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978-1-107-42915-4 - The Electra of Sophocles: With a Commentary Abridged
from the Larger Edition of Sir Richard C. Jebb

Gilbert A. Davies

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SOPHOCLES
WITH A COMMENTARY
ABRIDGED FROM THE LARGER EDITION
OF
SIR RICHARD C. JEBB, LITT.D.
BY
GILBERT A. DAVIES, M.A.

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PREFACE

THIS abridgment follows the same lines as its predecessors in the same series. I have made it my aim to omit nothing which contributed directly to the elucidation of the play. In a very few cases I have made small alterations and additions with the view of making particular points clearer.

G. A. D.

September, 1908.

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INTRODUCTION

§ 1. THE story of Orestes the avenger was complete in every essential particular before it came to the earliest of those three Attic dramatists, each of whom has stamped it so strongly with the impress of his own mind.

In the *Iliad* there is no hint that the house of Pelops lay under a curse which entailed a series of crimes. The legend in Homer. The sceptre made by Hephaestus for Zeus, and brought by Hermes to Pelops, is peacefully inherited by Atreus, Thyestes and Agamemnon. Yet the *Iliad* makes at least one contribution to the material which Aeschylus found ready to his hand. It is the figure of Agamemnon himself, with eyes and head like those of Zeus, in girth like Ares, in breast like Poseidon. This is the royal Agamemnon, ὁ παντόσεμνος, who lives in the Aeschylean drama, and whose image reappears in later poetry. For the rest, the *Iliad* gives us just one far-off glimpse of the king's home beyond the Aegaeon, where Orestes is a child in the fortress-palace at Mycenae, with three sisters, Chrysothemis, Laodicè, and Iphianassa, children of that Clytaemnestra to whom, in the opinion of her lord at Troy, the damsel Chryseïs was 'in no wise inferior, in beauty or in stature, in wit or in skill.'

The *Odyssey* tells the story as follows. Agamemnon, before going to Troy, charged a certain minstrel (ἀοιδός) to watch over Clytaemnestra at Mycenae. The precaution implies a sense of possible danger, but not necessarily distrust of Clytaemnestra. Presently a tempter came to the lonely wife in the person of her husband's first-cousin, Aegisthus, son of Thyestes, who, while his kinsmen were fighting at Troy, dwelt 'at peace, in

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the heart of Argos.' For some time Clytaemnestra 'refused the shameful deed; for she had a good understanding.' Meanwhile the gods themselves, by their messenger Hermes, warned Aegisthus against the course of crime upon which he was entering. But Hermes spoke in vain. Aegisthus removed the minstrel to a desert island, and there left him, a prey to dogs and birds. He then took the 'willing' Clytaemnestra to his home; while he sought to propitiate the gods by burnt-offerings on their altars, and by hanging up in their temples 'many gifts of embroidery and gold.'

Agamemnon, after a stormy voyage from Troy, landed on the coast of Argolis at a point not far from the dwelling of Aegisthus; who, apprised by a watcher, came in his chariot, and invited the king to a banquet; after which he slew him, 'as a man slays an ox at the manger.'

In this narrative (given by Menelaüs to Telemachus) Clytaemnestra is not even named; though Menelaüs had previously spoken of her 'guile' as aiding the crime. It is only in a part of the *Odyssey* which is of later origin than the 'Telemachy' in books I—IV,—viz., the Νέκυια in the eleventh book,—that Clytaemnestra appears as actively sharing in the horrors of the banquet, where she slays Cassandra with her own hand. And, even there, it is by the sword of Aegisthus alone that Agamemnon is slain.

The young Orestes fled, or was conveyed, to Athens. For seven years Aegisthus and Clytaemnestra reigned at Mycenae. In the eighth, Orestes returned, and slew Aegisthus. Clytaemnestra died at the same time, but how, we are not told; and Orestes 'made a funeral feast,' for both of them, 'to the Argives.'

Two points distinguish this Homeric legend from later versions. First, Aegisthus is the principal criminal¹. Clytaem-

¹ The *conception* of the murder (no less than the execution) is always attributed to him in the *Odyssey* (3. 194 Αἰγισθος ἐμήσατο: 4. 529 Διγ. δολίην ἐφράσσατο τέχνην: 11. 409 Διγ. τεύξας θάνατόν τε μέρος τε).

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nestra's part is altogether subordinate to that of her paramour. Secondly, the vengeance of Orestes is regarded as a simple act of retributive justice. It is not said that he slew his mother; the conjecture is left open that she may have died by her own hand. Nothing comes into the Epic view which can throw a shadow upon the merit of the avenger.

§ 2. In the interval between the *Odyssey* and the Lyric age, legends connected with the house of Pelops were further developed in some of the Cyclic epics¹. The *Cypria*, ascribed to Stasinus of Cyprus (*circ.* 776 B.C.), related the immolation of Iphigeneia at Aulis,—a story unknown to Homer,—and distinguished her from the Iphianassa of the *Iliad* (9. 145). A new source of poetical interest was thus created, since it could now be asked (as Pindar asks²) how far Clytaemnestra was actuated by resentment for the sacrifice of her daughter. In another epic, the *Nostoi* (by Agias of Troezen, *circ.* 750 B.C.), Clytaemnestra aided Aegisthus in the murder, though probably in a subordinate capacity. Further, Pylades was associated with Orestes. And the name of Pylades at once points to Delphi,—the agency by which the primitive legend of Orestes was ultimately transformed.

§ 3. The influence of the Delphic priesthood rose and spread with the power of the Dorians. It did so, not merely because that power was an apt instrument for its propagation, but also because in Hellas at large the time was favourable. The religion of

¹ The Epic Cycle (*Ἐπικός κύκλος*) was a body of epic poems by various hands, arranged in the chronological order of the subjects, so as to form a continuous history of the mythical world. One part of this Cycle consisted of poems concerning the Trojan war. A grammarian named Proclus (*circ.* 140 A.D.?), in his *Χρηστομάθεια*, or 'Manual of Literature,' gave short prose summaries of the poems in the Trojan part of the Cycle. The Manual itself is lost, but fragments have been preserved by the patriarch Photius (9th century) in his *Bibliotheca*.

² *Pyth.* 21. 22. See below, § 5.

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Apollo, as his Pythian interpreters set it forth, was suited to an age which had begun to reflect, but which retained a vivid faith in the older mythology. Here we are concerned with only one aspect of the Apolline cult, that which relates to blood-guiltiness. The Homeric man who has killed another may either pay a fine to the kinsfolk, or go into exile; but in Homer there is no idea that he can be purified by a ritual. In other words, there is the notion of a debt in this respect, but hardly of a sin; of quittance, but not of absolution. It was a somewhat later stage when men began more distinctly to recognise that in cases of homicide there are kinds and degrees of moral guilt which cannot be expressed in the terms of human debtor and creditor. Clearly a man ought to do what the gods command. But what if a god tells a man to do something which most men think wrong? If the man obeys, and if his conduct is to be judged aright, the tribunal, like the instigation, must be divine. Nor is this so only when the opinion offended is that of men. A god may command a mortal to do an act by which some other god, or supernatural being, will be incensed. Suppose, for instance, that a man receives a divine mandate to slay a guilty kinsman; if he obeys, nothing can save him from angering the Erinyes, who resent every injury to kinsfolk.

For questions such as these the Pythian creed provided an answer, or at least a mystic compromise. Purification from blood-guilt. Apollo, the god of light, is the all-seeing arbiter of purity. A man who commits homicide displeases Apollo, who abhors every stain of blood. But Apollo can estimate the degree of guilt. And he has empowered his servants to administer rites by which, under certain conditions, a defiled person may be freed from the stain. In later days the critics of Apollo could object that he had encouraged crime by thus far alleviating its consequences. But in the age when the doctrine was first put forth, it must have been, on the whole, beneficent. It tempered the fear of capricious or vindictive deities by trust in a god who, as his priests taught,

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never swerved from equity, and who was always capable of clemency. At the same time it laid the unabsolved offender under a ban worse than mere outlawry, for it cut him off from the worship of the temple and of the hearth, and, indeed, from all intercourse with god-fearing men. It made his hope depend on submission to a religion representing the highest spiritual influence which ever became widely operative among the people of pagan Hellas.

The ritual of Apollo the Purifier had already a place in the Cyclic epic called the *Aethiopis*, said to have been composed by Arctinus of Miletus, about 776 B.C. More than a century elapsed after that date before Lyric poetry was matured; and meanwhile the worship of the Pythian Apollo, with its ritual of purification from blood, was diffused throughout the Greek world. It was to be expected, therefore, that, when the story of Orestes began to receive lyric treatment, the influence of Delphi should be apparent. If, in avenging his father, Orestes killed Clytaemnestra as well as Aegisthus, the Pythian priesthood had a text than which they could desire none more impressive. For, according to the immemorial and general belief of Hellenes, Orestes did well to avenge Agamemnon. If, however, he slew his mother, the Erinyes were necessarily called into activity. Who, then, was to vindicate the avenger? Who was to assert, even against the Erinyes, that his deed was righteous? Who but Apollo, the supreme judge of purity? And then it was only another step to represent Apollo himself as having prescribed the vengeance.

§ 4. Stesichorus, of Himera in Sicily, flourished towards the close of the seventh, and in the earlier part of the sixth, century B.C. The Choral Lyric, which Alcman had already cultivated under the Dorian inspirations of Sparta, received a new development from Stesichorus. He applied it to those heroic legends which had hitherto been the peculiar domain of Epos. One of his most celebrated poems was that in which he told the story of

The *Oresteia*
of Stesichorus.

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Orestes ('*Opésteia*). It was of large compass, being divided into at least two books or cantos. The direct sources of information concerning it are meagre, consisting only of a few small fragments (less than twelve lines altogether), gleaned from the passing allusions of later writers. But archaeology comes to the aid of literature. The supplementary evidence of Greek art makes it possible to reconstruct, if not with certainty, at least with high probability, a partial outline of the once famous poem. This has been done by Carl Robert, in an essay on 'The death of Aegisthus,'—one of the series of essays, entitled *Bild und Lied*, in which he brings archaeological illustration to bear upon the heroic myths¹.

A combination of literary with artistic evidence leads to the hypothesis that the *Oresteia* of Stesichorus was planned somewhat as follows. Clytaemnestra slew her husband by striking him on the head with an axe. The nurse Laodameia saved the young Orestes, and entrusted him to his father's faithful herald Talthybius, who carried him away,—probably to Phocis. After some years, Clytaemnestra has the alarming dream, and sends Electra (accompanied by the nurse) with gifts to Agamemnon's tomb. Orestes arrives there with Talthybius, and is recognised by his sister. He then enters the house, while Talthybius keeps watch near the doors². Clytaemnestra, hearing the shriek of the dying Aegisthus, rushes to his aid with an axe; a cry from Electra warns Orestes of the peril; but Talthybius has already seized Clytaemnestra; who is presently slain by her son. The Erinyes then appear to Orestes, who defends himself with the bow and arrows given by Apollo³.

¹ *Bild und Lied: Archaeologische Beiträge zur Geschichte der griechischen Heldensage* (Berlin, 1881). The fifth essay is 'Der Tod des Aegisthos,' pp. 149—191.

² As the Paedagogus does in Sophocles (*El.* 1331 f.).

³ There is no clue to the manner in which Stesichorus managed the sequel. He may have followed the local Peloponnesian legend, which assigned a refuge to Orestes at the Arcadian town of Oresteion (Thuc. 5. 64) in Parrhasia, the primitive home of the Orestes-myth. Robert (*Bild und Lied*, p. 181, n. 30) finds a possible trace of this in Eur. *Or.* 1643 ff.

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It would appear that Aeschylus followed the general outlines of Stesichorus pretty closely; while Sophocles, who did not do so, has retained at least one Stesichorean trait, the part of the old man. Aeschylus did not need him, since *his* Clytaemnestra herself sent Orestes to Strophius; on the other hand, he retains the part of the nurse, which for Sophocles was superfluous. That fragment of the Stesichorean poem which describes Clytaemnestra's dream proves that Stesichorus conceived her in a manner which was much nearer to the Aeschylean than to the Homeric. And this change—whether first made by him or not—was connected with another of still larger scope. Stesichorus related in the *Oresteia* that Tyndareus had incurred the anger of Aphrodite, who doomed his daughters, Helen and Clytaemnestra, to evil careers¹. Here is the tendency—wholly absent from the *Iliad*—to bring crimes into the house of Pelops. The Dorian conquerors of Peloponnesus envied the renown which the old local lore, worked up by Ionian art in the *Iliad*, had shed around their Achaean predecessors, the ancient masters of Mycenae and Sparta. Under Dorian influences, the story of the Pelopidae was interwoven with those dark threads which appear in Attic Tragedy, while brighter traits were given to the legends of Heracles and the Heracleidae.

§ 5. Between Stesichorus and Aeschylus, the only poet who illustrates the story of Orestes is Pindar. In the eleventh Pythian ode (478 B.C.), he describes a victory in the Pythian games as won 'in the rich corn-lands of Pylades, host of Laconian Orestes; whom, when his sire was murdered, the nurse Arsinoë rescued from the violent hands of Clytaemnestra and from her deadly guile.' That 'pitiless woman' slew Agamemnon and Cassandra. What, asks Pindar, was her motive? Was it 'the slaying of Iphigeneia

¹ Frag. 35.

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at the Euripus?' Or was it an adulterous passion? 'Meanwhile, Orestes, a young child, became the guest of the aged Strophius, who dwelt at the foot of Parnassus. But in time, with the help of Ares, he slew his mother, and laid Aegisthus in blood¹.'

Three points in this sketch are noteworthy. (1) Pindar makes Orestes 'a Laconian'; following the tradition, adopted also by Stesichorus and Simonides that Amyclae in Lacedaemon was the place where Agamemnon was slain. (2) The house of Strophius, 'at the foot of Parnassus,' is the refuge of Orestes; and Pylades is his friend. Probably the *Nostoi* (circ. 750 B.C.), in which Pylades figured, gave this account; but Pindar is the earliest extant source of it. (3) Clytaemnestra, not Aegisthus, is in the foreground; and the speculation as to her *motive* reminds us that the myth had now grown into a shape which was ready for dramatic handling. Twenty years after this ode was written, Aeschylus produced his *Oresteia*.

§ 6. A poet imbued with the ideas of Aeschylus could never have accepted the view presented in the *Aeschylus*. *Odyssey*; that the vengeance of Orestes was a simply righteous retribution, by which the troubles of the house were closed. To the mind of Aeschylus the version which Stesichorus had followed would naturally commend itself: Orestes, the slayer of a mother, could be saved from the Erinyes only by divine aid. And the trilogy, the distinctively Aeschylean form of work, was a framework perfectly suited to such a conception. Clytaemnestra's crime is the subject of the *Agamemnon*; the vengeance of Orestes fills the *Choephoroi*; and the judgment upon him is given in the *Eumenides*.

The *Agamemnon* is pervaded from first to last by the thought of the hereditary curse upon the house: Clytaemnestra, indeed, identifies herself with this 'ancient, bitter Alastor'; and the Argive Elders recognise that this dread

¹ Pind. *Pyth.* 11. 15–37.

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power, though it does not excuse her, has presumably helped her. She is the principal agent in the crime. Her dominant motive is not love of her paramour, but hatred of the husband who slew Iphigeneia. Aegisthus is a dastard, 'the wolf mated with the lioness'; at the close he blusters, and threatens the Elders, while the strong woman treats them with a cold scorn. The shadow of the vengeance is cast before. Cassandra predicts the return of the exiled heir; 'for the gods have sworn a great oath.' And the Chorus reply to the menaces of Aegisthus by reminding him that Orestes lives.

The *Choephoroi* begins with a scene at Agamemnon's grave, near the palace. Orestes, who has just arrived from Phocis, enters with Pylades, and lays a lock of his own hair on the tomb. A train of women, dressed in mourning, approaches. These are fifteen Trojan captives, now domestics of the palace, who form the Chorus. They escort Electra. Orestes thinks that he recognises his sister, and draws aside, with Pylades, to observe the procession.

The Chorus chant the parodos, and we learn that they have come with libations to the tomb. 'The impious woman' has been alarmed by a dream; and the sooth-sayers declare that the dead king is wroth. But such offerings, the Chorus add, cannot atone for her deed.

Electra asks the Chorus what prayer she is to utter in pouring the libations. Can she ask the dead to receive these gifts from the murderess? Or shall she present them in silence? Guided by the counsel of her attendants, she prays to Hermes, and to her father's spirit,—with a special petition that Orestes may return.

In pouring the drink-offerings on the tomb, she finds the lock of hair, and turns in excitement to the Chorus. It resembles her own, and she surmises that it is the hair of Orestes,—not brought by him, of course, but sent. Presently she notices footmarks, which have a resemblance to her own.

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Orestes now steps forward, and, after a short dialogue, reveals himself. She at first fears an imposture, but is afterwards convinced.

Orestes then declares the oracle of Apollo, commanding him, under terrible penalties, to avenge his father.

Then comes one of the most characteristic and magnificent passages of the play,—a prolonged lyric chant or dirge (*kommos*), in which the Chorus, Orestes, and Electra take part by turns. It is a solemn litany, addressed to the divine powers who are to aid the vengeance, and to the spirit of the dead.

Then Orestes asks why his mother had sent gifts to the tomb? She dreamed—the Chorus reply—that she gave birth to a serpent, and was suckling it, when it drew blood from her breast. Orestes accepts the omen: the part of the serpent shall be his own.

He announces his plan. Electra is to enter the house. He and Pylades will arrive at the outer gate, wearing the garb of travellers, and imitating the Phocian accent. Electra now goes within, while Orestes and Pylades withdraw to prepare for their enterprise.

The Chorus, left alone, comment on the power of passion over women.

Orestes and Pylades are courteously received by Clytaemnestra. He describes himself as a Phocian from Daulis. With his companion, he was on his way to Argos, when a Phocian named Strophius—a stranger—asked him to carry the news that Orestes was dead, in case the youth's friends should wish to fetch the ashes home.—Clytaemnestra speaks, or rather declaims, as the afflicted mother, and then has the two visitors ushered into the guest chambers, saying that she will break the sad news to 'the master of the house.'

A short choral ode follows.

An old slave-woman, who had been the nurse of Orestes, then comes forth, having been sent by Clytaemnestra to summon Aegisthus. She mourns for Orestes,—recalling, with

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quaint pathos, all the trouble that the child had given her.— It seems that the queen has ordered Aegisthus to come *with armed attendants*. The Chorus prevail on the nurse not to give this part of the message, but to summon Aegisthus alone.

In the second stasimon the Chorus invoke Zeus, Apollo and Hermes. Next they apostrophise Orestes as though he were present.

Aegisthus enters. The report that Orestes is dead seems to him doubtful. Women are credulous. He must see the messenger, who will not impose on *him*. And so he enters the house.

A moment of suspense is marked by the short third stasimon.

The shriek of the dying Aegisthus is heard within. A slave runs out, crying that his master is slain, and summons Clytaemnestra. She knows that she is lost; but her spirit never quails; she calls for a battle-axe. But, before she can obtain a weapon, Orestes comes forth:—‘Tis for thee that I am looking; with *him*, ’tis well enough.’ She appeals to her son by the breasts that suckled him. For one instant he falters, and asks Pylades what to do. Pylades (who speaks only here) briefly reminds him of Apollo’s command. Orestes wavers no more. In vain Clytaemnestra pleads. He drives her into the house, to slay her where Aegisthus fell.

The Chorus exult in the retribution and the deliverance.

Then the spectators are shown the corpses of Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus, with Orestes standing beside them. He is prepared to seek the protection of Apollo. He denounces the crime of the murderers who have been slain, and displays the robe which Clytaemnestra cast over Agamemnon, ‘like a net,’ when she slew him in the bath. But, as he proceeds, a strange vehemence and a strange anguish begin to trouble his speech. He is going mad, and in terrible words he says that he knows it. Now he cries out that he sees forms clad in dusky robes, with snaky locks,—the avengers of his mother. ‘Ye cannot see them,’ he exclaims to the Chorus, ‘but I see

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them...They drive me forth':—and so he rushes from the scene. The Chorus pray that Apollo may protect him.

§ 7. The leading characteristic of the *Choephoroi* is the tremendous importance of those invisible and supernatural allies who assist the vengeance.

^{Supernatural agency.} Zeus, Apollo, Hermes, Hades, the spirit of Agamemnon, are felt throughout as if they were present with the human agents. This is the significance of the prolonged scene at the tomb, which forms more than one half of the play. It is not properly a suspension of action, but rather a dramatic prelude, emphasising the greatness of the issues involved in the action to come. It brings out the heinousness of the crime which calls for retribution, the appalling nature of the divine mandate to Orestes, and the supreme need of arousing and marshalling those superhuman forces which alone can secure the victory. The human strategy, as subsequently developed, is not especially skilful. The story told to Clytaemnestra by the pretended Phocian, who mentions the death of Orestes as a bare fact casually learned from a stranger, was not well fitted to find ready credence with the astute woman whose fears had just been quickened, as the conspirators knew, by a warning dream,—even if they assumed that she had missed the meaning which her dream at once conveyed to Orestes. And that Clytaemnestra did, in fact, suspect the 'Phocian's' story appears from her wish that Aegisthus should bring his body-guards. But then again the old nurse of Orestes was hardly the safest person to whom a message of such critical moment could be entrusted. The gods indeed justify the maxim of Pylades; they are the worst enemies of the guilty.

From the moment when the two 'Phocians' enter the house, the swiftness of the concentrated action is unchecked, save by that brief pause in which the tragic interest culminates,—the dialogue between Clytaemnestra and her son. She holds the same place in the retribution which she held in the crime. Her

<sup>Clytaem-
nestra.</sup>

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death is the climax ; it is by her Erinyes that Orestes is driven forth to seek refuge with Apollo. The fate of Aegisthus is a subordinate incident. Though Clytaemnestra's longest speech is limited to twelve lines, and her whole part to forty-six, Aeschylus has been marvellously successful in continuing that sense of horror, hard to describe or to define, which she produces in the *Agamemnon*.

The attitude of the Aeschylean Orestes is illustrated by the nature of the command which he obeys.

Orestes. In the play of Sophocles the oracle briefly directs that he shall take the just vengeance without the aid of an armed force. But in the *Choephoroi* he speaks of reiterated admonitions from the god, full of explicit threats as to the penalties which await him if he *refuses* to act. Spectral terrors shall haunt him in the night ; leprous ulcers shall rise upon his flesh ; his whole body shall be shrivelled and blasted with torturing disease ; he shall be an outcast, under a ban cutting him off from human fellowship and from the altars of the gods. Oracles of such a tenor plainly intimate that the task prescribed was one from which even a brave man might recoil. Apollo's purpose is to make Orestes feel that disobedience is the greater of two evils. It is dreadful to shed a mother's blood, but worse to leave a father unavenged. In the *Choephoroi* Orestes is indeed resolute ; not, however, because the duty before him is simple, but because the god's messages have braced him to perform it. Once—at the moment when a mother's claim to pity is presented in the most pathetic form—he does hesitate ;—Πυλάδῃ, τί δράσω ; μηγέρ' αἰδεσθῶ κτανεῖν ; But Pylades reminds him of the god's word. It will presently be seen how marked is the contrast here between Aeschylus and Sophocles.

The Electra of Aeschylus appears to have no sister living.

Electra. She performs the errand which Sophocles assigns to Chrysothemis, by carrying her mother's gifts to the tomb ; she could not refuse, for she is virtually a slave.

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Electra

Turning to the real slaves, her companions, she appeals to the common hatred which unites them, and asks what prayer she is to make. The Sophoclean Electra would hardly have sought advice on that point; yet the question is in place here, since her action, if contrary to the queen's orders, might compromise her unhappy escort. The heroic fortitude and bold initiative of the Sophoclean Electra are qualities which Aeschylus, with his different plan, has not desired to portray; but he has done full justice to her steadfast and affectionate loyalty. And with regard to the actual mechanism of the plot, she is, in one sense, even more important with Aeschylus than with Sophocles. It rests with her alone to decide whether the young stranger is her brother, and, if she is convinced, to aid his plan within the house. The latter service is assigned by Sophocles to the old man, who could also have established the identity of Orestes, if there had been need. When the 'recognition' has been effected, and the prayers at the tomb are over, the Aeschylean Electra can be dismissed from the scene.

The part of Aegisthus is notably brief, even allowing for the indifference with which his fate is treated. **Minor persons.** He merely passes across the scene; fourteen verses are all that he has to speak. The part of the Nurse is a masterpiece in its kind. And we note the happy inspiration by which Pylades is made to break silence once—at the supreme moment—as the voice of Apollo.

Nearly a third of the play is lyric. The Chorus have their share in the action; at the outset they are the counsellors of Electra; they persuade the Nurse to help the plan; and they send Aegisthus forward to his doom. But their function is, above all, to interpret the sense of reliance upon divine aid. 'Justice may delay, but it will come,' is the burden of the choral song; 'the sinner shall suffer' (*δράσαντι παθεῖν*); 'even now, Destiny is preparing the sword.' And when, at the close, a dark cloud gathers over Orestes, it is with unwavering faith that the Chorus commend

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him to Apollo, though no human eye can pierce the gloom which rests upon the future.

§ 8. Sophocles reverts to the epic view that the deed of Orestes is simply laudable, and therefore final. *The Electra of Sophocles.* It suited this aim to concentrate the sympathies of the spectators against Clytaemnestra as well as Aegisthus. And nothing could be more effective for that purpose than to show how their long oppression had failed to break down the heroic constancy of Electra.

We will now trace the plot of Sophocles.

The scene is laid before the palace of the Pelopidae at Mycenae. Three persons enter,—on the left of the spectator, for they are travellers from a distant place. These are, Orestes, who is about twenty years of age; his Phocian friend Pylades (son of Strophius, king of Crisa near Delphi—from whose home they come); and an old man, a faithful retainer of Agamemnon, who had been the paedagogus of Orestes, and had secretly carried him, as a child, away from Mycenae to Crisa, at the time when Agamemnon was slain.

The old man points out to Orestes the chief features in the landscape before them, and then exhorts the two youths to concert their plan of action without delay; already it is the hour of dawn, and the morning-song of the birds is beginning.

Orestes, in reply, states the purport of the oracle given to him at Delphi. Apollo commanded him to 'snatch his righteous vengeance by stealth,' without the aid of an armed force. He then sets forth his plan. The old man is to enter the palace in the guise of a messenger sent by Phanoteus, a Phocian prince friendly to Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus. He is to announce that Orestes has been killed in a chariot-race at the Pythian games. Meanwhile Orestes and Pylades will make offerings at the tomb of Agamemnon near the palace. They will then present themselves in the house, bearing a funeral urn. They, like the old man, will pretend

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to be Phocians, who have brought the ashes of Orestes to Mycenae.

A female voice of lament is now heard in the house (v. 77). Orestes asks if it can be Electra's, and proposes to wait and listen; but the old man dissuades him. All three now leave the scene (v. 85).

Electra comes out of the house; she is alone, for the Chorus have not yet appeared. Greeting the (Ἰσθμὸς ἀπὸ σκηνῆς : 86—120.) 'pure sunlight and the air,' to which her sorrow has so often been uttered at dawn, she speaks of the grief which ceases not, day or night, for her father, whom the wicked pair struck down, 'as woodmen fell an oak.' She invokes the Powers of the nether world to avenge him,—and to send her brother; for her own strength is well-nigh spent.

The Chorus, composed of fifteen Mycenaean women, had entered as Electra's lament was closing. Parodos : 121—250. They sympathise with her; and they do not conceal their abhorrence of the deed which she mourns. But they remind her that grief cannot restore the dead to life: they urge her to be calm, trusting in the gods, and hoping for the return of Orestes. She must not aggravate her lot by waging a fruitless strife with the rulers.

Electra replies that to abandon her grief would be disloyalty. If her father is not to be avenged, there will be an end to reverence for gods or men.

The Chorus say that they spoke only for her good; she knows best, and she shall be their guide. II. First episode : 251—471. Electra then justifies her conduct by describing what she has to see and suffer daily in the house;—Aegisthus in her father's place; her mother living with Aegisthus, and keeping the death-day of Agamemnon as a festival. Hardship and insult are her own portion continually. The Chorus cautiously inquire if Aegisthus is at home; and, on learning that he is absent in the country, ask Electra whether she

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thinks that Orestes will return. 'He promises,' she answers, 'but does not keep his promise.' 'Courage,' they reply: 'he is too noble to fail his friends.'

At this moment Chrysothemis approaches, bearing funeral offerings. She begins by sharply chiding her sister for this 'vain indulgence of idle wrath,'—in public, too, at the palace-gates. But she admits that she herself feels anger against the tyrants; were she strong enough, she would let them know it. Electra has right upon her side: only, if one is to live in freedom, one must yield to the stronger.

Electra tells her that the choice is between loyalty to the dead and worldly prudence. 'Canst thou, the daughter of Agamemnon, wish to be only the daughter of Clytaemnestra?' The Chorus timidly deprecate a quarrel. Chrysothemis says that she is used to Electra's vehemence. She would not have spoken, but that she had to convey a warning. As soon as Aegisthus returns, Electra is to be imprisoned in a dungeon, at a distance from Mycenae—unless she becomes more docile. Electra declares that she would welcome such a doom;—'that I may escape,' she says, 'far from *you*,'—thus identifying her sister with the oppressors.

Chrysothemis, finding her counsels repelled, is about to proceed on her errand, when Electra asks her whither she is taking those offerings. 'Our mother sends me,' is the answer, 'with libations to our father's grave.' It then appears that Clytaemnestra has been terrified by a dream. Agamemnon returned to life; he planted his sceptre at the hearth; a branch blossomed from it, and overshadowed the land.

Electra feels a sudden joy. This dream, she believes, has been sent by the gods below, and by the spirit of the dead. 'Dear sister,' she cries, 'cast those impious offerings away; take, instead of them, such gifts as *we* can give,—and pray at the tomb that our father's spirit may come to help us, and that Orestes may live to conquer.'

Chrysothemis is touched and subdued. She agrees to do

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as her sister bids ; only Electra and the Chorus must keep the secret ; she dreads her mother's anger.

The Chorus, encouraged by Clytaemnestra's dream, predict the vengeance. Agamemnon's spirit is not forgetful. The Erinyes, now lurking in ambush, will come. The curse upon the house of Pelops claims yet more victims.

First stasimon : 472—515.

Clytaemnestra enters, followed by a handmaid bearing offerings of various fruits for Apollo Lykeios, whose altar stands in front of the house. 'At large once more, it seems!' is her greeting to Electra ;—'since Aegisthus is not here to restrain thee.' She defends her murder of Agamemnon. 'Justice slew him, and not I alone.' Had he not slain her daughter, Iphigeneia, in the cause of his brother Menelaüs?

III. Second episode : 516—1057. (1) 1st scene : 516—659.

Electra replies that her father acted therein under constraint from the goddess Artemis ; but that, even if he had been a free agent, Clytaemnestra's plea would not avail. Then, passing from argument to reproach and defiance, Electra avows her wish that Orestes might come as an avenger ; though she also shows the anguish which she feels at the attitude towards a mother which is forced upon her.

An angry dialogue ends by Clytaemnestra enjoining silence, in order that she may make her offerings to Apollo. She prays that the god will rule the issues of the vision for her good, and for the discomfiture of her foes. Other wishes, too, she has, but will not utter them ; the god can divine them...

Here the Paedagogus enters, disguised as a Phocian messenger from Phanoteus. He relates how the young Orestes, after wonderful feats at the Pythian games, was killed in the chariot-race.

(2) 2nd scene : 660—803.

Other Phocians are on their way to Mycenae with his ashes.

Clytaemnestra hears the news with feelings in which joy is crossed by at least a touch of natural grief ; but the joy quickly prevails, and she openly recognises that the news is good. At

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last she will be safe from Orestes—and from Electra, who has been even a worse foe.

Electra invokes Nemesis to avenge her brother ; while Clytaemnestra cruelly taunts her, and then conducts the Phocian messenger into the house.

Left alone with the Chorus, Electra gives free vent to her anguish and despair. She will enter that house no more, but cast herself down at the gates, and await death—which cannot come too soon.

(3) 3rd
scene: 804–
870.

In the lyric dialogue which follows, the women of Mycenae gently endeavour to suggest comfort. Was not the seer Amphiaraüs betrayed to death by a false wife? And is not his spirit now great beneath the earth? Alas, Electra answers, there was a son to avenge him, and to slay the murderess ; but Agamemnon can have no such avenger. Orestes has perished, in a foreign land, without receiving the last offices of sisterly love.

Kommos:
823–870.

Chrysothemis enters hurriedly, in a flutter of joyful excitement. On reaching the tomb, with her sister's gifts and her own, she found that unknown hands had just been honouring it. Libations of milk had been poured there ; the mound was wreathed with flowers ; and on the edge of it lay a lock of hair. These gifts can be from no one but Orestes !

(4) 4th
scene: 871–
1057.

With pitying sorrow, Electra breaks to her the news which has come from Phocis. Probably the gifts at the tomb were brought by some one in memory of the dead youth. And now, as the delusive hope vanishes from her sister's mind, Electra seeks to replace it by a heroic resolve. Will Chrysothemis aid her in the purpose which she has formed—to slay the two murderers with her own hand? Electra reminds her of the joyless lot which otherwise awaits both Chrysothemis and herself ; and pictures the noble renown which such a deed would achieve.

To Chrysothemis this is sheer madness. She foresees only certain failure and a terrible death. In vain she seeks to

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dissuade Electra, who declares that she will make the attempt unaided. With a parting word of compassionate warning, Chrysothemis enters the house. Electra remains outside.

The Chorus lament the weaker sister's failure in that natural piety which the very birds of the air teach us. A sorrowful message for Agamemnon in the shades will be this quarrel between his daughters. How noble is Electra,—all alone, yet unshaken, in her loyalty! May she yet win the reward which she has deserved!

Orestes enters, with Pylades, followed by two attendants, one of whom carries the funeral urn (v. 1123). He asks for the house of Aegisthus, and, on learning that he has reached it, requests that their arrival may be announced. The Chorus suggest that Electra should do this. A dialogue ensues between Electra and the disguised Orestes. She learns that the strangers come from Strophius, king of Crisa, with her brother's ashes; and she is allowed to take the urn into her hands. She then utters a most touching lament, recalling the memories of her brother's childhood,—the close affection which bound them to each other,—her care for him, and her bright hopes, which have thus ended. 'Therefore take me to this thy home, me, who am as nothing, to thy nothingness... When thou wast on earth, we shared alike; and now I fain would die, that I may not be parted from thee in the grave.'

IV. Third episode: 1098—1287. (1) The recognition: 1098—1287.

The disguised Orestes finds it hard to restrain himself. In the dialogue which follows, he gradually prepares her mind for the discovery,—leading her through surprise, conjecture, and hope, to conviction. The scene is one of exquisite art and beauty (vv. 1176—1226).

In lyrics, Electra now utters her joy,—which reaches the height, when Orestes tells her that he has been sent by Apollo. He endeavours to check her transports (though he is loth to do so), lest she should be overheard.

μέλος ἀπὸ σκηνῆς: 1232—1287.

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At length he succeeds in recalling her to their scheme of action, and warns her against allowing Clytaemnestra to perceive her happiness. She promises obedience in all things. The old Paedagogus now comes out, and scolds them both for their imprudence. When Electra learns that the faithful servant is before her, she greets him warmly, as the preserver of their house. Then, by his advice, Orestes and Pylades enter the palace, after saluting the ancestral gods in the porch; and the old man follows them. Electra addresses a brief prayer to Apollo Lykeios, and then she also enters.

The plan of
action: 1288—
1383.

The Chorus, now alone, sing a short ode. The Erinyes have passed beneath the roof; the Avenger is being led by Hermes, in secrecy, to his goal.

Third
stasimon:
1384—1397.

Electra rushes forth to tell the Chorus that Orestes and Pylades are about to do the deed. Clytaemnestra is dressing the funeral urn for burial, while the two youths stand beside her.

V. Exodos:
1398—1510.
Kommos:
1398—1441.

In another moment her dying shrieks are heard. Orestes, with Pylades, then comes out; and, in answer to his sister's question, says: '*All is well in the house, if Apollo's oracle spake well.*'

Aegisthus is seen approaching, and the youths quickly re-enter the house. He is exultant, for he has heard the report that Orestes is dead. Electra confirms it, adding that the body has been brought to Mycenae; Aegisthus can satisfy his own eyes. The tyrant orders the palace-doors to be thrown wide, in order that his subjects may see the corpse, and know that all hope from that quarter is over.

The doors are opened; a corpse, hidden by a veil, lies on a bier; close to it stand the two Phocians who are supposed to have brought it. Aegisthus lifts the veil—and sees the dead Clytaemnestra. He knows that he is doomed, and that Orestes stands before him. Nor is he suffered to plead at length: though some bitter words pass his lips, before Orestes drives him in, to slay him in the hall where Agamemnon was slain.

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Electra

The Chorus rejoice that the house of Atreus has at last found peace.

§ 9. When this play is compared with the *Choephori*, the first difference which appears is broader than any that could arise from divergent views of the particular story. It concerns the whole stamp of the drama, and illustrates the difference, in bent of genius, between the two poets. Aeschylus exhibits in grand outline the working of an eternal law, full of mystery and terror. Justice, Destiny, the Erinys, are the paramount agencies. The human agents are drawn, indeed, with a master's hand, but by a few powerful strokes rather than with subtle touches or fine shading. Nor is much care shown for probability in minor details of the plot. With Sophocles the interest depends primarily on the portraiture of human character. The opportunities for this are contrived by a series of ingenious situations, fruitful in contrasts and dramatic effects. We have seen that the Greek art of the sixth century B.C. knew a version of this legend in which Talthybius, the herald of Agamemnon, saved the young Orestes from murder,—receiving him, doubtless, from the hands of the nurse—and in due time conducted the heir home again; a version which Stesichorus had probably popularised. It suited Aeschylus to leave out Talthybius, while keeping the part of the nurse. Sophocles revives the old herald in the person of the trusty Paedagogus, who received the child, not from a nurse, but from Electra herself, and carried him to Crisa. This change is a source of large advantage to the plot. It is a weak point in the *Choephori* that the story told by Orestes was not likely to impose upon Clytaemnestra, and does not, in fact, disarm her suspicion. The Sophoclean stratagem is of a different order. When the old man, as an envoy from Phanoteus, gives Clytaemnestra his circumstantial account of her son's death, he plays his part to perfection. He evinces some natural feeling for the tragic death of a brilliant youth, but at the same time

General
comparison
with the *Choe-
phori*.