

Marriage and Violence in Euripides' *Electra*

Where the poetic figure of Clytemnestra is concerned, scholars have rightly noted that any poet following Aeschylus must invariably interact on some level with his predecessor. For instance, Rabinowitz (1993) notes that “the story of her murder of Agamemnon was so well-known that Euripides could not create a Clytemnestra who was not vengeful” and Wheeler (2003) remarks: “Clytemnestra appears to have become a popular bogey in the wake of the *Oresteia*, and the radicalism of any softening of her character should not be underestimated.” While I agree that the Euripidean Clytemnestra is “softened” when compared to her Aeschylean counterpart, I argue that in his *Electra*, Euripides does more than dilute Clytemnestra’s traditional wickedness. I will demonstrate how Euripides draws upon the canonical characterization of Clytemnestra as portrayed by Aeschylus, namely the masculinized queen who thinks like a man and wields a man-slaying axe (Aesch. *Aga.* 11; *Cho.* 889), and applies these transgressive behaviors to the titular character Electra. By dividing Clytemnestra’s trademark character traits between two prominent female characters in the *Electra*, Euripides assigns the traditionally more negative characteristics to Electra in order to present to the audience a more sympathetic Clytemnestra, thus undercutting and defying previous expectations of the duo.

In order to illustrate the splitting and redistributing of Clytemnestra’s hallmark traits onto those of Electra, I will analyze Electra’s encounters with Orestes and her the treatment of the corpse of Aegisthus. In each of these episodes, Electra demonstrates the transgressive behaviors traditionally associated with her mother, namely a defiance of cultural and gender norms as she is presented defying traditional marital roles (Eur. *El.* 247ff.) and the use of agonistic language towards her dead step-father (Eur. *El.* 907ff). I draw upon McClure’s study of gendered

language (2010) and Foley's observations on female tragic behavior (2001), in order to analyze Electra's actions and rhetoric leading up to the *agon*, in which Electra reflects a marked proclivity towards violence, remarking how, much like the Aeschylean Clytemnestra, she has repeatedly imagined her mother's death.

Rather than merely softening Clytemnestra's character and eliding the role of the vindictive wife, Euripides retains the character of the transgressive female murderer but transposes it onto the character of Electra. By doing so, Euripides not only encourages the audience to condemn Electra for the very crimes it condemns Clytemnestra but also refashions the mother into a sympathetic figure who conforms to positive gender roles.

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