

Mother as Tyrant: the Succession Myth Pattern at Work in Euripides' *Electra*

When Clytemnestra murders her husband, Agamemnon, the family unit which is disrupted is a royal one. Hence, in their saga inheritance means kingship and power, and the continuity of the lineage has not just a familial function but a political one. Not only in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, but also in Sophocles' and Euripides' *Electra* plays, Clytemnestra moves into a position of power as ruler of Argos after Agamemnon's death. Electra's anger and grief at her father's murder is further exacerbated by the entrenchment of her mother on the throne. I will argue that Euripides, in his *Electra*, fashions the conflict between mother and daughter in terms of succession and inheritance. To do this, Euripides relies on certain story patterns which had distinct, set elements that were familiar to his audience. I will further argue that this succession struggle intensifies the conflicts between Clytemnestra and Electra to the point that Electra feels compelled to unseat her mother in an attempt to restore normalcy.

Euripides' play contains an exploration of what happens when the normal progression of generations is interrupted, what happens when children are not allowed to pass from one stage of life to another, to take their rightful places, or at least what they perceive to be their rightful places, in the order of things. In Electra's view, at least, Clytemnestra's failed mothering has not only deprived her of a caring companion but also of a support system as she transitions to adult life. Electra is not given the protection that her royal paternal household should afford her, nor is she allowed to enter into a marriage that is fitting for the daughter of a man such as Agamemnon. While her mother enjoys the luxury and wealth of Agamemnon's palace, Electra suffers, maltreated and alone. Clytemnestra has taken Aegisthus as a lover, and he becomes ruler of Argos, ultimately creating a system of uxori-local marriage with important implications for inheritance (Scodel 2001, 312). Electra has no husband or son, much less a father or a brother to protect and provide for her. When Agamemnon died, his kingdom should have passed to his son, Orestes. Although the details differ depending on the source, after Agamemnon's death, Orestes was essentially an exile.

I will argue that the same themes are frequently explored in Greek succession myths, which, however, tend to revolve around the conflict between son and father or son and usurper. In the *Theogony* Ouranos is protective of his power and essentially will not let his children come into being, so Kronos eventually violently conquers him. Kronos then repeats the same crimes against his own children and is thus overthrown by his son, Zeus. Euripides creates a play that invites the audience to construct an image of what Electra's womanhood could have been out of the deprivations that she currently suffers. The life of a wife and queen is one in which Electra would have rightfully expected to participate. By an emphasis on what she does not have, the absences in her life of husband, children, home, wealth, and through a constant comparison to Clytemnestra, who perhaps for a short time does "have it all," Euripides breaks from the typical focus on the disinherited son/avenger and explores instead exactly what is at stake when a noble daughter is prevented from completing her time as a *parthenos* and moving forward into her life as a wife and mother and, in this case, as a queen. This investigation of the dis-functioning of the familial and political system shows why the relationship between Clytemnestra and Electra is so fraught. Because Electra does not feel that Clytemnestra holds power rightfully or that she killed Agamemnon justly, she claims that it is right for her and Orestes to kill Clytemnestra; in fact they must kill their mother, Electra argues, in order to avenge their father and to return Orestes to his rightful place in the kingdom.

Work Cited:

Scodel, R. (2001). "The Suitors' Games." *AJP* 122.3: 307-27.