

Compassion in Sophocles' *Electra*

Electra might seem an odd choice for a drama to illustrate the theme of compassion, but the theme is presented in this play in a relatively straightforward manner. Also, in *Electra* Sophocles develops the theme of compassion dramatically in ways that closely anticipate his development of compassion in his last two extant plays, *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus at Colonus*.

The play presents the reunion of Electra with her brother Orestes during the execution of the plot developed by Orestes, his friend Pylades, and Orestes' Paedagogus to execute Clytemnestra and Aegisthus for their murder of Orestes' and Electra's father, Agamemnon. Compassion functions in *Electra* as a strong motivating force between friends that prompts Electra to end her sister Chrysothemis' "illusion" that Orestes is alive; it also prompts Orestes to end Electra's sorrow and suffering over the apparent loss of her brother, Orestes himself. Electra and Orestes are therefore characterized in the play as being capable of compassion. Furthermore, Aegisthus' and Clytemnestra's contrasting lack of compassion serves to motivate Electra and Orestes: Agamemnon's death is repeatedly characterized as pitiful, undeserved and unlamented; this motivates the retribution against his murderers in accordance with the ethic, "no pity for those who show no pity." The play does not seem to me to problematize that ethic. In fact, I will argue that the application and denial of compassion in this play conforms to expectations of reciprocity that were operational in ancient Greek society and were explored in the classic Greek tragedy of Sophocles.