

ALTERNATIVE SCENARIOS IN SOPHOCLES' *ELECTRA**

"It is not possible to abolish the stories that have been handed down – for example, that of Clytaemestra being killed by Orestes or Eriphyle by Alcmeon; rather, the poet must himself find a way to make good use of the traditional material."

Thus Aristotle (*Poetics* 1453b22-25); and we can safely assume that in all the Orestes- and Alcmeon-tragedies known to him, these basic mythical data were respected. It is, nevertheless, curious that he should have chosen, to illustrate his point, two items of myth which one poet at least, Homer, *had* to all appearance abolished or at least elided. As is well known, it is nowhere stated in the *Odyssey* how Clytaemestra died, and even the fact of her death is mentioned only once, indirectly, in a reference to the feast given by Orestes to the Argives for the funeral of her and Aegisthus (3.309-310). Aristarchus was uncertain whether this passage did or did not imply that Orestes had killed Clytaemestra as well as Aegisthus¹, and at least one other ancient scholar felt justified in affirming positively that Homer did not know of Orestes' matricide²; to mention the funeral without mentioning the death, however, suggests evasion more than it suggests ignorance, and most modern scholars suppose, with some ancient support³, that the poet knew of the matricide and deliberately suppressed it⁴, because it would disturb the parallel he wished to draw between the constellations Agamemnon-Clytaemestra-

* I owe the original idea for this paper to discussions with my research student, Stephen Dailly, though its conclusions are rather different from those we reached then!

¹ Σ *Od.* 3.309-310 ὁ δὲ Ἀρίσταρχός φησιν ὅτι διὰ τούτων παρυποφαίνεται ὅτι συναπώλετο Αἰγίσθω ἢ Κλυταιμνήστρᾳ· τὸ δὲ εἰ καὶ ὑπὸ Ὀρέστου ἄδηλον εἶναι.

² Σ *Od.* 1.300 οὐκ οἶδεν ὁ ποιητὴς τὸν Κλυταιμνήστρας ὑπὸ τοῦ παιδὸς μόρον.

³ Σ *Od.* 3.310 φέρεται διὰ τούτων τοῦ Ὀρέστου. τὸ μὲν γὰρ εὐφημότερον εἶπεν ὅτι ἔθαψε τὴν μητέρα, τὸν δὲ θάνατον παρεσιώπησεν.

⁴ So e.g. A.F. Garvie, *Aeschylus: Choephoroi*, Oxford 1986, xi-xiii, and S.R. West in A. Heubeck et al. *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey, Volume I*, Oxford 1988, 60. A somewhat different view is that of J.F. Davidson, *Homer and Sophocles' Electra*, "BICS" 35, 1988, 45-72, at p. 51, who claims that "the matricide is implied" in the reference to the double funeral; but if anything the passage insinuates, without asserting, the contrary. The very sentence that mentions the funeral says that it was held after Orestes had killed *Aegisthus* (ὁ τὸν κτείνας); moreover, as was observed by R.C. Jebb, *Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments, Part VI: The Electra*, Cambridge 1894, xi n. 3, "the Argives" would hardly have been willing to come under the roof of a matricide and partake of his food. A hearer (such as Telemachus) who did not know the details for certain would be almost bound to infer that Clytaemestra had committed suicide, in grief, shame or despair, after the death of her lover. It is just possible that such a version of the myth was actually imagined by an archaic poet on the basis of the Homeric passage, and that Aesch. *Cho.* 978-9 ξυνώμοσαν... ξυνθανεῖσθαι is a detail ultimately derived from it.

Aegisthus-Orestes and Odysseus-Penelope-Suitors-Telemachus and/or because it is the general policy both of the *Iliad* and of the *Odyssey* to suppress or tone down the more grotesque or atrocious features of inherited myth⁵. The latter motive is the one that seems to have been at work in *Odyssey* 11.326-7 and 15.244-8, in both of which Eriphyle's betrayal of her husband is mentioned but her death is not (even though Alcmeon is actually named in 15.248)⁶.

After Homer, so far as we know, it is never questioned that, as a matter of mythic fact, Orestes did kill his mother. But if the tragic dramatists apparently refrained from ever altering this datum, they were under no obligation to refrain from playing with the possibility that it *might* be altered. The device of foreshadowing a major mythical innovation, and then not delivering it, is one that tragedy frequently employs. It can take three basic forms.

(1) The mildest, and commonest, variant is that in which the characters, or some of them, anticipate a development which the audience know to be contrary to established myth (and sometimes to indications already given within the play itself), and the audience's perception of the characters' error or blindness is exploited for dramatic and tragic effect. This is of course one of the basic forms of dramatic irony, and is found, for instance, in six of the seven surviving plays of Sophocles⁷; it depends for its effectiveness on the audience *not* being deceived.

(2) At the other extreme, as in Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and Euripides' *Orestes*, an entire plot may be on the point of reaching a *dénouement* radically

⁵ On this policy see e.g. J. Griffin, *The Epic Cycle and the uniqueness of Homer*, "JHS" 97, 1977, 39-53, esp. 44.

⁶ Is it accidental that Odysseus breaks off his catalogue of women (11.328) at the very moment when he might have been about to speak of Eriphyle's death as he had spoken of the deaths of Epicaste (277-9) and, just before, of Ariadne (324-5)? In this case, however, we have no evidence that any ancient scholar thought Homer had suppressed the matricide; both Σ *Od.* 3.309f (citing Aristarchus) and Σ *Od.* 15.248 say Homer "does not know" of it.

⁷ In each of his four earlier plays, the chorus at some point anticipate a happy outcome only to be tragically disillusioned (usually quite soon), and each time one of the principals shares in the misapprehension: *Trach.* 200ff (chorus and Deianeira: safe and triumphant return of Heracles); *Aj.* 693ff (chorus and Tecmessa, cf. 787-8, 807: Ajax's supposed renunciation of suicide); *Ant.* 1115-54 (chorus and Creon: release of Antigone – but Teiresias has already foretold Haemon's death, 1066-7); *OT* 1076-1109 (chorus and Oedipus: Oedipus as child of Fortune or of a god – but Iocaste's final words and exit, 1056-75, have shown that she realizes whose child he actually is). In *Electra* the effect is reversed, as the false tale of Orestes' death is believed by everyone who hears it. At the end of *Oedipus at Colonus* Antigone asks for herself and her sister to be helped to return to Thebes in the hope of making peace between their brothers (*OC* 1769-72); we know – having been encouraged to think of *Antigone* by Polyneices' request to his sisters (1407-10) to see to his burial if necessary – that this mission will end not only in failure but in Antigone's death.

contrary to tradition and threatening the integrity of large sections of the accepted corpus of myth, until the arbitrary intervention of a *deus ex machina* puts it back on its 'proper' course. In such cases the dramatist in a way has his cake and eats it: the innovative plot is allowed to run its full course, yet without invalidating the traditional story. In this case the effectiveness of the device requires that the audience *should* be deceived. While the innovative plot is progressing, they must be sufficiently captivated by it to disregard their 'knowledge' that in mythical 'reality' things turned out differently: Neoptolemus' sacrifice of glory and acceptance of peril, for the sake of being true to his *philia* with Philoctetes, will be meaningless if the spectator is busy wondering how these developments are going to be reconciled with the mythical datum that both men went to Troy.

(3) Intermediate between these two varieties is a third, with which this paper will be mainly concerned, in which, while the course of the action itself is broadly in line with tradition, clues are planted by the author to mislead the audience into believing that he means to effect a major innovation; or alternatively, after encouraging the audience to expect an innovation of a particular kind, he surprises them with a quite different one. A well-known example of the latter pattern is the prologue of Euripides' *Hippolytus*. Our evidence suggests⁸ that, in most earlier versions of the story of Phaedra and Hippolytus, Phaedra had killed herself after Hippolytus' death, when in some manner or other⁹ it had become known to Theseus and the world that she had not only fallen in love with Hippolytus but had made or authorized an adulterous proposition to him. The order of events was approximately: (a) Phaedra, rebuffed by Hippolytus, accuses him to Theseus of actual or attempted rape; (b) Theseus curses Hippolytus and he is killed; (c) the truth about Phaedra's passion is revealed to Theseus; (d) Phaedra takes her own life. At the beginning of Euripides' second *Hippolytus*, as always, the audience will have been expecting a treatment of the story that will be to some degree novel¹⁰, but the extent and nature of the innovations will have been

⁸ See W.S. Barrett, *Euripides: Hippolytos*, Oxford 1964, 6-45; M.R. Halleran, *Euripides: Hippolytus*, Warminster 1995, 21-37.

⁹ In some versions possibly through her own confession, as in Seneca's *Phaedra* (1159-1200).

¹⁰ Thus in one sense the oft-repeated cliché that "the facts of most Greek plays were not a matter for invention, but were part of every Athenian child's store of legend" (H.W. Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, 2nd ed. rev. Sir E. Gowers, Oxford 1965, 305, s.v. *irony*) is the exact opposite of the truth: the one thing of which the spectators could be certain (and of which the dramatist knew they would be certain) was that the story they were going to see enacted would *not* be identical with any version of "the same" myth that they had seen or heard before.

unknown to them. Aphrodite considerably tells them what will happen: Phaedra, though smitten with love for Hippolytus, is keeping silent and confiding in no one; however, "that is not the destined outcome of this passion; I will reveal the matter to Theseus, and it will be brought into the open. And the young man who is my enemy will be slain by his father with the curses which the sea-lord Poseidon granted him...; and Phaedra will perish with a good name, but will nevertheless perish" (*Hipp.* 41-48).

In terms of the older tale, Aphrodite mentions coming events in the order (*c-b-d*), indicating one other modification (that Phaedra will die "with a good name"), and omits (*a*) altogether. This may well bewilder the spectator. In its context, "the matter" (πρᾶγμα) ought to refer to "this passion"; if Theseus knows about that before he has cursed his son, how comes it that he utters the curse at all, and how can Phaedra possibly die with a good name? Again, no mention has been made of the rape allegation, and Theseus' early knowledge of Phaedra's passion would seem to leave no place for it: what entirely new twist, then, is Euripides meaning to substitute for it? Only as the action develops will it be realized how Euripides has played fast and loose with his audience. Aphrodite has not told any lies, but she has not told the whole truth, and what she has told she has put in a misleading order. The actual order of events turns out to be close to (*d-a-b-c*). The rape allegation is there after all, though it is made posthumously and Phaedra's motives for it are in part¹¹ different from those portrayed in earlier treatments. The curse and Hippolytus' fatal injury occur, as tradition and logic require, *before* Theseus knows the truth, though he – and Hippolytus himself – are undeceived before Hippolytus dies. Aphrodite has led the spectator to expect far-reaching plot innovations; only one such innovation actually occurs (the retiming of Phaedra's suicide), and it occurs *contrary* to what Aphrodite's words seemed clearly to imply.

A more subtle use of the same device is found in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*. There is reason to believe that before Sophocles, Deianeira had been thought of as an active, assertive woman, capable of engaging in war, who resented Heracles' continual infidelities and, when he capped them all by bringing Iole home, killed him with full intent and premeditation¹². Through the first 530

¹¹ Only in part, for she is still concerned, as earlier Phaedras must have been, to avenge an insult (728-731) and to protect her reputation by forestalling an accusation by Hippolytus (689-692, 720-1) – though in this version his accusation, if made, will be a false one, and the practical benefits of Phaedra's preserved good name will accrue not to her but to her children (717, cf. 421-5), the Athenian heroes Acamas and Demophon.

¹² The evidence is discussed by J.R. March, *The Creative Poet*, London 1987, 47-60. T.R. Gantz, *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources*, Baltimore 1993, 864-5 nn. 88, 90, is sceptical but does not take account of evidence that Deianeira was of-

lines of *Trachiniae* Sophocles does all he can to create a Deianeira who is the exact opposite of this. She has never taken an initiative of any kind in her life. She would have submitted to marriage with the repulsive Achelous if Heracles had not "set [her] free" by overcoming Achelous in fight (9-21) while she sat at a distance, too terrified even to watch (21-25, cf. 523-8). She has accepted the frequent and lengthy absences of Heracles from home (28-35), and though the latest of them has lasted fifteen months and caused her great distress (37, 41-42, 46-51), she does not even think of taking active steps to seek news of him until prompted by her nurse (52-57). Lichas' lies impose on her completely, and when she questions him about the noble-looking woman captive (who is in fact Iole) and gets answers that are plainly evasive (310-9) she does not press the matter; then, when her other informant (the *angelos*) tells her who the girl really is, the much younger women of the chorus curse Lichas (383-4) but Deianeira, the party actually injured, does not, and when Lichas returns and repeats his lie (401) it is not Deianeira but the *angelos* who confutes him. When Deianeira speaks to him again, she says not one word of anger either against him or against Heracles; she has no right, she says, to condemn either Heracles or Iole for being unable to resist the power of Eros (439-49), any more than she has ever condemned any of Heracles' countless other mistresses (459-63). To do so would be to engage in a hopeless fight against a god (491-2). Both before and after she learned who Iole was, her overwhelming feeling towards her has been one of pity (298, 312, 330-1, 463-7); Lichas' request to her to treat the woman kindly (486) is unnecessary because that was what she meant to do anyway (490). All the signs¹³ are that, having long since accepted her husband's incurable promiscuity, she will quietly accept this latest manifestation of it as she has passively accepted every other misfortune of her life – and at this point the chorus are made to remind us of this by singing of the contest between Heracles and Achelous, during which Deianeira "sat waiting" (525, 528) and then followed the victor "like a lonely heifer" (530). And yet it is one of the certainties of myth that the capture of Oechalia and of Iole was almost immediately followed by Heracles' death – and at the hands of Deianeira. How on earth will this Deianeira be capable of doing it, and what motive could she have that she has not already disavowed? We learn the answer shortly: she

ten portrayed as a warlike character (Bacch. 5.165-175, *φῶν ἀλγικία* to her brother Meleager; Σ Ap. Rh. 1.1212; Apoll. 1.8.1; Nonnus 35.89-91).

¹³ One small hint is dropped just before the choral song, when Deianeira says that Lichas must take some gifts back with him (494-6); but even those who catch that hint, and realize that one of the gifts will probably be the poisoned *chiton*, will be most unlikely to fathom what could have made Deianeira send it (if with March, *op. cit.* [n. 12] 62-63, we assume that Bacch. 16 is later than *Trach.*).

too is not strong enough to resist Eros; she has decided to use magical means to win Heracles' sole devotion, and the charm is a *chiton* (580) smeared with relics of Nessus and of the Hydra. Told so much, we know the rest at once.

Returning now to the death of Clytaemestra, I wish to explore the ways in which Sophocles in *Electra* conditions his audience's expectations concerning this event. Modern studies have expressed the most diverse views on this matter. On one side we are told that "the matricide... is kept before us throughout"¹⁴, on the other that "we are never allowed to dwell in advance on the matricide; in fact Klytaimestra's murder is first spoken of... just a few verses before Orestes and Pylades go into the palace to kill her"¹⁵. It would seem desirable, then, to examine closely the actual references in the play to the event, before it happens, always bearing in mind, firstly that the established and expected scenario was that Orestes, with Pylades, would kill Aegisthus and Clytaemestra¹⁶, secondly that this was in principle capable of being modified in two ways: *either* Orestes might kill Aegisthus alone, with Clytaemestra committing suicide (as half-suggested in the *Odyssey*), *or* Clytaemestra might be killed by some person other than Orestes, say by Pylades alone or even by Electra¹⁷. Sophocles, as we shall see, plays with both these options.

References to the revenge in the prologue neither call in question, nor

¹⁴ C.P. Segal, *The Electra of Sophocles*, "TAPhA" 97, 1966, 473-545, at p. 474; cf. J.T. Sheppard, *Electra again*, "CR" 41, 1927, 163-5, at p. 164, and C.M. Bowra, *Sophoclean Tragedy*, Oxford 1944, 218.

¹⁵ March, *op. cit.* (n. 12) 105; cf. A.S. Owen, *Τά τ' ὄντα καὶ μέλλοντα*, "CR" 41, 1927, 50-52, and G. Ronnet, *Sophocle poète tragique*, Paris 1969, 222.

¹⁶ This was clearly the canonical order, reflected in many artistic representations of the death of Aegisthus (see A.J.N.W. Prag, *The Oresteia: Iconographic and Narrative Traditions*, Warminster 1985, 10-34, and D. Knoepfler, *Les imagiers de l'Orestie: mille ans d'art antique autour d'un mythe grec*, Kilchberg/Zürich 1993, 42-49) and taken for granted by Aeschylus – whose Orestes, on discovering that Clytaemestra is at home and Aegisthus out, does not think of doing anything but gain entry to the palace and await Aegisthus' arrival; it is also the logical order, since Aegisthus, being a man, is presumed to be the more dangerous enemy, whom a tiny band of conspirators can hope to kill only if they take him by surprise. Sophocles' reversal of the order is not prepared for in any way before it is announced at 1368 ("now is the time to act; now Clytaemestra is alone...").

¹⁷ In Euripides' *Electra*, Electra is a full participant in the murder and arguably the most guilty of the three: she urges a reluctant Orestes to go through with the act (962-84) although she, unlike him, had received no injunction from Apollo to do it (1303-4). I do not wish in this paper to enter into the endlessly debated question of priority between these plays, except to remark that Sophocles' raising, discussed below, of the *possibility* that Electra might have a role in Clytaemestra's murder would seem very second-hand, rather than intriguingly novel, to an audience that had previously seen her *actual* role in Euripides' play (cf. M. Cropp, *Euripides: Electra*, Warminster 1988, xlix-l, who develops a rather different argument for the priority of Sophocles' play also based on "the centrality of Electra").

explicitly confirm, the expectations about it with which the audience will have come to the play. The *paidagogos* speaks of having brought up Orestes as "an avenger of your father's murder" (14); Orestes himself says he asked the Delphic oracle "how I might gain revenge for my father from his murderers" (33-34) and later expects to "shine like a star upon my enemies" (66). Listeners who know, or think they know, that Orestes means to kill both his mother and Aegisthus, will understand these plural expressions as referring to the two destined victims; but the expressions used are so vague that *if* later on it becomes clear that Orestes actually has different intentions, we will not be able to complain of being misled. Neither the *paidagogos* nor Orestes has made any reference to Clytaemestra, or even to Aegisthus, as an individual. Nor can we make any deductions about the scope of Orestes' plans from the fact that he reports Apollo as having called the vengeance justified¹⁸ (37, 70); Aeschylus, after all, had made Apollo say exactly that with specific reference to the killing of Clytaemestra, and claim the authority of Zeus for doing so (*Eum.* 614-8). At the end of the prologue, by default, we will still be expecting the traditional outcome.

From this point to the recognition in 1211-26 Orestes' current revenge-plan remains completely unknown to the other characters, affecting the action only through the impact of the false tale of his death, and everything we hear about a possible revenge-killing arises entirely from the hopes of Electra and the chorus, and the fears of Clytaemestra. And the first two things we hear about it are both in different ways misleading.

Electra prays to the underworld gods, especially the Erinyes, to "avenge the murder of our father, and send me my brother" (115-7). By making the two petitions in this order, she seems to be implying that, like her Aeschylean

¹⁸ For this purpose it makes no difference whether we read in 37 ἐνδίκους (codd.) or ἐνδίκου (Lange). J.H. Kells, *Sophocles: Electra*, Cambridge 1973, 82, argues that we cannot in fact be sure whether ἐνδίκου(ς) is part of what the oracle said, or whether Orestes has inserted an epithet representing his own opinion into a paraphrase of the oracle's response; but 70 (δίκη καθαρῆς πρὸς θεῶν ὀρμημένος) shows clearly that Orestes believes Apollo has endorsed the justice of his mission (see H. Erbse, *Zur Elektra des Sophokles*, "Hermes" 106, 1978, 284-300, at pp. 286-7). J.T. Sheppard, *Electra: a defence of Sophocles*, "CR" 41, 1927, 2-9, at p. 5, ingeniously observed that Apollo's words could in principle be taken as mandating Orestes to carry out the killing that was righteous (*sc.* but not the one that was unrighteous); but what help does the context give a hearer (not reader) in extracting such an interpretation? Certainly not the fact, which Sheppard and others have found sinister, that Orestes had made up his mind to carry out the vengeance even before going to Delphi; the Aeschylean Orestes too feels it his duty to do the deed with or without an oracular command (*Cho.* 298-305). See further Bowra, *op. cit.* (n. 14) 216-7; M. Heath, *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy*, London 1987, 136 n. 30; and E. Lefèvre, *Die Unfähigkeit, sich zu erkennen: Sophokles' Elektra*, "WJA" 19, 1993, 19-46, at p. 43-4.

counterpart (*Cho.* 138-144, cf. *Cho.* 114-121, 160-3), she does *not* expect, or wish, that her brother should be the one who carries out the vengeance¹⁹. As in Aeschylus, we know that if she hopes for an avenger other than Orestes, she is mistaken; what we do not know, yet, is that *we* will be mistaken if we make the obvious deduction from her phraseology – this will become apparent only at 303-4.

A much more important false clue is planted, immediately afterwards, in the first strophe sung by the chorus. The greater part of this stanza focuses on Clytaemestra, as the chorus first address Electra as “child of a most wretched mother” (121-2) and then recall the death of Agamemnon “most impiously caught by the deception of your guileful mother, and betrayed by her²⁰ evil hand” (124-6). Yet the prayer with which they end is: “May *he* that brought these things about (ὁ τὰδε πορών) perish, if it is proper for me to speak thus!”.

In speaking of the murder the chorus refer only to Clytaemestra²¹ – but then they curse Aegisthus²². We can if we wish dream up reasons why they should choose to do this²³, but it is more important to attempt to explain why

¹⁹ That this is what the *Cho.* passages imply was seen by J.D. Denniston, *Euripides: Electra*, Oxford 1939, xx (cf. A.H. Sommerstein, *Notes on the Oresteia*, “BICS” 27, 1980, 63-75, at p. 65). Garvie *op. cit.* (n. 4) seems to take one view on 119 and another on 144, and makes no comment on the incongruity of 160-3 (α δορυσθενής ἀνὴρ wielding both sword and bow) if meant as a description of Orestes.

²⁰ The text does not explicitly specify the owner of the κακῇ χειρί, but πρόδοτον is more appropriate in relation to a treacherous “friend” than to a hereditary enemy like Aegisthus.

²¹ Whereas Electra (97-99) had spoken of her and Aegisthus as joint perpetrators.

²² Most interpreters pass over this anomaly in silence. It is noted by R.P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles: An Interpretation*, Cambridge 1980, 335, but it is not clear what significance he sees in it; nor do I understand what view Lefèvre, *op. cit.* (n. 18) 25 is trying to take. Jebb, *op. cit.* (n. 4) ad loc. and J.C. Kamerbeek, *The Plays of Sophocles, Commentaries V: Electra*, Leiden 1974, ad loc., both suggest that the masculine singular may be “general, including both the authors of the crime” (Jebb); but if that was what Sophocles meant, why did he not use the plural as he does almost everywhere else in this part of the play? As an alternative, Jebb thinks of taking the phrase as referring to Clytaemestra alone, comparing *Ant.* 464 (and indirectly *Eur. Med.* 1018); but it is one thing, as in those passages, to use the masculine in reference to “any person in the position of X” even when X happens to be a woman, and quite another to use the masculine singular in reference to a specific, known female person.

²³ So R.W.B. Burton, *The Chorus in Sophocles' Tragedies*, Oxford 1980, 186, suggests that they curse Aegisthus because they are “the wives of citizens who form a party in opposition”; but they are cursing him as a murderer, not as a tyrant! One might equally well (or equally ill) speculate that the women are reluctant to curse another woman (cf. C.F.L. Austin, *Textual problems in Ar. Thesm.*, “Dodone” 16, 1987, 61-92, at p. 78, on *Ar. Thesm.* 367) or that they are uncertain whether Electra would take kindly to a curse

Sophocles chose to make them do so. The near-contradiction between the beginning and the end of the strophe cannot have been meant to pass unnoticed; and the listener who notices it can hardly take it other than as a hint from the dramatist that in this play Aegisthus will be the main, perhaps even the sole, victim of the avengers. After all, if those who are not Clytaemestra's children are not prepared even to pray for her death, how much less will those who *are* her children be willing actually to kill her!

A listener who draws this inference will seek to reinterpret earlier passages in the light of it, and will not find this difficult. One can, after all, take vengeance on one's enemies, or on the murderers of one's father, without necessarily killing both of them, particularly if it was Aegisthus alone who had actually struck the fatal blow(s)²⁴; and σφαγός (lit. "slaughters") in 37 might be a poetic plural referring to a single killing²⁵. Perhaps then this is going to be a Homeric Orestes, who kills only Aegisthus? We must wait and see, remembering that for the time being any ambiguous or vague expressions are likely to be interpreted in the light of this apparent signal, and secondly that even if it does become clear that Electra wants her mother as well as Aegisthus killed, that does not tell us that such is Orestes' actual intention.

And the next few references to the vengeance, all from Electra, are indeed ambiguous or vague. In 205-212 Electra sings of the "twin hands" that inflicted death on her father and ruined her own life, and prays that "the great god of Olympus" may see that the murderers "suffer sufferings in requital"; in 245-50 she asserts that all human decency (αἰδώς) and piety would be at an end if after such a death "they are not afterwards to pay the penalty of retaliatory killing (μὴ ... δώσουσ' ἀντιφόνους δίκας)"; in 303-4, after a lengthy account of the *hybris* of Clytaemestra and Aegisthus and their op-

upon her mother (so T. Paulsen, *Die Rolle des Chors in den späten Sophokles-Tragödien*, Bari 1989, 30 n. 13).

²⁴ On this matter – regarding which earlier accounts, literary and artistic, varied greatly – we are never in the play told anything definite (so rightly A. Machin, *Cohérence et continuité dans le théâtre de Sophocle*, Haute-Ville PQ 1981, 213-4), but nothing that we are told is inconsistent with the possibility that Aegisthus was the sole αὐτόχειρ, αὐτοῦντης, παλαμναῖος (cf. 272, 587, 955; these terms are never applied to Clytaemestra). Electra in 97-99 spoke of two murderers but of only one weapon, and the chorus's reference to Clytaemestra's "evil hand" in 126 might allude e.g. to her entrapment of Agamemnon in the famous enveloping robe (cf. Aesch. Ag. 1107-28 [note χεῖρ ἐκ χερός 1110-1], 1382-3, Cho. 980-4, 997-1004). Aeschylus makes Clytaemestra the sole killer, with Aegisthus not even present; Euripides is inconsistent – at one point, as (on the above interpretation) in Sophocles, Agamemnon is said to have met his death by "the guile of Clytaemestra and the hand of Aegisthus" (Eur. El. 9-10, cf. 162-6), at another Clytaemestra herself is portrayed as having killed him with an axe (Eur. El. 1159-60).

²⁵ Cf. Aesch. Eum. 450, Eur. Hec. 522.

pression of her, she bemoans the failure of Orestes to “come and stop these things”. In none of these passages is either murderer singled out as an individual, and when they *are* mentioned separately, in contexts not concerned with the vengeance, the hostility expressed towards each of them appears about equal²⁶. And when a little later Electra asks Chrysothemis to pray that Orestes should “live, get the upper hand, and plant his foot upon his enemies” (453-6), we can hardly be meant to suppose that she is asking her cautious, not to say timid²⁷, sister to pray that Orestes should kill his mother, and that the latter is agreeing to do so.

By this time, however, the spotlight of interest is already falling more and more on Clytaemestra. The process begins with Chrysothemis' report (417-23) of her mother's ominous dream. Yet the dream itself, considered both in its own right and in relation to its literary precursors, still tends to point, if anything, away from the idea of matricide. Both the earlier versions of the dream that we know of, that of Stesichorus and that of Aeschylus, had been bloody. In Stesichorus (*PMG* 219) Clytaemestra had seen “a snake, the top of its head all bloodied, out of which appeared the king, the son of Pleisthenes”²⁸; this is unlikely to have been the whole of what she saw, but we have no clue to what followed. In Aeschylus (*Cho.* 527-35, 543-50) she *gave birth* to a snake and suckled it, and it caused blood to flow from her breast – and in case we are in any doubt as to the significance of the dream, Orestes at once interprets it to mean that “I am turning into a serpent and killing her”. In Sophocles there is no serpent and no blood. In the dream Agamemnon returned to the upper world, in his own person, and “took the

²⁶ In Electra's account of the usurpers' behaviour (266-302) Clytaemestra is given more space (21.4 lines against 9.6 for Aegisthus), and Electra twice quotes what purport to be her actual words; on the other hand the account begins and ends with Aegisthus, and the ending (300-2), with its accumulation of pejorative expressions in an asyndetic series, makes a particularly vicious climax. In the next hundred lines references to Clytaemestra as the common parent of Electra and Chrysothemis (326), whom the former accuses the latter of supporting in preference to her father (342, 366-7), are balanced by references to Aegisthus as the effective ruler, who, when at home, keeps Electra strictly confined within the palace (310-6), and whose return will be the signal for her to be imprisoned in an underground dungeon (379-386).

²⁷ Note her quite unnecessary request (468-9) that the sympathetic chorus should not divulge what she has done.

²⁸ That is, in the dream the serpent *was transformed into Agamemnon*; alternatively one might understand βασιλεὺς Πλεισθενίδας as “a king, a descendant of Pleisthenes” and suppose that the serpent *engendered an Orestes* restored to his royal rights, but “it would be curious for even... Stesichorus... to refer to [Orestes] as a ‘Pleisthenid king’, when Agamemnon himself is always thought of first and foremost as a king, and the expression would most happily fit him” (Prag, *op. cit.* [n. 16] 74, citing Ibycus *PMG* 282 (a) 21).

sceptre that was carried formerly by him and now by Aegisthus, and fixed it in the ground by the hearth; and up from it sprouted a burgeoning bough, by which the whole land of the Mycenaeans came to be shaded”.

This dream clearly portends that Agamemnon's son will regain his royal rights and become a beneficent ruler of his country²⁹; it carries no direct suggestion of any bloodshed or violence, and Clytaemestra herself does not figure in it at all³⁰. Of course it is significant that the dream has appeared to *her* and not to someone else, and the restoration of Agamemnon's son does bode disaster for her, but there is nothing in the dream, as there was in the Aeschylean dream, to indicate that she will perish at that son's hands. Thus the dream is likely to confirm our suspicions that the dénouement will be a non-traditional one. The choral song that soon follows conforms to the now familiar pattern: the chorus are certain that the dream will find fulfilment against “those who did the deed and shared in doing it” (τοῖς δρῶσι καὶ συνδρῶσιν, 497), avenging the events that followed from a murderous sexual relationship (493-4) described in language so obscure³¹ that it is impossible to tell whether the relationship meant is that between Agamemnon and Clytaemestra or that between Clytaemestra and Aegisthus.

Clytaemestra now appears on stage for the first time. Her very presence, and the obvious mutual loathing between her and Electra, continue the trend whereby attention is being concentrated upon her as Electra's and Orestes' main adversary; and in her first speech (516-51) she consistently speaks of *herself* as having killed Agamemnon, without mentioning Aegisthus once in connection with the murder³². It is in Electra's reply that Clytaemestra's death, in revenge for Agamemnon's, is specifically envisaged for the first

²⁹ For the image of the tree or bough cf. Aesch. Ag. 966-7, Hdt. 1.108, 7.19.1.

³⁰ Unless, as suggested by Kamerbeek, *op. cit.* (n. 22) ad loc., the “hearth” where Agamemnon plants the sceptre is a metaphor for his wife's body (cf. Aesch. Ag. 1435-6 and Hdt. 1.108 ἐκ τῷ αἰδοίῳ τῆς θυγατρὸς, and see J.J. Henderson, *The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy*, 2nd ed., New York 1991, 143 §164); but note that the bough is said to sprout not from the hearth but from the sceptre (421 ἐκ ... τοῦδ’). Agamemnon is, to be sure, performing a masculine act of reproduction with a quasi-phallic sceptre; but his δευτέρα ὁμιλία is not with Clytaemestra, who only *sees* it (417 εἰσιδεῖν), but directly with the earthen floor of his home which nurtures the offspring of that sceptre. Orestes is the child of the house; he is not, in the dream, the child of Clytaemestra. There is an excellent interpretation of the dream, with strong emphasis on “the restoration of the interrupted [male] descent line”, by S. des Bouvrie, *Women in Greek Tragedy: An Anthropological Approach*, Oxford/Oslo 1990, 264.

³¹ ἄλεκτρ’ ἄνυμφα γὰρ ἐπέβα μαιφόνων γάμων ἀμύλημαθ’ οἷσιν οὐ θέμις.

³² Cf. H. Friis Johansen, *Die Elektra des Sophokles*, “C&M” 25, 1964, 8-32, at pp. 15-16.

time in the play³³. At first it is envisaged only hypothetically: Electra, granting for the sake of argument that Agamemnon had sacrificed Iphigeneia without necessity in order to please Menelaus, asserts (580-3) that this would still not justify his murder: "Take care that in laying down this law for humanity you do not lay up pain and repentance for yourself. If we are going to kill one person in return for another, *you* would be the first to die, if you got your just deserts".

Electra's use here of the first person plural is the first hint³⁴ of another possible alternative scenario: that *she* might have a hand in the death of Clytaemestra. It prepares for a very important moment in the play, later in the same speech: the first clear declaration that matricide is the intention of at least one of Clytaemestra's children. Electra has by now moved from her original theme, of establishing that Clytaemestra had no shred of excuse in justice or honour for killing Agamemnon, and is recriminating with her over her unmotherly behaviour towards her children; and in the course of this she says: "You have often accused me of bringing him [Orestes] up to be an avenger (μιάστορα, lit. "defiler") against you; well, if I had the strength, *I would be doing that* (τόδ' ... ἔδρω ἄν), I assure you" (603-5).

Our uncertainty about Electra's wishes, engendered by the false clue of 126-7, is now ended. She desires the death of Clytaemestra³⁵, and has no compunction about the agent of that death being a child of Clytaemestra's. But which child? There is an ambiguity in τόδ' ... ἔδρω ἄν. Most interpreters³⁶ have taken the meaning to be "I would have brought him up to be an

³³ I ignore (despite Sheppard, *op. cit.* [n. 14] 164) the suggestion in 435-8 that Clytaemestra's offerings, instead of being placed in Agamemnon's tomb, should be buried in the ground to be "kept below as possessions for her when she dies"; the context has no connection with the vengeance, and Electra's implicit point is presumably that when Clytaemestra dies (no matter how) it will be as well for her to have provided grave-offerings for herself in advance, since no one else will want to do so.

³⁴ An unconscious one so far as Electra is concerned; by "we" she merely means the human race (cf. βροτοῖς 580).

³⁵ Owen, *op. cit.* (n. 15) 51 argued that her assertion is compatible with her desiring the death only of Aegisthus; but if Sophocles had meant us to entertain that as a possibility here, he would never have coupled the singular σοι with so bloodstained a word as μιάστορα (rightly Sheppard, *op. cit.* [n. 14] 164).

³⁶ The commentators are mostly silent, though G. Kaibel, *Sophokles Elektra*, 2nd ed., Leipzig 1911, 168, clearly takes the conventional view ("Diesen falschen Vorwurf greift El. ... auf, nicht um ihn zu widerlegen... sondern um zu wünschen, er möchte wahr sein"), and similarly J.C. Hogan, *The Plays of Sophocles: A Companion to the University of Chicago Press Translations*, Bristol 1991, 291, paraphrases "yet would I nurture him for vengeance if I could"; but most translators' renderings imply, by grammatical details (note the words italicized below) rather than by anything more explicit, that they understand the passage thus, e.g. "I kept him alive, you have often said, to be your executioner. *Yes*, if I

avenger against you". That Electra, as this reading implies, (i) desires her mother's death and (ii) would be content, indeed happy, for Orestes to inflict it, is appalling enough, however understandable. One feature of the text, however, suggests another reading even more appalling. That Electra has not in fact reared Orestes is due not to any lack of strength (n.b. ἔσθενον 604) but to lack of opportunity: the rearing (τρέφειν) of children, or even of adolescents, is not an activity requiring physical strength³⁷. A task that is normally thought of as requiring physical strength³⁸ is the taking of violent revenge; and Electra's words are therefore perhaps better understood to mean "if I had the strength, I would <not merely, as you allege, be inciting another to take revenge on you, but> actually (καί) be *doing* the deed!"³⁹. On this reading⁴⁰ Electra (i) as before, desires her mother's death and (ii) is willing in spirit (though, or so she feels at present, too weak in flesh) to inflict it *herself*. Electra never said anything like that in Aeschylus⁴¹, and it is unlikely

could, I would have done just that" (E.F. Watling, *Sophocles: Electra and Other Plays*, Harmondsworth 1953, 86); "You say I am sustaining him that he may come as an avenger: would to God I were!" (H.D.F. Kitto, *Sophocles: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Electra*, 2nd ed. rev. E.M. Hall, Oxford 1994, 121); "I would have done so... had I had the power" (H. Lloyd-Jones, *Sophocles: Ajax, Electra, Oedipus Tyrannus*, Cambridge MA 1994, 219). The paraphrase of our sentence by Winnington-Ingram, *op. cit.* (n. 22) 220 ("Electra... is hoping for the return of Orestes to kill Clytemnestra") is typical of the view taken by most critics who have taken note of the passage at all. I have found one translation that apparently perceives, and attempts to capture, the ambiguity of the sentence, that of Kenneth McLeish, *Sophocles: Electra, Antigone, Philoctetes*, Cambridge 1979, 22: "You say I saved him to punish you one day. If only I had! If only I could!"

³⁷ Orestes has in fact been reared to young manhood (13f) by the elderly *paidagogos*.

³⁸ As Chrysothemis will point out (997-8); cf. also 1415. The possibility that a female avenger might make use of a method not requiring physical strength, such as the stereotypically feminine device of poison (cf. Medea, Deianeira; Eur. *Hec.* 878, *Ion* 616-7, fr. 464.2; Ar. *Thesm.* 430; Antiphon 1; see R. Just, *Women in Athenian Law and Life*, London 1989, 265-8), is never raised in this play or, so far as is known, in any version of the Agamemnon-Orestes myth.

³⁹ Whereas on the other reading, envisaging Orestes as the avenger, the imperfect tenses of this unfulfilled conditional sentence could be taken to refer to a (hypothetical) continuing action in the past, on the reading now under consideration the reference must be to (imaginary) present time, since taking violent revenge, unlike bringing a person up, is a single act rather than a continuing activity.

⁴⁰ This interpretation is presupposed, rather than asserted, by T. Woodard, *Electra by Sophocles: the dialectical design (Part I)*, "HSCP" 68, 1964, 163-205, at pp. 185, 188, and adopted explicitly by G.H. Gellie, *Sophocles: A Reading*, Melbourne 1972, 115; neither seems aware that it is controversial, and no one to my knowledge actually *discusses* the meaning of the passage.

⁴¹ Quite the contrary, she prayed to be "more virtuous (σωφρονεστέραν) and more pious in action" than her mother (*Cho.* 140-1); in our play she specifically repudiates this as-

that she had ever been made to say or think anything of the sort by *any* poet before Sophocles.

As previously observed, to say that *Electra* desires a matricidal revenge is not to say that *Orestes* desires or intends it, but we are subsequently given two further pieces of evidence which prove that they are in fact at one on the matter. One of them comes, paradoxically, at the very moment when Electra is facing what she believes to be a final sundering from her brother, having just heard the false news of his death; the second when she is holding the urn which she supposes to contain his ashes, and lamenting over it in, but unaware of, his presence.

Clytaemestra's famously ambivalent first reaction to the tale told by the *paidagogos* (766-8) includes the sentence "It is a grievous thing, if I save my life by having an injury done to myself". That she regarded the existence of Orestes as a danger to her life we already knew (603-4). But now we discover that she had good reason to do so: "After leaving this land... he taxed me with his father's murder and threatened to do terrible things, so that neither by night nor by day could sweet sleep enfold me, but time... was continually as it were leading me to my death" (778-82).

The circumstances make it impossible to suppose that Clytaemestra is lying here. There is no reason at all why she should show, *in public*, such relief and satisfaction at the death of her only son⁴² unless she genuinely feels it. Orestes, then, from exile, either in a personal letter to his mother or in a public manifesto, has made declarations that have convinced Clytaemestra that he intends to kill her or to have her killed. We knew that Electra was willing, indeed eager, for such an outcome; now we know it of Orestes as well, and his utterances in the prologue can now be understood in their straightforward, traditional sense.

In case any trace of doubt remains, Sophocles finally removes it by having Electra mention, during her lament over the urn, that Orestes had frequently sent her secret messages⁴³ saying that he would come to take revenge

piration as impossible in the circumstances in which she is placed (*El.* 307-8; cf. R. Garner, *From Homer to Tragedy: The Art of Allusion in Greek Poetry*, London 1990, 126) and admits, or asserts, that in crucial respects she has come to *resemble* her mother (605-9)

⁴² Aeschylus carefully avoids letting her do so; her reaction to the news is to display intense grief (*Cho.* 691-9), and when the disguised Orestes expresses regret at having had to bring bad tidings (*Cho.* 700-6) Clytaemestra, while remembering her duty as hostess, says nothing to show that she is anything but sorrowful at the news. Even to the servants within the palace she presents a sad face (737-8), though the Nurse believes that inwardly she is laughing (738-9). On the relationship between the Aeschylean and the Sophoclean scene see J. Jouanna, *Électre, tragédie du retour*, in A. Machin & L. Pernée ed. *Sophocle: Le texte, les personnages*, Aix-en-Provence, 1993, 173-187, at pp. 180-2.

⁴³ We had heard of these messages before (171-2, 319), but of their content we knew

on their mother (1154-6). Aegisthus is not mentioned here: Clytaemestra is the one on whom vengeance is to fall. Orestes has been determined from the beginning to kill her, and both Electra and Clytaemestra herself knew it all along.

Meanwhile the chorus also – who at first, it will be remembered, were not willing even to pray for Clytaemestra's death in Electra's presence – have given evidence of a very different attitude. When they are alone with the despairing Electra, soon after she has received the news of Orestes' supposed death, they try to comfort her by evoking the parallel case of Amphiaraus, who like Agamemnon had been killed through the treachery of his wife, but who has become a lord of great power in Hades (837-41); after which they and Electra together recall how the guilty Eriphyle was killed, and Amphiaraus avenged, by "one who cared" (846 *μελέτωρ*) – namely (as everyone knew, though it is not explicitly stated here) their son Alcmeon. Neither the chorus nor Electra give the least sign of concern about the fact that the murderer on whom Alcmeon was taking revenge was his mother; Electra grieves only that where Alcmeon succeeded Orestes has apparently failed (846-8), and the current of the chorus's sympathy for her is not deflected. Later, despite having advised Electra to accept the prudent counsel of Chrysothemis and refrain from attempting to take revenge herself for her father (1015-6), they praise her determination to sacrifice her life if necessary for the sake of destroying "the twin Eriny(e)s" (1078-80)⁴⁴ – and later still, when the avengers have gone into the palace specifically for the purpose of killing Clytaemestra, and then at the time of, and after, the killing itself, the chorus, while recognizing that the deed is a terrible one (1385, 1394, 1407-8, 1422-3), also regard it as the punishment of a great crime (1387), the vindication of the dead (1391-2, 1420-1), the restoration of the legitimate heir (1393), and the end of the long tribulations of *oikos* and *polis* (1413-4), and find themselves unable to condemn it (1423)⁴⁵. The progressive trans-

only that Orestes said he yearned (*ποθεῖ* 171) to return to Argos (or to be reunited with Electra) and promised he would come (318-9).

⁴⁴ Paulsen, *op. cit.* (n. 23) 55-60, attempts to explain this change of mind in terms of the thought-processes of the chorus, suggesting that Chrysothemis' stress on *φρονεῖν* (1056) has led them to think of the *φρονιμώτατοι οἰωνοί*, the storks, and their filial piety (1058-62; cf. Winnington-Ingram, *op. cit.* [n. 22] 242 n. 82), and thus to favour Electra in the sisters' quarrel because she is displaying similar piety; the logic of this analysis is somewhat convoluted, and I would prefer to note that Electra must score heavily with the audience, and surely also with the chorus, when she in effect forces Chrysothemis to admit for the second time (1041-2, cf. 338-9) that her policy of passivity is *ἄδικον*.

⁴⁵ The last two points both rest on textual emendations (*σοι* for *σε* in 1413, *ψέγειν* for *λέγειν* in 1423); but the case for these, and against the transmitted readings, is so compelling that Kells, *op. cit.* (n. 18), to whose understanding of the play both passages as

formation of their attitude, from inability even to contemplate matricide to clear approval of it⁴⁶, runs parallel with the progressive revelation of the true intentions of Orestes and Electra. I have suggested that a crucial catalyst is the appearance of Clytaemestra on stage, and this finds confirmation in a brief but important remark by the chorus. Shortly after Electra has sung of the "caring", and matricidal, son of Amphiaras, she speaks of her own life as "month after month a constant spate of many terrible and hateful experiences" (851-2) and the chorus reply (853) εἶδομεν ἃ θροεῖς "we have seen what you are talking about". This can only refer to what the audience too have seen⁴⁷: Electra's squalid condition and her mother's degrading treatment of her. What the chorus have seen, and what we have seen, gives credibility to Electra's account of things we have not seen; and it is not so much (as in Aeschylus) the fact and the nature of Clytaemestra's killing of her husband, but the accumulated wickedness⁴⁸ of her behaviour over seven years or more⁴⁹ thereafter, that makes her killing by her son, in this play, the lesser of two evils⁵⁰. It is fitting that after carrying out the killing, Orestes says not, as

emended are *prima facie* very damaging, accepts both emendations without question and tries to remove their (to him) embarrassing implications by interpretative ingenuity.

⁴⁶ Though unlike Electra (1154-6) and Orestes (1427), they can never actually bring themselves to utter the word μήτηρ in connection with the vengeance.

⁴⁷ Since Electra's presence outside the walls of the palace is unusual (see next note), so that the chorus of women of the city can be taken to know little of how she has been forced to live.

⁴⁸ In addition to adultery and murder, the crimes of Clytaemestra mentioned in the play are as follows: (1) mutilating Agamemnon's corpse and wiping off his blood on his own head (445-6); (2) keeping festival every month on the day he was killed (277-81); (3) producing children with Aegisthus to usurp the position of Agamemnon's children (589-90, cf. 653-4); (4) attempting to murder Orestes as a child (601, 1133; cf. 294-8) and publicly expressing satisfaction at the news of his death; (5) together with Aegisthus, deliberately keeping both Electra and Chrysothemis unmarried (165, 187-8, 961-6); (6) together with Aegisthus, keeping Electra under house arrest (312-3, 517-8, 911-2) and forcing her to live and work like a slave (189-92, 814, 1192-4); (7) personally subjecting Electra to physical violence (1195-6); (8) together with Aegisthus, threatening to immure her in an underground prison (379-86; the phrase ζῶσα δ' ἐν κατηρεφεί στέγῃ, with its echoes of *Ant.* 774, 885, 888, may half suggest that, as in Antigone's case, this would really be a sentence of death by starvation – note that the prison is to be χθονὸς τῆσδ' ἐκτός as if to avoid any risk of polluting the soil of Aegisthus' realm should Electra die there). See Machin, *op. cit.* (n. 24) 208-12.

⁴⁹ There are some indications that Sophocles is assuming a rather longer interval than Homer's seven years (*Od.* 3.304-6) between Agamemnon's murder and Orestes' revenge: Electra thinks Orestes has been procrastinating (171-2, 319), and feels that "most of my life has already passed away from me" (185-6).

⁵⁰ That Sophocles wants us to see it as an evil is in my view certain; otherwise he would not have shown us, at the beginning of the play, Orestes instructing his agent to

we might expect, "Now my father is avenged", but, to Electra, "You need not fear that your mother's arrogance will ever degrade you again" (1426-7).

Thus far the implications of the raising, and eventual rejection, of the possibility of a scenario in which Orestes kills Aegisthus but refrains from killing Clytaemestra. But even as that alternative scenario is fading away, another is conjured up, in which, probably for the first time⁵¹, Electra participates in the killing of her mother, or even carries it out on her own. The first indications of this appear, as we have seen, in Electra's speech in the *agon* with Clytaemestra, when she says that Clytaemestra would in justice deserve to die "if we are going to kill one person in return for another" (582-3) and when she counters the charge of bringing up Orestes to be an avenger against Clytaemestra by asserting ambiguously that "if I had the strength, I would be doing that" (603-5). For the time being the idea remains dormant, and when Electra hears the false news of Orestes' death her reaction is, for quite a long time, one of utter despair and the loss of all wish to live (674, 677, 808-22), a mood not in the least relieved by the consolations of the chorus, and, so at first it seems, only confirmed by the true but uncredited news of Orestes' return brought by Chrysothemis (920-5). But then it suddenly revives⁵² as Electra proposes to her sister that the two of them should them-

commit perjury (47-8; the instruction is quietly ignored by the agent) and asserting that self-advantage justifies any lie (61; cf. the despicable Odysseus in *Phil.* 108-11), and at the end Electra – that heroine in some ways so reminiscent of Antigone – insisting that Aegisthus be denied burial (1487-90). Nobody, it seems to be suggested, can set aside the inhibitions that normally prevent us from even contemplating such acts as matricide without also setting aside other inhibitions essential to civilized life (cf. Aesch. *Eum.* 494-5 πάντας ἤδη τόδ' ἔργον εὐχερέϊα ξυναρμόσει βροτούς). And yet it does not follow that Sophocles wants us to see the matricide as wrong in the given circumstances. If we condemn Orestes for doing it, Electra and the chorus for approving it, they are entitled to answer us with the challenge posed by Dicaeopolis (echoing the Euripidean Telephus) in *Ar. Ach.* 540: "if you say they shouldn't have done that, then what *should* they have done?". So far as I can discover, none of the scholars who have taken this view (e.g. Sheppard, *opp. citt.* [n. 18, n. 14]; Friis Johansen, *op. cit.* [n. 32]; Kells, *op. cit.* [n. 18]) has attempted to meet this challenge.

⁵¹ Cf. note 17 above.

⁵² The text does not directly indicate any motivation for the sudden change in Electra; but what immediately precedes it is Chrysothemis' expression of distress (930-7) at the disappointment of the hopes that she had come, with such joy, to report to Electra. Electra had previously written off Chrysothemis as a coward (cf. p. 202 above) who would assist the cause she knew to be right (338-9) only if she ran no risks thereby; in the present scene, both in her initial joy and in her subsequent sorrow, Chrysothemis' words and actions have been spontaneous, emotional, uncalculated, from the very moment when, "putting aside propriety", she *ran* up to Electra with her news (871-2). She has shown her real self as surely as Clytaemestra did when she greeted so eagerly the message that Orestes was

selves avenge their father's murder.

Now in making this proposal (954-7), Electra names only Aegisthus as the intended victim. Are we to understand that at this moment she is only interested in killing Aegisthus?⁵³ Or does she deliberately refrain from mentioning Clytaemestra because she is sure Chrysothemis would balk at such a suggestion⁵⁴? Or is it misguided to assign a motive to her (rather than to the dramatist) at all?⁵⁵ The chorus at any rate, without having subsequently been given any further information⁵⁶, take it for granted (1080) that Electra is determined to kill *both* Aegisthus and Clytaemestra; and if this is to make any sense to an audience who recently heard her passionately appeal to Chrysothemis to join her in killing *Aegisthus*, that audience must be assumed to understand that in making that appeal Electra was revealing only part of her

dead (675); and if that is the real Chrysothemis, then Electra is not as she thought (813-4, 819) alone and friendless – at least she can now say (950) “we *two* are left alone”, using the extremely rare form of the first-person dual (λελειμμεθον). If the words of 930-7 are strongly reinforced (as they surely would be) by body-language, then added to what Chrysothemis has said already they will provide a credible explanation for Electra's new-found resolve. Cf. Machin, *op. cit.* (n. 24) 226-7 and S. Saïd, *Couples fraternels chez Sophocle*, in Machin & Pernée, *op. cit.* (n. 42) 299-327, at pp. 322-3 (“La tirade où Électre explicite son projet est tout entière sous le signe du duel, du nous et de la coopération”).

⁵³ Thus I.M. Linforth, *Electra's day in the tragedy of Sophocles*, “UCPCP” 19, 1963, 89-125, at p. 103 (cf. R. Kitzinger, *Why mourning becomes Elektra*, “CA” 10, 1991, 298-327, at p. 321) suggests that Electra does not expect to be able to kill more than one of her enemies, and Aegisthus as the holder of power is the one whom it is essential to remove; Gellie, *op. cit.* (n. 40) 119 thinks Electra “is proposing the more difficult task, in fact the only real task”. D.M. Juffras, *Sophocles' Electra 973-85 and tyrannicide*, “TAPhA” 121, 1991, 99-108, argues with some plausibility that Electra is represented as proposing an act of tyrannicide (with reminiscences of the Athenian cult of Harmodius and Aristogeiton), so that Clytaemestra is irrelevant; but why should Electra expect a plan for a political assassination to be attractive to Chrysothemis, of all people?

⁵⁴ So e.g. A.J.A. Waldock, *Sophocles the Dramatist*, Cambridge 1951, 185 (“She names only one name – Aegisthus; it would have been out of the question to risk more”); Ronnet, *op. cit.* (n. 15) 224 n. 1; H. Lloyd-Jones, *Tycho von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff on the dramatic technique of Sophocles*, “CQ” 22, 1972, 214-228, at p. 224; Kamerbeek, *op. cit.* (n. 22) ad loc.; C.P. Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles*, Cambridge MA 1981, 284; M. Whitlock Blundell, *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies: A Study in Sophocles and Greek Ethics*, Cambridge 1989, 160 n. 46.

⁵⁵ Thus C.P. Gardiner, *The Sophoclean Chorus: A Study of Character and Function*, Iowa City 1987, 165, suggests that Sophocles wishes to keep the debate between Electra and Chrysothemis entirely on the level of expediency, without raising issues of moral principle as the suggestion of killing Clytaemestra inevitably would; she argues that Electra's “real” intentions, being (in Gardiner's view) unknown to the audience, are irrelevant.

⁵⁶ The plural τοῖσιν ἐχθροῖς at 979 is not in itself decisive evidence, any more than were the plurals at 66, 209, 247 and 456.

intentions⁵⁷. And they have had sufficient evidence to justify that assumption. They know (603-5) that Electra desires Clytaemestra's death and that the thought of a matricide gives her no qualms; they know that for her perhaps the most lamentable thing about Orestes' supposed death is that he has been unable to play the part of Alcmeon to his mother's Eriphyle (842-8); and ever since Clytaemestra appeared on stage (most recently at 929) Electra's verbal assaults have been directed almost exclusively against her⁵⁸. It is impossible to believe that her animus against her mother has suddenly vanished⁵⁹; if she mentions only Aegisthus to her sister, it is because she wishes above all to win her over and will say only what she thinks is likely to contribute to that aim. For the same reason, while fully aware, as the chorus are, that she will be putting her life in the utmost jeopardy (1320-1, cf. 1078-9), in her plea to Chrysothemis she makes no direct reference to any risks at all⁶⁰.

When Chrysothemis refuses to cooperate, Electra declares that she will make the attempt alone (1019-20, 1045); and this is no spur-of-the-moment folly, for later on (1319-21), long after solo action by her has ceased to be necessary, she reaffirms that had Orestes not come she would have done it and "either nobly saved myself or nobly perished". We know, of course, that Orestes is close at hand, but we cannot be sure at what moment he will appear; in particular, we cannot be sure that Aegisthus will not return before Orestes arrives⁶¹, in which case Electra will have to act at once or not at all (cf. 379-386).

But Orestes does arrive, and this event diverts the action back into its

⁵⁷ And therefore that when she said "I must no longer conceal anything from you" (957), she was lying. This is not necessarily out of character for a Sophoclean hero; in *Ajax*, after all, it is Odysseus, not Ajax, who consistently tells the truth! Electra herself shows a remarkable facility in deception at 1323-5 when, on being warned that someone is coming out of the house, she instantly shifts from conversing happily with her brother to formally directing two "strangers" into the palace.

⁵⁸ Between 389 and 955, indeed, Electra makes mention of Aegisthus as an individual only in 587-600, and then primarily in order to indict Clytaemestra for living with him (cf. 587 ξυνεύδεις, 594 γαμείσθαι, 600 συννόμου) in the course of a sustained attack on *her*.

⁵⁹ Indeed Sophocles will shortly provide us with further evidence that it has not, when he makes an exasperated Electra say to Chrysothemis "Go to *your* mother (μητρί ... σῆ) and tell her all this" (1033), implying "I don't regard her as *my* mother".

⁶⁰ Possible dangers are admitted only via an indirect allusion (980 ψυχῆς ἀφειδῆσαντε, in a speech put in the mouths of members of the general public); rewards, on the other hand, including "a worthy marriage" (971-2), are predicted with confident future indicatives as the consequence not of success but of willingness to make the attempt (967), as though making it would guarantee success.

⁶¹ Orestes himself is evidently unaware of Aegisthus' absence from the palace (Electra's assumption that he has heard of it, 1307-9, is not warranted by anything in the text theretofore) and therefore of the importance of forestalling his arrival.

traditional channel. Only not quite. When the *paidagogos* urgently tells Orestes and Pylades that “now is the time to act” (1368) – against Clytaemestra – they duly go inside, while Electra, remaining out of doors (where she has been, on stage, without a break ever since her first entrance), prays to Apollo (1376-83) for their success – or rather for their *and her* success⁶² – *and then follows them inside*. There has been some bafflement⁶³ as to why Sophocles should have taken Electra offstage like this, only to bring her on again very shortly afterwards (1398). She has an important role to perform in the next few minutes, both for the conspirators (keeping a lookout for Aegisthus) and for the dramatist (bringing vividly to life for the audience what is happening out of their sight); that explains her reappearance, but it does not explain why she was made to exit in the first place. Like Gellie⁶⁴, I can see only one adequate explanation for that: when Electra goes into the palace, the impression is created that *she has gone inside to take part in the murder*. This has been prepared for by her (recently recalled) willingness to carry it out herself if necessary, by two remarks (1297, 1335-7) which seem to indicate that she, not Pylades, will be entering the palace with Orestes to do the deed⁶⁵, and by her expressed readiness (1319) to obey any directions Orestes gives. Now, thanks to the delay caused by her prayer, it is *her* entry into the palace, not that of Orestes and Pylades, that is accompanied by the grim song of the chorus (1384-97) in which Ares breathes out blood as the hounds that none can escape pass beneath the roof of the house. At this moment it can truly be said, with Karelise Hartigan, that “Sophocles has so structured his plot that we become uncertain as to the actual perpetrator of the

⁶² Cf. 1376-7 ἴλεως αὐτοῖν κλύε ἐμοῦ τε πρὸς τούτοισιν, 1380-1 γενοῦ πρόφρων ἡμῖν ἀρωγός.

⁶³ See e.g. Linforth, *op. cit.* (n. 53) 108-9 who suggests three motivations, none of them very convincing: (i) on Electra's part, to show the men their way about the house (but then she would need to go in *with* them rather than after them); (ii) on the dramatist's part, to enable her to say what she says in 1400-1 (a pretty trifling dramatic gain, as Linforth admits); (iii) to mark “the end of [her] dramatic dominance” (yet from her re-entry to the end she directs virtually everything that happens on stage!).

⁶⁴ Gellie, *op. cit.* (n. 40) 126.

⁶⁵ At 1297 the phrase νῶν ἐπελθόντοιν δόμους is embedded in Orestes' warning to her not to give the game away to Clytaemestra by looking happy (1296-9). See Gellie, *op. cit.* (n. 40) 124. At 1335-7 it is even clearer that the *paidagogos*' injunction ἀπαλλαχθέντε τῶν μακρῶν λόγων καὶ τῆς ... σὺν χαρᾷ βοῆς εἴσω παρέλθεθ' must be addressed to Orestes and Electra, since Pylades has not engaged in any “long talk”, indeed has not said a word all through the play, and Electra is the only person who has indulged in “cries of joy”; cf. Saïd, *op. cit.* (n. 52) 326. In 1367, on the other hand, the dual σφῶν “you two” refers unambiguously to Orestes and Pylades, in contrast with Electra whom he had been addressing just before.

matricide"⁶⁶.

Directly after the song Electra comes outside again. The killing is after all to be carried out by Orestes, assisted by Pylades. But although the second of our alternative scenarios has now at last evaporated, it has left behind an important residue. Electra does not take a physical part in the killing of Clytaemestra (or of Aegisthus); she does more than that. Far from her obeying Orestes' directions, he obeys hers. She, not Orestes, answers Clytaemestra's desperate appeal for the child to pity the mother (1411-2). She urges Orestes to strike a second time⁶⁷, and he does: in the words of Bernd Seidensticker⁶⁸, "the second blow is her blow" – and it is the second blow that is the killing one⁶⁹. She warns Orestes and Pylades to get out of the way when Aegisthus is seen approaching (1430)⁷⁰, says she will deal with him (1437), and entraps him with an exquisite series of ambiguities (1448-65), finally interrupting an exchange between him and Orestes to insist on his immediate execution and the exposure of his corpse (1483-90): this last she demands as the only possible satisfaction for *her* past sufferings (1489-90), just as Orestes had reported Clytaemestra's death to her by assuring her that *she* would no longer be insulted by her mother's arrogance (1426-7). Orestes may carry out the killings, but they are done at Electra's direction and for Electra's benefit⁷¹.

Thus the phantom possibility of a matricide by Electra has proved in the

⁶⁶ K. Hartigan, *Resolution without victory/victory without resolution: the identification scene in Sophocles' Electra*, "Drama" 4, 1996, 82-92, at p. 90. In context Hartigan is actually referring to the killing itself, in regard to which her statement is something of an exaggeration (cf. rather D. Seale, *Vision and Stagecraft in Sophocles*, London 1982, 75: "Electra appears mentally, if not physically, to appropriate the act by the violence of the language with which she wills it").

⁶⁷ Or to strike twice as hard (so H. Lloyd-Jones and N.G. Wilson, *Sophoclea: Studies in the Text of Sophocles*, Oxford 1990, 74).

⁶⁸ In J. de Romilly ed. *Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique XXIX: Sophocle*, Geneva 1983, 257.

⁶⁹ Or should we go even further? Machin, *op. cit.* (n. 24) 425 notes that Orestes does not strike even the first blow until Electra has "engaged openly in the action" by calling out to those within the house (at 1411-2; her words at 1406 and 1410 had been addressed only to the chorus).

⁷⁰ Addressing them as ὦ παῖδες, which is a legitimate form of address between siblings (at least if of opposite sex) regardless of their relative ages (cf. *OC* 1255, 1420, 1431) but which here, covering Pylades as well as Orestes, will sound as though Electra is assuming superiority over them: the vocative παῖ(δες) is never used in addressing a person of even approximately equal age other than a sibling or a slave (see E. Dickey, *Greek Forms of Address from Herodotus to Lucian*, Oxford 1996, 65-72, 266-7).

⁷¹ Saïd, *op. cit.* (n. 52) 327, hardly exaggerates in claiming that "Oreste n'est plus qu'une main guidée par la volonté d'Électre".

end, in one sense, not such a phantom after all. How about the other phantom possibility – that of a revenge without any matricide? That, I fear we must say, has vanished completely. Clytaemestra's enemies may assert that one who behaves towards her children as she has done is no true mother⁷², but a mother she remains, and is so called by her children shortly before and after they kill her⁷³. Her monstrosities made her murder inevitable when it had not seemed so at the outset, and her murder by Electra conceivable when probably no teller of the tale had ever thought of it before; that murder is nevertheless itself a monstrosity⁷⁴, even if this play is not concerned with its consequences⁷⁵.

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⁷² 273-4, 597-8, 790, 1154, 1194, 1411-3.

⁷³ 1289, 1296, 1309, 1427.

⁷⁴ See note 50 above.

⁷⁵ Aegisthus' famous reference to "the future woes of the Pelopids" (1497-8) is not evidence to the contrary: if he is speaking of anything beyond his own death, it is of future events destined to take place under "this very roof" (τήνδε τὴν στέγην), and that excludes any possibility of an allusion to the pursuit of Orestes by the Erinyes (see Erbse, *op. cit.* [n. 18] 298, also T.A. Szlezák, *Sophokles' Elektra und das Problem des ironischen Dramas*, "MH" 38, 1981, 1-21, at p. 18). The only future events to which Aegisthus' words *might* conceivably apply – leaving aside, of course, those which Euripides was to invent some years later in *Orestes* – would be the killing of Aegisthus' son Aletes, and the near-killing of his daughter Erigone, by Orestes, narrated by Hyginus *Fab.* 122 and apparently the subject of a play attributed by some in antiquity (including Stobaeus, who quotes seven uninformative fragments) to Sophocles though probably in fact of fourth-century composition (see U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Lese Früchte*, "Hermes" 64, 1929, 458-90, at pp. 465-6 = *Kleine Schriften* iv, Berlin 1962, 483-4). We know that Sophocles did write an *Erigone*; we know nothing about its plot (not even whether its eponym was the daughter of Aegisthus or of Icarius) except that it will have been significantly different from that of the play that was Hyginus' source (cf. note 10 above), but it is *possible* that it included the death of a son of Aegisthus (cf. *El.* 589-90), at Orestes' hands, in the Atreid palace, that Sophocles is here alluding to one of his own earlier plays, and that Aegisthus, far from predicting the future woes of his enemy, is ironically being made to predict, without knowing it, the extinction of his own male descent line.