

“Men Behaving Manly”: Orestes & εὐανδρία in Euripides’ *Electra*

In Euripides’ *Electra*, Orestes delivers a lengthy speech praising a poor farmer, his sister’s husband, and examining the nature of εὐανδρία (lines 367-400). Since this term is not found in literary sources before Euripides, Orestes’ discussion of possible criteria for detecting it should illuminate the meaning and significance of the word. Unfortunately, the speech offers few definitive conclusions and several confusing arguments. Scholars have tried to explain these defects in various ways: some question the authenticity of the passage (Wilamowitz 1875, for example, deletes 12 lines and reassigns 7 more); others defend the integrity of the speech and attribute its quirks to Euripides’ provocative examination of contemporary intellectual and moral issues (Perysinakis 2017, Egli 2003). Goldhill (1986) argues that the clumsiness of the rhetoric is deliberate and showcases the “ironic unsuitability” of Orestes’ heroic posturing in this play.

In this paper I will argue that the apparent defects in the speech are directly connected to the ἀνὴρ root in the term εὐανδρία and conceptions of masculinity promoted by Electra both before and after the passage. The start of Orestes’ speech (lines 369-376), which discuss nobility (γένναιος) and wealth (πλούσιος) as criteria for εὐανδρία, seems the most polished and cogent; these lines are also contextually appropriate, as Orestes is commending the farmer, who earlier disclosed that he has noble birth but lacks wealth (lines 35-38). Once Orestes moves on to the theme of bravery in battle, however, the speech loses focus and force. His following argument (lines 377-379), that martial valor is best “cast off as random” because no one could accurately witness it while busy fighting an opposing battle line, seems absurd: though democratic Athens held communal celebrations for combatants (Cropp 2013), it is hardly inconceivable that an individual soldier could be honored, as was the practice in most *poleis*. The statement is also

contextually incongruous given that the farmer has nothing to do with warfare. But this argument makes more sense if we consider Electra's earlier remark that Orestes should be able to slaughter Aegisthus easily in a one-on-one fight (ὁ δ' ἄνδρ' ἔν' εἶς ὄν, lines 336-338), her last words in a speech that shortly precedes Orestes'.

The term εὐανδρία also invites association with the Panathenaic contest of the same name, for which we have literary and epigraphical references from the early 4th century BCE (Crowther 1985). Ancient sources claim these contests honored men for physical attractiveness (Athenaeus) and strength (Xenophon). Notably, both Electra and Orestes throughout the play use metaphors and imagery related to competitions to distinguish real accomplishment, particularly acts of violence, from empty spectacles. Electra's disdain for "girly-faced men" (παρθενωπός) in favor of those "of manly character" (τάνδρείου τρόπου, line 949) is a key example, as she notes that the former are valuable only as "an ornament for dancing" (κόσμος ἐν χοροῖς, line 951); this echoes a remark from Orestes' speech where he condemns athletes as mere "decorations of the marketplace" (ἀγάλματ' ἀγορᾶς, line 388).

Orestes' speech and its rhetorical quirks illustrate how masculinity in this play is conceived as a performative spectacle. While the farmer whom Orestes praises seems confident enough in himself, Orestes' speech emphasizes the distance between Electra's rigid expectations about what "real men" are and Orestes' insecurities about his ability to fulfill these expectations.

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