Sophocles

Electra

A new translation and commentary by Eric Dugdale

Introduction to the Greek Theatre by P.E. Easterling

Series Editors: John Harrison and Judith Affleck
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Preface

The aim of the series is to enable students to approach Classical plays with confidence and understanding: to discover the play within the text.

The translations are new. Many recent versions of Greek tragedy have been produced by poets and playwrights who do not work from the original Greek. The translators of this series aim to bring readers, actors and directors as close as possible to the playwrights' actual words and intentions: to create translations which are faithful to the original in content and tone; and which are speakable, with all the immediacy of modern English.

The notes are designed for students of Classical Civilisation and Drama, and indeed anyone who is interested in theatre. They address points which present difficulty to the reader of today: chiefly relating to the Greeks' religious and moral attitudes, their social and political life, and mythology.

Our hope is that students should discover the play for themselves. The conventions of the Classical theatre are discussed, but there is no thought of recommending ‘authentic’ performances. Different groups will find different ways of responding to each play. The best way of bringing alive an ancient play, as any other, is to explore the text practically, to stimulate thought about ways of staging the plays today. Stage directions in the text are minimal, and the notes are not prescriptive; rather, they contain questions and exercises which explore the dramatic qualities of the text. Bullet points introduce suggestions for discussion and analysis; open bullet points focus on more practical exercises.

If the series encourages students to attempt a staged production, so much the better. But the primary aim is understanding and enjoyment.

This translation of Electra is based on the Greek text edited by Hugh Lloyd-Jones and Nigel Wilson for Oxford University Press (1990).

John Harrison
Judith Affleck
Background to the story of Electra

The names of characters who appear in this play are printed in bold.

The play takes place in the aftermath of the Trojan War. Its setting is the palace at Mycenae. Agamemnon, king of Argos (the territory in which Mycenae is located), led an expedition of Greeks against Troy because the Trojan prince Paris had abducted Helen, the wife of his brother Menelaus. During his absence on campaign Agamemnon’s wife Clytaemnestra took a lover, Aegisthus (Agamemnon’s cousin). The two of them murdered Agamemnon on his return and ruled as usurpers. The play stages the return of Orestes, Agamemnon’s exiled son, to reclaim his rightful throne and avenge his father’s murder.

Violence in the royal house of Argos goes back several generations and repeats itself, with one violent act engendering another. Agamemnon’s great-grandfather Tantalus cut up his own son Pelops and served him to the gods to test their divinity. The gods realised and refused to eat the meat they had been served. They restored Pelops to life and punished Tantalus with eternal suffering in Hades (where he was tantalised by food and drink just out of his reach).

Pelops took part in a contest for the hand of Hippodamia, daughter of Oenomaus, king of Pisa, who had promised his daughter in marriage to whoever could beat him in a chariot race (see 498–502), the price of failure being the suitor’s death. Pelops defeated Oenomaus through trickery, bribing Oenomaus’ charioteer Myrtilus to sabotage his chariot by loosening the linchpins in his chariot wheels (or by replacing them with wax replicas, according to a different version of the story). Oenomaus suffered a fatal crash in the race, and cursed his charioteer as he died. Pelops subsequently killed his accomplice Myrtilus, hurling him from his chariot into the Aegean Sea (either because he did not want to pay him his reward or because Myrtilus had insulted or tried to seduce Hippodamia). Myrtilus cursed Pelops and his descendants (see 503–10) as he fell to his death.

Pelops’ descendants continued to be plagued by family strife. His sons, Atreus and Thyestes, fought for the throne of Argos, which an oracle had declared to belong to ‘a son of Pelops’. The brothers agreed that whoever acquired a golden-fleeced ram should become king. The elder brother Atreus got the fleece, but Thyestes seduced Atreus’ wife, Aerope, and persuaded her to steal the fleece. After a period of exile Atreus returned and retook the throne. He got his revenge by feigning reconciliation and inviting Thyestes to a banquet, then killing Thyestes’ sons and serving them to him to eat. When Thyestes realised what he had eaten, he cursed Atreus and went into exile.
The feud between Atreus and Thyestes was, in turn, continued by their respective sons, Agamemnon and Aegisthus. Aegisthus took revenge on Agamemnon by seducing his wife, Clytaemnestra, then killing him on his return. Clytaemnestra, for her part, was angry with Agamemnon for killing their daughter Iphigeneia, whom he had sacrificed to appease the goddess Artemis and gain favourable winds that would allow the Greek expedition to sail to Troy.

Electra saved her brother Orestes from the hands of Aegisthus and Clytaemnestra by giving him to their old Tutor to take to Phocis for safe-keeping. He was reared by Strophius, a friend and loyal relative of Agamemnon. Strophius' son Pylades accompanied Orestes on his mission to Argos, which, according to Orestes, was mandated by Apollo's oracle (see 32–8). In the Fourth Episode of the play Orestes and Pylades pretend to be messengers sent by Phanoteus bringing news of Orestes' death; Phanoteus was the brother and bitter rival of Pylades' grandfather Crisus, and was an ally of Aegisthus.

The story of the royal family of Argos was well known, told by many poets beginning with Homer. Versions of the story told by each of the three major Athenian tragedians – Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides – survive, allowing us to compare the ways in which each playwright developed the myth. Sophocles, for example, gave a particularly prominent role to Orestes' sister Electra, and added their sister Chrysothemis as a character. Aeschylus' Oresteia, produced a generation or so before Sophocles, was written as a trilogy, while the versions by Sophocles and Euripides were single plays. It is still a matter of debate whether Sophocles' play or Euripides' play came first.

Further reading

Genealogical table
Some minor characters are not shown.

Tantalus
---------------------
Pelops = Hippodamia
Atreus = Aerope
Agamemnon = Clytemnestra
Menelaus = Helen
Anaxibia = Strophius
(some versions)

Iphigeneia
Electra
Chrysothemis
Orestes
Iphianassa
Hermione

Phocus
Phanoteus
Crisus
Strophius = Anaxibia (sister of Agamemnon and Menelaus)

Thyestes = Pelopia
Aegisthus
liaison with
Clytemnestra

Erigone
Aletes

Pylades (= Electra in some versions)
Map of Ancient Greece