

## Male Absence and Female Performance in Sophocles' *Electra*

Sophocles' *Electra* is unique in the conspicuous absence of male characters throughout most of the tragedy. Almost the entire play consists of female characters trying to navigate their relationships in the aftermath of Agamemnon's murder. Its other striking feature is the display of Electra's dominating laments and mourning. One aspect that contributes profoundly to lamentation *ad infinitum* is the absence of central male figures in Electra's life. These absences have both political implications as well as repercussions for how Electra continuously voices laments for her father and rebukes against her mother and Aegisthus (Foley, 2001). To explore how male absence shapes Electra's character, I apply modern political theory and gender theory to Sophocles' text. First, to understand the performance space where Electra laments, I apply Giorgio Agamben's principles from the *State of Exception* (Agamben, 2005). This reveals how a space is created that compels Electra to continue her mourning. I then explore how principles from Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight* help illuminate how Electra's performance can be viewed as an intense acting out of the gendered expectations placed upon her (Bordo, 1993). After that, I will use principles from Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* to explore how Electra uses the space created by male absence to *perform* both female and male acts of vendetta (Butler, 1990). Through these three authors, I will show that male absence is fundamental to both the space and the performance of Sophocles' *Electra*.

Identity is inscribed by expectations for gender within the environments where individuals reside. Agamben's principles of the "state of exception" shows that Electra resides in a space that is neither inside nor outside the law. The non-space freezes Electra in an environment of violent male removal that is normally meant to be temporary. Electra fills this

space outside the doors of her home and risks inhabiting it more permanently when Aegisthus threatens to place her in a tomb outside of Argos. The stage, outside the doors and for most of the play devoid of Agamemnon, Orestes, and Aegisthus, compels the ways in which Electra performs her gender (Seaford, 1985). In a society that is built upon the presence of male authority to maintain order and law, its absence creates problems for how the female protagonist deals with the lawless space she inhabits (Easterling, 1987). She both exaggerates the extent to which she is expected to mourn her father's death and attempts to perform acts of vengeance upon her father's murderers that are expected of male relatives (Holst-Warhaft, 1992). Male absence is a serious problem for the women of *Electra*. While male power seeks to keep households and cities in order, men's additional participation in risky and violent aspects of their culture create complex challenges for the women left behind when men are violently removed.

#### Bibliography

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