

The Faces of Electra

a Study of Performance and Translation in Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides' Electra Plays

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Introduction

In Greek mythology, **Electra** is the loyal daughter of Trojan War hero **Agamemnon** and his treacherous wife **Clytemnestra**. When Agamemnon returns from the war, Clytemnestra and her new lover **Aegisthus** brutally murder him, and destine his son **Orestes** to avenge the murder.

The three Electra plays—Aeschylus' *The Libation Bearers* or *Choephoroi*, Sophocles' *Electra*, and Euripides' *Electra*—tell the story of Orestes' return from exile and, with Electra's help, murder of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Each play tells its own version of the story and imagines different Electras.

Motivation

- Goals**
- **Evaluate** and **contrast** 3 versions of the Electra plays
 - **Determine** the Electra character constructed in each play
 - **Find** compelling translations of the three plays

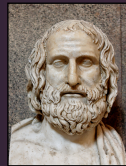
Importance

- **Contributes** to Dr. John Harvey's new translation of Sophocles' *Electra*
- **Informs** direction and choreography of the new translation
- **Enhances** ability to discuss the history and variety of Electra plays with cast and audience

Method

- **Evaluate** the 45 translations available in M.D. Anderson Library
- **Select** a small group of elegant, interesting translations for each play
- **Analyze** the groups in terms of style and content

The plots of the three plays have many points in common; three that illustrate Electra's character in each are 1) her reunion with Orestes, 2) her role in the murders of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, and 3) her reaction to the murders and their consequences. Throughout the stories, Electra is shown to be hopeful that Orestes will return and vengeful toward Clytemnestra and Aegisthus (as well as abused by them); but she also takes on distinct characteristics in each one.



Aeschylus'
The Libation Bearers

Aeschylus' Electra is mild-mannered and deferential. She grieves and struggles, but maintains her poise.

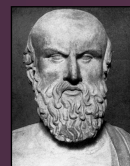
When hopeful detective work leads to her reunion with Orestes, she is happy and prayerful, and immediately transfers control of the prayer to Orestes.

After the siblings pray, Orestes dismisses Electra into the house, where she will keep lookout. Electra expresses no disappointment at her detached relationship to the justice she has awaited for so long.

Below are selections from Electra's initial prayer for Orestes to come home. Tony Harrison's translation is punchy and a bit cryptic, while David Slavitt's is polished and poignant.

"Electra's a bonds slave, and Orestes an exile./...I pray Orestes returns with luck in his life-lot/ and my life-lot unsullied, not marred like my mother's./ heart and hands blameless, unblemished by blood."
Harrison, p54

"I am a servant here, a slave, and my brother/ roams the earth, a vagrant, alone and impoverished./...But Orestes may come,/ may reappear any time... And this is my prayer./ Grant it, father. Bring him home, soon, soon./ And keep me true and chaste—I am not like my mother!" Slavitt, p76



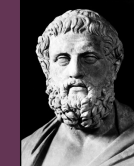
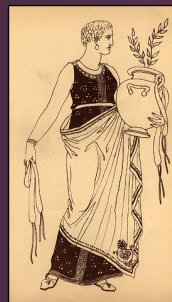
Euripides'
Electra

This Electra is made practical and self-possessed by a life of hard work and frustrated hope.

When an old man recognizes Electra's guest as Orestes, she resists the temptation to believe it, but once convinced snaps to planning the murders.

When Orestes' commitment to kill Clytemnestra wavers, Electra not only strengthens his resolve but shares the sword with him as he takes her life.

Immediately afterward, she feels intense remorse. Her suffering is deepened when she is again separated from her brother, but is soothed by her engagement in a favorable marriage.



Sophocles'
Electra

Here, Electra is passionate and ireful above all. Both her grief and hope are unending.

After a day of conflicting stories about Orestes' death, Electra is nearly hysterical with joy when she is reunited with her brother; her flood of emotion nearly ruins the murder plots.

While Orestes kills her mother, Electra cheers him on and encourages brutality. When it is time for Aegisthus to die, she denies him the right to last words, insisting he be killed immediately.

Neither sibling experiences consequences of the murders. Not even the Eumenides come for Orestes, and the pair literally get away with murder.

Below are selections from Electra's keening over what she believes are Orestes' ashes. Ezra Pound's translation is earthy, spare and rich. Anne Carson's is clear and flowing.

"All that is left me/ my hope was Orestes/ dust is returned to me/ in my hands nothing, dust that is all of him,/ flower that went forth."
Pound, p50

"If this were all you were, Orestes,/ how could your memory/ fill my memory,/ how is it your soul fills my soul?/ I sent you out, I get you back:/ tell me/ how could the difference be simply nothing?/ Look!/ You are nothing at all."
Carson, p184



Conclusions

- Assessed similarities and differences in plot lines
- Grasped constructions of Electra and dynamics between Electra and other characters
- Discovered gripping translations of Aeschylus and Sophocles' plays, but not of Euripides'



The Next Step: the Stage

- This research allows us to:
- Place our production in its artistic context
 - Share outstanding, illuminating translations with the cast
 - Design and choreograph the Center for Creative Work's *Electra*, Spring 2010

