

Manipulative Listening in Sophocles' *Electra*

Sophocles' *Electra* is one of his most controversial plays, and heroines. The fact that the murderers do not hesitate before the matricide or show remorse after it leaves the audience with a disconcerting moral conclusion. This paper takes a fresh look at the difficulty of morally endorsing and emotionally identifying with Electra through an examination of the dynamics of listening in the play, specifically in its four lyric dialogues (*amoibaia*). The readings I present here are based on the idea that one's vocal responses are the expressive avenue for the act of listening they embody, the manifest end of an internal, intangible action that is inseparable from it. More broadly, they address the question of how listening sounds. The problematic assessment of the heroine is magnified by the chorus' involvement in the action and what can be considered their unequivocal support of the killings (e.g. Gardiner 1987, Paulsen 1989). Yet the chorus, even while they maintain a caring and tender stance towards Electra throughout the play, do express reservations about her excessive mourning from the very beginning, and also, I argue, stand apart from her violent vengefulness at the end. In the first two *amoibaia* between Electra and the chorus, the way in which she manages to disarm their moral opposition regarding her lamentation depends upon her unique mode of listening, which manifests itself through her compelling voice. In particular, she has the capacity to metrically echo the choral song while changing its tone and import, thus exhibiting what I call manipulative listening. This manner of listening is disconcerting, for Electra manages to deepen the chorus' empathetic stance while rejecting their advice, and also suggests that an inherently sympathetic quality on her part—namely, the ability to listen—is abused for moral effect. Electra's mode of listening, then, sheds light on the ethical and emotional complexity of her character.

This kind of listening is conspicuously absent from the last third of the play, where execution of the murders takes center stage, and where, concomitantly, the *amoibaia* become less and less lyrical—that is, the sung dialogues incorporate progressively more spoken parts. In the final *amoibaion* of the play, during which Clytemnestra is murdered, Electra does not sing at all. This, I argue, demonstrates that her voice is devoid of the cogent lyric force which has come to define her up to that point, and that, essentially, Electra loses her unique ability to listen. The shift in the dynamics of listening within the play and the corresponding change in the lyric landscape are dramatically necessitated, since Electra’s vocalization of mourning has no place as the revenge is being performed. Yet the fact that Electra no longer sings and listens in her distinct manner suggests that a crucial medium by which she engendered and commanded empathy is lost, and raises the possibility that she is ultimately, even if subtly, criticized (cf. Segal 1966, Finglass 2007). That the chorus no longer participate in her song but rather respond in song to Electra’s speech may hint that they attempt to dissociate themselves from her at the moment of carrying out the matricide. The change in Electra’s voice, then, renders emotional identification with her and moral approval of her deeds less readily available to her dramatic counterparts as well as to her audience precisely as the killings are being plotted and performed.

Bibliography

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