

ELECTRA

Electra

- Her degradation and grief have led to *exaggerated self pity*; and this *indulgence* is her one luxury in life

Page 109 & 111

- Claims she has no friends, cut off from social life but the Chorus ask her to accompany them to Hera's festival - she churlishly rejects offers of kindness and seems totally *engrossed in self martyrdom* - seems determined to keep herself apart from the community.
- The squalor of her personal appearance is a *neurotic affectation* of her own doing -

Page 111 & 113

- It is suggested by some commentators that she exaggerates the dishonour shown to Agamemnon's body.
- Orestes slowness in appearing to rescue her is one of her favourite *grievances*

Pages 114 & 109

- Electra is a woman in whom it is *hardly possible to find a virtue* - she is self centred, fantastic in hatred and callous.
- She is not representative of ourselves and therefore difficult to empathise with or like. Medea, likewise is not representative yet is somehow symbolic of human tragedy, but Electra has no universal significance. She is Medea - without the tragedy ! *Out of touch with ordinary humanity.*

ELECTRA

- Desire for vengeance is stronger than her affection for her brother or father.
- She scornfully rejects all the tokens in the recognition scene - and is cruel to the Old Man who regards her as a daughter

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- Mean nature - towards the honourable peasant -
 - in public **"Dear husband"**
 - in private - reminds him of his lowly status
 - "You fool.....Remember, you're the poor"**
- The true Electra is seen in the scene between the two murders when she addresses the head of Aegisthus (page 136). Electra's emotions relieve themselves in a torrent of abuse.
- She is far more vituperative about Aegisthus than her mother, some commentators suggest that Euripides intended to portray a frustrated and sexually jealous Electra.
- Unflattering descriptions and abuse she heaps on his corpse : list from the text
- Is not supported by Aegisthus's actual behaviour in the play.
- Electra's description of her mother also does not fit in with the character presented to us. Clytaemnestra comes immediately to her when she hears Electra has given birth. A formal debate takes place between mother and daughter - both present a fairly strong case. However Clytaemnestra comes *across as a sadder and wiser woman* who is trying to be *conciliatory rather than aggressive* (look at text closely).

Page 142 - Important quote

- *and thus heroism is entirely absent from her murder.*

ELECTRA

ORESTES

- ♥ The heroic image of Orestes is a figment of Electra's imagination. In her mind he is a romantic hero – the suggestion that he might come to Argos secretly makes her indignant.

Page 112 & 114

- ♥ In reality Orestes has dared not to enter the walls of Argos and is keeping near the frontier; petrified of being recognised.
- ♥ Delays revealing himself even when Electra makes it clear that she would go to any lengths to help him (page 114).
- ♥ Why? Is Orestes frightened by her fierce resolution? There would be no turning back if he revealed himself.
- ♥ No clear idea of how to carry out his vengeance (look at sequence and types of questions he asks the Old Man pg. 126-7)
- ♥ Orestes has no clear plan; the Old Man suggested how Aegisthus might best be murdered.
- ♥ Strong overtones of *ritual sacrifice* – killed whilst sacrificing to the Nymphs, murder weapon was a sacrificial knife.
- ♥ Aegisthus died without discovering who his murderer was, struck from behind by a man who claimed to be a Thessalian stranger.
Hardly a heroic act of vengeance!
- ♥ Killing of Aegisthus – no detail is spared in Messenger speech which could emphasise that Orestes's exploit is not only unheroic but sacrilegious and Electra's exalted praises adds a satirical note (she refuses to admit sordid fact but concentrates on her own mental 'heroic' image).

ELECTRA

The killing of Aegisthus

⌘ The killing of Aegisthus is based on a confidence in his courtesy :
Pages 127 & 132

⌘ He is a very different person from the tyrant whom Aeschylus portrays in the Agamemnon.

⌘ Orestes kills Aegisthus with every circumstance of dishonour – he is their host and they are at a sacrifice.

⌘ Orestes recognises dangerous sacrilegious territory he is in – and thus lies about purification and prays under his breath.

Page 132 & 133

⌘ Finally Orestes strikes him from behind, hits him in the back with an axe. Aegisthus had no foreknowledge, grim imagery – lying on the ground with his back split open, screaming and dying in convulsions (page 134)

THE RECOGNITION SCENE

- ★ The Old Man insists on identifying Orestes. The chief emotion is embarrassment.
- ★ Orestes is reluctant to be recognised because he sees all too clearly the inevitable consequences.
- ★ Electra probably unconsciously reluctant to recognise him because her self-indulging grievances could be removed with Orestes appearance.
- ★ This explains the slowness of the recognition scene, the nervous remarks and the rather stylised exchange of endearments, which follow (page 124)
- ★ Euripides' purpose?
 - Lock of hair
 - Footprints
 - Piece of cloth woven by Electra

To include them as means of recognition would be incongruous with the realistic treatment of the main characters. What Euripides does therefore was to make these signs not the *means* of recognition (as in Aeschylus' Choephoroi) but an excuse for the *delay* of recognition that both Electra and Orestes desired for their own reasons.

- ★ Is this scene a deliberate parody of Aeschylus' version?
- ★ Euripides was probably playing some sort of literary, theatrical game with the stock recognition scene.

THE ENDING OF THE PLAY : THE ROLE OF THE GODS

- ✚ As soon as Orestes and Electra appear from killing Clytaemnestra they acknowledge they have done wrong.
- ✚ Both are overcome with horror. Orestes calls it a bloody and horrible deed. (page 145)
- ✚ Electra's response is interesting (despite her faults, she is quick to accept her faults) "I am guilty".
- ✚ Orestes blames Apollo (page 108 & 146)

And recalls that it was his oracle that instructed him to commit the deed.

- ✚ Both Orestes and Electra focus on their future – Orestes wonders what country or friend will accept him now as a matricide. Electra too believes she will be stateless and will never find the noble husband for whom she has longed.
- ✚ Orestes graphically reports the murder scene, how his mother bared her breast to him, clung to his neck, touched his cheek and begged for mercy from her child.
- ✚ This account is made more terrible by Orestes's horror as he describes the scene – he had to shield his sight from such an abhorrent sight.
- ✚ As a relief from all this torment – intervention of the gods – Castor & Polydeuces (Pollux)
- ✚ They appear above the scene (peasant's cottage) using the deus ex machina.

6.

Question of Justice

- † The Dioscori announce the Clytaemnestra deserved her fate as do the Chorus.

Pages 148 & 146. Comment on this.

- † Castor and Polydeuces go on to criticise Apollo's wisdom and advice (pg. 148)
- † What could this tell us about Euripides?

- † Futures of the main characters are prophesied – play finishes on a note of mixed relief and sorrow.
- † Make sure you know the future of the following in detail : Orestes, Electra, Peasant, Pylades

GENERAL POINTS TO MAKE

- It is argued by Kitto in 'Greek Tragedy' that Euripides' Electra was not tragic but melodramatic, that the aim, first and foremost - to be theatrically effective and it is this that gives them the play its character and form.
- Did Euripides take gloomy delight in blackening the characters of respectable heroes of legend? Sophocles' Electra is full of noble qualities and is therefore a fully drawn tragic heroine.
- Electra may contain incidental themes of wider interest, but its first purpose is to attract and sustain our interest by theatrical effect (c/f Agamemnon)
- Relies on exciting characterisation with plot as an accessory
- The 3 tragedians used the same myth as a springboard for their art rather than as a straightjacket.

Aeschylus: Libation Bearers (CHOEPHORI) 458BC

Sophocles: Electra

Euripides: Electra

- Could view Euripides play as a deliberate transgression of the conventions of dramatic representation
- A play about the perversion of rituals and social order
- Aegisthus is murdered whilst sacrificing Clytaemnestra when invited to a sacrifice
- King's daughter is married but still a virgin
- Peasant proves to have more nobility of spirit than any of the noble characters
- Choral ode about the hero Achilles is juxtaposed to a scene involving the unheroic Orestes
- Orestes identifies the nature of virtue in man, yet fails to fulfil the criteria - "I've seen a noble father breed a worthless son"

- Recognition tokens are introduced only to be rejected
- Descriptions of Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus fail to match the appearance of the characters themselves
- No triumph at the end, merely remorse, doubt and disgust.

Euripides' Electra: Study Questions

1. Enumerate the possible reasons for Electra's anger towards her mother.
2. What do Electra's attitudes to clothes and social rank say about her?
3. What do you make of her attitudes to marriage (her own and her mother's) and her mother's lasciviousness?
4. How sympathetic/unsympathetic do you feel towards Electra and why? Does your view of her change at all during the play? If so, at which points (make a note of page numbers).
5. Draw up a list of contrasts and comparisons between Electra and Orestes. Which character do you find more sympathetic and why?
6. Why do you think Orestes chooses first not to reveal himself to his sister?
7. What does Euripides have to say about justice and its problems in this play?
8. In the second paragraph on p.118 Orestes expresses democratic sentiments (a man ought to be judged by his actions rather than social rank). Can you find other examples of democratic sentiments - or their opposite - in the play?
9. Aegisthus never appears but is spoken of. What do you learn about him from others' words? How does this compare with the views of Electra and Orestes?
10. Clytemnestra does appear and engages in dialogue with her daughter. How does Clytemnestra's self-presentation at the close of the play compare with the Peasant's presentation of her at the opening and with Electra's view of her?
11. What do you think Euripides suggests about the nature of femininity? How does his view relate to the general view of Classical Greeks?
12. What part does the chorus play in Electra? Look again at each of the choral odes and consider their tone and how they relate to play.
13. Comment on the *deus ex machina* at the close of the play. What part do they play? Why are they important?
14. Does Euripides have a moral purpose in this play? If so, what is it?
15. How does the play leave you feeling? Explain why you feel this way.
16. Read Aeschylus' Libation Bearers and Sophocles' Electra. Both are versions of the same story. Then note down the principal differences in the treatment of the story.
17. Why do you think this story fascinated the Greeks and continues to fascinate us?
18. Do you know what Freud meant by the 'Electra complex'? Try to find out.