

The Poetics of Waiting in Sophocles' *Electra*

Focus on effects of hero's absence on those **waiting at home** (= Electra & al.), rather than **returning hero himself** (= Orestes & al.)

Electra's passive, nonviolent resistance (at first – later she considers violence, cf. S. *El.* 947-89)¹:

- lamentation for her father
- the circumstances in her house
- longing for Orestes' return as savior of the house

This type of passive resistance seems like “inaction” – but is not:

- Winnington-Ingram (1980): words can be a form of action (239)
- Electra's “actions” are just as valid as Orestes' plans

Preliminary thoughts on *nostos* in the *Electra*

- Alexopoulou (2009): whole structure of *Electra* depends upon effects of Orestes' absence and false death on the waiting Electra (39)
 - Female waiting figure “an essential precondition of the *nostos*-story” (42), but often characterized as “helpless” (50)
- Goward (1999): *nostos*-plays require interstitial material between the news of return and the actual return (42)

Vocabulary of **waiting** and **hesitation** (instances **bolded**; see statistics **below**):

- προσμένω, “to wait, await”
- μέλλω, “to delay, hesitate”
- ὀκνέω, “to hesitate, shrink (from), fear”
 - ὄκνος: “hesitation, fear”

Cf. καιρός, “right moment” & ἀκμή, “the (best) time” (~Eng. idiom “high time”)

Progression of **waiting** in the *Electra*

Paedagogus & Orestes: hesitation as acceptable strategy

1. Paedagogus: No longer the “right time” to hesitate, but “high time” for action (οὐκέτ' ὀκνεῖν καιρός, ἀλλ' ἔργων ἀκμή, 22)
- 2a. Orestes: it is the “right time” (**καιρός**, 75) to plan to retake the house
- 2b. Paedagogus: don't approach Electra yet (ἴκιστα, 82)
- 2c. Electra (later): Orestes both died and was saved by trickery (ὄρᾱτ' Ὀρέστιν τόνδε, μηχαναῖσι μὲν / θανόντα, νῦν δὲ μηχαναῖς σεσωμένον, 1228-29)
3. Orestes, unlike Electra: living “happy in youth, concealed from pains” (κρυπτᾶ τ' ἀχέων ἐν ἦβᾳ / ὄλβιος, 159-60)

1 All citations of the *Electra* are from the text of Finglass (2007) unless otherwise noted.

Electra

- Waiting is problematic
- Chrysothemis is unsupportive (e.g., *inter alia*, 328-40, 396, 398)

Electra's conditions in the house

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| <p>4. Electra sings many mournful songs (πολλὰς μὲν θρήνων ῥδίας, 88)</p> <p>5. Traditional mourning by beating breasts (πολλὰς δ' ἀντήρεις ἤσθου / στέρνων πλαγὰς αἰμασσομένων, 89-90)</p> <p>6. Lamentation for Agamemnon (τὸν δύστηνον ἐμὸν θρηνώ / πατέρ', 94-95)</p> <p>7. Sleepless nights (τὰ δὲ παννουχίδων κήδη, 92) in a terrible bed in a terrible house (στρυγεραὶ ... εὐναὶ μογερῶν οἴκων, 92-93)</p> <p>8. Cannot bear the burden of grief alone (μούνη γὰρ ἄγειν οὐκέτι σωκῶ / λύπης ἀντίρροπον ἄχος, 119-20)</p> | <p>9a. Chorus: Unceasing misery (ἀκόρεστον οἰμωγάν, 123) will destroy Electra (ἐπ' ἀμήχανον / ἄλγος αἰεὶ στενάχουσα διόλλυσαι, 140-41)</p> <p>9b. Electra suffers disproportionately more than others in the house (πρὸς ὃ τι [ἄχος] σὺ τῶν ἔνδον εἶ περισσά, 155)</p> <p>9c. Yet she is not the only one suffering (οὔτοι σοὶ μούνα, / τέκνον, ἄχος ἐφάνη βροτῶν, 153-54)</p> <p>10. The Chorus' "tough love": time heals all wounds (χρόνος γὰρ εὐμαρῆς θεός, 179)</p> <p>11. Electra lives like an "outsider" (ἔπαικος, 189) in her own home</p> <p>12. Electra's "irreparable" troubles (ἄλυτα, 230) and "numberless" laments (ἀνάριθμος ... θρήνων, 232) (cf. πολλοῖσι θρήνοις ... ἄγαν, 255)</p> |
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- Lamentation will continue for the rest of her life (103-9, 132-33; cf. 223-25)

Electra's litany of laments (e.g., 259-86)

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| <p>13. Electra's situation worsens daily (κατ' ἡμᾶρ καὶ κατ' εὐφρόνην αἰεὶ / θάλλοντα μᾶλλον ἢ καταφθίνοντ' ὄρω, 259-60)</p> <p>14a. Mutual hatred between daughter and mother (τὰ μητρὸς ... ἔχθιστα συμβέβηκεν, 261-62)</p> <p>14b. Electra shares a home with her father's killers (ἐν τοῖς ἐμαυτῆς τοῖς φονεῦσι τοῦ πατρὸς / ξύνεμι, 263-64)</p> | <p>14c. The killers also control her livelihood (κάκ τῶνδ' ἄρχομαι κάκ τῶνδέ μοι / λαβεῖν θ' ὁμοίως καὶ τὸ τητᾶσθαι πέλει, 264-65)</p> <p>15a. Aegisthus usurps her father's throne, kingdom, & wife (267-74)</p> <p>15b. Electra can only lament over and honor her slain father – less often than she would prefer (282-86)</p> |
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16. Electra's eternal wait for Orestes (164-72)

ὄν γ' ἐγὼ ἀκάματα προσμένουσ' ἄτεκνος,
τάλαιν' ἀνύμφευτος αἰὲν οἶχυνῶ,
δάκρυσι μυδαλέα, τὸν ἀνήνυτον
οἶτον ἔχουσα κακῶν· ὃ δὲ λάθεται
ὦν τ' ἔπαθ' ὦν τ' ἐδάην. τί γὰρ οὐκ ἐμοὶ
ἔρχεται ἀγγελίας ἀπατώμενον;
αἰεὶ μὲν γὰρ ποθεῖ,
ποθῶν δ' οὐκ ἀξιοῖ φανῆναι.

17a. More on Electra's "eternal" wait for Orestes (303-9)

ἐγὼ δ' Ὀρέστιν τῶνδε **προσμένους** αἰὲν
παυστῆρ' ἐφήξειν ἢ τάλαιν' ἀπόλλυμαι.
μέλλων γὰρ αἰὲν δρᾶν τι² τὰς οὔσας τέ μου
καὶ τὰς ἀπούσας ἐλπίδας διέφθορον.
ἐν οὖν τοιούτοις οὔτε σωφρονεῖν, φίλοι,
οὔτ' εὐσεβεῖν πάρεστιν· ἀλλ' ἐν τοι κακοῖς
πολλή 'στ' ἀνάγκη κάπιτηδεύειν κακά.

17b. On "fighting fire with fire" (= 308-9), cf. Electra being forced to do "terrible things in terrible circumstances" (δεινὸν ἐν δεινοῖς ἠναγκάσθην, 221)

The Chorus and Electra on whether Orestes will return, and not losing hope (317-23)

- 18a.** Chorus: Will Orestes return, or is he delaying? (καὶ δὴ σ' ἐρωτῶ, τοῦ κασιγνήτου τί φῆς, / ἥξοντος ἢ **μέλλοντος**; εἰδέναι θέλω, 317-18)
- 18b.** Electra: He says he will, but he hasn't done so yet (φησὶν γε· φάσκων δ' οὐδὲν ὧν λέγει ποεῖ, 319)
- 19a.** Chorus: Men doing "great deeds" are fond of hesitating (φιλεῖ γὰρ **ὀκνεῖν** πρᾶγμα ἀνὴρ πρᾶστων μέγα, 320)
- 19b.** Electra: I didn't save Orestes by hesitation! (καὶ μὴν ἔγωγ' ἔσωσ' ἐκεῖνον οὐκ **ὀκνω**, 321)
- 20.** Electra: I would not have lived for long without that hope [of Orestes' return, 322] (πέποιθ', ἐπεὶ τᾶν οὐ μακρὰν ἔζων ἐγώ, 323)

More hesitation even when Orestes returns

- 21a.** Orestes is here, but wait silently (πάρεσμεν· ἀλλὰ σιγ' ἔχουσα **πρόσμενε**, 1236)
- 21b.** Electra almost directly relays this phrase to the Chorus (ἀλλὰ σίγα **πρόσμενε**, 1399)
Cf. Chorus: "time is a god who brings ease" (179, #10 above)
- 22.** Orestes to Electra: do not speak until it is the "right time" (οὔ μὴ ἐστι **καιρός**, 1259)
- 23.** Paedagogus: "Delaying is evil" (τὸ μὲν μέλλειν κακόν, 1337)
Cf. Pylades: ὀκνος γὰρ τοῖς φίλοις κακὸν μέγα (E. *Or.* 794)³
- 24.** Paedagogus: the "right time" to act has arrived (νῦν καιρὸς ἔρδειν, 1368), do not delay further (ἐφῆξετον, 1369)

The Vocabulary of Hesitation and Waiting in the *Electra*

προσμένω, "to wait, await" (somewhat rare in tragedy – **only 11x**)

- Electra's preferred verb for waiting (others: ὀκνέω or μέλλω)
- Sophocles (8x): *El.* 164, 303, 1236, 1399; *OT* 620, 837; *Tr.* 390, 525
- Euripides (2x): *Hel.* 505, *Med.* 1116
- Aeschylus (once): *Eu.* 497
 - Cf. simple verb μένω: *El.* 81, 958 (μένω at 1024 is an unrelated use)

ὀκνέω, "to shrink (from), hesitate, fear" (**twice** as often as προσμένω in tragedy, **22x**)

- Sophocles (16x) (**three** in *El.*): *Aj.* 81, 1394; *El.* 22, 320, 1271; *OC* 655 (2x, Oedipus and Theseus), 731; *OT* 746, 749, 922, 976, 986, 1000; *Phil.* 93, 111, 907.
 - Cf. κατοκνήσεις (*El.* 956)

2 On the euphemism δρᾶν τί, cf. ὡς δρᾶν τι βουλευθεῖς (S. *OC* 732), with Jebb (1900)'s note *ad loc.*

3 Cited from the text of Diggle (1994).

- Euripides (5x): *Alc.* 180; *Ba.* 780; *Hcld.* 28; *Or.* 794; *Phoen.* 1001
- [Aeschylus] (once): *PV* 628.
- Only **six** total instances best translated as “to hesitate”
 - **S. *El.* 22, 320, 1271**; *S. Phil.* 111; *E. Ba.* 780; *E. Or.* 794

ἄκνος, “hesitation, fear” (**16x total** in tragedy)

- Sophocles (9x): *Aj.* 82, 139; *Ant.* 243; ***El.* 321**; *OC* 652; *OT* 1175; *Phil.* 225, 887; *Tr.* 7, 181
- Euripides (5x): *Hcld.* 245; *IA* 865; *Or.* 794, 1236; *Suppl.* 295
- Aeschylus (2x): *Ag.* 1009; *Sept.* 54
- Only **eight** occurrences whose context suggests the sense of “hesitation”
 - **S. *El.* 321**; *S. Phil.* 887; *A. Ag.* 1009; *A. Sept.* 54; *E. IA* 865; *E. Or.* 794, 1236; *E. Suppl.* 295

μέλλω, “to delay, hesitate” (**47x total** in tragedy in this sense)

- Sophocles (13x): *Aj.* 540; *Ant.* 499, 939; ***El.* 305, 318, 1337** (1486 also, bracketed by Finglass (2007) & al.); *OC* 219, 1074, 1627; *OT* 679; *Phil.* 1256, 1449; *Tr.* 952
 - Elsewhere in the *Electra* it indicates intention, not delay: 360, 379, 538, 1498
- Euripides (27x): *Alc.* 527; *Ba.* 197, 1351; *El.* 576, 757; *Hcld.* 132, 383, 723, 821, 1045; *Hec.* 726, 1094; *Hel.* 1593; *IA* 866, 1329, 1539; *Ion* 1002; *Med.* 274, 1242; *Or.* 275, 426, 1283-84; *Phoen.* 299, 1146; [E.] *Rh.* 532, 673, 955
- Aeschylus (7x): *Ag.* 290, 908, 1353; *Pers.* 407; [A.] *PV* 36, 627; *Sept.* 99

τί [δῆτα] μέλλεις (*vel sim.*), “Why are you hesitating?” (**22x total** in tragedy; **15x** in Euripides)

- *S. Aj.* 540; *S. Ant.* 499; *S. OC* 1627; *S. OT* 679; *E. Alc.* 527; *E. Ba.* 1351; *E. El.* 757; *E. Hcld.* 1045; *E. Hec.* 726, 1094; *E. Hel.* 1593; *E. Med.* 274, 1242; *E. Or.* 275, 1283-84; *E. Phoen.* 299, 1146; [E.] *Rh.* 532, 673; *A. Ag.* 908; [A.] *PV* 36, 627

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