

Gender (Mis)-Appropriation in Euripides' *Electra*

In the *Electra* of Euripides, each character has qualities which are dictated by that individual's gender. No character fully lives up to his/her gender; each meets some expectations but fails to meet others. An examination of Electra, Orestes, and the old man in light of their failure or success to live up to their respective gender expectations reveals that Euripides' *Electra* demonstrates the interdependence of gender—the impossibility of one group to accomplish anything significant without the assistance of the other.

Electra's actions, from her lamentation to her domestic labor to her obsession with childbearing, are generally feminine activities. The proper woman *should* mourn her dead father, *should* take care of the home and help her husband, and *should* want to produce children. Electra, however, takes proper feminine activities and misappropriates them to her character, twisting them in such a way that she becomes ineffectual. Ultimately, her failure as a woman leaves her as a character who can never have a proper female role and this failure negates her ability to be an heroic figure.

Likewise, Orestes is supposed to be a hero, the avenger of the house of Atreus, the savior of Electra and Mycenae. But, the Orestes Euripides presents to his audience is a far cry from the purpose-driven Orestes of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. By examining Orestes' actions in light of his failure to appropriate the proper masculine course of action, one sees that ultimately Orestes was bound to fall short of the heroic standard that was expected of the son of Agamemnon. He is supposed to be a masculine hero, but this never really comes to fruition. His inability to plan, his hesitancy to act, and his questionable methods of accomplishing his actions inevitably set him up for failure.

The character who is perhaps the most consistent with expectations of his gender role is not actually one of the mythic heroes of the story, but rather the simple slave who recognizes Orestes for who he is. He will pick up the slack where Orestes leaves off and through him Electra gains the recognition she is incapable of achieving. Through proper appropriation of the gender of the Old Man, Euripides underscores the failings of Orestes and Electra and accomplishes the actions which their failed gender would stop from happening. He is not only a catalyst of the action, but he is also a necessary character to fill the gaps left by Orestes and Electra.

The failed femininity of Electra and the misappropriated masculinity of Orestes are redeemed by the role of the old man. Between the three of them, they are able to realize the tasks which they set out to do, though imperfectly. No character in this play could have accomplished all of the action required without the significant assistance of the others. They are all interdependent upon each other and each supports the qualities missing in the others. The three form a cohesive unit capable of exacting revenge on Aegisthus and Clytemnestra; without even one of them, all hope of success is lost.