

## The Poetics of Waiting in Sophocles' *Electra*

Winnington-Ingram (1980) notes that, in Sophocles' *Electra*, "Electra acts (or would act), her sister refrains from action; Electra is heroic, her sister is unheroic" (239). Throughout much of the *Electra*, Electra's actions involve lamenting the murder of her father Agamemnon, and those actions serve to keep his memory alive (e.g., *S. El.* 104-20 and *passim*). I, however, intend to explore these "actions" and consider them as "inaction": waiting, praying, and hoping for Orestes' eventual return and vengeance. Much later in the play, only after Electra hears of Orestes' "death," does she consider direct action, revealing to Chrysothemis her plans to slay Clytemnestra and Aegisthus (*El.* 947-89). Electra's apparent passivity in the *Electra* starkly compares with her rather active role in Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* as she plots the murders with Orestes and Pylades. Winnington-Ingram (1980) also argues that "words can be a form of action, or so Electra thinks..." (239). Yet these verbal acts have not meaningfully furthered Electra's cause, and, according to Chrysothemis, may seriously harm her. After the threat of imprisonment in a "vaulted chamber" (κατηρεφεῖ / στέφῃ, 381-82), Electra prefers Aegisthus to return swiftly to finish the job (ἀλλ' ἐξίκοιτο ... ἐν τάχει, 387). While Electra incessantly waits for Orestes, the Paedagogus exhorts Orestes to abandon hesitation and take action (ὡς ἐνταῦθ' ἴμεν / ἴν' οὐκέτ' ὀκνεῖν καιρός, ἀλλ' ἔργων ἀκμή, 21-22). Electra does not realize her καιρός or "right moment" for Clytemnestra's murder until the Paedagogus informs the two siblings (νῦν καιρὸς ἔρδειν, 1368) to proceed without any further "pause" (ἐφέξετον, 1369).

Much has been written on the homecomings of heroes, but I intend to focus on the conditions suffered by those waiting for the returning heroes. The *Electra* illustrates Electra's thought processes as she grieves for Agamemnon, and, eventually, Orestes, whom she also believes has died. Griffiths (2012) rightly points out that "we see the long years have taken their

toll, a combination of grief, unmet hopes, and a great sense of injustice” (77). Griffiths (2012) even situates Electra within the “five stages of grief” model proposed by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (86). Similarly, Beer (2004) notes that Sophocles, unlike Aeschylus in the *Choephoroi*, has made Electra the center of the *Electra*: “Through Electra’s sufferings and her reactions, the audience experiences the miseries of the *oikos*” (119). Electra wastes away at home, hopeless and without even the protection of a husband, presumably against Aegisthus and his designs upon her (*El.* 185-92), and lives like an outsider (ἔποικος, 189) in her own home.

I will examine, *inter alia*, key words and phrases describing Electra’s waiting, such as the verb προσμένω. Electra laments: “I, at any rate, while awaiting [Orestes] tirelessly, am always living childless, wretched, and unmarried” (ὄν [Ὀρέσταν] γ’ ἐγὼ ἀκάματα προσμένουσ’ ἄτεκνος / τάλαιν’ ἀνύμφευτος αἰὲν οἰχνῶ, 164-65). Electra later claims that waiting for Orestes is slowly destroying her: “But while I always wait for Orestes to arrive and relieve us of these things, wretched, I am perishing” (ἐγὼ δ’ Ὀρέστην τῶνδε προσμένουσ’ ἀεὶ / παυστήρ’ ἐφήξειν ἢ τάλαιν’ ἀπόλλυμαι, 303-4). For Electra, time is not “a god who brings ease” (χρόνος γὰρ εὐμαρῆς θεός, 179), as Electra still must wait even after Orestes’ return. Before murdering Clytemnestra, Orestes commands Electra to wait even longer in silence: “I am present, but stay silent and wait” (πάρεσμεν’ ἀλλὰ σῖγ’ ἔχουσα πρόσμενε, 1236). Electra then enjoins the Chorus also to wait silently, essentially relaying Orestes’ phrase (ἀλλὰ σῖγα πρόσμενε, 1399). Conversely, Orestes initially debates waiting and listening to Electra’s laments (μείνωμεν, 81), but the Paedagogus immediately forbids it (ἤκιστα, 82), out of devotion to Apollo and the task at hand (τὰ Λοξίου πειρώμεθ’ ἔρδειν, 83).

## Bibliography

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