra? Are you willing to wait here and listen to her laments?" The Paedagogus, intent on the action, refuses with a curt ἤκιστα, "by no means" (82). He insists on following the god's command (82–83). But the way has been prepared for Orestes' emotional commitment to Electra. *Dystēnos*, as Kaibel remarks, will "remain alive in Orestes and influence his mood."⁵² Later it will specifically reflect Electra's side of her bond with Orestes and her desolation at the news of his death: she uses it of herself at the first news of his death (677) and of Orestes himself in the ode that follows the Paedagogus' detailed account (862).

The Paedagogus' ἤκιστα in 82 makes strongly and deliberately clear from the beginning Sophocles' departure from Aeschylus. Aeschylus places the recognition early in his play (*Cho.* 212 ff.), and his Orestes reveals himself with a direct and unsuspectful ὅδ' εἰμί, "I am he" (*Cho.* 219).⁵³ Sophocles, on the other hand, builds up suspense for the recognition and gives it a high dramatic importance.⁵⁴

One might have expected that Orestes, alert to Electra's presence since line 80, would recognize her as soon as she made her intense appeal for the urn at 1119 ff. (e.g. 1125, "some one dear to him or related by blood"). But all sign of recognition is postponed until

⁵² Kaibel 66–67. On the interpretation of this scene in general see also Kaibel 81 ff., and Suys, *LEC* 10 (1941) 128–29.

⁵³ See T. von Wilamowitz (above, note 6) 172–73.

⁵⁴ On the recognition scene as the "high point of the play" see T. von Wilamowitz (above, note 6) 212; more moderately and sensitively, Reinhardt (above, note 13) 170 ff.

after her long lament of 1126–70. Orestes is thus made to recognize Electra in terms of her grief and her past love for him. The Paedagogus' brief allusion in the prologue (12) to Electra's part in saving his life is now given substance. Orestes sees the extent both of Electra's earlier involvement and of her bereavement. Previously his plans contained no reference to saving his sister. Now he discovers her in a characteristic attitude, the pose in which she has seen herself fixed, Niobe-like (150), forever, hopelessly devoted to the dead, isolated, bereaved of love, hope, and life.

In taking in her utter prostration, Orestes discovers Electra's sufferings as his own: "I was not, then, aware of any of my own ills" (*ὡς οὐκ ἄρ' ἤδη τῶν ἐμῶν οὐδὲν κακῶν*, 1185). Thus he not only confronts and shares the burden of her grief, but also stamps their love with its authentic quality of suffering. They come together amid the *kaka* in which both their lives are immersed. This scene, then, is not merely a recognition of names and faces; it is also a revelation of essential natures.⁵⁵ Orestes entered bearing the urn as a mechanism of his success, a means of entering the palace. But for Electra the urn is the remaining substance of whatever love she has felt and can feel still; and for them both it becomes the token of love found and shared in the midst of evil and death.

For Electra too there is a profound rightness in her meeting Orestes under these circumstances. On the one hand, the meeting comes after she has reached her own resolve to act unaided; and, as Whitman has pointed out, she thus shows "to what lengths she could endure and with what courage she could act in the face of the uttermost despair."⁵⁶ But, on the other hand, Electra also fulfils one of the deepest needs of her nature. In her world love and death are inseparable. Now the two meet, each at its zenith. She finds herself as "nothing" (1166) and wants to withdraw into the urn (1165), to become insensate, the one joy of death: *τοὺς γὰρ θανόντας οὐχ ὀρῶ λυπούμενους* (1170). Here again she feels suffering with the intensity of the great figures of Homer: she is like Priam who finds it unendurable that he is still sentient amid the sufferings of his tortured old age (*Il.* 22.59–65).

Though the urn-scene contains much that is positive, it must also be

⁵⁵ See Reinhardt (above, note 13) 171 with note 1, 276–77.

⁵⁶ Whitman (above, note 44) 168.

regarded in terms of the death-life inversions of the rest of the play. On the one hand the scene obviously enacts a significant "rebirth." Orestes is found alive, and Electra gives up her longing for death (1165–67) with the exultant cry, "O births, births of bodies dearest to me" (*ὠὸ γοναί, / γοναί σωμάτων ἐμοὶ φιλάτων*, 1232–33). On the other hand the urn itself is a symbol of Electra's blasted love, the death-in-life condition of her world, and the living death of Electra herself.⁵⁷ It is under the sign of death that brother and sister meet. At the same time Electra's lament over the urn is the natural development of the theme of her childlessness and her separation from the life-creating capacities of womanhood. She performs the rite of lamentation that Clytaemnestra, the "no-mother" (1154, 1194), should be performing. She treats the urn as if it were the body of her child: she holds it close, refuses to give it up, complains of the loss of her "nurture" (1143–44, 1147), calls it "that which is dearest to her" (*ta philtata*, 1208). In thus clinging to the urn as a mother to her child, she re-enacts the sterility of her love; and it is only after this travail of suffering and barrenness that the "birth" (*gonai*, 1232–33) will come.

Now, after years of silence and loneliness, Electra cannot hold back. All the force of her passionate nature breaks forth in the lyrics of 1232–87. For once Electra is not bent on the murder. Her thoughts in this moment of sudden, unspeakable happiness are all of love, joy, pleasure (cf. *hêdonê*, 1272, 1278), the joy of life she has earlier utterly abjured (see 359–64, 821–22). Liberated by the tremendous cry of 1232–33, *ὠὸ γοναί, γοναί*, her woman's feelings rule her. But the brother who has just given her new life reminds her with increasing firmness of the destructive capacity of woman: "See how Ares lies in women too" (1243), and thus recalls her to the *kaka* in which they both live (*οὐδέ ποτε λησόμενον ἀμέτερον / οἶον ἔφν κακόν*, 1249–50; *ἄς ἐγὼ οὐδ' ἂν ἐν κακοῖς λαθοίμαν*, 1287). Not even here is Electra allowed to "forget" (1249, 1287). "Not even amid woes (*kakois*) would I forget" are the last words of the lyric passage (1287), and we are reminded once more of Electra's lonely "not forgetting" in her opening song (146, 168, 178).

Orestes brings the scene back to the ordered movement of iambics at 1288 and calls for an end of "excessive words" (*τὰ περισσεύοντα τῶν*

⁵⁷ See H. Musurillo, *Symbol and Myth in Ancient Poetry* (New York 1961) 75–77. On the importance of the urn in general see Woodard (1) 190–91.

λόγων), using the adjective applied to Electra herself by the chorus at the beginning of the play (*περισσά*, “excessive,” 155). The word prepares us for Electra’s reply: when she answers him, though she now uses iambic trimeters, she speaks with a renewed intensity of hatred, as bitter as any utterance in the earlier part of the play: “Do not fear that our mother will ever see my face in the house bright with laughter. For hatred has of old worn deep into me.” Here, as in the following lines (1312–17), joy and pain are confounded, as are life and death, light and dark (note *phaidron*, 1310, 1297); and Electra’s deepest hate rises up in the midst of her ecstatic cries of love. When she tells Orestes shortly after, *εἴργασαι δέ μ’ ἄσκοπα* (“You have done me things unimaginable,” 1315), she may be referring to the ineffable greatness of her joy. Yet the word is ambiguous and could refer as well to the greatness of her suffering and Orestes’ “lack of consideration” (another meaning of *askopos*). It echoes the chorus’ dismal pronouncement of 864: to Electra’s crushing grief over Orestes’ fate they reply, *ἄσκοπος ἂ λώβα*, “unimaginable the doom.” The repetition of this adjective in 1315, then, sets the joy of success against the suffering inflicted by the means that win it.

Electra’s statement of 1315 is part of a larger reference to death (1313–17):

How would I stop weeping, I who have seen you dead and living on this one journey? You have done me things unimaginable, so that if my father should come to me alive, I would not longer think it a wondrous prodigy, but would believe that I saw him.

In Orestes the “dead” have in fact come to life; but Orestes’ stratagem also continues the confusion of life and death that persists to the very end of the play (see 1384–97, 1417–21, 1477–78).

Orestes, perhaps because of his own involvement in the emotions of the recognition, is rather ineffectual in checking Electra’s outbursts. It takes the firmer and rather colder presence of the Paedagogus to achieve that. Even he cannot repress a ten-line exultation on Electra’s part (1354–63), but his curt *ἄρκειν δοκεῖ μοι* in 1364, like his *ἤκιστα* at the end of the prologue, recalls the young people to the grim business before them. His further words here in 1364, however, not only check Electra’s joy, but bring back something of the mood of her first appearance in the play (1364–66):

τοὺς γὰρ ἐν μέσῳ λόγους
πολλὰ κυκλοῦνται νύκτες ἡμέραι τ' ἴσαι,
αἶ ταῦτά σοι δείξουσιν, Ἥλέκτρα, σαφῆ.

“As for the tale of what’s between, Electra, many nights and equal days in circling motion will show them to you clearly.” The endless succession of nights and “equal days” points back to the static condition of Electra in her first scene. There, as she feels her existence as a living death, day and night are indeed “equal” for her, and time is but a closed circle of repeated lamentations.⁵⁸

III

The ending of the *Electra* has been a subject of great controversy. In the remaining pages I shall concern myself with the extent to which this ending is positive or negative, how the tone of the ending reflects upon the tragedy of Electra herself, and what this tone may imply about the meaning of the play as a whole.

It is important and illuminating to consider the last 150 lines in terms of Electra. By this point, to summarize the movement of her tragedy, she has passed through despair and a kind of death (ὄλωλα τῆδ' ἐν ἡμέρᾳ, 674) to a renewed strength and moral energy in her decision to act. This is followed by a renewal of actual life in the recognition scene, where she relinquishes the urn to embrace the flesh-and-blood Orestes standing alive before her. Yet the closing scenes of the play give us no full or easy resolution of Electra's condition. Despite her triumph, her tragedy is unrelieved. The scene between the recognition and the matricide (1288–1383) modulates carefully from joy back to gloom. Despite the prominence of Orestes and the Paedagogus here, the main focus of attention is still Electra. It is her one moment of joy that is tempered by the Paedagogus' harsh rebuke of 1326–38 and by his cool promise of a distant fulfilment which the succession of “circling nights and equal days” will bring (1364–66).

⁵⁸ For Electra's “circular” conception of time see Woodard (II) 196 ff. On time in the *Electra* in general see Whitman's chapter (above, note 44), “Trial by Time: Electra,” *passim*; and, recently, R. M. Torrance, “Sophocles: Some Bearings,” *HSCP* 69 (1965) 307 ff. On time and the Sophoclean hero generally see Knox (above, note 6) 25–27.

Before turning to the scene of the matricide, however, I wish to consider Electra's response to her great success in the final scene.

The accomplishment of the vengeance itself intensifies rather than dispels the play's grimness of mood. It is in accordance with the dampening of Electra's joy after the recognition scene that she, rather than Orestes, is the one to feel this grimness most acutely.⁵⁹ Thus it is she, not her efficient and practical brother, who presses for a quick end (1483–84):

*μη̄ πέρα λέγειν ἕα,
πρὸς θεῶν, ἀδελφέ, μηδὲ μηκύνειν λόγους.*

“Let him not speak further, my brother, by the gods; let him not lengthen out his words.” Orestes seems willing to protract the experience (see 1504: *φυλάξαι δεῖ με τοῦτό σοι πικρόν*). But Electra has lived among “evils” long enough. Her one thought is to get the whole thing over with as quickly as possible. She wants Aegisthus killed and out of sight (*ἄποπτον ἡμῶν*, 1489). After her plea for an end of *logoi* (1483–84), she continues (1485–90):

*τί γὰρ βροτῶν ἂν σὺν κακοῖς μεμειγμένων
θνήσκειν ὁ μέλλων τοῦ χρόνου κέρδος φέροι;
ἀλλ' ὡς τάχιστα κτεῖνε καὶ κτανῶν πρόθεσ
ταφεῦσιν ὧν τόνδ' εἰκός ἐστι τυγχάνειν,
ἄποπτον ἡμῶν. ὡς ἐμοὶ τόδ' ἂν κακῶν
μόνον γένοιτο τῶν πάλαι λυτήριον.*

(For, since mortals are mingled with woes, what profit of time would he gain who is about to die? But kill him as quickly as possible, and when you have killed him put him out for the buriers which it is fitting for him to get, far from our sight. This would be my only release from the evils of the past.)

Her emphasis in these lines is not upon savoring the vengeance, but finishing it and banishing all sight and memory of it. Thus in 1487–89 she does not openly taunt Aegisthus with threats of dogs or birds, but leaves the reference to his burial (or non-burial) so vague that it is

⁵⁹ Electra's ambiguous line to Aegisthus, *χαίροις ἂν, εἴ σοι χαρὰ τυγχάνει τάδε* (1457), perhaps reflects another recognition that this success is not a “matter for rejoicing.”

quite possible that she actually means to give his body proper care.⁶⁰ Her verb, *πρόθες*, is the regular expression for the laying out of a corpse. If Electra does intend the exposure of the corpse, it is strange that the woman who shouted out for a second thrust at her mother (1415) should feel squeamish about mentioning the fate of the adulterer's body. But even if Electra does mean dogs and birds by her "buriers" of 1488, she gives this point remarkably little emphasis. She passes over it with the vague and colorless terms, *ὦν τόνδ' εἰκός ἐστι τυγχάνειν* (1488), while her stress falls on performing the act of vengeance itself (note the repetition, *κτεῖνε καὶ κτανών*, 1487) and then forgetting it (*ἄποπτον*, 1489; *λυτήριον*, 1490). It is barely possible, of course, that Electra's periphrasis in 1487–89 may reflect indecision, though such a possibility seems unlikely for so strong-willed and definite a personality. More probably, her language here indicates that she is not thinking beyond the moment. She does not care deeply whether Aegisthus is buried or not. All she wants is Aegisthus dead and out of sight (1489).⁶¹

⁶⁰ Jebb on 1488 assumes the reference to be to dogs and birds. In the version of the legend given in the *Odyssey* (3.258–61) Aegisthus is actually left for dogs and birds, and Jebb is perhaps influenced by his notion that Sophocles gives us the action with an "Homeric colouring." That Electra intends actual burial and not exposure of the corpse is well argued by Bowra (above, note 15) 254–55. Kitto (above, note 3) 136 is so certain that Electra means dogs and birds that he paraphrases her speech, with quite misleading simplicity, "In god's name, let him say no more. Kill him at once! Throw his body to the dogs!" Similarly H. Weinstock, *Sophokles* (Leipzig and Berlin 1931) 32, over-translates the lines: "Wirf die Leiche / zum Frass den Wårtern hin, die er verdient . . ." (my italics), thus completely destroying the subtlety of *ταφεῦσι*, *εἰκός*, and *τυγχάνειν*.

⁶¹ It is possible that if Euripides wrote his *Electra* shortly after Sophocles', as I believe he did, he may have intended the corresponding scene in his play to form an explicit criticism of this lack of directness about Aegisthus' body on the part of Sophocles' heroine. In Euripides' play Orestes, entering with Aegisthus' head, announces to his sister, "I've come, having killed Aegisthus not in word, but deed. But that I may add to this (statement) clear knowledge, I bring you the dead man himself. Cast him forth, if you wish, a prey to dogs or fasten him up on a pike, a spoil to the sky's children, the birds. For now he's yours" (893–98). With *S. El.* 1487–89 compare *Eur. El.* 896–98:

*ὄν εἴτε χρήζεις θηρῶν ἀρπαγὴν πρόθες,
ἢ σκύλον οἰωνοῖσιν, αἰθέρος τέκνοις,
πήξασ' ἔρεισον σκόλοπι· σὸς γάρ ἐστι νῦν.*

Kaibel (299) says with regard to the scene in Euripides, "Das besonders verletzend liegt in der ausführlichen Detaillirung der phantastischen Malerei, mit der Euripides den von Sophokles gegebenen Gedanken übertrumpft." Kaibel holds, however, that Sophocles' Electra also means "dogs and birds" (298).

Two lines of this speech require special attention, namely 1485–86:

τί γὰρ βροτῶν ἄν σὺν κακοῖς μεμειγμένων
 νήσκειν ὁ μέλλων τοῦ χρόνου κέρδος φέροι;

They are difficult because, as often in Sophocles, beneath their surface clarity lies an ambiguity fundamental to the conception of Electra. Most simply, the lines refer specifically to the present situation and mean, “How would this man, Aegisthus, one of those mortals whom evil has overtaken, gain any profit by delaying since he is about to die?” But the lines seem to suggest also a larger, more general meaning: “Since all mortals have a share in suffering, what profit would a man going to die gain by delaying?” Taken in this sense the lines would be a variation on the theme of the horror of life, the blessing of death: “Of all things, not to be born is best for mortals; . . . but, if born, to pass as quickly as possible the gates of Hades” (*Theognis*, 425–28), a famous saying echoed by Sophocles in his last play (*O.C.* 1224–28). It is, of course, impossible to say how strongly Sophocles intended this second interpretation; but the lines imply the possibility at least of such a meaning (note the *present* optative, *φέροι*, and the generic word, *βροτῶν*).⁶² This implication is important for Electra’s mood here. She returns to her earlier feeling of the power of death and darkness that hold life frozen in an inescapable sameness of repeated, ineffectual gestures. In these lines she answers Orestes’ confidence in change and improvement, his optimistic anticipation of the “profit” (*kerdos*)⁶³ of his title and patrimony, with a profound sense of life’s futility (*τί . . . τοῦ χρόνου κέρδος*). The play’s initial contrast, then, between Orestes and Electra, between masculine readiness for

⁶² On the ambiguity of lines 1485–86, but with a rather different interpretation, see Woodard (ii) 202–3 and his notes there. The thought expressed in these two lines occurs as a gnomic generalization elsewhere in Sophocles (a fact which, of course, need not signify anything for the *Electra* passage): see *Ajax* 473–78 and *Antig.* 463–64. Our passage seems to be a close verbal echo of the *Antig.* passage:

ὄστις γὰρ ἐν πολλοῖσιν ὡς ἐγὼ κακοῖς
 ζῆ, πῶς ὄδ’ οὐχὶ κατθανὼν κέρδος φέρει;

⁶³ *Kerdos* is an important word in the play for indicating differences in the basic attitudes of the main characters, Electra, Orestes, Chrysothemis, Clytaemnestra. In addition to 1486 and 61, see 353, 361, 370, 452, 457, 767, 1016, 1305. See also Woodard (ii) 202–3.

action and female static emotionality, is not resolved, but only reiterated at a deeper level.

Λυτήριον, "means of release," is Electra's last word in the play. One can hardly say that she softens in her attitude toward the vengeance. But her closing speech hints that the revenge is perhaps not so fulfilling as she has expected. Earlier, she had spoken of her suffering (*κακόν*) as being, by its very nature (*ἔφυ*) "never capable of release" (*οὐ ποτε καταλύσιμον*, 1247). Necessary and inevitable the deed may be, but it is not a source of positive "life." While Orestes is totally involved in the act itself, Electra looks away to the mortal condition as a whole (1485-86). Her final speech, then, seems to constitute a last and solitary tragic recognition which tempers *her* triumph, if not Orestes'. Though united with him in the deed she has so desperately longed for, Electra remains in a sense still alone.

This muting of Electra's mood at the end reflects, of course, on the mood of the entire work. It is true, as has often been pointed out, that in closing with Aegisthus and not Clytaemnestra's death, Sophocles de-emphasizes the subsequent curse on Orestes and thus smoothes the way to the optimistic choral pronouncement which ends the play.⁶⁴ It is also possible that in turning at the end from Electra to Orestes he lightens the tone somewhat. Action has a simplicity and clarity for Orestes that it cannot have for Electra with her more complex inner life, her greater intensity of hatred, and the burden of her previous sufferings.

At the same time the final act is left hanging heavily over us, spelled out clearly in Orestes' "kill," in the last iambic line of the play. Though Aegisthus is not yet actually killed, his death is, of course, as good as accomplished. And yet through this postponement (see especially 1504) the final achievement of order, justice, and peace is still seen across the darkness of the brutal but necessary act which will make them present. Sophocles leaves us with no illusions about the cost of restoring *diké*. Clytaemnestra is cut down amid the fiercely exultant hatred of Electra; Aegisthus' death is drawn out with a certain

⁶⁴ So Linforth (above, note 5) 125; more recently M. J. O'Brien, "Orestes and the Gorgon: Euripides' *Electra*," *AJP* 85 (1964) 27. See also G. M. Kirkwood, "Two Structural Features of Sophocles' *Electra*," *TAPA* 73 (1942) 93-94, though he admits "dark and ominous hints of trouble to come" (94).

relish.⁶⁵ The clarity and beauty of the order to be restored still tremble with the dark passions from which it has at last emerged. What may have been pure and lucid in the mind of Apollo Lykeios cannot remain so in the clouded, emotion-filled atmosphere of Mycenae, or perhaps in any other abode of men, *βροτῶν σὺν κακοῖς μεμειγμένων* (1485).

There are indications too that the central inversion of life and death is not completely righted at the end of the play. Orestes has come "alive," it is true. Yet when he asks the Paedagogus if the news of his death has been announced, he receives the reply, "Learn that here you are one of those in Hades" (1342). The sentence evokes the heavy atmosphere of death that lingers over the earth of Mycenae (see 417–23), an atmosphere which Orestes has now entered. Soon after, Hermes, god of stealth, leads Orestes inside the House (1391); but Hermes, as *nekropompos*, is also the conductor of the dead to the lower world. Indeed, just after the matricide, "those long dead" and "beneath the earth" are said to live and drain the blood of the murderers (1417–21).

It is to exact justice, of course, that the dead come alive. But it is not simply that the dead are reborn, that "death" becomes "life"; rather, the dead walk the earth in all their terrifying power. It is noteworthy, in this connection, that at the stricken Clytaemnestra's first cry the chorus applies to itself the adjective *dysténos*, "unfortunate," (1407); thus in the moment of victory they take on themselves the epithet applied to the wretched Electra (line 77) and to Clytaemnestra herself (121) at the beginning. The cry itself is something that makes them shudder (*ὥστε φρίξαι*, 1408). And a few lines later they describe the liberation of the House not as a rebirth, but as the "wasting away" of the curse (1413–14):

*ὦ πόλις, ὦ γενεὰ τάλαινα, νῦν σοι
μοῖρα καταμερία φθίνει φθίνει.*

The repeated *phthinei* harks back to the image of general "death" in the natural and moral world (cf. *kataphthinonta*, 260); and, though it asserts a positive movement at the last, it does so in negative terms.

⁶⁵ On the deliberate drawing out of Aegisthus' death at the end see Perrotta (above, note 6) 322–23; also R. Lattimore, *Story Patterns in Greek Tragedy* (Ann Arbor 1965) 70.

The language of this passage, then, repeats at a different level that initial ambiguity in the description of the dawn: "The black night of stars has failed" (19).

It has been argued that the play presents a movement "from an initial separation of higher and lower to their union."⁶⁶ Yet rather than a final "union" of upper and lower worlds, the ending may reveal only the continued agency of the lower world, the continued reality of the power of death that has been operating from the beginning. One should not neglect, of course, Electra's prayer to Apollo Lykeios (1376–83) which seems to introduce the light and order of the Olympian gods. Yet this prayer, like the echo of the death scene of the *Agamemnon* which "answers" it (1415–16), has a double aspect. On the one hand it is the "poetic justice," the *nemesis* which Clytaemnestra's earlier prayer to Apollo has called forth. On the other hand, it puts Electra in a position dangerously similar to her mother's. True, she can pray openly as Clytaemnestra could not; yet she too does not explicitly avow the object of her prayer. A mother's prayer for the death of children is answered by a child's prayer for the death of a mother. The ambiguity of the "child-destroying" (τεκνολέτειρα, 107) nightingale in the Procne-myth of the parodos takes on more darkly tangible meaning as those early thoughts of bloodshed (see especially 110–20, 193–212) are realized. Clytaemnestra's prayer ended on a note of hypocrisy and terrible irony: "For it is fitting that the children of Zeus should see all things" (659). Electra is not hypocritical. But there may also be an irony—an irony inherent in the moral *aporia* in which she stands—in her conclusion, "Show to men what sort of wages for impiety (*dyssebeia*) the gods bestow" (1382–83), for one is reminded of the fact that, on her own statement, she finds "piety" (*eusebein*) impossible in her world (308).

The sinister implications of this parallel between Electra and Clytaemnestra are reinforced in Electra's last words in the play. She asks for a *λυτήριον*, a "release" from "the evils of old" (1490). Clytaemnestra prayed to Apollo for "release" from her night fears (*λυτηρίους εὐχὰς ἀνάσχω δειμάτων*, 635–36).⁶⁷ These repetitions seem to

⁶⁶ Woodard (II) 211.

⁶⁷ Note too that in 447 Electra uses *λυτήρια* to describe Clytaemnestra's expiatory

complete the tragic hint that Electra, despite herself, fulfils her bitter boast that she “does not shame her mother’s nature” (609).

Electra’s prayer to Apollo is not to be referred only to the earlier prayer of Clytaemnestra. It contrasts also with her own initial prayer to the powers of the underworld (110–15):

ὦ δῶμ’ Ἀΐδου καὶ Περσεφόνης,
ὦ χθόνι’ Ἑρμῆ καὶ ποτνί’ Ἀρά,
σεμναί τε θεῶν παῖδες Ἑρινύες,
αἱ τοὺς ἀδίκως θηήσκοντας ὄραθ’,
αἱ τοὺς εὐνάς ὑποκλεπτομένους,
ἔλθετ’, ἀρήξατε. . . .

At first, then, the prayer to Apollo in 1376 ff. seems to mark a positive, upward movement in the action. The two following choral passages (1384 ff., 1417 ff.), however, raise doubts, for here recur many of the figures of that first prayer: Hermes (1395), ἀρωγός in 1392 (cf. ἀρήξατε, 115), the curses (*arai*, 1417; cf. *potni’ Ara*, 111), the Erinyes (1386 ff.; cf. 112), the dead themselves (1417 ff.; cf. 113). Electra prays to Apollo, but the answer comes from Ares, “breathing gore” (1385), hardly a confirmation of Apollo’s lucid order. Ares too recalls Electra’s opening lament. There she complained that Agamemnon did not even have a warrior’s death at Troy at the hand of “bloody Ares” (φοίνιος Ἀρης, 96). Here, after the murdered are said to “live,” Ares returns in a phrase which verbally recalls line 96: φοινία δὲ χεῖρ / στάζει θυηλῆς Ἀρεος (“The bloody hand drips with the sacrifice to Ares,” 1421–22). A “sacrifice” to Ares, then, follows a prayer to Apollo Lykeios. This “sacrifice” also takes us back to the impure sacrifice Clytaemnestra makes to Apollo (631–32) and, before that, to the terrible sacrifice of Iphigeneia by Agamemnon (note the emphasis on θύειν: 532, 535, 572, 576).

These reminiscences thus qualify the forward movement toward justice and light with a circular movement back into the past. The *dolos* employed in the death of Clytaemnestra (1391, 1396) recalls the *dolos* of Agamemnon’s death earlier (196). The prominence given

offerings which, Electra believes, cannot in fact bring “release” for her. Note also ἔλυσαν, 755, of the “releasing” of Orestes’ body from the twisted harness: this is the act which does, it would seem, give Clytaemnestra her “release” from this: cf. 783, ἡμέρα γὰρ τῆδ’ ἀπηλλάγην φόβου.

to the chthonic powers at the end suggests the enveloping atmosphere of darkness and hate which remains despite the victory. As in a nightmare—and this a play of nightmarish visions—the guilty are struck down, but something almost as terrible rises up in their place (1417–18):

τελοῦσ' ἀραί· ζῶσιν οἱ
γᾶς ὑπαὶ κείμενοι.

There is a similar mixture of progress and circularity in the light-dark motif at the end of the play. On the positive side, the “concealment” (*κρύπτειν*) plotted by Orestes from the beginning (55) answers Clytaemnestra’s concealed prayer (638) which she could not “unfold into the light” (639–40). On the other side Orestes’ act takes him again into the darkness of the House of Atreus. The gloomy choral passage that precedes the matricide ends with Hermes leading Orestes “to his goal” and “concealing (*κρύψας*) the deceit with darkness” (1396–97). In the Aegisthus scene too concealment is ambiguous and sinister. Here at last all concealment is abandoned; the truth is brought to light. There is both justice and irony in Aegisthus’ command (1468–69):

χαλάτε πᾶν κάλυμμα' ἀπ' ὀφθαλμῶν, ὅπως
τὸ συγγενές τοι κάπ' ἐμοῦ θρήνων τύχη.

(“Loose every covering from the face, that what is kindred to me may receive its due laments from me as well.”) The veil is lifted not just “from the face” that is covered, but, by implication, “from the eyes” (*ἀπ' ὀφθαλμῶν*) of Aegisthus himself (note too the emphasis on vision in this passage, 1466, 1468, 1471, 1474, etc.). On the other hand, what is “uncovered” is a grim sight: *μάλ' ἄζηλος θέα*, says Electra in 1455. This fearful recognition between illicit lovers complements and balances that happier recognition between brother and sister.

A special point is made too of the “darkness” of the House where the final execution of justice takes place (1494) and the “evils” (*kaka*) which the House is yet to “see” (*ἰδεῖν*, 1497). Sophocles perhaps intended a deliberate contrast with the conclusion of the *Eumenides*. Aeschylus carries the action away from sin-haunted Mycenae to Delphi and Athens; Sophocles concentrates pitilessly on Mycenae: the palace,

the tomb of Agamemnon, the altar of Apollo Lykeios. Aeschylus' Orestes emerges purified from his past in the clear air of Athens; Sophocles' Orestes, even granting that we are not to think of a subsequent pursuit by the Furies, steps back into the dark House for the deed of bloodshed with which the play ends. Aeschylus' finale in the *Eumenides* presents a communal procession to the mysterious places of the earth with lit torches and brilliant dress; here two men alone enter the darkness, not of the sacred earth, but of a crime-ridden House.

That the play ends with such a slow and deliberate re-entrance to the House of the Pelopids should also give pause to proponents of an entirely optimistic interpretation. The House and its wealth—the latter often dangerous in Greek literature—are introduced with sinister overtones from the beginning of the play and so recur at crucial points throughout (*Μυκήνας τὰς πολυχρύσους . . . / πολύφθορόν τε δῶμα Πελοπιδῶν τόδε*, 9–10; *παγχρύσων δίφρων* of the murdered Myrtilus, 511). And Orestes at the end is led, as “the helper of those below” into “the abode of his father wealthy of old” (*ἀρχαίοπλουτα*, 1393).⁶⁸ His first words after the matricide are a reference to the House: “What’s in the House (*τὰν δόμοισι*) is well, if well Apollo oracled” (1424–25).

It is interesting in this connection that the Paedagogus is the first of those from “outside” to make contact with the House. With his unremitting concentration on the deed, he stands in a closer relation to the destructive past than Orestes, so full of fresh and youthful hopes. It is from the House that he interrupts what remains of the recognition scene between the two young people. The Paedagogus, who, like Electra, has firsthand experience of the grim past, easily and early re-enters the House which contains that past. Orestes comes to it only after he has been prepared by his deepened experience of Electra’s suffering in the recognition scene, for it is there that he learns more fully and immediately than anywhere else what the past is and what those who live with it can suffer. Orestes’ initial hopes are for the positive contents of the House: wealth, title, power (see

⁶⁸ For the sinister significance of gold and wealth in the play, note also the golden necklace of Eriphyle, 839. The ominousness is reinforced by the possible reference to the *Agamemnon*: see *Ag.* 961–62 and also 948–49. The adjective *ἀρχαίοπλουτος* (*El.* 1393) occurs in *Ag.* 1043.

ἀρχέπλουτον, 72); but this wealth is old and stained by the past (ἀρχαίόπλουτα, 1393), and Orestes finds in the House not just his father's wealth, but, as Aegisthus' words of 1498 suggest, also his father's curse. The House and its wealth are not possessed without risk. One may recall that Clytaemnestra too hoped to enjoy only "the present wealth" (πλούτου τοῦ παρόντος, 648) without its past. Her sinful desire is defeated; but the end of the play suggests a possible qualification of the initial simplicity of Orestes' aims as well.

Orestes' entrance into the House at the end involves another movement analogous to that from light to dark: he changes places with Electra. Coming from the expansive "outside" world implied in the prologue (17–19), he now enters the inner world where Electra has "wasted away" for so long. Shortly before, Electra cried, "Receive me into your urn" (δέξαι μ' ἐς τὸ σὸν τόδε στέγος, 1165). But now it is Orestes who is received into the House in terms which recall Electra's στέγος (see δωμάτων ὑπόστεγοι, 1386; εἶσω στέγας, 1392; τήνδε τὴν στέγην ἰδεῖν, 1497).⁶⁹ But, although Orestes enters Electra's enclosed world, Electra does not correspondingly enter Orestes' wider realm. Orestes enters the House, but Electra is left on stage. Whether she exits with the chorus after their concluding lines or herself enters the House after Orestes is uncertain.⁷⁰ In either case, she is left once more confronting the House, alone, standing "before the doors of her father" exactly as she was at the beginning (see τῶνδε πατρῶων πρὸ θυρῶν, 108–9). Throughout the play Sophocles has stressed Electra's bondage to the House. Even being outside is a risk for her (312–13, 328, 911–12). At the news of Orestes' "death," all her despair is focused on the House: she is ready to let herself sink down at the gate, waiting for death (τῆδε πρὸς πύλην/παρεῖσ' ἐμαντὴν ἄφιλος αὐανῶ βίον, 818–19). Now in the final scene the House is still an immensely menacing presence. Here again the end of the play takes us back to the beginning.

Orestes has come, he says, as the "purifier" of the House (69–70),

⁶⁹ Cf. also 379 ff.: Chrysothemis warns Electra of the danger of being locked in an underground chamber (στέγη, 382), where she will never see the light of the sun. This motif is, then, perhaps fulfilled in Electra's own wish, when her last hope has failed, to enter Orestes' urn (στέγος, 1165).

⁷⁰ For Electra's presence in the final scene see W. M. Calder III, "The End of Sophocles' *Electra*," *GRBS* 4 (1963) 213–16.

and he has doubtless succeeded. But at the end Sophocles places far less stress on the new purity of the House than on its heavy burden of past sins: the ancient wealth (1393), the blood of those long dead (1417–21), the darkness (1396, 1494), the “evils of the Pelopids” (1498). The three-line choral passage which closes the play is often taken to refer to the House of Atreus, now “free” and “perfected” (1508–10):

ὦ σπέρμ' Ἀτρέως, ὡς πολλὰ παθὼν
 δι' ἐλευθερίας μόλις ἐξῆλθες
 τῆ νῦν ὄρμῃ τελεωθέν.

(“O seed of Atreus, after much suffering you have come out with difficulty to a point of freedom, perfected by the present effort.”) Yet σπέρμ' Ἀτρέως (1508) in customary Sophoclean diction should mean not “House of Atreus” (so Jebb), but “child of Atreus.” The phrase is equivalent to a patronymic, just as σπέρμ' Ἀχιλλέως in the *Philoctetes* means Neoptolemus (*Phil.* 364, 582, 1066).⁷¹ The choral tag, then, here refers not to the House of Atreus, but, most plausibly, to Electra herself (Orestes, of course, is also a possibility, but Electra, rather than he, is the chief subject of the play).⁷² It is she, once a slave (note her δουλεύω, 1192, and cf. 814), who is now made free (*eleutheria*, 1509); she, so long suffering (πολλὰ παθόν) who is now “perfected,” “consummated,” in her heroic nature. The salvation of the House is not denied, but neither is it explicitly affirmed. The phrase δι' ἐλευθερίας μόλις ἐξῆλθες, moreover, is a close echo of Electra's own words at the close of the recognition scene two hundred and fifty lines earlier: μόλις γὰρ ἔσχον νῦν ἐλεύθερον στόμα (1256). This parallel strongly supports the likelihood that the closing lines refer to Electra alone.

At the same time the phrase σπέρμα . . . τελεωθέν seems to contain a metaphor which qualifies the joyful tone of this passage. The verb *τελειόω* is used of the biological maturation of plants or animals or men.⁷³ The “seed brought to maturity,” then, continues the language

⁷¹ For this use of *σπέρμα* (always referring to a person when used with the genitive of a proper name) see the lexica of Ellendt and Dindorf, s.v.

⁷² That σπέρμ' Ἀτρέως refers only to Electra has also been argued recently by Calder (above, note 70) 213–16.

⁷³ See Kaibel 301, who cites Plato, *Laws* 8.839A. See also Plato, *Symp.* 192A, *Republ.* 466E and 498B. For other references see *LSJ* s.v., II.1 and 2. A similar metaphor may be present in the *τελεόμητος* of S. *Trach.* 824–25.

of biological growth and life (cf. *βλαστάνειν*, *θάλλειν*, *φυτεύειν* discussed above, Section II); but it comes immediately after the deed of death. Thus it again juxtaposes the gain of "life" with the cost in death. It also serves as a reminder of Electra's initial condition of physical unfulfilment and the waste of her capacities for creating life. The explicit reference of *τελεωθέν* may still be to the "perfection" in suffering of the heroine; but this result is shown against the dark background of past misery and grim present effort, of which the chorus' *μόλις* is a small, but strong reminder.⁷⁴

Τελεωθέν is also obviously akin to *τελεῖν*, the verb used throughout the play and especially at the end to mark the gradual preparation for this enormous deed and perhaps something of its irrevocability (see 735, 779, 947, 1344, and especially 1398–99, 1417, 1435).

The end of the play presents one further inversion. Hitherto it has been Electra who engaged in fruitless words, *logoi*, Orestes who has pressed continually for deeds, *erga*. But now this situation is reversed. This reversal too is rooted in the tragic situation and the basic human needs of the main characters. Electra, though she has lived on ineffective *logoi*, has experienced the concreteness, the *ergon*, of suffering and injustice. For Orestes, however, man of "deeds" though he is, the past sufferings are only *logoi*. He knows of them only through the *logoi* of the Paedagogus. His own death is a *logos*, devised with no sense of its emotional effect on Electra. Hence it is in keeping with Electra's intense experience of "death," in all its forms, that she unhesitatingly believes the Paedagogus' *logos* of death and as unhesitatingly rejects Chrysothemis' *logos* of life (871–946). For Electra, then, this *logos* of Orestes' death is an *ergon* of tremendous power. The two positions cross at their highest point when Orestes actually witnesses his sister's grief. The "words" he hears now are not the *logoi* he has used as instruments, but a deeply stirring *thrénos*. At a loss for *logoi* himself (1174–75), he now confronts in Electra's wasted

⁷⁴ The adverb *μόλις* is a strong and significant word in the play. It occurs four times (in addition to 1509), each time associated with painful events or great suffering. In 575 Electra uses it of Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigeneia. In 601 she uses it of Orestes' bare escape from his mother's hands. In 754 the Paedagogus uses it of the difficulty of extricating the torn body of Orestes from the reins. Finally in 1256 Electra, having moved from death to life, speaks of having gained "with difficulty" freedom to speak after years of silence. On the adverb in 1509 see now Torrance (above, note 58) 313–14.

form (note *eidōs*, 1177) the visible fact, the *ergon*, of her—and his own (1185)—past suffering.

With this paradoxical relation of Orestes and Electra to *logos* and *ergon* is connected the basic paradox of the entire play: Electra is a heroine who does not act, only suffers.⁷⁵ Yet her non-action (for one can hardly call it passivity) has an intensity more absorbing than Orestes' *ergon*. Without this vividness of Electra's non-action the play could not succeed. Electra must be able to hold us—as she holds Chrysothemis and Clytaemnestra—by the sheer power of her emotions and her will. Sophocles has written a work wherein the “action” is almost pure emotion, where *logos* (as it is connected with Electra) has the substance of *ergon*.

In his brilliant analysis of *logos* and *ergon* in the play, Woodard has recently argued that, at the conclusion, ideal (*logos*) and actual (*ergon*), previously separated in the persons of Electra and Orestes respectively, now come together.⁷⁶ It is true that Electra, in her deception of Aegisthus (1448–65), now brings *logos* to bear on *ergon*, uses “words” not for sterile, unchanging lamentation, but for effecting a real and positive change in her world. Yet it seems possible to look upon this scene not in terms of the reuniting of *logos* and *ergon*, but as a suggestion of a certain degeneration in *logos* itself. The *logos* becomes exclusively a means for the *ergon*. Orestes had so spoken of *logoi* earlier in the play in enunciating a principle of dubious moral validity: “No word is base if gain (*kerdos*) accompanies” (61). And this “practical” use of *logos* in the play has cut both ways: it has indeed gained its effect and brought *kerdos* to Orestes; but it has also nearly killed Electra. She has felt the edge of *logos*, just as she has experienced the *erga* of death and evil, more deeply than Orestes. She has come to full and personal knowledge of the principle she stated herself earlier, “Many times have small *logoi* tripped up mortals and righted them again” *πολλά τοι μικροὶ λόγοι / ἔσφηλαν ἤδη καὶ κατώρθωσαν βροτούς*, 415–16). It is she, then, who calls for an end of *logoi* (1483) and, implicitly, for an end of *erga* too (see 1489–90). The two spheres come together here not necessarily in a reunion, but because both

⁷⁵ On the paradox involved in Electra as passive protagonist see Perrotta (above, note 6) 331–32; Weinstock (above, note 60) 13.

⁷⁶ Woodard (i) 191 ff.

have been directed toward the vengeance, and both have therefore been fulfilled. From this point of view it is questionable whether one can even speak of a prior separation of *logos* and *ergon* at all, for *logos* from the beginning has been an instrument of the deed. In this play, as Electra declares, τὰ δ' ἔργα τοὺς λόγους εὐρίσκεται (625): the deeds invent (or find out) the words.

Associated with "profit," full of falsehood, shifting as the circumstances alter, *logos* in the play is not simply a lucid vehicle for determining truth or an expression of something ideal, but rather a tool, a weapon of war; and like any weapon it is indifferent as to which side it wounds.

There is general agreement that the *Electra* is among Sophocles' later works and belongs almost certainly within the last two decades of the fifth century.⁷⁷ The view of *logos* in the play argued above would well suit this period. Thucydides bears witness to a change in the role of *logos* as the war goes on.⁷⁸ In the restrained, intelligent demeanor of Pericles, *logos* does express an ideal (the Funeral Speech), is kept always within the limits of reason, and is strongly opposed to the demagogic πρὸς ἡδονὴν τι λέγειν of his successors (Thuc. 2.65.8–9). At his death Athens passes, via Cleon and the Mytilenean debate, to the Melian Dialogue, where the rational force of *logos* is incidental to the brute fact of power. The *logos* there, as in the *Electra*, has lost its impartial clarity, its austere, autonomous validity as an organ of thought. In the *Electra* it is a clever means to action. In the Melian Dialogue it is ancillary to the fact of power. And perhaps Thucydides' most painful account of the failure of *logos* is relevant here too, the Corcyrean *stasis*, where the basic moral terms

⁷⁷ Though the chronological relation between the two *Electras* is still unsettled (see Lesky [above, note 13] 124 with note 1; Kitto [above, note 3] 350 with note 1), critics are agreed that Sophocles' play is late. See Jebb lii–lviii (not before 420); Schmid (above, note 13) 388–89, with note 5 on p. 388; Perrotta (above, note 6) 365 ff. ("forse posteriore, certo non anteriore, al 415," p. 367); Whitman (above, note 44) 51–55 (between 418 and 414); A. Dain and P. Mazon, *Sophocle* ("Budé," Paris 1958) 2.134 ("proche de 415"); Johansen (above, note 1) 10–12 (probably after 413). See now W. Theiler, "Die ewigen Elektren, *WS* 79 (1966) 102–12, who would have Euripides' *Electra* composed in 419/18 and not performed until 413, while he would agree with A. S. Owen in dating Sophocles' *Electra* to 411 or 410.

⁷⁸ In Thuc. 3.42.2, for instance, Diodotus, criticizing Cleon's position, says, τοὺς τε λόγους ὅστις διαμάχεται μὴ διδασκάλους τῶν πραγμάτων γίνεσθαι, ἢ ἀξύνετος ἔστω ἢ ἰδίᾳ τι αὐτῷ διαφέρει.

shift their meanings and all values are dissolved (Thuc. 3.82–83). Though the *Electra* presents nothing like the extreme confusion of the Corcyra passage, yet there is a certain ambiguity surrounding some of its basic moral terminology: *kalon*, *aischron*, *kakon*.⁷⁹

The final *logos* in the play too is not some noble principle which leaves us at a serene, lofty vantage point from which we understand the meaning of the action. Orestes concludes (1505–7):

χρῆν δ' εὐθὺς εἶναι τήνδε τοῖς πᾶσιν δίκην,
ὅστις πέρα πράσσειν γε τῶν νόμων θέλοι,
κτείνειν· τὸ γὰρ πανούργον οὐκ ἂν ἦν πολὺ.

(“This justice should be applied at once to all who wish to act beyond the laws—kill them. For wrongdoing would not abound.”) Though he speaks of “justice” and “law” and takes a universalizing point of view (τοῖς πᾶσιν, τὸ πανούργον), his words still breathe the passion of the moment. One should act, he believes, “at once” (εὐθύς), a doctrine not unlike that of the anti-intellectual Cleon in the Mytilenean Debate (Thuc. 3.38.1). The statement is preceded by a piece of unnecessary, if understandable, cruelty to Aegisthus, “. . . that you may not die in a way that would give you any pleasure; I must keep this as bitter for you” (1503–4). In the context of these two lines, then, Orestes’ closing *gnōmē* appears as especially harsh doctrine. The forceful enjambment in the last trimeter of the play places the emphasis brutally on *kteinein*, “to kill.” As far as morality goes, this utterance has little that is enlightening or profound, certainly little that is ennobling.⁸⁰ It is no more exalted than the prayer of the injured husband in the *Iliad* (3.351–54):

Ζεῦ ἄνα, δὸς τείσασθαι ὃ με πρότερος κάκ' ἔοργε,

⁷⁹ Some of this shifting of moral terminology is pointed out by Sheppard (ii) 6–7, and especially by Kirkwood (above, note 13) 137–43 and 240–41. See also Johansen (above, note 1) 27 and 31, with note 41 on p. 31. The most crucial instance is perhaps lines 1424–25: “What’s in the House is well (*καλῶς*) if well Apollo oracled.” On the ambiguity of *kalōs* here see Bowra (above, note 15) 253; Kitto (above, note 3) 181 and 183; Perrotta (above, note 6) 301 ff., especially 304. Note also the play on this same ambiguity in 790–91 and particularly toward the end of the play: 1320–21, 1345, 1493. Connected with this ambiguity is the tension between the “objective” and the “moral” sense of expressions like *καλῶς ζῆν* (also *εὖ*, *κακῶς ζῆν*) or *καλῶς* (*εὖ*, *κακῶς*) *πράσσειν* throughout the play: e.g. 354, 523–24, 1026, 1083.

⁸⁰ See *contra* Woodard (ii) 217 and *passim*.

διὸν Ἀλέξανδρον, καὶ ἐμῆς ὑπὸ χερσὶ δάμασσον,
 ὄφρα τις ἐρρίγησι καὶ ὀβιγόνων ἀνθρώπων
 ζεινοδόκον κακὰ ῥέξαι. ὃ κεν φιλότητα παράσχη.

The age of Socrates, Protagoras, Democritus had brought forth more "civilized" and humane theories about punishment and law and seems to have been well aware of the limitations of basing morality on force and coercion. So, for example, this fragment of Democritus:

He is more effective in promoting *areté* who uses exhortation and persuasion of word (*logou peithô*) than he who uses law and force (*ananké*). For it is likely that a man who is kept from injustice by law will commit his crime in secret, while the man who is led by persuasion to doing what is right and fitting (*to deon*) is not likely to do anything out of the way either in secret or openly. Therefore one who does what is right by intelligence and understanding becomes brave and right-minded at the same time.⁸¹

Is it not possible, then, that we are to feel the ending of this play as deliberately harsh, not because Sophocles wished to make the tone of his play "Homeric," but because he is concerned with the threats to civilization, to a more humane (and more intelligent) order of things in a world where force and trickery are the necessary means to justice, where the *logos* is but a means, an appendage to the *ergon*? One can hardly assume, of course, that Sophocles held the "advanced" moral views of a Democritus. On the other hand, there is no solid reason to assume that the words put into the mouth of a youthful and ambitious character in the heat of action reflect the attitude of the aged tragedian: "Kill at once—for thus wrongdoing would not abound."

Seen from this point of view, the tragedy of the *Electra* is the tragedy of Athens. The *logos* it presents is closer to the *logos* of Cleon than to that of Pericles, closer to the *logos* of Gorgias than to that of Protagoras.⁸² The play, at this level, reflects an Athens which has lost confidence in the visions which accompanied the rationalism of Protagoras and Pericles, an Athens which turns reason into cunning (cf. Thuc. 3.82–83), and must seek for the truth of its own "nature" amid murder and deceit.

⁸¹ Democritus, *VS* 68B181. See also Antiphon the Sophist, *VS* 87B44, fr. A, col. 2, lines 3–23 (vol. 2, p. 347).

⁸² See my essay, "Gorgias and the Psychology of the *Logos*," *HSCP* 66 (1962) 99–155, and especially 133–34.

Hence the “justice” (*dikê*) too that appears in the play is dangerous, violent, aggressive. From the very beginning it is coupled with terms of destruction (see *ἐνδίκους σφαγάς*, 37; *ἀντιφόνους δίκας*, 248; *Δίκαια, δίκαια φερομένα χεροῖν κράτη*, 476).

Dikê is claimed on both sides in the Clytaemnestra-Electra *agôn* (see 521, 528, 538, 551 [Clytaemnestra]; 560–61, 583 [Electra]). Though Electra clearly emerges as the winner in this debate, it is not unambiguously clear that she has *dikê* entirely on her side. The chorus has doubts. They react to her words about “not shaming her mother’s nature” with 610–11:

ὄρῳ μένος πνέουσιν· εἰ δὲ σὺν δίκῃ
ξύνεστι, τοῦδε φροντίδ’ οὐκέτ’ εἰσορῶ.

“I see her [Electra] breathing passion; but as to whether she consorts with justice I no longer see concern [in her] for this.”⁸³ Within Electra’s own speech (560–609) there are several points that leave questionable her relation to *dikê*. She begins, oddly enough for a champion of *dikê*, by dismissing the question of *dikê* altogether: “You say you killed my father. What *logos* could be more disgraceful than this, *whether you killed him justly or unjustly*” (εἴτ’ οὖν δικαίως εἴτε μῆ, 560). In what follows she makes no really adequate defense of Agamemnon’s sacrifice of his daughter, and gives no answer to the objection that Agamemnon could have disbanded the army and returned by land rather than slaughter Iphigeneia (see 573–75).⁸⁴

⁸³ On the interpretation of 610–11 I follow Jebb *ad loc.*, as opposed to Kaibel 168–69. It is perhaps not absolutely certain that the *phrontis* of 611 is Electra’s; but it seems to me harsh to refer it to Clytaemnestra (as Kaibel does) after the ὄρῳ μένος πνέουσιν clause. This seems especially so since the ὄρῳ of 610 is deliberately echoed in the εἰσορῶ of 611, thus reinforcing the parallelism between the two clauses and strengthening the likelihood of their having a common point of reference, i.e. Electra. Kaibel’s interpretation is also firmly rejected, on other grounds, by Perrotta (above, note 6) 312, note 1.

⁸⁴ On the inadequacy of Electra’s answer to Agamemnon’s guilt see Jebb on line 573, and Kaibel 162–63. Some interpreters have found in this scene simply Electra’s total victory: so T. von Wilamowitz (above, note 6) 184–86, and Letters (above, note 8) 256 ff. But even those who have found in the debate support for Electra’s “just” position have had reservations: see Linforth (above, note 5) 97–98; Perrotta (above, note 6) 341; Waldock (above, note 4) 182; Johansen (above, note 1) 15–18. Waldock finds Electra’s hunting story (lines 566–74) “a little awkward and somewhat labored and frigid,” even though he feels that it does its duty and “effectively clears Agamemnon.” Of this last assertion one may have serious doubts. There is little in the play to suggest that Sophocles is interested either in clearing or incriminating Agamemnon. The only

Electra wins, then, not by logical argument or even by clear possession of justice so much as by sheer passion of conviction (see μένος πνέουσιν, 610), passion that takes aback even the favorably inclined chorus (610–11).⁸⁵

In telling the story of Agamemnon, furthermore, Electra herself answers for the goddess Artemis: ἢ γὰρ φράσω· κείνης γὰρ οὐ θέμις μαθεῖν (565). This is surely a presumptuous step in a Greek tragedy. And what Electra offers to substitute for the goddess' pronouncement is only hearsay that has reached her: ὡς ἐγὼ κλύω, in her next line, 566. This phrase seems to indicate a curious reliance, for a legalistic debate, on a personal source of information that seems by no means unimpeachable. Finally Electra herself enunciates a *nomos* according to which *diké* cuts both ways (579–83):

Should he [Agamemnon] have died at your hands? By what law (*nomos*)? Watch out that in establishing this law (*nomos*) for mortals you establish not suffering and repentance for yourself. For if we kill one in retaliation for another, you would be the first to die if you should come upon justice (*diké*).

These lines deal with essentially the same theme as Orestes' speech at the end of the play, and, like that, combine *diké* and *nomos*. But the situation is exactly the reverse. Electra here criticizes the retaliatory justice which later she is to enforce. And what she says of Clytaemnestra here in 579–83 would, of course, apply to herself and Orestes after the matricide.

A passage in the exchange between the two sisters bears strongly on this question of justice (1041–43):

El.: What? Do I not seem to you to speak with justice?

Chrys.: But there are places where justice brings harm (*blabé*).

El.: Under these laws (*nomoi*) I do not wish to live.

Electra's life is devoted to justice; and yet Chrysothemis, though morally wrong, puts her finger on an important point: to attain justice

defense of him in the play comes from Electra; and it is *her* attitudes, not the fact of Agamemnon's guilt or innocence, that primarily interest Sophocles. If anything, the reference to Agamemnon in the first lines of the play and later in 694–95 suggest the Aeschylean prideful figure: see *Ag.* 577–79, 782–87, etc.

⁸⁵ Perrotta (above, note 6) 341, in fact, finds this encounter between Clytaemnestra and Electra "la scena meno felice della tragedia" and feels that the character of Electra "non è ingrandito, ma è abbassato e rimpicciolito da questa scena."

Electra, in accordance with the inversions of the play, gives up "life" (ζῆν), as Chrysothemis in choosing "life" gives up justice (see 338–40). The tragic reversals create an irreconcilable clash between life-values and moral values. There is no question of a resolution. The situation is given in the plot, emphasized and expanded in the imagery, dramatized visually in the deprivations of Electra. It cannot be evaded save by the passive acceptance of immorality, of moral "death," to which the weak Chrysothemis accedes.

The most recent critic of the *Electra* has attempted to deal with the question of "justice" in terms of a "higher law" and a cosmic order which operates through a dialectical movement that constitutes *Dikê*.⁸⁶ Such an interpretation seems better suited to Aeschylus than to Sophocles. It is hard to find much of a "higher law" in any of the explicit statements, choral or other, about *dikê*. *Dikê*, as spoken of by the actors and chorus, is simply the *lex talionis*; and as such it ends the play in the brutal concluding utterance of Orestes. *Dikê* in this play, precisely because it is so closely linked with the passions of Electra, has little of the divinity that it has in Aeschylus.⁸⁷ Indeed, just because of her passionate involvement in the vengeance, Electra seems at times to step beyond the limits of *dikê* taken in an absolute, moral sense. Thus she strikingly omits mention of *dikê* from her two strongest prayers for vengeance, that to the chthonic powers in 110–20 and that to Apollo Lykeios in 1376–83.⁸⁸

One may, of course, argue, as Weinstock does,⁸⁹ that Electra here simply takes *dikê* for granted. But one must not lose sight of the fact that the play is primarily about Electra, not *dikê*. And in Electra's soul the personal emotions of hate and love weigh at least as heavily as any abstract considerations of "justice" as a cosmic principle. One should not make of Electra an Antigone, and an Hegelian Antigone at

⁸⁶ Woodard (n) 215 ff.

⁸⁷ For a cosmic *dikê* in the play see also Kitto (above, note 3) 139–42. For a somewhat similar view see Winnington-Ingram (above, note 5) 24–25.

⁸⁸ The absence of *dikê* from Electra's speech of 110–20 is all the more striking because of the contrast with *Cho.* 122–51 (see especially *Cho.* 144 and 148), a passage which Sophocles surely had in mind. On these prayers see the excellent remarks of Perrotta (above, note 6) 308 ff., though Perrotta himself seems to go too far in arguing that Electra merely dismisses the *lex talionis* (p. 309) and that this ancient law has become "soltanto un pretesto sofistico" (p. 310).

⁸⁹ Weinstock (above, note 60) 33–34.

that.⁹⁰ It is the chorus, not Electra, who speak of "the greatest laws that have come to birth" and of "piety toward Zeus" in language which recalls Antigone's great speech on the "unwritten laws" (*Antig.* 450 ff.).

In her commitment to emotion more than to principle, to the intensely personal bond to *her father* as much as to "justice" in the abstract, Electra shows herself deeply feminine. One should perhaps be reminded here of the Greek suspicion of woman as a passionate, unstable, dangerous creature. Sophocles follows out the logical (and psychological) consequences of making a woman the vital center of his play. Aeschylus, whose stress is on the moral principle and on the religious and cosmic implications of *dikê*, shifts the weight of the dramatic crisis to the male, Orestes, in the last two plays of the trilogy. So too the culmination of the *Eumenides* in Athena's pronouncement in favor of male order.

If *dikê* has any larger or more philosophical meaning in the play, this may reside rather in its inscrutability. The ways of justice are not the ways of human happiness. The measure of justice is not man. "There are times," says Chrysothemis, "when justice brings harm." To hold out in her grief and love in the face of this "harm," in the face of the negation of her life, is the foundation of Electra's greatness. But it is also the roots of her tragedy, the *anankê* to which she is bound, for this "harm" seems also to threaten her own moral being (307-9, 608-9).

What is affirmative in the play, then, seems to lie not so much in a cosmic order as in the way the human figures—and especially Electra—meet the situation which surrounds them. Electra's resistance to the moral inversions of her world and her intensity of feeling create the immense, desperate gesture through which the myth rises from the level of sordid intrigue (as it is in Euripides) to heroic action. In Electra moral conviction becomes passion. Justice, hate, vengefulness are all one in her soul and kneaded through with an equally intense capacity for love. With Orestes she restores justice. Yet to do so she

⁹⁰ Weinstock's interpretation (above, note 60) seems to run the risk of exaggeration in this direction in making Electra an "incarnation" of "die religiös-sittliche Idee" (34). See also pp. 37-38 and 15: "Sie opfert, könnte man zuspitzen, ihr persönliches Bild von Frauenmass und -adel dem höheren Anspruch, ihre Person dem Gesetz, ihre Form der Norm."

must keep alive in herself and others all the hatred and violence of the fearful past. Her "life," as she says more than once, lies precisely in preserving unabated the force of this hatred.

Given Electra's final speech and the closing scene between Orestes and Aegisthus, it is difficult to maintain that Sophocles has reasserted a positive relation between life and death. The inversions which run throughout the play are not overcome. In leaving these unresolved, Sophocles has also left the moral issues of the Orestes legend unresolved. To claim that Sophocles is being "Homeric" here is no solution, for a writer and thinker cannot simply turn his back on several centuries of crucial ethical development. The author of this "Homeric" approach, Jebb, himself formulated it as a desperate expedient to a difficulty which he felt "greater than has generally been recognized," namely the conflict between the "religious" and the "moral" aspects of the matricide. After proposing his "Homeric" solution, Jebb restated the difficulty of the problem, and made a point which has been too often overlooked:

Having resolved to limit his view by the epic horizon, Sophocles has executed the plan with great skill. But his plot labours under a disadvantage which no skill could quite overcome. He could not, like his Homeric original, dispense with Apollo: the Apolline thread had long ago become so essential a part of the texture that he could not get rid of it. But, the moment that Apollo is introduced, the thought of the stain upon Orestes becomes importunate, since the very purpose for which Apollo first came into the story was that of showing how the supreme arbiter of purity could defend his emissary against the claim of the Erinyes.⁹¹

I have no solution to these dilemmas and rather think that Sophocles had none. One is then left with the possibility that the play is a failure. Or one may lay the blame on Sophocles' form and maintain that the Sophoclean "single play" is inadequate to deal with a myth which raises issues of such scope. The alternative—and the approach taken in this essay—is that the play is not a failure (ancient judgment ranked it with the *Antigone* as the "high point," ἀκρόν, of Sophocles' work),⁹² but that its "success" does not lie in solving the moral problems of the Orestes-legend. These problems do not lie at the

⁹¹ Jebb xli.

⁹² *Anth. Pal.* 7.37, attributed to Dioscurides.

center of the play, but do contribute to the tone of irresolution and the continued presence of "evils" at the end (see 1498). These negative elements, as I have tried to show, form a consistent pattern throughout the play and must be given their proper weight.

What is most characteristically Sophoclean in the play is the fusion of the tight structural symmetry with the character of Electra. This structure and the inversions of which it largely consists set into broader perspective her passage through those alternations of life and death which form the deepest levels of her suffering. And Electra grows in stature the more deeply she suffers. She is far nobler and more unambiguously sympathetic, for example, after the news of Orestes' death than in the midst of her quarrel with Clytaemnestra. It is on her that the inversions of life and death center most fully. She rejects "life" (see 1043) on terms that would be below her heroic nature; and yet the terms on which she must live are cruel. We have in this very condition one of the deeper levels of Sophocles' irony: however wasted Electra's life and form outwardly, inwardly she is not degraded.⁹³ She is bitter, intense, excessive, dominated by hate; but she is not wicked. Her tragedy lies in the "necessities" of feeling and action to which such a nature is subject.

If one seeks to understand the play in terms of its times, perhaps one should look not so much toward a specific event, like the revolution of the Four Hundred (as L. A. Post has suggested),⁹⁴ but rather toward the whole effect of the Peloponnesian war. Could one perhaps read in Electra's *anankê* the tale of the pressure of the war—the *βίαιος διδάσκαλος*—on the spirit of Athens: the creative, life-giving energies of the city compelled to violence, hatred, and vengeful thoughts although capable of better things? Yet like Athens, like Sophocles himself, who wrote his last, magnificent work in the city's darkest days, Electra retains to the end an integrity of inner life and some of the positive, life-giving qualities of her nature.

Seen in these terms, the question of whether the play is positive or not seems almost an extraneous issue. As one critic has put it, to speak of optimism here "would be almost as foolish as to call Dante's

⁹³ Kirkwood (above, note 13) 263 thus speaks of Sophocles' irony being almost identical with the "cruelty in the very terms of life as Sophocles presents them."

⁹⁴ See Post (above, note 42) 152–53.

Divina Commedia optimistic because it ends in Heaven: after a descent to Hell one no longer speaks of optimism.”⁹⁵

The *Philoctetes*, written probably not long after the *Electra*, is certainly a very different statement about resistance to the “necessities” and baser expediencies of war. There compassion and nobility of “nature” (*physis*) win out over deception and short-term success. *Physis* there is noble and ennobling, while in the *Electra* it is dangerous and debilitating (see *El.* 608–9). There the past, far from having a negative and morally deleterious effect, is creative, educative, exalting in the figures of Achilles and Heracles who stand massively behind the action. And the “piety” (*eusebeia*) which Electra feels compelled to abandon (307–9) is in the *Philoctetes* given an indestructibility, an almost transcendent ideality in the play’s last iambic utterance (1443–44):

For piety dies not at the same time as mortal men;
whether they live or die, it is not destroyed.

One need not regard the *Philoctetes* as an answer or a recantation to the *Electra*.⁹⁶ Yet the two plays seem to complement one another remarkably well. It is almost as if Sophocles, having plumbed the depths of Electra’s “nothingness” (*El.* 1166), reclaims in the *Philoctetes* the “life” which Electra has lost.

It is the negative state of Electra’s world which calls out her greatness, yet also immerses her in a hopeless *anankê*. She remains loyal to her hates and loves, but her situation precludes a full realization of the positive aspects of her nature. These positive qualities, indeed, are perhaps given a final tragic turn in her last speech, her plea for an end of words and for a “release” from the old evils (1483 ff.). The next scene—that is, the conclusion of the play—is ambiguous in suggesting such a “release.” Purgation was Orestes’ initial purpose (70), but purgation, however necessary, is not an adequate end in itself. To be free of evil is not to obtain the good. Joy, Electra has said at her happiest moment, lies far from her countenance (1309–11). Yet, though there is darkness at the end (1396, 1494), it is not utter darkness. Freedom at least has been won (1509). But the cost has been high, and the full light and life are still remote.

⁹⁵ J. C. Opstelten, *Sophocles and Greek Pessimism*, tr. J. A. Ross (Amsterdam 1952) 105.

⁹⁶ Post (above, note 42) 151.

Goethe wrote of having learned from Homer that "in our life here above ground we have, properly speaking, to enact Hell." His celebrated dictum is perhaps applicable to the *Electra* as well as to the *Iliad*. Or at least in order to *emerge* from Hell, one may have to enact some of its horrors. How much of what is best in oneself can be salvaged in the process is another question, a question of no small importance to a cultured Athenian—and a creator of Athenian culture—surrounded by the war that was to end his city's most brilliant period. It is this problem which the *Electra* circles; and in it Sophocles unveils some of the possibilities, negative and positive both, with that difficult objectivity of his style: on the surface lucid and uncomplicated, yet hard to penetrate at its deepest and most personal levels. The issue is not one to be answered simply, nor does Sophocles do so. Rather, he has weighed the victory and the losses in his balances with excruciating exactitude, and we feel the pull on both sides.

The *Electra* has its full share in that dark strain in Sophocles which breaks forth so powerfully and mysteriously in the *Trachiniae* and the *Tyrannus*.⁹⁷ In all the plays except the *Philoctetes* and the *Oedipus at Colonus* the protagonist dies amid suffering or is hideously maimed. Electra lives and, it would seem, triumphs. But one may wonder whether she too has not suffered a maiming—an inner disfigurement—almost as fearful as Oedipus'. Unlike Antigone, whom Electra superficially resembles, she has her victory in this life and returns from the death which cuts off Antigone half-way through her play. Yet Electra also lacks the moral clarity and the softer lines of Antigone's character. And what is true of the two protagonists is true of the two plays themselves: though technically more fully unified and structurally more successful, the *Electra* lacks the relatively clear moral focus of the *Antigone*. The difference is perhaps the difference between Athens circa 440 and Athens circa 415, or perhaps between a younger and an older Sophocles.

A further point of comparison with the other plays sharpens an appreciation of the clouded and oppressive atmosphere of the *Electra*: the play lacks the expansive, meditative odes which, in other works,

⁹⁷ On this dark side of Sophocles in relation to the *Trachiniae* and the *Oedipus Rex* see the remarks of Torrance (above, note 58) 301–7.

lift the tragedy into a larger, more lucent realm and lend it the serenity of beauty, if not of true peace. The lyricism of the *Electra*, on the other hand, is the lyricism of the dirge. After the parode, the choruses are short, concerned entirely with death and vengeance, and closely held to the specific action. They contain few flights of imagination, few rich excursions into mythology. The *Electra* has nothing like the odes of the *Antigone*, which move from philosophical speculation on man (332–83) to lyric Dionysiac hymn (1115–54); nothing like the odes of the *Tyrannus*, with their large lyrical questionings of prophecy and divine justice; nothing like the odes of the *Trachiniae*, with their cosmic setting (94–140), elemental violence of mythology (497–530), geographical breadth (633–62).

This absence from the *Electra* of the expansive, meditative lyrics of the other plays has the effect of reinforcing the monotony of Electra's life and the sombreness of her world. There are only four mythological references in the odes, all extremely brief: Procne and Itys (107 and 147–48), Niobe (149–52), Myrtilus (504–15), Eriphyle (837–47). Of these, the first two are barely mentioned and are given scarcely any narrative; the fourth is recounted in dialogue-form and in a most abbreviated and allusive manner; and the third (Myrtilus) is itself part of the curse of the House and hence almost a part of the action, the "evils of the Pelopids" mentioned at the beginning and the end of the play (cf. 10 and 1498). The second stasimon (1058–89) devotes only eight lines to the general question of filial gratitude (1058–65). The other thirty-two lines of the ode deal specifically with Electra and the immediate situation. And closely parallel with this treatment of the subject-matter of the odes is their form: instead of broadly contemplative odes spoken in a single voice by chorus or coryphaeus, the *Electra* tends toward lyric dialogues between two characters or a character and the chorus (so the parode and also 823–70 and 1232–87).

This stylistic feature of the play enhances the sense of total immersion in the grim atmosphere it has created. Sophocles devotes the larger part of the play to building up this atmosphere, and then sets against it two scenes of rapid action in the last hundred lines and a three-line choral statement of congratulations. As argued above, these last hundred lines are themselves full of reservations about a positive

outcome; and a three-line choral tag cannot lift the weight of a fifteen-hundred-line meditation on waste and death.

The heavy atmosphere of the *Electra*, as suggested above, may reflect the oppressive later phase of the Peloponnesian War: the grinding monotony of years of waiting, the wasting away of communion with past greatness, the blighting of youth, beauty, nobility of spirit, the inescapable involvement in an action which is not a positive good in itself but can only bring "a release from past evils" (1489–90). Yet the intensity and heroic endurance in the figure of Electra are the still living embers from which blaze forth, perhaps only a few years later, the confidence in human greatness and trust in innate nobility of the *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus Coloneus*. To interpret a play like the *Electra* in terms of external circumstances is always dangerous and, in one sense, irrelevant. Such movements in a poet's work as that from *Electra* to *Philoctetes* may be wholly inward and private. One may be warned of such oversimplifications by the not dissimilar movement in Shakespeare from *Lear* and *Macbeth* to *The Winter's Tale* and *Tempest*, plays which stand in no clear relation to public events. But that Sophocles could, in such circumstances and in the last decade of his life, produce the *Philoctetes* and the *Coloneus* is a remarkable testimony to his, and Athens', greatness of spirit. Electra's power to wait for "life" amid "death" and barrenness may have been born and tried first in her creator's soul.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ I hardly mean to suggest, of course, that one can argue simply from the protagonist to Sophocles himself; yet the play itself testifies that Sophocles' imagination and sympathy could encompass so unserene a figure as Electra. Edmund Wilson, *The Wound and the Bow* (Boston 1941) 293, has put the situation very well: "Somewhere even in the fortunate Sophocles there had been a sick and raving Philoctetes." Whitman (above, note 44) who cites Wilson (p. 253, note 30) on this point, himself remarks à propos of Sophocles' "serenity," "The most intense of tragic poets could scarcely have lived entirely above the tragic emotions" (p. 16).